

Introduction

The History of the Poetic Career

So all the slightly more than young
Get moved up whether they like it or not, and only
The very old or the very young have any say in the matter,
Whether they are a train or a boat or just a road leading
Across a plain, from nowhere to nowhere.

—John Ashbery, “A Wave”

In the winter of 1901 Wallace Stevens wrote to his father, Garrett, to propose leaving the *New York Tribune* so he could take up writing full time. The response he received was unequivocal: “This morning I heard from him &, of course, found my suggestion torn to pieces” (*SP* 101). Stevens’s experience is hardly exceptional: Hart Crane argued with his father, Clarence, about devoting himself to poetry, and Ezra Pound unsuccessfully tried to persuade T. S. Eliot’s father, Henry, to support his son’s move to London to make his way as a poet. When Langston Hughes showed his father a copy of *The Crisis* magazine featuring “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” Jim Hughes asked only how long the poem had taken to write and how much money it had brought in.¹ Though Marianne Moore enjoyed more encouragement from her mother than Stevens, Crane, Eliot, or Hughes received from their fathers, Mary Warner Moore’s support for her daughter’s literary career was nevertheless complicated by their different perspectives on how such a career should be conducted.

Poetry offers so little in the way of such traditional occupational values as security and remuneration that the notion of the “poetic career” in this chapter title is apt to seem inherently contradictory.² Pursuing a career as an American poet during the twentieth century has typically meant pursuing a career as something else: Stevens worked for an insurance company, Crane for an advertising agency, Eliot for a bank, and Moore for a library. Hughes worked at a variety of jobs and wrote prolifically in other genres to

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support himself, well after the popular and critical acclaim of his debut had established him as a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance. In the years since World War II, poets have often taken jobs teaching literature and creative writing in colleges and universities. While the challenges of cutting a path as a poet have obscured the importance of the poetic career to critics, among whom it still remains “largely unexplored,” those same challenges have made it a central preoccupation for poets.³ That preoccupation registers with special force in the first book, since the difficulties of conducting a poetic career are exacerbated by doubts about vocation that tend to plague even the most self-assured and ambitious poets prior to any substantial achievement or public recognition. The representation of career offers a powerful way to dramatize the construction of poetic authority, even though that authority traditionally derives in large part precisely from the difference between poetry and those forms of work that lend themselves more readily to the normative progress of the conventional occupational trajectory.⁴ In fact, imagining “the shape of life,” as John Ashbery puts it, is so far from being irrelevant to poets that it can, on occasion, seem difficult to evade. No matter how he conceptualizes it in poem after poem devoted to “finding metaphors for life,” he discovers that “still the ‘career’ notion intervenes,” and “all the slightly more than young” in the epigraph quoted above get “moved up whether they like it or not” (*JACP* 323, 292, 799).⁵

The First Book examines the twentieth-century obsession with career in the context of the poetic debut, a unique form of literary production that comes to be endowed with its own tradition, conventions, and prestige as it assumes an increasingly prominent role in the way poetry is written, published, marketed, and read. Surveying the ways in which career has been represented by American poets from Wallace Stevens to Louise Glück, I trace a shift from the emphatically indeterminate paths projected in first books of the 1920s to the emergence of trajectories that evoke various kinds of progress after World War II. That shift reflects a tension already in place at the beginning of the century, when the rise of professionalism put in crisis a romantic conception of the writer that emphasized untutored genius and spontaneity. The broken, errant, or halting trajectories often evoked in modernist debuts defy the ideology of professionalism, in which authority grows through the pursuit of a unified course of regular development.

With the institutionalization of poetry in the academy in the post-1945 period and the concurrent proliferation of first-book prizes for poetry, poets adopted new strategies of self-definition that struck a balance between the conflicting imperatives of professionalism and romanticism. The often strik-

ingly explicit theme of beginning that typifies first books of the last half century is writ large in the titles of such debuts as *A Beginning* (Robert Horan, 1948), *The Arrivistes* (Louis Simpson, 1949), *First Poems* (James Merrill, 1951), *A Mask for Janus* (W. S. Merwin, 1952), *Birthdays from the Ocean* (Isabella Gardner, 1955), *The Hatch* (Norma Farber, 1955), *A Primer of Kinetics* (James L. Rosenberg, 1961), *Preface to a Twenty Volume Suicide Note* (LeRoi Jones, 1961), *Birth of a Shark* (David Wevill, 1964), *The Breaking of the Day* (Peter Davison, 1964), *Preambles and Other Poems* (Alvin Feinman, 1964), *The Broken Ground* (Wendell Berry, 1964), *Fits of Dawn* (Joseph Ceravolo, 1965), *The First Cities* (Audre Lorde, 1968), *Learning the Way* (James Den Boer, 1968), *January: A Book of Poems* (David Shapiro, 1968), *Firstborn* (Louise Glück, 1968), *Breaking Camp* (Marge Piercy, 1968), *Official Entry Blank* (Ted Kooser, 1969), and *First Practice* (Gary Gildner, 1969), among others. Such titles project forms of normative development adapted to an increasingly institutionalized poetry scene. At the same time, they cast the poet as a kind of amateur whose art remains uncorrupted by the rationalizing ethos of modern professionalism.

