

Mediations

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Our current crisis, whose *phenomenal* inauguration began in 2008, and whose ending our rulers continue to proclaim with reference to the metrics of their stock market, continues to structure and transform the critical practices of Marxists and non-Marxists alike.¹ In what follows, I want to chart two waypoints in a historical terrain opened up by the global capitalist crisis and a marked upswing in anti-capitalist and anti-police struggles. In response to these changing historical conditions, we find a corollary set of shifts and foreclosures in an American humanities critical culture that is increasingly polarized between those whose methods confront the assaults on the very existence of remunerated cultural critique, and those whose methods respond just as sensitively to the aggressions of austerity, but turn instead to micro-ontologies, "new materialisms," and neoformalisms. A series of exciting questions has come to our attention: how has the current conjuncture fundamentally transformed the kinds of Marxist critical practice that are possible? What are the opportunities of vision and hermeneutic opened up by our experience of the first deep crisis that unfurled after the definitive end of the hemispheric antinomies structured by the Cold War? Which categories of criticism continue to offer their powers of illumination, and which seem wanting, stale, or too structured by textual forms and political regimes that may be descendent, or eliminated altogether? Do Adornian pessimisms, Lukácsian narratologies, Althusserian allergies to determinative assertions, the fetish as a primary interpretive tool, and reification as dominant pathology continue to offer the critical force they once did? What kind of texts might furnish a pane upon which the breath of new critical practices might frost? My contribution to a regroupment of forces and a renovation of vision in this short essay is to suggest a methodology at once historical and formal: (1) that we examine the texts of crisis in a comparative hermeneutic, such that the older contradictions of capital illuminate those that appear to be novel to our current moment; and (2) to discover in our comparisons the intersections of various limits to capital, which are encoded for our analysis in the limits to poetic form.

My concerns here are literary, and my examples drawn from twentieth-century American poetics. This means that my objects of study are not the traditional sites of Marxist inquiry, at least in this century and most of the last, and, as such, I hope, tunnel us out of a critical sediment comprising a seemingly infinite history of revisions of one concept: narrative. In this essay I seek to extend the project of developing Marxian reading strategies for poetic form in particular. This poetic turn is in part a response to what our current crisis has revealed: the invisible temporalities of circulation must be mapped upon, alongside, over, and under, the visible geographies of uneven development, lest they calcify into the basis for another announcement of a “new” capitalism, subjected not to critique, but to the narrative renovation of its dominant contradictions. As Joshua Clover has explained:

As real accumulation ebbed after Brenner’s “Long Boom” of 1948-73, competition for extant profits intensified....This intensification can be seen in the offshoring of labor and the tax revolts that inaugurated neoliberalism, in capital’s leap into finance in search of profit, and in the need for manufacturing firms to turn over their stock more swiftly — to conform to what Harvey names “socially necessary turnover time” (*Limits* 186). Accelerated turnover demands more credit-based liquidity while at the same time expelling labor from production in favor of what we might call process servers: the “techno-telemedia apparatuses” and the administrators of an ever-more-complex-and-hurried command-and-control network, in turn subtended by information-technology and knowledge workers coordinating an increasingly global and futural economic order. Thus, the rise in finance is correlated with the rise of both speculative value and immaterial labor — but this indicates a problem in production, not a new source or mode. Finance is neither cause nor solution for this problem but its veil.²

“Hurried,” “swift,” “accelerated”: such characterizations of the temporalities of financialization proliferate. But our crisis has proven that it is not, ultimately, possible “to annihilate space by time.”³ To the extent that the textual geographies of non-narrative poetic form temporalize space, and spatialize temporality, they are the historically adequate mediations of the combined and uneven spatial simultaneities in what appear as the homogenous landscapes of capitalism, just as much as they are mediations of the temporal lags, disbandings, speed shifts, and clogs in what appears to be frictionless, endless turnover. For this reason, poetics is *the form of the crisis*, providing us with entry points into the value form, and into the ontology of capitalist disaster.⁴ The broadest query of this hermeneutic is, how does twentieth- and twenty-first-century poetry strive to represent the unrepresentable, if the unrepresentable is, by definition, the global capitalist totality in which we live and from which we are

hived off? On the level of praxis, we might ask: how does poetry offer ways for its readers to grasp the contours of the global economy? Since a crucial force of poetry resides in the figural and the unseen — metaphors, similes, line breaks, vast and micro fields of white space, allusions — it is quite possibly uniquely suited to represent a world financial system that is increasingly conducted in an invisible manner, through derivatives, currency trading, outsourcing, collateralized debt obligations, and so on. American poetry itself has shifted its formal strategies in concert with changes in our economic lives, from Depression-era parataxis to the antilyrical material signifiers that emerged within and against the rise of late capitalism.

