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Where Is the Oil in Modernism?

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In 1900, there were 8,000 cars in the United States. By 1930, there were 26.5 million.[1] In 1910, the largest recorded single oil spill to date occurred in Kern County, California. The "Lakeview Gusher" spewed 378 million gallons of oil, lasted for eighteen months, and cut the world price of oil in half. Oil is everywhere during the modernist era, changing the shape of the landscape with cars, roads, airplanes, military equipment, and spawning suburbs, intensifying land speculation and commodity trading, further mechanizing agriculture, and producing new chemicals and plastics. But oil – and, for that matter, most other raw non-renewable commodities – rarely appears directly in modernist art, with the great exception of one work, Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* (1927). Engines, however, are humming constantly in the literature. How can we explain this gap between modernism and modernity? How does oil fit in the discussions over what aspects of the environment American modernists saw well and saw poorly, keeping in mind the knowledge about oil's history and boom-and-bust cycle available at the time? What does nature mean in modernism when artists either overlook or underplay the transformative roles of commodities and non-renewable energies?

But why should oil or any other commodity command special interest for modernist writers? We assume that commodities are not works of art and works of art cannot be reduced to commodities, so conjoining the two seems to be a mistake in categorization, even though we know that all artworks are made from commodities and circulate with them in the broader marketplace. If modernists did not care much about the role of oil, neither have modernist critics, and so far modernist cultural production and its industry of academics

have done fine without such worries. Combing modernism for one particular theme is like scanning a vast stretch of land for a place to put an oil well – one might get a lucky strike, but there are so many other things going on in modernist literature that one seems to be mistaking the derrick for the forest of other matters to address. Or as Daniel Tiffany puts it, "Only a fool reads poetry for facts."[2]

Yet maybe it is time to be foolish and break the rules set forth in literary criticism that forbid reducing art to anything so literal and obvious. Indeed, thematic reduction can be a strategic method by which to open art to new ways of reading the material conditions that make the irreducible and non-thematic possible. There is something compulsive about oil and its incredibly rapid transformation of the earth that makes its reduction to thematic reading all the more compelling. Admittedly, academic arguments that proceed by saying we need to look more at whatever *x* topic is being promoted as underserved usually lack some intellectual elegance. Furthermore, sifting a cultural archive for a certain item of content (flowers, airplanes, handshakes) tends to be an arbitrary and narrowly self-fulfilling end – one could just as well have searched for any other keyword. Oil, however, may not be just a keyword into modernity but is arguably one of its primary enabling events and what has helped it to keep running hot up to today. Oil is a global substance that frames globalization itself and transforms what it means to search for modernist content in the first place. Art is by definition open-ended and allusive, which makes thematizing it in elementary or totalizing terms impossible, but oil also has a special elusiveness, malleability, and an ability to stretch the possible that contributes to its definitive position in modernity. Oil is a trope and a condition, a substance and a spectacle, a paradigmatic experience of the new and the now, as well as an ancient, epochal form of pressurized carbon. It is a vision of the sublime encrusted in geology and a tradable commodity that can move as fast as finance capital. Oil has modernism, modernity, and the slash between the two written all over it. Oil both celebrates modernity and literally exhausts it, as F.T. Marinetti well knew: "combustion engines and rubber tires are divine. Gasoline is divine."[3]

I take further inspiration for this inquiry from Patricia Yaeger's recent call in *PMLA* to examine the "coordinates for an energy-driven literary theory."[4] Yaeger's proposition comes in the context

