



Konchan, V. (2013). From the New Deal to the Raw Deal: 21st Century Poetics and Academic Labor.
Workplace, 22, 53-57.

VIRGINIA KONCHAN

**FROM THE NEW DEAL TO THE RAW DEAL:
21ST CENTURY POETICS AND ACADEMIC LABOR**

In the midst of life we are in debt. —The Smiths

Real elitism is where the greatest concentrations of capital and power are, and where the greatest concentrations of capital and power are exercised over peoples' heads, whether people enjoy being indulged as the objects or playthings of that exercise or not... Elitism is first of all about power. —Keston Sutherland

Subject formation is an economically coded process, as well as a process inherent to the lyric (and, arguably, all aesthetics) project of identification and valuation. For Victor Burgin, the work of “becoming I” and becoming conscious of one’s material conditions is also concurrent with that of “becoming other” (Burgin refers to the act of the subject interpolated into being as being “sutured” into discourse). Poetic language is a form of discourse (in the same way that social capital is a form of capital), as well: while important to distinguish from ideology (a received consciousness or set of societal norms), the idea that poetic language, or any form of idiomatic speech (historical or cultural) creates a signifying order that structures political economy and not vice versa, suggests that to speak (and write) differently continues to be the most effective means of “speaking truth to power,” in an age when the mechanics of capitalism and neoliberal ideology appear to have overwritten the very existence, and search, for meaning.

Louis Althusser believed that we acquired social identities only when we recognize how we have been “hailed” by mass media and ideology: ideology—like capital—has no history. Breaking free from neoliberal ideology, then, requires first that one see its infiltration into one’s decision making and structures of valuation (personal, ethical, and aesthetic); only then can one make conscious choices about how to reject or accept these “ISA’s” and “RSA’s” (Ideological and Repressive State Apparatuses). If ideas, in sum, are material, it is the extent to which they are bodily incorporated and lived that they both can become ideology (praxis) as well as, like the necromantic character of capital, disappear.

The post-human subject, rejecting the Enlightenment ideal of human perfectibility, and accepting radical disunity within herself, and the world as a jumble of heterogeneous perspectives, is generally optimistic about how the hybrid identities of capitalism protect subjects from totalizing ideologies and universalizing discourses (from Romanticism to fascism). However, pluralization of identity, as Rob Wilkie says, “doesn’t challenge the logic of exploitation, but actually expands it since private property establishes individual responsibility as the very basis of one’s ‘natural’ existence by stripping people of any means of

survival outside of wage-labor.”¹ Furthermore, the derealization of the mind and body in post-humanism (bodies on which the constructedness of sexual difference and gender identity, can be marked) leaves the subject incapable of reconfiguring agency, as a result of what poetics scholar Oren Izenberg calls the “desacralization” or critique of the concept of the person.²

In this paper, I explore how aesthetic models of production (the labor of art and the work artists do to survive) were modeled after industrialist and now technological models of capitalist production and profit-seeking, largely contained today within the University system. I argue that the cultural capital generated and distributed by poets today too often substitutes for a living wage, benefits, and other forms of non-exclusionary capital (financial and social), creating a disturbing imbalance that could, if recalibrated, help artists reclaim financial and aesthetic autonomy, and re-orient the modernist ratio between poetic imagination and the “real.”

Making Poetry “Matter”: Post-Empire Lyric Consciousness

T.S. Eliot defined “lyric” as a voice-driven, didactic, or dramatic mode of speaking: only in the first “voice” is it a mode of self-expression (of sentiments or thoughts), a spoken interiority or “talking to oneself.” The lyric’s path from Horace (oral recitation) to Catallus’s *Carmina* (the first Greek poetry “collections” in serial form) shaped the lyric as a form of self-presentation of a fragmented *cri de coeur* “organized” only in a formal sense though its binding in a collection, and the interpretation of theme, metrical patternization, and meaning by a reader.

The history of lyric poetry, as explained by scholars such as W.R. Johnson, has privileged monody (solo) over dialogic form or choral voice, relationship established through the “fictional” (propositional) “I/Thou” of pronominal placement (deixis). Grounding wayfaring bodily perceptions and sense of “self” in a pre-literate (or post-literate, during an image regime) through deictic markers (here, now, you), lyric’s *poesis* (self- and world-making) solidifies the self’s projected reality through the mastery of time (lyric continuity) space (the page), and the “voice” or response in a call and response poem, of the other. The value of lyric poetry, then, is related to the “value” of the reified self and the projected other, a value not exteriorized into the social realm as a means of broader identification or participation, nor as a commodified product.

Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* and Ginsberg’s “Howl” can be seen as procedural instances of the journey from mimetic sound-making to semantic meaning-making (writing and intention): what Derrida calls the “becoming-literary of the literal.” The chora is the space and rhythmic time of the pre-socialized body: the semiotic process by which significance and the sensory body is constructed. These forms of self-, other, and group foundation are socializing forces with extra-aesthetic purposes take place on the level of language and music are made by the possible the emergence of the “subject” however conceived from the somatic into the symbolic (social). Sound-making, however, is not “insignificant” on the level of the isolated phoneme: if anything, sounds are more intentional than words, according to Umberto Eco, who describes phonemes as motivated in contrast with the deployment of “conventional and arbitrary words.” The phoneme’s abstract zero sign “gains value through opposition” to other phonemes.

Theory is blind: so is the history of lyric consciousness, and its reading. Perceived as a structural “outside,” or series of textual effects, we are “blinded” to the meaning and suspended moment of the lyric poem: thinking is the only means to extricate self, other, and meaning within the Gordian knot of the lyric. The lyric poem, analogous to a rhizome or labyrinth, therefore, is not an easily navigable structure, with its implosive blurring of inside/outside, seriality and stasis, sound and sense. Escaping from the “dream” of symbolic, structuralist or formalist readings into the “real” (the lived experience of contextualized,

¹ Rob Wilkie, “Capitalism’s Post-Human Empire.” *The Red Critique: Marxist Theory and Critique of the Contemporary*. Issue 14, Winter/Spring 2012.

² Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), p. 2.

embodied art), however, is contingent upon the reader's own evolution into personhood, or the "will-to-mean" (and thus read putative "meaning" into other subjects, and texts).

A language poetics of grammar or post-language poetics of deconstructed fragmentation can not, I argue, construct a ground for dialogic participation or critique, yet this struggle to assert one's independence from a signifying order recall Paul De Man's efforts to "make mind mine" as well as anxieties in 20th century poetics over how to "make meter mean." This resistance itself, has, after modernism, structuralism, and deconstruction, resulted in a valorization of the means of disrupting the stabilized lyric speaker in decontextualized, "I"- evacuated fragments, as well as literary history, what Harold Bloom called the fear of a precursor's parasitic influence.

In the 21st century, consciousness-as-labor, the ultimate unappropriable capital, can only emerge alongside a contextualization of the "absolute value" we now assign to consumer goods and material realities, humanists to human subjects, and post-language poets, the poem. To think is to refuse absolutism in all forms, instead bearing witness to the *differend*, and to reanimate the relationship between the excesses and over-valorization of aesthetic "labor" and related evacuation of political "praxis": the work of critical assessment, and participation in the dialogue of cultural valuation amid the streams of liquid capital and pop culture referents.

To re-write the self (after its appropriation and dispersal as commodity) is "to decide to re-think the self," said Barthes, the crucial emphasis being on decision, which can only happen to a subject (an author or a reader). Furthermore, for the text to break free from its own "law" (structuralist logic, or subsumption under capital) it must claim the right to "speak deliriously," a "right" that begs the question of whether a writer chooses the form (genre) of their utterance (oral or written), thereby owning (being accountable for) their utterance or whether they are (by lyric possession, group-think, or capital commodification), being "spoken through."

Neoliberalism's (Seemingly) Limitlessness Flows of Capital

What is neoliberalism, exactly? The mid-century economic liberalism through which neoliberalism developed, in most Western societies, was Keynesian, and most "liberals," social democrats or Marxists. The idea that the State would voluntarily reduce its role in the economy, that corporations would be given total freedom, and that trade unions and other forms of social protection would disappear was foreign to the times. The first prophet of neoliberalism's socially destructive agenda was Karl Polanyi, whose 1944 *The Great Transformation* was a fierce critique of 19th century industrial, market-based society. To allow the market to structure humanity, in lieu of other forms of governmentality, would result, Polanyi believed, in the demolition of civil society.

The Bretton Woods conference of 1944 resulted in the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, developed by Keynes and Harry Dexter White, one of Franklin Roosevelt's closest advisors to, ostensibly, help prevent future conflicts by lending for reconstruction and development and by establishing international creditism as a temporary solution to national debt. These corporations had (initially) no control over individual government's economic decisions nor did their mandate include a license to intervene in national policy. By the 70s and 80s, however, the world's money supply increased 1,000 percent without much change in growth or product, which caused enormous inflation: world governments quit creating money as such but created cheap credit, causing vast asset inflation in housing, real estate, oil, and gold. At the same time, nations could now cover imbalances and budget deficiencies by selling bonds (large credit transfers): sovereign countries bought each other's bonds, and these debt transfers are what allowed Greece and the U.S. to live beyond their means. Total debt in the U.S. in 1964 was \$1 trillion; by 2007 it reached \$50 trillion, and will never be repaid except by inflation or default.

