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1. The Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression: Three Long Poems

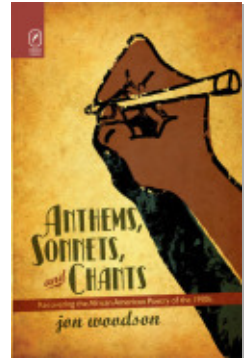
Published by

Woodson, Jon.

Anthems, Sonnets, and Chants: Recovering the African American Poetry of the 1930s.

The Ohio State University Press, 2010.

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The Crash of 1929 and the Great Depression

THREE LONG POEMS

THREE JEREMIADS

Prophecy is the individualizing of the revolutionary impulse . . . and is geared to the future.

—Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*

The three poems discussed in this chapter—Wright’s surrealist montage, Dodson’s sonnet sequence, and Jenkins’s Whitmanesque catalog—are representative texts through which black poets have given literary form to the crash and the Great Depression. These poems might seem to have little else in common. However, all three poems center their discourses on the proposition that a sociocultural failure of ethics produced the Great Depression. When we look past the poems’ differences in forms and discourses, we see that a common concern with ethics aligns all three texts through the language and thought of the American jeremiad. In *The American Jeremiad*, Sacvan Bercovitch observes that the European jeremiad, a lament over the ways of the world (7), was modified in America to convey the myth of a uniquely American mission: “The question in these latter-day jeremiads, as in their seventeenth century precursors, was never ‘Who are we?’ but, almost in deliberate evasion of that question, the old prophetic refrain: ‘When is our errand to be fulfilled? How long, O Lord, how long?’” (Bercovitch 11). Applying Ber-

covitch's ideas to African American rhetoric, David Howard-Pitney in *The Afro-American Jeremiad* proposes that "the complete rhetorical structure of the American jeremiad has three elements: citing the promise; criticism of present declension, or retrogression from the promise; and a resolving *prophecy* that society will shortly complete its mission and redeem the promise" (8; emphasis in original). Howard-Pitney contributes the insight that African Americans see themselves as "a chosen people within a chosen people" (15) and as such have adopted the jeremiad and extended it as "a prime form of black social rhetoric and ideology well into the twentieth century" (15). Howard-Pitney notes that "the American jeremiad has been frequently adapted for the purposes of black protest and propaganda" so that it "characteristically addresses *two* American chosen peoples—black and white—whose millennial destinies, while distinct, are also inextricably entwined"(11). What Bercovitch calls a "litany of hope" (11) would seem well adapted to the needs of an incompletely emancipated minority group that is faced with the two-fold catastrophe of racial oppression and the Great Depression's rampant unemployment.

Given these twin calamities, African Americans felt the need both to describe their deteriorating and insupportable socioeconomic situation and to invoke themes of imminent social, political, and economic emancipation. It is immediately apparent that the problematic presented by the black poets' jeremiad represents a complex set of responses to social problems and aesthetic concerns. While for African Americans, the conditions under which they were forced to live in *normal* times represented grave weaknesses in the American social fabric, the crisis of the Great Depression and the contingent exacerbation of their social, economic, and political problems presented the prospect of a type of social failure hitherto unforeseen and unimaginable. Bercovitch suggests something of the gravity of this situation in his more general comments on the symbol of America (as it pertains to the construction of the American civil religion [*Afro-American Jeremiad* 195 n.6]): "The symbol of America magnified the culture into a cosmic totality: Hence the euphoria of its adherents. But the same process of magnification carried a dangerous correlative: if America failed, then the cosmos itself—the laws of man, nature, and history, the very basis of heroism, insight, and hope—had failed as well" (*American Jeremiad* 190). Thus, the theme of ethical failure results from a concern with cosmic failure: the poets' attempts to assign the crisis an identifiable cause, to place the crisis in a historical framework, and to determine the manner in which the crisis might be resolved foregrounded American society's latent social failures. All three poets viewed the Great Depression as a further development of the pervasive crisis of the black community.

In “Transcontinental,” Richard Wright renders into poetry the black revolutionary sublime; Wright is faithful to the form of the American jeremiad to a remarkable degree, though given the pervasive biblical intertextuality of his poem, we might have expected this to be so. Wright has cast his poem into a primary concern with the controlling device in the discourse of the American jeremiad, what Bercovitch calls “the symbol of America” (176): “Of all symbols of identity, only *America* has united nationality and universality, civic and spiritual selfhood, secular and redemptive history, the country’s past and paradise to be, in a single synthetic ideal” (176). The concern with revolutionary politics in Wright’s poem reduces America’s promise to three one-line refrains (“America who built this dream . . . [7] America who owns this wonderland . . . [15] America America why turn your face away”[25]) and describes the America of the golfing and cocktail-drinking ruling class. Wright’s narrator is another, less abstract, manifestation of the failure of the promise: the man who cannot thumb a ride, the man who is literally left out in the cold and going nowhere. This critique is implicit. Wright’s narrator knows of the promise only through movies and only as a class-restricted, capitalistic mode of distribution.

If the American jeremiad consists of promise, criticism, and prophecy, Wright’s revolutionary joyride is the jeremiadic prophecy, whereby Wright foresees the imminent redistribution of the wealth of the leisure class. Having reached a platform from which he may effectively address his audience, Wright enunciates the promise portion of the jeremiad as the uprising of those wretched proletarians who form the American soviets. Wright’s treatment of the jeremiad represents a major departure from the American jeremiad in that he foresees an overthrow of the American system. Bercovitch points out that in the conventional jeremiad, “the revelation of America serves to blight, and ultimately to preclude, the possibility of fundamental social change. To condemn the profane is to commit oneself to a spiritual ideal. To condemn ‘false America’ as profane is to express one’s faith in a national ideology. In effect, it is to transform what might have been a search for moral or social alternatives into a call for cultural revitalization” (179). Wright is, above all, calling in his prophecy for moral and social alternatives of the most far-reaching kind: “America, America / Plains sprout collective farms” (lines 240–41). America will still be America, but it must undergo a radical alteration in order to fulfill the American promise. Wright is trapped in “jeremiadic ambiguities” (Bercovitch 183), so he does not reject the symbol of America; instead, he maintains a vestige of investment in the very American myth that he has set out to analyze and destroy.

Dodson’s “Negro History: A Sonnet Sequence” departs from the complete rhetorical structure of the American jeremiad chiefly by restricting the

address to African Americans. Dodson embraces what Howard-Pitney refers to as the black nationalistic posture that directed blacks to a redemption and salvation apart from the dominant white culture (15). Though the first three sonnets are addressed to black people in three distinct historical experiences—the Middle Passage, slavery, and Reconstruction—the historical remove of the addresses suggests that the 1930s reader, to whom the entire sequence is directed, is not assumed to be exclusively black. (Because the poem was published in *New Masses* in 1936, the poem in fact reached a wide audience.) The speaker of the first sonnet addresses his fellow slave using the collective “we.” The second sonnet presents a pair of speeches that suggests a more complicated diegesis. In the octave the first voice is distinguished from the narrator through the use of quotation marks: the first speaker addresses the slaves as “you.” The narrator’s rejoinder castigates the first speaker as much for the separation manifested by the use of the second person as for the objectionable tenor of what is being asserted by the person that the narrator calls “this worshipper of dying” (line 9). In the twelfth line, the narrator again takes up the collective “we,” where the narrator says “we will mend.” In the third sonnet, “Post Emancipation,” the speaker’s voice is indistinguishable from the group’s voice. It is only in the fourth sonnet, “Harlem,” that the narrator assumes the previously unsanctioned second-person voice to direct a commanding denunciation *to a contemporary black audience*. Dodson’s sonnet sequence, then, is a highly compressed jeremiad. The first three sonnets cite the promise and suggest that the very survival of Africans in the face of an excess of dangers constitutes the collective African American version of the American promise: in Dodson’s jeremiad the promise for African Americans is that they are sustained by a future strength—“the hope that we will mend / The patches of these transitory years / With swords, with hate, in spite of frequent tears” (“Past and Future” lines 12–14). The theme of death is foremost among the narrator’s concerns; through the first two sonnets, the poems’ burden is to demonstrate the African American’s heroic rejection of death. In the third sonnet, there is a more considered presentation of the promise, and it is striking to notice that Dodson has not only reified the promise but also dramatized its specific inefficacy: “The parchment that declared that we are free / is now collecting dust in some dark spot, / Despite the promise and the certainty / we thought its words would give, but gave them not” (“Post Emancipation” lines 10–13). “Harlem,” the fourth sonnet, combines a further criticism of the present decline from the former heroic posture and the prophecy of a coming redemption. The rebuke is occasioned by black people’s willingness to believe that they have somehow fulfilled the promise by assuming the role of the exotic Other. Dodson’s narrator denounces the role of African Americans as the “deep, dark flower of the

west” (“Harlem” line 1). The narrator urges them to assume another posture: in the concluding lines, the narrator shows that history “reveals the fears / The copper petals must be conscious of / If they would hold their life” (lines 12–14). The second half of the final line presents the redemption of the promise in the new era’s brutal terms: “Grow strong or starve.” The phrase is a paraphrase and a revision of a famous poem by Langston Hughes, and as such, Dodson’s version is a denunciation of the entire project of the so-called Harlem Renaissance. In Hughes’s brash and confident poem “I, Too,” the American Negro who states in the concluding line that “I, too, am America” (line 18) says from his place in the kitchen, “But I laugh / And eat well, / And grow strong” (lines 5–7).

At issue in “Negro History” is the Harlem Renaissance’s discourse of becoming: according to the New Negro movement, the Negro is “ready”—ripe, mature, full grown, and adult. Dodson wishes to intervene in this discourse and to have an end to its ambiguities and evasions. We can recognize that in Dodson’s poem the New Negro movement’s comedic discourse of growth, in which the fates of all Americans are intertwined, has been replaced with an alternative vision wherein the ambiguous banishment of the Negro to the kitchen (paradoxically, a sure prelude to freedom and inclusion) is at once an indulgent invitation and the enforcement of racial stigmas. Dodson’s “Harlem” implies that the New Negro in Hughes’s “I, Too” has been sent to eat in the kitchen *like a child*, and thus, childish and fantastically, the New Negro sits in the kitchen eating heartily and boasting of his gathering strength. The New Negro’s uncertain prospects for social advancement have been abrogated by the economic strictures of the Depression. The discourse of both/and (laugh-eat-grow has become in “Harlem” a matter of the conditional—either/or (either grow or starve). African Americans have no choice but to return to the former promise of survival, and the optimistic ending of Hughes’s poem, in which the (New) Negro embodies America’s promise, has been replaced with the Darwinian injunction to “Grow strong or starve” (line 14).

The most disturbing aspect of Dodson’s conclusion is the separation of eating from growing strong: while Hughes’s poem represents the imposition of a natural order, the taking of strength from food, Dodson suggests that strength is not contingent on food but on some other means of nourishment. The strength that Dodson invokes in his critiques of Hughes’s poem is all the more effective for its rejection of food for strength; in Dodson’s version, once black people have become strong, they will find a means to eat. The symbolism of growth frames “Negro History.” From the nursing mother of “On the Slave Ship” to the flower, pollen, stamen, and petal described in “Harlem,” the seed and the fruit are at issue. The “seed” is prophesied in

“Post Emancipation”—“the seed / Of Freedom” (lines 8–9)—but the seed is a future state, and the document that provides for it “is now collecting dust in some dark spot” (line 10).

We can neatly encapsulate the tension between the New Negro discourse of growth and Dodson’s altered discourse of “grow strong or starve” by reading the word “Negro” as soundplay—*Ne-grow*. In Dodson’s version, a choice must be made: the contradictory pleasures of the kitchen (the complex that involves such symptoms as “double consciousness,” “black and blue,” “we wear the mask”) are no longer on the table, so to speak, and the Negro must either perish or resolve to persist. The sonnet sequence is an eloquent, acute demand that the Negro people answer the call of their history and produce the fruit that comes at the end of the cycle of growth: to *starve* is not a viable possibility. Neither is starvation a necessity, for the historical arc has been a path from inarticulacy to the articulacy of the jeremiad—and we see that discourse itself is Dodson’s theme. The Negroes in Dodson’s sequence begin inarticulately with “pounding,” “groaning,” and the “chant [of] agonizing songs” (“On the Slave Ship” lines 8–11), and in the person of Dodson, their discourse reaches its acme with the crisp and premonitory rhetoric of “grow strong or starve.”

Welborn Victor Jenkins’s *Trumpet in the New Moon* is couched in the rhetoric of the biblical prophet, though Jenkins chose to quote Psalm 81 in the title rather than to quote Jeremiah. So close was Jenkins to the tradition of the American jeremiad that he utilized its terminology; in framing his presentation of the promise, Jenkins calls it a promise:

I saw that nation spreading toward the westward.
 Horace Greely gave good advice to the young men—
 St. Louis, Kansas City, Denver, San Francisco
 Took form and grew like mushrooms in the night.
 New Orleans, child of the Mississippi, basking in the
 rich cotton fields of the Delta,
 Glanced proudly at the rising suns of Promise and Fulfillment.
 (lines 46–51)

At line 104, the poem begins a detailed depiction of “A Break in conduct” (line 107) that enacts Bercovitch’s “retrogression from the promise.” Like Wright’s “Transcontinental,” *Trumpet in the New Moon* is addressed to a personified “America,” though Jenkins never moves away from this form of address to assume the various distances and intimacies so characteristic of Wright’s poem. The prophetic section of *Trumpet in the New Moon* commences with line 410: “God hasten the day when ‘Be American’ / Shall carry the selfsame

Inspiration / To call forth all the heroism and nobility / That lie dormant in the human spirit” (lines 410–13). Despite the use of the jeremiadic discourse in *Trumpet in the New Moon*, the poem foregrounds a psalmic discourse of group unity acquired through “the metaphor of the individual” (*The Great Code* 90). The centrality of the psalmic discourse in Jenkins’s poem elides the actual use of “you,” and the poem is addressed to a heroic American “I.” This device is used most effectively in the Charles Lindbergh section, where the aviator is an “I” who only becomes a separate “he” once the popular culture bestows fame and gold on him (lines 186–87), an act of separation that violates and repudiates the original collective American soul. The jeremiadic discourse is thus weakened and the device of deriving prophetic authority by the imposition of unpopular views (the need for morality, humility, obedience, and other virtues) (*The Great Code* 126) is moderated by affirming the centrality of the potential heroism of the American individual, the Lindberghian essence of symbolic America.

In the final analysis, even Jenkins, a poet who rejects the solutions offered by the Left, is a social revolutionary, though certainly not in Third Period terms. Poetry did not respond uniformly to the crash and the Great Depression. Instead, black poets made a number of revolutionary attempts to revive American democracy through the master discourses of the American culture. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, the black poets of the thirties derived their authority from the unpopularity of their messages, a stance that was natural given the sundered social margins from which those declarations were made.

