

LITERATURE, AMUSEMENT
AND TECHNOLOGY IN THE
GREAT DEPRESSION

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Disinterring Edward Dahlberg

I pose you your question:
 shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?
 I hunt among stones.

Charles Olson, "The Kingfishers"

In chapter three of *Do These Bones Live*, Edward Dahlberg praises Randolph Bourne as a prophetic guide whose subversive writings retain the potential to lead the nation out of the political and cultural wilderness into which it has stumbled. It was the "raucous" voice of this physically "deformed but inwardly transfigured hunchback" that had spoken the "direful truths" the rest of the country refused to hear. "Bourne conceived such homely and radiantly mortal errors; this was his desperado impossibilism, and for this we remember him. We recall him to guide us . . . through the infernal limbo of American culture." What he saw was "the Cult of Politics that had dwarfed man down to the drabest dimensions of the *homo economicus*, the 'ideational automaton'."¹ A fierce social critic who fell out of favor when he protested American involvement in the First World War, Bourne's dissenting opinions had caused him by the end of the 1930s to suffer the "grim and repetitious fate" of other equally committed radical intellectuals. He too now "lies in oblivion and is as unknown as our tradition," his marginalized writings buried beneath the highly esteemed "memorials" of respectable political figures. "The power of the State lies in the majesty of oblivion, in crypts, catafalques and mausoleums. The vaults in which the remains of the Presidents, those sacral ciphers of public chronicles lie, evoke no tears and laments." One will have to dig beneath these "canonical death-monuments" to catch sight of those unseemly yet impassioned creatures responsible for our populist radical culture, a powerfully moving tradition whose existence is hidden by "bureaucratic commemoration odes" (*Bones*, 22). It is below the magnificently constructed resting places of our past leaders that one encounters the challenging, assertive writings of those who have

become in official history as frighteningly repugnant and unbearable to look at as a dreadful mythological entity. “We turn our back upon our own past as though it were as horrible to behold as Medusa” (28).

More than a half century later, it is Dahlberg who “lies in oblivion,” unknown. His autobiographical novels seldom read and his criticism infrequently discussed, Dahlberg’s decaying corpus has been deeply interred in the graveyard of American literary prose. Save for a brief resurgence of interest in him upon the publication of *Because I Was Flesh* (1964),² which makes use of the same autobiographical materials he used in his first two fictions (*Bottom Dogs* [1930] and *From Flushing to Calvary* [1932]) but in a rhetorically much altered fashion, Dahlberg has received minimal scholarly and critical care. The burden of this essay then is to determine what we have lost by turning our backs upon the creative and critical output of this peculiarly grotesque writer, one whose work may prove to be “as horrible to behold as Medusa.”

The excavation of a portion of Dahlberg’s corpus from its relatively unmarked place in the ground of literary history³ brings into focus one of the first attempts in this country to formulate theoretically and develop a practice of a grotesque aesthetic suited to the machine age. The essential source of artistic inspiration for him in this regard was the field of carnivalized American public amusements. Dahlberg’s turn to forms of entertainment for compositional guidance constituted a social investment on his part. Grounding his aesthetic appeal to non-literary cultural practices was his sense of connection to members of minority communities. It was his identification with the relatively disenfranchised persons in whose daily lives such popular amusements played a central role that spurred his interest in forms of entertainment. The traditional and modernized recreations that were condemned by “nice people” as “vulgar and naïve” yet that “millions of less pretentious people loved” and “flocked to” supplied him with a literary point of departure. It was out of the world that extends back from slapstick film to “the theatre: the barefaced honky-tonk and the waltzes by Waldteufel, slammed out on a mechanical piano,” and that includes as well “burlesque, vaudeville, [and] circuses,”⁴ that Dahlberg the autobiographical novelist first emerged.

Like Henry Miller after him, Dahlberg’s recollection of “the laughter of unrespectable people having a hell of a fine time, laughter as violent and steady and deafening as standing under a waterfall,”⁵ helped initiate a radically motivated project. His rarely remarked upon status in the history of American literature may be marked as a precursor to postmodernism in the sense that his writing does not seek to seal itself

off from the influence of non-literary recreational practices. Insofar as the distinction between high and low culture is inoperative in his enterprise, he appears to participate in the (postmodern) transition away from the high modernist aspiration to protect the autonomy of art. But he remained exceptionally ambivalent about the repercussions of his own project, and one observes in his early writing the recurrent impulse to re-install the very distinctions he puts at risk. Dahlberg consistently retreated from the transgressions he required to get his enterprise going; and in the end, he desperately strove to expel technology from artistic realms. Thoroughly repulsed by what obviously attracted him, Dahlberg repeatedly sought to put the barriers back in place that he had helped dismantle.