of a push for more environmentally invested criticism to further analyze how literature and non-renewable resources work in and through each other as enabling constraints. "Without reverting to crude materialism," Yaeger recommends a more critical eye toward the role of resource commodities in modes of economic and literary production. Regarding the missing oil in modernism, she notes that "energy invisibilities may constitute different kinds of erasures."[5] To read oil in modernism then is to read obliquely and after erasure or expenditure, which happens to be one of the favoured ways of reading that theorists of modernism advocate. As Brecht once declared, "Petroleum resists the five-act form."[6] Oil defies direct representation and symbolic narrative. It is hidden underground, the end product of a still not fully known process; the technical apparatuses used to extract it are beyond the knowledge of laymen; to store it is to not see it; and to use it is to vaporize it or fix it into a new material (we usually see oil only when something has gone wrong and it is spilled). Its effects spread inexorably into the conscious and unconscious, begging to be leered at in forms of spectacle and conspicuous consumption but resisting vision all the same. Oil beckons the cultural critic with the lure of offering juicy prose describing the gooey confection that is easy to write. The sensual power of oil is tied into the way it affects an exquisite sensory synaesthesia (proffering mobility, movies, plastics, military power) that supports its addiction. As Stephanie LeMenager remarks, "Visual, kinaesthetic, acoustic ('hissing'), tactile, olfactory – oil touches us intimately, and everywhere."[7]

Let's face it, the absent presence of oil in modernist art is too compelling to not demand critical investigation, even as such inquiry is like the plot of a film noir, with the detective looking for the perpetrator who is everywhere woven into the fabric of the *mise-en-scène* but still confounds direct interrogation. Oil commands authority in modernist cultures, but its quick combustion raises perpetual problems that make the commodity a source of both power and crisis. The story of the rise of oil, which spread across the globe at the same time as modernist culture, is tied to the rise of specific national and regional fortunes, first in the United States and the Russian-controlled region of Baku, then in Mexico, Venezuela, and the Middle East. Matters of modernism and modernity weave through these national and regional centres as they deal with the spectacular rise

of the oil economy and the insatiable desire for more of it. A.R. Orage testified to the imbrication of modernism, modernity, and state power through oil in an editorial statement in a 1920 issue of *The New Age*: "Oil is power in its most modern form; it is almost a condition of any industrial future whatever; and still more absolutely of the industrial future of the United States."[8] Orage is actually one of the few to take seriously oil's finitude at the time, which he foresees as making the inevitable connection of oil to global power plays that much more volatile. Orage asks, "Where is the oil to come from, since of the American-controlled resources, forty per cent are already exhausted?"[9]

This chapter provides a brief sketch of how the stories of oil and modernism intertwine in the context of American culture. Primarily, I am interested in how the ecological side of this story is generative of both form and content for modernist literary works. To bring oil to the surface of modernist studies means attending to not just modes of production as base and background of cultural output. This way of reading also analyzes how environmental disturbances and dependencies reverberate across cultural forms and how commodity forms intersect with issues of cultural productivity. Furthermore, it means accounting for the new material, psychological, and subjective states that appear under such conditions. Since the American modernist archive shows relatively little ostensible, overt engagement with oil itself, we must attend to the matter of how oil enabled yet eluded the rise of modernism as well.

Amitav Ghosh pointed to the mystery of "the muteness of the Oil Encounter" in literature in an essay written in the early 1990s, calling out to American writers in particular to explain "why there isn't a Great American Oil Novel."[10] In Ghosh's view, oil turned away many literary heads until just recently because of its impenetrable grime, brooding blackness, and the soulless message of its pursuit by way of a violently militant opportunism at all costs.[11] Modernist and postmodernist writers can at times be quite attracted to these motifs and affects in other contexts, and Ghosh is rightly surprised that the epochal shifts in energy, economic, and social organization spurred by oil did not translate into a similar generic demand.[12] And if the novel could not accommodate oil, poetry was not really even in the game: "As for an epic poem [on oil], the very idea is ludicrous."[13] Though don't tell this to Lucretius, whose *De rerum natura* is an epic poem largely about raw goods from atoms on up.[14]