RICHARD WRIGHT. “TRANSCONTINENTAL” (1936)

Richard Wright, a member of the Communist Party of the United States of America from 1932 to 1944, was one of the most prominent African American poets of the 1930s, despite his having written and published a mere dozen poems. Wright’s combination of racial and proletarian characteristics were warmly received by certain elements of leftist culture. The only leftist African American poet who rivaled Wright’s importance was Langston Hughes, but Hughes was not—in terms of Third Period convictions—a model revolutionary writer. Though Langston Hughes had been an advocate of radical causes for several years before the crash, the (economic) collapse of the Harlem Renaissance, and the subsequent interest of many American writers and intellectuals in the politics of the Left, Hughes had received a college education and patronage by wealthy sponsors. He did not join the Communist Party. Wright, a self-educated black poet who migrated from

the Deep South to Chicago's slums, presented impeccable proletarian credentials. He also demonstrated a fervent commitment to the Communist program and an ability to write effectively in the service of his newfound cause. Economic hardship and racial oppression befell Richard Wright, forcing him to a new recognition of his place in the world and inspiring him to search for a means to relieve the suffering that he saw around him. The story of Richard Wright's transformation into a revolutionary poet is particularly illuminating. Wright was what his friend and colleague Horace Cayton called a "clear case": "His was a total exposure to the callousness and cruelty of the closed society" (Hill 208). Eugene Redmond gives this précis of Wright's tumultuous early career: "He joined the Communist party in the thirties and remained as a member until 1944. His poetry, coupled with calls for unity between Blacks and whites, was published in various journals and news organs of the period: *International Literature*, *New Masses*, *Anvil*, *Midland*, and *Left*" (Drumvoices 224).

The poetry that Wright and Hughes wrote was often sloganized, abstract, and breathlessly fanatical. Both poets lacked the formal, emotional, and imaginative resources of Vladimir Mayakovsky, "the poet of communism," who carried into early Soviet writing the experimental techniques of the prerevolutionary cubo-futurism, a movement with which he had been aligned before becoming a Communist. Wright and Hughes also suffer in comparison to the complex and resourceful surrealism of Louis Aragon. Hughes translated Mayakovsky while living in the Soviet Union in 1933, and Wright patterned what is his "longest and perhaps most ambitious poem" (Fabre 131) on Aragon's "Red Front." (It seems likely that Hughes's poem "Waldorf Astoria" is also derived from Aragon's influential long poem "Red Front.") Both Hughes and Wright fell victim to the limitations of the realistic aesthetics that circumscribed American political poetry in the 1930s. Even though they sought new social realities, Hughes and Wright were limited in their ways of extending that search into literature, and their works often have a banal ring to them, while poems by Aragon and Mayakovsky still hold up (largely because of their verbal pyrotechnics). Nevertheless, the poems that Hughes, Wright, Frank Marshall Davis, Welborn Victor Jenkins, and Melvin B. Tolson wrote in the 1930s were marked departures from what the majority of their black contemporaries were writing. Critics have called Wright's poems "protest poems" (Redmond 223); Dan McCall opines that "[agitprop] poetry has nothing to recommend it other than revolutionary enthusiasm" (47). However, Wright's poems are ones of dissent and struggle, not protest. James Scully states that "by rights we should distinguish dissident poetry from protest poetry. Most protest poetry is conceptually shallow. . . . Dissident poetry, however, does not respect boundaries between private and

public, self and other. . . . It is a poetry that talks back, that would act as part of the world, not simply as a mirror of it" (5). Whatever else Hughes and Wright may be faulted for, their poems give voice to the resurgent Other; their works move beyond their own culture-bound sensibilities and contemplate social realities with an eye toward advocating—even engineering—specific radical readjustments.

Views of Richard Wright as a realist and a naturalist have given way to readings that account for previously overlooked elements of his work. It is said that Wright is "not so much naturalistic as hallucinatory, dreamlike, and poetic" (Dickstein 380), a reading first broached by Morris Dickstein and reiterated by Hakutani, who follows Dickstein's lead in seeing that *Native Son* is greatly affected by "Wright's affinity to Dostoyevsky" (16). The hallucinatory character of Wright's prose may also be traced to his poetry, especially to "Transcontinental." That Wright based "Transcontinental" on Aragon's "Red Front" indicates Wright's commitment to risk taking, experimentation, and advancing beyond the restricted forms typical of proletarian poetry. Proletarian writing was supposed to be simple, realistic, precise, socially useful, and factual. It was supposed to avoid individual responses, lyricism, emotion, and eccentricities (Pells 176). Aragon's poem has none of these proletarian attributes. The poem is a collage that gives a sarcastic description of Maxim's restaurant in 1931 (Caws 40). The poem is complex in discourse, disorienting, provocative, and cruel. Aragon's poem was notorious, for in France it had provoked what was called "L'Affaire Aragon," and the poet was brought to court because the poem was interpreted by some as a call to anarchy (Caws 12 n.12). In 1933, Wright read e. e. cummings's translation of "Red Front" in *Contempo*. Eugene Miller has suggested that Wright may have been open to surrealist innovations because Wright could have appropriated surrealist techniques without risking political transgressions. The surrealists called themselves Marxists and saw their work as revolutionary literature (Miller, *Voice* 78). Moreover, Wright connected surrealism to African American culture, and he stated in his memoir that surrealism helped him to clarify the hallucinatory mode of langue used by his mystically religious grandmother and by blues singers (Miller, *Voice* 79). Wright wrote "Transcontinental" in 1935 and dedicated it to Aragon (Miller, *Voice* 78). *International Literature* published the six-page poem in January 1936. One critic has called it "the longest and perhaps the most ambitious [poem] he ever wrote" (Fabre 131).

Eugene Miller has observed that Aragon's poem is not obviously surrealist (78), and Ruhle has confirmed that his poetry "was never so firmly committed to the Surrealist model as that of their teacher and mentor Breton" (*Literature and Revolution* 359). Since the conclusion might simply be that

Wright's "Transcontinental" is not surrealistic, it is necessary to establish more exactly the nature of Aragon's poem. Mary Douglas, in a discussion of jokes, has characterized the surrealist movement as "passionate frivolity" ("Jokes" 292) that has had wide cultural implications and has shaped the categories in which modern experience is structured. Surrealism, then, is not so much a style made up of strange juxtapositions as it is a valorization of "freedom from limitations of any kind" (Caws 43) by means of violating social conventions. André Breton framed the surrealist conception of freedom with his second surrealist manifesto, published in 1930: "The simplest act of Surrealism consists of going into the street gun in hand and blindly shooting into the crowd for as long as one cares to" (Ruhle 359). Matthews adds that "beneath his apparent frivolity in the surrealist poems of *La Grande Gaité* (1929) lies a sense of responsibility, often masked by a vulgarity it would be a mistake to consider gratuitous. . . . Deliberately offensive language hides in Aragon's work a deep concern, of which the search . . . for the purity of love is indicative" (34–5).

Though Wright acknowledges Aragon's "Red Front" by the name and title at the top of his poem, "Transcontinental" is a highly original text, for Wright situates his poem within specifically American cultural conditions, and he employs formal devices and rhetorical techniques that are not present in Aragon's poem. Chief among these devices is the use of the Hollywood film as form, as subject, and as a familiarizing discourse. The opening stanza of the poem alludes to screenplay, montage, newsreel, and drama:

[Through] trembling waves of roadside heat
 We see the cool green of golf courses
 Long red awnings catching sunshine
 Slender rainbows curved above spirals of water
 Swaying hammocks slung between trees—
 Like in the movies. . . .

The opening five lines are suspended above the situational, anchoring, ingratiating simile "Like in the movies," as though the suave voice of the narrator could continue describing the alluring scene forever. "Like in the movies" abruptly forces a descent from the capitalist sublime of the visual imagery, distancing the reader with cinematic context that has been layered over the initially contextless opening hallucination. By juxtaposing the scene and the simile, Wright prompts the reader to ask: why am I being told about this beautiful place? Once readers have been prompted to consider the scene as though it is a scenario in a movie, readers may hear the voice simultaneously as the dramatizing, inflated voiceover of a newsreel reporter and as the

more prosaic voice of a screenwriter who is merely reciting words. “Like in the movies”—both voices place the reader in a movie theater and deny the reader the opportunity to identify with the scene’s drama.

American popular film played an important role in Wright’s imagination and contributed to the discourses of his longer works of fiction. A movie theater is the setting for one of the most evocative episodes in *The Man Who Lived Underground*, a novella published in 1938. Early in Wright’s acclaimed novel *Native Son* (1940) the thuggish teenage protagonist Bigger Thomas and his gang attend a movie, and Bigger—in the original and uncensored version of the text—masturbates while watching a newsreel in which the young woman that he later murders is presented to society at a debutante ball. Bigger’s pornographic excursion to the movies illustrates that the newsreels and popular films of the 1930s provided the have-nots with images of the luxurious lives of the haves: “Thomas grows up on the dross of a glamorized popular culture he can see but never have, look at but never touch” (Szalay 253). “Transcontinental” shows that Wright’s concern with the American popular film goes back to his poetry, where popular film is a controlling element of his harrowing depiction of apocalyptic revolution.

In the 1930s the motion picture was the most important form of entertainment available to the American people. A more realistic style of acting and the increased use of sound (and later, color) coincided with the social conditions of the New Deal era and the studios’ resistance to censorship between 1930 and 1934. Production Code began active enforcement of a ban on interracial marriage and applied other conservative social standards. These factors influenced the development of new genres of film: the screwball comedy, the spectacular musical, the western, the detective film, the horror film, and the gangster film. The Depression had shaken some of the oldest American cultural myths, such as the myth that hard work and perseverance would bring success. People did not know what to believe in. Some men and women in politics and the media saw it as their duty to revitalize and refashion America’s cultural mythology. Direct portrayals of the Great Depression rarely appeared in movies; usually, filmmakers represented the Depression by “structuring absences” (Schatz 83), though films such as *My Man Godfrey* (1936), *Wild Boys of the Road* (1933), *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum* (1933), and *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) did offer undisguised portrayals of the Depression. Robert Sklar states that

in the first half decade of the Great Depression, . . . the movies called into question sexual propriety, social decorum and the institutions of law and order. The founding of the Breen Office in 1934 seriously curtailed the permissible range and depth of Hollywood films for years to come. . . .

The movie moguls gave up their adversarial stance because they suddenly found greater opportunities for profit and prestige in supporting traditional American culture, in themselves becoming its guardians. (175)

The American movie in the thirties was a highly contested cultural site, and it is no wonder that Wright sought to situate his poem within the discourse of the popular film. In Wright's texts, movies reinforce popular myths and moral economic values. While genres of social order (like the gangster film) and genres of social integration (like the screwball comedy) may have helped viewers think about class, gender, individuality, and crime, movies rarely addressed racial themes.

"Transcontinental," Wright's surrealistic "movie" poem, is a proletarian comedy. First, we are shown scenes of haute bourgeois luxury. In Wright's comedic fantasy of American political revolution, displacements and reversals result from questions in the first three stanzas: "America who built this dream . . ." (line 7); "America who owns this wonderland . . ." (line 15); "America America America why turn your face away. . . ." (line 23). The lines are impressionistically punctuated and the derelict mode of Wright's inquisition establishes a rhetorical progression that carries away everything that it opposes. This outcome is, however, not readily apparent, for the first stanza modulates the luxury into a lament: the scenes of luxury and leisure are but reminders of a time when the proletarian-revolutionary "we" who are standing on the highway "used to get paychecks."

The Great Depression is graphically depicted in the poem through the postures that the enounced (the speakers selected inside the work) assume: in the tenth line of the long fourth section of the poem, they have "begging thumbs" (line 33). Several lines further down, the poet describes their reduced circumstances in grim detail: they have the hot sun on their backs, their stomachs growl with hunger, and when they sleep on the streets at night, their hips rest on the unforgiving pavement. In the concluding lines of the fourth section, Wright again briefly presents their poverty—their "empty dinner pails" (line 94) and "the tight-lipped mother and the bare meal-can" (line 95). Presumably, it was not necessary for Wright to provide more than a few of these images; his readers would have been familiar with these images already. The poem is not so much invested in depicting the ravages of deprivation as it is in providing a look at the transformation of the characters' circumstances. And when Wright does present the Great Depression's most salient image, the bread line, it is subordinated to the highway—"See the bread-lines winding winding winding long as our road" (line 157). Since the road is where Wright's poem situates his regime change, the bread line takes on the meaning of progressive change and agency. Similarly, the word *crash*

is given a new meaning when it is surrealistically reinscribed as the wish-fulfilling climax of a revolutionary cartoon:

O for the minute
 The joyous minute
 The minute of the hour of the day
 When the tumbling white ball of our anger
 Rolling down the cold hill of our lives
 Swelling like a moving mass of snow
 Shall crash
 Shall explode at the bottom of our patience Thundering
 HALT
 You shall not pass our begging thumbs
 America is ours
 This car is commandeered
 (lines 24–35)

In order to approach “Transcontinental” as a comedy, it is necessary to frame it within a theory of comedy. In *Semiotics of the Comic*,¹ Peter Marteinson argues that “the comic will be shown to be an instinctive response to an epistemological problem resulting from the ‘undesirable’ realization that several truth categories operate in social being” (3).

Marteinson’s theory allows values to be assigned to the “comedic” components of Wright’s poem. Wright satirizes the wealthy (bankers, brokers, and businessmen) in the opening stanzas of the poem. In his opinion, and in the view of many others at the time, the wealthy caused the Depression. The wealthy created chaotic social conditions, and they responded to those conditions irresponsibly and amorally. Wright makes evident their awkward social position by describing their “close-up” responses, their “glazed faces” (line 19), their tight lips (line 22) when in public, and their private laughter (line 11). The conflict, then, is between the antisocial motivations of the powerful bourgeoisie and the impoverishment of the powerless, disorganized masses. The hero’s social identity is structured by a dialectical social identity—hobo and worker—assigned from two opposing perspectives determined by class. By *worker*, Wright indicates that the unemployed hitchhikers are to be understood to be the revolutionary proletariat. At first the bourgeoisie are able to laugh at the worker-hobos while speeding past them in luxurious automobiles, but once the workers have commandeered the automobile—transforming the symbol of class privilege into the reified *revolution*—it is the revolutionaries who eject the wealthy and laugh.

The Hollywood film that most closely parallels the comedic scenario of “Transcontinental” is *It Happened One Night* (1934), a screwball comedy that was one of the most popular films of the era. Due to a series of reversals, the hero (a newspaperman) and the heroine (an heiress)—a mismatched and constantly bickering pair—are reduced to thumbing a ride to New York, and they are picked up and driven to a roadside stop for lunch. When the driver makes off with the protagonists’ suitcases, the newspaperman runs desperately behind the car. In the next scene, the newspaperman returns driving the car: he tells his traveling companion, a spoiled rich girl that he calls “Brat,” that he gave the man a black eye for the car. Though the newspaperman wears a few scrapes, there is no explanation about how the exchange was accomplished. The car having been miraculously “commandeered,” the blithe couple drives off—with all of their former animosities forgotten in the wake of their righteous indignation.

Wright’s poem takes a plotless approach to the revolution that it narrates, so the elements of what Marteinson calls *illusion* and *discovery*—the features that would take up the majority of the screen time in a movie—are reduced to mere gestures in “Transcontinental.” In *It Happened One Night*, the illusion and discovery phase is the long narration of the heroine’s trip from Florida to New Jersey. As she moves north, she descends the social scale, losing her wealth and social status: she is forced to hitchhike, ride in a stolen car, and eat stolen carrots. In “Transcontinental” the illusion phase is represented by the brief and indistinct struggle over the steering wheel, a struggle that Wright signifies through roughly forty lines of pseudodialogue (lines 37–81).

