

Gaming the System

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A REVIEW OF:

Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009.

David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009.

1

Within the privilege zone that bears the demand to produce a book in the first place, nothing, one might say, brings one closer to what Jameson called the "commodity structure of academic intellectual life"¹ than the task of filling out one's

¹See C. Wright Mills, *White Collar* (New York: Oxford UP, 1956), 132; Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 393.

publisher's marketing questionnaire. *Please describe*, one is more or less impertuned, in any of several standardized variations, *what makes your book unique*. Not what one's book shares, as it inevitably does share, with all the work it builds on, and with which it is in present or proleptic dialogue, among its rival products—but rather what most clearly, and most substantively, isolates it from all the rest, so as to displace the rest in the market for knowledge modeled simultaneously, and interdependently, on the discovered truth and the exchanged commodity. What have *you* thought (or at least written down), one is asked in such encounters, that no one, bound by an artificial scarcity of cultural memory, can reasonably be remembered to have written before?

That the impossibility of such radical originality, in the humanities, is recognized by all parties attentively involved, in no way prevents it from functioning as that cut in the “endless flow of Essay”² through which literary humanists are constrained to embrace the System (that form of enclosure that every one of us takes for granted—and of which we nonetheless skeptically demand definition, just when it adjures us. I will leave it undenoted for now). It might well be merely amusing, if the presumption of novelty were not an element of the routine operation of that system, through which we assign value to the inter- and transdisciplinary gesture, while offering systemic continuity—and indeed, posterity—first to those who know better than to indulge it. (At least, as they say, Before Tenure.) To the colonization of late-blooming work in the literary humanities, a product of synthesis (which sometimes also requires non-productive silence), by the disjunctive form of the scientific breakthrough achieved in relative youth,³ we can add its settlement by the sovereignty of the monograph, the chronic overproduction of which everyone from indentured to emancipated academic writers protests, today, while griping concurrently that nothing can be done (that is, until Harvard, as the caveat goes, makes the first move). Only the best and the worst of the old guard still wants to play *Doktorvater*, anyway, turning out sectaries of a branch of work

²The phrase (modified here only by capitalization) is Clifford Siskin's; see Siskin, “The Year of the System,” *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. Richard Cronin (Basingstoke, England; New York, NY: Macmillan; St. Martin's, 1998): 31.

³On normal “late blooming” in the humanities, see Lindsay Waters, “Tenure, Publication and the Shape of the Careers of Humanists,” *Profession 2007*: 96 and Robert K. Merton, *On Social Structure and Science*, ed. Piotr Sztompka (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996), 326-27. On the disjunction of the scientific “paradigm,” and the forms of intellectual sociality that drive it, there is of course now an inexhaustibly massive expository literature on the work of Thomas Kuhn—the best of which, one might say, reads it in counterpoint with the work of Ludwik Fleck. See Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, trans. Fred Bradley and Thaddeus J. Trenn, ed. Thaddeus J. Trenn and Robert K. Merton (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981).

to be elaborated in bodying-forth, and David Damrosch has suggested the extent to which such relations always already determined a form of succession that modeled *itself*.⁴ All of which, we might say, fixes a certain pressure on scholars' first, and even second books (and indeed, why stop there?), in literary studies, the best of which could be said to lack any inner sense of their own novelty, while the worst rehearse unpersuasively its conspicuous imputation.

It cannot be denied that the works here under review are saying something new, if by "new" we mean also that which, far from being discovered in uncharted territory, was all along hidden, as it were, in plain sight. Sometimes, it is a matter of the structural amplification of scale through which the matter (the material, *and* its *mattering*) of context itself thwarts the circumscription of the phenomenological object, by reorganizing it from within (its image, as it were, re-taken at higher resolution); at other times, it seems necessary to *look through* the plane of the real, with and at that other, imaginative world of remonstrative interpretation called ideology critique. Both are flexible and adaptive forms of the scientism through which the literary humanities in the United States, in its retransmission of French intellectual struggle, mixes discourse-analytic tactics of parallel delineation with hermeneutic strategies of serial penetration, and through which both its Comtean and its Marxist positivisms express, as François Dosse has put it of their transatlantic progenitors, "a certain degree of [Western] self-hatred."⁵ Indeed, one might say that taken together, these two works—insurgent, each of them, in its own way—make the case for such "masocriticism"⁶ as the very ground of the ground, as it were, of a postcolonially melancholic U.S. literary studies, today. To the extent that the model more or less affirmed, on the one hand, is the model more or less interdicted, on the other, it is perhaps less than decisive that one figure legible against this ground resists the autoimmunity it diagnoses, while the other abides it.

2

Mark McGurl's *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* is a remarkably generous, unusually inclusive, and irresistibly buoyant work

⁴See Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995), 161ff.

⁵See Dosse, *History of Structuralism, Volume I: The Rising Sign, 1945-1966*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), xx; 14.

⁶See Paul Mann, "Masocriticism," *Masocriticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999): 19-50.

of literary criticism and scholarship. It needs to be read first of all as a deeply collegial piece of work, in that respect. In and of itself, this sets McGurl's book apart, in a field of endeavor where, a vibrant minor countertradition of polemics in Marxist and anarchist anticolonial cultural criticism aside, one feels too often that one is fighting over crumbs, with an intuitive ferocity that only invokes benign myopia and baleful interpellation in turn. The best pages of *The Program Era* (they are many) are animated by what can only be called the principle of hope, and by what Jameson, translating Bloch, termed "material astonishment," marking the intellectually willed concurrence of a phenomenological with an objective anticipatory disposition.⁷ At a time when, all entirely warranted leftist reservations about Obama aside, things *are* looking just slightly better for these latterly suicidal United States, one might be forgiven for remarking the prolepsis of a major work presumably conceived and composed during the larger portion of the last eight years of national darkness. It is instructive to consider that while most of our literary intellectuals simply buried their heads in the sand, and those left to tend the farm doubled down (entirely reasonably) on *der Ausnahmezustand* and *homo sacer*, someone among the chorus was working out a road to redemption.

Not that we may take it complacently, as such (a dilation to which I will return in a moment). For the novelty of McGurl's study is to bring into view, with a simple switch of the university channel, an entire mass of inexorably material fact—one might even say "facticity"—that both the scholarly study of U.S. literature after 1945 *and* its primary production has thrived by repressing. That that literature is, as McGurl suggests, historically illegible absent an integrated account of the institutional history of the university creative writing program, is a gauntlet thrown down, by his book, before scholars and creative writers alike. But at a time when the symbolic autonomy of creative writing as a discipline is coming under new forms of pressure,⁸ one might reasonably suggest that it is university creative

⁷See Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 122.

⁸See, for example, Donald Morton and Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "The Cultural Politics of the Fiction Workshop," *Cultural Critique* 11 (1988-89): 155-73; Wendy Bishop and Hans Ostrom, ed., *Colors of a Different Horse: Rethinking Creative Writing Theory and Pedagogy* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1994); David Radavich, "Creative Writing in the Academy," *Profession* 1999: 106-12; Joe Amato and H. Kassia Fleisher, "Reforming Creative Writing Pedagogy: History as Knowledge, Knowledge as Activism," *EBR: Electronic Book Review*, August 17, 2002; Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query," *Pedagogy* 3.2 (Spring 2003): 151-69; Paul Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (New York and London: Routledge, 2005); Tim Mayers, *(Re) Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 2005); Kelly Ritter and Stephanie Vanderslice, "Teaching Lore: Creative Writers and the University," *Profession* 2005: 102-112; Marjorie Perloff, "Cre-

writers who have more to lose in demurring, here. Let me begin, then, by noting what *The Program Era* offers our colleagues, as they say in Congress, on the other side of the aisle.

A center-left scholar of recognized authority (and excellent credentials) places the creative writing program at the very center of the history—and thus the scholarly historical field—of postwar U.S. literature. No one has done this before. To be sure, the priority thus granted the place of the institutionalized writer, by his scholarly colleague, is a gift that that writer must certainly see as borne, as it were, by a Greek: and that, one imagines, whether the writer hails of the last and most glorious wave of secession, holding court in Dey House in Iowa City (now safely remote from the English Philosophy Building), or from the rather more populous ranks of the unfortunates, nearly everywhere else, who never quite escaped the English Department host. But McGurl does not defer to his creative writing colleagues, in the passive-aggressive manner that is customary, and which signifies both envy of the writer's freedom in primary productivity, and contempt for the ne-science that is liberty's compensation. Rather, *The Program Era* grants university creative writers a foothold in the scholarship of postwar U.S. literature, on what are authentically equal terms, and a place from which they can work forward, if they choose, in joining a scholarly conversation.

To be sure, the writer must take that choice, against long years or even decades of conditioned resistance. It is true that if he⁹ chooses to join that conversation, he can no longer come to class, as he is wont to do, without any books, like a student reserving his semester's funds for spring break in Cancun or Daytona Beach. He may not yet know much of the history of the vast social and institutional drives that begot his more or (more likely) less pleasant sinecure; but that is easily remedied, as McGurl knows, by reading the right-wing critic D. G. Myers's *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* through Veblen, Mills, Bill Readings, and Christopher Newfield, along with an edited collection or two and a few scattered

ative Writing Among the Disciplines," *MLA Newsletter* 38.1 (2006): 3-4; Ritter and Vanderslice, ed., *Can It Really Be Taught? Resisting Lore in Creative Writing Pedagogy* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 2007); Kimberly Andrews, "A House Divided: On the Future of Creative Writing," *College English* 71.3 (January 2009): 242-55; Steve Healey, "The Rise of Creative Writing and the New Value of Creativity," *AWP Chronicle* 41.4 (February 2009): 30-38.

⁹My first draft of this essay used the pronoun "she" here, in the routine inversion of the specificity of a universalized "he" that is now accepted practice. With repetition across the iteration of "McGurl," however, it formed a pattern re-gendering it as heteronormative facing McGurl's own actual social gender—and eliding, in that, as well, some of the combative masculinism of the secessionism of creative writing within the university. For this reason (and as a non-solution), in these passages, I have restored, as a non-universal, the masculine-universal pronoun "he."

journal articles.¹⁰ It is, one must say, a beginning scholar's dream: to begin in medias res (or as Joan Retallack might put it, "in medias mess"¹¹), with so little of the usual burdensome catching up to do. Most self-identified U.S. creative writers, if they choose to pursue careers as literary scholars, end by specializing in post-1945 or, even more often, "contemporary" U.S. literature, and one cannot help thinking that scholarly envy, which turns on the romance of contact (with vitalized life and other figures of transport) in primary productivity, will yet grant the fledgling writer-scholar, emerging from the M.F.A. *experience* into properly bureaucratic scholarly culture, all the jealously guarded primacy he could want. Where both the letter *and* the spirit of McGurl's book take hold—and one thinks they will, where it counts—a certain sustained, if transformed deference must follow, and it is in this sense that the writer may take McGurl as the very type of a new scholarly ally.

