Introduction
Poetry, Modernity, Crisis

The idea of poetry as a genre in relation to crisis is nothing new. Commentators have assumed a natural link between poetry and crisis since at least 1897, when the French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarmé declared his infamous "*crise de vers*." From Mallarmé's vantage, the end of the nineteenth century was witnessing a crisis in ideas that was itself related to a crisis in society on the cusp of the twentieth century. Poetry, if it were to remain relevant, would now need to find a shorthand through which to encode the dislocations and contradictions of modernity's reigning social and economic order: Industrial capitalism. It would need to establish idioms that were irreducible to the communicative demands of an emerging commodity culture, yet still firmly rooted in the ground of contemporary social experience.[1] Roughly one hundred and twenty years later, the forms of sociality, political organization, and financial accumulation that defined Mallarmé's *fin-de-siècle* world have been steadily and irremediably transformed. Capitalism – modernity's persistent underlying economic logic – has continued to morph through successive stages, punctuated by cycles of growth and retraction, forcing steady social adaptation at every turn. At the same time, the conception of poetry as a genre in relation to the nagging sense of crisis wrought by this unceasing state of flux and transformation has only deepened, raising once again the question of the specific relationship between poetry and crisis.

This book charts the linkages between these two terms as it investigates a few of the many ways poetry, as a set of linguistic forms and cultural practices, has engaged iterations of crisis – economic, cultural, and epistemological – that have occurred throughout, and indeed become synonymous with, modernity. The relationship between poetry and crisis is far from being circumstantial. In modern societies, poetry becomes a means of lending *form* to crisis, rendering it socially and aesthetically legible. Poetry, perhaps more than any other process of forming, immediately raises questions of language's role in shaping the social. As a set of

self-aware language-based operations, poems interpose their formal aesthetic arrangements between their reader and any semantic content they carry, confronting their reader with their status *as* language. Poetry, then, is inherently social and material; poems, as events that take place in language, are vitally attuned to language's social ontology, its embeddedness in practice and custom, institutions and movements, patterns and assumptions, networks and modes of exchange. Poems, moreover, have often been enlisted to register and document moments when language's social ontology breaks down, changes tack, or morphs into something new. Crisis becomes a shorthand for such moments, marking historical rupture points when a given mode of social organization, with its linguistic operations, becomes arrested in its normal functioning, and thus exposes itself to view.

Poetry and the Limits of Modernity poses the question of poetry's relationship to crisis in the context of the Depression 1930s, when the growth-based model of Fordist capitalism – and with it the progressive, developmentalist logic associated with the modern, liberal nation – found itself beset by system-imperiling setbacks and limitations. From the vantage point of the early 1930s, all of the indicators – falling GDP, curtailed industrial production, widespread bank closures, surging unemployment – suggested that this intricately networked system was on the verge of collapse: Industrial capitalism seemed for the first time to be genuinely imperiled.[2] According to the conventional narrative, the Depression constitutes a neatly cordoned-off decade or so between the World Wars, a period bookended by the October 1929 stock market crash on one end and the gradual recovery through the New Deal engineering of the Keynesian state and the mass mobilization of the defense industry in preparation for war on the other. Rather than accepting this neatly bounded account, though, I propose that the forms of crisis associated with the Depression constitute an ongoing expression of modernity as such. According to this revisionist narrative, crisis has become normalized within US-American culture in the form of a set of shared experiences of ongoing upheaval, as we struggle to reposition ourselves amid the fluctuations and disparities of life (dis)organized by capitalism.

Rather than amounting to an aberration from the normal functioning of modernity, the crisis signaled by the Depression occurred as part of a lived ontology, one that has become synonymous with a generalized, even culture-wide set of affects and experiences. This idea is summed up in Lauren Berlant's notion of "crisis ordinariness," according to which "[t]he present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another" (7). Crisis, for Berlant, "is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process

embedded in the ordinary" (10). The lack of exceptionality attached to crisis in Berlant's model suggests that events that may be experienced as deviations from the routinized functioning of market-based modernity – such as the Depression of the 1930s, the post-1973 recession, or the post-2008 "economic downturn" – are in fact indicators of perennial cycles of economic reorganization. Such cycles never occur in isolation from their social and cultural contexts; as Annie McClannahan sums up the effects of the post-2008 recession, a "sense of crisis has become both the ambient context and the manifest content of cultural production, social experience, and economic life in the United States" (15). If living with crisis has become a normalized aspect of social life in the early twenty-first century, parallels to such a social experience must be sought out in earlier historical moments, such as the Depression of the 1930s.

