John Seed

History, poetry and 'ethical materialism': Benjamin, Orwell, William Carlos Williams

'A poet's words can pierce us.' (Wittgenstein)[1]

Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), George Orwell (1903-50) and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) seem, on the face of it, a rather discrepant trio. The first a German Marxist philosopher and literary critic, associated with Brecht and with the Frankfurt School; the second a social-realist English novelist, author of several important works of investigative journalism; and the third an American modernist poet. Though not quite belonging to the same generation —there is a gap of twenty years between Williams and Orwell— each contributed significant writing on the economic and political crises of the 1930s and each was aligned more or less with the Left in these years. But my purpose in this essay is not to bring these authors together into some kind of comparative framework. Rather, some very specific texts by each are used merely as way-stations —or guide-posts— in an exploration of some questions about representations of the urban poor. So they perhaps constitute what Benjamin and Adorno described as 'a constellation', a momentary crystallisation of a pattern of concepts, images, questions, texts.

I begin with Orwell's well-known passage about a woman kneeling in a backyard from *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1936). Nothing could seem further from the sunny strolls of the flaneur through the Arcades of Second Empire Paris than the relentless plodding of George Orwell through the endless winter of northern England in the 1930s. However, Walter Benjamin saw the flaneur as

δοκιμές, τεύχος 19-20, Φθινόπωρο 2016, σσ. 39-70

a prototype of a number of later urban figures — and I want to suggest that his critical histories of the flaneur raise some interesting questions about Orwell's writing. I want then to think about how relations between the observer (author) and the observed (the poor) are articulated with relations between literary form and radical politics. This brings us to poetry and to William Carlos Williams — though it also brings us to the writing of history, the use of sources, and the question of testimony. I conclude with some comments on Adorno's ethical materialism, Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* and Jacques Ranciere's *Proletarian Nights*.

1

I will begin with a passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier* in which Orwell describes a brief moment looking out of the window of his train as he leaves Wigan on a winter morning in 1936. Described by Peter Davison as 'the most vivid picture in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, perhaps in all Orwell',[2] it is quoted by a number of commentators, usually without much comment:

> As we moved slowly through the outskirts of the town we passed row after row of little grey slum houses running at right angles to the embankment. At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was blocked. I had time to see everything about her — her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen.[3]

The impact of the passage from which this extract comes owes something to its sequence of negative adjectives, evoking a cold, drab, unhappy world:

'monstrous', 'foul', 'horribly cold', 'blackened', 'grey', 'leaden', 'clumsy', 'pale', 'exhausted', 'desolate', 'hopeless', 'bitter', and so on. This northern industrial landscape is familiar: 'the monstrous scenery of slag-heaps, chimneys, piled scrap-iron, foul canals, paths of cindery mud criss-crossed by the prints of clogs' and the miserable terraced streets, 'row after row of little grey slum houses'. These are images going back at least as far as novels of the 1840s and 1850s, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*. Responding to Orwell's verbal image of the slum girl and her immediate environment involves activating a whole repertoire of visual, poetic, even aural images.

The Road to Wigan Pier included 32 black and white photographs of slum conditions — though none of Wigan. I want to suggest that it is at least partly through its echoes of documentary photography of the 1930s that Orwell's sketch of the Wigan slum-girl reaches out beyond that particular morning in 1936. In his influential 1931 essay on photography Walter Benjamin points to one of the peculiarities of the photographic image — the haunting presence of its referent. A photograph is, of course, the product of the artistic intentions of the photographer. But it is also the product of a physical process: light striking a particular kind of chemical surface. Thus a photograph has a two-way relationship to what it represents. According to Benjamin, when we look at a photograph we are responding not just to the artistry of the photographer, but also to the seemingly immediate presentation of a specific moment; what he describes as, 'the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject'. After two or three generations the subject of a painting loses his or her power to engage the viewer and if the painting continues to interest, it does so, Benjamin suggests, 'only as testimony to the art of the painter.' But with photographs, he goes on, 'we encounter something new and strange'. And he illustrates his point by focusing on a particular photograph by David Octavius Hill:

> in Hill's Newhaven Fishwife, her eyes cast down in such indolent, seductive modesty, there remains something that goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art, something that cannot be silenced, that fills you with an un-

> ruly desire to know what her name was, the woman who was alive there, who even now is still real and will never consent to be wholly absorbed in *art*.[4]

It is this 'tiny spark of contingency' that gives the photographic image its peculiar power to reach out to the future. In his wonderful last book *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes registered the powerful impact of photographs in very similar terms. He talks about 'the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency' and 'this stubbornness of the Referent in always being there...' The photograph, he says, is 'wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope'. But more than this, from particular photographs something shoots out like an arrow, piercing and wounding the perceiver. This Barthes calls the *punctum*. 'A photograph's *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)'.[5] Orwell's image of the woman on her knees in a Wigan back-yard has something of that 'tiny spark of contingency' and that sense that there was a referent beyond the text — an actual woman in an actual back-yard on a specific morning in the northern industrial town of Wigan.[6]

But was there? Is it very likely that a man inside a moving train on a railway embankment could be near enough to 'almost' catch the eye of a woman kneeling in a backyard? And how does he know that she is a woman of twenty-five who looks forty? Maybe she is a woman of forty? Further and more significant questions are raised by comparing this passage from *The Road to Wigan Pier* with an entry from his diary, dated 15th February 1936. Here Orwell described passing on foot a young woman kneeling at the back of a house clearing a blocked drain:

> Passing up a horrible squalid side-alley, saw a woman, youngish but very pale and with the usual draggled exhausted look, kneeling by the gutter outside a house and poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe, which was blocked. I thought how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling in the gutter in a back-alley in Wigan, in the bitter cold, prodding a stick up a blocked drain. At that moment she looked up and caught my eye, and her expression was as desolate as I have ever seen; it struck me she was thinking just the same thing as me.[7]

Note the differences between the two accounts. The event reported in the diary as happening on 15th February becomes in the published version, 'This was March'. More important, in the published version he is no longer walking on foot in an alley when he comes upon the woman on her knees. Now he is on a passing train. Of course, we shouldn't be too quick to assume that the diary entry is necessarily more authentic. It too is writing and perhaps it fictionalises an earlier experience? And we might note how experience itself is already mediated by all kinds of meanings, values, images. Nevertheless, the discrepancy between Orwell's two accounts would raise serious questions about their admissibility as evidence in any court of law.[8]