Recent work in the developing field of “career criticism” has shown that the literary career demands further investigation, and it has laid out a variety of questions and contexts relevant to the topic. Inaugurated in the early 1980s in a pair of studies by Richard Helgerson and Lawrence Lipking, career criticism was developed through Patrick Cheney’s several books on early modern authorship from the 1990s and 2000s and promoted in two recent volumes of essays, *European Literary Careers: The Author from Antiquity to the Renaissance* and *Classical Literary Careers and Their Reception*. “‘Career criticism,’” as Cheney remarks, “emerged almost exclusively in English Renaissance studies, and primarily in studies of Edmund Spenser,” and it is still primarily concerned with preromantic literature.⁶ Since this book deals mainly with modern and contemporary poetry, I adopt an approach adapted specifically, though not exclusively, to cultural and literary analysis in an era of increasingly autonomous artistic production, with the result that it departs from career criticism in several significant ways. The received definition of the literary career in the field, for example, stresses the “writer’s self-conscious inscription of a pattern of genres.”⁷ Rather than focus exclusively on the Virgilian progression from pastoral to georgic to epic and its variations in the work of poets who respond to it by scrambling, reversing, or suppressing its pattern of development, I follow the twentieth-century poets discussed here in engaging career from a variety of angles. Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s influential sociology of cultural production, I take as a basic premise the idea that poets’ trajectories generally lead across

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the field of production from a dominated position to a dominant one through the accumulation of recognition in the forms of publications, honors, and profits. This gradually intensifying alignment with the establishment comes at a cost, and a particularly significant one for poets, insofar as poetry defines “the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of cultural production,” where “the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of ‘loser wins,’ on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies” (*FCP* 39). In other words, what Bourdieu calls the “autonomization of intellectual and artistic production” creates an environment in which upward mobility, even on the relatively limited scale available to most contemporary poets, entails a kind of tragic fall, one that is no less damaging for being inevitable for any poet with an audience.⁸ The perceived decline in autonomy attendant upon recognition generates a sense of vocational crisis that is embodied in and negotiated through the representation of career.

This negotiation demands everything of a poet, not least because the creation of poetic authority itself crucially depends on pursuing a condition of relative autonomy through the elaboration of career.⁹ That this pursuit involves playing a “game of ‘loser wins’” doesn’t make things any easier: success both corroborates and corrodes artistic legitimacy, with the result that any claim to disinterestedness can always also be construed as a covert expression of self-promotion. Moreover, this negotiation is bedeviled throughout by what Bourdieu describes as “the hectic rhythm of aesthetic revolutions,” a defining attribute of the field of poetic production, which ensures that even the most effective forms of self-presentation have a half-life dictated by ongoing intergenerational struggles for legitimacy (*FCP* 52–53).

As important as the “self-conscious inscription of a pattern of genres” is to the history of the literary career, the poetry discussed here calls for a perspective in which career permeates every aspect of a poet’s work, not just genre. Anyone studying literary careers would do well to remember Stephen Greenblatt’s claim that “self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language.”¹⁰ A poet’s every gesture and reference, including those that are less than self-conscious and those only obliquely related to genre, index more or less specific relations to one or more of the practices, norms, values, figures, schools, subjects, and styles that define the field of production, and in this way they participate in the process of career making. On this view, those texts that overtly invoke career, which Cheney terms “career documents” and which Philip Hardie and Helen Moore describe as specific “statements or hints, explicit or implicit, in an oeuvre that point to a devel-

opmental relationship between the individual works in the oeuvre,” are no more important to the negotiation of vocational crisis than those in which career is represented indirectly or runs against the grain of a “developmental” plot. Even a poet’s silences signify—indeed, are particularly likely to signify—in an arena in which independence from the market, from political power, and from institutional authority carry a great deal of value.¹¹

Such an approach implies that career is not only or even primarily a means of self-promotion, deliberate or otherwise. The poets I focus on in the following chapters, including Stevens, Moore, Crane, Sylvia Plath, Ashbery, and Glück, among others, bear witness in their different ways to the impoverishments of career, which always entails seeing “under private aspects,” as Emerson puts it in a well-known passage from “Experience,” with a corollary sense of estrangement and isolation. As each of the following chapters will show, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries career tends to be suffused with pathos in still greater measure than it is steeped in triumph, and it is often treated as a sign of separation, a form of imprisonment, or a species of self-betrayal that is no less devastating for being inescapable.¹² If the representation of career has sometimes served to propel poets on the very developmental courses inscribed in their verse and thus to operate as an effective strategy of self-advancement, it has also figured as a way of coming to grips with a variety of threats to poets’ sense of artistic freedom and relationship to the greater human community. As the readings elaborated here show, to lament the upward fall into official honors and privilege as the telltale sign of a contemptible careerism is only to oversimplify and reiterate a point that poets themselves have been making with no little passion and sophistication for a long time.¹³ Moreover, in placing the blame for selling out on particular individuals, such a view misses the crucial fact that career, and thus the appearance of careerism, are inherent in the very structure of the field itself, insofar as the “space of positions and the space of the position-takings” that constitute the field inevitably change around a poet as struggles for legitimacy unfold. These changes endow even putatively stationary figures with a kind of virtual mobility, and they render even the inactive poet vulnerable to the charge of that sort of crypto-careerism in which self-interest takes cover in a calculated exhibition of disinterestedness.¹⁴