In considering modernist poetics, the idea of oil mixing with poetry seems ludicrous given that modernist poetry never sticks to a single topic but flashes from image to image, and generally sees new technology and science as enticements for new aesthetic forms instead of barometers for the politics of ecology. Yet the lack of a petroleum consciousness in modernist poems stands out even more considering that modernists were obsessed with ascribing a kind of energy to the poem itself. Ezra Pound compared poetry to a turbine and a vortex of high energy forces. William Carlos Williams used words like "electricity," "dynamism," and "power" to describe the impetus of the poetic ("the imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam").[15] Indeed, in modernism more generally, new sources of energy are frequently understood to pulsate not just through machines, but also within words, bodies, and minds, and at the moment of creativity as well. H.G. Wells thought "A petrol motor … does exactly the same" as the human body, since "in both cases, besides fuel, there must be a supply of air."[16] Wells added that "The living organism so far as its energy-output is concerned is really and precisely a combustion engine."[17] New and more powerful forms of energy seemed to require an equally energetic writing style, as if it were literally impossible to write languid or flowery prose while using electric lights or riding in a speeding car.[18] For Henry Adams, new forms of power production educated the eponymous figure as much as classrooms full of philosophy or history: "the next great influx of new forces seemed near at hand, and its style of education promised to be violently coercive."[19] Adams extrapolated that these energies and technologies would henceforth serve to raise up all Americans as cyborg-like beings with astonishing powers: "[T]he new American – the child of incalculable coal-power, chemical power, electric power, and radiating energy, as well as of new forces yet undetermined – must be a sort of God compared with any former creation of nature. At the rate of progress since 1800, every American who lived to the year 2000 would know how to control unlimited power."[20] If energy is the impulse of the now, the dynamism of the everyday, and the inexorable acceleration into the future, there is no need to think of energy's structural limits and environmental costs.[21] Storing and releasing energy is ascribed by Heidegger to be the essence of modernity itself (another example of what he calls "enframing"). Heidegger cannot resist phrasing his own spectacular version of what the oil sublime has done to the

world: "Nature becomes a giant gasoline station, an energy source for modern technology and industry."[22]

Heidegger's totalizing vision of oil elides the multiple roles that oil plays in modernity (including the spectre of scarcity). It is important to mention that as much as oil changed what we mean by nature, it also gave a boost to some aspects of environmentalism. The discovery of oil in North America almost certainly saved whales from being hunted into extinction for their oils, used in the mid-nineteenth century to light lamps and to grease machines. Oil also prompted a slow but important shift away from coal, the latter of which is relatively less energy efficient and pollutes more. The global shift to oil and hydroelectric power, along with more efficient use of coal, came at the same time as American national fervour arose for parks and wilderness preserves, which industry and government increasingly supported since using timber for fuel had obvious inefficiencies. Automobile manufacturers and oil companies promoted advertisements of breezy drives in the countryside and protected parks, peddling a kind of petroleum pastoralism, finding they could make more money by leaving these regions intact than by turning them into an energy source.

When the car became as much a character as the human protagonists in the first road trip novels in the United States, it was the long-standing romance of the American landscape rather than the investigation of the harnessing of the land into a commodity that drove the narrative. Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919), perhaps the first major American novel to feature both car and cross-country road adventure, made the democratically suggestive title coincident with the fumes of the combustion engine. Lewis's novel tells the story of Claire Boltwood's journey in her car from Brooklyn to Seattle, the sundry lot of folks she meets along the way, and the fellow motorist Milt Daggett that she eventually swoons over. Sinclair puts an able female character at the wheel, although the plot is driven by her constant need of rescue as she deals with what will become the staples of every driver's angst: hitchhikers, carjackers, bad roads, night driving, mechanical breakdowns, where to sleep at night, back-seat drivers, and roadkill. Claire proves to be a more than capable driver as she invents a code for the road, which boils down to not thinking much at all about it: "she was finding the one secret of long-distance driving – namely, driving; keeping on, thinking by fifty-mile units, not