Orwell's admirers justify this kind of rewriting as somehow not affecting what was 'essentially true'. Peter Davison, for instance, acknowledges that Orwell's 'creative imagination' sometimes reshaped the raw materials in his Wigan Pier diaries. But these rewritings were not misrepresentations of the facts, they simply enhanced their meaning. So in this instance, Davison argues, by changing the encounter from something that happened face to face in an alley to a more distant view from a passing train Orwell was able to suggest how he is insulated from her dreadful environment, in a way that the middle class usually are from the lives of the poor.[9] I don't find this argument very convincing. The problem with Orwell's rewritings of the evidence is not, finally, an epistemological one — whether the revised text in some way corresponds to the facts and is therefore 'true'. Rather it is a question of the contract between author and reader. *The Road to Wigan Pier* is presented to the reader by Orwell (and by his publisher) as an eye-witness account of the real conditions of the working class, especially the unemployed, in certain districts of northern England. The work of observing and interpreting is never a simple and straightforward report of the facts. But however problematic the sources of evidence, however problematic the language and literary forms which any author has to use, the reporter cannot include events that didn't happen or significantly change specific details! If he does so, then his contract with his readers surely requires him to acknowledge that the text in front of them is a novel, a fiction, a reworking of the data of experience by the imagination? Otherwise it has the status of the worst kind of propaganda

— the wilful distortion of the facts for political purposes. And for Orwell this is particularly problematic since he represents himself as an honest and straightforward observer simply reporting in transparent prose what he sees. It is surely the reader's confidence in Orwell that gives his image of the 'slum-girl' its resonance and that gives the reader some faith that beyond the words on the page there really was a particular woman kneeling on the cold hard stones of a particular back-yard on that specific morning. Orwell's description has something of the 'punctum' that Barthes finds in particular photographs: 'that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me),' — but surely only because the reader trusts him when he assures us that this is precisely what he saw with his own eyes in Wigan.

More troubling than the subordination of evidence to propaganda purposes is the conclusion that Orwell then goes on draw:

> It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say, "It isn't the same for them as it would be for us," and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her — understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a foul drain-pipe.[10]

Note the condescension of his comments that he had time 'to see everything about her' and that this woman 'understood as well as I did' what it meant to experience the harsh environment of a Wigan back-street. How could George Orwell, a mere visitor to the area for a few weeks, ever understand that *as well* as she did? And who is the 'we' that could have ever said that 'they' are like animals, knowing no better, inured to their suffering? The very denial concedes too much to what is being denied. Because it is not merely a 'mistake' to say that 'we' are like animals — it is a deeply offensive comment, symptomatic of the chill inhumanity of the English officer class towards its subordinates. Note also how 'we' are with the author in the train; 'we' are included as the readers of his book, part of the conversation among the edu-

cated who govern England and who Orwell is addressing as his equals. 'They', on the other hand, are the people who live in 'little grey slum houses' in places like Wigan and are the object of our pitying gaze. 'They' are not being addressed by Orwell. As he comments: 'It is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist; though perhaps it is better not to stay there too long.' What demonstrates the *flanerie* of Orwell's thrilling northern adventure more clearly than that sentence? The phrase 'lest you should forget', evoking Remembrance Sunday and the three-word epitaph 'Lest We Forget' on a thousand war memorials, reminds us that Orwell is writing these words now safely restored to the so-called 'Home Counties' and looking back to what is, for him at least, past and over. And obviously his readers do not live in Wigan, which is 'there', far away in the North. Apparently no complimentary copies of *The Road to Wigan Pier* were sent to those back up North who had freely given of their time and their knowledge to help him. As Raymond Williams comments, Orwell's silence about the social and political network of working-class socialists who helped in the writing of the book was necessary to create both the character "George Orwell" as an isolated independent observer and the northern working class as 'them', the nameless and mostly silent objects he observes.[11i]

And now we begin to see why Orwell in the published version had to edit out that moment when their eyes met in the alleyway. 'At that moment she looked up and caught my eye', the Diary says. In the published version it reads: 'She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye.' In the former case the exchange of looks compromises Orwell's position as observer — he becomes part of the scene and entangled in some kind of equal relationship with another person. In the published version, with eye contact deleted, he sees her (and 'we' see her) but she doesn't see him. Instead of an encounter between two individuals, in which she possesses, momentarily, the initiative, she is now an object of his (and 'our') gaze.[12]

This question of the observer and the observed is worth exploring a little further. In one influential line of feminist argument, it is the one that looks who controls the field of vision and is the bearer of power: 'taking other peo-

ple as objects, subjecting them to a controlling gaze', in the words of Laura Mulvey.[13] In dominant forms of visual culture, such as painting, film and photography, the argument goes, it was the male subject who looked, the female subject who was turned into the object of the gaze — and a sexualised object. Orwell's description —'a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery'— perhaps ensures that the nameless woman is not a conventional object of desire. Yet the domestic servant did often figure as an object of bourgeois sexual fantasy in nineteenth century households, including in several of Freud's case studies.[14] In Orwell's diary entry she is kneeling and looking up at the man who is looking back down at her — a stance not just of subordination and supplication but one that mimics a sexual act. (An enthusiastic Freudian might even want to make something of her 'poking' a stick up a waste-pipe!) However, the position of the observer is by definition detached from active involvement in the scene 'he' is observing. So when Orwell is relocated from alley to railway compartment and their exchange of looks is broken he separates himself from any active relationship with her and her environment. He is rescued from being subjected to her gaze or from speaking a word to her or giving her a name — in other words, he is spared the indignity of mutual recognition. Placed at a safe distance, Orwell is now beyond her reach. But, at the same time, Orwell's revised vantage point exemplifies the paradox of the male gaze: that its position of power is conditional on its absolute impotence.[15]

It is worth remembering that for Sartre —the *fons et origo* of much thinking about 'the gaze'— objectifying was not the primary effect of looking. 'This woman whom I see coming toward me, this man who is passing by in the street, this beggar whom I hear calling before my window, all are for me *objects* — of that there is no doubt.'[16] But this is only one of the modalities of the other's presence and Sartre posits a more fundamental connection between the perceiving subject and the other person: what he describes as 'a fundamental apprehension of the Other in which he will not be revealed to me as an object but as a "presence in person".' And central to this 'presence in person' is that she looks back at me, so that there is a relationship between two

subjects, though a relationship that is fundamentally antagonistic. This look, Sartre says, is 'only the concrete manifestation of the original fact of my existence for others... therefore I experience myself existing for the Other outside any individual appearance of a look'.[17] Before looking at anyone else the subject is already conscious of being a visible object within a 360-degree field of vision. And so this original fact of existing for others in a material world is about *vulnerability*.