Wright’s poetic model, Aragon’s “Red Front,” consists of four sections. The first two dwell on the absurdities of the bourgeoisie, and even the third section, in which the revolution begins, devotes many lines to the possessions of the enemy class. It is only in the final section that they lose their statues, finery, and attitudes, so that Aragon’s much longer poem is more heavily invested in mocking the bourgeoisie than is Wright’s poem. Rather than waiting until the end of the comedy for the discovery of the hero’s true identity, the disclosure that the pathetic, perishing hobo is a robust, cacophonous revolutionary comes very close to the beginning of “Transcontinental,” in line 36, where the “car” is commandeered. And here is the crucial factor in Wright’s comedy: in the movies, the comedy aims to deflate antisocial agents in effigy: in *It Happened One Night*, the mockery of wealth climaxes when the absurd groom flies in an autogiro to his lavish wedding only to find that his betrothed has run off with a newspaperman. For Wright, the deflation must be carried out directly on actual class enemies. Wright presents a surrealist enactment of “justifiable” mass murder. In Wright’s dreamlike

carnival of death, countless racially motley underdogs speed across America in an apocalyptic clown car to run down their oppressors.

Having established the contrast between the “wonderland” (line 15) and the “hot highways” (line 17) on which the displaced and dispossessed wander, the poem juxtaposes two disparate circumstances. The anger of the proletarian masses is compared to an avalanche rolling down “the cold hill of our lives” (line 28). However, although the effect of this “tumbling while ball” (line 27) is to smash the status quo, it does so by bringing to a halt the automobile of American capitalism. Wright recalls Old Testament rhetoric by making the verbs “crash” (line 30), “explode” (line 31), and “HALT” (line 32) conditional to the uniform application of “shall” (lines 31, 32), an effect that is reminiscent of the syntax and parallelism of Psalmic poetry (for instance, “Surely goodness and mercy *shall* follow me all the days of my life, / and I *shall* dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long” [NRSV Psalm 23; emphases added]). The cascade of images is at once surrealistic and cinematically “realistic” in that it is within the power of movies to picture such impossible eventualities, thereby rendering them in a sense realizable. But since what Wright presents is “like in the movies” (line 6), the revolution is accomplished in the same way that insurmountable obstacles are routinely overcome in the movies. If a giant ape climbs a skyscraper in pursuit of a femme fatale in *King Kong*, and if young men with no prospects become wealthy and powerful in *Scarface*, what might not be accomplished within cinematic *unreality*? In Wright’s cinematic text, the mythic historicity of biblical subtext supports the unreality of events. “*America America America why turn your face away*” (line 32), alludes to Armageddon: “Nevertheless Josiah *would not turn his face from him*, but disguised himself, that he might fight with him, and hearkened not unto the words of Necho from the mouth of God, and came to fight in the valley of Megiddo” (KJV 2 Chronicles 35:22; emphasis added).

Wright uses Judeo-Christian myth to frame the climax of the class war, indicating the ambivalent, polyvalent character of his thought: here he encapsulates the theme of social identity in the refusal of the bourgeoisie to recognize his humanity. He also locates the class struggle within the framework of biblical eschatological myth as a subtype of (African) American folklore. African American Marxists who steered more closely to Communist Party ideology maintained an unsympathetic attitude toward African American Christianity, so in “Blacks Turn Red,” Eugene Gordon could state that “the automobile, the newspaper, the radio, and the motion picture have carried knowledge to the backwoods, and the church, with its mumbo-jumbo superstitions, has retreated, mouthing curses” (238). Gordon’s view—a dialectical construction of modernity that saw technology and media as having ren-

dered irrelevant the folkway of religion—was not uncommon among radical intellectuals. J. Edward Arbor in *The Crisis*, in 1935 acrimoniously gives a similar opinion: “Perhaps if the Negro put less faith and vigor into worshipping the Lord and devoted more of his energy toward solving the substantial and complex problems that face him, he would gain a few of the blessings he waits to be showered upon him by the heavenly hand” (111). Neither Gordon nor Arbor made a distinction between the church and Christianity. Both saw the religious enterprise as a continuum of outward social forms and ideologies. Wright was not as condemnatory in his approach to the black church: “While Wright dismisses Christianity as useless for black people’s freedom and independence, he values the black church in the city because it enhances their community life” (Hakutani 111). In “Transcontinental” the discourse of Judeo-Christian religion represents the power of collective myth, and the revolution that Wright delineates is an exchange of one communality for another. Rather than seeing modernity as a liberating force as do Gordon and Arbor, Wright’s understanding of modernity lies in his own experience of its power to dehumanize, to isolate, and to nullify.

Thus, it is ironic that Wright has chosen the automobile—one of the most prevalent reifications of modernity—as the site of the struggle for mass emancipation. In contrast to the hallucinatory exchange of roles that occurs through the trope of an avalanche that intervenes in “the joyous minute” (line 25), Wright presents American totality through the trope of the automobile. In a comedic reversal, the speaker declares, “This car is commandeered” (line 35). The automobile has a powerful totemic presence in the movies. The protagonist of the gangster movie *Scarface* is closely identified with his armored car’s bulletproof glass and steel body, for example. The automobile offers a compressed space in which to depict the Armageddon of class war. It is also one of the most pronounced factors through which modernity isolates, disrupts, and depersonalizes. Wright’s poetic moviemaking depends on a deep intertextuality between social realism and the Bible. In the poem’s subtext, the realism of industrial commodities, “Packards Pierce Arrows / Lincolns La Salles Reos Chryslers” (lines 20–1), is layered over mythically inflected wordplay—*commandeer* compresses *Communist Manifesto*. The word *commandeer* not only suggests seizure for public use through its literal meaning but also occurs in the lexicon adjacent to *commandment*, thereby suggesting the inexorable power of the Ten Commandments. The commandeered car is the *Ark* of the Covenant, reminding us of how the Hebrews carried the Ten Commandments throughout years of wandering in the desert. Wright makes the masses—the We, who hitchhike in the “roadside heat” (line 1)—analogous to the biblical wanderers. Thus, Wright refashions the bourgeois American car into the *ark of the Communist Manifesto*, which will exist in the new order brought about by a revolutionary Armageddon. In *The Great*

Code, Northrop Frye describes the ark as the sign of “the end of all cyclical movements and the coming of a final separation between apocalyptic and demonic worlds” (177).

Wright’s use of the car as the vehicle by which the revolution is disseminated is surrealist, for it is the car’s dreamlike and polymorphous qualities that allow it to accommodate the multitudes of “WOORKERSWOORKERS” (line 91) who are invited to “pile in” (line 92). Wright’s fantasy represents the victory of desire over reality. The workers (no longer merely *workers*) are metamorphosed into WOORKERSWOORKERS by the comedic order of the revolution, which Wright presents as essentially a matter of garnering a sufficient quantity of laughter: those who once owned the “silvery crescendos of laughter” (line 11) now moan (line 176), and in the new order, “The world is laughing The world is laughing” (line 203). The laughter of the new proletarian order is the laughter produced “in order to judge the position that gives meaning” (Kristeva 182). Thus, it is the laughter of the mass audience that has been radicalized and is now aware of itself as a class; it is the laughter of the workers in revolt. Wright rejects bourgeois laughter’s fundamental ugliness, and allows his monologic construction of bourgeois consciousness into the poem only as parody. Bourgeois consciousness is no longer to speak for itself through its novels, operas, and dramas: bourgeois discourse is stripped to the cognitively dissonant wheedling of a woman in the back seat of a luxury automobile (lines 67–69).

Having commandeered the car, Wright presents a series of uninspired caricatures of the upper class through a radical and comedic revision of social identity. When the (Negro) hobo is beside the road, his physical circumstances enforce his social identity, for he is motionless outside of the speeding car. The wealthy drivers enforce the social codes not only by driving past the hitchhiking hobo but also by refusing to meet his gaze—thus refusing social interaction and in effect determining that his social identity is a negative identity. Here the specifics of his place on the highway have made him invisible, immobile, and silent. Because the hobo is outside of the car, he is beyond the reach of social discourse, for his social identity—an *outsider*—removes him from the social whole. But once the hobo has climbed into the car, a new type of social identity comes into effect, for suddenly the mode of social exchange is face-to-face. Wright presents the bourgeoisie as cartoon characters, and this is very much a limiting device that robs “Transcontinental” of the more evocative and detailed portraiture that Aragon accomplishes through his more literarily self-conscious, lingering, and capacious satire. Wright’s decision to situate his attack within a “movie,” nevertheless, rings true. We can rationalize and justify Wright’s caricatures of the idle rich by recognizing that he does not depend on the presupposition of direct familiarity with the bourgeoisie (in contrast to Aragon’s method of

allowing us to hear their voices); rather, Wright approaches the bourgeoisie through the remove of their semiotics in the discourse of the Hollywood movie and by allowing the hero-worker to feel the presence of the idle rich as antagonists. That is, Aragon goes among the wealthy and reports on them in intimate detail, though, of course, satirically. Wright reaffirms the depiction of the rich that the mass audience has gained through movies: he only transvalues what the masses have seen, and he does this by placing the mass audience within a movie reinscribed as revolutionary comedy.

The Hollywood movie was designed to extract from the mass audience a consensual, conspiratorial laughter. As movies presented the rich, social differences could be bridged through laughter, a laughter not of rejection, contempt, or disgust, but of sympathy and affection: it is laughter that arrives “in order to put ourselves out of judgment’s reach, in some surreality where everything is equal” (Kristeva, *Desire* 182). The “surreality” of the screwball comedy made the rich merely amusing—thus it made them seem harmless. In “Transcontinental” Wright follows Aragon by withdrawing that amused sympathy. The proletariat’s laughter is not the laughter of a leisurely mass audience; it is the black laughter of moral exhaustion, where no sympathy remains for the wealthy, and the masses inflict a bloody and thorough revenge upon their class enemies. Wright insists that once the world has been freed of the bourgeoisie, the world will laugh (lines 185–201). However, Wright’s imaginative powers are limited, and the liberated masses really do not laugh. Under the new social conditions, they pursue appropriately banal, collective, proletarian entertainments: socialist baseball leagues spring up, and accounts of the revolution written by formerly outcast proletarian authors are utopian best sellers.

Wright’s automobile—the conveyance of the revolution—stands in marked contrast to the train, which assumes that function in Aragon’s “Red Front.” Moreover, the railroad helped disseminate the Bolshevik revolution, so Aragon’s use of this trope is not definitively surrealist, nor is it especially imaginative. Wright perhaps rejected Aragon’s use of the train because of its associations with the old order in the semiotics of the Great Depression: the railroad was the chief means by which the unemployed moved about the country, and riding aboard freight trains was comfortless and dangerous. The automobile, the semiotic opposite of the freight train, was associated with escape from the effects of the Depression, and going for a drive in a car was as popular as going to the movies. Sales of gas and oil increased during the Depression, and oil companies were profitable. Hobos hopping freight trains became one of the stereotypical images of the Great Depression; thus, the American railroad was an inappropriate sign for revolutionary emancipation. The contrast between the car and the railroad is tacit in *It Happened*

One Night. When the newspaperman blissfully drives to retrieve his beloved, he is forced to stop at a crossing to let a train go past, and he joyously salutes first a lone hobo atop a box car, then a group of hobos in the door of another car. The contrast between the freedom and jubilation expressed by the driver is contrasted with the expressions of the men on the train. The latter seem either lonely or overwhelmed by unwelcome company. Their futures are determined, deprived, and precarious.

Wright's automobile is problematic, then, in several ways. The private car was the antithesis of the railroad train, and the car was also a reaffirmation of individual identity. The car operated consistently as a sign of wealth and social power. In selecting the car as the vehicle for the revolution, Wright reinforced all of these associations, and he did so because, to some degree, he was unwilling to abandon private individuality if doing so meant being swallowed up by the collective consciousness of the masses. In his presentation, Wright seems to have constructed a position between the two extremes, a type of public individuality that "would try to put some of that meaning back" (Fabre 120).

Wright's presentation of the revolution in terms of the discourse of the movies is easy to trace. The speeding car is an overwhelmingly prevalent feature of the early gangster films. The gangsters (like the proletariat) begin as weak, impoverished men who desire power and notoriety. In *Little Caesar* these desires are voiced as the protagonist's desire to "be somebody." The attainment of an identity is achieved through ruthlessness, an unhesitating willingness to kill and to take—to commandeer—but its signs of this identity are an automobile, clothes, and an office. In *Scarface* the car itself suffices as a status symbol. When *Little Caesar* is recognized by the policeman slinking alone through the dark streets at the end of the movie, the policeman shouts, "Halt," much as the masses shout "HALT" (line 32) to stop the cars of bourgeois America in Wright's poem. When *Little Caesar* does not immediately surrender, the sergeant reaches for a "chopper," a Thompson machine gun. In "Transcontinental" the chopper is disguised and rendered through metonymy—"All right chop us into little pieces" (line 46). Ironically, once the revolutionaries are in the car with the bourgeoisie, the Marxists take up their defensive justifications in the tough guy dialect of the gangsters—"You say we're robbers / So what" (lines 41–42). The comedy in this revision is that Wright has also cast the bourgeoisie as gangsters who need to be eliminated: like the alienated, sociopathic gangsters of the movies, the bourgeoisie are beyond rehabilitation and must be gunned down without hesitation. Yet, the workers have adopted the voice of the gangsters (the *comedic* device used by the protagonist in *It Happened One Night* to rid himself of a blackmailer), and the workers reply to the derogatory accusations of the bourgeoisie in the language of movie gangsters.

The workers/gangsters are allowed to speak first; when we hear the voices of the bourgeoisie, their words issue from the imaginations of the workers. The bourgeoisie is present only as a ventriloquized other during the struggle for the steering wheel of the stationary automobile. When the voices of the bourgeoisie are allowed to be heard in a passage not prefaced with “you say,” we must continue to suspect that their voices are mediated by the workers’ imaginations, for what the bourgeoisie utter is little more than what the workers must assume is the authentic racial discourse of the bourgeoisie: “But dear America’s a free country / Did you say Negroes / Oh I don’t mean NEEEGRRROOOES / after all / Isn’t there a limit to everything” (lines 54–58).

The parody of privilege was a common feature of thirties movies: though we seldom meet the upper class in the gangster films, there are sufficient hints, if only in the social-climbing of the gangsters, to allow viewers some access to the upper-class social stratum. Though “Transcontinental” is concerned with the expansion of justice, the bourgeoisie and the gangsters share the same fate of being gunned down in the streets. Once the conflict has been racialized, the car is used to redress racial injustices. The revolution heads south, and after the car destroys the capitalist government (“congressmen Fascist flesh sticking to our tires” [line 126]), it slams into a lynch mob—“Plunging the radiator into the lynch-mob / Giving no warning” (lines 131–32). In Wright’s poem the alienated individual assumes the posture of the movie gangster in order to enact his aggressive campaign of revenge. The gangster type is usually read as an anarchic individual battling a disordered society (Sklar 181), with the question of the final resolution remaining in the hands of the audience, who were charged by messages from the studios at the opening of these movies to take action in the face of government inaction.

The final result of Wright’s revolution is not the Faustian-Dionysian tragedy that the unhinged assassin-on-the-make enacts in the gangster film but the comic reversal accomplished in the screwball comedy: social order is restored as in gangster movies, not by the removal of the gangster but by the removal of an offending social class. In the screwball comedy, the lives of the rich are exposed so that the audience comes to recognize them as funny, lovable, and harmless (Sklar 188). Schatz observes that “by restructuring the fast-paced upper-crust romance, the screwball comedy dominated the Depression-era screen comedy and provided that period’s most significant and engaging social commentary” (151). Meanwhile, “The screwball comedies by and large celebrated the sanctity of marriage, class distinctions and the domination of women by men” (Sklar 188). Similarly, Wright resolves his poem in a successful courtship after overcoming social obstacles to such a resolution by using gangsterish violence.