Though he spares not the rod when it comes to mirages of autarky, it is applied with a gentle grip, and with the aim of lifting some of the veils of light the writer has romanced himself with, to his own detriment. That the prankish follies of Ken Kesey were locked, from the start, in (systemic) step with the temperance of his Stanford University mentor, Wallace Stegner, serves as one form of a reminder that freedom is just another word for overdetermination; still more ruinous, perhaps, for the writer set against the Establishment, are McGurl's brassier portraits of haute bourgeois libertines like Kay Boyle, who disdained university patronage even as she came to rely on it, with her independent fortune as an opposition leader flagging.¹² To the writer prepared to double down, here, with invocations

¹⁰See Myers, *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006); Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2007); Veblen, *The Higher Learning in America: A Memorandum on the Conduct of Universities by Business Men* (London: Routledge/Thoemmes, 2004); Mills, *White Collar*; Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996); Newfield, *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880-1980* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003); Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2008); and, in addition to the works cited in note 8 above, Joseph M. Moxley, ed., *Creative Writing in America: Theory and Pedagogy* (Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1989); Ben Siegel, ed., *The American Writer and the University* (Newark: U of Delaware P/London: Associated U Presses, 1989); Christopher Beach, *Poetic Culture: Contemporary American Poetry Between Community and Institution* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999).

¹¹Joan Retallack, *The Poethical Wager* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2004), 118.

¹²"While Kay Boyle, as a creative writing teacher, may have seen it as her duty to 'save the creative writer from academia'," McGurl observes, "her own case is arguably one of a creative writer saved *by* academia: come the 1960s, when she was herself in her sixties, this living link to the heroic oppositionality of expatriate Paris had very few readers and almost no income. The

of Brautigan and Bukowski, one is inclined to say that given ample archival time and space, any critic with McGurl's eye for the antinomies of pure freedom will uncover the constitutive and integral trace of the network of dependence outside which any such person of posterity ostensibly lived his life. For the bedrock of McGurl's approach, here, is a *fait accompli* so conspicuous, in every aspect of U.S. American life, today, that it might seem difficult to censor even in a culture that, all things considered, is famous for its famous ignorance of itself. That *fact* is that since (at the very latest) 1945, the United States of America is to be understood as the very center of the overdeveloped world, its comparatively low population density, comparatively high rates of relative poverty, and persistently voidist frontier myths notwithstanding—and that this means that nothing and no one dead or alive, in it, escapes its entanglements, howsoever such entanglements be conceived. Not only is there truly no such *thing* as Society, here in the capital of the capital of the world—there is nothing outside the manifold that it *is* only in motion.

For the university writer on whom this predicament has finally begun to obtrude, *The Program Era* serves as a vademecum digest of theories of what he is doing—a self-diagnostic manual, as it were, keyed to the affective intensities indexed by such conceits as “craft” and “voice,” not as illusions, but as normal functions of the cultural System. With the institutional demand for creative writing (which is happiest, as we all know, showing not telling) to explain what it does unfolding from different angles, nowadays, one might prevail on the writer to consider what such a call for justification means, and whether, once the terms of theoretical engagement have been set, they do not become more and more difficult to modify. At stake, here, after all, is the very production of drift, from intellectual ardor to corporate-cubicle anomie (and back), providing definitionally middle-class but low-wage student labor at the intake valve of the university, and a perpetually circulating adult student body of melancholy middle management, for its therapeutic re-skilling service wing. Such teratology is by no means the exclusive faculty of the luxury industry that is U.S. private higher education, today; as McGurl shows in his study of the University of Iowa's Writers' Workshop, as well as of such neither city- nor prairie-lit programs as that of John Barth's Penn

high-paying *New Yorker*, where her stories were a staple in the 1930s and 40s, was no longer interested in her work, and novels about Europeans caught up in the currents of European history—her specialty—were no longer in vogue. However poorly paid, the tenured position at S[an] F[rancisco] State was a godsend for her” (221). Arguably, this elides the role that McCarthyist blacklisting played in the decline of Boyle's literary reputation. (I owe this insight to James Morgart.)

State, it tenders the labor of purportedly democratic civic dispensation, as well.

3

So that to embark on this journey, the writer must accept nothing less than that figure by which everything, in his fractious self-evidence, is ungoverned. For creative writing in the university is a System, nested in the System of the university itself—and on, and on, in a structure for analysis terminable but interminable. *The Program Era* advances three arguments around this precept, each of them posed, like Kant's three liminal queries, as an interrogation of the future through the present as an articulation of possibility in itself. The first argument—that the postwar integration of literary production into the university, and the inversion of attitudes accompanying that integration, is a genuine novelty—has already been signaled. The historical novelty marked here is homologous with the historiographic novelty of *The Program Era* itself, in so far as it ushers the observer of the historical object-in-field from one seat to another, within the theater of understanding. The university, McGurl argues, is now the principal patron of ambitious literary practice in the United States: a structural transmutation amalgamating the extra-academic deportment of literary modernism with the forms of institutional space it had resisted, until the Fugitive-Agrarians banded together at Vanderbilt in the 1920s and the Iowa Writers' Workshop was founded, before the second outbreak of war. With that passage all but complete, McGurl asks us, in a tropism characteristic of this work's sodality of literary-critical substance with style, to consider that "all novels aspiring to the honorific status of literature must be considered campus novels of a sort" (47).

But all that means, perhaps, is that we can't sensibly read United States literature after 1945—or read it well, anyway—without considering this massive, and unprecedented, material transformation of its context and means of production. And, perhaps, that the production of literature, in this more or less radically new dispensation, is non-extricable from the production of the new individual practitioner of literature, hunting a cipher of freedom in practical literary self-actualization. Which is to say that, in a transaction expedited by the creative writing instructor, who grasps the austerity and rigidity of what such students really want, the new system produces literature *as* creative writing *and* its writers at the same time, as the loci (and foci) of discrete anticipations. The prospect of the university creative writing student is not that his instructor labor in instruction, at all—not as a mere person merely writing, in the normal or routine practice of hu-

man creativity (and certainly as not a mere teacher, merely *teaching* writing)—but rather that his instructor *be a writer*, a “charismatic model of *creative being*” (36), whose allure is vested in seclusion from the lonely crowd of the congregation, for whom his magnetic ipseity caps a kind of parade. “I didn’t *apply*,” objects the student writer, culling a word McGurl re-deploys with gleeful malice, throughout *The Program Era*—“to this program in order to be *constrained*” (by erudition, examination, or any of the other discomfiting afflictions of schooling); *I entered this Program* (and I am paying tuition, and/or selling my teaching labor) *in order to be free*.

To suggest that the Program is designed to contain, and to atomize, the potentially revolutionary collective energy of dissatisfaction with the status in quo, would perhaps be to force analysis back (or forward) to the critique it resists, as a risk to the complexity of relation. Still, in the notion of the M.F.A. program in creative writing as “a prolongation of the ‘college experience,’ an all-too-brief period when the student is validated as a creative person and given temporary cover, by virtue of his student status, from the classic complaint of middle-class parents that their would-be artist children are being frivolous” (17), it is neither difficult nor fanciful to find a circumscribed space of produced play, offered in trade for the life of white-collar captivity to follow. It is perhaps not raging youth that poses the gravest threat to the colonization of the lifeworld by consumption, in the U.S.A., but that profound, if inconclusive interrogation of the value of *growth* marking the mid-life crisis of the dependent employee, who senses that his life has prematurely come to an end. How else are we to rehearse the best years of our lives, than in that resignation to slavery that sustains alumni giving as a decisively unimpeachable source of endowment funds? Knowing what they must face, sooner or later, who *isn’t* compelled to protect for one’s children a space in which to live as they please—even, perhaps, to write poems, stories, and plays, in a tragic inversion of vocational indoctrination? And who could decline the social order their grateful compliance, in later, inexorably adult life, will unquestionably ensure?¹³

¹³A vivid enactment of such prolepsis appeared in an article in Penn State’s *Daily Collegian* on May 2, 2009, discussing the annual “Miffin Streak” marking the commencement of spring semester finals week. “One thing is for sure,” the article’s student author observed, apropos of a long history of controversy associated with the event (including arrests and a reported suicide attempt, by a prior survivor of rape). “Men—and women, too—will throw off their clothes and sprint along Miffin Road, just like the hundreds of Penn State students before them.” The article concludes with a statement from a Penn State junior charged with (and subsequently acquitted of) lewdness and disorderly conduct after participating in the event in 2008. “College is only four years,” this student is reported as stating. “Work is forever. These are supposed to be the best years of our lives—and people brave enough or stupid enough should be able to streak.”

Of course, if such children grow up to become professors, everything changes. Where the proletarianized worker poses a popular threat, in the menace of class consciousness and militant solidarity, the leftish managerial professoriate, no less self-coerced to *read the world* widely, deeply, and systematically, represents an intellectual (and pedagogical) hazard, in precisely its painfully atomized, maso-critical self-awareness. Where the corporate middle manager— what Mills called the “man who does not rise”¹⁴—concedes his exploitation only at home, in the domestic zone of the family where he (or she) has someone to take it out on, the truth is that he is hardly ever at home. For the same reason, he *never has time to read*, or to think, to the extent that thinking follows reading, or to converse or argue, in the sense that conversation and argument follow thought: and certainly not to *write*, in the generously interdependent organic and machinic senses delivering the Program Era. The student who joins the professors is, so to speak, the one who gets away.

