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## English Composition As A Happening

Geoffrey Sirc

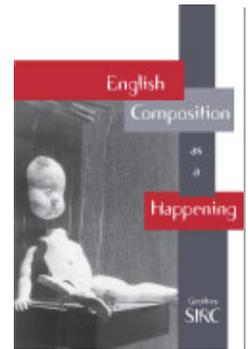
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### THE AMERICAN ACTION WRITERS

*To forget the crisis—individual, social, aesthetic—that brought Action Painting into being, or to bury it out of sight (it cannot really be forgotten), is to distort fantastically the reality of postwar American art. This distortion is being practiced daily by all who have an interest in “normalising” vanguard art, so that they may enjoy its fruits in comfort: these include dealers, collectors, educators, directors of government cultural programs, art historians, museum officials, critics, artists—in sum, the “art world.”*

Harold Rosenberg

Two brief comments, made in fairly proximate places, in New York, at almost precisely the same moment in time, August 1956, revealing two radically different world views. First:

Life is beautiful, the trees are beautiful, the sky is beautiful. Why is it that all I can think about is death? (Naifeh and Smith 789)

This morose remark was made by a compositionist who'd neared the end; whose theories, forms, processes, relationships, even his own body—all had entirely worn down. His very life, in fact, as this speaker was to die about a day after he articulated this stark vision. This comment, focusing on the rupture in the symbolic order, evokes the avant-garde. The second comment:

Let your fantasy take over, make your wildest dreams come true. (Naifeh and Smith 789)

This was made by a young compositionist excited that her own program seemed finally about to take shape. According to this view, any material can be reworked into a beautiful fiction. Such a view, one which restores the symbolic order, we might term the academic.

That first quote was muttered by Jackson Pollock, wandering drunk through the town of Springs, Long Island, the day before his death, realizing his span of days had been played out. Jackson was a person

always at odds with the world. “For some time after arriving in [his boyhood home] Phoenix, he refused to venture past the kitchen door without his mother” (Naifeh and Smith 52). Even at the peak of his popularity, in 1950, when he had been crowned by *Life* magazine as “the greatest living painter in the United States,” Jackson moaned, “I feel like a clam without a shell. They only want me on top of the heap so they can push me off” (Naifeh and Smith 628). This was a person, for example, who tried three times to sit through *Waiting for Godot* but couldn’t: seeing what seemed his own story onstage caused in him such open weeping and loud moaning that he had to be taken from the theatre on one occasion.

The second quote was Ruth Kligman’s advice to her friend Edith Metzger on the train out to Springs: Kligman in a kind of fantastic denial, hoping that her own wildest dream of being Jackson’s lover was soon to come true and so chirping the joys of optimism to a friend who was depressed over an affair with a married man gone sour. According to painter and friend of Jackson’s, Audrey Flack, “[Ruth] wanted to meet important artists, but she’d never heard of Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, or Bill de Kooning. She wrote their names down on a little piece of paper and I drew her a map of how to get to the Cedar. . . . She asked which one was the most important and I said Pollock; that’s why she started with him. She went right to the bar and made a beeline for Pollock. Ruth had a desperation and a need” (Potter 228). (How often, it seems, our wildest dreams are driven by desperation and a need.)

I want to think about those two schools of thought—the academic and the avant-garde—as they played themselves out in the compositional practices of Jackson Pollock, whose story, untold in *Composition* (but almost endlessly reactivated in more general postwar critical theory) provides an opportunity to refocus our practices around the now-discarded notion of process, that once-perennial of CCCC topics, the bright promise of Comp ’68 (the metonym, in fact, for that entire era of Composition Studies). Process was the key Happenings trope, as well. Kaprow, for example, recalled, “I have seen [Cage’s] preparations for a very short piece that were just exquisitely done—descriptions of how he worked, the time he spent, the operation necessary to draw all the graphs. It was to me more of a Happening than the music itself” (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 113). I want to spend time re-enchanting Jackson’s

process, then, because it was crucial to the development of the Happenings compositionists at large—but unfortunately Jackson’s was a notion of process, both as an individual gesture of material inquiry as well as a larger dynamic of cultural myth, that compositionists in our own field seemed unwilling or unable to engage. Moreover, and this is intimately connected with Composition’s failure of process-nerve, recovering Jackson’s production-aesthetic—seeing process as a nexus of both unique self-expression and a considered feeling for materials—allows one to affirm (rather than bemoan or fix) the processes even of those compositionists considered, as Jackson was, most humiliatingly *basic*. Composition must consider Jackson or risk self-marginalization as having no comment on the central compositional questions of the age because, let’s face it, the true spectacle of American Composition began in the Summer of 1947, when Jackson put his canvas on the floor of his studio in Springs, Long Island, changing forever the way composition is made, received, and defined. Jackson, then, is Modernism’s fulcrum, its ‘Balancing Rock’ landmark-site. According to Kirk Vardenoe, who curated MOMA’s 1998 retrospective of his work, “Pollock now looms as a central hinge between the century’s two halves, a key to how we got from one to the other in modern art. As the pivot on which prologue and coda balance, he has become in history, still more than he was in life, a legitimator. . . . [A]ccounts of Pollock also become litmus tests for broader philosophical and political positions about the meaning of his epoch”(17).

We can begin by naming Hans Namuth, who photographed Jackson in his Springs studio in the summer of 1950, as Composition’s first process-researcher. Those photos—showing Jackson in intense concentration, wearing jeans and a black T, whirling and splattering over a canvas in his studio, cigarette always dangling from his lip—have been described in the corniest of prose: as being “the picture of the romantic Genius, possessed by demonic *terrabilità*” (Rose “Namuth’s Photographs”), evoking “the image of Marlon Brando’s brooding pouting profile looking down while Stella ripped his tee-shirt . . . the agonized look of a man wrestling with himself in a game of unnamable but high stakes . . . [saying], You can’t talk about me. You can’t explain art” (Segal in Rose “Namuth’s Photographs”). But perhaps you just can’t be too corny when describing photos that changed the course of art history. Those photos showed Jackson as the King of Process—in Harold Rosenberg’s famous phrase,

“the action painter”—and helped establish American painters, so long denigrated by academics, as compelling cultural figures, figures beginning a new chapter in the mythology of American Composition, showing “a new image of the artist in the grip of impulse, driven by inner forces . . . an inspired shaman, entirely ‘other’ than the pedestrian businessman who dominated American social life” (Rose “Introduction”). Jackson’s art became that much more enriched by seeing the process-trace underlying the product. Artists Jim Fasanelli and Tony Smith testify to the insights into Jackson’s composition that could be gained from Namuth’s process-account. Fasanelli, a friend of Namuth’s, speaks for the art world when he attests to what was revealed by those photos, their ability to archive (and reactivate) the passage of one person through a rather brief, but artistically charged, moment in time:

It taught me to respect Pollock in a way I never had before. For one thing you could see, literally see, he was not dripping. That word simply does not suffice. What you saw was Pollock take his stick or brush out of the paint can and then, in a cursive sweep, pass it over the canvas, high above it, so that the viscous paint would form trailing patterns which hover over the canvas before they settle upon it, and then fall into it and then leave a trace of their own passage. He is not drawing on the canvas so much as in the air above it. He must have loved the forms and lines he could make this way. This is what is really on the canvas . . . the sign of the passage of something fleeting. (Namuth)

For Smith, watching the brief movie Namuth made of Jackson painting meant seeing his friend and fellow-artist as an organic, natural force: “he was shown [in the film] painting on glass seen from below, and it seemed that the glass was earth, that he was distributing flowers over it, that it was spring” (Namuth). Critic Barbara Rose also caught the force-of-nature quality in Namuth’s composing-process data: “The style of his photographs of Pollock working does not conform to the style of the artist’s portrait or the studio interior, but is related to the style of motion photography used in photographing wild animals unobtrusively” (“Introduction: The Artist as Culture Hero”).

Such high romantic notions about process were transformed into a full-blown cultural myth thanks to the critical overlay of Rosenberg’s highly influential 1952 essay, “The American Action Painters,” which was very much based on Namuth’s photos. In that article, all academic-aesthetic notions of composition were discarded in favor of existentialisms.

The painter was now seen as “living on the canvas” (23), the surface of the work having become “an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce. . . . What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event” (22). The very term “painting” itself was stripped of any terministic accretions and replaced by Rosenberg with the more indeterminate phrase “gesturing with materials” (23). Connoisseurship was dead—“an action is not a matter of taste” (50)—all that mattered was “the revelation contained in the act . . . that in the final effect, the image, whatever be or be not in it, will be a *tension*” (23). The central dynamic of the work—as local situationist archive, recording the passages, the moments, of one’s life-drama—became the locus of interest, not the work’s form, style, or function as critical/historical project, and critics who could not shift perspective were doomed to irrelevance:

A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist. The painting itself is a “moment” in the adulterated mixture of his life—whether “moment” means, in one case, the actual minutes taken up with spotting the canvas or, in another, the entire duration of a lucid drama conducted in sign language. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence. The new painting has broken down every distinction between art and life. . . . The critic who goes on judging in terms of schools, styles, form, as if the painter were still concerned with producing a certain kind of object (the work of art), instead of living on the canvas, is bound to seem a stranger. (23)

The photos and the essay utterly changed the cultural reception of Jackson Pollock. Previously, his work, in particular the drip paintings, had been infantilized precisely by dint of its process-status: Robert Coates, for example, called the paintings “mere unorganized explosions of random energy, and therefore meaningless” (Naifeh and Smith 555). Henry McBride thought his canvases looked “as though the paint had been flung at the canvas from a distance” (Krauss *Optical* 245) and likened them to “a kaleidoscope that has been insufficiently shaken. Another shake or two might bring order into the flying particles of color—but the spectator is not too sure of this” (Naifeh and Smith 465). *Time* quipped that a “Pollock painting is apt to resemble a child’s contour map of the Battle of Gettysburg” (“Words” 51). And, in 1949, *Life* cattily reminded its readers that many critics called Jackson’s canvases “degenerate . . . as unpalatable as yesterday’s macaroni” (“Jackson Pollock: Is He?” 42). Jackson’s process, especially his signature style of “dumping” (allowing bits of the everyday to encrust his canvas), was described by *Life*

as quaint eccentricity: “Sometimes he dribbles the paint on with a brush. Sometimes he scrawls it on with a stick, scoops it with a trowel or even pours it straight out of the can. In with it all he deliberately mixes sand, broken glass, nails, screws or other foreign matter lying around. Cigaret ashes and an occasional dead bee sometimes get in the picture inadvertently”(44). They summed up their characterization of Jackson’s process with the petulant image of the painter “brooding and doodling” (45)—all of this in an article that ultimately raised the stakes around Jackson as cultural figure by seriously asking “Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?” For Krauss, this initial reception fixed Jackson’s work in its process-status; not surprising, given the way the drip paintings can be read as an index of their process, pointing to the material condition of their production: “in places, the poured line would leach out into the weave of the canvas like a viscous, oily stain, while in others the filaments would sit high and ropey on top of one another, and in still others the paint would puddle up and dry unevenly, its crusty surface pulling into scummy-looking scabs” (“Horizontality” 97).

**I**ronically, though, it was finally process—only now an iconic, existential process, not Piagetian grade-school doodling—that refigured the response to the artist and his work, because from 1952 when Namuth’s process-photos and Rosenberg’s exegesis/essay hit, Jackson’s myth became untouchable, catalyzing a generation of artists. Watching him work or just marveling at the visual traces of him in his studio, seeing the final product of such liberating practice, reading the metacommentary on Jackson’s compositional scene—what Jackson provided was a kind of amalgam-text made up of process, product, and discourse. The potential of such a refigured composition—text now as scene rather than thing—was enormous. Vardenoe is only one critic who notes how the new strategies Jackson provided led to so many artistic breakthroughs. He comments on the way the paintings

fuse the how and why, means and end, instrumental method and expressive message. It’s that self-evident combination of what’s left out (no familiar hierarchy of marks, no ordering constraints) with what’s left in (a seemingly spontaneous, even reckless laying-on of raw skeins of liquid paint) that has been so compelling to so many artists . . . the permissions it gave have percolated irrepressibly through painting, sculpture, installation and performance art, and hybrids of all of the above (not to mention the effect on musicians and writers). (17)

The Happenings artists in particular were galvanized by the idea of what Jackson had done—these artists for whom, in Kaprow’s words, Jackson became “the embodiment of our ambition for absolute liberation and a secretly cherished wish to overturn old tables of crockery and flat champagne” (“Legacy” 24). Kaprow’s 1958 article on Jackson’s legacy is routinely cited as a formative text for the Art of the Happening. For Kaprow, Jackson provided artists with “the possibility of an astounding freshness, a sort of ecstatic blindness” (24). Rosenberg’s hype, the fusion of composition and life into situationist event-scene, proved operational. The paintings became a “diaristic gesture” of process for Kaprow (26); in fact, “they ceased to become paintings and became *environments*” (56). Because they radically re-envisioned notions of form, they provided the Happenings compositionists with a new compositional space, one read not according to conventional interpretive strategies, but according to the heuristic of the *dérive*. “You do not enter a painting of Pollock’s in any one place (or hundred places). Anywhere is everywhere and you can dip in and out where you can” (26). Inside that new space Kaprow saw an “activity which our imaginations continue outward indefinitely, as though refusing to accept the artificiality of an ‘ending’” (55). This new environmental effect, a blurring of the canvas and the endless space surrounding it, was an irresistible challenge now become strategy: “Pollock . . . left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street” (56). It was as if Kaprow could re-enter the horizontal floor-space with Jackson, re-activate the process, be *in* the work, too. Situated thus, Kaprow could see the keys and cigarettes and matches being dumped down onto the work. His article’s final litany, concluding his meditation on the meaning of Jackson’s practices, became a Happenings manifesto: Jackson’s, he claimed, was an art able to “disclose entirely unheard of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies, seen in store windows and on the streets, and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sigh or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat—all will become materials for this concrete art” (57).