His work manifests from this perspective the multiple crises the (male) authorial subject sought to negotiate in the Depression era. More precisely, the extreme anxiety apparent in his writing manifests the existential and aesthetic conflicts experienced with intensity in the 1930s by those interested in conjoining literature and amusement. The feminine, the machine, and commercial entertainment all rose up as objects of extreme fascination to the formally ambitious, innovative writer. Initially perceiving these as an exciting resource, Dahlberg eventually came to the conclusion that they constituted a debilitating danger. The completion of his career as a novelist coincided with his capitulation to “the double male fear of technology and woman.”⁶ We may trace this tension by following the paths of Dahlberg’s traumatized autobiographical protagonists, who repetitiously encounter the machine as the cause of severe panic, as a kind of maternal force capable of enveloping the terrified individual. *Mimes*, a parodic autobiographical fiction he stopped working on in 1925 (though it would not be published for another half century), provides an introduction to this set of issues. A comic (self-) portrait of the anachronistic aspirations of a youthful, would-be transcendentalist poet, the narrative is designed as an illustration of a critical thesis. The comic presentation of the romantically inclined character’s silly efforts to meet the challenges of his urban environment marks the obsolescence of pastoral aesthetics.

MACHINE-AGE MIMICRY

Mimes . . .
 Mere puppets they, who come and go
 At bidding of vast formless things
 Edgar Allan Poe, “The Conqueror
 Worm”

The ludicrous protagonist of *Mimes* is lodged firmly within the aesthetic ideology of Anglo-American romanticism, for Leonid Gottinger repeatedly attempts to evade the artistic and existential implications of life in urban-industrial modernity. The excruciatingly overwrought diction Dahlberg uses to convey the character's thoughts or direct speech establishes the work's critical frame. The following exceedingly ironic description of the solitary Leonid is typical: "In an open field he would lay, breathing in the aroma of new-mown hay and gaze into the heavens. Falling into a madcap vein he would luxuriate in the lugubrious droning of the crickets, wanton with the tapering shadows, mock the meditative night."⁷ Leonid is most laughably misguided when striving to achieve an ecstatic union with nature. The next paragraph recounts the "mystic spell" that "the pure aeolian murmur of the trees" casts over the character.

Breathless, he halted for a moment and leaned against a large, gnarled oak; he became at one with it: with eyes fixed on the cold light of the stars, the snowy moon, the Milky Way, he poured forth the melody of all that had entered into the inner recesses of his self: nature's myriad forms were indelibly imprinted on his trembling soul – his pantheistic soul aquiver with rustling leaves, the droning of insects, geometric shadows, muddy blades of grass, the generative spirit of fecund earth! (*Works*, 16–17)

The target of Dahlberg's irony, however, is not the fundamental narcissism that sustains such an "insidious play between mood and matter" but the insistence on choosing pastoral landscapes as reflective surfaces. Thus the numerous, blissful mergers of self with nature the book describes are repeatedly presented as evidence of a deluded desire to convince oneself that one's mode of existence in the world is as stable as that of a tree or plant. Tellingly, Leonid is perennially evasive when it comes to acknowledging his own mortality. "The thought of death weighed him down; it was beyond his comprehension. He could not conceive of a still body, eternally breathless, spoiled of consciousness, laid in the cold, dank ground. He shuddered." "That one should suffer complete annihilation he could not brook nor understand. He could not resign himself to the existence of lifelessness" (30). The resistance to ontological insight gives rise to aesthetic foolishness. Nor can Leonid conceptualize adequately the temporality of human existence: "Time was such an incomprehensible thing to him [Leonid], he tried to understand it: he could not" (18). The character's unwillingness to acknowledge the difference between human beings and natural entities makes him a joke to author and reader alike, a ridiculous object they may laugh at together.

Given the rough yet unmistakable parallel between the events of the fictional character's life and those of the author's, it is reasonable to suppose that the ironic narrative is a form of self-mockery. Dahlberg's critical intention is to free himself from the desire to pursue romantic pastoralism. The interpolation of a manuscript – "Maurice Succumbs to the Malady" – confirms this hypothesis. It is a "burlesque brochure" by Leonid's "leman," a "young transcendentalist" who goes nowhere without a copy of Emerson," put together so "that he [Leonid] might better see and understand and laugh over . . . his own foibles and enormities" (49). Tellingly, it is stylistically indistinguishable from the main text itself, save for the fact that the vocabulary is even more pretentious and archaic in the inserted text, with diction like "sooth," "slewn," and phrases like "lavish main and purple choler." The significance of the title then is that Leonid and his friends are mere imitators, miming their precursors so completely as to remain (figuratively) mute; genuine expression is inaccessible to those who can do nothing but repeat conventionalized gestures.

The most significant scene in *Mimes* is its final one. Set in a New York subway station, it depicts Leonid undergoing an experience resembling what Fredric Jameson has called the hysterical sublime and diagnosed as a distinctively postmodern predicament.⁸ Here the suffering Leonid becomes immersed in the urban crowd and consequently loses all sense of personal identity, the terrifying perceptual overload the city generates causing an emotional breakdown. The immediate cause of his psychic despair and subsequent disorientation is a shattered love affair. Yet the interest of the scene exceeds its context in the story in that it links the character's collapse, his inability to organize the events of his life coherently, to an encounter with a threatening mechanized environment. Moreover, the crisis involves not only uncertainties about the relation of the human to the technological but also the difference between male and female. As the body/machine complex coalesces with a panic pertaining to gender difference, it becomes apparent that for Leonid (and on a more self-conscious level Dahlberg) the threat of the machine is indissociable from the threat of the feminine.