Such accusations apply not only to poets, but also to the field of poetic production as a whole, which, it may be argued, evolved the culture of the debut as a means of elevating its status within the hierarchy of artistic subfields by advertising its willingness to welcome challenges to the status quo from new generations of poets. The broad applicability of this sort of

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critique, however, makes it not only tiresomely repetitive, but also misleadingly reductive, because it simplifies the complexity of art's resistance to economic determination. While the freedom of the artist for Bourdieu is not a "godlike freedom" from rational self-interest and market demand, neither is that freedom "unreal," as John Guillory observes.¹⁵

Consider as a ready example of the poet's position both in and out of the game a letter Plath sent home from Smith College to her mother in which she provides "a list of prizes and writing awards" for the year (*LH* 176). The list includes a range of honors and publications (not all of them "prizes" or "awards") along with the money brought in by each—" \$5 *Alumnae Quarterly* article on Alfred Kazin," "\$100 Academy of American Poets Prize (10 poems)," "\$50 Marjorie Hope Nicholson Prize (tie) for thesis," and so on—and ends with a summing up: "\$470 TOTAL, plus much joy!" Plainly, Plath writes for money, though her sensible plan to "pay all debts and work toward coats and luggage," which she notes in closing, can serve as a reminder that even the kind of blatant self-interest evident here, though it runs against the grain of the art-for-art's-sake ideal, doesn't seem all that embarrassing or depraved once we see it in context.¹⁶ There are certainly more expeditious ways to amass wealth and prestige than writing an article on Alfred Kazin for an alumnae magazine. And even if Plath does, to an extent, write for these reasons, by themselves they cannot account fully for her motives, even if we assume that her "joy" may have as much to do with her sense of successful accomplishment as her pleasure in writing poetry.

As Guillory goes on to explain, "Playing the literary game to win in no way cancels the work of making art as an expression of 'the love of art'" for its own sake.¹⁷ In other words, economic self-interest accounts for only part of a complex literary practice that incorporates a wide range of motives, strategies, and forms of production. In my view, neither Plath nor the other poets discussed in these pages would play the game so hard if they were playing only for economic rewards, though such rewards, which confirm vocation even as they undermine it, can scarcely be ignored. So it is that I draw on Bourdieuan sociology in conjunction with formal analysis, biographical criticism, cultural history, and paratextual studies in order to offer an account of twentieth-century careers and the rise of the first book that tries to do justice to the complexity of poets' efforts to invent their writing lives at a historical moment in which assurance of artistic election is particularly hard to come by.

As the focus on the first book in my title suggests, I also diverge from Cheney's view that "holistic commentary" ought to serve as a foundation

of career criticism. The trajectories on which poets develop and decline exhibit an anarchic variety that ought to unsettle the conventional assumption that steady maturation endows a series of works with a developmental arc that should be understood as a whole. To insist that career criticism try always “to come to terms with the total oeuvre of a writer” is to concede a great deal to that assumption, for it implies that the logic of the career path can be discerned only when a poet writes her last poem. In this regard my approach turns still more radically from that of Lipking, who claims not only that the careers of “great” poets progress, but that they progress in the same way: “The same patterns recur again and again; the same excited discoveries lead to the same sense of achievement. We cannot ignore the evidence that the development of a great many poets follows a consistent internal logic.”¹⁸ More recently, wondering whether “the real story of any career” is “no grand design but only one thing after another,” Lipking suggests that “career critics do not think so.”¹⁹

Granting that a poetic career might well exemplify a “grand design,” one inscribed by an author conceived not as a Foucauldian “function,” but in the more traditional sense of the gifted individual who writes with the intention of ordering his oeuvre in a particular way, I think there are still good reasons to make room for alternative, less totalizing conceptualizations of career alongside the ambitiously organized developmental narratives that Cheney, Lipking, Hardie, Moore, and others tend to prioritize. At virtually every turn in the stories of the lives and works discussed here, we see how career takes shape amid a wide range of unstable circumstances and shifting modes of response. Marianne Moore had two first books published under her name; Hart Crane evoked career as both a “constant harmony” and a “record of rage and partial appetites”; W. H. Auden went out on a limb to publish Ashbery’s debut, gave the book a new title, and then used his introduction to sound off on its faults; Glück’s re-births manifest not a “grand design” but the mixed excitement and frustration of starting over and over; Matthew Dickman thanks forty-five individuals by name, the Vermont Studio Center, the Michener Center for Writers, the Fine Arts Work Center, the *American Poetry Review*, the Honickman Foundation, and Copper Canyon Press for being “a part of this book” in the acknowledgments to *All-American Poem*. Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely. They collectively suggest that the questions Michel Foucault raised in “What Is an Author?”—questions that challenge the unity of “the work” and deprive the writing subject “of its role as [sole] originator”—remain pressing ones even now, despite their familiarity.²⁰ The examples also stress the point that the representation of

career, like the notion of the poetic debut, varies according to its contexts, in ways that both complicate the notion of an oeuvre as a unified whole and forestall the inscription (and perception) of grand designs without, however, diminishing the relevance of career to the interpretation of the text at hand. In focusing intensively, though not exclusively, on first books, I argue for treating the representation of career as the product of a diverse set of practices geared toward the affirmation of vocation and the construction of authority at every step of the way.