I want to shift focus to a couple of short prose pieces by two contemporaries of Orwell (and Sartre) where the 'male gaze' is not experienced as an objectifying gaze or as some kind of easy affirmation of male power. First, in a short piece called 'Desire on the Street', published in *The Adelphi* in 1935, the neglected writer Jack Common raises some questions about encounters between men and women in the street. Orwell may have read this before he went to Wigan, since he was not only a close friend of the author but a regular contributor to *The Adelphi* which Common was editing at this time. He observes from his office window: 'a wide street full of people keeping themselves to themselves, drifting by the shops in ones and twos and threes, indifferent to each other, little knotted creatures like small fists closed about their selves and denying their common humanity.' This is a conventional enough observation about anonymity and the breakdown of social connection in the modern city. But Common goes on to make the striking point that marriage is increasingly a desperate and doomed attempt to bridge that gap and to connect with another human being. In this way sex has to stand in for meaningful social relations between people. Thus, he says, women now go about 'made up to look halfway between the screen vamp and the dressmaker's dummy.'

> We put them in a *purdah* of cosmetics. For as we have no way of saluting them, except by flashing the sexual semaphore, they go endlessly about our streets numbed by a thousand impacts of sexual desire. They are prostitutes to the ineffectual gaze.

There is an assumption of male textual and social authority in the proposition

that 'we' put women, 'them', into 'a purdah of cosmetics'. But there is also a measure of pathos in the passage's representation of how a genuine male wish for a social connection with a woman, or even the wish to acknowledge the attractiveness of a stranger, what he terms 'a flare of recognition, a warm and steady response', is transmuted into a stare full of sexual innuendo.

> We bare our desire —not meaning that, but as substitute— and she shields herself from the falsity. The cold glance of desire meets the cold defence, concupiscence meets cosmetic and the recognition of a precious relationship is slain.[18]

So in contrast to a feminist or a Freudian reading of the male gaze, for Common the objectifying sexual dynamics of the look are a displacement of a more fundamental desire for human contact, for community, in an urban society where relations between people, especially between men and women, have broken down.

We see something of the same experience of the 'ineffectual gaze' —and of isolation and vulnerability in public space— in a short prose piece by a contemporary of Orwell and Common, the American Communist poet Herman Spector. 'A Very Little Incident' (1929) describes an encounter with a woman on a New York street. The male narrator is hurrying back to work at the end of his lunch hour when he spots a little crowd around a woman who is selling mechanical toys. The rest of the sketch recounts how his desire to purchase a toy was frustrated. The narrator notes from the beginning that it is unusual for a woman to be selling things illegally on the street like this. He does not speculate about her situation and why someone so evidently ill-fitted to be a street seller finds herself on a New York street on a bitterly cold day, but bits of information point to a familiar story: a respectable woman fallen on hard times —perhaps the death or sickness of her husband— and forced into the street to try to earn a few dollars. 'I knew this was a bad cold season of the year many falling by the way...' She is referred to as 'a pitiful creature' and 'listless'; 'she looked hopeless', he says. But she is also described as an 'ordinary' respectable woman and not as any kind of sexual object. 'The

woman was ordinarily clean and nice and fat and eyes, she had on a coat trimmed with the ordinary fur, and she said no word which is bad tactics for one who wished to sell goods to a little crowd of people on the street.'[19]

The narrator distances himself from other members of the little crowd 'who were just wasting their time here in apathetic watching waitfulness it seemed'. They soon lose interest and drift away, but the narrator remains. Wanting to purchase the toy but worried about the price she may ask, he feels increasingly embarrassed. Eventually he does leave, without buying anything. The brief encounter upsets him:

> I shamefacedly whistled and sauntered slouched away. But it annoyed me, it bothered me: I ask you, why should I have been undecided, and maybe I lost a chance then and there to get a bargain and earn a *mitzvah*, 2 things every good Jew like myself wants to happen at the same time, and as they say in the bible, I was sore troubled and that woman's pleading face was easy to remember. And I damned myself...[20]

So 'A Very Little Incident' ends on a note of anxiety and guilt — and an unsettling question to the reader. And the woman remains a troubling puzzle, unassimilated to any easy category of spectatorship. We will come back to this.

2

These engagements of Orwell, Spector and Common with female strangers bring us at last to Benjamin's critical comments on the street encounters of the flaneur. We'd probably not expect to find many flaneurs strolling the streets of Wigan in the 1930s. But I want to suggest that Orwell's position as a social investigator, rooted in a long tradition of English urban writing stretching back to Dickens and Mayhew and beyond, can in some ways be usefully examined through the conceptual lens of the flaneur; and further, that Benjamin's critical commentaries in the *Arcades Project* help us to clarify

some of the limitations of Orwell's position. Drawn primarily from the poetry and prose of Baudelaire, mixed with a Lukascian reading of Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism in the first Volume of *Capital*, Benjamin's *flaneur* belongs to the Paris of the Second Empire and especially to the Arcades. The flaneur is a stroller, a man who wanders the city streets. Apparently an idle spectator, his position, as Chris Jencks puts it, 'both enables and privileges vision': 'The flâneur... walks at will, freely and seemingly without purpose, but simultaneously with an inquisitive wonder and an infinite capacity to absorb the activities of the collective, — often formulated as "the crowd".'[21] The flaneur is also an active producer of cultural commodities: 'As flaneur, the literary man ventures into the marketplace to sell himself'.[22] Yet the definitive description of this creature, he says, was to be found in Edgar Allan Poe's short story, 'The Man of the Crowd', which was set in London. And the striking feature of this story is its obsessive cataloguing of urban types. The first half of the story is made up of a long, detailed categorising of the individuals that pass by the window where he is sitting. Each person who passes is slotted into his or her appropriate place in his typology. And here, as Benjamin stresses, there are affinities between the flaneur, the detective and the social investigator.[23] The flaneur subsequently disappeared or was metamorphosed into a number of different urban figures. Nevertheless, the kinds of perspective which he embodied and the characteristic literature of flanerie survived. In particular, he initiated a particular kind of social observation which permeated 19th-century novels, magazines and newspapers. 'Always scanning the gritty street scene for good copy and anecdote', as Judith Walkowitz has put it, the flaneur and his successors turned social documentary into products for the leisure industry.[24] Even when an author expressed sympathy for those suffering poverty and exploitation in the streets, it was ephemeral. These momentary feelings of horror or sympathy for a stranger were, Benjamin says, like that 'love at last sight' which infected the erotic life of the city-dweller. Such moments of empathy were brief and transient. They did not provide knowledge that could change the situation or bridge the gap between classes or between the flaneur and the people he was observing.[25]