Waypoint 1

Comparative Crises: The comparison, better even triangulation, of the three major crises of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries ('29, '73, '08) trains a critical aperture on textual prolepsis, where form anticipates limits to capital or revolutionary possibilities as yet unpeeled by history. It also opens up the retroactive illuminations afforded by the textual artifacts of more aged crises, lays bare prehistories, and inoculates against habitual, myopic pronouncements regarding the “newness” of our own moment.

I will begin by saying that embedded in this methodology is a call for the transformation of the manner and ways that Marxism produces knowledge about our present world and its historical antecedents. In the available institutional memory, Marxist cultural theory and literary criticism has practiced ideology critique, with special attention to the contraction of vision produced by reification, the fetish, and the pernicious effects of the culture industry. To turn to the crises, and radical responses to the crises, of the 1930s, of the 1970s, and of our present, is to expand our critical work beyond pointing up contradiction, into frontiers where we might trace the conjunctures that have stenciled what Jodi Dean has called “the communist horizon.”⁵ Revolutions and revolts around the globe have adopted the myriad forms of the Bolivarian process, the occupation (carried out in a range of forms), the unification of the factory and the square glimpsed in Egypt, barricades erected against the austerity imposed by their class, direct action shutdowns of the major arteries of capital, highways, rail, and subways, under the flag of resistance to the murderous rule of a racist police state. These indicators of widespread non-consent mandate a turn from dour Marxism and toward a vigorously historical utopianism. To compare crises is to find continuities not only in the limits at which that capital constantly claws back; it is also to find continuities of communist practice, to find out how Flint '36/'37 is, and is not, AIM's '69 occupation of Alcatraz which is, and is not, the Oakland Commune and West Coast Port shutdowns of '11. Triangulating our crisis with its 1930s' and 1970s' antecedent forms is part of renewing the visibility of the communist horizon, and part of understanding our own crisis as both historically specific and singular, but also a punctual moment in an ongoing process of immiseration and radicalization.

Part of renewing this visibility of the communist horizon is of course a matter of recovering and constructing our own archive of literature that militates against the system giving rise to crisis. For its part, anticommunism continuously constructs, clips, redeploys, and refashions the historical record of the politics, causes, and aesthetics of the crisis. The literary record confirms this. The corpse of modernism has been raised and reanimated at various moments of capitalist crisis. The ideology of American poetic modernism was first concretized by the Southern Agrarian poets who had migrated to northern institutions; poets like John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate would brand their modernism in the embers of confederate nostalgia and anti-New Dealerdom. The tectonics of uneven development produced a conjuncture in which these American literary ideologues protected vibrantly historical works, like *The Wasteland*, from history in an alembic of formal integrity. By mid-century, the New Criticism (whose primary authors were the Agrarians) produced a modernism that excluded from the historical record whole trajectories of communist, anarchist, socialist, Black nationalist, and internationalist and utopian poetic interventions.

The first strains of renewed economic contraction after the post-war boom saw the opening of the poetic archive to discover precisely what had been excluded. Riding the crest of the next great capitalist crisis of the twentieth century after the long 1930s, the Language Poets had to produce their prehistory in those radical Zukofskian and Steinian modernisms that had been confined from view. In general, there was a re-tethering of poetry to resistance: Hannah Weiner and the American Indian Movement; Amiri Baraka and Beat disaffection from the rationalization of the labor process; again, Amiri Baraka and Black Power; Antler and rank and file machine sabotage; and on and on. These new constellations are, I want to argue, at once reconfigurations and remediations — continuities — of the older, First Crisis alliances between the avant-garde and revolutionary movements, alliances the ideology of modernism can no longer obscure.