Fleeing "madly through the evil city" that appears "to him like a solid cube spinning on its edges," the amusingly agitated character arrives at the entrance to a subway. Dahlberg presents the character's descent to the platform as a journey to the underworld, emphasizing the psychically disquieting experience mechanized systems of transportation may produce.⁹ Standing on the platform as the train arrives, Leonid perceives it to be a gigantic beast. Hurlled into the midst of an agglomerated mass

of humanity, the character's ability to demarcate the self from what is outside it vanishes. As the boundaries between his body, other bodies, and his mechanized surroundings erode, the panicked, insecure male loses his sense of agency and identity. All motive power now goes to the machine, Leonid having ceded control over his physical movement through space to the "neolithic colossus."

Reaching the platform he saw looming up before him a terrible monster with garish green, amber yellow, and brothel red eyes. As a black ichthyosaurus, it swung about the curb of the grottolike tunnel. The masses, with one collective instinct, fell upon one another and were pushed headlong through the doors by the guards. Losing all personal identity he became completely absorbed into the press of bodies, as a speck of consciousness into Nirvana. The doors being automatically slammed to, the huge train, like a neolithic colossus, was set in motion. (125)

The tiny Leonid is doubly immersed here. Uncomfortably trapped in the surging crowd, he is then engulfed by the monstrous machine. Dahlberg genders the "ichthyosaurus," its "brothel" eyes vaguely associating the train with female sexuality. Literally propelled into the subway car, Leonid figuratively re-enters the body of the mother. From this perspective the plunging of the character into the car evokes a forced reversal of the birth process. His loss of motor control at the door to the electrically powered beast is analogous to a state of fetal or infantile helplessness at the threshold of the maternal womb. As the car gets moving, Leonid experiences an equally undesirable mingling of his body with the feminized machine. The "horrific cacophony" produced by the grinding of "the prodigious wheels" of the train along the steel rails of the track engenders "on his brain tone clashes which welled up into a grandiose discord." "The wheels" seem "to be revolving within his febrile temples and constantly throbbing against his aching head." "His heart" pounds "up and down within his chest, wildly" pulsating to the "insensate rhythm" that "the terrific hammer blows" of the wheels on the rails smash out. Fatigued by the concussive, shocking assault on his senses, mentally and physically overtaxed by the unwanted, involuntary fusion with the train, Leonid falls "into a sort of feverish drowse" (126). Over-stimulation of the nervous system has led to a depression of the vital processes.

The agonized retreat from the impression of a technological intrusion into the natural body is associated here with a youthful male's anguished sense of being overwhelmed by the maternal. The character's feeling that he is being consumed by the mechanical entity is also experienced

as an absorption into a feminized (albeit faintly), undifferentiated mass. When Dahlberg rewrites this scene at the end of *From Flushing to Calvary* the associations will be enriched such that the anxiety manifested will encompass not just the subway and the mother but an American form of public amusement too (Coney Island). In other words, his handling of the relation of literature to collective entertainment was consistently coupled with his handling of gender distinctions. To come to terms as a writer with technologically mediated entertainment was, for Dahlberg, to come to terms with the feminine. Aesthetics and sexuality commingle in the writer's struggle to establish a self in relation to two associated others (women and amusement). Complicating this arrangement further is his battle to ground his identity in relation to urban-industrial modernity. That Dahlberg condenses women, the city, amusement, and the machine in this manner allows us to correlate Leonid's concerns about his masculinity and his status as a lyric poet with the character's distress as he mimetically assimilates himself to his urban environment.

Leonid next proceeds to lose all perceptual control over his field of vision, those around him appearing as distorted versions of himself, the reflected images flowing into an undifferentiated, formless background. In this proliferation of mirror reflections, narcissistic delight gives way to paranoid terror. External reality is no longer a pleasing mirror of the self but a horrifying array of turbulently swirling, indistinct, and indistinguishable shapes that refuse to stop moving erratically.

His cheeks flushed with burning fever, his vision obscured, he saw those opposite him as through a convex and concave mirror. Everything before him became grotesque and unreal. The figures, the arms of which were suspended to fixed straps, became hallucinations, were as theatrical marionettes made animate through wires and ventriloquism. A veritable medley of tawdry colors, jaundiced, hectic and pallid placards, danced before his eyes like cowering Greek mimes. The waxen faces, become a series of masks, could no longer be differentiated from the splotched advertisements above them – a sepulchral madhouse in motion. They were as pigments that had mixed and run together. (126)

As the living, breathing body is replaced by the wires and wood of inanimate puppets or marionettes, and the human face turns into a wax replication or a paper mask, Dahlberg could be staking out a grotesque counterpart to more classically oriented strains of modernist art. Plagued by the rush of sensations in a crowded metro, Leonid does not turn to natural imagery to organize social reality: the apparition of these faces is *not* like petals on a wet, black bough. But he accomplishes this task by going

backward in literary historical terms rather than forward. For the scene derives from Poe's "The Conqueror Worm," as does in a sense *Mimes* as a whole. Like his precursor, Dahlberg characterizes human existence as a "motley drama" in which persons are no more than puppets, mimes, flying "hither and thither," coming and going at "the bidding of vast formless things." By the end of the narrative, Leonid's self-knowledge has brought him to the point where he feels he is a "mere automaton" (126), his movements and thoughts driven by outside forces ("he no more understood how he lived or breathed"). As the train jerks to a halt, the protagonist, hurled against his seat, falls into a fit of convulsions, his body shaking "spasmodically" as if in the throes of death. Coughing painfully, he feels the vibrations of the subway ring through "his hollow chest like the fatalistic knocking of the Fifth Symphony of Beethoven" (126); he now moves with "absolute mechanical resignation" (126).¹⁰