The process of Pollock is received differently here. Rather than a spirit of ridicule or traditionalism, Kaprow’s response grew out of an existential intensity—mesmerized, as the shimmering surface disclosed

undreamed-of possibilities. Kaprow saw the work as tension-filled moment-trace, an endlessly recurring dream, able to connect us back up with our everyday, with our bodies and lived situations, with basic processes of life. Such a view diffuses the work into life, pulling against the gallery's stubborn conception of form as "what can maintain itself as vertically intact, and thus a seemingly autonomous gestalt" (Krauss *Optical* 294). Jackson's art remains intimately connected with the horizontal floor—its process-context, its production-scene. As exscription, as life-dumped text, Jackson's composition is filled with mementos of momentariness: Edward Hulst, a plumber in Springs, recalls visiting Jackson's studio: "It was one of those times a canvas covered nearly the whole studio floor—hardly any room to walk around it—and it was covered with paint, but he told me to walk across it. 'Go ahead,' he said, 'you won't hurt it.'" (Potter 140).

Throughout his career, it seems, there was Jackson's ceaseless interrogation of process, always looking beneath the seemingly random tracing for the underlying tension and a way to capture it. When he first moved to New York, he'd stare in fascination at three-card monte games and even go so far as to follow the urination trails of police horses in an attempt to decode nature's patterns. His early sketchbooks show how Thomas Hart Benton, the American regionalist and Jackson's first and only post-secondary formal teacher, taught him to break down the compositions of the Old Masters into their underlying geometric shapes and lines. Yve-Alain Bois, in analyzing those portions of the sketchbooks, speculates on why Jackson kept at that exercise long after he left Benton's tutelage. He felt it showed Jackson "in search of a unitary mode of notation that would be able to transcode anything" (Review 84). That transliteration of the swirling pulse underlying life evolved into the rudiment of Jackson's composition, his line. (Ah, the search for a serviceable, non-discipline-specific compositional technique in order to record hopes, fears, fantasies; a kind of transmodal, multi-representational, plainspeak lyrical line for autoarchiving human experience—this is *my* wildest dream as a writing teacher. "Who amongst us has not dreamt . . . of the miracle of a poetic prose . . . supple and staccato enough to adapt to the lyrical stirrings of the soul, the undulations of dreams, and the sudden leaps of consciousness?" [Benjamin *Charles Baudelaire* 69]) Jackson had to develop his own line because he had a unique, personal vision to express. Dr. Wayne Barker, a psychiatrist who summered on

Long Island, got to know Jackson and realized his imperative for communication: “I think Jackson was trying to utter something almost incomprehensible to himself. I know people speak of his dancing in his paintings, but to me it’s more like talking . . . the need to utter. . . . I think he had trouble saying it—a lot of people might understand him better had he been a writer—and I think as a philosopher the best he could do was an approximation” (Potter 177). Jackson’s strategy, then, was most important in the way he restored content to the center of composition. If Jackson’s work is about anything, it is the ultimate significance of the emotional/ideational center of the work, the rich spiritual quality of the statement. He turned to painting because it could be made into a direct gesturing with materials, and as he said, “the more direct—the greater the possibilities of making a direct—of making a statement” (Wright).

As compositionist, Jackson’s was a line that evolved painfully. Throughout his life he was told he couldn’t draw. His formal teacher Benton, the arch-academic, was appalled at Jackson’s rendering, saying about his young student, “His mind was absolutely incapable of drafting logical sequences. He couldn’t be taught anything” (Naifeh and Smith 164). Frustrated with his inability to perfect the traditional representational line, the correct line, yet needing a serviceable, functional line to express his vision, Jackson turned to other teachers, determinedly pursuing a homemade education in the technology of composition through Indian sand painters, automatic writing, Mexican muralists, Jungian analysts, obvious influences like Picasso and Miró, as well as lesser-known artists like Albert Ryder and Janet Sobel; at the same time immersing himself in an exhaustive study of traditional and non-traditional materials, “searching for a way to make the world see the world his way” (Naifeh and Smith 538). Jackson’s immersion in a purposively technologized process can best be seen in his apprenticeship with the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, at whose Fourteenth Street studio Jackson learned how to exploit available technology in the surface of making a revelatory statement. Jackson joined the crowd of young artists in Siqueiros’s loft working on political floats and murals.

In his studio, Siqueiros generated a “torrential flow of ideas and new projects” with a child’s eye for investigation and surprise. Paint itself was a source of endless discovery, especially the new industrial paints like Duco—a synthetic nitrocellulose-based paint developed for automobiles. (Siqueiros’s passion for the new paint earned him the sobriquet “il Duco.”) Synthetic resins like Duco

were not only stronger, more durable, and more malleable than organically based oils, they were *new*: products of the technological era. What medium could be more fitting for an art that “belonged” to the workers of that era? “Lacquer had so many possibilities,” recalled [painter and friend of Jackson’s during his student days] Axel Horn, “that we tried everything. We threw it around, we dripped it, we sprayed it, we chopped it with axes, we burnt it just to see what would happen.” They applied it in gossamer-light veils of spray and in thick, viscous globs. For a hard edge, they sprayed it through stencils or friskets. For texture they added sand and paper, pieces of wood and bits of metal. “It was like high school chemistry class,” said Horn. “When the teacher leaves the room and there’s a mad dash for the chemical cabinet. You grab things and throw them in the sink and throw a match in to see what will happen.” Mistakes (“failed experiments”) could be scraped off easily—the new paints dried to hardness “almost instantly.” Instead of canvas duck or Belgian linen, they used concrete walls, Masonite panels, and plywood boards nailed together like siding on a house—industrial surfaces for industrial paints. “As early as 1936,” claims Harold Lehman [another artist and student-friend of Jackson’s], “we had already announced the death of easel painting.”

New materials demanded new methods, new ways of creating images. A painter should work the way a *worker* works, Siqueiros believed. In applying paint, he should use a spray gun; for plaster, a plaster gun. In one corner of the Union Square workshop stood a silk-screen frame, long considered merely an industrial tool for sign-making. “A lot of people were using these materials, these techniques,” Horn recalls, “but he came along and said, ‘This is all usable in art’” (Naifeh and Smith 286–287).

But such an exhaustive material quest can be frustrating. In Dec. 1936, Jackson complains to his brother, “I am at more unrest with the problems of form in art than ever. I have not yet crossed the bridge of experimentation that will put me on the road to production” (Naifeh and Smith 290). Jackson, perhaps, never really crossed that bridge; the drip paintings, for example, exploit a technology—premixed liquid paint—that had only been available for about ten years. By making experimentation stand for production, he changed the work. The critical response to such a new work becomes telling, as either the critic will develop new criteria (as Rosenberg did) or risks misjudging the work. Such misjudging might take the form of a derogatory trivializing (of the kind that first greeted Jackson); at best, it implies a recuperative misreading of the work, one that makes a strange sense of it under an established evaluative system.

It's fascinating to watch a critic like Clement Greenberg strain his own established aesthetics to accommodate radically different art like Jackson's. Such art couldn't be unique, *sui generis*, because, as such, it would destroy the force of Greenberg's critical machine; it would mean there was powerful work unmeasurable by his established theoretical mechanics. Therefore, Greenberg confidently explains all abstract art (Jackson's included) as just a logical phase in the unfolding of western art, his area of expertise: "Abstract art is not a special kind of art; no hard-and-fast line separates it from representational art; it is only the latest phase in the development of Western art as a whole, and almost every 'technical' device of abstract painting is already to be found in the realistic painting that preceded it" ("The Case" 82).

To make Jackson seem like a natural evolution in the history of Western art meant terming him "very much of a Late Cubist . . . [who] compiled hints from Picasso, Miró, Siqueiros, Orozco and Hofmann to create an allusive and altogether original vocabulary of Baroque shapes with which he twisted Cubist space" ("American-Type" Painting 217). Greenberg even glosses over the key shift in Jackson away from the easel: "Pollock was very much . . . a hard and fast easel-painter when he entered into his maturity" (217). Krauss characterizes this change as "sublimating Pollock".

Of raising him up from that dissolute squat, in his James Dean dungarees and black tee-shirt, slouched over his paintings in the disarray of his studio or hunkered down on the running board of his old Ford. This is the posture, in all its lowness, projected by so many famous photographs, images recording the athletic abandon of the painting gesture but also the dark brooding silence of the stilled body, with its determined isolation from everything urban, everything "cultured." The photographs had placed him on the road, like Kerouac, clenching his face into the tight fist of beat refusal, making an art of violence, of "howl." Clem[ent Greenberg]'s mission was to lift him above those pictures, just as it was to lift the paintings Pollock made from off the ground where he'd made them, and onto the wall. Because it was only on the wall that they joined themselves to tradition, to culture, to convention. It was in that location and at that angle to gravity that they became "painting." (*Optical* 244)

The critical repositioning of Jackson's canvas from the horizontal (the floor, the act of creation) to the vertical (the museum wall, the act of exhibition) changes the perspective from process to product, rewriting

the now-changed object according to a conventional perspective. But such a familiarization was impossible for Jackson's work, a work in which "the axis of the image has changed" (Krauss "Horizontal" 95). He denied the vertical distancing of the gallery wall, a destination whose point of origin is the upright easel: "My painting does not come from the easel," he explained; working on the floor, "I can . . . literally be *in* the painting" ("Jackson Pollock: Is He?" 45). No wonder Kaprow could so easily inhabit that scene, or that so many viewers thought of the works in terms of landscapes, nature ("Pollock loves the outdoors and has carried with him and into his painting a sense of the freedom experienced before endless mountains and plains" [Goodnough 38]); he provided a re-enterable scene. Krauss cites Jackson's *Full Fathom Five*, both for its title, as well as the residue of "dumping" contained on the surface—splashed gobs of white lead, as well as a variety of trash like keys, nails, cigarettes and matches—to support Jackson's claim that the work had to be connected to the ground, "the fact of standing over the work and looking down" (*Optical* 293). Robert Morris spent the late sixties searching for the grammar of the "Anti Form," an idea that typified the spirit of American art, which, at its best, has developed through negation: "by uncovering successive alternative premises for making itself. . . . Disengagement with preconceived enduring forms and orders for things is a positive assertion. It is part of the work's refusal to continue estheticizing the form by dealing with it as a prescribed end" (43, 46). And so he was drawn to Jackson's work because it revealed the primacy of process, of the work's "making itself": "only Pollock was able to recover process and hold on to it as part of the end form of the work. Pollock's recovery of process involved a profound rethinking of the role of both material and tools in making" (43). Pollock, then, successfully interrupted the formalist dynamic, in which process is of relatively minor concern, important only as prelude—the central focus of attention: the final work, with all its hierarchical relations and patterns; its hints, allusions, and Baroque shapes.

Concern for process has waned in CCCC, possibly because the concern for the statement has as well. In 1985, the rumblings started sounding, with Ray Rodrigues's article "Moving Away from Process-Worship," in which he seemed to realize that process-orientation in our field might become as speciously cultivated as it had with the Action Painter. Its proponents were "missionaries," Rodrigues cracked, who

were sloppy in their enthusiasm, trivializing process in “the use of unsystematic, open-ended writing instruction” (24). He might have been discussing process, but really he was worried about the ultimate product. Anticipating retroactively, perhaps, how indulgence in process might naturally result in the kind of drip-composition *Time* magazine in 1949 called “Jackson Pollock’s non-objective snarl of tar and confetti” (Eliot 26), Rodrigues complains about process being “rather . . . like a tangled string after a kitten had played with it” (25). Rodrigues might have even been responding to an image put forth one year earlier, in 1984, by Donald Murray, in a chapter from *Write to Learn*, entitled “Writing as Process,” where Murray affirms, “If we could open up a writer’s head during the act of writing we might see an electro-chemical process that looks like this:”



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Murray, however, immediately backs off from the unwitting comparison of creativity to the Pollock dripped web, and settles back into Composition’s agenda of simplification, standardization, reassuring the student that “If we could untangle that spaghetti we might find the following five primary activities taking place . . .” (7). Composition’s ultimately tepid support for process proved entropic, so much so that by 1994, John Trimbur will refer to his Compositional era as “post-process,” claiming the process paradigm failed because it closed on a prescribed form—a conventional, expressive statement, made in a conventional, “authentic” prose—which simply “reinstated the rhetoric of the belletristic tradition at the center of the writing classroom” (“Taking the Social Turn” 110). A Happenings practice, though, inflects situations, revelations, tensions, over forms. It insists on the primacy of Jackson darting about the floor, what such a gesture means, over the work’s institutionalization on the wall

(and into academic history). The Happenings lesson to take from Jackson's art is (life-)process-oriented: his process fascinates not in order to discover how to paint like Jackson (reproducing forms, reinstituting rhetorics) but to empathize with him, to re-enter the compositional scene as Kaprow could, to consider how he solved problems (what he even saw as problems), how he met limits, considered materials, tried to make a direct statement in an interesting way—to think about what Jackson felt in the moments of composition. His process's liberatory power as radical heuristic is consistently acknowledged. His friend and fellow-painter George McNeil remarked, "Pollock is . . . one of those artists who are mid-wives: they change the course of art. The great power in his work helped all of us who were so intellectually dominated by consideration of form—it was really a tonic" (Potter 278). And the art historian Leo Lerman agrees: "Even people who don't know of Jackson Pollock see differently because of him—all sorts of visual things couldn't have happened without his influence. Pollock freed the eye and he freed the imagination. . . . He really saw the cobwebs in things and cleared them away" (Potter 279). Trimbur's sober reappraisal, in its eagerness to write the end of one chapter and review notes for the beginning of the next, stems from a curatorial gesture like Greenberg's, not a Happenings sort of process-reading which would, in this case, see Pollock as an action, an extension of being in a moment in time, as an endlessly re-activatable action. Process was too messy, too gnarly for Composition. But for Jackson, that tangled, loopy web came closest to capturing the inner life one lives. Nicholas Carone, a fellow Long Island artist, recalls Jackson arguing that it was impossible to teach art. When Carone suggested that there were certain things you could teach—the language of art and basic forms, Jackson shot back, "Well, [that's] got nothing to do with what I'm involved in, the cosmos." Carone persisted that there were certain basics that could be the subject of instruction. "Maybe you're right," Jackson said, "but if I had to teach, I would tell my students to study Jung" (Potter 197).