In the approach to its centenary, amid our own not-quite-unprecedented forms of precarity, accumulation through dispossession, structural unevenness, ecological disaster, and media technologies whose social impacts (positive *and* negative) we are only beginning to grasp, the 1930s Depression feels more urgently contemporary, and the project of historicizing and interpreting it more pressing, than at any previous moment. My title's use of the phrase "Depression America" thus suggests not an exceptionalistic or nostalgic notion of the US-American nation, but an acknowledgment of the relevance of the phrase in suggesting a set of ongoing affects and experiences. As a term summing up the way in which system-wide economic contradictions become social realities, "crisis" furnishes a practical shorthand for this experience of American Depression as an economic and cultural phenomenon associated with an unsettling of the progressive notion of modernity and its ideological expressions. In her account of the 1930s Depression, Jani Scandura uses the phrase "depressive modernity" to suggest what she describes as "a modernity that moves neither forward nor backward, but idles, trembling, face-to-face with the fallout of progress" (3). In staging an overlap between economic and affective registers, Scandura's "depressive modernity" accounts for the process by which crisis-driven instability becomes personalized. Along similar lines, I adopt "crisis" as my keyword here due to its peculiar ability to index the points of intersection and overlap between the economic, the social, the material, and the poetic. Crisis names a general ontological condition of modernity, as well as resonating with the more particular usages I survey in what follows. More specifically, crisis suggests a significant overlap between the sphere of political economy, where it names inbuilt, cyclical forms of destabilization and devaluation endemic to

modernity, and the sphere of aesthetic (and particularly poetic) practice, where it implies a breakdown in the previously taken-for-granted means and techniques by which the arts can be said to intervene in the social. Raymond Williams suggests such an overlap between the social and the aesthetic when he adopts the term "crisis" to account for a widespread sense of rupture within modernity: "Since the late nineteenth century, crises of technique – which can be isolated as problems of the 'medium' or of the 'form' – have been directly linked with a sense of crisis in the relationship of art to society" (*Marxism* 163). Williams makes it clear that diagnoses of crisis occurring within particular cultural forms – such as Mallarmé's "*crise de vers*" or the various attestations to a Depression-era crisis in literary language that I survey below – are in fact expressions of a more generalized sense of crisis that occurs as the linkages mooring the aesthetic to its social and material underpinnings are subjected to the exigency of adapting to constant systemic change.

In my application, then, the term "crisis" enables me to gauge and assess the interrelationships between poetry and the social during a particularly pronounced period of upheaval and reorganization. It is not, however, my intention to posit a singular model of crisis and then retroactively read the poetries of the period back into it. Instead, I read across a broad spectrum of poetic texts by writers hailing from an array of class, racial, regional, and cultural backgrounds and embracing a variety of aesthetic and political positions to discover how a range of poetic forms and styles became engaged in documenting and inscribing crisis. Viewing the Depression decade's poetic output through this notion of overlapping forms of historical crisis – economic, political, cultural, and epistemological – reveals the many linkages running through the work of the period's poets, who, beyond their historical coincidence, shared a project of discovering and elaborating forms and idioms capable of encoding economic and cultural rupture. The Depression exposed the fault lines within a partially achieved modernity and revealed the nation's "combined and uneven development" – the coexistence of the premodern and the hypermodern – to be an inbuilt effect of the system itself, as the experience of living with economic and cultural turmoil became a normalized feature of US-American life in the twentieth century.[3] The texts I revisit here are thus motivated by a common sense of urgency in discovering and mapping out the *limits* of US modernity, in the sense of both limitations to the prevailing Fordist, growth-based model and its cultural logic, and of modernity's reaching its limits as it transitions into *something else*, something that would later assume identifiable contours as late or postmodernity.