At the end of "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia" (1935), Roger Caillois comments on roughly the same type of phobic, depersonalizing experience Dahlberg represents at the conclusion of his first extended autobiographical fiction. Drawing insight from the behavior of insects, Caillois argues that the anguished perception of space as an overwhelming, devouring force expresses the "mimetic assimilation" of the "animate to the inanimate," which inevitably leads to a sense of lifelessness and loss of identity. Proposing that biological (and magical) phenomena have "a common root" with psychic experience, he speculates on the possibility that the transgression of the boundary between living beings and their environment is a process comparable to Freud's concept of the death drive. This "*attraction by space*" is, Caillois suggests, "as elementary and mechanical as are tropisms," and its effect is that "life seems to lose ground, blurring in its retreat the frontier between the organism and the milieu."¹¹ Human beings and other animate entities have an innate tendency to renounce feeling and consciousness by assimilating themselves to their inanimate surroundings. The relationship of imitation, mechanization, death, psychic and physical dissolution that Caillois posits discloses a conceptual constellation of negativity that compulsively recurs in Dahlberg's literary theory and practice. It is as if his critical impulses continuously pushed him beyond his aesthetic principles so that he repeatedly interferes with the self-preservative aspirations of his own autobiographically expressive undertaking.

In *Mimes*, the corollary to Leonid's spatial disorientation, to his sense that he has been overcome by his oppressive surroundings, is a temporal

breakdown. Leonid's hysteria involves a loss of historicity on a personal level: he can no longer organize his past experiences into a coherently substantive, narrative form. "Fixedly he [Leonid] contemplated his life as a series of disconnected, isolated moments without meaning or sequence – mere nothingness" (125). But on a more reflexive level, Dahlberg too has yet to resolve this problem. All he has done thus far is to copy and restate Poe's critique of American transcendentalism. The composer of *Mimes*, like his characters, has yet to invent an appropriate way of handling his mechanized surroundings and in so doing make a genuine contribution to the growth and development of literary history.

Four years later, in "Ariel in Caliban," Dahlberg articulates explicitly the challenge *Mimes* communicates implicitly; and in the process begins to construct a lineage of artists who have successfully confronted a changed environment. It is as if an act of self-mockery, in allowing Dahlberg to overcome his old-fashioned artistic tendencies, cleared the ground for a theoretical articulation of a more up-to-date aesthetic. Though published in 1929, before his first autobiographical fiction *Bottom Dogs* appeared in print in the United States, "Ariel in Caliban" was almost certainly composed after the novel.¹² The critical essay formulates in positive terms the artistic task *Mimes* outlines negatively: the burden of the artist in the machine age is to renegotiate the relation of the self to his urban, mechanized surroundings, a transaction in which grotesque amusements may play a significant role.

The essay situates historically the aesthetic and philosophical burdens of the contemporary artist, identifying the ontological and representational or expressive predicament of the American writer as particular to modernity. Mechanization remains at the forefront of the discussion while the feminine recedes into the background. Yet we might say that the latter's place is taken by the freak; the replacement of one by the other is justified in the logic of Dahlberg's discourse by virtue of their common existence outside the dominant (masculine) norm and their shared affiliation with artifice. Thus his autobiographical protagonists yearn for but remain wary of human oddities, women, and technology (in the form of mechanized amusements).

First published in the magazine *This Quarter* in 1929, "Ariel in Caliban" strives to formulate an aesthetic that will reconcile the self with its urban-industrial surroundings. Dahlberg calls for the development of a grotesque expressionism that will project the spiritual (Ariel) outward into the monstrous urban landscape (Caliban) and disclose the degree to

which the city has penetrated the human. The grotesque body becomes a crossroads or relay point between the self and its mechanized environment. And American mass amusements like the dime museum display of human oddities, Coney Island amusement park attractions, vaudeville, and slapstick film furnish the basis for this nascent aesthetic.

Dahlberg begins "Ariel in Caliban" by identifying the writers, mostly European, who have set the stage for the development of what he calls "an aesthetic of diablerie," one that takes as its point of departure the fact that today "life and nature [are] thoroughly mechanized."¹³ Flaubert and (with qualifications) Oscar Wilde are cited as important precursors, for if "too many things disgusted" the latter, and he often failed to "realize the lyric possibilities of the commonplace," he did on occasion "sense the unreality of a wet street or a city gas lamp" (*Samuel Beckett*, 3). Baudelaire is a more essential forerunner, his awareness of "the mechanical note in nature" and preference for "rouged women and metal trees" is a step beyond "sentimental and insincere," ridiculously affected attempts to "write a pastoral" today (3).¹⁴ Poe is mentioned in passing, while Sherwood Anderson is praised with reservations. His work is "too reportorial and has nothing of the grotesque that arises from artistic monism. The emotions and the objects upon which it impinges are too separable" such that "he never enters into the life of these inanimate things" (6). Too objective and realist and therefore insufficiently subjective and expressionist, Anderson has not fused the inside and the outside, has not set up a system of circulation such that the attributes of the animate person pass into the impersonal city.¹⁵ More impressive is Joyce's achievement. He has "done with ordinary Dublin what no artist has with the subway and surface cars of New York" (5), making the city give perceptual shape to what would otherwise remain invisible: "modern experience."