By tracing the rise of the twentieth-century poetic debut as a special type of literary production, I follow a number of critics in ascribing a special importance to literary beginnings.²¹ The axiomatic importance of making a good first impression places acute pressure on the debut: if, as Edward Said suggests, succeeding books settle doubts about whether an author can “keep appearing,” the first settles the question of whether the poetic career will exist at all.²² In fact, career is never more at issue than in the first book, a work positioned at a moment in which the writing life is not only highly precarious, but also uniquely (though not totally) unfettered, insofar as the debut and its reception inevitably affect prospects for self-definition moving forward.²³ As Magali Sarfatti Larson observes, “While biography is looking backward over one’s life, an after-the-fact search for order and meaning, career is looking forward, with a sense of order to come.”²⁴ Career assumes special urgency for anyone on the threshold of one, for it offers a way of laying claim to authority in the present by projecting an image of a self in the making.

The lack of an established reputation can count as a threat to the debut author’s prospects, then, but also as an advantage, particularly in the almost purely autonomous subfield of production occupied by poetry. The rise of the first book of poetry to special prominence in the twentieth century is propelled in large part by “the primacy the field of cultural production accords to youth,” which can be “traced back to the disavowal of power and of ‘economy’ which lies at the field’s foundation.” As Bourdieu puts it: “the opposition between the ‘old’ and the ‘young’ is homologous with the opposition between power and ‘bourgeois’ seriousness on the one hand, and indifference to power or money and the ‘intellectual’ refusal of the ‘spirit of seriousness’ on the other hand.” In other words, youth—understood here not biologically but as a phase in the process of what Bourdieu calls “social aging”—registers as a key virtue in the upside-down economy of cultural production insofar as it is usually assumed to be opposed to establishment values (*FCP* 105, 59). Of course first-book poets are in many ways at the mercy of the literary system: who more likely than the

aspiring unknown to follow current trends and ape the manners of prominent practitioners? But in an arena in which autonomy counts for so much, youth also functions as a form of symbolic capital with substantial value in the literary market. As we will see in more detail later in this book, Bourdieu's claim about the "primacy" of youth in the poetry scene is evident in the rapid proliferation of first-book prizes for poetry, which afford a unique opportunity for poets, judges, teachers, institutions, magazines, and publishers alike to capitalize on identification with the debut poet and take part in mediating relations between artistic generations.

Youth wasn't always such a selling point. The "current sense of vocation" is not the "lineal descendant of some original discourse," as Guillory puts it, "but the fossil record of successive upheavals," having passed from classical usage through "the medieval ecclesiastical lexicon," the "radical Protestant concept of election," and the discourse of modern professionalism.²⁵ So it is that my account of the rise of the first book narrates and interprets a recent episode in a complex evolution that began many centuries earlier: the literary career originates in the same external sources of legitimacy that it is often used to hold at various distances later on. "For later ages," Joseph Farrell writes, "Virgil's gradual ascent from humbler to grander genres was generally regarded as defining the ideal poetic career."²⁶ John of Garland represented Virgil's three-phase career pattern as the *rota Virgilii*, the "Wheel of Virgil," a diagram that linked pastoral, georgic, and epic to the settings, characters, tools, animals, and plants appropriate to each.²⁷ The *rota* assumes the close correspondence between a poet's work and his character that is conventional among the biographies of Greek poets, but the distinctive "rising generic trajectory of Virgil's career" emerges from "within a specifically Roman cultural milieu," not the Greek *vita* tradition.²⁸ It was in that milieu during the second century BCE that politicians began to enlist the services of poets as a way of promoting their progress through the hierarchical sequence of political offices known as the *cursus honorum*. As a result, Farrell explains, "the interdependence of poets and their politically ambitious patrons came to be institutionalized."²⁹

Modeling their careers on Virgil's, European authors made modifications to accommodate their particular gifts and goals, and they adapted their careers to contexts other than the story of the Roman Empire. A few centuries after Virgil, for example, "St. Augustine relied on the literary *cursus* of Virgil and his Roman heirs to form the subsequent pattern of Christian development."³⁰ Spenser's representation of career from *The Shepheardes Calendar* to *The Faerie Queene* draws on both religious and

political contexts, and it is overtly based on the Virgilian *gradus*, which prompts him to give up his pastoral “Oaten reeds” for the “trumpets sterne” of epic:

Lo I the man, whose Muse whilome did maske,
As time her taught in lowly Shepheards weeds,
Am now enforst a far unfitter taske,
For trumpets sterne to change mine Oaten reeds,
And sing of Knights and Ladies gentle deeds.³¹

Milton’s carefully presented debut collection, the 1645 *Poems*, looks forward to a Virgilian progress that culminates in *Paradise Lost*, a poetic career that manifests a self-conscious orderliness that is in keeping with his famous claim that “he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write hereafter in laudable things, ought himselfe to bee a true Poem, that is, a composition and patterne of the best and honourablest things.”³² A little more than a century later, Alexander Pope continued the tradition of imitating Virgil by publishing a first book of *Pastorals*, to which was affixed, by way of introduction, “A Discourse on Pastoral Poetry” in which Pope placed himself explicitly within the tradition of Virgil, Milton, and Spenser.³³