That is, unless he joins the creative writing faculty, who, as McGurl everywhere in *The Program Era* implies, have more in common with the “captive engineers of the corporation,”¹⁵ farmed out to their tactically customized cubes, than either might soberly be expected to dream. Like tax protesters mourning a social wilderness in which they wouldn’t survive their first night, the creative writing faculty mourn a barbaric primal creativity, their own failure to consummate which (there are, after all, ever so many blockades, in this modern life) consigns them to the purgatorial corral of the institution of education. In time, time itself and its sedimentations afford a kind of legerdemain. That those who *did* get away—the yeoman survivalist (who nevertheless does need manufactured equipment), the proletarianized or subproletarized squatter (who nevertheless does, so to speak, still dwell in the master’s house), the unidentifiable escapee who is neither or none of these—*may still be writing*, is a certainty that succeeds in ducking them.

On this point, McGurl himself is literally circumspect. The conjectural underpinning of *The Program Era*, derived from the sociology of Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, is grounded in the systemic conceit of “reflexive modernity”: a *reflective* theoretical figuration, in itself, that marks the imagination of modernity, from its Euro-Atlantic seat, as a *fait accompli*—and the post-scarcity civilization it produced as functionally imperishable. In itself, this is part of what lets McGurl’s book be accessible reading, at a level that carries both speculative and analytic rigor, without coercing a prepossession of the exegetic tradition of Marxist cul-

¹⁴Mills, *White Collar*, xii.

¹⁵Mills, *White Collar*, x.

tural theory as such. This, too, recommends it to the self-identified university writer, for whom McGurl's second argument, that the expansion and differentiation of the university System will not be reversed, can be taken as an audible mandate. "It would run counter to everything we know about the behavior of modern institutions," McGurl has written elsewhere,

if long-running processes of specialization and differentiation were reversed anytime soon. We should rather expect the multiversity to continue to act as a kind of institutional difference engine, increasing in complexity as it assumes new functions, serves new constituencies, and houses ever more specialized domains of knowledge, including the knowledge of how to write good novels. The only question is what will hold this contraption together.¹⁶

As an intervention into what one might call the "Program debates"—constrained, as McGurl observes not without calculation, by normative struggle over the goodness or badness of the M.F.A. for U.S. American writing—this reseating of the *why* (and what one might call the "whether-ought") of modernity within its *how* compounds an unbeckoned yaw of analytic focus, and is in itself one source of McGurl's hospitably descriptive ecumenism. That the Program, as an "established fact" (27) of postwar U.S. American literature, is simply not going away—by way of conditions far more deeply fixed *and* varied than student-consumer demand—is the university writer's own most commanding self-justification.

McGurl considers, and discards, two logotypes (or trademarks) for the political economy of a reflexive modernity enfolding the creative writer, before he settles on a third. That third term, found in Richard Florida's denomination of a "creative economy" ("which proceeds on the simple theory," McGurl archly observes, "that anything is possible except the restraint of capital" [20]), captures momentarily the profound imbrication of creativity with all aspects of research and development on campus today, regardless of discipline, academic unit or school, and congeniality to financialization.¹⁷ As such, it illuminates the moment-in-motion-at-rest of the present with at once more, and less romantic candlepower than the term that it supersedes, Joseph Pine and James Gilmore's

¹⁶McGurl, "The Program Era: Pluralisms of Postwar American Fiction," *Critical Inquiry* 32 (2005), 125. See also McGurl, *The Program Era*, 405.

¹⁷McGurl, 20-21; Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class, and How It Is Transforming Work, Leisure, Community, and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

“experience economy.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, it is McGurl’s engagement with this latter, discarded intellectual product that yields some of *The Program Era*’s most powerfully evocative critical meditations on temporality, labor, and desire, that anti-expedient whose disruptive mediations, subsumed under structures of function, infringe at crucial points, in this work, on McGurl’s own affable scholarly exteriority:

The exaggerated but telling sense that “everyone” across the land is writing or, even more frequently, not finding time to write “their novel” indexes something more than the wide distribution of a certain kind of literary ambition. Those relatively few, but nonetheless great many, writers who actually manage to produce and publish a novel speak to and for a broader existential urge to be living a significant—literally—life. In sum, the creative writing program produces programmatically, but also in rich and various profusion, a literature aptly suited to a programmatic society. (xi)

A novel is, after all, a very good example of an “experiential commodity” whose value to its readers is a transvaluation of the authorial labor that went into its making, and most often has little to do with the economic value of the pulp upon which it is pressed. This is brought into relief by the even better example of tourism, where the tourist pays simply *to be* in a certain place but hedges the immateriality of his experience by taking pictures and purchasing durable souvenirs. Since reading novels and being on vacation are so often aligned in popular practice, we might well suspect a deep link between the two. . . . To the extent that it, too, can be understood as an experiential commodity that the student purchases with tuition money, creative writing instruction can be understood in similar, if less artifactual terms. . . . Taking a vacation from the usual grind, the undergraduate writer becomes a kind of internal tourist voyaging on a sea of personal memories and trenchant observations of her social environment, converting them, via the detour of craft and imagination, into stories. By contrast, to read and analyze a novel in a regular literature class is to turn around and head back toward the workplace—back, that is, toward the submissiveness of homework. (15-16, quoted with omissions)

¹⁸McGurl, 14-16; B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theatre and Every Business a Stage* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1999).

To the extent that the experience economy corrects the computational-determinist bias of the “information economy” (the first term McGurl advances for consideration), it secures the return of the repressed denominational religiosity of the U.S. university before the Civil War and the Morrill Land-Grant Acts, as well as the humanist antagonism of secular science before the triumph of World War II. But psychic economies, focalized as they must be through serially conjured individuation, are nowhere near capacious enough for the new System, within which secular humanist Arts and Letters curricula proliferated in parallel, teratogenically dividing and subdividing themselves in a primary repetition limited only by the absorptive capacity of a new, collectively massive student body, seeded by a demobilized general infantry (or more accurately—and appositely—*galvanized iron*).

Among the instructional ranks of the new model army of writer-teachers whom Empire marched from the postwar hiring boom to the collapse of the job market in the 1970s and 80s, the exuberant “technomodernism” of maximalist allegories of institutionalization (the Barth of *Giles Goat-Boy*) flourished alongside a contrastingly cowed minimalist “lower-midde-class modernism” (Raymond Carver’s entreaties to please be quiet, please) and a “high cultural pluralism” like both and like neither of these (Sandra Cisneros’s barrio house on Mango Street, imagined from Iowa City). The literary culture wars of “postmodernism” (a nomen McGurl eschews altogether, here) can be regarded as so much all too human self-amusement, in so far as each such aesthetic formation was co-produced by a regulative difference engine utterly *indifferent* to authorized proclamations of the “exhaustion” or “replenishment” of Literature.¹⁹ At the core of this terrible and irreversible expansion—the bureaucratic administrative, if not the faculty-corporeal momentum of which has endured, through four decades of relative contraction—is the genius of *waste*, that conspicuously atavistic prodigality that liquidates the chimerae of technocratic and belletristic efficiency at one stroke.²⁰

It is from this modernism in reverse, in the non-negotiable seizure of the fiscal conservative phobia of the State *as* waste, that McGurl’s third argument emerges. Pitting Veblen against Readings, McGurl proposes that university Excellence, as the purely formal form of prestige traded in and by relative specular measures of value, is programmatically, if not deliberately, produced as such aesthetic luxury: a variation on Elizabeth Bruss’s insight that the drive for System is itself a

¹⁹See Barth, “The Literature of Exhaustion,” *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (New York: Putnam, 1984), 62-76 and “The Literature of Replenishment,” 193-206.

²⁰On the historically *belletristic* demand for a prose economy of “clarity,” see John Guillory, “The Memo and Modernity,” *Critical Inquiry* 31.1 (2004): 108-132.

(gratuitous, useless) drive—in other words, a mode of desire.²¹ So that it is impossible not to conclude, even if McGurl (for what can only be taken as honorable cause) never quite lets it be fully explicit, that if it is anything, it is *creative writing itself*, the currently most prominent form of Excellence as waste, that today holds the reflexively modern multiversity System together. The most cerebrally devastating passages of *The Program Era* cluster around this insight, which positions the writer internally as the “integrated outsider” (or “inside-outer” [338]), a therapeutically inspiring exemplar of the unalienated laborer, for the student on his inevasibly graduating way to soul-destruction in retail and office “shit work” (297; 408). And externally, as the locus (and focus) of the university’s alibi for financialization: what McGurl, in one of *The Program Era*’s rare and admirably balanced scraps of polemic, construes as a “further incursion of consumerism into the academy, a ballooning enterprise of mass vanity and anti-intellectualism” (74). If it is wise to be mindful of the injustice done to *The Program Era* by isolating such rare negations, one might say that one cannot, either, avoid the lesson—taken very much against the grain of its amiable social-democratic impatience with “un-persuasive” and “boring” recreations of blame (71; 74)—that if one wanted to advance (or destroy) the corporate multiversity, one might have to begin by advancing (or destroying) creative writing. Either way, as I began by saying, we are already at the omphalos.

4

It is waste, as a symptomatic byproduct of the technocratic repetition compulsion through which an order of things is mindlessly stamped on the stuff of life, that serves David Golumbia’s mark in *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, a work to be read as rawly new in the brute force with which it confronts the disavowed fatal flaw in a contemporary academic disciplinary formation: here, the intractably cultural First Worldism of digital media studies. Where the appeal of McGurl’s critical persona rests in its attentive modulation of the polemics attending its topic, that of Golumbia’s lies in its more elementally mercurial access of rhetorical double writing, in the directed embrace of diplomatic intemperance. Where McGurl’s graceful balance of point and counterpoint reconstructs the plausible equipoise of the object-model he takes as his own, Golumbia’s hyperbolic entrainments enact

²¹ McGurl, 405-7; Bruss, *Beautiful Theories: The Spectacle of Discourse in Contemporary Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1982), 48ff.

the epistemic violence just as plausibly providing that model's symbolic foundation.

Golumbia argues programmatically that computers are cultural "all the way down," and that the rhetoric of computation, entailing a way of posing all genuine problems as soluble, is both pervasively privileged, and imperceptible *as* privileged, in contemporary United States and Euro-Atlantic material and intellectual culture. If this sounds like the self-conscious embrace of critique, yoked as it must be to the heuristic planar schism of ideology and antithetic resistance, that is because that is indeed the mode in which *The Cultural Logic of Computation* operates, without transmitting anything whatsoever of that transcendentalist naivete through allegations of which anti-ideologues covertly admit their exhaustion by the imaginative burdens of truly dialectical thought. With a brusqueness one could only perversely mistake for crudity, Golumbia aims his anti-machine at the very foundation of Euro-Atlantic modernity, in the rationalist theory of mind that needs to be seen as fatally antiprogressive, in direct contraposition with its own claims for renovation. To the extent that the insights generated by this contrast can only be described as openly concealed, the mode that evolves from this directive is really a deeply, critically anticonservative form of common sense.