We find ourselves in this, the third major crisis in the functioning of capital, and as this waypoint suggests, the modernist conjuncture provides an absolutely necessary prehistory to our current moment of global capitalist crisis. Our return to these preceding moments might best be conducted as part of what I am calling a methodology of “comparative crises,” in which cultural critique at minimum triangulates its proliferation of genuine critical energies devoted tracing the roots of our moment to the onset of the rise of neoliberalism of the 1970s. This critical work productively searches for, and finds, embryonic traces of our neoliberal past in both incipient austerity aggressions and resistances thereto. Examples of this critical turn to the 1970s include: *Théorie Communiste*’s renewal of communization theory and libertarian Marxism; a renaissance of interest in autonomist feminist accounts of affective labor, such as those of Sylvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa; labor histories of American wildcat strikes (see Brenner’s, Brenner’s, and Winslow’s *Rebel Rank and File*) and the political and cultural economies of the 1970s in general (Judith

Stein's *Pivotal Decade*; Jefferson Cowie's *Staying Alive*); the popularity of Badiouian and Anarcho-communisms, with their roots in the diverse sands of Maoism, in '68, ecstatic workerism, and sponteneitist comportments. David Harvey's 1982 *Limits to Capital* has found a new generation of readers under its reissuing.

When we triangulate our prehistories, reaching back through and behind the 1970s to the 1930s modernist moment, which, as Jameson argues, has always been with us, we resist the historical narrative that periodizes us at one with the 1970s, only by instantiating a break from the 1930s. Such a break certainly costs us more than a continuity of struggle. It also produces a narrative that simultaneously aligns our crisis with the rise of austerity and financialization, while unyoking us from features of crisis that were more prominent in the 1930s, ones which we certainly share now: unemployment, overproduction, the poisonous rise of investment in fixed capital and thusly in the organic composition of capital. What if, instead, each crisis offered, as Harvey would have it, a new "window" on the limits to capital, windows which our comparisons keep continuously ajar? As Harvey writes:

Marx sees each relation as a separate "window" from which we can look at the inner structure of capitalism. The view from any one window is flat and lacks perspective. When we move to another window we can see things that were formerly hidden from view. Armed with that knowledge, we can reinterpret and reconstitute our understanding of what we saw through the first window, giving it greater depth and perspective. By moving from window to window and carefully recording what we see, we come closer and closer to understanding capitalist society and all of its inherent contradictions.⁶

Of course, Harvey's windows exist synchronically, allowing the value relation to be viewed from multiple perspectives: the commodity form, production, consumption. Crisis comparison invests these perspectives with a diachronic, historical dimension, wherein each crisis cracks open a transom, illuminating a door through which we might see to the future and the past. But the diachronic, it turns out, always, dialectically, returns us to the landscape of the present. Here, new contradictions do not replace old ones, but are sedimented atop them, or spatially bestride them.

For example: In what follows I want to argue that the halting failures of the M-C-M' double-transaction, which always clog up the routes of global financialization, are a reshifted mediation of (1) the contest between labor and capital, and of (2) the territorialization of all space by the needs of capital, both being, of course, the signature visible oppositions of the 1930s. Let me briefly say how this might work in the example of Larry Eigner's poetry. Eigner's work (whose hard-won composition, given his lifelong non-ambulatory condition, is a subject for more expansive inquiry elsewhere) stitches together two moments in the evolution of a "materialist poetics"

(at least according to their self-understandings): Black Mountain and Language.⁷ That is to say that his work, closely associated with both schools, sublates 1.) Black Mountain's pre-late capital, pre-Vietnam, fantasy of a textual "open field" in which a unified breath of the speaking/writing/aspirating body found its exact perceptual corollary in the type space of the page, effectively incinerating mediations of ideology and history, and 2.) Language Poetry's insistence on the immediate materiality of the signifier of the word itself. Language Poetry, then, was born in flight from the perceptible and terrifying finality of full subsumption, and indexed a valiant denial of language as a brutal mediation of other systems and darker orders. Eigner's signature windowscapes permit no such flight from history and its mediations; they display a curatorial, selective fidelity to the geographical particulars the poet surveys. This from his 1977 collection "The World and Its Streets, Places":

his life
 the
 open window

where the clock sounds fade

what is it?
 branches out there

can you
 stop
 the war

crickets stars

no birds the more air
 sing in the leaves

Get up and
 speak

something whatever it is

wilds around
 now now ...⁸

Three central themes convene in these opening lines: political will; the nonsubmission of nature to the value form; the unrepresentability of "whatever it is" that might

compose a reforested and repopulated commons whose “wilds” mark what lies on the other side of spatial limits to capital. The measured time that scores rhythms of accumulation and labor disappears (“clock sounds fade”), and in doing so, opens up an unsettled, inquisitive relationship to the “out there” that lies beyond the walls of domestic privacy. The outsideness of “out there” depends upon the voiceless phoneme “th” that differentiates “there” from “here,” and indeed the problem of our silence (“can you/ stop/ the war”; “Get up/ and speak”) delivers a pathetic fallacy in which trees, and not us, “branch out there.”