Surprisingly, Dahlberg clarifies the significance of *Ulysses*, Joyce's "intense personalization of Dublin life," by comparing his literary accomplishment to what amusement park and dime museum attractions have done. *Ulysses* is "like Coney Island where the scenic railway, the waxen figures lying in state, the merry-go-round which seems to move in a void and whose jangling music creates the illusion of a vacuum, like Noah's Ark in which the tragedy of machinery is bodied forth by an ingenious materialization of biblical symbols – like Hubert's [sic] Museum whose freaks and hermaphrodites by virtue of their unquestionable reality shadow forth an imaginary world" (6). Dahlberg draws

on the imagery of human oddities not to reinforce mainstream notions of normality but to contest these. The metaphorical use of the body of the freak as a figure for a general psychic predicament unsettles the reassuring spatial separation and correlative difference in identity the dime museum displays often worked to stabilize.¹⁶ To the extent that we are spiritually penetrated by our artificial surroundings, we are as internally unnatural as a human oddity appears to be on the outside. Dime museum freaks are representative because in the machine age we are all aberrant or anomalous, at least when measured against obsolete notions of what it means to be a human being. Noting the allusion to the fairgrounds is especially crucial not only because Dahlberg will soon attempt to reproduce the sensory appeal of the place in a section of *From Flushing to Calvary* but also because Coney Island stands “as America’s first and probably still most symbolic commitment to mechanized leisure.”¹⁷ From Dahlberg’s perspective, then, the American amusement park was ahead of the American writer in the quest to fashion a critically expressive aesthetic that will be adequate to “the social and economic conditions of a life and nature thoroughly mechanized” (4).

The essay also tackles the problem of how one should represent characters under such circumstances, and here forms of public amusement are most valuable. Two recent films from the German UFA cinema, shown at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, provide some useful clues. Anne Boleyn in their production of *Henry the Eighth* and the maidservant in *Backstairs* are significant because their gestures “suggest a puppet – but a puppet bent and gnarled by suffering. Here, tragedy, in its true Greek sense has transmuted the face into a mask and the body, its twists and contortions, into a marionette” (4). Since the lamentable truth about contemporary existence is that individuals lack agency and are at the mercy of their setting, they are most accurately depicted as spiritless automatons, things without human volition. An equally worthwhile resource for the writer in search of an appropriate technique is “the American Vaudeville Theatre.” The entertainment (as Nathanael West also realized) is “a rich library” where “a speculative mind interested in the comedy and mechanics of gestures” can find much to observe and learn from, especially by “watching the puppet-like movements of the jiggers” (8). Dahlberg offers one other cultural practice as a model for aspiring, machine-age artists: silent screen comedy, where one can observe the “inelastic jerks and movements” (4) of Harry Langdon.

Henri Bergson’s theory of comedy is a precedent, as Dahlberg acknowledges, for the aesthetic emphasis on the inanimate and the

involuntary in depictions of persons. In “Laughter” (1900), the argument is repeatedly made that “the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.”¹⁸ What Dahlberg has done then is radicalize this thesis into a philosophy of modern existence and in the process brings out its more mournful aspects: “there is another element upon which Bergson has not touched and that is the tragic suggested by the mechanical” (4). Any aesthetic that proposes to do justice to the material conditions of existence in the machine age must adapt to this change in circumstances:

The metaphysics which arise from machinery and mechanism has more aesthetic value than one which has its roots in naïve phenomena. Philosophy and art, like all physical processes, are ever becoming, and must of necessity move toward a nature with mechanical and industrial encrustations than return to one with a pastoral décor. (8)

In “Ariel” Dahlberg articulates and affirms two seemingly contradictory processes. On the one hand, he praises under the aegis of “an intense personalization” anthropomorphic embodiments of external reality. We might call this a grotesque prosthesis in that the apparent effect is to extend the scope and power of the collective body by attaching to it the inorganic world. The animated city becomes a part of the people who live in it, making up for the physical deficiencies of its inhabitants. On the other hand, Dahlberg remarks repeatedly on the unsettling intrusion of the outside world into the mind and body of subjects, urban, industrialized reality penetrating and disabling the human being. As the city and the machine come inside, persons are transformed into things, reified. If the end result of moving in one direction is a grotesquely embodied city, the effect of traveling in the other is the grotesque caricature of persons as puppets or marionettes.