With a bracing probity likely to subvocalize, in many of his readers, a hitherto circumspect disease with the academic fetish-world of digital media studies, Golumbia disowns the entire project of declaring ourselves "posthuman," without pretending that humanism has not sheltered precisely the contrivance he declines, at specific conjunctures—or that such declarations are not self-consciously tentative and exploratory, themselves, rather than baldly, and thus refutably, thetic. The continuist gradualism he substitutes for the disjunctive millennialism of digital media advocacy needs to be seen as genuinely disruptive, to the extent that it points up the schismic recourse to radical futures through which reflexive modernity, conceived as accomplished fact, evades both the nonmodern difference of its own past *and* its difference, in the present, from temporal non- and rival modernities alive alongside it (its "reflexivity" is in this sense a project to prevent escape).²² This is how Golumbia's opening gambit, which might otherwise stand as another restatement of nothing new under the sun, presents the antinomian contour of intervention. That Harvard University Press, in its promotional text for *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, exposes its author, "who worked as a software designer for more than ten years," as an apostate technocrat—or at least

²²See Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present," *Critical Inquiry* 33.3 (2007): 471-494.

functionary—tells us something about the inadmissibility of any self-consciously *exterior* humanist critique of technoscience (excepting that, of course, of those who take it all the way—who in that case become something like “normal” U.S. Americans); but that, in itself, only points more determinedly to what is at stake in the treason of stepping out. “In a time of the most extreme rhetoric of cultural change,” as Golumbia puts it, “which does not, at the same time, accompany a concomitant recognition of the possibilities for radical cultural difference... the need for resistance to the rhetoric of novelty seems especially pressing” (3).

Does it? On the one hand, the culture of computation caps a tercentennial segment of the cultural dominant of Western thought and its traditions of institutional power, embodied in the state, the university and the corporation; on the other, it marks an intensification after 1945, as the material cultural fields of all three formations (and soon enough, their amalgam) were dilated and cultivated by computerization, which, alongside the democratic distribution of power across individual “users,” serves also its authoritarian oligarchic-monopolist concentration against the *used*. It needs to be said, once again, that this is not a likeness of the System for which Golumbia’s critical persona seeks “reasonable” equilibrium—and that this is the product and evidence of a strategy the goal of which is simply not straightforward consensus, rhetorical, procedural, or contractual. Rather, working from the premise that a reasonable understanding of the present will value proximity to a verisimilar objectivity above all else, Golumbia merely reminds us that computerization is *not* democratic and authoritarian in equal measure, all highly touted and highly controlled trials in radical technofreedom notwithstanding. Rather, to the extent that Euro-Atlantic modernity *is* a modernity of institutions, computerization serves first and foremost the fundamental and constitutive modern institution of slavery.

This is a word Golumbia is not shy of using. Critique, which aims not for imminent (or for that matter, immanent) resolution, but for a dialogic elongation that strains to match a problem’s scale—by any temporal means necessary—must operate by affirming the difference erased by institutional power, while denying the difference that screens institutional power’s violence: chiefly, the regulatory discursive, and so conceptual and imaginative segregation through which atomized specialization serves a central authority. If, on the pages of *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, the neutral electromechanical and overdetermined socioeconomic senses of “slave” are permitted to consort without rigorous regulation,²³ that is

²³In electrical engineering, the word “slave” can designate any subordinate device controlled by another.

by way of suggestion, in a mode of argument criterial, rather than evidential, that computing emerges as prosthetic slavery, replacing the liberated human object of an abolished civilization with an artifact serving the same end. At the level of university-institutional administration, this illuminates how the proliferation of variables thrown by the difference engine is recontrolled by what Golumbia calls “hierarchical and often politically conservative forces” (4) routinely successful at reducing and eliminating difference in direct procedural, if non-corporeal violence (in nonadmission, nonhiring, adjunctization and other forms of nonpromotion, tenure denial, program closure, and department compression, recombination, and elimination). Working both centrifugally and centripetally from the relations of production of *The Cultural Logic of Computation* itself (not least in its status as a “tenure book”), Golumbia seats the female or feminized operators of a domestic workforce democratized by war’s exigency at the controls of the computer as world-war machine, suggestively linking the feminized technocratic class of the intellectuals to the subjugation-within-subjugation of the human computer under masculinist technocratic administration. “These human computers,” as Golumbia configures them, in a moment of inspired antihyperbole, “were in fact the first operators of electronic and mechanical computers, regardless of whether they were built for analog or digital functions. In the administrative scheme, computing acts as a slave to the powerful human master, and it is always the task of imperial administration to amplify computational power” (12).

It is here, in the enchainment of gender and technique—which advances to triangulation or quadrature, as we shall see, with the addition of language and language-race—that the anchoring stakes of the cultural logic of computation break the surface. To enslavement as a modality of warfare, there is the positive response of abolition; to its quotidian continuation by other means, there is perhaps only finally—or primarily—abrogation. The radical novelty of Golumbia’s intervention lies in the extent to which, alongside his wholly unstartling support for transgressive “hacking” as resistant ultradifferentiation *within* the System, he is willing to propose “the possibility of de-emphasizing computerization” (5): a proposal emphatically *not* made in the past indicative name of paper, or papyral reading, in the manner of the early jeremiads of Sven Birkerts (to whom Golumbia is miscellaneously but productively sympathetic). Liminaly figured, in the exteriority of the incommensurabilist abnegation of *not*-computing, we are permitted an Augenblick at the nonpossible concept of nonmodernity that is every bit as constitutional, we might say, to Western salvation as modernity’s reflexivization. Where McGurl, entirely unreprouchably, confronts nihilist critiques of the proliferation of a System of human creativity with their reactionary elitism—and the

irresistible asseveration that it is better to have a democratic mass of “bad” literature than no literature at all—Golumbia parses the Program’s code for its *other* lesson: that “we have to learn how to critique even that which helps us,” even, or especially, when such dangerous supplements assume the post-scarcity prospect of magnificent waste. “*Should* computers be used,” Golumbia will ask, in a radical and radically obvious enervation of the basis of his own authority to issue such speculation, “for everything of which they are capable?” (225). “*It would be better not to have computers,*” is his unequivocal answer, “than to live in a world where many more people come to believe that computers by themselves can ‘save us,’ can ‘solve our problems’ ” (13; emphasis added). Indeed.

5

For that is the essence of the cultural logic of computation: remodeling the world, and the mind that investigates, approximates, or abrogates it, as a computational system. Golumbia nervily sorts the wheat from the chaff of political affiliation, here, assigning the Statist (a word he emphatically capitalizes, throughout *The Cultural Logic of Computation*) mechanistics of Leibniz, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Descartes to the sociophobic right-conservative-Tory-neoliberal terminus of instrumental reason, and the skepticism of Locke, Voltaire, Swift, Hume, Kant, Marx, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Dewey, and James to its liberal-radical “usually, but not always, left” (9) opposition. This gathering of the tribes, tackled with the anarchist’s flamboyant tolerance for the improbable points of contact where the political spectrum becomes a fold, decisively overrides the opportunistic delegation of poststructuralism to the right which might be said to cater a parlor game, even today, for those trapped in regressive negative identification with Nietzsche and Heidegger, as paroxysmal figures of Euro-Atlantic self-congratulation for the peerless evil of the European Holocaust as compared with other, less modern genocides. (This is a prime form of what I will call “gaming the system”—that is, the either unpremeditated or systemically inevitable masocritical design of a contraindicative apparatus inadvertently hailing the crimes of Euro-Atlantic slavery and holocaust as prodigal modern *achievements*—precisely by refusing, as it were, to venture “outside” it, where comparable crimes may or may not wait to be found. If there is indeed a complicity with the illegalities of the Bush 43 administration to be found in the leftish opposition besotted by the “state of exception,” it lies here, in the narcissism of the left at war with its own narcissistic civilization, rather than in the caprice that left simply becomes right when it gets

ultra enough.) As such, it perhaps accounts for the unmarked cameo played by the center-right cattle-prodding of Mark Bauerlein (6), here, no less than Birkerts, in a book that speaks otherwise unequivocally for, as, and to the left.

In rescuing poststructuralism (yet again) for that left, Golumbia performs a brief reading of *Of Grammatology* extracting, from its own *Erinnerung*, the seduction of the young Derrida (and of Deleuze and Guattari, along the way) by the cybernetic model—thus removing one plank, at least, from long-standing left-secularist campaign platforms targeting Derrida’s ostensibly charismatic ostensible authoritarianism.²⁴ But the other filament in Golumbia’s theoretical braid, one which sits at some odds with the spirit of this poststructuralist salvage operation, is a Weberian conflation of capitalist rationalism with evangelical Christianity, which Golumbia doesn’t do much to differentiate, in *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, from that counter-mystification through which modern liberal and left Euro-Atlantic secular intellectuals have imagined themselves somehow undefiled by the permeative cultural Christianity they discern in the enterprises of their declared opponents.²⁵ Within the unavoidable cruditions of left-intellectual warfare, this conflict translates, for the self-declared secularist flank, as a loss of contact with the concurrent modernity of the radical or counter-Enlightenment Golumbia appears to identify himself (and Derrida, and Foucault) most closely with, here (13).²⁶

Such dubiety is conspicuous in Golumbia’s inventive critique of Chomsky, which, far from accepting that Chomsky has any place on the left at all, near or far, banishes him unceremoniously to the right of *The Cultural Logic of Computation*’s epistemo-political fold. Chomsky as “citation champ” drives the entire rightish intellectual formation of computationalism, rerouting one academic discipline (linguistics) away from its leftish culturalism and exerting regressive pressure on a host of related orders, as well (psychology, philosophy, cognitive science, and computer science). Disallowing as a canard the division of Chomsky’s social politics from his epistemological and institutional legislations, Golumbia

²⁴Golumbia, 10; 13.

²⁵On secularism as Christianity, see Gil Anidjar, “Secularism,” *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (2006): 52-77.