Not all poets imitated or varied Virgil’s model: the criticism collected in *European Literary Careers* and *Classical Literary Careers and Their Reception* usefully testifies to the presence of alternative paradigms and to many oeuvres that seem to resist patterning altogether.³⁴ But its persistence as an ideal generally defines the era before the autonomization of art began in earnest. Gradually freed from dependence on state, church, and patron as sources of legitimacy, “the idea of a poetic or authorial vocation as a common cultural myth” underwent “severe change” during the nineteenth century, writes Said. “The poetic *vocation*,” he goes on, “in the classical sense, had come to be replaced by the poetic *career*. Whereas the former required taking certain memorial steps and imitating a ritual progress, in the latter the writer had to create not only his art but also the very course of his writings.”³⁵

In Raymond Williams’s classic account, that “severe change” is driven by the “institution of ‘the market’ as the type of a writer’s actual relations with society” in the wake of industrialization, urbanization, new intellectual property laws, rising middle-class literacy, and the replacement of the patronage system, first by subscription-publishing and then by “commercial publishing of the modern kind.” The resulting “subjection of art to the laws of the market” threatens the integrity of the poetic vocation. “Never pursue

literature as a trade,” Coleridge declares in *Biographia Literaria*, perhaps with an ironic awareness that disavowing literature as a trade was quickly becoming something of a trade in itself.³⁶ Robin Valenza sums up the problem for Coleridge and the other poets of the romantic era succinctly: “Coleridge worries that a poet’s dependence on a regular poetic output for income” will require him “to pander to the taste of the market rather than to intellectual or moral standards.” The notion of poetry as an object whose value inheres in its originality, and of the poet as the untutored genius who sporadically produces it, is prompted, Valenza continues, by the “need to dissociate the poetic career from other, especially scientific, professions, whose productions might be assigned financial value.”³⁷ Framed by the rapid emergence of the commercial literary market as “just one more producer of a commodity,” and pressured to justify and define his role in a field of increasingly specialized and rationalized intellectual disciplines, the romantic poet presents himself as a “specially endowed person” whose labors generally tend to resist the routinizing imperatives of commercial production and the “memorial steps” of the traditional *gradus* alike.³⁸

In England this reaction against the role of the commodity-producer began earlier than in the United States, where the conditions necessary to make a living by writing, including the establishment of copyright law, the improvement of technologies supporting efficient manufacture and distribution of print materials, and the development of effective marketing techniques arose later.³⁹ Linda Zionkowski describes how the representation of the figure of the poet changes with the evolution of the literary market over the course of the eighteenth century. The “Distressed Poet,” as William Hogarth’s iconic engraving implies, is originally the object of satire—a man who only has himself to blame for his hardships, since common sense held that “poetry made a nice hobby, but a poor livelihood.” “Eventually, though, the target of this satire shifts,” Zionkowski continues, so that the figure of the impoverished poet focuses a “critique of the entire system of literary production and reception,” a critique in which the poet becomes “the repository of heroic values and sentiments that have lost ground in England’s increasingly mercantile society.” The rising interest in the figure of the bard and oral culture in general—evident in such poems as Thomas Gray’s “The Bard” (1757) and James Beattie’s *The Minstrel* (1771; 1774), as well as such popular anthologies as Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) and Walter Scott’s *The Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802)—testify in Zionkowski’s account to pervasive uneasiness about the contradictory situation of mid- and late eighteenth-century British poets, for whom literary authority could only be cultivated

by engaging with the same print market that threatened to undermine vocational integrity.⁴⁰ In Edwin, the protagonist of *The Minstrel*, for example, we see a “visionary boy” averse to money and conventional ambitions, living and working beyond the pale of the patronage system and the print market alike, and endowed with a providential gift for song that is all the more noble for its artless spontaneity.⁴¹

This highly influential model of organic growth, based on the paradoxically deliberate cultivation of what Wordsworth called a “wise passiveness” to nature’s influences, is correlated to a trajectory defined by the intermittency of the privileged moment of perception. The moment serves as the source of romantic poetic inspiration par excellence—the “Pulsation of the Artery,” as William Blake puts it in *Milton*, when “the Poet’s Work is done.” This “Pulsation” epitomizes the romantic myth of poetic production, which privileges a conception of career whose erratic quality—represented, for example, in the recurrent figure of the wanderer—runs counter to the imperative for “regular output” demanded by the market. Harking back to the conversion experiences described in Augustine’s *Confessions*, as M. H. Abrams shows, the “unsustainable moment” serves a redemptive function, enabling a transient sense of liberation, communion, insight, appreciation, or transformation in various contexts in romantic poetry and beyond. In Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, such moments govern the “plot of mental growth” that “moves in leaps of discovery”; in Walter Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, they center a vision of the tragic division of experience, even as they represent the only means available for redemption, however limited; in Stevens’s “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,” they are “occasions in which the poet as-if-reborn looks out upon a world as-if-renewed”; and in Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums*, which ends with an “epiphany on a mountain,” the narrator experiences the “revelation of a new world.”⁴²