by the ten-mile stretches of Long Island runs; and not fretting over anything whatever. She seemed charmed; if she had a puncture – why, she put on the spare. If she ran out of gas – why, any passing driver would lend her a gallon. Nothing, it seemed, could halt her level flight across the giant land."[23] Nothing could stop her except, maybe, the land itself, which at that point had hardly been graded for anything more than horse and covered wagon. In the same year as Lewis's novel, the US Army sent a cross-country caravan to demonstrate the power of the automobile and the need for a national road system, which was demanded by a modern military that needed transportation arteries to rapidly mobilize anywhere in the country in the event of an attack. Dwight D. Eisenhower, then an army captain, joined the convoy of forty-two trucks, which left Washington, DC, on 7 July. After many misadventures over rocky and muddy roads that led to constant breakdowns, the group arrived at San Francisco on 6 September.[24] Eisenhower later would combine his dedication to military management and automobility with the famous 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act, forever changing the conditions of the American road trip.

At the turn of the twentieth century, when the United States led the world in oil exploration and production, oil had been cast by the journalist Ida Tarbell and others as the essence of monopoly capitalism, which was defended by many as the economic signature of American nationalism at the time. Upton Sinclair's *Oil!* narrates the plot of oil as the plot of American power, inextricable from the nation's business acumen, scandals, exploitations, and windfalls. In a recent essay, Peter Hitchcock has argued that Sinclair's book fits the bill of the Great American Oil Novel that Ghosh had been looking for after all.[25] Indeed, *Oil!* has an impressive amount of fact and description about the hardscrabble industrial techniques involved in drilling: "Drilling was always a dirty business; you swam in pale grey mud until the well came in, and after that you slid in oil."[26] The book mixes a kind of anthropology of oil drilling with stories about the effects of oil discovery on land transformations (oil fields displace homesteads and food crops in Southern California), financial speculation, the spread of capitalist fever and risk, and the militarization of oil in the First World War and after. The narrator tells us that patriotism and oil were hand in glove during the war: "there was nothing more important than oil, and the way for them

to serve their country was to keep the stuff flowing."[27] As always in the case of oil narratives, there is the money shot that paid the bills for the writer and oilman alike: "The inside of the earth seemed to burst through that hole; a roaring and rushing, as Niagara, and a black column shot up into the air, two hundred feet, two hundred and fifty – no one could say for sure – and came thundering down to earth as a mass of thick, black, slimy, slippery fluid."[28]

But there is something too easy in the celebration of the "great" and the "American" that Sinclair buys into, and which sets him up to construct a particularly boosterish national fantasy about the impact of oil on state power and the dirty but heroic work of extraction. Hitchcock remarks that the novel locks into an agenda that "wants to make oil more intimately American";[29] for Sinclair, this means telling a story of the struggle for American labourers to rise up and get their due, while also still appreciating the outrageous rags-to-riches storyline that oil has offered to frontier speculators. Sinclair's oil becomes the setting as well as the lubricant for the spread of social realism, with its moral certainties, salt-of-the-earth codes of honour, and anthropocentric pride (as in the line in "The Internationale": "The earth belongs to us, the people"). The novel streamlines social critique toward issues of class (race and gender are treated as mostly insignificant matters in the book and often corralled into stereotypes) and exudes disdain for aesthetic experimentation. Sinclair excoriates corruption and monopolies because he wants to see oil extraction democratized and funnelled to bolster big America and its foreign-power prowess. He has no time or patience with modernist avant-gardes who use indirect or even non-semantic writing to imagine another world, one where production and consumption are not the be-all and end-all, because for Sinclair the democratizing of more and more industrial production appears to be the only Leftist political storyline out there.

COMMODITY POETRY

I want to conclude here by offering some brief thoughts on how to bring forth an oil analysis in a selection of modernist American poetry in particular that opens up different representational and affective terrain from realism. Because oil appears so rarely as a direct referent, and more in indirect forms such as cars, speed, consumption,

and energy expenditure, one way we can appreciate its suppleness is in the context of the wider aesthetics of commodities and the rise of "carboniferous capitalism" (Lewis Mumford's phrase).[30] There is enough evidence to suggest that one can identify a loose yet coherent subgenre of poetry emerging in modernism that can be called the "commodity poem." The modernist commodity poem situates a resource accumulated or extracted from the earth into a meditation on labour, literary craft, and the facticity and aesthetic impact of elemental materials. These poems also gesture outwards toward global networks of trade, the role of the poem as commodity, and the changes evident in nature as modernization spreads. The modernist commodity poem embodies the central importance of the lives of made things in modernity, and sees itself in connection with as well as in distinction from the world of goods that circulate around the planet.