²⁶See also the debate between Bruce Robbins and Akeel Bilgrami, from which neither participant might be said to have emerged victorious: Bilgrami, “Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Critical Inquiry* 32.3 (Spring 2006): 381-411; Robbins, “Not Without Reason: A Response to Akeel Bilgrami,” *Critical Inquiry* 33.3 (Spring 2007): 632-630; Bilgrami, “Reply to Bruce Robbins’s ‘Not without Reason,’” *Critical Inquiry* 33.3 (Spring 2007): 641-49.

proposes that “Chomsky’s embrace and defense of a particularly powerful ideology made his work useful for an intellectual and cultural politics that was looking for a home” (32). The promotion of individual rationality as a keynote of Cold War anticommunist and anti-Marxist agitprop dovetailed precisely, Golumbia argues, with “the emerging availability of computing machinery in universities,” and helps to explain the persistent currency of Chomsky’s influence on the most institutionally conservative “and even rightist” intellectual dispositions (32).

The statement that human language is computable is, Golumbia insists, no “mere metaphor,” but the mark of a systematic ideological sociophobia and rhetorical commitment to autoimmunity. Chomsky’s earliest work was funded by elements of the U.S. defense industry long since (and still today) engrossed by implausible prospects for the intelligence-processing applications of computerized transcription, translation, and generation of spoken and written human languages. This imagined capture of language by formal logic defined the project of the so-called Chomsky Hierarchy: “to establish a system in which the term *language* . . . can be applied both to logical formalisms like those used by computers and also to so-called natural languages” (37). Chomsky’s more or less consistent disavowal of such imagined practical ends of his work as fully automated MT (machine translation)—and his evident dismay at the ends to which his work has been put, on both strictly intellectual and more broadly epistemo-political grounds—does little to blunt the attack on his legacy, here, as something for which Chomsky remains responsible, even if it has escaped his control. The angry academic white men who employed Chomsky’s work in the restoration of instrumental rationalist Anglocentrist Europhone order to a domain of knowledge conceived as a culture in itself, motivated by radical alterity, and attractive to “women and minority linguists” (41) remain Chomsky’s followers, in more than one sense and irrespective of his temper for leadership. (As do those who extended his legacy, as Golumbia tells it, with the prolongation of the colonization of subjectivity in philosophical functionalism, in a white man’s discipline better protected than linguistics ever was or is, then and now, from the monolingualism of the other.²⁷)

“Despite Chomsky’s overt leftist politics,” Golumbia concludes pitilessly,

Chomsky’s effect on linguistics was to take a field that had been especially aware of cultural difference and the political situations of disempowered groups and, in some ways, to simply dismiss out of hand the question of whether their practices might have much to offer intellectual investigation. . . . In other words, Chomsky took one

²⁷Golumbia, 61.

of the few actually leftward-leaning academic fields in U.S. culture and, arguably, swung it far to the right. By arguing strenuously that linguistic phenomena could be separable into form and content, essentially out of his own intuitions rather than any particular empirical demonstration, Chomsky fit linguistics into the rationalist tradition from which it had spent nearly a hundred years extricating itself. (43)

6

Despite the heat here, the hospitality to traditional, premodern, amodern, or rival modern culture embodied in the behaviorist materialization of culture itself only incompletely defines Golumbia's own critical practice, in this book. Arguably, it is where he draws his terms of pejoration from the varieties of religious experience that Golumbia's attack on Chomsky most clearly risks re-enfolding *The Cultural Logic of Computation* in the monocultural interiority Golumbia goes to such formidably and ferociously moral length, in this work, to resist. Like it or not, "religion"—the Christian secular name for a non-Christian modernity whose rival empires sheltered a quotidian and intellective Judeo-Christian socius, while resisting Christian secular militarist imperialism (*and* its vision of capitalism)—steps in where secular belief systems grow so burdened by their own imperial concupiscence that they collapse. It has to be said that the perdurable influence, in this conversation, of Derrida and Spivak (to whom Golumbia, God bless him, grants full credit as one of its most conspicuous agents) will be here, in the *longue durée* of this insight, itself—and not with latter-day Weberians waging an imprecisely motivated war, these days, on post-secularism. One might say that by the same contrempts of misappropriation, it is in Golumbia's briskly savage portrait of Chomsky as "theological authority," accepting and excommunicating acolytes (46), that he has composed the only pages of *The Cultural Logic of Computation* that fail to live up to his task.

What is it with the System, anyway? Where McGurl might be said to have conjectured, by warrant, that science is, functionally speaking, king (and to signal amicably that if you can't beat it, might as well join it), Golumbia's meticulously crafted polemic returns us to the unfunctionalized *fata morgana* of transcendent-substantive power figured in so much puerile human(ist) resistance to the Establishment, the Administration, or merely "the Man." To the extent that the authors of the works under review, here, along with their reviewer, are all (for the moment, at least) entirely institutionalized intellectuals, it is beyond question that all

have been socialized by the leftish disappointment of 1968, leaving a transavant-gardist episteme whose cultural dominant is utopian-realist resignation to non-freedom. But surely the limitation of such a perspective—the limitation that *is* that perspective—is beyond nobody’s ken, howsoever it may have been dulled by tenure eligibility, tenure achieved, and the delusive consensus that both career chapters must stage. The narcissism of the conviction that *we* can’t have a revolution (so no one can), and that *our* capitalist modernity is undefeated (even though we hate it), ought to be more than plain. McGurl’s Program Era is a figure of complex enclosure, an *open* system, with a non-contingent “outside”; yet “the open system must have an outside to relate to in the first place” (193)—that is, “outside” is a *thing* to which a relation is always already invented, and so a thing the exteriority of which is limited in advance. Nothing in this diagrammatics is implausible, as either a creative *or* an archival configuration of the massive input of the G.I. Bill and its motivation of the perpetual-education machine of the Program Era’s “autopoetic” reflexive modernity. But to brand the sensible present, as McGurl does with a finespun, yet unclouded mark of position, less than one-quarter of the circuit from *The Program Era*’s starting gate, as suspending “unreconstructed romanticism” (72), is to foreclose on the unimaginable future that *that* history, in revealing itself in time, once also figured.

It is in this context that we can read McGurl’s clement, and yet saturated, ligation of utopia with unalienated labor.²⁸ Here, again, the studious and equitable descriptive neutrality of McGurl’s manner catches on the both functional and ruptural indescribability of utopia itself, understood not as a psychically modeled imagination of an historical unconscious, but as “a blankness or horizon of consciousness. . . formed not by the past but by the future.”²⁹ “From the point of view of temporality,” as Jameson put it in this early (but continuous) reading of Bloch, “the experience of hope consists in a coming to consciousness of that relationship to the *as yet* inexistent.”³⁰ In *The Program Era*, McGurl more than makes good on his promise to “realize a diverse aesthetic democracy” (74) through the critical reading of creative writing as enacting a general human creativity, in the already forefended past and the unavoidable present; but for all the genuine, and genuinely novel, politico-ethical acumen he unostentatiously gathers, here, there is no program for reading what happens when empire rising suddenly, as it were, begins to fall.

²⁸McGurl, 296.

²⁹Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 129.

³⁰Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 127.

Is this too much to ask? For the U.S. cultural elite, such as it is, outside the university System, we need retain no pity. To the extent that their apparent leisure is gambled on so-called independent wealth, they might as well be considered enemies of the state; either way, as electively illiterate cultural predators, they are, in the end, as integral to debt-leveraged American madness as the bankers and the chief embezzlement officers. Their resentment, for what they know is their own wholesale impoundment by the postmodern culture industry, is more than plain³¹ (those who protest that they are confirmed autodidacts are profoundly mistaken). But for the demotic upwardly mobile and extant middle-class masses for whom McGurl himself reserves his compassion, it seems clear that “the bubble world of American consumerism, as it existed at the start of Obama’s formal candidacy in 2007, will never be restored,” as Mike Davis puts it—“and protracted stagnation, not timely technology-led recovery, seems the most realistic scenario for the era that may someday bear his name.”³² What will become of the “strategically triumphalist” (409) Program Era as it bleeds, as it must bleed, into managed decline?³³

In addressing this question, at least, Golumbia’s overt negativity is more genuinely descriptive—and his counter-attack against the computationalist libel of “voluntarist romanticism” (Golumbia, 46) augurs what is recuperable in and from its cumbersome levity. The romantic (and Romantic) autonomy that the creative writer re-represents, after all, harbors a critique of institutions—firstly, of the institution of modernity itself—furnishing an aboriginal scapegoat for the lapsarian ethic of bureaucratic intellectual capitalism. In persuasively construing U.S.

³¹A good example is Charles McGrath’s imaginatively bankrupt review of *The Program Era*, “The Ponzi Workshop,” *The New York Times*, April 14, 2009—about as compelling a case against any journalists’ bailout as one could request.

³²Mike Davis, “Obama at Manassas,” *New Left Review* 56 (March-April 2009), 40.

³³See Giovanni Arrighi, “The Winding Paths of Capital,” *New Left Review* 56 (March-April 2009), 83: “It is not clear what Obama actually wants to do. If he thinks that he can reverse the decline, he’s going to have some very nasty surprises. What he can do is to manage the decline intelligently—in other words, change the policy from: ‘We are not accommodating. We want another century,’ to one of de facto managing decline, devising policies that accommodate the change in power relationships. I don’t know whether he’s going to do so because he’s very ambiguous; whether because in politics you cannot say certain things, or because he doesn’t know what to do, or because he just is ambiguous—I don’t know. But the change from Bush to Obama does open up the possibility of managing and accommodating the decline of the United States in a non-catastrophic way. Bush has had the opposite effect: the credibility of the American military has been further undermined, the financial position has become even more disastrous. So now the task facing Obama, I think, is managing decline intelligently. That’s what he can do. But his idea of escalating U.S. intervention in Afghanistan is worrying, to say the least.”

middle-class college attendance as an *anti*-institutional socialization ceremony (and creative writing as its heterotopic index), McGurl's deployment of Victor Turner's ethnographic models of tribal discipline suggests something of how the post-scarcity system contained youthful rebellion in curricular modules of exuberant self-expression.³⁴ But it might be said to discount, as well, the instruction of Marc Bousquet's current work on the undergraduate student body as a corps of captive labor, in the sense that commutes mirages of freedom to a coercion approaching Golumbia's reordinated slavery.³⁵

There is perhaps nothing, in any case, in "unreconstructed" romanticism that requires direct identification with the naivete and ignorance of the foolish youth undead in anyone awake and alive, at any age. The argument can be made that romanticism is in fact the best name for that masocritical insurgency, undertaken from within the *Erinnerung* of Euro-Atlantic modernity, which in its conservation of an image of unanticipable change, stands the best chance of contacting the dissent traced by the intractable computational insolubility of some social problems—and which might be said to mark the (not always resisted) spirit of the letter of *The Program Era*, itself, in its most productively ambivalent pages. Indeed, one might say that in context of a certain natural and legitimate tendency to militant statism, in the profoundly bureaucratic (and, as McGurl suggests, profoundly auto-interrogative) institution of the academy, romantic anticapitalism is, as the work of Michael Löwy suggests, too casually dismissed³⁶ —and that it is as good a delivery vehicle as any for a specific critical package. That, one might say, would not be "post-colonial theory," as a perhaps finally inter-statist accommodation of (any new) global order (in the new national transnationalisms and hemispherizations, the new global comparatisms, and so on), but anticolonial critique as insistence on local autonomy and self-determination, in setting multiple, epistemically distributed terms for debate.