Percy Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty” illustrates the myth of production predicated on the privileged moment. “Unseen,” “inconstant,” “uncertain,” and “unknown,” the “Power” of “Intellectual Beauty” would elevate “Man” so that he “were immortal, and omnipotent,” if that “Power” would only keep “firm state within his heart.” But it remains the cause of “Doubt, chance, and mutability” insofar as it comes and goes at random, immune to the “Frail spells” of the “sage” and “poet.”⁴³ The poem displays Shelley’s yearning for a redeemed state of perpetual fluency even as it evokes his sober acceptance of the fallen world in which manifestations of “Intellectual Beauty” are both fitful and fleeting. In this way it sheds light on the enduring power of this myth, which endows the indeterminate career path with particular resilience as a fiction of autonomy, despite the

tendency for such fictions to lapse into formula over time, and despite the changing contexts in which the integrity of the poetic vocation has come under pressure. “Regular output” is aligned with the idea of capitulation to market norms, but here, rooted in the “firm state” the poet might yet learn to sustain, it can also be seen to embody a quasi-religious ideal linked to immortality and omnipotence. The integrity of the poetic vocation is thus doubly affirmed: the indeterminacy of the trajectory attests to the poet’s disinterestedness by distinguishing the writing of poetry from routine commodity production; that indeterminacy is in turn certified through its appearance as the result of an agonized failure, rather than a deliberate accomplishment.⁴⁴ The poet’s autonomy from the literary market is presented not as an option but as a painful necessity to which he cannot help but submit.

The poet’s ambiguous relation to the literary market, reflected in the way the normative career is apt to appear as both a lofty ideal and a sign of fallen commercialism, premises a number of studies that date the professionalization of authorship to the romantic period. On this view, professions, like poets, are oriented away from the market insofar as the value of their work is based on an ethic of disinterestedness; disinterestedness can be leveraged, however, as a competitive advantage, so that autonomy from the market, for the poet and professional alike, becomes a roundabout form of participation in it. Larson follows H. Jamous and B. Peloille in proposing a definition that captures the essence of the contradictory logic of professionalism. Her definition features a “ratio” between “technicality,” which represents skills that can be systematically mastered and applied, and “indetermination,” which represents non-standardized capabilities that cannot be taught.⁴⁵ Drawing on this definition, Clifford Siskin contends that Wordsworth’s *Prelude* is “both a ‘masterpiece’ of indetermination” and also “a document of technicality detailing the training necessary to master a required body of knowledge.” To see “*The Prelude* now as both” is in Siskin’s view to identify it as the very “embodiment of professional behavior.”⁴⁶ Similarly, discussing late nineteenth-century literature, Jonathan Freedman argues that “aestheticism itself can be seen as the highest form of professionalism,” because the aesthete’s knowledge is something that can be systematically imparted to the public, even as its “esoteric” character suggests the challenges of doing so—challenges that themselves form a rationale for professional intervention.⁴⁷ A number of critics have seen the specialized language of modernist literature as a prime example of the hermetic discourse that accompanies the formal knowledge on which professional authority essentially depends.⁴⁸

Such arguments usefully illuminate the presence of the logic of professionalism in a variety of literary endeavors and, still more intriguingly, often bring to light the ways in which literature has itself contributed to the evolution of that logic. They also raise the question, though, of how to reconcile this view, in which literature from the late eighteenth century onward embodies the very apotheosis of professionalism, with the intuitive sense that “the ‘profession’ of writer or artist” is “one of the least professionalized there is, despite all the efforts of ‘writers’ associations, ‘Pen Clubs,’ etc.,” as Bourdieu observes (*FCP* 43).⁴⁹ As tempting as it is to frame this question solely as one of degree—just how professionalized is the literary writer?—I think the persuasiveness with which nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature can be described as both the epitome of professionalism and its antithesis demands an approach that, in keeping with Guillory’s sense of vocation as a “fossil record of successive upheavals,” employs distinctions of kind as well as those of degree.

As Bruce Kimball has demonstrated, the meaning of “profession” has “changed episodically” since the time of the Puritans, when the “profession” of faith demanded a “fundamentally dialectical” perspective on salvation: “This was the constant message of Puritan preachers: in order to be sure [of salvation] one must be unsure.”⁵⁰ The uncertain certainty that informs the Calvinist theology of vocation is recapitulated in the ratio between technicality and indetermination that informs contemporary definitions of professionalism, just as the reward of self-realization through modern professional work over the course of a career harks back to the promise of spiritual redemption afforded by signs of election. As Kimball makes clear, the spiritual assurance afforded by successful work in a calling is always partial in that it is ultimately limited by the fundamental human ignorance of divine purposes.⁵¹ If the Calvinist conception of vocation (which underpins that of both the romantic poets and their descendants) privileges indetermination, later conceptions increasingly tend to privilege the standardization imperative that goes by the name of “technicality” in the definition quoted above.⁵²

The poets I focus on here tend to resist the rational imperatives of twentieth-century professionalism—systematic training, regular production, the normative career—though the terms of that resistance, as we have already begun to see, are often considerably complex: the wandering path of the autonomous genius of one generation, for example, lapses into the routine protocol of the hack writer in the next, necessitating new strategies of self-presentation. In this study, the late eighteenth-century rise of the

print market, the establishment at the turn of the twentieth century of the ideology of professionalism as “one of the facts of life,” as Menand puts it, and the post-1945 institutionalization of poetry in colleges and universities represent a series of parallel threats to vocational integrity that poets respond to in different ways. Nevertheless, poets never more than roughly resemble their peers in other professions. If, as Charvat suggests, the defining attribute of professional writing is making a “living for the author, like any other job,” then the fact that “no American poet has ever made a living from his work except, in a few cases, late in life,” renders the professional status of the poet questionable on a fundamental level.⁵³