The commodity poem is not exclusively American or about oil but makes a widespread appearance in the nation that dominates the global commodities market at the time. The historian Gavin Wright argues that, at the outset of the twentieth century, "the single most robust characteristic of American manufacturing exports was intensity in non-reproducible natural resources."[31] By 1913, the United States led the world in natural gas and oil production and consumption, and also was the world's largest producer of coal and practically all other minerals. These resources and the control and shaping of them convey a cultural as well as economic experience, providing the basis for a sense of national prosperity and confidence in modernity. Marshall McLuhan argued that commodities are mediums just like new technologies – indeed the two are inseparable, as the virtual reality of radios and computers is impossible without new discoveries in the engineering of raw materials. McLuhan, following on the influence of his mentor Harold Innis (who researched how practices and technologies of communication were inextricable from the mobility of goods and information infrastructures), declared that "technological media are staples or natural resources, exactly as are coal and cotton and oil … For a society configured by reliance on a few commodities accepts them as a social bond quite as much as the metropolis does the press. Cotton and oil, like radio and TV, become 'fixed charges' on the entire psychic life of the community. And this pervasive fact creates the unique cultural flavor of any society."[32] Commodities are mediums that are messages just as

much as print or television. Coal, cotton, and oil effectuate cultural and psychological frameworks specific to their material properties and the modes of production required to harvest them. Whitman's 1855 *Leaves of Grass* is perhaps then the first commodity poem, in that its making, materials, editing, printing and visual layout, and vocabulary all contribute to its self-reflexive awareness as an object of "natureculture." In Whitman's oeuvre, commodities, labourers, idlers, and elements of nature circulate continuously along with the poet who sees himself as both object and subject in a world saturated with materials. Pound's *Cantos* expanded on the notion of commodities as poetic and poem as commodity by embedding in the epic form lyrical reflections on bookmaking, pricing, debt, circulation, and the literary marketplace in the context of geopolitical world-shaping.

Perhaps the most prominent, and maybe simplistic, example of the commodity poem can be found in the work of Carl Sandburg. His banner poem "Chicago," in *Chicago Poems* (1916), stacks words horizontally and vertically like so many goods:

> Hog Butcher for the world,
> Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat,
> Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler;
> Stormy, husky, brawling,
> City of the Big Shoulders.[33]

Here, commodities are figured as personifications and persons as commodities, as one cannot tell the difference between object and worker – is the "Tool Maker" a machine or a person? Goods are abundant, towering in capital letters, nationalistic, and rendered as aesthetically bombastic at the level of sound, typography, and lineation. For Sandburg, commodities are heroes to the poem and to the nation, putting both to work for each other. In his long poem "Good Morning, America," Sandburg locates supreme authority in the apparent solidity, use value, and political heft of the commodity. "Steel, coal, oil, the test tube arise as facts, dominions, / Standing establishments with world ambassadors."[34] Practically all of Sandburg's work consists of thematically driven paeans to the interchangeability of words, works, and workers.