In “Transcontinental” the wealthy are callous, racist, and corrupt, while

the workers are joyous and loving. The workers' victory is one of laughter. It results in social integration through the screwball comedy, where things are not what they seem, where reversals bring about community cooperation and utopian harmony. In its final episode of specific dramatic action, Wright's poem embraces the dominated/dominating female, a character that is one of the hallmarks of the screwball comedy genre, by elevating Pocahontas as an emblem of collectivization: "Bring her from her hiding place / Let the sun kiss her eyes / Drape her in a shawl of red wool / Tuck her in beside us / Our arms shall thaw the long cold of her shoulders" (lines 219–21). Having brought its "Red" bride into the car, the revolution achieves its final phase, described in depersonalized and abstract action: "rolling over tiles of red logic" (line 218), collective farms sprout up, prisons empty, and justice thunders. Wright urges the "forgotten Men" (line 208) to bring out from her hiding place Pocahontas, and here it is possible to recognize the Indian bride as a comedic heroine who is the sign of public individuality—thus Pocahontas mediates the abstract and the subjective. She is historical (and mythic), the protagonist of another romantic comedy (a comedy with a happy ending), and she is abstract in her capacity to symbolize the merging of the races in "maternal, semiotic processes" (Kristeva, *Desire* 136). Seated in the car beside the African American wheelman, Pocahontas is the matrix of the future, the essence of "AmericaAmericaAmerica" (line 248)—the poem's glossolalic, fugue-like final line—the surreal engenderer of the fetal mass individual of the revolution gestating in the maternal womb.

OWEN DODSON, "NEGRO HISTORY" (1936)

One of the most conceptually ambitious poems written by an African American poet in the thirties was Owen Dodson's "Negro History: A Sonnet Sequence," published in *New Masses* on April 14, 1936. In *Sorrow Is the Only Faithful One: The Life of Owen Dodson*, James V. Hatch relates the strange account of Dodson's becoming a published poet. Dodson's diffident reaction to a poem by Keats provoked his English instructor at Bates College, Professor Robert George Berkelman, to direct Dodson to "write a sonnet every week and bring it to me each Monday . . . until you write one as fine as Keats, or until you graduate, whichever comes first" (Hatch 27). Under Berkelman's direction, Dodson wrote sonnets from 1932 until 1936, and in his senior year he published a collection of eight of them in a chapbook titled *Jungle Stars*. Subsequently, these poems were published in *The Crisis* and *New Masses*, though Hatch does not explain how Dodson's work came to appear in radical publications. Hatch concludes this account by relating that

after Dodson published his eight sonnets, Berkelman informed the young poet that Dodson had made a grave error in choosing the Shakespearean sonnet as a form in which to write about slavery—a subject too fiery for the cool, formalized sonnet. (The sonnet is further discussed in chapter 2.) Berkelman further informed Dodson that because content and form go together, the subject of slavery required “a kind of Walt Whitman style” (Hatch 29). (In the thirties a style of poetry that blended elements from Walt Whitman [paratactic and parallel line structures] and Carl Sandburg [a less lyrical voice that Whitman’s] became de rigueur for a number of black poets, including Sterling Brown, Frank Marshall Davis, Richard Wright, Welborn Victor Jenkins, and Margaret Walker, though Dodson never did adopt the Whitman-Sandburg manner.) In later years Dodson dismissed his sonnets as vitiated from a lack of writing experience, life experience, and in-depth reading, given that he had not even read Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative*. Despite Dodson’s statement that “Negro History” is nearly valueless because “it was all imaginary” (Hatch 29), the sequence tackles the trans-Atlantic transportation of slaves, a subject one encounters only rarely in African American poetry prior to Robert Hayden’s “Middle Passage” (1962).

Ignoring Berkelman’s opinion about the racial nature of form and content in poetry, Dodson used a number of innovations to make the sonnet a more resonant instrument. Dodson superseded the restricted emotional range of the sonnet by extending the lyric into a sonnet sequence that carried the theme into a more analytical and discursively resourceful handling than was possible in the solitary sonnet. Dodson had taken as his mainstay Keats’s “extravagant and sensuous wordplay” (Hanson “Byron on Keats”), compounding and concentrating the effects of allusions, synecdoches, and puns, so that (as I will show) his four sonnets attain a wide span of associative meanings. As it announces its historiographic purpose, the “Negro History” sequence reaches toward historical consciousness, where as Marx has it the “vision of the past turns [historical individuals] toward the future, . . . kindles the hope that justice will yet come and happiness is behind the mountain they are climbing” (Schmidt 3). In these ways Dodson’s “Negro History” bears the stamp of the documentary and historicizing forms that characterized much of the cultural production of the iconoclastic period in which Dodson wrote his poems (Browder 2). Yet on close examination, Dodson’s sequence does not cohere with Marxist ideology. And though his four sonnets appear to conform to the conventions of the sonnet form, Dodson invented a technique that transforms and extends the form’s semantic possibilities.

“Negro History” deserves a place in a discussion of long poems on the Crash and the Great Depression because the long poem is not only a formal

but also an intellectual construct. The long poem expresses the will to grapple with the largest possible questions and to encompass or create a world (Shepherd). Dodson's meditation on the phases of black identity construction takes as its subject the struggle to build a new type of humanity and a new society. In "Negro History" the formal, antimodernist surface is deceptive, for Dodson overrides the archaisms of the form with collagelike and interart techniques. In their *New Masses* printing, the left margin contains subtitles set in italic type that serve as explanatory frames for the poems: "On the Slave Ship," "Past and Future," "Post Emancipation," and "Harlem." This presentation suggests in both form and content the influence of the "documentary imagination" that was the hallmark of New Deal art—particularly mural cycles with historical themes, although these complex historical murals had appeared before the crash.² Boardman Robinson's *The History of Trade [Commerce]* had been painted in 1929 and placed in the Kaufman Department Store in Pittsburg in 1930. The ten panels, painted in the style of Thomas Hart Benton, depicted episodes such as "The Portuguese in India—The Fifteenth Century," "The English in China—The Seventeenth Century," and "Slave Traders in America—The Eighteenth Century" (Potter 2). K. A. Marling characterizes this treatment of the past as a "smooth, unbroken flow of events" that provides the viewer with a sense of stability derived from the feeling that "the sequence can and will continue ad infinitum" (quoted in Staples 35).

Notably, "Negro History" periodizes history as Negro history, not as American history. The four sonnets treat four aspects of Negro history; however, the sonnets are not equal in transparency and exigency. "On the Slave Ship" takes up the signal collective experience of the transportation of millions of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean—voyages that occurred many times over hundreds of years. In order for the Middle Passage to be thought of as a historical period, Dodson's periodicity must construct a paradoxically *egoistic* and *collective-simultaneous* handling of time in which many other things must happen during the *period* of individual acts of transportation. In "On the Slave Ship," this disparity is demonstrated by the narrator's address to a collective "We" while also by measuring the span of the historical period of waiting and suffering against "the last / Black exile" (lines 3–4). "Past and Future" presents an eventless and impersonal debate between religious otherworldliness and rebellion that may also be thought to have extended over a long period of time, perhaps the entire span of Negro history. Emancipation was a historical event, though by assigning his third sonnet to "Post Emancipation," Dodson addressed his poem to another long period of time without limiting his periodization to events, historical figures, or a narrative: the sonnet summarizes the failure of Reconstruction and the imposition of

Jim Crow. Finally, the mysterious fourth sonnet, “Harlem,” seems to suggest that the crash of 1929 ended the relative social progress initiated by the brief and recent phase of black migration out of the South for industrial work in the North. In contrast to the abstraction of the preceding sonnets, “Harlem” names a specific location (which may also be read as a period of time), yet its botanical imagery and premonitory tone present considerable difficulties of interpretation.

Thus, Owen Dodson’s sonnet sequence, “Negro History,” through an explicitly Negro historical panorama composed of four discrete, sequential episodes or historical moments, reinscribes the cultural nationalism promoted by the New Deal. Dodson’s panoramic-modular approach to the depiction of historical imagery parallels that used in many of the 1,100 public murals commissioned by the government’s Section of Fine Arts during the New Deal. Many of the more ambitious murals depicted narrative scenes in sequential order. For example, the *Plants of the World* mural (1938) at the Field Museum in Chicago consists of eighteen panels. *The Story of Natural Drugs* (1937); at the University of Chicago Medical Center, consists of two large murals that are meant to be read chronologically from top to bottom. Similarly, the historical narrative in Dodson’s poem implies a linear progression that brings the reader from Africa to Harlem in four monumental stages. Harlem, thus, not only is a resonant geographic location in space but also embodies the final historical epoch in the narrative of the American Negro. Dodson’s struggle to bring order to this sweeping sociohistorical idea and his desperate ideological conviction resulted in a highly compressed sequence of four sonnets—a sequence whose emotional timbre is at once nervous, lyrical, and repressed.

Keats, according to James V. Hatch, is the source of Dodson’s conception of the poetics of the sonnet. However, it is Claude McKay—as a contemporary literary progenitor and as a militant radical—that Dodson’s sequence interrogates. The “boys” (line 2) and “girls” (line 4) of “Harlem” are synonymous with “The wine-flushed, bold-eyed *boys* and even the *girls*” of McKay’s sonnet, “The Harlem Dancer” (*SP* 61; emphasis added). Because he strips away McKay’s romantic handling of these figures, the implication remains that Dodson finds fault with the depiction of McKay’s lascivious and degenerate youths: McKay’s sonnet serves as an example of the tendency of the sonnet tradition to overwhelm the poet, as McKay gives in to the lengthy and lyrical depiction of a subject that is not worthy of such elaborate and costly treatment—the result of the so-called ideology of form that inhabits the sonnet. McKay and Dodson are equally subject to the influence of Keats’s intricate wordplay. McKay enriches his textures with a musical style that is “between sense and nonsense, between *language* and *rhythm*” (Kristeva,

Desire 135) so that his sonnets repeatedly play off of such musical-semiotic pairings as dim/mad, ancient/sciences (*SP* “Africa” 40); gaze/gauze, self/falsely, (*HS* “The Harlem Dancer” 42), and sinks/king (*SP* “America” 59). Such phonic uses of “sound-symbolism” are subjective, and they provide no unchanging or intrinsic meanings; only the contexts create semantic meanings for the music (Dicking 83). The synthesis of sound and sense in Keats’s work perhaps reached its limit when the sound motifs “echo the sense of the poem, as in the repetition of s-n-t in Keats’s “Sonnet on the Sonnet” (Logan 213). Dodson, in his more completely realized *anagrammatic* language play, has developed this technique beyond motifs of sound-symbolism so that in his sequence the words *interrelate* in ways that are definitional, systematic, and contextualizing.

In Dodson’s four sonnets, his high degree of formal and thematic unity yields two systems of anagrams that enact the meanings of his poem so that his textual recombinations eschew musical nonsense and achieve semantic intersection. Through these semantic intersections, Dodson created a new poetic device—the *dialectical anagram*—that sets in opposition pairs of words that contain an anagrammed relationship in addition to a dialectical semantic discourse. The motivation for this figure may be that Dodson was influenced by a comment that Spengler made about the quality of “form-language”: “The more nearly a Culture approaches the noon culmination of its being, the more virile, austere, controlled, intense the form-language it has secured for itself, the more assured its sense of its own power, the clearer its lineaments” (*Decline* vol. 1 107).

In “Negro History” there are two sets of dialectical anagrams. The first set operates within the four sonnets. “On the Slave Ship” primarily depends on the dialectical anagram that transposes “times” (line 2) into “smites” (line 4). “Past and Future” transposes “damn” (line 1) into “mend” (line 12). “Post Emancipation” transforms “hope” (line 1) into “echo” (line 13). “Harlem” changes “easy” (line 3) into “ex-ray” (line 10). A secondary set of dialectical anagrams operates among the sonnets—“lives” (1) / “shrivel” (sonnet 4), “dies” (sonnet 1) / “seed” (sonnet 3), “source” (sonnet 1) / “curse” (sonnet 2), “freedom” [doom] (sonnet 3) / “mood” (sonnet 3), and “groaning” (sonnet 1) / “grow” (sonnet 4). All of these varying associative relationships are dependent on a more succinct transposition that defines what Dodson is doing with language, namely the “swords” (line 28) and “words” (lines 40, 41) anagram that spans the final line of the second sonnet and the twelfth and thirteenth lines of the third sonnet. The swords/words conversion alludes to Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s aphorism from his play *Richelieu; or, The Conspiracy* (1839)—“The pen is mightier than the sword.” Because Dodson ends the sonnet sequence with “grow strong or starve,” his swords/words

figure also extends to another saying: “Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears: let the weak say ‘I am strong’” (*KJV Joel* 3:10). The implication of these conjoined aphorisms in the context of the poem is that Dodson casts doubt upon the efficacy of promises, and this is asserted in the surface text: “Distrust all words that echo to the stars.” (line 41). In other words, Dodson only brings up the Bulwer-Lytton aphorism to dismiss it with the aphorism from the book of Joel. To paraphrase the sense of the swords/words anagram, Dodson posits that the sword is mightier than the word and that the present historical period is a time in which it is best to take up arms.

Dodson’s time/smite anagram opens the poem to wordplay that I will designate the Spenglerian level of the poem because it derives from Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* (1918). In a sense, this Spenglerian level is announced by the title of the poem—“Negro History”—though the implications are not at first obvious. In contrast to Marxism,³ time is a manifest force in Oswald Spengler’s historiography”:

The central theme in *The Decline of the West* is that all higher cultures go through a life cycle analogous to that of an organic evolution, from birth to maturation, and to inevitable decline. Spengler used the analogy of four seasons: the spring (birth and infancy), summer (youth), fall (maturity), and winter (old age and decay). . . . Spengler found eight [great cultures] which are self-contained and have a distinctive “soul” or “style.” . . . Each of these units has an identical life-cycle lasting some thousand years. (Liukkonen “Oswald Spengler.” Web)

Spengler insists that Time is not an abstraction: “‘Time’ is no abstract phrase, but a name for the actuality of Irreversibility. Here there is only forward, never back” (*Decline* vol. 2 102). The thrust of “On the Slave Ship” becomes readily apparent only in comparison to its countertext, the thesis of the *Communist Manifesto*: “Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win.” Dodson plays with Marx’s trope in the near homonym change (14) / chains (30), which emphasizes the futility of hope; Dodson’s phrase “Distrust all words that echo to the stars” (line 41) applies as much to Marx as it does to Lincoln.