It would be only the slightest magnification of what we would have to call "critical license" to suppose that *that*, in the best of all the amalgamated possible worlds of *The Program Era* and *The Cultural Logic of Computation* read in counterpoint, is what both McGurl and Golumbia, themselves, are after—adopting this idiom in time (in the future anteriority of what *will have been*) rather than space

³⁴McGurl, 198-99.

³⁵Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York UP, 2008).

³⁶See Löwy, *Pour une sociologie des intellectuels révolutionnaires: l'évolution politique de Lukács, 1909-1929* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1976); Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: NLB, 1979).

(in the illuded critical object to which one, as it were, gives chase). “For the end of such apprenticeship consists in this,” as Hegel put it in a comment on the *Bildungsroman* quoted sympathetically by Lukács in a late work, “that the subject sows his wild oats, builds himself with his wishes and opinions into harmony with subsisting relationships and their rationality, enters the concatenation of the world, and acquires for himself an appropriate attitude to it.”³⁷ What Adorno, commenting on this forced or “extorted” reconciliation (*erpresste Versöhnung*), described as the Hegelian “ban on the return to the utopia of [Lukács’s] youth”³⁸ might best be recounted as a mode of gaming the System: of the interminable and interminably diverting rearrangement of its elements, which either aims to forbid (as Golumbia might construe it), or merely ends by forestalling (as McGurl might prefer), as it were, *going outside*. That the final turn in Lukács’s political outlook—back toward the revolutionary left, in 1968 (and at age eighty-three)—enabled him to reject what Löwy calls “the bureaucratic line on the ‘adventurist,’ ‘manipulated,’ or even ‘provocative’ character”³⁹ of radical youth movements, might serve as something of a lesson in projective scale for those of us whose embrace of bureaucracy is, sentimentally or unsentimentally (indeed, knowingly or unknowingly) a legacy of *mourning* for 1968, transmitted by those who might be said to have outlived Lukács, but by no means to have outwitted him.

³⁷Hegel’s *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Volume I* trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press/Oxford UP, 1975), 593; qtd. in Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, trans. John and Necke Mander (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 112.

³⁸Adorno, “Erpresste Versöhnung: Zu Georg Lukács: ‘Wider den missverstandenen Realismus,’” *Gesammelte Schriften II: Noten zur Literatur*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1996), 280; Adorno, “Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács’s *Realism in Our Time*,” trans. Shierry Weber Nichol森, *Notes to Literature* (New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1991), 240. For this juxtaposition of Hegel, Lukács, and Adorno, see Michael Löwy, *Pour une sociologie des intellectuels révolutionnaires*, 230; Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, 195. Löwy notes that in *The Young Hegel*, Lukács explicitly endorsed the mature Hegel’s *Versöhnung*, noting that “It was precisely because he moved away from the revolutionary ideals of his youth that Hegel was able to become the culminating figure of German idealism. . . The further he departed from his juvenile revolutionary ideals, the more resolutely he ‘reconciled himself’ to the domination of bourgeois society. . . the more powerful and conscious Hegel appears as a dialectician” (Lukács, *The Young Hegel*, qtd. with omissions in Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, 195n7).

³⁹Löwy, *Pour une sociologie des intellectuels révolutionnaires*, 253; Löwy, *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, 213.

7

To be sure, system-modeling lets us *do* things—genuinely useful things. To en-structure the cultural field of the Program Era is to unconceal the intricate dialectic of repudiation and re-embrace of the University, *in those who have already chosen it*—by now, a grand and tremendous mass of contemporary players, who have to be dealt with. In addition to debunking the deluded pretense to exteriority that is the object of so much gratuitous defiance and arbitration, in interfaculty affairs, this serves the more constructive purpose of opening up, in the archive of extant work on each of McGurl’s medial and limit cases, a substantial space for elaboration. (It does point, as well, to one reason *not* to affirm the integration of creative writing into the U.S. university, in its historical architectonic as a sinecure: that is, the extent to which the institutionalized creative writer’s hostility to the institution may be said to negate the practical commitment to teaching. That is, the labor problem, to put it bluntly, presented by writers who minimize or avoid their teaching responsibility—through manipulation of the system, or a more passive and more destructive attrition of time and effort—while clinging tenaciously to the university payroll in every other respect. The epitaph McGurl draws from a letter of Nabokov to Edmund Wilson—“I am sick of teaching, I am sick of teaching, I am sick of teaching” [McGurl, 1]—says it all.) And the project of extending McGurl’s cardinal novelistic analysis to the other major genres offers, as McGurl concedes with unfeigned charity, work yet to be done.

Another consequence, of course, is the erasure, by specular convergence if not cancellation, of the “underground”: of those who *do* genuinely choose against the System. There is not much one can do, in the end, to bring the recumbent figure of System to reconciliation, extorted or otherwise, with the heuristic schism maintained by its subterrain—though constrained as they are to produce such negotiations, institutionalized literary critics and scholars probably will (and probably should) never stop trying. Not even such a paladin of flexile systemic integration as Macherey ever seems fully competent to affirm the detachment of the exception from the best-played rule: thus the insistence, pedantic to the point of repressive desublimation, on a division of literary-critical from primary productive literary labor that one finds accompanying so many such auto-assignments, from Eichenbaum on.⁴⁰ When it advances to aggravated self-defense, such pedantry

⁴⁰Pierre Macherey, *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* (Paris, François Maspero, 1966); Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (New York and London: Routledge, 2006). (The chapter entitled “The Spoken and the Unspoken” is especially instructive, in this respect.) See also Boris Eichenbaum, “The Theory of the ‘Formal Method,’” *Russian For-*

is driven to the recognition of stupid undergrounds not only as romantic, within a disposition of literary-critical space, but as jejune, in a consecution of literary-historiographic time.⁴¹ To this constellation of disappointment, McGurl himself will occasionally ante a modernist jeer at the corny nostalgia latent in otherwise “tough-minded” travails—in his assessment of Ronald Sukenick’s vanguard escapism, for example, or of the cryptoradical fantasia at the center of the center of Pascale Casanova’s ballyhooed *The World Republic of Letters* (a work, it must be said, that in some of its very best features, *The Program Era* itself readily calls to mind).⁴² Certainly, the solitary masculinist-performative exploits of a Sukenick are scarcely exemplars of progressive confidentiality; but who is to say that non-stupid undergrounds cannot be constituted precisely as rival *institutions*, without being detected at once by university radar?⁴³

In what McGurl proposes we think as “technomodernism,” a node marking a dynamic surge of modernity after 1945, one is inclined to observe a productive repulsion of the critical stasis of drowsily codified “postmodernism,” McGurl’s canny circumvention of which confirms how deeply exhausted we all are, now, by its slack; but also, perhaps, that it evades the best-case ambit of postmodernity

malist Criticism: Four Essays, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 1965), 107: “In rejecting [literary-critical eclecticism], the Formalists actually rejected and still reject not the methods, but rather the irresponsible mixing of various disciplines and their problems.”

⁴¹See Paul Mann, “Stupid Undergrounds,” *Masocriticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999): 127-94.

⁴²McGurl, 324-8; Casanova, *La république mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999); Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004).

⁴³Mann, *Masocriticism*, x, xii: “Every manifesto, every exhibition, every review, every monograph, every attempt to take up or tear down the banner of the avant-gardes in the critical arena, every attempt to advance the avant-garde’s claims or to put them to rest: no matter what their ideological strategy or stakes, all end up serving the ‘white economy’ of cultural production. It is, finally, circulation alone that matters. . . . What if there were an avant-garde that was no longer committed to throwing itself on the spears of its enemies but operated in utter secrecy? What if the very history of cultural recuperation led us to imagine that some segment of what had once been the avant-garde must finally have learned from its mistakes and extended its trajectory into silence and invisibility? It might be necessary then to turn that silence and invisibility back against the critical project; it might be necessary to inflict that silence on one’s own discourse and suffer it as a kind of wound.” See also Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991), 143: “If the death of the avant-garde is its complete representation within the white economy, then one must assume that other projects have realized this and decided to disappear. In the end it is the theoretical condition of this disappearance that poses the greatest challenge.”

and its postmodernizations as cinching the stasis of modernity itself and *its* ends of histories—in other words, its re-placing of modernity *in time*. That, we might say, is the labor of what Jameson calls the “diachrony of synchrony,” in anti-systemic utopian thought: a temporal paradox in itself unrepresentable, in the object-form of historical transition.⁴⁴ Wisely enough, McGurl declines to interpret the service provided his work by the body of systems theory he draws on intermittently, yet fluently, and not without binding precision. Nor should he have to: the success of *The Program Era* lies in the genuine versatility of the “models I have tried to build” (369). To be sure, there is only so much work one can do to ground one’s ground, as it were, before going over its edge. And yet: the quandary of such modeling lies in the fundamentally uncontrollable experiment it becomes, in circulation, and in the receptive projection of model onto world that always seems to outrun critical admonition, in the end. “There is little doubt,” as Golumbia puts it, recounting the disenchanting appeal of the culture of computation, “that human languages can realize logical forms, or that some parts of linguistic practice appear logical on the surface. . . . But. . . the fact that language is capable of simulating these systems cannot be taken as strong evidence that language *is* such a system” (48).