Commodity poems can be odes to things, as in Sandburg's case, or they can be more ambivalent or polarized, concerning the role that

raw materiality and economics plays in modernist poetics. In William Carlos Williams's iconic "so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow // glazed with rain / water // beside the white / chickens," the ready-made wheelbarrow, water, and chickens are commonplace commodities that take on added aura and economic pressures as single lines. These objects are akin to the Duchampian ready-made, modernism at its zero degree, which is nothing more than a commodity placed in the context of an art institution. "[S]o much" pressure borne by bare things feeds back into the poem's own sense of pause over what it means to "depend upon" commodities that are taken out of the marketplace, converted into aesthetic images, and set circulating among other art objects. Williams also would write several unconsciously oil-inflected poems about coolly surveying the suburban roads in his automobile, idling in his car while letting his mind wander.[35] Oil and the automobile made the suburban much more navigable and integrated small town America more seamlessly into the flow of modernity. Williams erotically and poetically cathected to the car, but also hallucinated petrol as a thing of horror: "poems are small and tied and gasping, they eat gasoline, they all ate gasoline and died."[36]

Counter to the Futurist mania for the machine and the ironic Dadaist eye for oil-driven motors and cranks evocative of unsentimental, repetitive sexual acts, poets associated with Objectivism such as Charles Reznikoff and George Oppen drew melancholy portraits of how oil abruptly changed the landscape and turned Imagism into an elegiac form. Objectivism was a loosely used moniker for a small grouping of mostly New York-based avant-garde poets in the 1920s and '30s. In "A Garden" (1934), Reznikoff's anti-pastoral short poem finds a line of taxis making a garish bouquet.

> About the railway station as the taxicabs leave,
> the smoke from their exhaust pipes is murky blue –
> stinking flowers, budding, unfolding, over the ruts in the
> snow.[37]

The visual precision and burst of conceptual intuition that are features of Imagism here are applied to a scene of evanescent pollution, the puffs of smoke emanating from a car tailpipe. Neither car nor combustion of oil occupies the centre of the image, showing continued evidence of oil as representable only as an oblique cause. The

poem lingers on the after-effects of motor exhaust billowing into the snow, which gives the shadowy feel of the Imagist poem a sordid aftertaste. Many of Reznikoff's short imagistic poems follow from a scenario of the poet taking a leisurely, pastoral-like stroll through an urban world of detritus, industrial waste, beggars, factories, and ghettos. The strolling poet sympathizes with the sundry things of the world, be they trees or trash, as companions irrelevant of status, who struggle to survive in the city as he does. In an untitled poem from the same period, Reznikoff writes while likely waiting for his subway to appear: "Rails in the subway, / what did you know of happiness, / when you were ore in the earth; / now the electric lights shine upon you."[38] Reznikoff points to a melancholy of the commodity, tracing the outline of a fairly Marxist story of commodities ripped from their dwellings, alienated from their fabricators, and left to fend for themselves in a cold marketplace.

The socialist-realist portrayals of the lives of workers enmeshed with the lives of commodities often tried to dignify both with outsized portraits of their collective natures. Indeed, the frame of socialist-realism is hard to avoid when discussing the aesthetics of commodities in the modernist era. There seems to be no other way to think politically about commodities at that moment outside of advocacy for the labourers who handle them and contra the heavy-handed methods used by commodity monopolies to control their terrain. There is no momentum yet for directly politicizing individual commodities such as oil or coal for their polluting properties, ties to colonialism, and fostering of addiction for non-renewable things. Nations needed cheap oil to get out of the Depression, win World Wars, and develop the middle class, so critiquing oil directly seemed to have no political backing until the environmental movement really took hold in the 1960s. Socialist-realism glorifies the grime of commodity extraction as a leftist platform since these are the sites of labour union power. Objectivist poets interacted at length with socialist-realist writers and generally supported their causes, but decidedly sought a different aesthetics, one that would both break with the dogmatic political approach and the simplistic appeal to the transparency of left-identified signifiers. George Oppen's first book of poetry, *Discrete Series* (1934), approaches the poem as a set of pieces that can be taken apart, examined, serialized, and contemplated in critical relation to the Fordist mode of production. Many

of the poems in Oppen's book offer glimpses of a world made in the image of cars, with glass windows framing perception in the opening page, to roads, traffic, streetcars, street lights, subways, and a machine aesthetic jarring throughout the serialized poems. These telltale traces of a motorized world cluster in lines wary about "that dark instrument / A car."[39]