Trimbur critiques the process movement for closing on a certain type of representation, "self-revelatory personal essays written in a decidedly non-academic style," a style clued into by savvy students, who quickly caught on "that sincerity and authenticity of voice were the privileged means of symbolic exchange" ("Taking the Social Turn" 110). Despite Greenberg's ultimate misreading of Jackson's work, he clearly saw how easily a representational aesthetic could lead away from inner

expressionism to slavish rendering; such was the western tradition of composition, which “laid more of a stress than any other tradition on creating a sculpture-like, or photographic, illusion of the third dimension, on thrusting images at the eye with a lifelikeness that brought them as close as possible to their originals . . . involv[ing] the spectator to a much greater extent in the practical and actual aspects of the things they depict and represent” (“The Case” 78–79). So the danger Greenberg sees in non-abstract art, then, lies in the way it shifts attention to a predictable, practical, “real-life” content: “We begin to wonder what we think of the people shown in Rembrandt’s portraits, as people; whether or not we would like to walk through the terrain shown in a Corot landscape; about the life stories of the burghers we see in a Steen painting” (“The Case” 79).

Not so amazingly, such concerns formed Composition’s actual prescriptive pedagogy for expressivism. Expressivism withered in post-Happenings Composition because it fatally conflated intensity, not with content, but reproducibility; the statement itself wasn’t important, just the rendering of the setting. With expressivism in Composition defined as the faithful depiction of the “real world,” Donald Stewart, for example, in his *Versatile Writer*, advocates a series of techniques for his students “to increase the intensity and quantity of your perceptions of things around you” (36). Bearing out Greenberg’s reading of expressive aesthetics, Stewart wants a composition that adds depth to representation, creating a kind of hyperreal of the everyday: “Write short biographies of the persons sitting on either side of you right now. Do you know where they live? Where are they from? What are their majors? Are they married, engaged, pinned?” (41).

Elbow’s 1981 *Writing With Power* invoked the same dynamic; his “Metaphors for Priming the Pump” are a series of questions (e.g., “\_\_\_\_\_ is an animal. What animal?” or “\_\_\_\_\_ is really a spy. For whom? What assignment?” [82]) designed to “help you see more aspects of what you want to write about . . . and thus see more clearly” (78). And Murray’s *Write to Learn* contained a series of focusing exercises (“Look Backwards,” “Look Forward” [54]) advertised as “techniques that will help you move in close and concentrate your vision” (53). Such prescriptive gimmicks made sense when the writing desired was thoroughly conventional. The one thing every one of Jackson’s critics could agree on was that, for better or worse, there was never a work like his: Judd sums up the radical break he represents, noting that Jackson “used paint

and canvas in a new way. Everyone else . . . used them in ways that were developments upon traditional European or Western ways of handling paint and canvas" (195). There was no rupture in Composition's traditional program by process teachers, according to Harris, "they simply argued for what seems . . . a new sort of formalism" (*Teaching* 56). Their research studies, with the type of received texts they process-traced, determined this; it would have been akin to Hans Namuth deciding to photograph Jackson early on, as he struggled to copy Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes. Their *process*, then, became a retrojection "a kind of back formation from an ideal product . . . the sort of self-expressive writing that [process teachers] value above all others" (Harris *Teaching* 63). Jackson's "action" process was projective, a working-out of his life-statement, his self-as-message. What Naifeh and Smith call Jackson's "old dilemma" was not reproduction, but rather "how to reconcile the real world with the world of his imagination" (455). "Painting is self-discovery," Jackson once said. "Every good artist paints what he is" (Naifeh and Smith 536). CCCC's version of process had more banal goals. Their notion of "helping students to write 'better,'" according to Harris, had "less to do with self-discovery than with success in the academic or corporate world" (*Teaching* 64). So forget the inspired shaman, right? Bring back that pedestrian businessman.

Reifying what can now be called a "representational expressionism," meant that process became a certain series of steps—a replicable, prescribed process—leading to a certain predictable outcome (Trimbur speaks of the "growing disillusion with its limits" ["Taking the Social Turn" 109] felt by post-Happenings Compositionists, leading them to take the "social turn" to a cultural studies curriculum). The action painter's, however, was a raw, cowboy process. A distinctly zen cowboy's, though. As cornball-Romantic as Rosenberg's description might seem, it was very close to the way Jackson worked: "When I am *in* my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a sort of 'get acquainted' period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess" ("Statements"). This is a distinctly Happenings approach: Robert Whitman, creator of some of the most influential and poetically expressionistic Happenings, said, "You have to trust your intuition. . . . I don't think it's a good idea to be too knowledgeable about what you're doing. I prefer a situation where I

make something that I'm interested in, and I'll see what it tells me" (Kostelanetz *Theatre* 225, 226). By prescribing a process, framing it as prewriting, drafting, and revising, we made almost certain that students could never come up with what Jackson did. Unlike most painters, he spurned the invention stage of preliminary drawings. Asked if he had a "pre-conceived image" in mind as he began a painting, Jackson answered, "No—because it hasn't been created [yet]" (Wright). Paint, in all phases of his work, even the pre-drip canvases, was applied quickly; watching him paint, a friend said, was like watching someone shoot craps (Naifeh and Smith 452). He down-played technique because he was concentrating on the new expression: "New needs need new techniques," he said. Technique was "just a means of arriving at a statement" (Wright), "certain basic rules you have to know, and then forget it" (Rose "Pollock's Studio"). Where painters like de Kooning revised their work endlessly, Jackson bragged of a process that would capture it all in one take, a "one-shot deal" (Naifeh and Smith 406). When he got those early bad reviews, he knew it was because critics were bringing all their determinate, obstinately academic baggage to his work. "If they'd leave most of their stuff at home and just look at the painting, they'd have no trouble enjoying it. It's just like looking at a bed of flowers. You don't tear your hair out over what it means" (Naifeh and Smith 592).

Jackson, with Namuth as his researcher, would have made a wonderful case study for the formative years of CCCC. What Namuth's photos provided was exactly what Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer were after in 1963. Maybe they felt the Childanesque whiff of simulation in the air as they prepared their report on the status of Compositional knowledge. They realized something would be missing in trying to generalize knowledge about composition from "such indirect measures as multiple-choice or true-false tests, questionnaires, self-inventories, and the like" (24), so they instead advocated a study of the way actual writers worked, by "direct observation" (24). Namuth's was the kind of process-researcher methodology they liked: a case study (31–32), in which materials are provided and behavior recorded. A concern for simulation or replication is an important caveat as one studies process. For the composer, a thorough knowledge of process can allow one to understand materials and technologies, broadening one's own composition, allowing it to capture one's visions. Or it can simply allow one to repeat, replicate, perfect. For four years, Jackson explores the drip technology. He gradually perfects

the technique: how to control effects, for example, such as streams, drops, ripples, or that smooth pooling; when to use a stick, as opposed to a dried brush; how to thin the paint to the right consistency; how much to load on. But then, paintings like “Autumn Rhythm” and “One” became almost too perfect, such obvious masterpieces; when he could control the drip technique so that the lines did exactly what he wanted, the accident was gone. He had achieved scale and control at the expense of his unruly vision and inner torment. Realizing his bind, he turned to new materials—rice paper and ink, black paint alone, glass basting syringes instead of sticks and brushes—to fight through ritual and back to real emotion.

Process knowledge is necessary for a critic or teacher as well, but here, too, lies a choice: is process studied and taught simply to replicate a certain kind of work, or rather for deeper, conceptual reasons, to understand the nature of composition, to expand our sense of what can count as work? The art critic Leo Steinberg offers an illustration of this dilemma. He goes to see Jasper Johns’s first one-man show in 1958 and is utterly shaken. He looks at the canvases—numbers, letters, flags, targets (some with plaster casts of body parts attached, even a painting with a smaller frame glued in the center of a canvas, called “Canvas,” or one with the knobbed face of an actual dresser drawer inserted into the canvas, called “Drawer”), most done in the then almost-forgotten encaustic technique, which fittingly seemed to gray out everything one’s critical apparatus traditionally took as evaluative criteria: color, technique, brushstroke. Steinberg’s reaction is complicated: he initially hates the show; but he can’t stop thinking about the pictures, can’t stop returning to the Castelli Gallery to look at them:

I disliked the show, and would gladly have thought it a bore. Yet it depressed me and I wasn’t sure why. Then I began to recognize in myself all the classical symptoms of a philistine’s reaction to modern art. . . . I was really mad at myself for being so dull, and at the whole situation for showing me up. . . . [W]hat really depressed me was what I felt those works were able to do to all other art. The pictures of de Kooning and Kline, it seemed to me, were suddenly tossed into one pot with Rembrandt and Giotto. All alike suddenly became painters of illusion. . . . It looked to me like the death of painting, a rude stop, the end of the track. (12, 13)

What Johns’s work did to Steinberg was disturb the criteria-keystones on which he and other critics had constructed their neat art-historical

narrative, those “solid standards . . . set by the critic’s long-practised taste and by his conviction that only those innovations will be significant which promote the established direction of advanced art” (63). Steinberg is that rare critic who went further into the disturbing composer’s work to understand it; he decided a critic needed to be “more yielding . . . hold[ing] his criteria and taste in reserve. Since they were formed upon yesterday’s art, he does not assume they are readymade for today” (63). So Steinberg went deeper into Johns as compositionist, exploring his technological development and strategies (finding, in fact, that some of his most interesting effects were accidents) and taxonomizing Johns’s subject matter. The result caused Steinberg to radically re-determine his thoughts about art, to start fresh: “It is part of the fascination of Johns’s work that many of his inventions are interpretable as meditations on the nature of painting, pursued as if in dialogue with a questioner of ideal innocence and congenital blindness” (48).

New criteria, though, are not part of the academic program. In Greenberg’s steadily unfolding historical narrative there is never really novelty, never a sharp, essential break with Tradition; legitimizing a new notion like Jackson’s indeterminate, infinitely expandable, non-hierarchical line would be unthinkable. All is subsumed in disciplinary historicity, working itself out genetically, according to a pre-determined code: “I fail to discern anything in the new abstract painting that is that new. I can see nothing essential in it that cannot be shown to have evolved out of either Cubism or Impressionism (if we include Fauvism in the latter), just as I cannot see anything essential in Cubism or Impressionism whose development cannot be traced back to the Renaissance” (“How Art Writing” 142). Equally for Bartholomae, novelty does not exist, even if we wish it could. “There is a student in my class writing an essay on her family, on her parents’ divorce. We’ve all read this essay. We’ve read it because the student cannot invent a way of talking about family, sex roles, separation. Her essay is determined by a variety of forces: the genre of the personal essay as it has shaped this student and this moment; attitudes about the family and divorce; the figures of ‘Father’ and ‘Mother’ and ‘Child’ and so on” (“Writing with Teachers” 66–67).

The inevitability of Tradition’s tropes and genres—“Our writing is not our own” (“Writing with Teachers” 64)—becomes the simple truth of Modernist Composition. Since there can be no rupture in the academic symbolic, what is privileged is not the exercising of an individual’s

creative powers, but the inescapable monolith of historical impeccability (or, as Bartholomae puts it, “the particular representations of power, tradition and authority reproduced whenever one writes” [64], i.e., *only those innovations which promote the established direction of advanced art*). Greenberg hated how art writing slighted history in praising the contemporary artist as if he/she had “come out of nowhere and owes practically nothing to anything before him[/her]. It’s as though art began all over again every other day” (Greenberg “How Art Writing” 143). And so, for Greenberg, one of Jackson’s “deepest insights” is that “the past remained implicated in everything he did” (“Jackson Pollock: ‘Inspiration’” 249). This, despite reminiscences like the following, from fellow-painter Harry Jackson: “I wanted to paint realistically and study painting technique, and I brought him a book on the techniques of the old masters. Jack said, ‘Oh *no*. You can’t read that stuff. You can’t do that anymore, Harry’” (Potter 204). An Action Critic like Rosenberg will call Greenberg’s past-implicated work “art that accommodates itself to a prepared taste” (“After Next, What?” 72). Rosenberg even joked about how easy it was to generate a simulation-machine for Modernist composition based on a studied, detailed familiarity with the art of the past:

the mode of production of modern masterpieces has now been all too clearly rationalized. There are styles in the present displays which the painter could have acquired by putting a square inch of a Soutine or a Bonnard under a microscope. . . . All this is training based on a new conception of what art is, rather than original work demonstrating what art is about to become.