One origin of the concept of system, after all, lies in the breach of scholasticism by a discrete, insurgent natural science, and in philosophy’s attempt to regenerate, from that division, another plenum. In so far as in that sense, System names an attempt to redress the modern disciplinary division of intellectual labor, the re-bound unity of any such redress is only intelligible—if it be intelligible at all—as a non-unity of non-division, in something of the sense carried by Derrida’s Nietzschean thesis “différance *is not*.”⁴⁵ And if it models anything, then, System models difference-deferance itself, in the combatively interposed obligation of philosophy to accommodate science. “The concept of system,” in this strife of faculties, “has its historical root in the divergence of philosophy and science at the beginning of the modern period, and it appears as something obviously to be required of philosophy only because this divergence between philosophy and science has since presented philosophy with its constant task.”⁴⁶ By not at all the same token, but rather one transformed by both McGurl’s and Golumbia’s work,

⁴⁴Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005), 87.

⁴⁵Derrida, “Différance,” trans. Alan Bass, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1982), 6.

⁴⁶Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London, New York: Continuum International, 2004), 177n5.

here, we might say that System after 1945—in other words, the Program Era—models the non-modelable division of the “two cultures” of computationalism and literary humanism, and that, in sustaining that division, System, far from harmonizing it in dissent, rather *demands that we choose*.⁴⁷

8

So that System, we might say, is a *scene* and as such, a horizon, not an object,⁴⁸ and even those most determined to distinguish its traces are liable to end where the Table of Categories ends, before it begins—reserving the “supplementary” work of the system itself for another, always already deferred occasion.⁴⁹ From here, we might begin to ask ourselves what is at stake in McGurl’s preference for the institutional-modernist continuism of Beck’s and Giddens’s own model worlds, over the discontinuism apparently anathema to the world-systems analysis of Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi—but in fact affording a fundamental of what we might think as world-systems analysis’s literary-humanist implications. The very parcel of Euro-Atlantic *longue durée* defined by McGurl’s Program Era, in world-systems analysis, is segmented by the relative decline of the U.S.A. in its imperial form as a world center of capital accumulation, marked by the global cycle of financialization underway since the 1970s.⁵⁰ The very entertainment of the question “Can capitalism survive success?,” as a question of the American century,⁵¹ might be said to suggest a kind of semaphore for the exteriority that Wallerstein readily grants to annihilated “anti-systemic movements,” a league comprising anti-statist movements suppressed by their statist analogues. It is this suppression, read as a dynamic of the world-system itself, no less than its (and its

⁴⁷See C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures and a Second Look*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1964).

⁴⁸Heidegger, “Die Zeit des Weltbildes,” *Holzwege* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1957), 69-104; Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 57-85.

⁴⁹*Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), 114-15: “Since at present we are concerned not with the completeness of the system, but only with the principles to be followed in its construction, I reserve this supplementary work for another occasion. . . . To note, and, where possible, to give a complete inventory of these concepts, would be a useful and not unpleasant task, but it is a task from which we can here be absolved.”

⁵⁰See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (New York: Verso, 1994), esp. 269ff.

⁵¹See Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 325ff.

rivals') theorization, that might be said to inaugurate one consequence of modernity Giddens has never fully acknowledged: blowback.⁵²

Regarding the pandemic unity of Euro-Atlantic modernity with its imperial rivals, Braudel himself was judicious, reiterating in the 1972 preface to the English translation of *The Mediterranean* that the Ottoman empire, as “an Anti-Christendom, balancing the weight of the west,” constituted a “major historiographic problem, a zone of formidable uncertainty.” “We historians of the west,” as Braudel put it, “are in exactly the same position as the contemporaries of Philip II, of Gian Andrea Doria or Don John of Austria: we can glimpse the Turkish world from the outside only. The reports sent by ambassadors and intelligence agents to Christian princes tell us something of the workings of that great body, but hardly ever anything of its motives. The secret, or some of the secrets, lie hidden in the vast archives in Istanbul.”⁵³ McGurl’s disinterest in unincorporated or unincorporable exteriority, either in itself, or as a legitimate object of interest for those inside the System of the university, is certainly no disavowal; one accepts in entirely good faith that even the compendious four hundred sixty-six-page system of *The Program Era* must cease expanding somewhere. It is by mere implication, then, that those not admitted to the Program, in the first place, come to bear on the scales that *The Program Era*—if no more or less so, in this respect, than any other unavoidably translative human endeavor—requires us to place on our eyes.

McGurl joins the resistance, here, to superficially opportunistic exercise of the transnationalization of U.S. American literary studies, noting the symptomatic aversion to subnational regions, localities, and institutions so often at play, there.⁵⁴ That this counter-critique occludes the *incommensurability of linguistic difference*

⁵²Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990); Wallerstein, “New Revolts Against the System,” *New Left Review* 18 (December 2002): 29-39. Both popular social movements (socialist parties and trade unionism), and popular national movements (those unifying the European nation-states, and later their decolonized principalities), Wallerstein notes, divided along state-oriented and autonomist lines, in the intensity of the fight for survival. “Many early versions of these movements,” he continues, “were totally destroyed. . . over the last three decades of the nineteenth century both types of movement went through a parallel series of great debates over strategy. . . . For the social movement, this was the debate between the Marxists and the anarchists; for the national movement, that between political and cultural nationalists. What happened historically in these debates. . . was that those holding the ‘state-oriented’ position won out. The decisive argument in each case was that the immediate source of real power was located in the state apparatus and that any attempt to ignore its political centrality was doomed to failure, since the state would successfully suppress any thrust towards anarchism or cultural nationalism” (30).

⁵³Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II, Volume I*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Berkeley: U of California P, 1995), 13.

⁵⁴McGurl, 401.

that endures as an absolutely explosive concern in the struggle of the rump right-wing U.S. Anglo business and cultural elite, today, confronting Hispanized demographic involution, might be said to index a waste-product retention unsuited to a work of *The Program Era*'s otherwise undepletable brio—even in context of what is admittedly, perhaps, a damned if you do, damned if you don't kind of configuration. Still, sometimes, as it turns out, the nineteenth-century African-American slave "narrative" has been composed within U.S. national borders, not in English, but in Arabic⁵⁵—while at least one authentically U.S. American writer of the Program Era has composed all of his poetry in modern Turkish, for publication only, as we like to say, overseas.⁵⁶ To refigure as transnational the authentically *local* documents of what Gönül Pultar calls the "other other," non-Anglophone U.S. American literature, so as to legitimate scholars' reading of them only in (English) translation—if we read them at all—is in fact to refuse the abundant legitimacy of the critique of transnationalization (or hemispherization) itself. To commit sincerely to the locality of historical and contemporary U.S. American literature, one might say, one would have to accept the need to read in the original language of composition: in Arabic or Turkish, for example, as a language in which one's fellow *local* U.S. Americans were and are writing *first*.

McGurl's readings of Morrison's *Beloved* and Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* tend to ventriloquize, from the more or less squeamish equivocation inlaid in their journeys "outside," the verdict required by the System: that no viable politics of liberation can entirely renounce the school,⁵⁷ or that Program Era modernity, "especially for women. . . presents an array of possibilities for individual self-development unthinkable in a traditional society" (383-84). Here, we might say, a *debate* exceeding the restrictive scope of *The Program Era* is re-represented, within its critical field, as a conclusion. Something of the same abbreviation is at work in the System's legislation of Chicana/o literary culturalism, which culminates, in *The Program Era*, in the promotion of Sandra Cisneros's bilanguaging "caramelo" to the institutional dominion she is always already assumed to desire:

So. . . if the little girl with caramel-colored skin represents, for the narrator, an encounter with the redemptive beauty of indigenous color,

⁵⁵See Ronald A. T. Judy, *(Dis)Forming the American Canon: African-Arabic Slave Narratives and the Vernacular* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993).

⁵⁶See Gönül Pultar, "Ethnic Fatigue: Başçılar's Poetry as a Metaphor for the Other 'Other Literature'," *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature*, ed. Werner Sollors (New York: New York UP, 2000), 124-139.

⁵⁷McGurl, 354.

one cannot miss how swiftly the onrushing narrative sweeps past this little girl into a future in which she has no future, certainly no future as a graduate of the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop. Thus it seems fair to wonder, in the spirit of Toni Morrison, what ghosts will be booking passage on these gleeful transnational journeys, which can never quite forget the educational institutions from which they were launched. (346)

That the cultural pluralist imperative to “find your voice” *as an excluded other* is produced by the System is an insight occasionally forcing the critical source of such insight, himself, to a reflexivity of a more distinctly discomfiting and unwarrantable complexion. At such moments, the mourning that describes the scholar's indentured loss of interest in the outside world intersects with the melancholia of the critical ego temporarily blinded by withdrawal:

This is an ambiguity at the heart of creative writing: does it allow you to be who you are? or to escape who you are? To the extent that fiction is a means of escape from determination, then fictional characters have an obvious reason for being: they are the vehicles of a therapeutic alienation, a movement from identity to otherness. If the risk of the first is the haunting discovery that the *person I really am* is the product of an American institution, the risk of the second is the discovery that the *person I am not* is the same—the product of an American institution. In this case, testifying to the limits of the imagination, the institutional other offers no plausible path of escape from its determinations. . . .

Put these two together and you have the signature dilemma of reflexive modernity, one we might call . . . the dilemma of the *institutional a priori*. Is there, after all, a space outside institutions for postwar American writers? Perhaps there is even now; perhaps this is what the great sprawl and effervescent verbal excess of literary maximalism are telling us: creativity will not be contained! At the same time, but in a different spirit, we could also observe that a system is never so completely closed as when it contains, within itself, a compelling representation of its own outside. (371)

When he revisits this red thread, in the craftily stormless closing sentence of *The Program Era's* final full chapter, McGurl ties it off with a compact, yet elaborate sequence of hypothetical first person declarations, from the final iteration

of which one might well locate his “own voice,” emerging. That the statement proffered (or professed), here, in “one’s own voice,” is fully a negation of the performatively vitalized freedom realized in creative writing’s “I am whoever I want to be,” is itself something of a feint, in so far as we can just as easily read McGurl’s dialectical equivocations back toward the actuality they grant, even in disavowal, to the disavowed first term.⁵⁸ “Perhaps the true *subject of creative writing*,” he suggests in his final concession, here, “the person who can figuratively be said to speak to us from the million acts of self-expression of which the Program Era is the simultaneous product and occasion, is simply this *life force*, this maximal urge to live and create and differentiate” (398). A dividend paid for affirming that systemic circumvolution—to which every one of us who continues to speak is doomed—is the license it grants us for the discretion with which we might simply let this act of speculation stand.