Turning back to *The Road to Wigan Pier* and Orwell's portrait of a nameless

woman in a back-yard: note that Orwell is wandering (like a flaneur). He has no particular reason for being in that alleyway — except as a journalist looking for copy. He had no relationship to the woman except as an observer and their encounter was as fleeting and superficial as Benjamin contended it must be. Surely Orwell could have acknowledged her existence by a word, a gesture of commiseration, a mordant joke? By replacing the direct one-to-one encounter in the alley, as reported in his diary, with a more distant perspective from a passing train as published in the book, Orwell removes these awkward questions of human contact. His social and physical distance objectifies her, turning her into a symbolic figure. She is not an individual with a name and an individual story; she is a type, part of 'them', the poor, an exemplification of a wider social and political problem. Orwell is not part of her world and she is not part of his. In Spector's 'A Very Little Incident', by contrast, there is a 'we': the narrator is troubled about his failure to transcend the distance between two people in public space — and not only by speaking and acknowledging, but also by an action which would have involved reciprocity. Spector's narrator is not merely a casual observer of alien life: he has a reason to be there on the street and in some ways shares her situation: 'My own job was a sonofabitch thing, but I was anxious to forget that during lunchhours which come only one a day anyway'. And it is not irrelevant here that the 24-year old Spector was at this time working at various low-paid jobs and only a matter of weeks later wrote an impassioned letter to *New Masses* complaining: 'I assure you there is no fun being a proletarian and listening to discussions of 'revolutionary art' when it stands to reason you can't slave 12 hours a day like a slob and create any kind of art at the same time'.[26] In Spector's story the moment of empathy does not freeze into a still-life, it opens out into an unresolved question — or perhaps several unresolved questions.

The usefulness of 'the flaneur' as an analytical tool has been subjected to some salutary criticism in recent years. Janet Wolff has bid an affectionate and relieved farewell to a figure that has appeared in her work on several occasions during the last 25 years or so.[27] In his path-breaking study *The Victorian Eye*, Chris Otter has been critical of the claims for the historical importance of the flaneur, a figure 'more evident in late-twentieth-century

cultural studies texts than on the streets of the nineteenth-century city'. Flanerie was the somewhat narcissistic predilection of a few literary gentlemen who, moreover, seldom described themselves as flaneurs. And it is unhelpful, Otter suggests, to describe as a flaneur anybody who happens to wander through cities with their eyes open or any writer who happens record the minutiae of metropolitan life. 'Flanerie, quite simply, cannot be seen as a representative visual practice in nineteenth-century Britain'.[28] In a broader critical survey of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* Simon Gunn has noted the rudimentary nature of Benjamin's archival research, utilising mostly printed literary sources. His perspective on Paris is thus largely restricted to that of the male literary gentleman with little sense of the very different perspectives of working men and women. And the flaneur, Gunn notes, is one of a few social 'types' who stand in for a more searching investigation of the multiple economic, social and cultural groupings that make up the population of mid-nineteenth-century Paris which is largely reduced in Benjamin's account to 'the bourgeoisie' and 'the masses'.[29]

All this is useful. Nevertheless it is worth remembering that for Benjamin the flaneur was not merely somebody who wanders in public space and has a particular way of enjoying it. He is always a producer of certain kinds of urban representation and I think the notion of the flaneur, critically deployed, can still illuminate some aspects of writing about 'the poor' in late Victorian and early twentieth century England. Orwell's role as undercover social investigator was full of ambiguities. He was, after all, an Eton-educated writer and former Imperial policeman going undercover with a false identity and adopting for only a few weeks and for particular purposes the life of a Paris dishwasher, a London vagrant and an unemployed man in Wigan. There remains a tension in the whole tradition of writing about the urban poor in Britain, between producing objective analyses with implications for practical policy and often critical of the powers-that-be on the one hand, and, on the other, catering for the commercial demand for sensational copy about urban life.

There is also a danger that we might forget that Benjamin was not after all an academic historian writing a cultural history of Paris in *The Arcades Project*. He was a political exile desperately engaged in understanding the

proper political role of the writer confronting fascism in the 1930s. This was one of the central issues raised for Walter Benjamin by the fate of the flaneur: the problem of the politically committed, bourgeois writer of his own time. What then must we do? 'The Author as Producer' (1934) presents some answers. He rejects a political commitment which is merely some kind of solidarity in consciousness and does not involve a radical transformation of the writer's own practice. Benjamin proposes that the key question is not, 'What is the attitude of a work *to* the relations of production of its time?' but rather, 'What is its position *in* them?'

> This question directly concerns the function the work has within the literary relations of production of its time. It is concerned, in other words, with the literary technique of works and the extent to which it produces a transformation of form.[30]

Technique and formal innovation is to literary production what technological innovation is to material production — a productive force. Benjamin is interested in new literary forms that 'channel the literary energies of the present'. Thus Brecht's Epic Theatre utilises not just aesthetic innovations such as surrealism and montage but also the new technological forms of photography, film, and radio. These formal innovations work to break down the assumptions of audiences. They are forced to become participants as producers of new meanings rather than distant, contemplative observers recycling traditional meanings. In the *Arcades Project* Benjamin is similarly seeking a revolutionary form to encapsulate new dynamic forms of urban life.

3

I want to probe further this question of form by looking at a slightly older contemporary of Benjamin, Orwell, Common and Spector, who shared their interest in writing about the life of the streets: the American poet William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). Here is a short poem from 1938:

The Poor

It’s the anarchy of poverty
delights me, the old
yellow wooden house indented
among the new brick tenements

or a cast-iron balcony
with panels showing oak branches
in full leaf. It fits
the dress of the children

reflecting every stage and
custom of necessity —
Chimneys, roofs, fences of
wood and metal in an unfenced

age and enclosing next to
nothing at all: the old man
in a sweater and soft black
hat who sweeps the sidewalk —

his own ten feet of it —
in a wind that fitfully
turning his corner has
overwhelmed the entire city[31]

That this brief piece of writing —95 words— is a poem rather than prose need not detain us too long. It is written in more or less grammatical English but it is broken up into lines and organized into six four-line stanzas. The short lines surround the words with a lot of white space and a lot of silence. The attentive reader thus *sees and hears* the words, experiences their weight, is more conscious of their relations with words on either side of them and thus

more aware of visual and sound patterns. In other words, the short lines slow the reader down and emphasise the materiality of words on a page. They also focus the reader's ear on how to read for an implicit voice.[32]