It is clear that “Negro History” is couched in an ethical premise derived from Oswald Spengler. As Clare Corbould has observed, “The idea that civilizations come and go, rise and fall, was popular among black Americans because it meant that they could not only rewrite the past but also imagine and hope for a better future, one different from that bound to emerge from dominant histories of the day. . . . Drawing heavily on Oswald Spengler’s

popular *The Decline of the West*, the first volume of which was translated in into English in 1918, black historians foretold an end to Western civilization” (65). Dodson suggests the title of Spengler’s book in line 43—“deep, dark flower of the west,” which invites us to extract *lower* from *flower* (with the sense of *going down*, *Untergang*) as the German title *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* has it. Oswald is heard indistinctly throughout the third and fourth sonnets in the assonance and alliteration of *dust*, *distrust*, *walls*, *petal’s*, *petals*, *hold*, and *shallow* (line 53), which approximates an anagram of *Oswald*. *Splinters* in line five sounds roughly like *Spengler*. If the title, “Negro History,” is read as an ideologically specific proposition, the concept of Negro history conforms with Herderian romantic nationalism but is well beyond the concerns of Third Period communism. Spengler’s system of world history, which is not directly descriptive of Negro history, which only takes in vastly larger historical structures, is not directly descriptive of Negro history, though *Decline* describes a mechanism that allows Dodson to find a conceptual niche within the temporal and intellectual vastness of world history for his minuscule study of Negro history in poetry. Keith Stimely summarized Spengler’s world-historical system⁴ in these terms:

Human history is the cyclical record of the rise and fall of unrelated High Cultures. These Cultures are in reality super life-forms, that is, they are organic in nature, and like all organisms must pass through the phases of birth-life-death. Though separate entities in themselves, all High Cultures experience parallel development, and events and phases in any one find their corresponding events and phases in the others. It is possible from the vantage point of the twentieth century to glean from the past the meaning of cyclic history, and thus to predict the decline and fall of the West. (2)

“Negro History: A Sonnet Sequence” recapitulates the central concepts of Spengler’s world-historical system, though since this is done at the figurative and lexical levels of his poem, Dodson offers a more cryptic than literal presentation. The word most closely associated with Spengler’s historiography is *doom*; Neil McInnes states that “Spengler provided a doomsday scenario regarding the future of civilization. . . . The *Untergang* he was prophesying did not mean a smash-up: ‘The idea of catastrophe is not implied in the word. It meant rather fulfillment (*Vollendung*); as Lewis Mumford said, ‘The title whispered the soothing words downfall, *doom*, death’” (quoted in McInnes, “Oswald Spengler Reconsidered”; emphasis added). Uncharacteristically, Dodson’s sequence creates a musical anagram with “doom” and “*mood*” in line 4 of “Post Emancipation.” Yet, the music of “doom” and

“mood” plays unsatisfactorily against the dialectical anagrams that otherwise dominate the word play in “Negro history.” It is tempting to add “freedom” (Post-Emancipation, line 6) to this reading, where “freedom” stands as the antithesis of “doom,” while also affirming the Spenglerian idea that freedom is illusory: “Universal human rights, freedom, and equality are literature and abstraction and not facts” (Spengler, *Decline* vol. 2 183).

Another important Spenglerian concept is the “seasonal life cycle of civilizations,”⁵ and this is alluded to by the four sonnets that stand for the four seasons. Since Dodson assumed that the Great Depression was a further sign that the West was in its autumnal phase, he chose to refer to this decline by means of a rich lexicon of decomposition, using words such as “season” (line 16), “autumn” (line 25), “fall” (line 5), “died” (line 36), “dies” (line 4), “death” (lines 1, 16, 25), “dying” (line 23), “rotting” (line 53), “rancid” (line 12), and “shrivels” (line 46). Spengler’s system describes two kinds of time, so Dodson replied with a rich temporal lexicon, including the words “time” (line 14), “times” (line 2), “future” (line 15), “forecasting” (line 25), “years” (line 27), “yet” (line 19), “when” (line 42), “till” (line 35), “centuries” (line 35), “eons” (line 35), “destines” (line 14), “fate” (line 14), “transitory” (line 27), “delay” (line 16), “passed” (line 1), “anew” (line 47), “never” (line 7), “wait” (line 13), “end” (line 24), “frequent” (line 28), and “past” (line 15). In “Negro History” Dodson pairs *time* with *smite*. *Smite* is a word heavy with associations. It occurs 125 times in the Old Testament and appears in five of the Bible’s books: Genesis, Deuteronomy, Samuel, Zechariah, and Numbers. The biblical story that best corresponds to Dodson’s concept of Negro history is the story of the Jewish people’s captivity in Egypt, especially when Yahweh tells Moses in Exodus 3:20, “And I will stretch out my hand, and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in the midst thereof: and after that he will let you go.” (*KJV*). In “Negro History” Dodson subverts the lack of agency that characterizes the original narrative, since Yahweh delivers the enslaved Hebrews who are not called upon to resist the Egyptians: the time/smite anagram seems to suggest a parallel delivery that does not require action from the enslaved African Americans.

However, the redress that is to come about through the potential agency of the “black exile[s]” (line 4) must occur in some future period of time that exists beyond the four sonnets of Dodson’s sequence, for “Negro History” completes its recapitulation of Negro history with the speaker continuing to turn his attention and his intelligence *toward the past*. Yahweh’s promise takes the form of “I will,” whereas the slaves in Dodson’s sequence must content themselves with the polyvalence of smite/might—with the comic/tragic double meaning of *might* as either “physical or bodily strength” (*AHD*) or “the past tense of may” (*AHD*), the latter definition suggesting conditionality

(and the possibility of failure). At the same time, the first two sonnets reinforce the assertion of some immaterial promise of emancipation in the insistent repetitions of “will sleep” (line 2), “will come” (line 12), and “will come” (line 13) in “On the Slave Ship” and of “will come” (line 18) and “will mend” (line 22) in “Past and Future.” Thus, Dodson creates tension between meta-physical predetermination and human effort. The poem turns on the word *reign*—a homonym of rain in line 13, which the desperate Africans look to for relief from their misery. The *reign* to which Dodson looks is the Roman phase of Spengler’s historical morphology: “During ‘autumn,’ life becomes dominated by materialist, instead of artistic and religious, concerns, and by purely rational and mechanical, instead of dream-like and imaginative, thinking. . . . This is the transition to the era of ‘Civilization’ (again, used in a technical sense). The realm is falling back into barbarism, the only thing that counts being brute force” (Chin 2007). In keeping with the requirements of this violent phase of history, Dodson’s sequence ends with an analogous endorsement of violence, “Grow strong or starve”—a parodic rejection of the ambivalence of Hughes’s “I, Too” (1925): “I am the darker brother. / They send me to eat in the kitchen / When company comes, / But I laugh / And eat well, / and grow strong.”

In Hughes’s poem, “I, Too,” the implications of “the darker brother’s” strength, for Hughes’s “darker brother” speaks as one who represents the Negro masses—who are in Hughes’s poem orphans who are sent into the kitchen and self-assured and optimistic. By contrast, in the enounced of “Harlem,” the individual has been merged into a “you” (“Together you must silence winds that blew” [line 47]) that the speaker charges with carrying out the collective action of taking the strength depicted by Hughes and using it as a means to action. In Dodson’s poem, it is clear that without direct and timely action, the moment will be lost and the gathered strength will come to nothing. “Harlem” considers the danger of failure: the strength of the New Negro movement may be wasted. Dodson’s empirical and emulative wordplay opens up *wary* in line three of “Harlem” to a reading of the word as “war-y,” so that the embedded word *war* is emphasized, and the meaning shifts to “warlike”—“be war-y”—an exhortation not to wage class war but to adopt the stance of the warrior. Dodson wrote this passage in the shadow of Spengler’s description of the shift to a new historical phase of the decline of America: according to Spengler, “The civilization phase concludes with the Age of Caesarism. . . . The advent of the Caesars marks the return of Authority and Duty, of Honor and ‘Blood,’ and the end of democracy. With this arrives the ‘imperialistic’ stage of civilization, in which the Caesars with their bands of followers battle each other for control of the earth. The great masses are uncomprehending and uncaring” (Stimely 2). *Wary*, derived

from “to perceive, to watch out for” (*AHD*), intimates the same advice given in line 14, where “be conscious” is an emphatic echo of “be wary.” Dodson delivers his opinion of the Harlem movement in “Harlem” through the pun on “veins” in the twelfth line: “Within the petal’s veins, reveals the fears”—namely, that the “renaissance” was *in vain* unless African Americans adopt a new resolve.

Much of “Harlem,” the final sonnet in the sequence, is derived from the opening paragraphs of volume 2 of *The Decline of the West*. The opening line of the sonnet, “Harlem—deep, dark flower of the west”—takes up the substance and mood of the opening sentence, “Regard the flowers at eventide as, one after the other, they close in the setting sun” (4). Dodson’s association of flowers, darkness, and the west suggests the similar associations of Spengler’s text. The fear that Dodson refers to in line 12, “Within the petal’s veins, reveals the fears,” is introduced in the second sentence of the opening paragraph: “Strange is the feeling that then presses in upon you a feeling of enigmatic fear in the presence of this blind dreamlike earth-bound existence” (3). Dodson’s introduction of the x-ray machine in line 10, “Remember that the x-ray of the years,” is the most original element of his sonnet. is the most original element of his sonnet. Spengler looks at his specimens with another machine—the microscope: “The seeds of a flowering plant show, under the microscope, two sheath-leaves which form and protect the young plant that is presently to turn towards the light, with its organs of the life-cycle and of reproduction, and in addition a third, which contains the future root and tells us that the plant is destined irrevocably to become once again part of a landscape” (4). This passage provides the suggestions that generate the unaccountable materials that belong to the fourth sonnet, namely stamens, pollen, petals, petal’s veins. Several lines later, Spengler makes clear why Dodson associates these plant forms with the boys and girls of Harlem: “Sense and object, I and thou, cause and effect, thing and property each of these is a tension between discretets, and when the state pregnantly called “*détente*” appears, then at once fatigue, and presently sleep, set in for the microcosmic side of life. *A human being asleep, discharged of all tensions, is leading only a plantlike existence*” (4; emphasis added).

In the thirties the x-ray marked a more recent advance in the powers of scientific observation than the microscope. In the thirties, pulmonary tuberculosis took more lives than any other contagious disease. There was no cure for tuberculosis in the thirties, but the “public health community was already successfully linking x-ray technology to the control of tuberculosis” (Curtin 48–9). Dodson’s handling of the x-ray machine is couched within the medical discourse of disease detection, and as such it is a symbol of the Spenglerian world-historical gaze with which Dodson’s poem analyzes

the Harlem phase of Negro history. Also, the x-ray looks beneath the skin, and thus it dissolves the importance of race. Spengler was not interested in race as it was understood in America in the thirties: “Thereby the cosmic-plantlike side of life, of Being, is invested with a character of duration. This I call race” (*Decline* vol. 1 113). Dodson’s skepticism would seem to have extended far enough that the unconventional notion of a “Negro history”—in the America of the thirties, black Americans officially had no officially recognized history—ultimately serves to deconstruct the racial essentialism that might have been thought to give them a history. Dodson’s thesis asserts that in the philosophy of history described in *The Decline of the West*, there is no admissibility for such a concept as Negro history: black Americans either become world-historical actors or cease to exist.

The Great Depression is Dodson’s x-ray machine. In “*Harlem*,” Dodson reifies his break with Hughes’s romantic, cultural, nationalist discourse by *medicalizing* his nationalist-realist analysis and by equipping the Spengler-inflected speaker in the poem with the latest scientific diagnostic device, the Roentgen X-ray machine. With the new technological perspective that “the ex-ray of the years” (line 10) provides, Dodson’s persona diagnoses the pulmonary tubercular condition of the racial lungs—the “deep, dark flower[s] of the west”—and directly observes and measures the “rotting of the shallow halls / Within the petal’s veins” (lines 11–12). Through his “ex-ray” trope, Dodson indicts Americans for their social failures. Since the counteranagram of *ex-ray* is *easy*, the associations revolve around dis-ease and Spengler’s animal-plant analogy. The historical x-ray shows the diseases in the social body, specifically the diseases within the bodies of black Americans: black Americans are passive, plantlike, and they are tubercular. The theme of American social failure is depicted in the “rotting of the shallow halls” (line 53), for in the thirties it was common knowledge that the “hallowed hall” was Carpenter’s Hall, where the Founding Fathers signed the Declaration of Independence. So to say that the hall is “shallow” and “rotting” is to reveal the ill health of American culture. In the third sonnet, Dodson deprecates the Emancipation Proclamation: “The parchment that declared that we were free / Is now collecting dust in some dark spot” (lines 37–8). This statement depicts American racial hypocrisy as a “dark spot” of infection—a dark spot that might appear on an x-ray film.

Through an intricate series of tropes, Dodson rests his analysis of Harlem on “x-rays” of Langston Hughes and other Harlem colleagues. It is possible to identify Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen as one of the subjects of “Harlem,” for “copper” (lines 8, 13) and “sun” (line 3) insinuate the title of Cullen’s 1927 collection of poems, *Copper Sun*. Another prominent Harlem Renaissance figure, novelist Rudolph Fisher, is implicated through the fact

that he was a medical doctor and an x-ray specialist, a rarity in the 1920s and 1930s. But Dodson's x-ray is designated an "ex-ray" (line 10) to emphasize that the Harlem Renaissance is forevermore passé. Because the (e)x-ray machine is a technological trope, the poet opposes order and rationalism to the irrationalism, exoticism, and primitivism of the Harlem Renaissance. Dodson's disgust with Harlem is also derived from Spengler, who argues that in the autumnal phase of civilization, there is always to be found, so to speak, a New York and a Harlem: "But the relief of hard, intensive brain-work by its opposite conscious and practiced fooling of intellectual tension by the bodily tension of sport, of bodily tension by the sensual training after 'pleasure' and the spiritual straining after the 'excitements' of betting and competitions, of the pure logic of the day's work by a consciously enjoyed mysticism all this is common to the world-cities of all the Civilizations. *Cinema, Expressionism, Theosophy, boxing contests, nigger dances, poker, and racing—one can find it all in Rome*" (*Decline* vol. 2 103; emphasis added). Dodson articulates a harsh new meaning of the Cullen-Hughes debate between "art for art's sake" and "racial art"; the Depression forced a shift in the debate. The discourses of the twenties that depended on the dyad of culture/politics were reinscribed by Dodson as the dialectic of survival/death. The Great Depression silenced the laughter of Hughes's "darker brother." The unemployment rate for black men was as high as 50 percent in some major cities. The speaker in Hughes's poem assures the reader that African Americans have achieved social progress; the speaker in Dodson's sonnet rejects this claim.

Looking beyond "Harlem" to the three sonnets that precede it in the "Negro History" sequence, it is apparent that what Dodson means by "history" rather than a series of events, is a tension between "the heavy chains of servitude" ("Post Emancipation" line 2)—abjection, dehumanization, and chattel slavery—and emancipation. In the sonnet sequence, unidentified voices debate the wisdom of choosing either accommodation or resistance during this period of suffering. The militant interlocutor dismisses accommodation as "hopeless resignation" ("Past and Future" line 10). He urges his people to "distrust all words that echo to the stars" ("Post Emancipation" line 13), so that the day will come when they "will mend / The patches of these transitory years / With swords, with hate" ("Past and Future" lines 12–14). The political position of the speaker is presumably that of the poet: resistance is ineffective and dangerous until the proper time arrives. The resistance-accommodation dyad was evident in the thirties: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League (NUL) adopted gradualist positions while the Communist Party of the United States of America called for revolution. While Dodson did not assume the strident mode of Hughes, Wright, and Davis, all of whom

embraced the revolutionary position, Dodson nonetheless challenged the black masses to “grow strong or starve”—suggesting that with the weakening of the capitalist system in the Depression, the *time* for movement, life, and individuation had finally come to pass. Dodson’s sequence shows that he had absorbed the analogical form of Spengler’s thought. In the final analysis, what Dodson presented was the notion that in the autumnal phase of Caesarism, black Americans must make the transition from “plants” to “animals,” for as Spengler states, “Servitude and freedom—this is in last and deepest analysis the differentia by which we distinguish vegetable and animal existence” (*Decline* vol. 2 23). Dodson looks to the coming of “the force-men of the next centuries” (*Decline* vol. 1 37), and he aligns his sonnets with Spengler’s admonition “I can only hope that men of the new generation may be moved by this book to devote themselves to technics instead of lyrics, the sea instead of the paint-brush, and politics instead of epistemology. Better they could not do” (*Decline* vol. 1 41).