The geographic particulars (“crickets,” “stars,” “air,” “birds,” “leaves”) weigh against one another on both sides of a scale composed of empty typespace, and in this fantastical scale, “no” and “more” are quite impossibly equivalent. This is precisely what regimes of exchange and fictions of supply/demand fungibility cannot confess: that within the value form lies the possibility for a series of surpluses, thefts, devaluations, and accretions that split wages, prices, and labor time phenomenally asunder. The poem’s antilogical scales, constructed of the dynamic between space and type, between the excess (more air!) and the absence and/or silence (“no birds” are the numerator, impossibly less than the denominator of their “sing”ing) of nature, weigh the secret inequalities that reside within the dashes of M-C-M'. The current renaissance of value form theory and the return of the question of the commons and the natural surfeit therein — theoretical returns only really possible after the historical convergence of capitalist crisis and the Left’s regroupment after the failures of Stalinism and social democratic reformism — affords this window onto Eigner’s “window.” But even this window is only widened when we construct an analytic triangle of crises: our moment, Eigner’s own simultaneously crisis-contoured and countercultural 1970s, and the modernist moment. Because Eigner is also working, most acutely, at the contact point of a recognizably modernist, older tension: the production of an ever-more differentiated and uneven capitalist space which will tirelessly produce nature as the opposite of us, a space which Lefebvre reminds us, began with the surrealists, who, like Eigner, would transcode the interior life of the subject of capital, its freedoms and its unfreedoms, onto increasingly autonomous topographies of natural space; and streetspace; and private space.⁹

Waypoint 2

Capitalism is not a topic. The representation of capital itself is, of course, impossible; its sheer size and abstraction could never concretize fully in a text. However, poetry encodes in its forms and contents a vast array of “limits to capital.” The detection of the limit is a form of criticism responsible to the experience and fact of permanently recurring crises. The limit is the dialectical complement to the traditional task of totalizing; it locates a failure of capital to valorize just as it locates a place for physical and critical occupations.

As Harvey has lushly explicated, these limits include: spatial and temporal barriers to the valorization of capital and, in that, the reproduction of the value form; circulatory blockages of all manners, from state intervention to the contracted consumption of immiserated workers, employed and unemployed; class struggle against the wage form and against life at the machine and the screen; overproduction and the temptations and hazards of total vertical integration, etc., etc.¹⁰

Capital can only ever be approached by texts askance, in partial ways that result in marvelous failures that give rise to the contradictions that propel the text into halting semiotic coherences. The new neo-empiricisms (object oriented ontologies, affect theory whose form of appearance as a study of feeling distracts us from its positing of the body as an empirical fleshly text that immediates systems, thing theory, animalisms, and the like) are more and more finding poetics a site of inquiry (e.g., Lauren Berlant's John Ashbery in *Cruel Optimism* or Bill Brown's W.C. Williams in *A Sense of Things* or Timothy Morton's Percy Shelley in "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry").¹¹ These, and many other new empiricisms, will continue to arise, compensatory salves for the temporary expulsion of Marxism from the university and from social life. However, even the neo-empiricisms seem to sense that totality is unrepresentable. An example, whose lightness the reader will indulge: the call for papers for a recent Modernist Studies Association offers evidence of a fetishistic and encyclopedic relation to the content of the quotidian, as it identifies "topics of growing significance in modernist studies," wherein "the everyday and the event might be considered separately or together to include, for example, domesticity, objects, food, fashion, waste, public engagement, responses to events of local, national, and international significance, the traumatic event and modernism as itself a happening."¹² This sheer proliferation of possible object-oriented entry points is a symptom of anxiety about that totality, mistaken here as so many lifeworlds of so many things, towards which modernism itself strove asymptotically.

Not all recent interventions in poetics foreclose the subject of capitalism itself: for example, for surface readers, capitalism is available content, and the work of the post identity-politics critic, with a healthy allergy to substitutionism, is to curate texts in such a way that casts light on their arrangements in a system pointing to capital. Surface reading emerges, then, as a negation of academic "activism" but it lands not far from where the critique was launched: a liberal-democratic faith in the always-already radicalized nature of both the oppressed and the text (one is reminded of Spivak's critique of Deleuze's workerism and his attendant blindness to the problem of ideology in "Can the Subaltern Speak?").¹³ This critical comportment offers no re-entry point for criticism into social life; and its unannounced points of departure are 1.) the rejection of mediation in toto and 2.) the eradication of the organic intellectual in the American academy. For all the neo-empiricisms, capitalism is a permanent atmosphere. It may be characterized by permanent crises, but it is not a transcendable horizon, despite the production of vast numbers of subjects who see right through it.