'The Poor' consists of a series of discrepant moments which together make up 'the anarchy of poverty'. These do not follow a linear narrative but are structured, in Enda Murphy's brilliant phrase, via 'the cubist juxtaposition of narrative planes'.[33] First there is an old wooden house among new brick tenements. Second, there are new leafy oak branches wrapped among the iron fencing of a balcony. Third, there are the clothes of the children which are compared to these patched-up panels. And finally there is a man sweeping the sidewalk outside his house though the whole city is being swept by wind. Each of the objects or scenes is somehow out of kilter —in pleasing ways— with the prevailing reality. It is in this respect, I think, that they embody 'the anarchy of poverty' — anarchy not as a negative figure of chaos and disorder but on the contrary as small, unexpected, human inventions which are counter-posed to a larger inhuman order: an old timber house not a new brick tenement; leafy oak branches not cast-iron fencing; patched-up children's clothes. The old man gratuitously sweeping the street seems particularly to embody the values of an older, traditional, home-made world: the idea that he is responsible for the ten feet of pavement, the kind of communal responsibility rarely found in modern urban environments ('an unfenced age'). This is suggested too in the home-fence 'enclosing next to nothing at all'. These boundaries are not, then, about protecting private property. And the courage of acting on these apparently outdated communal values is captured in the concluding image of the solitary man, as he sweeps in the face of a wind 'that fitfully/ turning his corner has/ overwhelmed the entire city'. The 'anarchy of poverty' stands against a larger, bleaker, inhuman anarchy. The old man sweeping his ten feet of pavement might also be a metaphor for the poet, working at his little verse (his 'ten feet' if he was working in iambic pentameters) in the face of the huge deafening storm of language around him. And I don't think it's pushing this reading too far to see how the poem itself —with its patchwork of discrepant urban scenes— is like the yellow house, the panels of the iron balcony interwoven with oak branches and the patched clothing of the children.

The following poem from 1917 is an earlier variation on the same theme:

Pastoral

When I was younger
it was plain to me
I must make something of myself.
Older now
I walk the back streets
admiring the houses
of the very poor:
roof out of line with sides
the yards cluttered
with old chicken wire, ashes,
furniture gone wrong;
the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves
and parts of boxes, all,
if I am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best
of all colors.
No one
will believe this
of vast import to the nation.[34]

Why should this be of vast import to the nation? Perhaps because the nation needs to learn that no matter what deprivation is visited upon them, the poor still have the capacity to create their own home-made world? Or more, that once we move beyond the immature values of individual ambition, —'older now'— we discover a new human, disorderly everyday world in which nature too shares. I take it that the bluish green which smears the fences, outhouses

and abandoned boxes in the yard is moss. A rolling stone gathers no moss? Moss represents a kind of continuity — a slow re-absorption of the products of human labour into the natural world and hence 'properly weathered'. So the title 'pastoral' isn't entirely ironical.

Williams wrote hundreds of short poems like these on all kinds of topics, many of them momentary scenes — snapshots. Not all are as quietly sunny as 'Pastoral'. Williams can do bleak almost as effectively as Orwell, surely one of the great masters of bleakness. However, 'The Poor' and 'Pastoral' represent a recurring theme in his poetry, celebrating the capacity of the poor to build a world out of the detritus of the dominant order of things. And this points towards another way of responding to Benjamin's argument about the position of writer within the relations of production. 'If Americans are to be blessed with important work', Williams wrote in his 'Comment on Contact', 'it will be through intelligent, informed contact with the locality which alone can infuse it with reality'.[35] Williams was committed to the local. According to the 'Introduction' to his 1944 collection, *The Wedge*, the poetic act begins in speech: 'When a man makes a poem, makes it, mind you, he takes words as he finds them interrelated about him and composes them...' In other words, the poet is inevitably engaged in the life, the social relationships and the speech 'interrelated about him.' In Williams' case his particular involvement in the social life around him was as a general practitioner in Rutherford, a New Jersey suburb. Born there in 1883, the son of English and Porto Rican immigrants, he set up his medical practice in his home town in 1910 and lived and worked and wrote there for the rest of his life. He was, then, a writer who was conscientiously local, who spent his whole life as doctor and neighbour of several generations of people in and around Rutherford. It was out of this experience that he wrote novels, a series of 'stories' and hundreds of poems. Robert Coles, a young doctor, accompanied Williams on his visits to patients and saw how closely he observed and listened to each man, woman and child he attended. Williams was conscious of how hard it was for an educated professional man to make contact with farm labourers, factory workers, unemployed men and women. Coles later recalled him saying: 'Those house calls are giving me an education. Every day I learn something new —a sight, a

phrase— and I'm made to stop and think about my world, the world I've left behind'.[36] In similar terms in his *Autobiography* in 1951 Williams wrote about how his medical work had brought him into new kinds of active relations with working people:

> In illness, in the permission I as a physician have had to be present at deaths and births, at the tormented battles between daughter and diabolic mother, shattered by a gone brain—just there—for a split second—from one side to the other, it has fluttered before me for a moment, a phrase which I quickly write down on anything at hand, any piece of paper I can grab.[37]

This is a fascinating insight into some of the sources of Williams's writing — almost like a photographer catching a moment, but using his ears rather than his eyes.

Williams wrote prolifically — poems, essays, stories, novels, plays. Many of his stories in particular arise out of these daily experiences as a doctor. They represent not just the material lives of the poor in Depression America, they also represent how individuals and families actively responded to these conditions. And they represent the doctor's own response to these responses — sometimes patient and caring, sometimes insensitive, uncomprehending and impatient. He was an observer but at the same time an active and emotionally engaged participant in the social relations and everyday life of the working people he encountered:

> I lived among these people. I know them and saw the essential qualities (not stereotype), the courage, the humor (an accident), the deformity, the basic tragedy of their lives — and the importance of it... I saw how they were maligned by their institutions of church and state — and "betters". I saw how all that was acceptable to the ear about them maligned them.[38]

Immersing himself in the locality, however, was also about language and aesthetic form. Note the emphasis that Williams puts on *the ear* — listening. Remembering Benjamin's comment about the position of any literary text *within*

the relations of literary production, it is not only the real practical sympathy of Williams towards poor working people that matters. It is how his active and everyday relations in his local community shaped the language, the very syntax, of his writing. Williams wanted a new American poetic language rooted in the everyday speech of the people, incorporating into poetry its rhythms, its energy, its constant originality. It is worth noting that Orwell too recognised the significance of the relationship between literary form, popular language and social relations. He valued, like Williams, the pleasures of the social majority and valued them not least for their disrespect towards official England.[39] His hostility to the left-wing intelligentsia, conversely, was because of their po-faced seriousness, their lack of active involvement in the real disorderly lives of working people. And this separation from ordinary life contributed to what he thought of as their political irresponsibility — their gullibility about Stalin and the Soviet Union, their flimsy pacifism, their eccentricities (naturism, vegetarianism). He also recognised the debilitating effects of this divorce on literary culture. The English language, he said, had 'grown anaemic because for long past it has not been invigorated from below.'