WELBORN VICTOR JENKINS,
TRUMPET IN THE NEW MOON (1934)

Jenkins’s *Trumpet in the New Moon* is a 448-line free-verse sequence with a prosy and didactic tone that was derived more from Sandburg than from the meditative, prophetic, and celebratory lyricism of Whitman. At line 24, the poem begins to describe what are for Jenkins the significant and defining episodes of America’s history. Lines 24 to 110 describe the discovery of the North American continent, the founding of the United States, and the chronicle of events leading up to the late 1920s. Lines 112 to 138 detail the exploitation of black labor. Lines 138 to 172 present Jenkins’s discourse on African American labor, which Jenkins conceives of as “service.” Lines 173 to 185 discuss patience. The nearly one hundred lines from 185 to 270 present the story of the aviator Charles Lindbergh. Lines 272 to 284 offer a discussion of racism and lynching. From line 285 to 305, the poem addresses the theme of historical decline, and the aura of Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* seems to inform that section. Lines 306 to 351 exhort the nation to change its ways. Subsumed in that section is a brief presentation of the Scottsboro Boys case (lines 346–351). The poem crescendos after line 352 as the speaker describes the British model of nobility and heroism; this section celebrates nationalism and sacrifice. Searching even farther afield for models of fortitude and dedication, Jenkins invokes the Roman gladiators in lines 419 to 436. In lines 437 to 448, the poem concludes with the possibility of a national rebirth. Though failure is the subject of *Trumpet*, Jenkins does not

appropriate the imagery of failure directly. He treats the Great Depression as a speech act that can be reversed through language; accordingly, he says, “Fail not has been your watch word” (line 239).

In *Trumpet in the New Moon*, the Whitmanian persona that the poet adopts is not so much the sign of the slippage of the real (Barnard 101) as it is the means to regain the world of *real things*. Jenkins’s project revolves around the possibility of a vision of an authentic culture in the past that has been overshadowed by the infinitely replicated and adroitly meaningless productions of modern mass culture. Jenkins associates Whitman with the discourses of an authentic culture which the social artists of the 1930s were striving to reconstruct (Barnard 101). Whitman is above all the poet of work and the visualizer of the worker: while Whitman spoke as an individual, he also placed himself among the masses and within the community and the nation. Whitman’s style provided Jenkins a vehicle for the assimilation of *the real*: the loose, organic form of the Whitmanian sequence allowed the introduction and consideration of an endless variety of themes. Jenkins embraced Whitman because Whitman was considered democracy’s poet and spokesman. Jenkins proved to be a political and philosophical descendant of Walt Whitman. Though Jenkins’s poetry does not match Whitman’s lyricism and eloquence, Jenkins succeeded in assuming the voice and posture of the authoritative national poet.

Trumpet opens with a stern declaration addressed to the nation: “You have work to do, America— / You have work to be done / The goal which was set for you in the dreams of your founders / has not been realized” (lines 1–4). The word *work*, a fundamental word in Whitman’s vocabulary, occurs many times in *Leaves of Grass*,⁶ indicating the intricate intertextuality between *Trumpet* and *Leaves*. The passage of Whitman’s that comes closest to Jenkins’s opening occurs in “By Blue Ontario’s Shore.” The lines point to work that is yet to be done (one of the major themes of *Trumpet*): “The immortal poets of Asia and Europe have done their work and Pass’d to other spheres, / A work remains, the work of surpassing all they have done” (“By Blue Ontario’s Shore” section 5, lines 3–4).

Whitman expresses concern that softness and civilization will lead to degeneracy and threaten America’s prospects for survival. In Whitman’s cultural critique, he urges his countrymen to take up *a work* as a means to avoid cultural decline and historical obliteration. Yet the work that Whitman recommends to future generations is not work and is not to be undertaken for its own sake. It is in the Sandburg corpus that work is the defining, authenticating activity of American culture: Chicago’s identity is stripped to its work—it is nothing more or less than the “Hog Butcher for the world” (“Chicago” line 1). Whitman conflates the American builders with

the *poets* of Asia and Europe. Whitmanian work is not labor, it is something approaching a *work of art*: “Our republic is, in performance, really enacting today the grandest arts, poems, etc., by beating up the wilderness into fertile farms, and in her railroads, ships, machinery, etc.” (“Democratic Vistas” 494). While *Trumpets* also addresses the broader sweep of historical succession, Jenkins’s poem does not warn against the abstract dangers of civilization; rather, *Trumpet* warns against the barbarism of the Great Depression and the oppressive racism of the unchallenged Jim Crow system. *Trumpet in the New Moon*—Jenkins’s revision of Whitman—is a historical narrative that structures the American democratic experiment as an enterprise that begins with a golden age and thereafter suffers a series of lapses that endanger the nation’s promise:

The goal which was set for you in the dreams of your founders
Has not been realized.
You are off the trail, America—
You are wandering in the Wilderness like the Israelites of old.
You are worshipping strange gods, America—
You have lost your first love and fallen
from grace.
In your early garb, I thought you beautiful.
Your coon-skin cap, your leathern breeches, your brogans,
 your axe and your flintlock were beautiful to me, America,
Because your motives were pure.
Then was your Love boundless,
Then was your Hope boundless,
Then was your Enthusiasm boundless
Because
Your faith was boundless.
(lines 3–17)

In the conceptual structure that underlies *Trumpet in the New Moon*, the “Age of Gold is in the past and also in the future”: “You were honor bright; and, at least your heart was right” (ln 23; Eliade, *Myth and Reality* 53). The debate about history that Jenkins engages by structuring his poem as a degenerating historical narrative does not in any way exempt his formulations from being provisional. For example, Frank Marshall Davis’s “What Do You Want, America?” (a parody of Sandburg’s “Chicago”) proposes a counternarrative in which Jenkins’s American Eden never existed. The first twenty lines of *Trumpet in the New Moon* establish, as the major theme of the poem, the proposition that *the golden age of American purity is in eclipse*.

At the outset, Jenkins establishes a crucial intertextuality between the Bible and *Trumpet in the New Moon*. Jenkins compares Americans to the Israelites. Both peoples have wandered in the wilderness and worshipped strange gods. Further, the title of the poem is taken from Psalms 81:3. Jenkins grounds his poem in the intertextuality between the American historical narrative and the Jewish historical narrative so that the Bible serves as a historiographic underpinning to his reading of American history. Jenkins's historiography follows the shape of biblical mythic narrative—"a repeating *mythos* of the apostasy and restoration of Israel. This gives us a narrative structure that is roughly U-shaped, the apostasy being followed by a descent into disaster and bondage, which in turn is followed by repentance, then by a rise through deliverance to a point more or less on the level from which the descent began" (Frye 168). Jenkins's historiography intersects the American historical narrative at the phase of the Great Depression, the specific instance of the nation in decline, and it equates the American people with the lost and wandering Hebrews. Thus, *Trumpet* departs from the tradition of the spirituals, a tradition in which slaves and sharecroppers identified themselves with the enslaved Israelites of the Bible. Jenkins's poem appropriates the Bible as an intertext to assist in the mythologizing of American history. The most striking feature of Jenkins's poem, then, is that he presents American history as the myth of an originally socially fused and spiritually homogenous people that comes in time to be afflicted with their adherence to individuality—a contradictory myth of fundamental social fragmentation. So carefully is this feature of the poem obscured beneath the rhetoric of Jenkins's argument and beneath the panoply of historical details, it is not readily apparent that Jenkins includes African Americans in his condemnatory dissertation on American history.

Hazel V. Carby has located two discourses that are particularly pertinent to the examination of Jenkins's poem: "ideologies of a romantic rural folk tradition" and "[representations of] the collective acts of a black community as signs for future collective acts of rebellion and liberation" (140). However, Jenkins's discourse is a departure from the discourse of *revolution* and the discourse of *romance*, for Jenkins's poem constructs an individual and original textual response to the historical conditions of the Depression. Yet Jenkins does not announce his program in terms that challenge these pervasive discourses. Instead, he approaches his subject tangentially by using a prophetic voice as rhetorical subterfuge while creating a complicated tragic-heroic national myth.

Jenkins's rapid and compressed narrative of American history proceeds conventionally, until his narratives reaches the beginning of industrial modernity and the rise of American national power at the conclusion of the First World War:

But now I thought I saw another shadow creeping
 over the epic canvass:
 Unrest—The casting Adrift from the Moorings of Faith—
 “The Revolt of Youth”—Candor Run Riot—Morals Amuck—
 A Break in conduct—A loss of Respect for many of the Ancient Virtues.
 So what have you? I ask you, America—
 What have you done? and what have you come upon?
 Cynicism! Disillusionment! Night Clubs! “Legs” Diamond!
 “Speakies!” Capone! Joy Rides! “Whoopee!!!”
 (102–111)

In Jenkins’s view, one destructive attribute characterizes the modern sensibility: disillusionment. Jenkins writes, “Directly I thought I saw the bitter fruit of that ‘Disillusionment’” (line 114). Disillusionment is the new factor that prevents Americans from doing the required work and that breeds a catalog of modern evils: “intolerance” (line 116); lynching (“the altars of Human Sacrifices,” [line 119]); race riots (“Tulsa, Atlanta, Washington, Chicago,” [line 124]); and hatred (“Who are they who drove the shaft of hate between / the working black and the working white?” [lines 128–29]). Jenkins’s eccentric interpretation of American history aligned with the Southern Agrarians’ reading of history. Responding to the crash of 1929 and the ensuing economic collapse, the Southern Agrarians published *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* in 1930. The Agrarians believed that the economic catastrophe was the result of industrialism, and they advocated a return to the older way of life: “They wished to recapture the virtues of the vanished past through a program that called for de-industrialization and the encouragement of widely diffused small property holdings as a basis for social stability and order” (Sutton 109). The Agrarians ignored the facts that the society that they idealized “had rested upon a system of human slavery” (Sutton 109) and that “the stable, cultured old order to which they looked back nostalgically never existed except in the realm of fantasy” (Sutton 109). Despite what sounds like a Marxist critique of class conflict in such lines as “Who are they who drove the shaft of hate between / the working black and the working white?” (line 126), Jenkins came to a similar advocacy of agrarian culture.

The pronouncedly un-Marxist interpretation of race relations that Jenkins develops in his long poem centers its discourse on the words *disillusionment* and *service*. Disillusionment is at the heart of Jenkins’s analysis. Whereas the Marxists and the Southern Agrarians thought that racial problems resulted from the socioeconomic system, Jenkins believed that the problems started within the hearts of the ruling class. Whereas the Marxists saw capitalism as the producer of its own destruction, and the Agrarians traced

the failure of capitalism to the rise of industrialism, Jenkins thought that the problems stemmed not from *systems* but rather from moral lapses brought about by the shocks of modern warfare. Jenkins's reading of history does not allow for a Marxist bifurcation of classes, in which the proletariat defeats its class enemies and creates a new type of society. Jenkins's perception that the ruling class suffered from *disillusionment* caused him to confront his contemporaries with the proposition that no single faction of society can save itself at the expense of another. Society succeeds or fails in its entirety. This proposition resembles Oswald Spengler's conception of civilization as a living organization. Jenkins was right to take disillusionment seriously; it ultimately contributed to the discourses of the thirties that helped to end the Depression. Disillusion recognizably entered American life during the First World War, and social analysts took it seriously as a social factor. From a psychoanalytic perspective, disillusion is considered dangerous, as "it is accompanied by . . . depression, despair, rage, or anxiety, and it results in self-fragmentation or self-dissolution" (Rotenberg 140). Hence, it follows that McKay characterized the Harlem rioters of 1935 as "disillusioned" (see chapter 3). In his "Negro History" sonnet sequence, Dodson grounds the second sonnet in "The disillusion of this life" (line 17). Yet Jenkins disagrees with the Agrarians, who, like the dialectical Marxists, were grounded in a systemic dialectic, one that opposed agrarianism with industrialism. In Jenkins's antidialectical discourse, the collapse of the capitalist economic system was the result of the willingness of highly placed individuals to violate moral and ethical codes that had long been in effect and had, throughout American history, been responsible for assuring the stability of society. Of course, both Jenkins and the Agrarians endorsed idealized views of the past; their visions of society were based on myth more than on history.

Jenkins saw interethnic, interclass *service* as the principle that organized and sustained traditional American society. Fundamental to this view is the proposition that American society was originally without contradictions, tensions, and contending factions, with each component serving the common good. In this view, divisions within the social whole do not arise out of inherent conflicts (such as competing class interests or the dehumanizing means of industrial production) but out of the willful and conscious decisions of individuals to separate themselves from the social collective. Antisocial actions, if they are to have consequences, must be performed by individuals with formidable social power who violate the social contract to benefit themselves: "You Masters who have exploited the black laborer for centuries, / Held us up as a constant threat to the white working-man, / causing him to despise us, / Causing him to consider us a perennial menace to his well-being— / Is the light worth the candle? / Does the end justify the means?" (lines 130–35).

In *Trumpet*, Jenkins does not recognize that he contradicts himself about slavery. The historical fact of slavery at times can be treated in various discourses as a signifier, the meaning of which is shifted according to various requirements so that slavery may in a sense disappear altogether, as it has in Jenkins's *Trumpet*. Hazel V. Carby has remarked upon "Selznick's liberal gesture in portraying blacks as peasants rather than as slaves" in *Gone with the Wind* (133). Slavery undergoes a similar disappearance in *Trumpet*, as Jenkins investigates the relation between blacks and whites, an investigation that leads to his revisory concept of *service*: "Sing of the service— / Remember the service" (lines 135–36). In privileging service, Jenkins ignores the textual productions of the black folk (work songs, spirituals, folk tales, blues, and slave narratives) that was so widely embraced by writers and intellectuals in the 1930s, so that Jenkins disallows African Americans any unmediated oral responses to their *enslavement*. The performers of these vaunted musical and narrative forms are denied their own voices in *Trumpet*. Nevertheless, Jenkins's evocative and original treatment of service was of sufficient importance that Sterling Brown quoted it in *Negro Poetry and Drama*.

While the discourse of work (labor, unemployment, strikes, jobs) permeated every aspect of the culture of the thirties, there was no discernible discourse of *service*, as there had been under the feudal social system, where servants appeared often in the comedic movies of the thirties. Their performances are marked by a resistance to service and a willingness to refuse to be *servile*. For example, in the *Thin Man* movies, Beulah, the black servant, constantly grouses about her duties and disparages the bohemian behavior of her employers. The screwball comedy *My Man Godfrey* (1936) presents a racially neutral depiction of service. In the movie, a whimsical, upper-class architect masquerades as a "forgotten man" who is happy to work as a butler for an obnoxious wealthy family that is unable to keep servants. "Godfrey's" servant-as-trickster persona subverts his upper-class employers' anachronistic expectation that servants are servile. In the Great Chain of Being, even a king was the servant of God: while the serf owed fealty to the lord, the lord was bound to the serf by duty.