At the center of this wide practicing of the immediate past, however, the work of some painters has separated itself from the rest by a consciousness of a function for painting different from that of the earlier [artists]. (“American Action Painters” 22)

Action Painting had nothing to do with art history, and it had everything to do with offering the individual an opportunity for expressiveness, training not in an update of standard conceptions, but in how to afford even the most basic student a rhetorical-existential line capable of turning anyone’s record of daily annihilations into a diary of the American Infinite, a “means of confronting in daily practice the problematic nature of modern individuality . . . restor[ing] metaphysical point to art” (Rosenberg, “Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion” 40).

But Modernist Composition never admits it doesn’t know what’s going on. So Greenberg insists on seeing Jackson in terms of the next

stage in Late Cubism, and Bartholomae insists on seeing basic writers as carrying out (or trying to) the ongoing project of the university's unfolding narrative: to see these composers otherwise (as offering new meditations on the nature of composition, say—statements having little or nothing to do with the arbitrarily assembled “history” of composition preceding them) would automatically render the Modernist critical project odd and obsessive. No wonder, for example, language poet Charles Bernstein unnerves Bartholomae when, in a conversation, Bernstein calls traditional essay-writing, with its artificial coherence, “a kind of lying” (“On Poetry” 51). Bernstein would teach writing as drift, the *dérive*:

If you don't account for digression at every level of teaching—from elementary school on—if you don't account for the enormous force of digression, then you end up, on the one hand, teaching some people to have an enormous facility to cut out what doesn't fit and to fit in, which is a very corporate, commodified, homogenized, bland way of imagining writing. And on the other hand, you're letting people who can't develop that facility, or have just an enormous psychological resistance to it, feel disenfranchised from their own language. (51)

Bartholomae almost stammers back a response, not wanting to consider the implication that dawns on him, about how, “if we taught the parenthesis with the same vigor as we taught the topic sentence, we'd have a different tradition of writing in this country” (52).

Just the idea of an art history tradition is amusing, when thrown into relief against Jackson's work. How could you speak of Jackson's art in terms of the past, when it looked like it came from the future? According to the painter David Budd:

Meeting Jackson was a turning point in my work and in my life. He was a hero—the thing about him was that he was *right*, and the paintings were right. . . . That hero for me is still: I was talking not long ago to a friend and I turned on the sidewalk and there in a window was a Pollock. It jolted me like an electric shock—after thirty years it looked like it would be done *tomorrow*, it was so good. So you have to stop talking and just look. That's super power, super magic, super whatever! (Potter 193)

Clem's idea of fitting Jackson into the lineage of Analytical Cubism: such formalist fashionings of thematic continua always seem silly and obsessive-compulsive, missing the individual poetry of the work, the

inner drama. “The whole evolution of Abstract Expressionism could, in fact, be described as a devolution from a Synthetic kind of abstract Cubism to an Analytical kind. . . . In the all-over Pollock and in the de Kooning of the last seven or eight years, analogous planar segments are analogously deployed (smaller in Pollock, larger in de Kooning), with the principal difference being in their articulation or jointing” (Greenberg “After Abstract” 127–128). Rosenberg had no patience for this impulse in Greenberg, seeing it as the free-world version of the kind of state-styled control of art history practiced under Communism: “The critic in a free country, who maps out the direction that art must take, does the next most effective thing: he demonstrates his accuracy by consigning to the critical rubbish heap any art that fails to take that direction” (“After Next, What?” 65). The problem with such neat notions of periodicity, for Rosenberg, is their remove from the actual creative process:

the nature of creation is that it contains the unexpected . . . . It moves through time in a ragged, irregular order, neither purifying itself nor succumbing to an ultimate logic. (By the “logic of history,” art should have ended with Malevich, and a current panel of French critics and philosophers sees it as extinguishing itself with “art informel.”) Art wishes not to be historically impeccable but to exercise the powers of creation available to it. (“After Next” 66)

In our own subfield of Composition, history indeed imposes; and a writer’s art must be historically impeccable. Language is the ultimate presiding logic of history to which the writer must succumb: “It is language that mediates, that stands before a writer and determines what he will say” (Bartholomae “Writing on the Margins” 72). And so Bartholomae can trace the historical implications of language’s mediation in his students’ papers (the tropes used, the phraseology) much like Greenberg can detail the analogous planar segments in Jackson’s work. Here’s Bartholomae on the White Shoes paper in “Inventing the University”:

The “I” of this text—the “I” who “figured,” “thought,” and “felt”—is located in a conventional rhetoric of the self that turns imagination into origination (I made it), that argues an ethic of production (I made it and it is mine), and that argues a tight scheme of intention (I made it because I decided to make it). The rhetoric seems invisible because it is so common. This “I” (the maker) is also located in a version of history that dominates classrooms, the “great man” theory: History is rolling along (the English novel is dominated by a central, intrusive narrative presence; America is in the throes of a Great

Depression; during football season the team was supposed to wear the same kind of cleats and socks) until a figure appears, one who can shape history (Henry James, FDR, the writer of the “White Shoes” paper), and everything is changed. In the argument of the “White Shoes” paper, the history goes “I figured . . . I thought . . . I told . . . They agreed . . .” and, as a consequence, “I feel that creativity *comes from when* a person lets his imagination come up with ideas and he is not afraid to express them.” The act of appropriation becomes a narrative of courage and conquest. (150–151)

Poor White Shoes, having to learn the lesson the media so painfully taught Jackson: you should always be afraid to express the imagination’s ideas. (The obvious irony that must, of course, be noted: Jackson *was* that ‘great man’ who appeared and changed the course of art history, whose life was a narrative of courage and conquest.) Jasper Johns, too, not so surprisingly fails according to the academy’s criteria (Greenberg went out of his way to denigrate him in reviews); the audacity of a genre being radically made over in encaustic, with a dresser drawer sticking out of it.

The proper genre exists in Composition (it’s “already there in the institution” [“Writing on the Margins” 72]); it’s the essay, because historically that is the key genre of “the exemplary culture within which our students live . . . academic culture, with its powerful ways of representing the world” (79). The form and content of that essay are also historically determined; it has its “available introductions, transitions, and conclusions” (72), “its peculiar gestures of authority, its key terms and figures, its interpretive schemes” (69), which must be reproduced. Teaching, then, becomes a kind of relocation project in which a “student moves into” (72) this language. Allowing students to exercise the powers of creation available to them is laughably naive; the notion that we can “give students genuine options or transform the university system so that all styles are equally genuine” runs counter to ultimate institutional logic; it is “a utopian construction” (72). And Jackson, of course, searching for that unitary mode of notation that would be able to transcode anything, also flunks out, for teaching—even permitting—a student “to use a pure, reasonable common tongue [so that] the distinction between a professional and lay person, an expert and a novice, or school and home would disappear at the level of language” (72) is equally utopian. Rosenberg saw the simulation game of art history, where “anything can be ‘traced back’ to anything, especially by one who has elected himself First Cause” (Rubinfeld 239). Action Painting represented a “new motive” for painting, one irrelevant to art history. It was composition as a record

of transformation, change: “painting . . . as a means for the artist’s recreation of himself and as an evidence to the spectator of the kind of activities involved in this adventure into freedom” (Rosenberg “After Next, What?” 68). Clem insouciantly dismissed Rosenberg’s mythic view of Jackson, holding firm to the art-historical line:

Pollock’s art turns out at the same time to rely far less on the accidental than had been thought. It turns out, in fact, to have an almost completely Cubist basis, and to be the fruit of much learning and discipline. . . . It was the first look of the new American painting, and only the first look, that led Harold Rosenberg to take it for a mystification beyond art on to which he could safely graft another mystification. (“How Art Writing” 141)

This makes perfect sense. If Jackson is allowed to be a Brandoesque cult figure, instead of a *maître*, then Greenberg’s whole theory falls apart. Jackson is *that* dangerous in the implications of his act. (Equally, if White Shoes was judged as high school sports hero who got a little taste of the spectacular from the crowd at the game, it would undo the whole system that needs to see him as a *maître maudit*, as a writer whose “skill does not include the ‘consciousness of mediation’” [78].) So Clem is especially careful to bring hyper-connoisseurship to Jackson: to turn him into what Rosenberg called “a fabricated ‘master’” (“The Search” 58); to note, for example, how the drip paintings “create an analogously [i.e. to Cubism] ambiguous illusion of shallow depth . . . played off, however, against a far more emphatic surface” (“The Jackson Pollock Market” 132). It’s amusing to see whirls and lariats of paint spoken of in such a rarefied dialogue, like hearing a punk song described as having subtle shadings or something. The mistakes of Rosenberg’s first-and-only-first impression are repeated anew any time someone fails to see Jackson’s formalist genius:

Pollock’s “all-over” “drip” paintings seem swiftness and spontaneity incarnate, but their arabesque interlacings strike the uninitiated eye as excluding anything that resembles control and order, not to mention skill. . . . His strongest “all-over” paintings tend sometimes to be concentric in their patterning; often the concentricity is that of several interlocking or overlapping concentric patterns (as in the marvelous *Cathedral* of 1947). In other cases the patterning consists in a rhythm of loopings that may or may not be counterpointed by a “system” of fainter straight lines. At the same time there is an oscillating movement between different planes in shallow depth and the literal surface plan—a movement reminiscent of Cézanne and Analytical Cubism. (“Jackson Pollock: ‘Inspiration’” 246–247)

Yet we can't fail to feel the tension in these lines. When one reads Greenberg on Jackson, his struggle to fit the obviously non-academic swirls into the discourse of museumification, there's always this inescapable question hovering over the critical scene: just why did Greenberg like Jackson's work, since it so obviously owed allegiance to a different, non-formalist agenda?

What Greenberg has always really wanted to talk about, one suspects, is a rapturous pleasure in Jackson's work, unspeakable by a formalist lexicon. This suspicion is confirmed in a 1969 interview. Asked, "What caused you to believe in [Jackson] when others did not?" Greenberg doesn't miss a beat: "His quality. His pictures 'sent' me" ("Interview Conducted by Lily Leino" 310). At its core, his appreciation of Jackson's gesture is a gut thing, transcending a carefully-worked-out aesthetic. Entirely understandable, given the incredibly powerful universe Jackson hoped to capture in his compositional quest. Some people, especially fellow painters, showed how effectively Jackson's meaning could be captured in terms more elemental than critical: Buffie Johnson remembers, "I saw [his paintings] as violent then because I knew the man; now I see them as still marvelous but floating and *him* more of a dreaming poet than I realized" (Potter 100); and Larry Rivers loved the effect the work had on him and his era: "His works . . . [are] like the gorgeous remains of some weird culture. He was a perfect product of that time, exemplified it, and he was full of power and contradictions. He opened up the whole idea of images with generous proportions—before that no one would have them so big" (Potter 278). Greenberg feels that kind of visceral response, obviously, and loves to use the appropriate vocabulary to capture it, speaking of the work's "mazy trickling, dribbling, whipping, blotching, and staining of paint" (247). It must feel excitingly transgressive to use those terms. Suddenly we remember Clem's infatuation with 60s pop, his favorite Peter and Gordon songs, and his serious drug use. His biographer Florence Rubinfeld notes, "In some respects Greenberg was a sensualist tarted out in positivist clothes. He once indicated a preference for Matisse over Picasso by commenting, 'I can taste Matisse's paintings. I never taste Picasso'" (303). But that sensualist impulse is held in check by his quality-centered formalism; telling his readers how the pictures '*sent*' *him* would be a Happenings discourse. A critic in the non-formalist camp, Thomas Hess, has none of Greenberg's compunctions; he not only admits, in poetic terms, to being sent by a poured painting in 1950, he describes in detail the place he's sent to:

The spectator is pulled into the paroxysm of creation itself, but after this shared act of violence is consummated, the image surprisingly insists on a magnificent serenity—restless, quiet, like the floor of some deep, frozen lake where life is pulsing only in the smallest organisms. (63)

Or take Bill Coles, who is quite clear about what it was that ‘sent him’ in his student George Humphrey’s writing: it was its “incantatory power,” not its traditional, formal criteria (“as an arrangement of words, the paper is not completely within the writer’s control, may even be read as seriously flawed” [Coles and Vopat 326]), and so his analysis is as poetic as Hess’s. Humphrey is an action writer for Coles, and as action composition exists as event or encounter, a lived tension, so Coles knows (as Namuth knew) appreciation of such must return to “the rhetorical scene of the paper” (325). An evocative power suffuses action composition (“of the same metaphysical substance as the artist’s existence” [Rosenberg “American Action Painters” 23]), and indeed Coles’ criticism evokes the scene of the writing along with the mythology of the writer. His encounter with the act-writing sends him to Hess’s deep, silent, still place; a place that looks to Coles like the death of college writing, a rude stop, the end of the track:

We were almost at the end of a freshman writing course, one I was concluding by having students examine various ways of defining a university—almost at the end of a course, and that same spring, 1970, twenty-five miles from Kent State (as the bullet flies), almost at what felt like the end of everything else as well. It’s partly a matter of what I remember of the writer of the paper too—what he had come from and through in his work for the course for one thing; the boy himself for another: filament-thin, fierce, graceless, as improbably gladdening as a crocus in the snow. And above all I remember the silence that followed my reading the paper aloud in class, deep enough in that time of that place to still the waters it seemed, to winnow heaven from earth. (325–326).