> Language ought to be the joint creation of poets and manual workers, and in modern England it is difficult for these two classes to meet. When they do so again —as, in a different way, they could in the feudal past— English may show more clearly than at present its kinship with the language of Shakespeare and Defoe.[40]

But in his own work Orwell did not bridge this social and linguistic gap and nor did many other social observers and writers of their time. My argument is that Williams' writing did go some way towards bridging this gap — and some way towards fulfilling Benjamin's wish for new, innovatory and revolutionary forms of writing in the 1920s and 1930s. And it does so partly because of Williams's active relations with the New Jersey working class, male and female.

Let me immediately add that I don't want to pursue this argument too far or to counter-pose Orwell and Williams, as embodying two different ways of

engaging with the poor, one good and one bad. It would be absurd to build too much on the foundations of a brief reading of a couple of Williams's poems and a critical reading of one passage of a few hundred words in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Williams's own position, despite his insertion in a locality and its social life, was profoundly ambiguous. In his novel *White Mule*, for instance, he positions his working-class hero between capital and labour: 'Yes, it was a battleground all right, his battleground —the bosses on one side and labor on the other— he in the middle'.[41] This was in many respects Williams own position in the polarised years of the 1930s. On the one hand, as a medical man he had one foot in the practical world of the independent craftsman — working with his hands and his eyes as a skilled manipulator of his tools, struggling to get paid a few dollars by his impoverished patients. As a poet too he valued craftsmanship, the skills of the experienced eye and hand. A number of his poems in these years affirm the value of the craftsman. At the same time, he was an educated and professional man, living in the suburbs with a car and a family and even a domestic servant. As such he was of the middle class and had some power and influence in the district. Williams's writing is full of all kinds of misrecognitions and insensitivities. There are, for instance, representations of working-class women in several poems as coldly uncomprehending as anything in Orwell. See for instance, one of his best known poems, 'To Elsie', first appearing in *Spring & All* in 1923, about a new servant taken into the Williams household.[42]

And turning back to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, there are passages which demonstrate a much more sympathetic engagement with working-class experience than the description of the woman on her knees in the Wigan backyard — and which provide the critical understanding of social and economic realities which the *flaneur* and his successors are presumed to be incapable of. For instance, Orwell makes some sharp and well-informed criticisms about housing provision and about the working conditions of coal-miners. Similarly in *Down and Out in Paris in London* (1933), Orwell's brief experience as a dishwasher and a vagrant takes him far beyond the ephemera of street life. He gets to know specific individuals and experiences real living and working conditions. And he offers some concrete proposals for change, including leg-

islation to deal with the cheap lodging-houses where vagrants and migrant workers were forced to stay. He concludes with these seven precise nostrums, which bear repeating today:

> I shall never again think that all tramps are drunken scoundrels, nor expect a beggar to be grateful when I give him a penny, nor be surprised if men out of work lack energy, nor subscribe to the Salvation Army, nor pawn my clothes, nor refuse a handbill, nor enjoy a meal at a smart restaurant.[43]

Since reading this years ago I have rarely refused to accept a hand-bill in the street from someone whose thankless underpaid task it is to hand them out to passers-by.

Orwell and Williams exemplify an active resistance against another contemporary phenomenon which Benjamin and Adorno diagnosed — not the experience of poverty but the poverty of experience. This is my first concluding point. In contrast to much contemporary writing which restricts its attention to the play of inter-textuality, Orwell and Williams go out into the world and look and listen. However mediated by language, by preconceptions and social values, something of specificity, of contingency, of difference does filter through — as I hope I indicated in the close readings of Orwell and Williams above. The historian by contrast has no access to the material experience of specific historical pasts. However, I think there are convergences which are worth thinking about.

One way of exploring this further is through Adorno's vigorous rejection of what he terms 'identity thinking'. In contrast to a philosophy which seeks to absorb its object within its own conceptual system, thus disfiguring it, he proposes a 'negative dialectics' — a thinking which is always open to the fragmentary, the particular, the individual and the non-conceptual. This is a kind of ethical materialism committed to voicing the suffering of specific and individual people. For Adorno, materialism was not a matter of metaphysical doctrine or epistemology but a kind of orientation towards the suffering body. He even goes so far as to propose that the moment of solidarity is not an abstract principle but a 'somatic impulse': 'The physical moment tells our

knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different'.[44] I think this is close to what literature does at its best — and social commentary and history too.

> Forty feet above the ground on a telegraph pole,
> the lineman
> forced the spur he wore into the pole and,
> throwing his other leg around it,
> leaned over
>
> to fasten a line with his nippers
> to the end of a crossarm
> by a wire around the glass cup on a pin.
>
> The line, hauled tight
> hundreds of feet ahead of him
> by means of a reel,
> broke,
> and the crossarm
> broke where it fastened to the pole:
> he fell headlong
> to the stones below.[45]

This is one section of Charles Reznikoff's book *Testimony*. It was begun in the 1930s when Reznikoff was associated with a group of mostly New York leftist poets who were labelled by one of their number as 'Objectivists' and who were closely associated with William Carlos Williams. I quote it here not just because it is one of a number of sections of *Testimony* that has precisely the visceral impact —the *punctum*— that Roland Barthes found in certain photographs, leaving the reader wincing and illustrating how a poet's words can, as Wittgenstein claimed, 'pierce' the reader. And I cite it not merely as an exemplification of Adorno's 'somatic impulse' —poetry as ethical materialism— though I think in some respects it is. Reznikoff said of his poetry: 'I see some-

thing and it moves me and I put it down as I see it'. His fellow Objectivist, George Oppen, said the same thing — but in ways that converged more explicitly towards Adorno's ethical materialism. He stated in an interview that his obligation as a poet is to his feelings alone and to what he thinks is true, regardless of whether it is 'ethical or not', or whether he wants it to be true, or whether it is good for the reader. Hence his revulsion against the war in Viet Nam fed into his poetry, whether he liked it or not:

> I'm just reporting my experiences in life, including the one that when they drop enough jellied gasoline on children, you can't stand it anymore. I'm just stating a fact about what you can and cannot stand. If it didn't bother one to burn children, why say it does? ... You can only talk about what you actually feel.[46]