Oppen famously took a hiatus of twenty-five years before he would publish again, citing in part a need to focus on leftist politics. The mechanical ambience of *Discrete Series* that is the pace of 1930s New York City does not disappear but is further examined in Oppen's next book *The Materials* (1962), which opens with three ecologically potent poems: "Eclogue," "Image of the Engine," and "Population." Oppen resets his poetic career with a garden and juxtaposes it with a machine and the growing planetary multitude. "Image of the Engine" begins with a section extolling the metallic intricacies of the car's motor, which Oppen was adept at fixing. The engine before the poet, however, breaks down, and its failure prompts thoughts of mortality, entropy, and "embarkations / foundered."[40] This poem is full of ruin, "every crevice of the city leaking / Rubble: concrete, conduit, pipe, a crumbling / Rubble of our roots."[41] It is not a stretch to say that this poem offers an early glimpse at the connection between cars, oil, and a series of infrastructural crises that are veering toward the big collapse, when the breakdown of machines and ecosystems overtakes the capacity to restore these. I do not think Oppen is making a grand statement here about peak oil per se, yet he demarcates how modernist machines are no longer naively energizing or enchanting, and instead disclose a shadow in which pools the darkness of oily things. What Oppen begins to tap into then is the aesthetic and political hallmarks of both the rise and fall of commodity modernism.

Oppen was joined in this sentiment by Allen Ginsberg, who crisscrossed the states in cars and wrote poems drawing from the geography and radio soundscape the car enabled, but consistently cast such machines in a melancholic and dejected pose. In Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra," the garden and the machine have both collapsed. The globe has become addicted to disposable consumer goods, and a politics of refusal toward the world enabled by cheap, nonrenewable energies starts to take shape. Ginsberg wanders among train tracks and sees a litany of used-up objects that have long lost

their industrial verve and erotic cathexis: "rubber dollar bills, skin of machinery, the guts and innards of the weeping coughing car, the empty lonely tincans with their rusty tongues alack, what more could I name, the smoked ashes of some cock cigar, the cunts of wheelbarrows and the milky breasts of cars, wornout asses out of chairs & sphincters of dynamos – all these."[42] Ginsberg and Oppen cite the abject aftermath of the industrial age as the gateway not to the abandonment of machine aesthetics but its entrance into a new phase that takes seriously the cycles of boom and bust that are built into the commodity-dependent world and the culture it exudes. The leftover ends of "free oil," the becoming of oil into a global political problem, and the rise of the trope of the end of oil all come together at the close of this period of modernism and its paean to the commodity.

NOTES

1 Public Roads Administration, Federal Works Agency, *Highway Statistics Summary to 1945* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1947), 18.

2 Daniel Tiffany, *Toy Medium: Science, Materialism, and Modern Lyric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 11. To emphasize his skepticism toward any reductive materialist reading practices, Tiffany adds: "a modern reader does not generally consider poetry to be a reliable source of knowledge about the nature or substance of material things" (11).

3 F.T. Marinetti, "The New Ethical Religion of Speed," in *Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 256. Eventually, some Futurist had to write a poem about oil exploration itself. This poem finally came with Maria Goretti's "Song of Petroleum" in 1941. Maria Goretti, "Song of Petroleum," in *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 476–9.

4 Patricia Yaeger, "Editor's Column: Literature in the Ages of Wood, Tallow, Coal, Whale Oil, Gasoline, Atomic Power, and Other Energy Sources," *PMLA* 126, no. 2 (March 2011): 307.

5 Ibid., 309.

6 Quoted in Christopher Innes, "Modernism in Drama," in *The*

Cambridge Companion to Modernism, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 150.

7 Stephanie LeMenager, "The Aesthetics of Petroleum, after *Oil!*," *American Literary History* 24, no. 1 (2012): 82.

8 A.R. Orage, "Notes of the Week," *The New Age* 27, no. 4 (May 27, 1920): 51.

9 Ibid.

10 Amitav Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances: A Chronicle of the Turmoil of Our Times* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 140.