This process of exchange may be described in rhetorical terms. The relationship between the city dweller and the urban landscape is narcissistic in the sense that it involves the projection onto external reality of emotional properties of living, human beings. In addition to being invested with a grotesque body (Caliban), one’s inanimate environment is also personified. The relay also occurs in the opposite direction: the qualities of objective reality are transported into living persons who can thus be conceived as dead matter or machines. The end result of this much less desirable, reverse aspect of the dynamic process is reification: human beings are degraded to the status of mere things. The myriad, systematic crossings Dahlberg’s aesthetic theory calls for (yet which his

practice also reacts against) are facilitated through the use of two tropes. But the transfer of attributes from one place to another and vice-versa may be accounted for more comprehensively in terms of a different figure of speech: chiasmus. It is the structure of this linguistic figure of reciprocal circulation that governs the numerous transactions (self/world; male/female; human/mechanical; natural/artificial) Dahlberg's early writing ceaselessly enacts. (It may even explain the basis for his literary enterprise as a whole: the transference of aesthetic traits from American amusements to the autobiographical novel is a crossing of sorts.)

It remains unclear whether the artist merely records or helps enact these two processes, but the interplay between the two is evidently asymmetrical. The insertion of the external into the internal and consequent emptying out of the substance or spirit of the living is more prominent in the essay. Caliban tends to obliterate Ariel. This is the condition that elements of American amusement make perceptible and intelligible. (The waxen figures "lying in state" are imitations of death, the merry-go-round moves "in a void," its jangling music creating "the illusion of a vacuum," and the biblical figures of Noah's Ark materialize, "body forth" "the tragedy of machinery.") The Coney Island exhibits and rides render in visible form the technified condition of human existence in the machine age, the depersonalized state of nothingness from which we all suffer.

The novel Dahlberg would soon set to work on constitutes a practical corollary to the theory articulated in "Ariel in Caliban." *From Flushing to Calvary* is additionally important in that it broaches the possibility that the emptiness of the subject can be determined in a more precise sociological manner. This sequel to the autobiographical *Bottom Dogs* concerns itself with the purposelessness impoverished and excluded individuals feel, in part due to their lack of political awareness. Rather than characterize collective spiritual despair as a general problem, in this book Dahlberg points to the absence of class-consciousness as the cause of the disenfranchised individual's dejected state of mind. Still a couple of years away from joining the Communist Party,¹⁹ Dahlberg had already begun to politicize his aesthetics, and it is on the threshold of his involvement (a short-lived one) with the political organization that he completed his most enduring novel.

Flushing is also a comically inflected analysis of the psychic dilemmas of Lorry Lewis, its profoundly troubled protagonist, who anxiously negotiates his vexed relationship to his gravely ill mother. This fraught familial relationship is densely intertwined in the book with the character's ambivalence toward mechanized recreation, a visit to Coney Island proving

traumatic and precipitating an emotional breakdown. More intriguing, elements of carnivalized fun are oddly conjoined to maternal images in the youth's psyche, both alternately attracting and repulsing him. Put differently, mechanized recreation and the mother tend to merge in the text because both phenomena are phobic objects capable of triggering intense, symptomatic reactions in the shocked male subject. The oscillations of unconscious desire thus emerge as familial *and* social investments. Abjection is a private mental condition paradoxically alleviated and exacerbated by public modes of collective play.

We can catch a preliminary glimpse of Dahlberg's penchant for layering social, psychosexual, *and representational* anxieties onto twentieth-century entertainment technologies by looking at a short piece he composed with the intention of including it in *Flushing*, though he ended up publishing it (in *Pagany* in 1931) separately: "Graphophone Nickelodeon Days."

"GRAPHOPHONE NICKELODEON DAYS"

And I think it can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. (Charles Olson, "Projective Verse")

A fictional reminiscence that compresses much of the autobiographical material Dahlberg used in his first two novels, "Graphophone" takes as its point of departure a three-term analogy between mental, literary, and mechanical recording processes. The analogy is grounded in the fact that the brain, printed matter or verbal discourse, and new technical media all share the capacity to preserve acoustic and optical information. The piece implicitly affirms therefore that autobiography, considered as a supplement to memory, may now take its formal cues from two recently developed storage technologies. The aim of Dahlberg's compositional experiment is to achieve the status of a media link between (silent) film, the graphophone, and writing. The implication of its title, which refers to a type of phonograph (see figure 4²⁰) and to the theatrical venue where early movies were viewed, is first that human memory may be materially or technologically conceived of as a combination of celluloid and a record disc.²¹ The psyche records aural and optical data, which are therefore available for future projections and playbacks. The literary text is designed to perform both these functions. And if writing is like a technologically mediated recording process, reading is comparable to the



Fig. 4 Columbia Graphophone. c. 1905. Advertisement in New York Hippodrome Program

watching of a mental film with musical accompaniment. In Dahlberg's cinematic prose, the page is an internalized screen with sound. (That the remembrance exceeds the eye and ear and involves the perceiving body in its entirety is evident in that "Graphophone" is an attempt to reproduce the serial flow of olfactory, tactile, and gustatory data as well. It is the total sensory response to his outside surroundings that the autobiographical subject "could never erase."²²)

Yet the significance of the innovative piece is that in the end it empties the familiar comparison between literary and technologically mediated representations of its positive contents. In an oft-quoted formulation, Agee *seems* to support a more externalized variant of the analogy in question, affirming, in *Famous Men*, his faith in the representational abilities of the camera in relation to objective as opposed to subjective reality. If handled appropriately, the camera, a "some ways limited, some ways more capable, eye" is, "like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments:" "incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth" and both are therefore epistemological ideals for the documentary writer.²³ Dahlberg starts out with a related belief that writing modeled on the moving picture camera and the phonograph can record the rush of sensory impressions and in the process protect past subjectivities from vanishing without a trace. But he also unsettles (in frustration) this assumption. Beginning with the aesthetic intention of taking the media revolution of 1880 as a means of enhancing literature's power to recreate a visible and audible world,²⁴ Dahlberg's critical rigor pushes him to reject the idea that a literary text that can be read "as music is listened to or a film watched" (*Famous Men*, xv).