Humphrey’s paper represents what action writing should be, “an extension of the artist’s total effort to make over his experience” (Rosenberg “American Action Painters” 48), and so Coles rightly speaks of it in transformative terms: as “creat[ing] possibilities for living” (326), “an enactment of what I have to see the teaching of writing as being about, as having the possibility of involving” (328). The paper becomes, then, wholly *sui generis* yet also a perfect type, and Coles can only speak of it in a new lexicon, a language that constantly undoes itself: the *very complicated*

*way he goes about doing what at first he seems to have avoided altogether; a place that isn't one . . . a no-place . . . between worlds; to lose can be to gain . . . but to gain is also to have to lose; a new whole unsuccessfully formed* (326–327). (Hess resorts to the same self-canceling prose to speak of Jackson: “Pollock deliberately pushed violence to the point where it contradicts itself and includes calm. The painting is made radically stable” [64]). The scene of the late 60s still haunted Composition in 1985, when Coles wrote his commentary on the Humphrey paper. In this brief text, Coles manages to write Composition Studies’ “American Action Painters,” and offers the new anti-criteria agenda for the action writer: “to put and hold together not just too much with too little, but all he knows with all he has” (327).

What is missed by Modernist Composition is what Rosenberg refers to as the “trans-formal” nature of composition (“Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion” 45). For instance: One of my favorite LP’s from 1971 is David Crosby’s *If I Could Only Remember My Name*. It’s a real mood-and-memory piece, capturing not only the drug-hazed idealistic feel of the era, but existing as a sort of quiet, timeless space between excess and the ethereal (a sort of perpetual 2:30 AM of the mind). The lyrics might have seemed corny even then: “I wonder who they are, the men who really run this land. . . . What are their names, and on what street do they live? I’d like to ride, ride over this afternoon and give them a piece of my mind, about peace for mankind. Peace is not an awful lot to ask.” But I sort of don’t really hear the lyrics as great poetry, in any tradition. Transformatively, it’s the sound and the endlessly activatable, late-night hush of a scene that signifies. It’s the spirit of what the lyrics say, voiced with the passion of Crosby’s quintessentially sixties voice, and their occasional moments of low-key beauty (“it’s hard enough to gain any traction in the rain”), along with the ringingly idiosyncratic lead guitar of Neil Young interwoven with the psychedelic-blues filigree of Jerry Garcia’s, both played against the insistent bass of Phil Lesh. Those corny lyrics are exactly what Composition would investigate, doing a dazzlingly authoritative read of the unoriginality of their theme and imagery and, hence, missing the entire point (anything can be traced back to anything). The point is the way Crosby transcends determinism to create an evocative amalgam-text. One that can change people. Bartholomae tries to resolve the irresolvable, definitively re-figure the ambiguity. Should we read White Shoes the writer or the person? Is Action Painting the life or the work? It does no good to force

one or the other reading. Rosenberg knew that Action Painting only made sense in this transformatory, contradictory context:

An action that eventuates on a canvas, rather than in the physical world or in society, is inherently ambiguous. . . . It retains its vigor only as long as it continues to sustain its dilemmas: if it slips over into action (“life”) there is no painting; if it is satisfied with itself as painting it turns into “apocalyptic wallpaper.” (“Action Painting: Crisis and Distortion” 45–46).

So the transformative—the attempt to make a statement, something honest that might make a difference, might change someone or something—becomes crucial evaluative criteria: “the test of any of the new paintings is its seriousness—and the test of its seriousness is the degree to which the act on the canvas is an extension of the artist’s total effort to make over his experience” (“American Action Painters” 48). Do we doubt that the writing had a transformative effect on White Shoes? It may have helped solidify his character in sports, may even have influenced other athletes who heard the paper. Are we really saying our course work is more important than that? And though I don’t know if he did it each time he sat down to write, when George Humphrey sat down to write his final paper for Bill Coles, he did indeed invent the university. But not as Bartholomae would want it invented, as already-invented (as “part of the general critique of traditional humanism” [“Writing with Teachers” 71]); he invents it instead as previously un-invented, as a new place, a non-place “between worlds, the old ones undead, the new ones not quite born,” as a very local critique of traditional academicism, perhaps. (Tellingly, Bartholomae shows himself a compositionist of the institution, not the statement: he wants students to invent the *university*, not *writing*. Jackson could care less about inventing the gallery, he wanted to invent painting; as his friend and fellow-artist Cile Downs recalls, Jackson “hated the whole apparatus—critics, dealers, all those schemes” [Potter 26].)

What’s needed is a different grammar and lexicon. Just because we observe a composer (especially, given the contrived tasks writers perform in most research studies, when what we observe is a simulation of composition), how do we know we understand composition? Perhaps we simply lack the discourse to conceptualize the composition fully. Steiner wonders whether one’s understanding of Pollock (or any composer) is limited by the discursive frames operative in the observer:

If the problem were the meaning of a painting, an explanation of the painting would enable us to experience it rather than merely see it. Experience is therefore learning a grammar; understanding is making use of one. A grammar, then, is an explanation. To *express* one's understanding requires more-over a different grammar, one that connects an object to an analysis. The difficulty in the case of Pollock may be that explanation and understanding conflate; it may be that we only understand the explanation and can only connect grammars. The sign may only be explained by a sign, so it can never be understood. Is this why, for example, when people view Pollock they see a landscape, a myth, a psychological statement by Jung, or a plate of pasta? They translate the experience of the painting into a language they already know, moving it from one verbal scene to another, or from a visual to a verbal, as though from a museum to a living room. (19)

This concern exists most crucially in our field when those taught are so-called basic writers, composers who don't seem to understand our grammar because they (apparently) can't make use of it, and so are deemed unable to compose. Such was Jackson. His high school stint at Manual Arts in Los Angeles was "an unfolding disaster . . . ill-prepared and unmotivated for academic work . . . socially inept, he was a misfit in a school and a community that prized fitting in above all else" (Naifeh and Smith 122). Even though he was personally supportive of Jackson and his work, Benton not only demeaned his drawing ability, but gave him the lowest marks on ideational skills as well: "He had no verbal facility," Benton claimed. "He had read too little anyhow to be at ease with the subjects discussed" (Naifeh and Smith 238). Benton's (mis)understanding of Jackson was constrained by his own grammar: Benton, the meticulous planner, the artist who re-captured the archly academic Renaissance medium of egg tempera for his murals, a medium notoriously unforgiving and resistant to "thinking on paper" through it; Benton, whose confident, beautifully curving line was in stark contrast to his student Jackson's tortured struggle to master rendering. "Even after two years at the League [studying under Benton], sketching was still not an easy process. Every new piece of paper was another battle with spontaneity, every line laden with risks" (Naifeh and Smith 219). Kozloff's description of Jackson at odds with his compositional surface reads like Shaughnessy as art historian: "It is as if the friction the [paper] itself offered the path of his hand sent him into a rage. The resulting oily turbulences and hectic typographies . . . are of an incomparable strangled brutishness. At every recognition of these failings, Pollock would try to extricate himself

by redoubling his furor, which only emphasized them the more" (145). The impression given by his biographers is that Jackson spent the majority of his early years as a painter either sitting in his studio with his head buried in his hands, or angrily yelling, "I'm no damn good!" The image Jimmy Ernst had of him was of "a man looking into the rain, a hard-driving rain" (Potter 71). And Jackson's brother Frank recalls that in the studio the young Jackson shared with his older brother Charles, a much more accomplished, traditional artist, "Jack's work was always turned to the wall" (Potter 42). That correctness of line, how it plagued Jackson, now the Archetypal Basic Writer. To decide to live outside the law of those standards that had been so cruel to him, so unyielding, was very brave; and then, to rise above them, conquering them by avoiding them, living to show there are other ways to produce powerful art.

According to Bois, "it is precisely because Pollock 'did not know how to draw' that he was led to his magisterial invention of the drip, which dealt a radical blow against drawing as it had previously been known" (Review 84). With his formal education under Benton causing a growing sense of betrayal, Jackson had to unlearn what his teacher taught. He had to learn how *not* to render, he had to learn what makes drawing *bad*. Material immersion was his deliverance. One anti-pedagogical strategy he evolved was not to correct errors, but to follow them; he applied neither rules nor models to his mistakes, just materials, working deeper into them rather than through them. As one after another of his official assignments would go bad, he would draw over them. Unable to perfect the undulating line of Benton's hollow-and-bump trademark technique, Jackson would dwell on his crude approximations, doodling unconsciously over them, learning how to veil the representative image he was so inept at rendering. "An outline of a torso would become a skein of swirling lines. . . . Jackson may already have begun to glimpse their significance" (Naifeh and Smith 220). And there was also the extracurricular lessons he was learning through his association with the Mexican muralist Siqueiros, who taught an appreciation of technology and material that was at odds with Benton's traditional academicism. Not just through his advocacy of industrial tools and techniques did he influence Jackson, but in the way he never worked from sketches, "preferring to work directly—in 'partnership' with his materials. He studied the dynamics of paint—its density, its viscosity, its flow rate—in an effort to incorporate those dynamics into the image, letting the paint itself help create the painting" (Naifeh and Smith 287). Jackson was fascinated by

Siqueiros's paint-pouring experimentation, and one night, in 1936, he put a canvas on the floor and tried to replicate the dripped technique of the muralist. What Jackson learned in such personal study was the cynical truth of traditional composition, that it's all about teaching the correct line at the expense of the right line. Jackson became a real compositionist only when he began to follow his heart: discovering he had a vision and voice worth sharing, then realizing he had to abandon his struggle for the correct line and embark on the search for a personally useful and perfectible line to express that inner vision. Traditional composition is oblivious to the value of the right line, it wouldn't even know how to teach it, since it's incommensurate with the standards in place. Traditional composition doesn't consider the text as situationist space for Action Students, a canvas on which they can/must live. With the standards of evaluative criteria firmly in place for most formalist compositionists (who speak *a language they already know*), incorrect writing like Jackson's that seems so obviously to miss the mark seems an easy call. A tangle of dribbles and drools that needs untangling. What Composition would call the Basic Writer's surface became the look that best expressed his statement; as Friedman notes, by 1947, "Pollock had recognized that accidents (spillings, splatterings, puddings, drippings) incorporated in his work came closest to the look and feel he wanted" (*Energy* 96). A discussion of Jackson and process, then, must spend some time looking at how Composition considers those dribblers and droolers, the ones who "don't know how to write," those for whom instruction seems most adamantly a matter of learning the correct line, the Basic Writer. An obvious text for analysis in this regard becomes Sondra Perl's landmark study of the processes of basic writers, the first to treat such composers, and a study, published in December of 1979, that helps mark the transition from the 'action' spirit of Happenings Composition to the simulationist pedagogy of the post-Happenings. Indeed, Sondra Perl's program for teaching writing amounted to a way to de-Pollock a Pollock: what was needed, she felt, was for a teacher to see "meaning beneath the tangles in [a student's] prose . . . interven[ing] in such a way that untangling his composing process leads him to create better prose" (328).

**I**n explaining her rationale for being the first to undertake a process study of basic writers ("As long as 'average' or skilled writers are the focus, it remains unclear as to how process research will provide teachers

with a firmer understanding of the needs of students with serious writing problems" [318]), Perl reveals how the academy portrays the basic compositionist: as in need, deficient, problematical. They are the ones who can't draw. We see this as well in her study's reliance on miscue analysis ("the observer analyzes the mismatch that occurs when readers make responses during oral reading that differ from the text" [323]) as a way of capturing an understanding of the basic writer's process. They are *translated*, then, as mistake-makers, their process existing in some interstitial space of slippage; the locus is *discrepancy*. Basic writers are *les bassesses de composition*. They don't imply contagion, as Rose thought, but rather a denial of the very possibility of healthy communion. The clumsy strangeness of their work when compared to what it should resemble: it's as if done according to the measures Marcel invented, the standard stoppages. Duchamp dropped string onto a table three times and traced the shapes, using them to form his new measures, his new criteria. Basic writers' prose resembles them, in the entropic, degenerative pull of their compositions: the huge, almost magnetically negative heart at the center of their work—it threatens to pull all other writing into it. BW prose is a standard-stoppage in terms of its status as the end of measurable composition. For Bois, any picture, post-Picasso, becomes "a system structured by arbitrary signs" ("Use Value" 28). It was Duchamp who exposed this "semiological repression": "His *Three Standard Stoppages* knocks one of the most arbitrary systems of the sign there is (the metric system) off its pedestal to show that once submitted to gravity, once lowered into the contingent world of things and bodies, the sign does not hold water: it dissolves as an (iterable) sign and regresses toward singularity" (28). Basic writers show not only the flimsiness of our arbitrary systems and signs for writing (which by all means should flow regressively, de-deterministically, into the idea of writing as basic line), but maybe the flimsiness of representation in general, how what is most worth representing (the sublime) can't be represented. A Basic Writer's best come-back line to Traditional Composition now becomes Jackson's line, "I choose to veil the imagery" (Naifeh and Smith 537). Perl's urgency is Modernism's crisis of representation, getting these students able to draw correctly, effecting the proper (arbitrary) resemblance. The "major question" of her study of basic writers is, "What does an increased understanding of their processes suggest about the nature of composing in general and the manner in which writing is taught in the schools?" (317) The key is understanding the process of writing, demystifying it, in order to allow

easy replication by even the most unskilled. Perl academicizes the rhetorical scene, then, attempting to restore the fiction of order to the now-ruptured symbolic. Observing a process for her is untroubled, and it leads to direct *increased understanding*, especially given the code she has invented, her representational grammar: “a meaningful and replicable method for rendering the composing process as a sequence of observable and scorable behaviors” (318). That’s absurd, of course; or it’s true only for very trivial processes. Observing Jackson’s process was by no means untroubled. Did he start with the figure, and then use his webs of paint to veil it? Did he really abandon a sense of composition as a process in stages? Was it truly a one-shot deal for him? When and why did he “lose contact” with a work and abandon it? How does he determine its doneness? (He was supposedly “finished” with *One: Number 31, 1950* when Namuth showed up to photograph him painting it. Namuth begged to at least photograph the studio; as Jackson showed him around, he couldn’t help returning to the work, dancing and whipping paint around for another half-hour.) Scholars have gone so far as using Namuth’s process-research to form computerized composite photographs which might answer some of those questions, but in any event the data didn’t really let us figure out composing for Jackson, in terms of understanding it enough to replicate it. What it offered was a vocabulary for talking about the art, insights into the compositionist, and a new, mythic, action-grammar. But Composition has desired of its research, not seeds for myth, but the truth of resemblance (what Werner Herzog, in complaining how “so-called Cinema Verité is devoid of verité,” calls “a merely superficial truth, the truth of accountants”). So maybe Namuth wouldn’t have been at all the kind of process-researcher Braddock, Lloyd-Jones and Schoer would have loved. But what he lacked in accountancy-truth, he made up for in transformatory richness.