11 As Ghosh phrases it, "To a great many Americans, oil smells bad. It reeks of unavoidable overseas entanglements, a worrisome foreign dependency, economic uncertainty, risky and expensive military enterprises; of thousands of dead civilians and children and all the troublesome questions that lie buried in their graves" (139).

12 More recently, Peter Hitchcock has expanded the list of disciplines that missed the importance of oil to the fields of social and political theory: "Why is it, for instance, that oil's representation seems ubiquitous and yet is relatively absent from critically and creatively articulated claims on space, history and social formation?" Peter Hitchcock, "Oil in an American Imaginary," *New Formations* 69 (Summer 2010): 81.

13 Ghosh, *Incendiary Circumstances*, 138.

14 Marx, in *Grundrisse*, also makes the case for the close connections of commodities and epic poetry in particular: "[I]s Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer's bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?" Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Penguin, 2005), 111.

15 Williams, "The Right of Way," *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume 1, 1909–1939* (New York: New Directions, 1986), 207.

16 H.G. Wells, Julian Huxley, G.P. Wells, *The Science of Life, Vol. 1* (London: Doubleday, 1931), 29.

17 Ibid., 30.

18 Garry Leonard suggests that we should think of modernism as running according to a kind of engine of its own. "The internal combustion engine is a machine that requires explosion and repetitive rupture to produce smooth, continuous, forward motion. As such, it is an apt metaphor for modernity where a continually renewed series of

'shocks' is systematically converted into 'progress.'" Garry Leonard, "'The Famished Roar of Automobiles': Modernity, the Internal Combustion Engine, and Modernism," in *Disciplining Modernism*, ed. Pamela Caughie (New York: Palgrave, 2009), 222.

19 Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 414.

20 Ibid., 413.

21 Here I think it is relevant to mention that the price of oil stayed remarkably cheap and consistent for nearly one hundred years; from 1870 to 1970, the price of a gallon at the pump ranged from $0.20 to $0.40, and only began to rise volatilely with OPEC intervention in the early 1970s.

22 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 50.

23 Sinclair Lewis, *Free Air* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1919), 69.

24 Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 207–8.

25 Hitchcock, "Oil in an American Imaginary," 81.

26 Upton Sinclair, *Oil!* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 65.

27 Ibid., 206.

28 Ibid., 25.

29 Hitchcock, "Oil in an American Imaginary," 91.

30 Mumford further connects a critique of the carbon-dependent economy with a nascent environmentalist awareness: "The animus of mining affected the whole social organism: this dominant mode of exploitation became the pattern for subordinate forms of industry … And the damage to form and civilization through the prevalence of these new habits of disorderly exploitation and wasteful expenditure remained, whether or not the source of energy itself disappeared. The psychological result of carboniferous capitalism – the lowered morale, the expectation of getting something for nothing, the disregard for a balanced mode of production and consumption, the habituation to wreckage and debris as part of the normal human environment – all these results were plainly mischievous." Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1934), 158.

31 Gavin Wright, "The Origins of American Industrial Success, 1879–1940," *American Economic Review* 80, no. 4 (September 1990): 651.

32 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 21.

33 Carl Sandburg, *The Complete Poems of Carl Sandburg* (New York: Harcourt, 1991), 3.
34 Ibid., 327.
35 For an example of literary criticism on Williams and cars, see John Chatlos, "Automobility and Lyric Poetry: The Mobile Gaze in William Carlos Williams' 'Right of Way,'" *Journal of Modern Literature* 30, no. 1 (2006): 140–54.
36 "The Descent of Winter 1928," *Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, 295.
37 Charles Reznikoff, *The Poems of Charles Reznikoff 1918–1975*, ed. Seamus Cooney (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005), 103.
38 Ibid., 97.
39 George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson (New York: New Directions, 2002), 8.
40 Ibid., 41.
41 Ibid., 42.
42 Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947–1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 138–9.