However I cite Reznikoff's *Testimony* here also because it is raises difficult questions about the historian's 'ethical materialism'. It is based entirely on court records. Certain cases attracted his attention. He transcribed them, cut and edited and arranged the words into lines. As he explained: 'In *Testimony* the speakers whose words I use are all giving testimony about what they actually lived through. The testimony is that of a witness in court — not a statement of what he felt, but of what he saw or heard.'[47] His editing did not significantly change the language of his source: to change the testimony significantly in a court of law would be to detract from its value as evidence. So the poet shows the same kind of respect for the integrity of the testimony of witnesses as the lawyer and the court of law should — and, of course, as the journalist and the historian should. As in the court of law so in the poem, as Reznikoff explained:

> Evidence to be admissible in a trial cannot state conclusions of fact: it must state the facts themselves. For example, a witness in an action for negligence cannot say: the man injured was negligent crossing the street. He must limit himself to a description of how the man crossed... The conclusions of fact are for the jury and let us add, in our case, for the reader'.[48]

I don't think the point of utilising court records is merely a naive faith that they accurately represent what happened and it is simply a matter of transcription of 'the facts'. Undoubtedly there is here in Reznikoff, as in Orwell and Williams I think, some kind of passion for objectivity. But the individual's experience and perspective always needs to be checked and qualified by the perspectives and the voices of others and the testimony generated by a court of law is precisely a space in which testimony is checked and questioned and verified. Is there any other poetry where the sources of a poem can be checked and questioned? But, as I say, it is not finally about epistemological guarantees. Here we have a kind of poetry in which the authorial voice disappears — a poetry which is social and which pushes the reader both to make sense of the words on the page and to question their origins.[49] A radical scepticism is currently the fashion — so perhaps Reznikoff's *Testimony*, while it raises questions about the witness and about evidence, also invites us to trust, however cautiously. As such, its relentless focus on facts, on the experience of others, on the value of the testimony of witnesses, on the possibility of reaching some kind of truthful account about what happened, is the more critical position to take today. His final book —postponed for many years— was the agonising, courageous *Holocaust*. It was based on records of the trials of Nazi war criminals at Nuremberg and Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem and brought into even sharper focus the question of testimony and how a writer can utilise it.[50]

It is precisely the question of the author's relationship to his (or her) object, sources, materials, which has been raised more recently by Jacques Ranciere. In several works he has challenged the authority structures which shape the historian's use of sources. In his *Proletarian Nights* he introduces into his text all kinds of writing by mid-nineteenth century French workers — stories, fantasies, descriptions, philosophical speculations and so on. And he refuses to draw conventional distinctions between fact and fiction, popular language and literary language, even document and argument precisely because it is such distinctions which these texts challenge, including their own status as 'popular'. As he puts it in his preface to the new English edition:

> To account for the subversive power of their work I was forced to break with the habits of social science, for which these personal accounts, fictions, or discourses are no more than the confused products of a process that social science alone is in a position to understand. These words had to be removed from their status as evidence or symptoms of a social reality to show them as writing or thinking at work on the construction of a different social world. That is why this book renounced any explanatory distance.[51]

In the book that followed, Ranciere elaborated an extended critique of writing about the poor in which Plato, Marx, Sartre and Bourdieu, were indicted precisely for exploiting this 'explanatory distance' to subordinate working people to the authority of a knowledge that they possessed.[52] There is much more to be said about this — including some critical reservations about Ranciere's critique. We need to be aware of the anti-egalitarian implications of traditional modes of approaching the 'other', or the 'popular', as agents of an inferior form of knowledge. And Ranciere is surely right to demonstrate how what is categorised as 'the popular' challenges its own confinement to its proper sphere. At the same time, this begs a lot of important questions — for instance, about forms of knowledge accessible to the modern historian but which were not accessible to working people in mid-nineteenth century Paris; the population of Paris for instance, or the causes of cholera.[53] A number of historians, exponents of 'history from below', have been writing since the 1960s in ways surely as sensitive as Ranciere to the experience and the intelligence of working people in the past.[54] Nevertheless Ranciere does raise important questions about the historian and his (or her) poor — and her (or his) sources.

Interestingly, as Ranciere ruefully comments, *Proletarian Nights* was declared by some historians and philosophers to be no more than a work of 'literature'. But it is perhaps especially 'literature' which has the resources to revitalise the writing of history. In their different ways I think, Orwell observing his woman in a Wigan backyard, Spector worrying about the woman selling toys in a New York street, Benjamin pondering the flaneur and the task of the writer, William Carlos Williams writing about ordinary moments

in the street and Charles Reznikoff patiently editing nineteenth-century court records, offer critical perspectives on what historians do when they read their sources and turn it into writing — and what we do when we read history. Or, to put it another way, they invite us to step outside certain limits of written and authorised interpretation.

NOTES

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, ed. G.E.M.Anscombe and G.H.von Wright, trans G.E.M.Anscombe (Oxford 1981) # 155, p. 28e.
2. Peter Hobley Davison, *George Orwell: a Literary Life* (Basingstoke 1996), pp. 73-74
3. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, new edition with introduction by Richard Hoggart (1989), p. 15. This is subsequently cited as *Wigan Pier.*
4. Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography', *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, translated by E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, (London 1979), pp. 242-243. There is a collection of Hill's mid-Victorian photographs of Newhaven fishwives at: http://www.edinphoto.org.uk/pp_d/pp_hill_calotypes_newhaven_fishwives.htm.
5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard, (London 1982), pp. 4-5, 6, 17.
6. It was, incidentally, at more or less the same time —on a cold rainy day in March 1936— that Dorothea Lange took a series of photographs of a woman and her children in a makeshift tent at a camp of migrant pea-pickers in California. One of these pictures, 'Migrant Mother', became a famous image of the Depression in 1930s America. There is some interesting discussion, especially about how Florence Owens Thompson felt to be turned into a 'migrant madonna', in Linda Gordon, *Dorothea Lange. A Life Beyond Limits* (New York 2009), pp. 236-243.
7. George Orwell, 'The Road to Wigan Pier Diary, 31 January - 25 March 1936', *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus (London, 1970), vol. 1, p. 203.