Shooting with available light, Namuth was forced to use long exposures, and the swiftness of Pollock’s movements meant that his image was frequently blurred. Some of the photographs from the first session were also blurred by a defect in one of Namuth’s cameras. He was initially troubled by these imperfections, but ultimately came to feel that they enhanced the pictures’ visual excitement. (Karmel 90)

For Composition, after a veridical composing process is faithfully captured, it’s only a matter of how correct imitation can be taught, how the academic can maintain its semblance of order. (Compare this, say, with

the sociolinguistic project, which desires only to show how language is used, to capture the shimmering surface's truth of situation.)

Composition's need for a new grammar, a new way of translating the experience, is readily apparent in Perl. Rather than focusing on the idea, the metaphysical statement-value in the writing, she focuses on the text as conventionally articulated, formal structure. Jackson's concern was the inner reality, not the outer form. According to Jackson's friend Reuben Kadish, "Jack didn't go looking for sophistication; he looked for the statement. And he would go for the primitive before the sophisticated" (Potter 106). The focus was on an inner truth that outward material effects couldn't influence; we remember the permission he gave people to walk across his canvases. And Marcel:

When he learned that the [*Large Glass*] had been shattered, while being transported from a show at the Brooklyn Museum to the Connecticut home of Katherine Dreier, its owner, Duchamp did not appear particularly upset. (Tomkins 129)

If the work exists as statement, idea, its form is ultimately not precious in itself. It doesn't need a perfect surface. Rather than a focus on the inner, lived life, the sense of a text as *dwelleable*, Perl focuses on the formal structure, as a particularly defined, reproducible type, with no discussion of that form's potentially enchanting program. The idea of replicating a Pollock occurred often as his fame grew; in fact, fake Pollocks turned up regularly after his death. The British printmaker, Stanley Hayter, lived in the United States during the 1940s, running his famous Atelier 17, where Jackson was a frequent visitor. Hayter realized the folly of trying to replicate a Pollock:

A lot of our people said [the drip technique] was nonsense, that anybody could do it. That enraged me and I said, "Go to it, and I'll bet you that not one of you can make one square inch of anything that could be mistaken for what Pollock's done . . ." And they couldn't because it's absolutely distinctive, more than handwriting. It's like attempts at faking Pollock: You can't be fooled. (Potter 98)

Dripping seemed somehow not art; any child could do it. It was, unsurprisingly, even equated with the worthlessness of the body, as a common body-process (urination); 'Jack the Dripper' was the pejorative nickname some clever wag of a reviewer gave him. The poetry is missed by

an exaggerated formalism made equivalent to replication. Jackson's way of reading was to dwell in the supra-formalist process and content of the work. According to Nick Carone, Jackson

had a very intimate way of looking at work. . . . He would read things in it, you know, looking as though he's talking to something there, like *he* was painting that picture and on a kind of psychedelic trip of the visual experience. He judged by the unconscious imagery, not by three-dimensional form, reading the pictures in the Jungian sense.

It wasn't verbal so much as an intense communion of the moment, and empathy. (Potter 160–161)

As Goodnough wrote, in his own process-research on Jackson: "He feels that his methods may be automatic at the start, but that they quickly step beyond that, becoming concerned with deeper and more involved emotions which carry the painting on to completion according to their degree of strength and purity" (60). Perl's claims about her coding tool ring false when read against Jackson's process. In hyping her method, she claims "it labels specific, observable behaviors so that types of composing movements are revealed" (320). To define a technology of composition by a 16-item list, made up of 11 basic activity-terms (planning, commenting, interpreting, assessing, questioning, talking, repeating, reading, writing, editing, silence) provides a poor translation scale for process, reducing the context around the production-event to "types" that are vague at best. This counters the more persuasive logic of a site-specific lexicon; with Jackson, for example, there are all those luscious, poetic gerunds like flooding, dripping, dumping.

Indeed, what sort of composing process is it about which a coding instrument can be claimed to depict "the entire sequence of composing movements on one or two pages" (320)? Namuth's coding tool—photographs of the artist in process, along with heartfelt, self-descriptions of the work—was more expansive. Since the process-scene was opened up rather than reduced by his method, it even led Namuth to the use of another instrument—the film camera—to capture that expansiveness. Filming, he said, was "the next logical step. Pollock's method of painting suggested a moving picture—the dance around the canvas, the continuous movement, the drama" ("Photographing Pollock"). The process Namuth was capturing was lived, situationist theatre in a comfortable space Jackson had spent his life searching for; Perl's students, on the other hand, were performing unfamiliar rituals ("composing aloud, to

externalize their thinking processes as much as possible" [318]) in artificial circumstances ("the sessions took place in a soundproof room in the college library" [318]). When Perl claims her method makes it "possible to determine when students were talking, when they were writing, when both occurred simultaneously, and when neither occurred" (320)—and, when we remember traces of Jackson's process that could never be so easily articulated (Barnett Newman said of Jackson's process, "Forget hand. It's the mind—not brain, but *mind*—soul, concentration, gut" [Naifeh and Smith 5]; I mean, how do you delineate that?)—we have to wonder just what sort of measuring tool can do what she claims; or rather, what sort of writing is so easily observable. Perl, of course, is not capturing composition; she's generating a simulationist model, one with an easy unity ("it provides a way of determining how parts of the process relate to the whole" [320]) that has nothing to do with the messy, idiosyncratic, existential business of a human engaged in significant symbolic creation. No doubt, the tool she designed might have been perfect to capture the trivial, pseudo-academic tasks her students were engaged in: intro social science tasks, for which the student "reads the directions and the question twice and then begins to plan exactly what she is going to say, all within the first minute" (321). And indeed, her subject Tony's process is perfect for the kind of limited genres he's asked to compose. Rather than showing a Pollockian expansiveness, Tony's process is reductive to the point of implosion: as Perl puts it, "densely packed, tight . . . so full that there was little room left for invention or change" (324).

The students Perl studies are only too aware that writing has been defined now as dutiful replication of some existing type. She notes they all edited far more for form than content. She fails to acknowledge that her findings in this regard—"most of [Tony's] time was spent proofreading rather than changing, rephrasing, adding, or evaluating the substantive parts of the discourse" (326)—might very well be a logical result of the academic-formalist curriculum the students have experienced. A debilitating representational template was obviously strongly instantiated in Tony, as Perl herself discovers: "From the moment Tony began writing, he indicated a concern for correct form that actually inhibited the development of ideas" (324). But Perl is blind to her own insight: she never advocates changing that reality, just assisting basic writers, with their tangled, miscued processes, to do it better. She plays Greenberg to Tony's Jackson: seeing only her own formal reality, her

attitude is as patronizing as Clem's upon first looking on Jackson's work: "Being young and full of energy, he takes orders he can't fill" (Greenberg "Marc Chagall" 621). It's up to her to help Tony fill those orders (which are really the academy's). She doesn't seem bothered by the curriculum which produces a Tony, for whom writing is simply re-representing, rather than discovering or being ("there is no point in an act if you already know what it contains" [Rosenberg "American Action Painters" 22]). Steinberg abandoned formalism, after Johns's banal (but thoroughly enchanting) new work forced him to learn other criteria, because he saw greater value in the poetic content of a work—that *statement*, which couldn't be coded by formalist schemes:

I find myself constantly in opposition to what is called formalism; not because I doubt the necessity of formal analysis, or the positive value of work done by serious formalist critics. But because I mistrust their certainties, their apparatus of quantification, their self-righteous indifference to that part of artistic utterance which their tools do not measure. (64)

This is the part of the work that Perl never mentions, the enchanted part of the work. There's never a question of Tony's writing *sending* Perl. A formalist schema, Steinberg felt, will keep "breaking down because it insists on defining modern art without acknowledgement of its content" (71). Except to note the way her writers quickly took complex topics and turned them into simplistic dichotomies ("classifications . . . made on the basis of economic, racial, and political differences" [325]), Perl finesses away serious attention to the ideational content of her students' work: "No formal principles were used to organize the narratives nor were the implications of ideas present in the essay developed" (325). Had she done so, she might have expressed disappointment that the writing Tony did in no way stretched him spiritually or intellectually. Barnett Newman felt Jackson led "the fight against . . . empty forms instead of real emotions," and implied that good grammar and syntax had little to do with great composition: "Anyone can construct a good-English-sentence kind of picture," he noted; what Jackson engaged in was "painting with a capital P" (Naifeh and Smith 690). Tony's process was hermetic, his standard ploy was "rephrasing the topic until either a word or an idea in the topic linked up with something in his own experience (an attitude, an opinion, an event)" (325), which allowed him simply to re-circulate cynical truisms ("they are men born in rich families that will never have to worry about any financial difficulties . . ." [336]). It reminds one of

Jackson's early, Benton-derived regionalist canvases—conventional images of wagons heading west or landscapes with livestock (Ratcliff calls such work “a slack variant” on Benton's style [“Jackson Pollock's” 105]). Perl finds the “most salient feature of Tony's composing process” not the hermetic canniness of his content but rather its formal “recursiveness” (324). The locus of her commentary on the work is not spirit- or statement-centered, but *techné*-centered. Tony is simply, formally, a builder—whether it's bombs or widgets or exotic pleasure-palaces is immaterial. The builder's routinized, technical actions are what circumscribe his process, the charm or poetry or emotional content is immaterial. (A situationist architect complained, in 1948, one of Jackson's most prolific years: “We have been given the machine for living in, where very often nothing is sacrificed to the only truly human parts of life, to poetry and to dream” [Sadler 7]). Such a definition of process, as formalist replication, limits generic conceptualization. Indeed, Tony's repertoire for editing—non-substantive, formal—ensures he will never reach that moment of textual anagnorisis, that radical re-evaluation of the very work, that Jackson did: Lee recalls, “A little later, in front of a very good painting . . . he asked me, ‘Is this a painting?’ Not is this a good painting, or a bad one, but *a painting!* The degree of doubt was unbelievable at times” (Friedman “An Interview”).

A formalist definition of composition misses the opportunity for the mythic terminology of Jackson's process. There is no real “getting acquainted” period, say, in Tony's process for a given work; each simulationist assignment occasions the same quick routine (“remarkably consistent in all his composing operations” [324]). ‘Getting acquainted’ would imply coming to know a particular work—an ever-new, site-specific discursivity or productivity—but Tony's process, in the way it simply re-activates the same code or model, is all one long forgetting of the actual text in which he's engaged: “when Tony completed the writing process, he refrained from commenting on or contemplating his total written product. . . . It was as if the semantic model in his head predominated” (327, 328). Writing seems very much a genetic code for Perl; she feels her coding scheme “lends itself to the longitudinal study of the writing process and may help to elucidate what it is that changes in the process as writers become more skilled” (334)—as if the process unfolds (when it doesn't get snarled) according to some inner logic. Perl wants Tony to connect back with the stuff of his writing: not re-work it,

enchant it, but rather perfect it, restore it, resolve the “unresolved stylistic and syntactic problems” (328). She wants a basic writing teacher to remove any Pollockian traces from students’ prose, straighten out any non-representational dribbles or drools:

What [Tony] needs are teachers who can interpret that process for him, who can see through the tangles in the process, just as he sees meaning beneath the tangles in his prose, and who can intervene in such a way that untangling his composing process leads him to create better prose. (328)

It is Composition’s failure that that canned nothing of a paper Tony wrote, a re-cycling of spiritually empty clichés, wholly devoid of any truly expressive inner reality, can be said to be in any way “meaning”-ful. And that removing the surface errors from it would be in some significant sense “better”-ing it. What rules is not an expressionism, however abstract, but representationalism—the recognizable, the conventional model: for Perl, “consistent composing processes” implies that “the behavioral sequences prewriting, writing, and editing appeared in sequential patterns that were recognizable across writing sessions and across students” (328). No sense of being in a painting, of taking the canvas off the easel to re-configure it as an arena for existential action. That would not be the predictable, measurable, trivial thing, which is what counts now (and needs to be perfected) as process. It is no wonder her five students’ processes are so remarkably similar; they have internalized this limited notion of composition as ritual: students get a question, read it over until they figure out a way to connect it to something conventional—usually in the simplistic, dichotomized terms of a sports drama: “Turning the large conceptual issue in the topic (e.g., equality) into two manageable pieces for writing (e.g., rich vs. poor; black vs. white)” (328)—come up with a topic sentence that rephrases the question into a statement, and churn out a few supporting generalizations (activating cultural scripts or phrases). The main concern is getting the representational (not thematic) form right: All of the students observed asked themselves, not ‘Is this a painting?’, but “Is this sentence [or feature] correct?” (332). To invent and perfect a new process, to discover new materials, to desire a radically new product . . . those were the only things replicable in Jackson’s process, and the only things that make composition worth teaching, perhaps.