It may help to clarify the idea that nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets contend with, even as they are shaped by, several different forms of professionalism to show how the poet’s progress toward professional status in the more fully rationalized, secularized modern sense unfolds more slowly than Siskin, Freedman, and other like-minded critics often seem to suggest. Williams cites a passage from John Keats’s letter to J. A. Hessey as evidence of the romantic resistance to system and method: “The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself.”⁵⁴ The “formal knowledge” that typifies modern professionalism is evoked as the codifying discourse of “law and precept,” which figures here as virtually useless to the aspiring poet; “salvation” depends instead on a passive discipline of “sensation and watchfulness” that recalls the habit of vigilant introspection encouraged by Calvinism.⁵⁵ Tellingly, not much appears to have changed in the century between Keats and Stevens. Wondering if literature was “really a profession,” Stevens asked his journal in June of 1900 whether “you [could] single it out” or “let it decide in you for itself” (*WSL* 39). That the same issue is being confronted in both cases and in virtually the same terms reflects the persistence of the question of imagining career in an era defined by an ongoing crisis of artistic autonomy. But the differences are also revealing. The presence of the word “profession” (and the absence of the word “Genius”) in Stevens’s journal entry suggests that the ideology of professionalism had become much more fully established by the end of the nineteenth century.

The prospects of a stable career path, financial security, social prestige, and self-realization promised in that ideology must have appealed powerfully to Stevens, who had just graduated from Harvard and was looking for work as an entry-level journalist in New York City when he posed these questions. Furthermore, he belonged to a generation that had seen

for itself that poetry could, in exceptional cases, make money: poets such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Rudyard Kipling, among others, had won both financial success and critical acclaim, while Francis Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*—"the rarest of things poetic," as Frank Lentricchia puts it, "an actual best seller in the United States"—showed that timeless art and economic reward were not necessarily mutually exclusive.⁵⁶ These success stories lent substance to the fantasy of a normative career that would combine vocation and avocation, an imaginary formation anchored in the Puritan ideal of life as a series of "good works combined into a unified system" in which artistic election and economic rewards converge.⁵⁷ The dominance of the ideology of professionalism is reflected in the fantasy of an ideal professional career encoded in Stevens's question, a fantasy that Keats magisterially dismisses. Stevens's willingness to meet the desire for such a career halfway shows in his promotion to the august category of "literature" the routine journalism he would do as a cub reporter before enrolling in law school. But the word "really" in his question—"Is literature really a profession?"—conveys a measure of skepticism in which, on the evidence of the representation of career in *Harmonium*, he was to be confirmed.

In my first chapter, "Apprentices to Chance Event: First Books of the 1920s," I explore representations of career in *Harmonium*, *Observations*, and *White Buildings* that resist the normative course of development that underpins the professional ideal of regular production. The indeterminacy of representations of career in nineteenth-century poetry is pressed to an extreme in modernist debuts, which are burdened not only with evoking the uncertainty that confirms vocational integrity and the intermittency that signals autonomy from the market, but also with evoking those ideas in new ways. This last challenge, necessitated by the demand that every artistic generation make it new, is made still more daunting by the rise of a culture of professionalism in which writing poetry was apt to appear as childish, effeminate, escapist, elitist, and generally absurd. The irony, outlandishness, and obscurity that characterize the paths projected by Stevens, Moore, and Crane in their first books define their attempts to recuperate the romantic myth of poetic production and the disinterestedness that it dramatizes. So it is that Stevens's "times of inherent excellence" represent "incalculable balances" that are "extreme, fortuitous, personal," as he was to put it in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (*WSCP* 334); in "Nomad Exquisite" from *Harmonium*, he presents his writing as the

work of a Paterian “Exquisite” whose fidelity to what “come[s] flinging” in him, as if out of nature itself, dictates the wandering path of a “Nomad” (*WSCP* 77). Stevens’s “fortuitous” moments resemble Moore’s. “With me it’s always some fortuity that traps me,” she remarked in response to Donald Hall’s question about poetic inspiration in an interview. This emphasis on accident marks the perspective from which she offers her complex critique of “ambition without understanding,” as she puts it in “Critics and Connoisseurs” in *Observations* (*BMM* 77).⁵⁸ Crane is ambivalent about privileged moments: the lyrics of *White Buildings* admit their deconstructing randomness even as they struggle to project their containment in an image of continuity. “Account such moments to an hour: / Account the total of this trembling tabulation,” he declares in “Possessions”: amass them as he may, “such moments” seem never to yield the heroic whole that is more than the sum of its parts (*HCCP* 13).

If Stevens, Moore, and Crane evoked careers that stressed indetermina- tion, their mid-century heirs were increasingly obliged to balance strate- gies of indetermina- tion with strategies of rationalization—in effect, to combine the imperatives of the professionalist “ratio”—in order to accom- modate an expanding culture of professionalism. In my second chapter, “‘Poets of the First Book, Writers of Promise’: Beginning in the Era of the First-Book Prize,” I examine the professionalization of the poetic vocation in the wake of the expansion of the American system of higher education during the post-1945 era. The teaching of poetry writing in colleges and universities redefined poetry as something that could, at least in some sense, be taught, and it rendered the traditional image of the poet as an “untutored genius” highly problematic. First-book prizes for poetry proliferated in this new literary environment largely because they served to rein- force its central values. For the institutions to which they were in many cases linked, such prizes functioned as an assertion of cultural authority. They strengthened poetry’s status as a profession by presenting its hierar- chy as a meritocracy, open, like other professions, to anyone with talent and drive. Prizes also affirmed the authority of contest judges, who like professors—and in many cases the judges were themselves professors—were supposed to evaluate work with an objectivity that in turn supported the notion of poetry as an increasingly rationalized discipline.