Szalay shows that in the thirties it was the discourse of work that was all pervasive, while there was little impetus to serve: for example, Szalay states that "the advantage of the salary form in particular, writers came to realize, was that it made the writer's ability to perform his or her work no longer dependent on the public's response to what labor did in fact produce" (68). In contrast to the universality of *work*, the word *service* appeared in the language primarily to express the condition of being "pressed into service." At other times, *service* was used as a rhetorical flourish—a substitution for the word *work*—in order to allow for some variation in the monotonous and

pervasive discourse of work. Jenkins uses an older meaning of the word: the “pressed into service” cliché derives from impressment, which is defined as “compelling a person to serve in a military force” (AHD), while the other usages are derived from the meaning of service in the more neutral meaning of useful—“employment in duties or work for another” (AHD).

Service is a word related to preindustrial, premodern work, and in that premodern society the serfs were “the lowest feudal class in medieval Europe, bound to the land and owned by a lord” (AHD). Both *serf* and *service* are derived from *servus*, the Latin word for slave; thus, to be of service was to be in some sense a slave. The Southern Agrarians dedicated their program to resurrecting feudal society. The appeal of feudal society to the modern consciousness lay in the nostalgic feeling that this archaic form of social organization contained a more humanizing form of social relationships than did postindustrial modernity—that humanity would no longer be alienated from its work, and that individuals would be supported spiritually, culturally, and psychologically in ways that were no longer possible in modern society. This is a utopian view of society that parallels the utopian outcome sought by Marxists, the difference being that the Southern Agrarians’ golden age was the feudal past, while the Marxist golden age was the worldwide dictatorship of the proletariat. Like the Agrarians, Jenkins believed that the solution to the economic and social crisis lay in the past. In order to support this belief, he had to revise the entire matrix of American social relations, for his thesis was that African Americans had served willingly as slaves and with “100% Loyalty” to their masters (line 163). In order to formulate a new understanding of the role of African Americans in American culture and history, Jenkins interrupts his admonitory presentation of service—a presentation that he develops over the course of nearly fifty lines (140–85)—to insert the narrative of Charles Lindbergh.

At the center of Jenkins’s concern with service is the problem of alienation that arises in Marxism, where service is unalienated work, and Jenkins rejects Marx’s Theory of Alienation—that capitalist workers have no autonomy: “Then, as now, a Black Face was a badge of Loyalty no one doubted. / Remember the Service!” (lines 166–68). Jenkins conceived of labor as service, and he opposed the Marxist thesis that in capitalist economies, even those economies based on slavery, there is inescapably “*antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie*” (Engels 110; emphasis in original); thus, alienation and antagonism arise under capitalism because “the work has ceased to be a part of the worker’s nature” (Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* 47). In contrast to the Marxist view of labor, Jenkins’s view revised the relevance of antagonism and assigned social alienation and racial prejudice to the dominant class. Jenkins is particularly concerned with the

reaction of the white man to the problem of race relations: “You speak of the burdens— / You speak of the ‘white man’s burden’ / But you speak patronizingly, / And you boast overweeningly— / The ‘white man’s burden!’” (lines 174–78). According to Jenkins, the white man claims to have dealt with his own alienation by assuming the social cost of the black man; thus, the white man views himself as the laborer. Not only has the black man ceased to be a laborer but his labor has vanished, leaving only the alienated white man.

Jenkins’s presentation of racial labor has interesting implications with regard to one of the most challenging components of Marxist systemizing. Marxism, for all of its attempts to construct a scientific understanding of history, society, and the human condition, contains indefinable terms. Chief among these is *commodity fetishism*: “The object produced by labor, its product, now stands opposed to it as an *alien being*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object and turned into a physical thing; this product is an *objectification* of labor” (Marx quoted in Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man* 47; emphases in the original). Daniel Tiffany states that “in effect, the commodity fetish is a split or double object, with material and phantasmic properties; it is an inert body haunted, or animated by the specter of human labor. This spectral dimension of the fetish has not been overlooked by critics. Michael Taussig, for example, has observed, ‘Fetishism elucidates a certain quality of ghostliness in objects in the modern world and an uncertain quality of fluctuation between thinghood and spirit’” (6). It has always been possible to focus on the commodity and its component of human labor while repressing the fact of the existence of the human laborer: to paraphrase Blanchot, the slave/laborer is no one, he no longer has any relations with this world except as a burden (Tiffany 8). Race, then, is a structure of absence that renders the slave invisible. With the slave turned into a phantom, “the object of this [white man’s] gaze always escapes visibility, or disappears as it becomes visible”—so that the phantom slave is subject to what Blanchot speaks of as “the gaze of Orpheus” (Tiffany 8, n.13). The white man, as Jenkins has depicted him, imagines that by virtue of being white he has performed the labor that has brought the commodity into existence, that he himself has assumed the burden of the labor. Jenkins is insistent that the black man’s *service* must be remembered, because as the black man’s labor comes into view, the false slave/phantom dichotomy becomes visible.

Jenkins denies that the slave ever was a phantom. Jenkins insists on the visibility of *service*, which is also the cryptic *surface* that he insists is all that is visible. This ahistorical, visible surface that Jenkins uses to present the slave/black as a uniformly laboring subject, and the strangely consistent black worker who inhabits Jenkins’s historical panorama are fashioned to hide

the phantom, the historical subject-in-process that is “a constantly changing subject whose identity is open to question” (Kristeva, *Desire* 147)—the *other* that Jenkins is determined to continue to repress. In Jenkins’s system, the sign *slave/service* is affixed to the sign *master/service*. The creators of the white system of signs and the black system of signs refuse to look beyond the surfaces of their creations, for both systems of signs are systems of surfaces. Jenkins’s complaint is that modernity interrupted this benign system of service/surface: to his horror the new system of race relations insisted on the *otherness* of the black man and established an inalterable system of stereotypes. The white man became a subject-in-process, while the black man remained a servant, as he always has been. Thus, Jenkins’s system is based on types. The white man has exchanged the *heroic* type of feudalistic social relations for the *intolerant* type of modern social relations. When the white man makes movies like *Intolerance*, he views the black man as his own creation, and suddenly the black man is portrayed as lazy, sexually deprived, conniving, and arrogant.

The white man creates and enforces various forms of minstrelsy in order to establish and maintain these signs of otherness in the discourse of race relations. What Jenkins is saying is that the black man looks upon these signs of his spectrality, and nowhere does the black man recognize himself; yet Jenkins cannot understand that the black man is and has always been a phantom. Why? Because prior to modernity, nothing informed the black man of his spectrality. Through the medium of popular culture, the black man then looks at the creator of these discourses and does not recognize the creator: the white man is as much a phantom as is the black man.

Jenkins has constructed what Derrida calls “a messianic teleiopoiesis” (235), an unrequited friendship. Despite the incompleteness of this type of relationship, Jenkins centers his poem on the “logic of gratitude” (Derrida 178), with no regard for the inappropriateness or the contradictory outcome of this strategy. Were there indeed a friendship of the type that Jenkins presents in his historical account, there would be one soul shared by two bodies: “The union of such friends, being truly perfect, leads them to lose any awareness of such *services*, to hate and to drive out from between them all terms of division and difference, such as good turn, duty, gratitude, request, thanks and the like” (Montaigne quoted in Derrida [178–79]; emphasis added). Thus, in being able to catalog a long list of instances of service, Jenkins demonstrates that the relationship was not that of friendship; rather, the services rendered were performed by an *other*. Ultimately, Jenkins allows us a view of the spectral nature of the black phantom, even though he intended to historicize a discourse of a racial relationships without pitting the “white self” against the “black other.”

The Lindbergh section that follows the discussion of service etiologically replies to the white man's argument as Jenkins's narrator has given voice to it:

But you speak patronizingly,
 And you boast overweeningly—
 The “white man's burden!”
 “A Negro should know his place” —
 “A Negro should be taught his place” —
 “A Negro should stay in his place” —
 The white man's burden!”
 (lines 176–83)

Jenkins answers the “white man's burden” argument by presenting what is for him modernity's finest example of the white man, the aviator Charles Lindbergh. In lines 184 to 218, Lindbergh's transatlantic flight of 1927 is a reification of the discourse of the messianic friend. The airplane, itself a product of modernity, is absented from the poem by an acutely dematerializing and romanticizing metonymy—“Sing of Wings!” (line 189). In line 111, Jenkins describes the flight as a hedonistic and antisocial joyride. Elsewhere, he puts his tongue into his cheek and refers to Lindbergh as “Norseman,” “Youth Incarnate,” “Lone Eagle,” and “Manhood” so that Lindbergh is not a modern man accomplishing a technological feat *in a machine* but rather a primordial savior-god analogous to Attis or Osiris:

Listen, I shall tell you a true story, America:
 There was a young Norseman came up from obscurity
 Upon wings.
 Sing, O Sing, of wings—and the dark earth—and
 mountain crest—and stormy skies—
 Sing of Wings!
 He was intrepid; he was “American Youth Incarnate”
 Sing of “Youth Incarnate!”
 You saw him hover upon the shore of the Atlantic
 Like some “Lone Eagle” poised above the rocky promontory;
 And then you saw him point straight into the gloom
 of the ocean, America,
 and the Night and a Silence like Death swallowed him up.
 “Flying Fool!” said some;
 “God keep his soul!” prayed some.
 The World held its breath, America—

The World had one thought, America:
 Black water, angry—menacing—frightful—deep—
 Black night, deep as all Eternity—
 Loneliness sublime, infinite—
 But Paris and Glory at least! America.
 Glory for your Prowess, your Institutions,
 Your undismayed and invincible Youth,
 Your virile and intrepid Manhood,
 Your courageous and Unquenchable Spirit!
 Glory for the “Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave”—
 A Land where a Rail-splitter may become a King!
 Yet what have you Done, America—
 (lines 184–212)

The Lindbergh “saga” introduces the subject of nobility into the poem, a theme that is fundamental to the value system of feudalism—and feudalism is central to the development of Jenkins’s discourse of service. Similarly, Jenkins alludes to Abraham Lincoln as a king—“A Land where a Rail-splitter may become a King!” (line 211)—an indication of the degree to which the discourse of *Trumpet* flies in the face of the Whitmanian democratic aesthetic, the radicalism of Sandburg’s poetics, and the characteristic social realism of the thirties. In Jenkins’s narrative Lindbergh’s feat is analogous to an ordeal in which death is temporarily conquered; at the end of Lindbergh’s trial in the poem, Jenkins alludes to the tragic destruction of the hero. The poet construes Charles Lindbergh as the exemplary white man to further demonstrate the decline of the white man: Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight is an instance of transcendent service, and the pilot is the exemplary, messianic, Christlike friend alluded to in the lines below. In contrast, the degenerate modern world sullies the meaning of Lindbergh’s service by rewarding him with money and fame:

How have you rewarded him who pawned his life for your Glory?
 Gold you gave him—yes;
 Fame you gave him—yes;
 But the Dregs in the Cup you gave him to Drink—
 Sing of the Bitterness, the Wormwood and the Gall!
 Go hide your head in Shame, America.
 You speak of burdens;
 But you speak condescendingly,
 And you boast unbecomingly.
 (lines 185–221)

At the end of the Lindbergh interlude, Jenkins takes up the anticrime discourse of the gangster movies that were popular in the 1930s. In the transitional line, “Think will you, of your underworld, America” (line 221), Jenkins refers to *Underworld* (1927), the first of the gangster movies, though the allusion is understated. However, the name of the protagonist of *Underworld*, Bull Weed,⁷ is heard in the consonance and assonance of lines that cast crimes as infectious diseases:

Think, *will* you, of your underworld, America.
 Ah! Here is the sore that is galling your *back*;
 Here is the *ulcer* that is *eating* your vitals;
 Here is the virus that is chilling your heart;
 (lines 218–21)

Jenkins’s treatment of the theme of crime situates *Trumpet* in relation to the important discourse of a resurgent concern with morality by censors and film studios. As I have shown, Richard Wright appropriated the gangster films’ iconography to create a language of revolutionary emancipation: Wright’s poetry uses the criminal’s automobile, gun, dialect, and antibourgeois ethos to construct the persona of the militant revolutionary. In contrast, Jenkins (who was more concerned with religious morality and selfless sacrifice) uses the gangster film to depict the criminal nation brought to justice:

Stand forth before the Bar, America,
 While I read from the Indictment;
 While I enumerate your Transgressions;
 While I prosecute before the Jury!
 You have made of “Success” a fetish
 (lines 227–31)

Though the narrative frame tacitly implicates the gangster movies, the charges against “America” are not the transgressions of gangsters, but the crimes of American business culture: the pursuit of success, materialism, prejudice, class hatred, injustice, and economic inequality. It is only after enumerating this list of crimes for thirty-one lines that Jenkins returns to the gangster theme:

Racketeers infest your streets;
 Dealers in “hot goods” lurk on every corner.
 Kidnappers drive a thriving business;
 “Come-on” men and Crooks consort with Ward-heelers

and “Public Citizens.”
 Your children are abducted.
 And you call high heaven to witness your sorrow;
 (lines 261–67)

In *Trumpet*, Jenkins conflates business and organized crime; it was common for writers to do so in the thirties. Robert Warshow’s 1948 essay in the *Partisan Review*, “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” theorized that “in the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful . . . one is *punished* for success” (quoted in Maltby 1). Richard Pells refines the idea somewhat by stating that the gangster film “often functioned as a parody of the American dream . . . the criminal became a sort of psychopathic Horatio Alger embodying in himself the classic capitalist urge for wealth and success” (quoted in Maltby 1). Jenkins observed this “metaphorical relationship between crime and business” before Warshow and Pells (Maltby 3). Given that Jenkins argues in favor of social relations based on an idealized concept of totalized, other-directed service, he is hardly interested in distinguishing between the self-made business entrepreneur and the successful, organized gangster. The racketeer and the entrepreneur are equally guilty of antisocial practices. Thus, Jenkins treats the gangster only tangentially, never endowing his Bull Weeds with the powerfully attractive attributes that give gangsters an important place in American popular myth.

Jenkins never settles on a verdict, however. He defers justice because he has submerged the source of his legal discourse—the fictional lawyer-detective Perry Mason, who became “the most famous lawyer in the world” through books and films in the thirties. Pursuing his argument as if enacting a legal thriller in the Perry Mason style, Jenkins builds toward the climactic moment when he wittily, urbanely, and astonishingly unmasks the perpetrator (Robinson 1). In *Velvet Claws*, Perry Mason states his objective: “I take people who are in trouble and try to get them out of trouble” (Robinson 1). This position parallels the objective of *Trumpet*’s “lawyer” in lines 227 to 269. The poem, then, is less concerned with making a legal argument than with depicting the stock courtroom maneuverings of a legal thriller. Jenkins’s disinterest in pursuing the trial motif by means of a logical strategy is demonstrated by his abandonment of the argument at its conclusion. Jenkins’s narrator not only quits the courtroom but also breaks off his courtroom indictment of the American people. The narrator grandstands by indulging in a Perry Mason–like ruse: he gives a long catalog of infractions, injustices, crimes, contradictions, and violations before concluding with an anecdote that seems to be a non sequitur but ultimately is the linchpin of the argument. Like Perry Mason, the narrator sees “human nature with the shutters open” (Robinson 1).