9

If it is hard, on the other hand, not to read *The Program Era* as something of a critic’s elegy for the writer he might *also* be, that in itself reflects the reanimation, in this work, of the conflict of the postwar left with the student and youth movements of the 1960s. There is something of both Irving Howe and Adorno in McGurl’s insistence on the waywardness of exuberant students, their inability to distinguish left from right, and their “desire to submit to unofficial forms of authority” (210), all too easy to redirect (as in the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, with which McGurl makes hay).⁵⁹ At this level, *The Program Era* performs on the one hand a passionate, progressive belief in the democratic ethic of surprise, and on the other, a more conflicted distrust of any *asystemic* instance of self-organization.

This, too, makes for instructive contrast with the thrust and parry of *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, as unwilling to endorse any hope for escape, yet more vigorous in its assault on the stockade. Columbia’s identification of state-systemic

⁵⁸McGurl, 398: “As an exercise of the imagination, creative writing supplies a special effect of personal agency in that performance, a way of saying not only ‘I am’ but ‘I am whoever I want to be,’ which unfortunately I am not.”

⁵⁹See McGurl, 187; 192; 201; 225. See also Adorno’s response to student-partisan accusations of quietism, in “Resignation,” *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft II: Eingriffe, Stichworte, Anhang* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1977): 794-799; Adorno, “Resignation,” trans. Wes Blomster, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 198-204.

interiority with “numerical rationality applied as an understanding of human subjectivity, and not vice versa” (10) clarifies something in the bearing of time and force in signification, here, even if it sacrifices some of McGurl’s wealth of trustworthily measured appraisal. It is no surprise, then, that where Beck and Giddens provide for *The Program Era* a platform of dynamic equanimity, Golumbia looks to the work of Harry Braverman, Paul Baran, and Paul Sweezy, in which democratic modernity violently reconverges with feudal tyranny. The antithetic model Golumbia derives, here, revises the equalizing dynamic claimed for the prescript of economic competition, as a screen for the uninterrupted concentration of economic power.⁶⁰ By analogy, the computational striation of smooth space, in the antipodes Golumbia obtains from Deleuze and Guattari, is a tactical interposition of mathematical modeling, into the production and administration of knowledge, that presents itself as hyperdetermined (fated) superscription. What is proposed, here, in other words, as the simple supersession of accomplished historical fact, is in fact *first* a schism both demanding we choose, and staging the decision already made.

Such *cleavage* is medial to the computationalist “classification mania” of SGML and XML, as standards for the definition of hierarchical text objects and metadata which demand that text conform to them⁶¹; in the Anglophone monolingualism of programming languages, command-line interfaces, and operating systems, through which mass computerization becomes “a vehicle for the accelerated spread of a dominant standard written language” (121); in the actuarial modeling of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) and Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) systems that produce “profitable service prevention” (131); and in the mathematically modeled “history effect” of such real-time strategy games as *Warcraft*, *StarCraft*, *Age of Empires*, and *Empire Earth* (143). It is this observation that propels Golumbia’s resistance to the mode of resistance routed “through protocol, not against it,” in the hacker manifestos of Alexander Galloway and McKenzie Wark:⁶² a systemic trade name one might well read as complementary to creative writing’s extra-abstractional dictum “show don’t tell.”

Modeling what he cheekily calls “limitation theology,” McGurl tells how this apothegm codified the programmatic regeneration of impersonal *restraint* from nothing less than the free “self-expression” of the dorsal formation of nineteenth-century educational progressivism.⁶³ The “masochistic aesthetics of institutional-

⁶⁰Golumbia, 129.

⁶¹Golumbia, 105ff; 211.

⁶²Golumbia, 25.

⁶³McGurl, 99; 102; 131.

ization” (135), for example, devised in the fiction of Flannery O’Connor is read in fugue with the progressive urban sociology that O’Connor’s elite Southern traditionalist conservatism, implacably hostile to the boreal precept of modernization, obliged her to check⁶⁴—though never without productivizing such impedance, as well. Where Golumbia’s prescription for “resistance *against*” protocol is offered directly to the contemporary left,⁶⁵ McGurl, in apostrophe to the orthodoxy of his models, extends a discretion segregating the elected political conservatism of agents from the predestined technical conservatism of all institutions, even within majority progressive formations. Here, too, however, McGurl tempers such clear-headed (and conscientious) self-incrimination with rebuke for the anachronism of “romantic” visions⁶⁶—a raid receiving its answer, in *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, in the religation of these two articles of voluntary forced choice. “It can be no coincidence,” Golumbia conjectures, “that the computer emerges at just a moment when the public ideology of human enslavement has been changed by intense social effort. We address computers as our slaves” (26).

It is when modernity stands thus, under utterly unabridged indictment, that one risks the dystopian self-congratulation overdetermining some of the most insightful Eurocentrist biopolitical philosophy, today. In the reconstruction of Nazi thanatopolitics as constituting an “irreducible protrusion” into human history, an unrecognized antinomy of “absolute newness” in the disposition of death,⁶⁷ there might be said to dwell, alongside the unimpeachable archival program we call “never again,” a certain Euro-Atlantic exceptionalism. An unintentional, inverted, and perverse expression of pride, in other words, in the conclusion that *our* modernity constructed human history’s greatest crime—and that *we* thus have the world’s least exhaustible forensic self-critical project, in turn. It would be entirely consonant with the spirit of *The Cultural Logic of Computation* to suggest, in reply to Golumbia’s inculpation of IBM’s role in the Holocaust,⁶⁸ that if the directors of the German state today were truly serious about atoning for Hitler’s atrocities, then in addition to publicly funding commemoration after commemoration of an undeniable and unforgettable crime, they would lawfully welcome the *new* alien others whom the substitutive liberation of the death camps brought to modernity’s European convulsion, and who so quickly and efficiently rebuilt its modern cap-

⁶⁴McGurl, 138.

⁶⁵Golumbia, 24-25.

⁶⁶McGurl, 155-56.

⁶⁷See Roberto Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), 110.

⁶⁸Golumbia, 214.

ital.

By the same token, when Golumbia observes that “today all of the Earth’s land mass, and a great part of its waters, are constantly surveilled by electronic monitoring, all of which inherently places locations on a single, global grid” (149), one is inclined, without in any way wanting to dispute this statement, to note the conservation here, in negative form, of the imperial aplomb of influence. It is at work, as well, in a denotational maneuver between computationalism as the cultural logic of the modernity of the Euro-Atlantic West, on the one hand (144), and as the “legitimate replication of the master-slave relationship out of which the United States,” in particular, was built (188), on the other—in response to which one is tempted simply to ask: What, really, is the difference? Without a doubt, McGurl’s comparatively steady poise is an asset, in so far as in its best pages, the work of *The Program Era* invites a response remote from the customary conflict mode, with its irresistibly predictable autocritical “problematizations.” But as we have noted, that, perhaps, is only one way of marking, in its contradistinctive change, in both of these undeductibly appraisable works, the danger of ending by merely, as it were, gaming the System: the custom Golumbia marks as a “style of authority,” and for which his final example is Bill Gates and Steve Ballmer, two Harvard mathematics majors assured of their place in the ruling class, ignoring their courses, then cramming “like mad” for the final exam (199). That that risk remains in the end fairly distant, here, wastes nothing of the categorical imperative to regard it.

10

We cannot, of course, conclude without asking, like a petulant child: *can we still go outside?*⁶⁹ One is tempted to say that literary humanism will meet its death still seeking resistance, policing the search for resistance, and counter-policing the policing of the search for resistance, all within what Paul Mann has called the “white economy” of critical discourse terminable but interminable.⁷⁰ Such determined self-enclosure is ironic, we might say, not in the bogus contradiction through which its intentions cross its results, but rather in the fold through which the release of an object becomes its pursuit again: a pursuit not of the same object,

⁶⁹For a trenchant critique of Luhmann on this question, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “No Exit? (Response to Luhmann),” *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity*, ed. William Rasch and Cary Wolfe (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000): 51-56.

⁷⁰Mann, *Masocriticism*, x.

itself, but of the non-objective object *release*, that stands for the act of releasing it.

So-called popular or mass culture—to the systemic pertinence of which, it is true, both McGurl and Golumbia are (each for his own reasons) necessarily mostly cool—is a poor proxy for any exteriority, in a national system of savage aversion to education and elected ignorance. There is nothing democratic whatsoever in such collective suicide. Of the more recent proxy of the animal, one can only observe that it offers effective distraction from the truly posthuman condition in which most of the world’s human beings are, entirely avoidably, forced to live. Golumbia’s unabashed use of the nomen “life,” as a headquarters for cultural and linguistic difference (122) and “our responsibility to each other as human beings” (119), is perhaps more propitious, in so far as it openly ventures what McGurl himself never seems entirely willing to fail to dispute. For if we take McGurl at his inwardly disputed word, we will have to admit that it just might be creative writing, as the “rebellious exercise of Eros” in “unfettered fecundity” (398), that sets us free, in so far as creative writing, alone among the disciplines, can replace the research object of whose divisive Being the culture of computation is a culture of rapacious need.

*What kind of traitor to the mission of mass higher education, we might well ask ourselves, would you have to be to think otherwise?*⁷¹ This challenge, which caps McGurl’s postludic meditation on “systematic excellence,” fairly dares us to contravene him, marking those who would persist in opposition, in the Program Era, as inegalitarian. That it serves so very aggressively, here, to engage the leading attack—and as such, as a maneuver unquietly describing manifold colliding paths—leaves an inextirpable mark, we might say, of the cardinally expressive, inevasibly intimate animation of a novel “release” of criticism and scholarship which, no less than *The Cultural Logic of Computation*, is certain to advance bearing justice’s arms.⁷²

11 Acknowledgments

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⁷¹See McGurl, 410.

⁷²C. Wright Mills, “Appendix: On Intellectual Craftsmanship,” *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000), 200-1: “Books are simply organized releases from the continuous work that goes into them.”