**T**he waning of process was inevitable, perhaps—even without its trivial reification by process-theorists. Process was seen as inimical to

the Modernist program that post-Happenings Composition defined as writing; so Bartholomae complains how

as a result of the “writing process movement,” criticism was removed from the writing course, where it was seen as counter-productive (a “barrier” to writing) and characterized in the figure of the maniacal English teacher with the red pencil. (“What is Composition” 27)

For a theorist like Bartholomae, putting a phrase in quotation marks is the equivalent of consigning it to the psych ward. And, in effect, that was the process movement’s fate, its teachers seen as deluded paranoiacs, dangerous enablers, or hopeless dreamers (Rosenberg was right about the inherent ambiguity in the process-encoded product of action-composition). Salon academics triumphed and process was relegated to the pastoral phase of the field’s golden years . . . retro, *outré* . . . thankfully matured now into the serious business of historicity, ideology, identity, and discursivity. So, at the 1998 CCCC, for example, there were two sessions that advertised a concern with the composing process. And, really, how would we even teach it? How does one *learn* the avant-garde? Not through traditional schooling, certainly. Jackson was bounced out of every school he attended. But he studied intently what he knew could help him: besides the technologies and materials that interested him, there were things like those copies of *Dial* magazine his older brother Charles sent back home to Jackson and Sande in the early 1920s, both of them pouring over the reproductions of contemporary European painters. On his deathbed forty years later, Sande will reminisce to an amazed Charles about “the spell the *Dial* articles had cast” over Jackson and him (Naifeh and Smith 99). Jackson’s story, then shows the importance of non-mainstream schooling as pre-requisite to learning the avant-garde because, let’s face it, Official Composition is a bore. Lee relates how the gallery-mandated practice of the discipline disinterested Jackson, outside of a few contemporaries. (“I don’t believe in art,’ said Duchamp. ‘I believe in artists’” [Tomkins 129].) What Jackson cared about were local practices, knowing that some nobody was engaged in the act, working out a compositional gospel: according to Tony Smith, “He seldom talked about art, but when he did it was often in relation to his own community—as if it were a form of therapy, or religion. He’d mention some old lady, or a retired broker, who had taken up painting. He would say it in a quiet, solemn way—they had had the call. He cared that they were painting” (du Plessix and Gray 54). Think of the young

Jackson and his friend, Reuben Kadish, re-figuring the LA County Museum in terms of what counts as powerful art,

searching out works of art that captured the directness, the immediacy, the emotional energy. . . . At the Los Angeles County Museum . . . they bypassed paintings by the old masters and exhibitions of local art and headed for the deserted cellar to wander the “ethnographic” exhibits of South Pacific cultures—glass cases filled with boldly sculptural ceramic bowls . . . carved knife hilts and sword handles . . . tapa clothes in vivid geometric designs. “We had to lie down on our bellies sometimes to see what was in the bottom of the cases,” Kadish remembers. “Marvelous things were just stuck back in there. At the time, those things were thought of as mere ethnological data, but we didn’t care. We would eyeball them for hours rather than waste our time with the show that the Los Angeles County Art Association was putting on upstairs. We knew where the vigor was, where the real energy was.” (Naifeh and Smith 203–204)

Many critics have speculated on how Jackson learned his famous dripped line. Naifeh and Smith trace it to Labor Day, 1924: Jackson’s father Roy invites Sande and him for a hike to the Indian ruins in Cherry Creek Canyon. The weather is blistering hot, so they take a brief rest near the creek. Jackson watched “as his father climbed a nearby boulder and urinated onto a flat rock below, creating a distinctive pattern on the sun-baked surface” (101). Greenberg called this explanation “nonsense,” but who knows? The point is such learning is mysterious, unspeakable. Jackson felt art couldn’t be taught, only phonies tried. So, there’s Jack the Dripper, urinating on a canvas, the Basic Compositionist dribbling out a tangle-trace of prose, incapable of drafting logical sequences. Sometimes, though, the drip-canvas looks more like trails of clotted blood. In 1952, as he danced around the canvas which would become “Blue Poles,” late one night, after calling Tony Smith over to talk him out of suicide, Jackson kept throwing the glass basting syringes he used to apply paint against the canvas as they became clogged. They’d shatter on the cotton duck on the floor. In bare feet, both artists worked on, even as the glass shards cut into their skin. Or better still, Jackson at a table in the Cedar Bar, in depressed, drunken solitude, breaking plates and glasses, then playing with the shards, “casually making designs as his fingers dripped blood onto the table-top” (Naifeh and Smith 749), traces of his own literal passage. Kaprow called Jackson’s paintings “a kind of diaristic gesture” (“Legacy”

26), capturing the way the work was a record of the life's passage. "Decorate[d] with his own daily annihilation" (49) was how Rosenberg described the action painter's work. Urine, blood, some have even said semen; in Max Kozloff's metaphor, for instance, the drips come from "that aerial sphincter of his consciousness" (146), and Ratcliff agrees: "intimations of all the body's processes appear in Pollock's stained, smeared, encrusted canvases" (64).

Death, blood, despair—that's what's missing from our idea of composition. "Begin with death," says the Dalai Lama, "start from there, and you won't go far wrong" (Heath 41). For the epigram to one of his essay collections, Rosenberg cites Picasso's insight into Cézanne: "What forces our interest is Cézanne's anxiety—that's Cézanne's lesson" (*Anxious Object*). There was anxiety in the White Shoes paper, that refusal "to wear the same type of cleats and the same type of socks" ("Inventing" 150), neglected by the steamrolling power of Bartholomae's critical engine. And Jackson's process was subsumed in anxiety, that endless commitment to new technologies and materials, that breakthrough gospel he left us, which probably helped kill him . . . imagine, for example, being sealed up in that small studio, made as air-tight as possible against a Long Island winter, breathing in the noxious fumes of the Devolac that he used for the black paintings. But even if we discount the materials, it's process itself, with its cumulative force of daily annihilations, that did Jackson in. The incessant need to capture process, the cultification underlying the discourse of action painting, certainly it helped drive him to the breaking point. Namuth's short film took a seemingly endless time to make, outside, in the growing cold of a Springs autumn. On the last day, after shooting for hours, Jackson's hands were freezing; he had grown bitter and surly with this particular tracing of a passage. At 4:30 PM, when they finally wrapped, he tore into the house, poured two tumblers of bourbon, and knocked them back one after another, taking his first drink in two years, and starting the reckless slide leading to his fatal crash. Of course process will wane. How can it do otherwise? By its very nature, it's a sign of the passage of something fleeting. Tension, agony, loss . . . these were always at the heart of Jackson's art. The horrific violence that is birth, the family dinner table he painted over and over that seems like a convocation of cannibals, the naked man with knife suspended, the eyes in the heat, the self-portrait that captured Jackson's on-going anxiety, like Cézanne's, like any Happenings compositionist. All his works are anxious objects, confronting the terror on the other side of the kitchen door, that

world that can turn hostile at any moment. And so he responded in kind, with a counter-composition. Lee brings Hans Hofmann, her *maître*, to visit Jackson's studio, which is a chaotic mess. Hofmann uneasily picks up a paint-caked brush, evidence of the state of disgust this room is in, and the coffee can it has dried in comes up with it. Hofmann holds it out to show Jackson, stammering, "With this you could kill a man." "That's the idea," Jackson replies (Naifeh and Smith 398).

To be avant-garde, then, is to be concerned with waste, refuse, impermanence; to see its value, to move through it, to know it is all you can inhabit. To make it your art. The easily accessible, the all-too-available, the unspeakable. Showering down like Roy Pollock's pee, like the enamel housepaint Jackson started using because it was far cheaper than oil paint at Dan Miller's store in Springs (leaving him more money for beer). And earlier, when he used oils, he turned them into Duchamp readymades, squeezing them on directly from the tube. For his canvas, he used unprimed cotton duck, bought in remnant bolts, the kind used for ships and upholstery (he'd treat it before or after with an industrial glue called 'Rivit' to give the canvas a harder surface). None of his materials were bought from an art supplier. When asked "What is Composition?" the voice of CCCC answers with the words of the salon: *a professional commitment to do a certain kind of work with a certain set of materials; this work must play itself out in the space on the page, there and not somewhere else*. The space on the page? That's not where Jackson was at; he knew he could gain immeasurable force by connecting more with situational space than compositional surface:

To eliminate all friction of brush on canvas, Pollock taught himself to pour his colors through the air. . . . To intensify his contact with the painting—the image—Pollock had to break contact with the canvas. Giving up the usual control of his medium, he gained control of a new kind. (Ratcliff *Fate* 59)

Defining composition exclusively, around the parameters of page or canvas, results in that conventional, academic surface. Jackson shows another way to think of the composition—as a record of tracings, of gestures, a result of a body moving through life. This means the abandonment of the salon style, where students learn the established technique and how to work with difficult materials to reproduce rarified genres. It's no wonder Jackson's process was taken by Kaprow and others as a jump-start for the Happenings: they found in Pollock the origin of a different art, one that left the surface entirely, exscribing itself into larger

physical space. Jackson and Lee, in a *New Yorker* column from that powerful summer of '50, spoke of how certain critics couldn't understand his gesture, the process-product. Jackson recollected:

"There was a reviewer a while back who wrote that my pictures didn't have any beginning or any end. He didn't mean it as a compliment, but it was. It was a fine compliment. Only he didn't know it." "That's exactly what Jackson's work is," Mrs. Pollock said. "Sort of unframed space." (Roueché 16)

Such a gesture naturally leads to seeing composition as theatre-notes for the exploding plastic inevitable of our lives. A few years after Pollock's death, Rauschenberg and Johns will come along, the new avant-garde. They'll pick up an idea adapted from Duchamp and Pollock, the idea of the readymade, making art from the easily available, the all-too-quickly-discarded stage properties of our on-going performance piece. And then dumping them into one's compositional surface. I see a urinal, that's art. I see a comb, that's art. I see some Ballantine's Ale cans, from another night of restless drinking, that's art. I see this old quilt, the one on the bed where Jasper and I sleep, that's art. All of these things, so crucial to recording, not recoding, our own passing. "Memories arrested in space" was Jackson's term for his work (Naifeh and Smith 540). "A painting that is an act is inseparable from the biography of the artist" (23). And, where are the intimations of the body's process on CCCC's canvas, the blood on Composition's tracks? Why, covered up with our own wildest fantasies, which aren't really all that wild; to mend the rupture process theory tore in the symbolic order, Rodrigues, for example, desired a re-affirmation of salon-values: "structure . . . models . . . mechanical skills . . . think through ideas . . . revise them . . . write for real audiences and real purposes" (27). But I love it when I get those dashed-off but deeply affecting whirls of rhapsodic prose from students. And it often happens when students get a chance—usually in informal settings like emails or in-class writes, using their own familiar materials—to make a *statement*.

So many avant-garde practices had at their center the use of accessible materials and the rejection of salon techniques, realizing, as Jackson had, that technique was "just a means of arriving at a statement" (Wright). The avant-garde placed a premium on expression, on affording expression to a wider audience than just the select initiates of the academy. Changing the locus of our criticism from the easel to the floor, from the canvas as a space on which to reproduce an object to an arena in which to act, means returning to the idea of a central *revelation* in a

work, the *tension*, rather than the formal, aesthetic trappings, the expected pleasures. The surprises of biography, rather than the rituals of mimicry. The statement, rather than the technique. How touching that some young athlete somewhere decides on a new way to wear his uniform, convinces a few other team members how cool it looks, and thereby energizes the team and its fans. Of course that's worth expressing. It changed them. Are our students searching for a way to make the world see the world their way, or, rather, do we insist they be made to show the world the way we think it's supposed to be seen?