First-book prizes isolate and formalize the initial moment in the poetic career, which they construe through a kind of synecdoche as a rising se- quence of books in which the “first” prefigures others yet to come. In this way these prizes can be seen both to symbolize and advance the claim of

the culture of professionalism on the life of the poet: the poet starting out during the era of the first-book prize will likely have more difficulty rejecting the normative progress of the modern professional career, since that progress is often stamped on the writing life from the beginning. The special emphasis on beginning in post-1945 debuts signifies, on the one hand, poets' capitulation to a culture of professionalism demanding career development from the start: the radically indeterminate paths evoked by Stevens, Moore, and Crane would clearly be ill-suited to poets making their way in a poetry scene dominated by the university. On the other hand, thematizing beginning may be read as a strategy of defense, for it allows poets to present themselves as if they had yet to embark on professional careers. As we will see through readings of poems by poets ranging from Richard Howard and Robert Pack to Amiri Baraka and Michael Palmer, among others, this emphasis informs debuts by poets positioned both inside and outside of the literary mainstream.

The first two chapters offer surveys of poetry from periods defined by complex forms of vocational crisis to provide a sense of the terms in which the crises manifested themselves. The third and fourth chapters are case studies, each focused on an individual poet, that explore the ways in which poetic responses to vocational crisis unfold in the course of a book-length collection and a poetic career, respectively. In my third chapter, "Everything Has a Schedule: John Ashbery's *Some Trees*," I offer an interpretation of one of the most remarkable debut collections ever selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets award. The reputation of the book as an unconventional debut has dominated the critical response to it, from the early, largely negative judgments by critics such as William Arrowsmith and Donald Hall, to more recent attempts to revalue it by Marjorie Perloff, Vernon Shetley, David Lehman, and others. I argue that *Some Trees* has been misread both by its detractors and defenders, who tend to stress the ways in which the poems resist interpretation while ignoring many of the ways in which they encourage and support it. Ashbery's poetic is much more in keeping with the literary mainstream of the 1950s than has yet been allowed: much like the other poets of the era of the first-book prize, he elaborates in *Some Trees* a conflicted embrace of the career, balancing the dueling imperatives of an increasingly professionalized poetry scene through an emphatic thematization of beginning. By situating the book in the context of its literary and cultural moment, I propose a way of appreciating Ashbery's achievement that resists isolating its anti-establishment energies as its sole source of appeal, and I explore the various ways the

book evokes the idea of the “mooring of starting out,” as he would put it in “Soonest Mended” from *The Double Dream of Spring*, that was to become one of his central preoccupations (*JACP* 186).

In my fourth chapter, “From *Firstborn* to *Vita Nova*: Louise Glück’s Born-Again Professionalism,” I turn to a poet whose work lies at the opposite end of the spectrum, in several respects, from Ashbery’s, and I expand my focus on first books to consider subsequent volumes from Glück’s oeuvre. The differences between Ashbery and Glück are meant to stress the pervasiveness of the fascination with the vocational trajectory that they share: the same conflicted embrace of career is as legible in the serene disorders of *Some Trees* as it is in the fierce analyses of *Firstborn* and throughout the seven collections Glück published leading up to *Vita Nova*. The logic of Glück’s career, I argue, illustrates the double bind of literary professionalism with radical severity. Wholly “bent on personal distinction,” as she avows in “The Education of the Poet,” she is drawn to plot her career as a rational course of artistic advancement, but she is also drawn to strategies of indeterminacy that devalue steady development as the sign of a discreditable motive of self-interest (*PT* 5). So powerful is the conflict produced by these rival impulses that the theme of vocational initiation that they tend to produce in post-1945 debuts is not only evoked in her first book, but is revisited throughout her career. As my chapter title suggests, the explicitness and regularity of the pattern recall the origins of contemporary professionalism in the never-ending, soul-racking self-examinations of the Puritans. Focusing in particular on the poems with which her collections begin, from “The Chicago Train” in *Firstborn* through “Vita Nova,” the title poem of her eighth book, I show how the theme of rebirth in her poems reflects the opposition that typically marks the representation of the career in post-1945 poetry, just as that opposition impels in turn the serial resumption of the beginner’s stance elaborated in her first book. The interest that Glück’s work continues to command indicates the limits of the critique of the professionalization of poetry and mass production of prize-winning first books. Her example suggests that to privilege the moment of beginning is to practice a resistance to career and institutional routine that is well worth valuing, even if it is bound, in time, to take on the appearance of a form of careerism in itself.

I conclude in “Making Introductions” by bringing up to date the history of first-book prizes begun in chapter 2. Supplementing the interpretation of poems with the interpretation of debut paratexts, I show how the prize-winning debut—framed by lyrical prefaces, elaborate acknowledgments,

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and other, often tellingly overwrought, textual devices and conventions—continues at the turn of the millennium to legitimate virtually all the figures and institutions operating in the field of poetic production. I highlight the ways in which debut paratexts evoke the ideal of poetic autonomy even as they call it into question, and I look at recent poems that illustrate poets' ongoing engagement with the complex issue of imagining careers at the moment before their careers have properly begun.