A personal recollection of the pleasures commercial entertainments provided the author during his youth, the highly crafted "Graphophone" alludes to a wealth of early twentieth-century cultural materials. For the autobiographical protagonist, "it all came back, the taste of it, the tang and brine of it." "All that he was and could never completely unknow all those down-and-out days went carouselling through his brain ragtiming through his head" ("Graphophone," 306; spacing in the original). The fond recollection conveys the essential role amusements played in his everyday life, forming a constitutive element of his existence as a member of a relatively downtrodden social group. The material artifacts mentioned appear amid a dizzying rush of remembered images – a kind of projective prose. The recollections include lyrics excerpted from popular tunes, the sports and political figures once found on the "oblong pasteboard pictures" accompanying the purchase of cigarettes, the "funnies,"

“penny arcade moving pictures,” “slot machine phonographs,” and a “one cent muscle machine.” The character also remembers live forms of entertainment: “lyric moving picture house, open air tents, lawdie lawdie tabernacle sermons” and “pimpish gaslight joints” (308). The period of time the reminiscence covers stretches from the days of the “rough riders” and visits to the “ringling bros.” and “barnum and bailey” circuses (313) to 1917, when America entered the First World War and “keith’s circuit vaudeville [and] slapstick” were still in the air (317). That Dahlberg devotes an entire section of the prose poem to a live performance given by Lew Dockstader’s minstrel troupe suggests the lasting impression it must have made on the writer when still a child. Reproducing the comic routine of the opening act, he remarks as well upon the audience’s delighted response: as one jokester sings and the other mocks him, the “pulsing and motorthrobbing” crowd becomes frenzied; there is “stampeding of feet everywhere” and “thick yellow spudblocks of laughter jam the air” (314). Dahlberg then hints that the joys the show furnishes its overly enthused patrons had a politically subversive edge as well, hyperbolically characterizing the general impact of its central monologist on the nation as comparable to social and political upheaval. “Lew Dockstader who shook the country like the russian revolution of 1905” (315).²⁵

Immediately after this line, however, Dahlberg begins to put his representational undertaking into question. For example, the epigraph (from *Peer Gynt*) to the next section reads “‘layers and layers of sensation and no heart in it.’” The shifting implication of the internalized museum that Dahlberg employs twice in “Graphophone” also marks the critical turn. Early in the piece the recollected cultural materials have constituted for the young protagonist “his boyhood louvre” (312). Whereas here the figure connotes the fascination of the objects the child found around him in the outside world, the later use of the trope frames the psychic return to the material past as the observation of relics on display in a deserted, barren cultural institution: “up the hall of the memory-membrane tissues of the nose, clinking, clinking against the metaphysical corridors and stirring up the museum – desolation in his blood” (316). No longer immersed in the animated world of amusements, the protagonist’s mausoleum-like consciousness retains only the unsatisfying idea of the substantial things and persons formerly available for direct sensory contact. If the displacement from outside to inside and consequent loss of substantiality is a common motif in narratives of recollection, its presence here nevertheless clarifies the nature of “Graphophone” as an act of mourning. A personal expression of grief in the wake of the separation of the self from the milieu in

which he once found sensual pleasures readily available, the piece also, in a crucial detail, suggestively registers referential absence as an inherent aspect of mechanized reproduction.

Having just characterized New York in the twenties as a “syphilitic body” decorated with “jaundiced electric lights diseasing the night,” Dahlberg further qualifies the appearance of this object as “a cancerous blurred negative” (318). The effect of this last characterization is unsettling in the context of a work predicated on the virtues of *positive* images as the means of re-establishing contact with an original perceptual experience, of reinhabiting the body. By remarking upon, if only in passing, the stage during which the illusion that the referent is still physically present is temporarily displaced by an encounter with the materiality of the medium, Dahlberg reverses the thrust of his “intermedial”²⁶ analogy. Though adhering throughout to the implicit equation between literature, the psyche, and technological recording devices, Dahlberg ends up inverting the significance of the relationship. In the end, what the assorted media (writing, film, and the phonograph) are shown to have in common with the mind is that the traces they preserve all presuppose the irretrievable absence of the referential thing.