Taking my cue from such observations, I venture a set of related propositions: First, that the crisis in modernity signaled by the Depression of the 1930s not only upended firmly held notions of progress and prosperity, but also undermined the legitimacy of the communicative forms on which the modern nation relied for information and social cohesion. This situation, in turn, led to ever-deepening doubts concerning the efficacy and value of *all* media – including language itself – in their ability to represent the social. Second, I propose that such anxieties concerning representation and language as sites for the production and dissemination of cultural meaning during the Depression were often addressed in the language-based art of poetry. As a self-reflexive medium capable of limning the boundaries of linguistic expression, poetry works to reassert language's significatory capacities by adapting them to the exigencies of specific historical moments. In its aesthetic application, then, crisis suggests a situation in which, under the duress of the disruptions of living with modernity, the relationships between social life and the forms enlisted to represent it become challenged, called into question, and ultimately renegotiated.

Poetry and the Limits of Modernity thus proposes that alongside the economic, political, and cultural crises of the 1930s, there occurred an epistemic crisis that became codified in the work of second-generation modernist poets whose careers were launched around the onset of the Depression, as these poets grappled with modernity not as a liberatory project, but as an endless series of setbacks, dislocations, and ruptures. With the Depression as a breakdown of the smooth functioning of modernity and its market-based social organization, this book claims, there occurred a parallel breakdown in the social ontology of language, as the latter came to be regarded with suspicion for its role in perpetuating forms of commodification and appropriation associated with a crisis-ridden modernity. As I will argue throughout, the interface between the poetic and the social is sharply revealed through a Depression-driven epistemic shift, in which poetic language was forced to reconfigure its relationship to a society that was itself always in flux. What emerges in the aggregate of this survey of a broad cross-section of the poetic idioms associated with the Depression is a sense of poetry's critical stance regarding market modernity as a progressive, developmentalist force, and a related commitment to the project of reinscribing language's social ontology.

Contemporary critics have frequently adopted a rhetoric of crisis to describe the uneasy linkage between poetry and society within modernity, particularly its Depression-era instantiation.[4] These critics have, however, stopped short of offering fully-articulated theorizations of the ways in

which economic and social crises translate into epistemological and poetic ones. *Poetry and the Limits of Modernity* seeks to fill this gap as it builds upon these earlier critics' explications, taking their lines of inquiry further as it seeks to add a much-needed layer of complexity to current understandings of the interchange between poetry as a social activity on the one hand, and modern social life as a normalized, albeit unevenly distributed, sense of crisis on the other. My intention, simply put, is to deepen our understanding of the relationship between social forms and poetic forms at a particularly vexed moment in modernity.

Economic Crisis and/as Crisis of Representation

Capitalist modernity, as political economists and cultural historians have claimed, becomes virtually synonymous with crisis as it takes the form of cycles of expansion and retraction, prosperity and panic. Giovanni Arrighi accounts for such recurring phenomena by positing a process punctuated by successive regimes or cycles of accumulation, or "long centuries," which involve transfers of economic hegemony from one imperial power to another as the global economy is retooled in the image of new forms of production, accumulation, and investment. Each of these successive epochs is initiated by a "signal crisis" as such new forms take hold, and closed by a "terminal crisis" that occurs as a given regime reaches its limits, when periods of heavy investment in production and manufacturing yield to periods of financialization and liquidity that tend to mark the "autumn" preceding a final collapse.[5] As Arrighi's model suggests, then, crisis becomes a normalized mechanism of capitalist modernity, an "ordinary" modality of the structuring logic of markets, as periodic destructions of accumulated capital mark the transition from one epoch to the next. David Harvey offers a parallel economic rationale for the normalization of crisis, in which an inbuilt market tendency toward falling rates of profit leads to situations in which surpluses of capital that cannot profitably be reinvested are destroyed. Such forms of "creative destruction" function as inherent features of the system, becoming "embedded within the circulation of capital itself. Innovation exacerbates instability, insecurity, and in the end, becomes the prime force pushing capitalism into periodic paroxysms of crisis" (*Condition* 106).[6] As periods of instability clear the field of weaker competitors, they also concentrate existing forms of *constant* capital – infrastructure, machinery, resources – into fewer and fewer hands.[7] A paradox thus emerges: For its value to be realized, capital must be kept in circulation, yet there is a system-specific tendency working in the

opposite direction, namely toward concentration, centralization, and overaccumulation. Crisis, as a shorthand for this paradox, lays bare the contending interests and uneven patterns of development within a given society. As Harvey makes clear, "[a]t the moment of crisis, all of the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production are expressed in the form of violent paroxysms" that take the form of social conflict (*Limits* 200).[8] Ongoing economic readjustment, which results from the chronic upheaval to which modern, market-based societies are prone, destabilizes not only the economic realm, but the whole of the process of social reproduction. Far from being exceptional, then, such periods of crisis are part and parcel of the "normal" functioning of capitalist modernity.