According to Michael W. Clune, in the early 1970s, Western governments, academia, and the media understood the relationship between the state and the market according to the same liberal consensus that had been in place since the end of World War II. "During what is commonly called the "golden age of

capitalism,” government, capital, and labor had reached the uneasy agreement that markets produced social ruin when left to their own devices. The state was needed to mitigate inequality, to provide basic services, and — through a combination of monetary and fiscal means — to even out capitalism’s boom-bust cycle,” Clune states, dating the early 1980s as the tipping point, when British and American governments, joined by large segments of the media and intelligentsia, declared that the state was “the root of social evil,” and that free markets could do nearly everything better than the government, whose meddling had precipitated previous economic crises.³

The term “neoliberal” was first popularized by Marxist geographer David Harvey, whose 2005 *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* redefined the concept as a dangerous form of utopianism wherein the idea of freedom “degenerates into a mere advocacy of free enterprise” (liberty of means, expression, and representation for those who can afford it, and a lifetime of precarious and contingent labor for the majority, whose democratic rights don’t protect them from the power of property owners and market realities). The only way this liberal utopian vision can be sustained, according to Harvey, is by force, violence and authoritarianism. Called “Thatcherism” in the UK, “Reaganism” in the US, and “neoliberalism” in academia, marketization has transformed higher education into a system of heavily subsidized services and inputs, with protected patterns of funding and credentialism as a spillover of free market ideology.⁴

In a globalized world, market exchange *is* commodity exchange: the prices fixed by neoliberal market on qualitative goods including human subjects, knowledge, and aesthetic objects, are based on a bankrupt state and neoliberal ideology, and today must be reevaluated and reassigned by the consumer-citizen. Along with progressive tax reform, federal oversight of the banking industry, and a reigning in of federal expenditures, a return to a labor theory of value in higher education, rather than corporate creditism and loan defaulting, is the “hope beyond hope” of higher education and knowledge production today, ensuring that radical scholarship has a life (and value) outside of the Ivory Tower, as a powerful voice in exploited wage-labor reform.

Finance versus “Cultural Capital”: Caché for the Academic Elite

In a globalized world, market exchange is commodity exchange, but as the prices fixed by neoliberal market on qualitative goods including human subjects, knowledge, and aesthetic objects, are based on a bankrupt state and ideology, today must be reevaluated and reassigned by the consumer-citizen. Along with progressive tax reform, federal oversight of the banking industry, and a reigning in of federal expenditures, a return to a labor theory of value in higher education, rather than corporate creditism and loan defaulting, is the “hope beyond hope” of higher education and knowledge production today, ensuring that the writers of post-capital poetics and scholarship have a means of subsistence outside of the Ivory Tower, and the surplus-value-generating machine of aesthetic labor outside of the university, within Pierre Bourdieu’s now-collapsed restricted field of production, as a voice for exploited wage-labor reform.

In post-production capitalism, the greatest abstract commodity is not suffering, or even human capital, but meaning (in the lyric and post-lyric traditions, this allegorical or symbolic figuration is the production, and manufactured body, as Ezra Pound said, of the beloved).

In an age when flarf and digital poetics constitute the final flourish on post-lyric democratization (to quote Vanessa Place, “when *The New York Times* is generating haiku algorithmically, it’s time to hang up your dancing shoes”), is it no longer useful to distinguish between visual and textual fields of reference (“surface reading” versus “depth hermeneutics”), aesthetic and ethical orientations, or Clement

³ Michael W. Clune, “When neoliberalism exploded: Historian Daniel Steadman Jones traces the origins of the right’s fascination with privatization and deregulation,” *Salon.com*, March 9, 2013.

⁴ John Quiggin, *Zombie Economics: How Dead Ideas Still Walk Among Us* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 3.

Greenberg's abrogated "kitsch" and "avant-garde"? What language acts comprise today's vanguardism ("post-avant" as the revolutionary cadre within the academy, and neo-absurdism from without)?

Attempting to determine whether lyric poetry is capable of structural critique, I argue alternatives exist to the zero-sum existential choice a state-sponsored individual in ontological debt faces, with no way to "cash out" aside from attempting to sell or give away the "goods" (subjectivity, cultural capital, wage-labor) other than socially-engineered suicide.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" was coined in 1973, in his essay, co-authored with Jean-Claude Passeron, "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," and developed in subsequent works such as *The Forms of Capital* (1986) and *The State Nobility* (1996). Bourdieu expanded the category of "capital" to include social, cultural, symbolic, and linguistic capital, the latter defined as a broad array of linguistic competencies, manners, preferences, and orientations (what Bourdieu terms the "subtle modalities in the relationship to culture and language").

Bourdieu's other main concept relevant to this paper is his concept of the "the field of restricted production," or restricted economy. Post-war artists and intellectuals, he saw, had drifted free of the demands of the state and church and were able to create what they choose independent of patronage, and, after modernism, traditional notions of aesthetic production. In order to become autonomous, according to Bourdieu, artists must reject the bourgeois market demands and create instead for a smaller group of producers and merchants of cultural goods. The emphasis placed on originality in modernism continued to be crucial to the newly "autonomous" artist as garnering cultural capital from critics and other artists, even if the work was too arcane to "sell" in the market.