The brain, mechanized representation, and writing are like one another in that all fail to bring the world the body once inhabited back to life. Thinking autobiography and memory along the lines of technical processes has the unexpected effect, then, of drawing attention to the mechanical aspects of literary and mental processes of recollection. If the dialectic whereby the absence of the thing is the precondition of its illusory presence in a representation has been the theme of much critical discourse on the arts in the twentieth century, “Graphophone” suggests the contribution the rise of mechanical amusements made to this development. The writer’s practical investment in new entertainment technologies stimulated a theoretical awareness of representational problems pertinent to autobiographical literary undertakings. The last feature of “Graphophone” I would like to take up is Dahlberg’s use of oedipal motifs and tropes to account for his altered relation to the field of commercial entertainment over the course of the first two decades of the twentieth century. Early in the prose poem the cheap attractions surrounding him both excite and frustrate the child’s libidinal impulses. For instance, an optical device gives him a goal without allowing him to reach it: “get a peep at *venus* through the telescope for only a nickle! cheap at half the price but why through a telescope” (307). In the same memory block, desire for the female star of the stage drama “*beverly of graustark*” plagues

the boy at night: “her talcum-powdered lotion-creamed breasts – a long moving picture soul kiss hot tossing nights, her thighs whorling like an electric barber pole: the penny arcade automatic piano jangling away in spasms” (307). The lusts American entertainment provoked in the boy at the time are also evident in his memory of one of the women who worked in his mother’s barber shop as having “legs [that] were lost in the amusement park grotto of her shroud-black clothskirt” (309). The incestuous dimension of the child’s erotic passion for older women becomes strongly apparent toward the end of the prose poem. While specifying the First World War as the force that destroyed his initial cultural milieu, or rather the legal sanctions on the entertainment field the war precipitated,²⁷ Dahlberg figuratively conveys this repressive action as the father reasserting his rights over the mother’s body. In other words, wartime restrictions on the nature of popular amusement in America are characterized as the prohibition of a primary object of desire. The following verbal compound establishes the conflation of the historical and the familial in the protagonist’s mind:

you goddam son of bitchin’ bolsheviks, the big parades, the war, the War, THE FATHER, SON, AND THE HOLY GHOST: THE WAR: *all ye millions I embrace thee* the redlight districts were shut down, puberty skyscraper erections, tallest building in the world, bigger and better wars, *all ye millions I embrace thee*, you goddam son of bitchin’ bolsheviks, *then what are you doing over here, over there, over there*

The yanks are coming . . . the yanks are coming, puberty skyscraper erections, the vaginal walls of jericho are falling, (317–18)

If the capitalized liturgical phrase registers strikingly the paternal dynamic operative here, the more surreptitious introduction of this relation in the oath (“son of bitchin’”) does so in a more significant manner, associating a political threat to authority (the Russian Revolution) with the child’s attempt at usurpation. The father’s reassertion of his rights then takes the form of an encircling (“*I embrace thee*”) of the domestic arenas of commercial entertainment from which all interlopers are henceforth excluded (“the redlight districts were shut down”). And it is tempting to read this as a drastically condensed allegory of the historical appropriation and transformation of vulgar working-class amusements into forms suitable for more respectable audiences. In any event, it follows, given the oedipal resonance of the passage, that these arenas are tantamount to the maternal body. The discovery of the invading offspring (“*what are you doing over here*”) leads to his expulsion, to his being pushed “*over there, over there,*” away from the tempting yet forbidden territory of

what we might call the national maternal entertainment body. Once he regains control over the sphere of pleasure, once he successfully defends his territory, the father as American military force will be free to return to and satisfy himself upon the domestic body of his wife. In the citation this task is both imminent and accomplished – the verb in the phrase “*The yanks are coming*” denoting approach yet connoting climax. Lastly, the conjoining of “puberty skyscraper erections” and “vaginal walls of jericho . . . falling” may be taken as an evocation of the threat of castration, this threat experienced in relation to the sight of the mother’s genitalia.

The resolution to this crisis, which Dahlberg does not pursue in “Graphophone,” would be for the maturing boy to recognize that he is on the verge of becoming a man. He may anticipate the acquisition of the phallus and the fixing, however precarious, of his sexual identity if he submits to the paternally imposed order and agrees to select a new object of desire. Given the evasive yet firm association between the body of the mother and the realm of commercial entertainment, the correlative burden placed upon the artist would be to find a replacement for the carnivalesque joy his original cultural milieu provided. However, it is quickly revealed in the following section that the twenties New York nightlife is an inadequate substitute as the character expresses his extreme loathing for the city by figuring it (with some help from the Bible) as a diseased female prostitute. After citing a passage from “the revelation”: “BABYLON THE GREAT, MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH,” he begins the concluding section of the piece as follows: “NEW YORK, the syphilitic body of god, its jaundiced electric lights diseasing the night, welfare island, a cancerous blurred negative” (318). Where, then, is one to find a satisfying substitute for the pleasures of turn-of-the-century carnivalized amusement? Can formally inventive literature provide these same joys? Dahlberg allows the tensions this quest engenders to unfold in the latter portions of the novel he published in the following year where he again explores psychosexual matters and the field of mechanized amusements in conjunction.

CONEY ISLAND ABJECTION

A Coney Island of the mind. The amusement shacks are running full blast. (Henry Miller, “Into the Night Life . . .”)

Throughout *Flushing* the barriers between bodies and machines, mothers and sons, persons and landscapes, life and death, the animate and