Apart from – yet related to – its specifically economic meaning, the term "crisis" assumed a prominent place in the Depression period's cultural criticism. The leftist intellectual Louis C. Fraina, for one, was explicit in linking the economic to the cultural; in *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (1935), written under the pen name Lewis Corey, Fraina explained that the crisis of capitalism was also a "crisis of culture" (*See* 223–27). The liberal critic Alfred Kazin concurred with the idea that the economic collapse signaled a cultural crisis; in his landmark critical account of American realist writing *On Native Grounds* (1942), he described the "crisis of the nineteen-thirties" as a period "which opened for Americans as a financial panic and as a sudden stop to the gluttony of the boom period" of the post-World War I years and ended as a "transformation . . . in American life" (363). Kazin makes it clear that, for observers during the period, it was no longer possible to separate the economic from the cultural; the Depression was a "material failure," but it "could not be understood in material terms alone" (363). Kazin's account suggests the ways in which the fallout from economic crisis played itself out on social and aesthetic levels, imposing confusion, but also a heightened sense of social responsibility, on the period's writers. As Edmund Wilson summed up the situation in the pages of the *New Republic* in 1932, "[i]t has now become plain that the economic crisis is to be accompanied by a literary one" (539). The ramifications of Wilson's literary crisis were widely felt, and writers, for their part, sought out the means to respond.[9] The first American Writers' Congress, held over three days in April 1935 in New York, was conceived in response to the economic decay its organizers – who included among their number figures associated with the literary left to varying degrees, including Kenneth Burke, Langston Hughes, Meridel Le Sueur, Lewis Mumford, John Dos Passos, and Nathaniel West – saw as

a sure sign of the collapse of the capitalist system.[10] The congress aimed, according to a call published in the January 22, 1935, issue of *New Masses*, to "reveal, through collective discussion, the most effective ways in which writers, *as writers*, can function in the rapidly developing crisis" ("Call" 20; emphasis in the original). More than anything else, the congress testified to a shared awareness on the part of a generation of young writers (and elders such as Upton Sinclair and Theodore Dreiser) that the cultural ramifications of the acknowledged failures of the capitalist system – including its exposure of the nation's already-existing class, cultural, regional, and racial fault lines – constituted their most pressing issue.

The manifest concern of the congress with parallel forms of crisis – social and literary – was echoed by its individual contributors. In an absentee address to the congress titled "The Writer as Technician," John Dos Passos associates the crisis of the Depression with a parallel "crisis" of language, in which "terms are continually turning inside out and the names of things hardly keep their meaning from day to day" (78). For Dos Passos, the solution lay in the writer's assumption of the role of "technician," a position that, according to Dos Passos, aimed at "the development of his material and of the technical possibilities of the work," in marked contrast to the aims of business, which always aims to "buy cheap and sell dear" (79). Acting in the capacity of technician, the writer, and especially the poet, would recalibrate language's significatory capacities to the exigencies of the present by bringing them up to the standards set by the emergent modes of inscription with which writing, as a medium, now had to compete. As an explicit rejection of an earlier model of artisanal handicraft that had been adopted as an analogy for the social role of the writer, this embrace of the role of technician (or producer or engineer) marks a shift in writers' conceptions of their own role during the period.[11] For Dos Passos, the idea of technicianship was vital, as language – which he describes as "the mind of the group" (79) – was in desperate need of being rescued from the degrading effects of commercialization. Dos Passos's epic U.S.A. trilogy (1930–36) can be read as a dramatization of the failures of language in modern America, an extended effort to reclaim the power of everyday speech against the perversion of language by society's elite; his preface to the first single-volume edition of the trilogy in 1938 makes it clear that "U.S.A. is the speech of the people" (vi). In a telling moment in the trilogy's third volume, *The Big Money*, Dos Passos reemphasizes his commitment to "rebuild the ruined words worn slimy in the mouths of lawyers districtattorneys collegepresidents judges without the old words the immigrants haters of oppression brought to Plymouth

how can you know who are your betrayers America" (350). The trilogy thus undertakes the utopian project of wresting control over language from powerful elites and "rebuild[ing] the ruined words" by rearticulating their social and historical situatedness, thus realizing their liberatory potential.