By some contrast, I want to suggest a reading practice that reads below the surface: less to find a symptom than to chart the sedimentations of the three major periods of twentieth- and twenty-first-century capitalist crisis. To read those sedimented inscriptions through epiphenomenal topics is to miss the opportunity to see the ways in which older texts are opened up by those of our moment, and vice versa. Each crisis rises out of, and lays bare, new limits, and wrenches open new forms of consciousness. Here we revisit a text from their Depression from the perspective of our Depression, in an effort to interilluminate two crisis-consciousnesses. Muriel Rukeyser's 1938 long poem chronicling the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster, which led to the death of over 700 workers, disproportionately African American, *The Book of the Dead*, offers multiple windows to the limits to capital. These include: nature, which demanded the diversion of a river; the lungs of the workers, which collapsed at the limit of extraction of relative surplus value; the costs required by capital to build the predicative fixed capital required for even larger industrial projects; the ruinous shortsightedness produced by the capitalists' discovery of the unexpected superprofits from silica. The poem delivers a dizzying range of formal strategies, the proliferation of which signifies the structurally unrepresentable fact of a totality and of a crisis in that totality: testimony; quasi-pastoral portraits; reportage; paratactical high modernism; Dickensonian type-silences; etc. Each strategy boils over then runs out of steam before moving on to another, and the limits of form mark the limits of capital.

Rukeyser's poem addresses the sub- and invisible: the interior of the lung, the interior of the extractive tunnel. This should matter to us now because it gives us pause as we receive neoliberal narratives about financialization's novel invisible immaterialities. When we open the window of the 1930s on the window of the present, we find that the invisibility of the current crisis isn't novel but rather a *mutating remediation*, at the level of circulation, of Hawk's Nest's older invisibilities: absolute and relative surplus value extraction; accumulation through dispossession; lending regimes rooted in racism.

Conclusion

In this short piece, I have suggested that poetic form provides a historically apt textual mediation of the rapidly proliferating limits to capital. While each poem responds to its ambient catastrophe, it is also marbled by older failures of capitalism to thrive and illuminated by future ones. It is not surprising that mediation should return as an object of debate at a time in which the failures of capitalism appear immanent, obvious; and at a time in which the humanities have undergone sustained attack, only to respond, for many new materialisms, to the imagined disciplinary authority of the harder sciences. However, there can be no theory of transition without one of mediation, and when the forms of the imagination burst forth carrying with them the crises past, present, and future all at once, we find ourselves needing to confront the question of both.

Notes

1. Much gratitude to my comrades Joshua Clover and Jordana Rosenberg for their generous help in the development and execution of this essay.
2. Joshua Clover, "Value | Crisis | Theory," *PMLA* 127:1 (January 2012): 112.
3. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973) 524.
4. For an excellent elaboration of poetry as the privileged index of the ur-failure of capitalist crisis: the incomplete conversion of space into time and vice versa, see Joshua Clover, "Autumn of the System: Poetry and Financial Capital," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 40:1 (Spring 2011): 34-52.
5. Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso, 2012).
6. David Harvey, *Limits to Capital* (London: Verso, 2007) 2.
7. See Michael Davidson's important essay "Missing Larry: The Poetics of Disability in Larry Eigner," *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: U Michigan P, 2008) 116-41.
8. Larry Eigner, *The World and Its Streets, Places* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1977) 62.
9. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) 18.
10. Readers of *Mediations* will of course recognize the foundational influence of Fredric Jameson's work on representation and cognitive mapping in this waypoint. In particular, in *Representing Capital*, Jameson discusses how Marx offers us a series of prisms, or windows, in his strategic, and infinitely incomplete, narration of capitalism as a total system. The hermeneutic of the limit marries those textual quilting points, where language finds its limits, with the political-economic limits to the capitalist system itself. See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011).
11. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke UP, 2011); Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2003); Timothy Morton, "An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry," *New Literary History* 43 (2012): 205-24.
12. "MSA 15: Everydayness and the Event" <http://msa.press.jhu.edu/conferences/msa15/>. Accessed 20 February 2013.
13. See Steven Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108:1 (Fall 2009): 1-21.