This brief anecdote is about “an eminent foreigner” who lacks the tact to avoid bringing up the contradictory construction of race in American culture. The anecdote operates in an ironic mode to question how “so many octaroons and quadroons and mulattoes” could have been born without the complicity of white people (line 277). For broaching such a taboo topic, the foreigner is summarily driven from the country, though this is accomplished with genteel discretion: the foreigner “was told of a ship leaving port at a certain hour: / And that we were grieved he so soon must be going” (lines 281–82). The ten lines of the anecdote are one of the most effective passages in *Trumpet*. Jenkins has returned to the racial theme by using the brilliant interplay of the narrator’s Perry Mason persona to introduce courtroom irony into an irrefutable indictment of sexual hypocrisy. Moreover, the passage introduces one of American culture’s forbidden topics, the discourse of the sexual basis of racism.⁸ Finally, the effectiveness of the anecdote is grounded in its form—it is a joke formed by the pattern of threes:

There was an eminent foreigner visited our Country
 To observe and study our manners and customs.
 Was told of certain Creeds and Laws and Restrictions
 That held the two races in separate compartments.
 Was told that the Noose and the Rack and Faggot
 Are oftimes evoked to maintain these Restrictions.
 The visitor listened in grave and respectful silence,
 Then asked: “Whence so many octoroons and quadroons
 and mulattoes?”
 Was told of a ship leaving port at a certain hour:
 And that we were grieved he so soon must be going.

The social constraints of the superego⁹ (“Creeds and Laws and Restrictions”) are enforced by the violent social mechanisms (“the Noose and the Rack and the Faggot”) of the more primitive features of the psyche. But the lawyer-trickster-narrator then delivers the punch line that brings the repressed sexual contents into social consciousness: “Whence so many octoroons and quadroons / and mulattoes?” (line 281). The delivery of the anecdote through the language of the insider—“our Country” (line 274) and “we were grieved” (line 283)—plays with the narrator’s relationship to the “You” who the narrator “prosecute[d] before the jury” (line 333). In the anecdote, the narrator uses the “eminent foreigner” as an objective observer of American culture to deliver the punch line—a verdict that is not explicitly stated, though it is implied by the foreigner’s question.

This passage shows remarkable artistry and restraint, for it is likely that Jenkins was thinking of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung’s visit to New York and

Massachusetts in 1909.¹⁰ By concealing the psychoanalytic function of the eminent foreigner's revelation, Jenkins's jocular anecdote enacts the repression of the sexual content of race, thereby recapitulating Freud's psychoanalytic work on jokes (always indicative of repressed wishes) in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). The anxiety that develops around the need to silence the foreigner reveals the dangerous nature of the truths foregrounded by his innocent questions. Thus, the psychoanalytic reading of "an eminent foreigner" gives rise to an *inner enemy*, namely, *the shadow* (see note 8), from which the white man flees by enacting horrifying, primitive, and futile deeds in a quest for purifying the self. The function of the foreigner is to violate an important taboo that structures American society but that is never consciously acknowledged. The narrator's joke at the expense of "America" is delivered as a shock: in order to maintain the illusion of purity, the personified nation is forced to seek a means to return conditions to their former status—repressed, racist, murderous, and soulless. The "eminent foreigner" is hustled aboard a departing ship: the barely hidden degree of haste with which he is sent on his way is humorous. Abandoning the courtroom at the point of having won his case against a malignant and unrepentant nation, Jenkins once more assumes the voice of an Old Testament prophet:

Wake up, America!
 The black man is not your Real Burden.
 Your inconsistency, your Selfishness, your Indifference, your
 materialism, your Intolerance, your descent from the Ancient Virtues,
 Make up your Real Burden.
 Buck up, America!
 And "Come out of the Wilderness
 Leaning on the Lord."
 Drop some of your Prejudice—
 Some of your Intolerance—
 Some of your Disdain for the Common Man, the Forgotten
 Man, the Man Farthest Down.
 Discard some of your Scorn for the Darker Races;
 For the Darker Races will be living in their present habitat
 When Chicago, London and Berlin are one
 With Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, Gomorrah,
 And all the buried cities of the past.
 Gray beard Chinamen will be carrying burdens upon
 their backs in their native fields
 When your civilization shall lie buried beneath the
 rust and dust of forgotten centuries.

Unless
 You shall change your ways, America,
 And get yourself a new Religion
 Based on Humane Co-operation
 And Brotherly Love twixt Man and Man;
 And unless
 You shall strip your hearts of Intolerance,
 And turn unto the ways of Justice and Love,
 The germs of decay will proceed unrestrained;
 And your paths will lead down to Confusion and Death.
 (lines 281–312)

This warning is a complex syncretism of several discourses. “Come out of the Wilderness / Leaning on the Lord” alludes to Numbers 9:1 and John 13:23 respectively, though the wording that Jenkins offers is like nothing that exists in the Bible.¹¹ The lines that address the theme of intolerance and prejudice reiterate the NAACP’s discourse of racial advancement.

In framing the consequences of continued racial divisiveness, the poem suggests that Jenkins had acquired a rudimentary familiarity with Oswald Spengler’s theory of the cyclical ascent and descent of civilizations as it was formulated in *Decline of the West* (1918, 1922).¹² However, Jenkins’s treatment of the theory is a considerable departure from Spengler’s position. In place of Spengler’s idea that cultures invariably decline given their inherently organic structure, Jenkins situates his approach to culture *prophetically*, with moral correctness being the crucial factor: just cultures survive, while external forces topple unjust cultures. Jenkins’s focus on cultural morality anticipates the work of Arnold J. Toynbee (*A Study of History*, 1948), which contends that civilizations are destroyed from within but that decay can be reversed by creative new attempts to meet challenges (*SHV*). Jenkins phrases the conceit of destruction similarly to T. S. Eliot’s depiction of the fall of the great world cities in *The Waste Land*. Where Eliot’s long poem is a concatenation of individual voices and personalities that the poet seeks to unify into a transcendent “voice of history itself” (Longenbach 208), Jenkins’s performance is derived from popular culture: *Trumpet* is personal and it substitutes the sermon for the montage, whereas Eliot embraces the montage and programmatically strains toward impersonality. The realism and documentation that serve as the background to Jenkins’s poem ensures that the personas through which he delivers his poem are more restrained in their theatricality—they merely imitate familiar stereotypes (the gangster, the lawyer, the southern patrician), don costumes, and always address the audience from center stage.

Eliot portrays successive historical ages through the form of a two-line catalog of five cities¹³—“Falling towers / Jerusalem Athens Alexandria / Vienna London / Unreal” (lines 374–77). This brief historical panorama is a prophecy delivered by Tiresias—Apollo’s priest whose blindness ironically allows him to see the circularity of the rise and fall of cultures throughout history. Jenkins adopts a similar two-line catalog of ancient and modern cities:

For the Darker Races will be living in their present habitat
When Chicago, London and Berlin are one
With Tyre, Sidon, Sodom, Gomorrah,
And all the buried cities of the past.

For Spengler, the megalopolis is a prime symbol of every civilization, and he named Rome the classical megalopolis, Alexandria and Constantinople the Magian megalopolises, and London, Paris, Berlin, and New York “the giant cities of our own civilization” (Fennelly 51). A comparison of the two passages shows that Eliot repeats the names of two of Spengler’s world cities, Alexandria and London, one ancient and one modern. Jenkins lists two of Spengler’s modern cities, London and Berlin. That Jenkins only lists ancient cities that have biblical and prophetic connotations suggests the degree to which Jenkins’s poem is grounded in the biblical discourse of the depravity of cities. Jenkins’s cities are not exemplifications of culture but instead are cases of the moral failure of urban life. His catalog names ancient cities that were destroyed in the Bible because of their embrace of perversity, wealth, and idolatry. Eliot, with his view encompassing only “falling towers” that are always already “unreal,” sees only the rise and fall of the cities themselves. For Eliot, the cities may be “unreal” but they are necessary; they are triumphs of the human spirit. Jenkins seems indifferent to the loss of the cities. What is central for Jenkins is not the attainments of civilization but the perfection of man, and he defines man not as the builder of towers but rather as “the Man Farthest Down” (line 293). Having diagnosed a gangrenous racism at the core of America’s rottenness, Jenkins bids Americans to save themselves by purging themselves of their racial affliction: “Discard some of your Scorn for the Darker Races” (line 294). In Jenkins’s estimation, the problem is modernity itself:

You shall change your ways, America,
And get yourself a new Religion
Based on Humane Co-operation
And Brotherly Love twixt Man and Man;

And unless
 You shall strip your hearts of Intolerance,
 And turn unto the ways of Justice and Love,
 The germs of decay will proceed unrestrained;
 And your paths will lead down to Confusion and Death.
 (lines 307–15)

Returning to the practice of using disease to describe the criminal underworld (lines 222–24), Jenkins medicalizes America's culture of racism through the trope of infection: "The germs of decay will proceed unrestrained" (line 314). Decay belongs to Spengler's vocabulary: "Each culture has its own new possibilities of self-expression which arise, ripen, *decay*, and never return" (quoted in Fennelly 31; emphasis added). Jenkins aligns his poem with the analogical discourse of Spengler's *Decline* as a "morphology of history" in which "each separate culture [is] a living organism which is born, grows, decays, and dies within the framework of a fixed and predictable life-cycle, just like any other living organism" (Fennelly 28). Thus, it is only a short step from Spengler's organicism to Jenkins's trope of America as a sick body: if the body becomes sick, it must be treated like any sick body. Either it is cured by modern medicine or it perishes because of neglect. Tomislav Sunić has traced Spengler's "biological" analogy to the discourse of eugenics. "Mankind," writes Spengler, should be viewed as either a "zoological concept or an empty word" (Sunic 61–2).

In contrast to the biological-social solutions of the discourse of eugenics, which seeks to ensure the health of the white race through the *discharge* or voiding of the black other, the counterargument of *Trumpet* revolves around the discharge of the disease of racism itself, and even the discharge of the eugenic model: Jenkins has rediagnosed the affliction, and he indicates that the affliction can be cured only by our realizing the true nature of the infectious agent that caused the decay of American civilization. Black Americans are not the infectious agent. Rather, unequal treatment of black Americans causes social and spiritual effects, criminal behavior and moral outrages. Therapeutic cultural change occurs through "discarding" ("Discard some of your scorn for the darker races" [line 307]), which corresponds to the biological analogy of discharging disease agents. *Scorn* intimates whipping (*score*) and burning (*scorch*). The "discard" of these activities may be interpreted as medically equivalent to the lancing of a boil. The passage makes a final assertion in line 315 that the "paths" (which social philology reads as pathological; pathology—caused by disease; disordered in behavior), thus the *pathogens* of intolerance, irreligion, inhumanity, and injustice, will "lead down to Confusion and Death" (line 315).

The “Wake up, America” passage (lines 284–315) has more the shape and tone of a sermon than of an Eliotic montage depicting the Spenglerian historiographical landscape. Jenkins uses a biblical vocabulary throughout his homilectic discourse, but the compression and combination of his signifiers frees them from reference to specific passages of the Bible. This compression provides his language with an authoritative tone that allows him to compound material from several discourses, while maintaining the illusion that he is employing an authentically biblical idiom. Such words as *paths*, *scorn*, and *confusion* belong to the vocabulary of the King James Bible, while *discard* does not. The concluding line of the “sermon” (“And your paths will lead down to Confusion and Death” [line 315]) strikes a gravely effective note of warning, and though it is suggestive of Isaiah 59:7 (“Their feet run into evil and they make haste to shed innocent blood; their [thoughts are] thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction [are] in their paths”), Jenkins’s line lacks the specificity and urgency of Isaiah. If we go one step further and supply a congruent occurrence of *confusion* from Isaiah (“Behold they are all vanity; their works are nothing; their molten images are wind and confusion” [41:29]), we can see that Jenkins uses the word *confusion*, which Isaiah associates with *vanity*, to bolster *Trumpet’s* more abstract language and more temperate tone.

The long concluding section of *Trumpet* consists of 132 lines; therein, the poem returns to the theme of chivalry. Jenkins’s strategy is to turn the values of chivalry claimed by the South against the actual conduct of Southern culture. The verses construct an abstract/concrete dyad; on one side, the chivalric virtues—liberty, wisdom, justice, moderation (line 333)—and on the other side, historical occasions of intolerance—the Atlanta race riot (line 340) and the case of the Scottsboro Boys (line 342). Jenkins presents the concluding section as yet another sermon. It begins with an approximation of the Whitmanian voice:

And now particularly to “white” America,
 And the sovereign commonwealths of Georgia and Alabama—
 I address myself to you:
 You are direct descendents of the men
 Who made the greatest contribution
 To the conserving forces of civilization
 This side of the crucified Jesus.
 (316–22)

What Jenkins offers to support his position is the “High English Chivalry” that the crew of the RMS *Titanic* demonstrated as the ship sank, an episode

that Jenkins describes in forty-seven lines of compressed narrative (lines 352–99). Jenkins addresses the Southerners of English heritage with the proposition that this “Noble English Chivalry” is “the nearest approach to a redeeming perfection / Which has appeared on this earth” (325–26). Jenkins suggests that when “Be American” (line 411) is equated with the captain’s command to “Be British” (line 400), an end will come to intolerance and injustice. Jenkins offers as a further example the comparison of the Roman gladiators to the American Negro soldiers (lines 419–436). The contrast is between the *despair* of the dying gladiators who are subservient to Roman tyranny and the *devotion* of the Negro soldiers who honor the democracy for which they sacrifice themselves. Comparing himself to “the Hebrew Harpist” (line 439), Jenkins ends the poem by declaring that the poem is the preparation for “the solemn Love-Feast of Brotherhood and Democracy” (line 448).

Jenkins designed his poem to shame white America into embracing what he calls “the heroism and nobility / That lie dormant in the human spirit” (lines 412–13). He treats this theme without irony, for his method is to take at face value the virtues claimed to be the sustenance of Southern culture. Jenkins gives only minimal attention to summoning instances of Southern barbarity. Instead, he focuses on the sinking of the *Titanic* as depicting a modern instance of chivalry. He wishes that the racists of Georgia and Alabama might rise to inhabit the values that they claimed to be theirs but that they were sorely missing:

Look to “ATLANTA,” America—
 Have you been Tolerant?
 Look to “SCOTTSBORO,” America—
 Have you been Just?
 I am appealing to your Heart of Hearts, America—
 You can afford to be Just.
 I am appealing to the hearts of Georgians and Alabamians—
 You can afford to be fair.

Jenkins cast his moral argument in economic terms, speaking of what the racists can *afford* to do with regard to black Americans. The issue is interesting given the role of the Great Depression in determining social conditions. Here, Jenkins does not address the issue of material abundance; rather, he addresses heroism and nobility, which are dormant but abundant in the American spirit. This idea is markedly different from those of leftist figures such as Richard Wright, for whom “the reality of the state’ [was] the only mechanism for securing the Black body from the abrasions of history”

(Szalay 22). The abundance of brotherhood and democracy that Jenkins points toward in “Blow[ing] up the Trumpet of the New Moon” (line 441) has its source in individual agency, not in the state. Moreover, history is the memory of such instances of individual agency, not the impersonal tides of insurmountable forces: the captain of the *Titanic* gives voice to words that are historic, pointing others to their destined moments of historical superiority, moments when they might rise above the “Mediocrity” (line 408) of intolerance.