Such anxieties concerning the vulgarized status of language in a time of crisis were not limited to the literary left, however. Writing from the other side of the political aisle, James Laughlin IV would make comparable claims in his preface to the 1936 inaugural issue of *New Directions in Prose and Poetry*, a magazine that Laughlin started at the behest of his mentor Ezra Pound. Far from embracing the revolutionary, Soviet-inspired Marxism of *New Masses* and the Writers' Congress, Laughlin's preface bears a strong Poundian influence as it explicitly declares its support for the social credit economics associated with the British economist Major C. H. Douglas. Despite such ideological differences, Laughlin's rhetoric bears striking similarities to that of Dos Passos and his comrades on the left: "We think with words," Laughlin writes, "[a]nd the clarity of our thought (and consequently our actions) depends on the clarity of our language" (n. pag.). Like Dos Passos, Laughlin saw parallel crises affecting modern society and its language: "The world is in crisis, and language is at once the cause and the cure," he writes (n. pag.). As much as their politics may have differed, Dos Passos and Laughlin were drawn to issue similar denunciations of what they both viewed as a degradation of language brought about by its commercial uses. The crisis in capitalist modernity, these practitioners of language insisted, had led to an evacuation of meaning in which language, their own chosen medium, had lost its power to represent the social.

Toward a Poetics of Crisis

The assertions concerning a crisis in literary language I have surveyed above are supported by the period's writers' many ironic disavowals of the written word. James Agee's observations, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), are telling in this regard:

> Words could, I believe, be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit. That is more than can be said of the instruments of any other art. But it must be added of words that they are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication, and that they come at many of the things which they alone can do by such a Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would fatten any other art into apoplexy if the art were not first shamed out of existence:

> and which, in two centrally important and inescapable ways: falsification (through inaccuracy of meaning as well as inaccuracy of emotion); and inability to communicate simultaneity with any immediacy; greatly impairs the value and the integrity of their achievement. (209)

Here Agee identifies language's very flexibility as its fundamental flaw: Through the sleight-of-hand rhetorical tricks of the writer, words can be made to do anything their user wants them to do, which leads to a loss of immediacy and outright falsification. In what began as an article for *Fortune* magazine in the summer of 1936 and swelled to hundreds of pages in its final published form five years later, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* cannily performs the "Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds" it describes as it fails to come to the point in meandering passages such as this one and intentionally hedges its bets regarding its own medium, namely "words." In Agee's literary experiment, language necessarily fails to embrace the moment in all its startling clarity, a task to which, Agee strongly suggests, photography alone is equal.

Agee's is perhaps the clearest explication of the crisis in language to which I am referring. In its perversion of linguistic transparency, the text takes up what Sue Currell has called "the fight over words and their function in the 1930s" (82).[12] For Agee, the beleaguered status of words – what Mark Goble refers to as "Agee's pained understanding of language as a medium in which distortion and misrepresentation are unavoidable" (266) – results from their use within increasingly corporatized and bureaucratized social structures, in which the ideologically compromised writer could only collude with business and governmental interests to aestheticize their agendas, thereby deluding readers. Rejecting such a collusion, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can be understood as a deliberate effort to undermine the corporate and governmental agendas of the very agencies that financed and supported it (namely *Fortune* magazine and the Farm Security Administration). In imagining a way out of this conundrum, Agee, who had himself published a book of poems titled *Permit Me Voyage*, which appeared in the Yale Series of Younger Poets in 1934, contrasts what he views as debased uses of language with the art of the poet: "Words cannot embody; they can only describe. But a certain kind of artist, whom we will distinguish from others as a poet rather than a prose writer, despises this fact about words or his [*sic*] medium, and continually brings words as near as he [*sic*] can to an illusion of embodiment. In doing so," Agee concludes, "he [*sic*] accepts a falsehood but makes, of a sort in any case, better art" (*Let Us* 210). The poet embraces the necessary illusion