Imagine, then, Jackson as a subject for process-research: not like the traditional process-subjects, re-tracing stock academic genres, but one engaged in continual experiment with form and material, trying to realize an inner vision. For that is Jackson's greatest lesson, according to his friend and biographer B. H. Friedman, that one's content, one's statement, "could not be learned or borrowed from outside examples but would have to be found within" (*Energy* 30). "But what are you really *involved with?*" was the question Jackson asked over and over to his friends (Friedman *Energy* xvi), not just 'what are you *working on,*' but 'what are you *involved with.*' If we wanted to learn from Jackson, then, take him as our anti-*maître* (*maître* and *anti-maître*), what would be the verbal rhyme to Jackson's painterly process? What would be a technology of composition that might result in a *prose web* to match Jackson's painted one? To start, we might try to develop in writers an interest in *choosing*, in a context or ethic of *alert waiting* (Rosenberg "American Action Painters" 23). (So many of my students in my writing-about-rap-music class tell me later, "I never actually listened to the words of these songs!"; it's not that they're uninformed, it's just that they need practice in attentiveness, so they can refine their choosing.) And we might keep in mind what other compositionists, also on the bridge to experimentation, learned from Jackson. Look at the influence of MOMA's 1967 Pollock retrospective:

Minimalist sculptors who had hitherto embraced strict geometric forms soon began creating three-dimensional equivalents to Pollock's painterly chaos. . . . Now sculptors like Robert Morris, Eva Hesse, Barry La Va, Bruce Nauman, and Richard Serra began "doing things" to a range of non-art materials like felt, glass, rubber, and lead. (Karmel 98)

A prose web, then, is writing as *doing things* to a range of materials. Composition as material gesture. It means changing the axis of the

image, supplying the (missing, now active) horizontal vector to disable the predictability of composition's strict verticality. But in terms of form, what would it be? Naifeh and Smith remark on the small calligraphic works on Masonite from 1949, in which Jackson has "stripped the web to its fundamental forms—loops, puddles, and spatters—and isolated them like tiny unicellular organisms fixed on microscope slides" (589). What, then, might be the fundamental forms of action writing? Kozloff provides a way to think further about the prose web, when he taxonomizes the four areas of accomplishment in Jackson's art. Kozloff makes the point, as so many do, that Jackson embodied the zeitgeist of postwar America, or more exactly, "the time became aware of a vital part of itself through him" (142). Since "there was nothing in the tradition of American art that prepared for any such event" (143) as what Jackson's art accomplished, Kozloff tries to tease out the major components of his innovation. His four areas of emphasis read like the elements of action style: *space* ("limitless . . . planeless . . . a labyrinthine web or screen constantly perforated by the eye" [143]); *order* ("the adjectives that describe the relationships of forms in practically all of Western [writing]—contained and computed, graded and regulated—do not apply . . . a diffusion of attention is equally charged . . . individual or local anarchies are subsumed by a conception of overarching rhythm" [143]); *chance* ("throws into question the very nature of the association of the [writer] and his work . . . what is loosened from conscious manipulation is caught again in a mental network in which every 'accident' is accommodated and dovetailed with its mate" [143]); *expressiveness* (the composition's surface "a palimpsest tissue of enormously varied tactile events . . . a graph of [the writer's] movement and his passion" [144]). Trying to capture the all-over quality of Jackson's compositional web, Greenberg characterized the dripped canvases as "filled from edge to edge with evenly spaced motifs that repeated themselves uniformly like the elements in a wallpaper pattern, and therefore seemed capable of repeating the picture beyond its frame into infinity" ("American-Type Painting" 217). And Judd comments on how Jackson's work had "the large scale wholeness and simplicity that have become common to almost all good work" (195). After Jackson, then, we can generally sketch a definition of the prose web: a stretch of textual material designed for intensity; a simple, basic whole, able to capture the author's statement; no dominant/subordinate, hierarchical ordering of the composition's elements; not a clean surface, but one "dumped" with

life-residue; expressive, with 'right' lines rather than correct ones; where accident in the service of interest replaces intention; whose overall effect is more *exscription* into the spacious world than *inscription* on tradition-circumscribed paper, writing now a surface where a contingent order is produced by the dialogue between chance events and ordinary materials, an intense communion of the moment. "It doesn't make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said," Jackson claimed (Wright).

And materially, of course. Our composition must change materially. Jackson's use of new materials, like aluminum fence paint, ensured that the work would represent a profoundly different reality, heretofore unseen: "Pollock uses metallic paint . . . to add a feeling of mystery and adornment to the work and to keep it from being thought of as occupying the accepted world of things" (Goodnough 41). (Clem of course hated the aluminum paint, felt it gave "an oily over-ripeness" to the work [Naifeh and Smith 555].) Lee recalled to B. H. Friedman how one morning on Long Island, before he entered his studio, Jackson told her, "I saw a landscape the likes of which no human being could have seen." Was he talking about a "visionary landscape," Friedman wondered? Lee agreed, adding, "in Jackson's case I feel what the world calls 'visionary' and 'real' were not as separated as they are for most people." If we want students to turn in writing that looks like Roland Barthes' or Richard Rodriguez's or Mary Louise Pratt's, why not just let them use a Xerox machine? Jackson understood this: asked why he turned away from representation, he explained, "the modern artist is living in a mechanical age and we have a mechanical means of representing" (Wright). That necessitated, in Jackson's mind, a different sort of coding for the modern compositionist's program, an abstract expression: "The modern artist, it seems to me, is working and expressing an inner world—in other words—expressing the energy, the motion, the other inner forces" (Wright). The key locus of critique for every composition now is Duchamp's—just the same, does it move? What's dying, what's ruptured a huge hole in the symbolic order, is people's ability to express themselves in artful, intense ways. That we're writing teachers, and we insist on a rarified technique for reproducing stock academic studies, when life is beautiful, the trees are beautiful, the sky is beautiful . . . it kills me.

You know what our problem is? It's a failure of nerve in our myth-making; revealing that about the field might be Jackson's most useful function for CCCC. According to Thomas Hess, "The Jackson Pollock

myth is a piece of his art; it reflects an aspect of the content of his painting" (39). Jackson's audacity was bracing; it coalesced the entire culture: as Greenberg notes, "even before [his death] his name had begun to be a byword, soon known to Jack Paar as well as Alfred Barr, for what is most far-fetched in contemporary art" ("Jackson Pollock Market Soars" 42). Greenberg cites British art historian Sir Herbert Read to show the catalyzing power of myth for composition. Read's earlier characterization of Jackson's work depicted it as the product of a "vacuous nihilism that . . . scribbles a graph of its uncertainty on the surface of a blank consciousness" ("Jackson Pollock Market Soars" 42). But, according to Greenberg, European critics fell prey to the force of Jackson's Brandoesque figure, his "art of raw sensation . . . untutored, barbaric force" (42). And so we have Sir Herbert, in one of his later surveys, treating Jackson, in Greenberg's words, "as he would a consecrated master" (42). Greenberg wouldn't quibble with that final judgment of Jackson, but he'd take serious issue with the route Read took arriving there. Greenberg's modernism can't learn from myths; the European conception of Jackson (like Rosenberg's) was "a great misunderstanding . . . inflated, and exaggerated and distorted" (42). So maybe what is involved in our field is not so much a failure of nerve as a canny distrust in myth, a thoroughly ironic consciousness that refuses to be swayed by poetry. For if Read is right, and scribbled graphs of uncertainty can ultimately prove powerful compositions, then the fault lies in our over-mediated consciousnesses. We don't have a blank enough consciousness to comprehend *celui qui fait des gestes blancs parmi les solitudes*; we don't have Stevens' mind of winter to behold the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is. A Modernist analysis like Greenberg's must counter the meta-textual myth of Jackson by revealing his logical place in the procession of Western art's *maîtres*. Rosenberg does the math on what's lost in the move toward establishing Jackson as "a fabricated 'master,'" and the cost is nothing less than the life; critiquing Bryan Robertson's analysis of Jackson, Rosenberg realizes how ridiculous the critical restyling can be: "In his attempt to inflate Pollock's reputation in terms of current attitudes, Robertson has done everything possible to deprive the artist's life of substance. He has even overlooked his dog, Gyp, and his model A Ford, the companions which served Pollock as equivalents to the frontiersman's gun and horse" ("The Search for Jackson" 58).

And in our field, we continue to let our composition be governed not by mythic figures, or even real lives, but by critical terms, academic

forms. But we can't change the fact that it was the *myth* of the "action painter"—that is, the real-time process-record of Namuth's photographs, plus Rosenberg's analysis of the data—which changed a generation of painters, sculptors and critics. What might have given the Action Painter myth its influential charge was the way, as O'Doherty describes it, it's really two classic American myths, the noble savage and the frontiersman, fused to the modern legend of the artist-outcast. Hess agrees with this, referring to the American-ness of the myth: Jackson, riding "out of the Old Frontier . . . the dark, tough, morose Badman" (39). Composition has had no shortage of "noble savage" mythologies, as we've seen with Perl, or as we could see with *Errors and Expectations*, the *Tristes Tropiques* of Composition Studies. But the work of Composition's "noble savage" theorists—at its best—reads like James Johnson Sweeney's backward-looking catalogue introduction to Jackson's first show at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century: "Pollock's talent . . . has fire. It is unpredictable. It is undisciplined. It spills itself out in a mineral prodigality, not yet crystallized. It is lavish, explosive, untidy" (O'Doherty 86). It is composition *manqué*. And though we have a seeming embarrassment of frontier metaphors—horizons, borders, distance, directions, new directions—we realize, in the way Composition never goes on the road, never departs the regional classroom campaign in search of the grand American landscape, that its *frontier* is a virtual simulation. What Composition really lacks is a truly broad definition of artistry, one it could fuse with the outcast-figure, to form the Jacksonian amalgam. With the exception of Macrorie and his ilk, Composition's outcast was set against the social fabric, not out of brooding, tormented genius, but because of plague, disease. Without a sense of an art that commands attention, our outcast myth devolves into a salvation-scenario. Composition's carefully delineated public expectation for writing, rooted as it was to the surface of the page rather than swirling in space, precluded inspired surprise; we would clean the surface of *Full Fathom Five* of all its dumping, de-tangle the crazy beat of *Autumn Rhythm* until it played the nicely-ordered melody of *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*. Our sophisticated irony saw through the truth of romantic myth as something irrelevant, preferring to deal with more manageable half-truths like reified technique. So now, post-process, our symbolic figures are far more modest: the successful writer, the university-inventor—our myth is Horatio Alger fused with a grammar handbook. If I prefer avant-garde practices to academic ones, it's

possibly because I teach basic writers, those students so often thought of as the academy's waste, who too often sense their own tragic loss in the midst of an academy that seems always to desire fantasies of excellence (its wildest dream being none of my students on campus any more). Anyway, the academy is craven. Look how quickly they caved in on Jackson's art, how quickly what was once drooly drips of nothing became a Quattrocento masterpiece. Henry McBride, who once thought Jackson's art looked as if "flung," later hopped on the bandwagon when *Life* called him the Greatest Living Painter: the painting still had "a spattered technic," for McBride, "but the spattering is handsome and organized and therefore I like it" (Naifeh and Smith 599); Parker Tyler, who once compared a canvas by Jackson to baked macaroni, now found in it "an impregnable language of image, as well as beautiful and subtle patterns of pure form" (Naifeh and Smith 603). It's not that the work changed, they were just too used to a certain kind of work with a certain set of materials. Myself, I'm always looking for work that sends me, that gives me something I'm not used to, student-writing that enacts the death of academic writing along with its rebirth, and I find that far more frequently with the less-mediated prose of so-called basic writers, writers whose texts are interpretable as meditations on the nature of writing, pursued as if in dialogue with a questioner of ideal innocence and congenital blindness.

If CCCC wants new myths, we could start with this basic choice: either an avant-garde process that continually reactivates itself, exploring new forms and materials in response to the always-rupturing symbolic order, trying to find a line of expressive intensity in order to both chart and inhabit that rupture; or continued salon-simulation, ever-wilder dreams that don't come true so much as crash. If we followed Jackson's choice, when we came upon text-as-diaristic-gestures, seeming at first little more than a tangled snarl, our gaze might dwell a little longer on the rupture, not turn back so quickly to overwrite it with our wildest dreams. We might, initially, fear the death in it, but then begin to suspect it of being a most compelling fantasy. Our evaluative commentary, finally, might sound something like this:

A boggy, squitchy picture truly, enough to drive a nervous man distracted. Yet there was a sort of indefinite, half-attained, unimaginable sublimity about it that froze you to it, till you involuntarily took an oath with yourself to find out what the marvellous painting meant. (O'Doherty 90, 105)

This describes neither the ideal review of one of Jackson's shows, nor the kind of humane sort of Colesian commentary that would focus on a student's heartfelt statement rather than botched technique, but rather the picture that hung in the Spouter Inn, the symbol of Ahab's quest. O'Doherty (who first connected those lines to Jackson) reminds us of Jackson's interest in Melville, how *Moby-Dick*, that mythic American search, was one of his favorite books.

Surely, though, all this is merely the stuff of one's wildest academic dreams . . . except now that we've moved on to the beautiful world of post-process, why is it that all I can think about is death? 'Post-process,' though? Really? Oh, post-what-became-that-silly-CCCC-process, definitely. But post-*Jackson's*-process? Post-the scrupulous exploration of available technologies? Post-the openness to non-standard materials? Post-the intrepid faith in the personally *right* line over the academically *correct* line? Post-a process (like my own, and most of my students' as well) suffused with equal parts ambition and uncertainty? If you feel we've in some way moved past that . . . that there really is something beyond text as viscous material, hovering for a moment, then leaving behind the sign of one's fleeting passage, the dribble of one's daily annihilation; something more than a bodily intimate writing, in a personally-evolved line, a line that's really nothing more than gesturing with materials but, all the same, capable of expressing a shimmering tension, holding together not just too much with too little but all we know with all we have; the writing course as nothing more (or less) than high school chemistry class, the mad dash for the chemical cabinet . . . If that's somehow not enough . . . well, may *your* fantasy end better than Ruth Kligman's.