8. For a painstaking examination see Robert Pearce, 'Revisiting Orwell's Wigan Pier', *History* 82 (July 1997), pp. 410-428.
9. Davison, op. cit. See also the comments of Margery Sabin, 'The Truths of Experience: Orwell's nonfiction of the 1930s', *The Cambridge Companion to George Orwell*, ed. John Rodden, (Cambridge 2007), p. 50.
10. *Wigan Pier*, p. 15
11. Raymond Williams, *Orwell*, (London, 1971), pp. 51-52.
12. The controversy surrounding Manet's 1865 painting *Olympia* revolved in part around this issue of the male gaze being reciprocated by the woman. See T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life. Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, (London,1985), Chapter 2. See also Nancy Locke, *Manet and the Family Romance*, (Princeton, 2001), especially pp. 95-98.
13. Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones, (London 2003), p. 46.
14. See Leonore Davidoff's important essay, 'Class and Gender in Victorian England: the case of Hannah Culwick and A.J. Munby', *Worlds Between. Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class* (London 1995), pp. 103-150.
15. A point usefully discussed in Slavoj Zizek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Women and Causality* (London, 2005), pp. 73f.
16. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, translated with an introduction by Hazel Barnes (London, 1957), p. 252.
17. *Ibid*., p. 420.
18. From 'Apology For Playing Hell', *The Adelphi*, vol. IX (Feb. 1935), reprinted in *Revolt Against an 'Age of Plenty'*, edited by Huw Beynon and Colin Hutchinson, *Strong Words*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1980), http://www.revoltagainstplenty.com/index.php/archive/34-archivelocal/25-the-writings-of-jack-common.
19. Herman Spector, 'A Very Little Incident', in *Bastard in the Ragged Suit. Writings of, with drawings by Herman Spector*, eds. B. John and J. S. Clancy (San Francisco, 1977), p. 60.
20. *Ibid*., pp. 60-61.
21. Chris Jenks, *Visual Culture* (London 1995), p. 146. For a useful collection of essays on the flaneur see Keith Tester, ed., *The flâneur*, (London 1994).
22. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), p. 446.

23. Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, p. 442.
24. Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight. Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London*, (London 1992), p. 16.
25. See in particular Susan Buck-Morss, ‘The *Flaneur,* the Sandwichman, and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering’, *New German Critique* 13 (1986), pp. 99-142.
26. H. Spector, ‘Weiss is Wrong,’ *New Masses*, August 1929, in *Bastard in the Ragged Suit*, p. 65. Sadly Spector subsequently gave up the struggle, though *Bastard in the Ragged Suit* does include some interesting and previously unpublished writing from his years as a New York taxi driver before his death in 1959.
27. Janet Wolff, ‘Gender and the haunting of cities (Or, the retirement of the *flaneur*),’ *The Invisible Flaneuse? Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, eds A. D’Souza and T. McDonagh (Manchester, 2006), pp. 18-31.
28. Chris Otter, *The Victorian Eye: A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800-1910*, (Chicago, 2008), pp. 7-8.
29. Simon Gunn, ‘City of Mirrors: the Arcades Project and urban history’, *Journal of Victorian Culture*, VII, 2, (Autumn, 2002), p. 272. See also the comments in David Harvey, *Paris. Capital of Modernity*, (London 2003), pp. 18-19.
30. W. Benjamin, ‘The Author as Producer’, in *Understanding Brecht*, translated by A. Bostock (London 1973), p. 87.
31. *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, vol. 1: 1909-1939, (New York 1991), pp. 452-3.
32. See Hugh Kenner’s reading of the dynamics of a short William poem in his ‘Syntax in Rutherford’, (1968), reprinted in *William Carlos Williams. A Critical Anthology*, ed. Charles Tomlinson (London 1972), pp. 306-312.
33. Enda Duffy, *The Subaltern “Ulysses”* (Minneapolis 1994), p. 65. Chapter 2 is a sparkling discussion of James Joyce’s Dublin *flaneur*.
34. Williams, *Collected Poems*, vol. 1, p. 64.
35. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays,* (New York 1969), p. 68.
36. Robert Coles, *The Call of Service. A Witness to Idealism* (New York 1993), pp. 146-147
37. *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, (New York 1968), p. 289.
39. Williams, *Selected Essays*, p. 300.
39. See for instance two pioneering works in Cultural Studies: ‘Boys’ Weeklies’ and

'The Art of Donald McGill' in, respectively, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus (London,1970), vol. 1, pp. 505-531 and vol. 2, pp. 183-195.

40. *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus (London 1970),vol. 3, p. 29.
41. William Carlos Williams, *White Mule*, (New York 1967), p. 48
42. Williams, *Collected Poems*, vol. 1, pp. 217-219
43. George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, (London 1966), p. 189.
44. Theodore W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, translated by E.B. Ashton (London 1973), p. 203. For a briefer introduction to this kind of argument see T.W. Adorno, 'The Actuality of Philosophy', Telos no.31 (Spring 1977), pp. 120-133.
45. C. Reznikoff, *Testimony: the United States (1885-1890): Recitative*, (New York 1965), p. 22. A second and much expanded edition was published posthumously: *Testimony: the United States, 1885-1915: recitative*, 2 vol., (Santa Barbara 1978-1979).
46. L.S. Dembo, interview with George Oppen, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring, 1969), pp. 165-166.
47. L.S. Dembo, interview with Charles Reznikoff, *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Spring, 1969), p. 202.
48. C. Reznikoff, 'First, There IS the Need', *Sparrow* 52 (Santa Barbara 1977), np.
49. The question of whether or not the writings that make up *Testimony* or *Holocaust* are "poetry" is not very interesting. Reznikoff did not include either collection in his *Collected Poems*, though those he did include he sometimes called 'verse', a lesser version of poetry — and a typically diffident gesture on Reznikoff's part. For *Testimony* he used the term 'recitative', the use of passages of ordinary speech in opera — again suggesting a minor or subordinate art form.
50. C. Reznikoff, *Holocaust*, (Los Angeles 1975). This work has attracted much more critical attention than *Testimony*. For an excellent overview of Reznikoff's work see Stephen Fredman, *A Menorah for Athena. Charles Reznikoff and the Jewish Dilemmas of Objectivist Poetry*, (Chicago 2001).
51. Jacques Ranciere, 'Preface to the New English Edition', *Proletarian Nights. The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, translated by John Drury, (London 2012), p. xi.
52. Jacques Ranciere, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, edited with an introduction by Andrew Parker, translated by J. Drury, C. Oster and A. Parker (London 2003).

53. I explored some of these questions further, comparing Henry Mayhew and Karl Marx's understanding of the causes of poverty in nineteenth-century London in John Seed, 'Free labour = latent pauperism': Marx, Mayhew and the "reserve army of labour"' in *The Peculiarities of Liberal Modernity*, edited by Simon Gunn & James Vernon, (Berkeley 2011). See also Eleni Andriakaina, 'Εκεί όπου ο ιστορικός γίνεται ποιητής: John Seed's *Pictures from Mayhew*,'[Between history and poetry: John Seed's *Pictures from Mayhew*] *Books' Journal* (Athens), 21 (July 2012), 75-76.
54. See for instance Edward Thompson's preface to his *The Making of the English Working Class* (2nd ed., London 1968) where he famously defends his artisans and weavers and sectarian preachers from 'the massive condescension of posterity'.