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“Who the hell are you”: Kenneth Fearing and the Effacement of Identity

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ABSTRACT

Kenneth Fearing is considered a minor poet of the 1920s and 30s New York circle of proletarian poets. At his peak, he published a variety of poems that captured the alienating powers of modern society. Using cynicism to analyze consumerism’s influence on the individual, he focuses on the expiration of the individual’s voice within a city subjective to capital-controlled mass production. A theme pervading his poems is the inability to attain significant interpersonal connections. This failure, I argue, results from mass media’s infiltration into daily life and Fearing’s characters exhibit an inability to communicate; instead, they suffer from a separation brought on by the consumer world around them and their own internal confusion.¹

KEY WORDS: consumerism, mass media, newspaper, isolation, identity.

The December 1933 edition of *Americana* contained a report of an event of unprecedented status: consumers were revolting against the commodity advertising market. Led by one Thomas Uppercue, the “Consumers” paraded down Broadway carrying signs replying to product advertisements. Some read “We’re going to kick with our ATHLETES FOOT,” others wrote, “They tell our wives they have ‘THAT HAGGARD LOOK’” (144).

¹ This article is a revised version of a dissertation chapter from *Nathanael West, Henry Miller, Kenneth Fearing and the Literary Competition with Consumer Consumption* (2013).

What sounds like a credible revolt against the consumer marketplace, Don Langan's fictional parade was merely an artistic depiction of what might happen if current society actually rose up against the media industry. During the same period as this piece of public satire, Greenwich Village artist Kenneth Fearing was publishing his most critical poems, incorporating equivalent media targets utilized by Langan. A decade before, Fearing transitioned from Chicago to New York, intensifying his exposure to a consumerism that vibrated outward across the country. Fearing incorporated observations of mass industry—an integral tool for consumerism—into his work, illustrating the extent to which media presence and consumer fetishism infiltrated his everyday observations. Evincing a cynical tone towards the spectacle of modernity, Fearing uses cynicism as a means to analyze consumerism's influence on the individual. Through this critical perspective, his poetry focuses on the expiration of the individual's voice within a city subjective to capital-controlled mass production.

This essay will initially examine what I believe to be pertinent background information concerning Fearing's transition from Oak Grove, Illinois to the media-infused metropolis of New York City. While Fearing may have been most widely known for his poetry and his successful novel, *The Big Clock* (1946), his essays and reviews for *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*, as well as his pulp magazine publications, expanded his daily writing activities to encompass more than poetry and novel writing. As Robert M. Ryley notes in the introduction to *Collected Poems Kenneth Fearing* (1994), Fearing's work encompassed both poetry and freelance writing (xiii). A few difficulties related to the examination of Fearing's personal and professional career is that comparatively few biographical details exist. We know only the essentials concerning his family and his relationships with close friends; personal correspondence between Fearing and other writers that might help to provide an insight into his authorial mindset, is sparse.

As I will develop, Fearing portrays characters placed in diverse environments, inundated by the presence of consumerism and mass media. In these enigmatic figures there is the verisimilitude of the poet remaining intentionally hidden behind a created façade, in many ways parallel to “the maelstrom of modern life” (Berman 16) being generated partly through consumer preoccupation that focused upon objects instead of individuals. Margery Latimer, who dated Fearing for three years during the 1920s, accused Fearing of holding “satanic conceptions of people” (Latimer). I will demonstrate how such a claim may be applicable to his poetic characters; however, my argument will strive to exhibit how media competition and effacement of the individual drives the human essence from Fearing’s society.

Moving to New York City and setting up residence in Greenwich Village, Fearing did not relish the Village atmosphere often touted as being the epicenter of New York City’s creative output. For example, in November 1929, playwright Lionel Abel recalls meeting Kenneth Fearing in the company of Lionel Stander at a Village speakeasy. Abel’s recollection of the conversation with the now jaded Fearing, illustrates Fearing’s disregard for the bohemian lifestyle representative in other villagers. Frustration arising from the attempts to achieve success brought on disillusionment with the entire Village scene. Fearing condemns the Village in his diatribe:

“Lionel Stander is going to tell you that this part of New York is blessed with insouciance and spirit, that most of the people who live here are wonderful, seeking the beautiful things in life, which they are prevented from finding elsewhere. According to him, they...,” he pointed around the gin mill, “and we, and all the people in the other ginmills at this hour—at least in the ones bounded by Greenwich Street and Second Avenue [...]—and all those people now in their studios painting pictures or banging on typewriters, writing,

singing, dancing, kibitzing, screwing, listening to records, are all the salt of the earth. Well, I don't think so. I'm not, I know that, and Stander isn't. [...]. As for you, young man, stay here in this place you think is like Heaven, and you won't be either." (qtd. in Abel 15–16)

This caveat failed to dampen Abel's spirits, but the reality that the Village artists appeared to be pretentious and arrogant denizens suggests, as Abel himself does, that the Village was filled predominantly with "people who had never done anything" (16). Like the Village residents Fearing lambastes, there is a sense of desperation in Fearing's characters as in the poem "Invitation," which outlines a place where its members "dine, while the destitute actor shakes hands cordially in an uptown bar" (CP 77–78).

By 1931, Fearing had grown repulsed by the artistic competition of New York City. In letters to his wife, Rachel Meltzer, he refers to New York as a hell, a place where even with all of his efforts he was still incapable of making ends meet. Leading up to and into the Depression, the evolving world of the Village was becoming decisively more mainstream, and some of the artists associated with the milieu "were in semi-revolt against the rapidly commercialized Bohemia" (Gregory and Zaturenska 462).² Not surprisingly, the Depression hurt the writing industry most. David Welky, in *Everything Was Better in America: Print Culture in the Great Depression*, summarizes the consequences of the crash on the print industry: "Newspaper circulation fell by 12 percent in the early 1930s. Magazine sales dropped by about 15 percent between 1929 and 1933. Sales of books slid from more than 214 million to about 111 million" (10). In light of these statistics, Fearing's success in publication

² In the May 1933 edition of *New Masses*, Joseph Freeman would lament the loss of the influences under which the Village had evolved into a artists bohemia: "I speak of this bohemia in the past tense because the Village I knew is dead. If another has arisen in its place I do not know it. The old one affected American literature and art" (19).

is an even greater accomplishment during this period. To focus on his work, Fearing regularly went back to Oak Park, dedicating his time to both poetry and novel writing. In a letter dated February 3rd, 1932, Fearing wrote Rachel that he was "pushing the novel as rapidly as possible, being anxious to get back to NY—and some good, healthy starving" ("Letters").

Diversifying his publication avenues separates Fearing's view of authorship from many others who idealized the "writer," distancing themselves from writing as a form of mass commodity. In New York City, Fearing would find publication avenues associated with the more risqué writing genres. Because of this tendency, he strikes me as an opportunist, switching his styles for different publication venues; instead of shunning the pulp magazines, he successfully submitted multiple stories over the years that afforded him an income, albeit, a small one. Writing for "sex pulps" earned him ½ cent per word. While attempting to establish himself as a serious writer, the majority of his income arose from the pulp magazine publications (Santora 314). In order to scrape by as a writer, Fearing published short stories such as "The Gentleman From Paris" in *10 Story Book* (November 1925),³ which touted itself as "A Magazine for Iconoclasts." Eventually, he invented for himself a pseudonym, Kirk Wolff, under which he published some more racy titles.

Competition in the literary field, Fearing believed, inhibited an author's chance of success in publication. Rita Barnard, drawing attention to Fearing's *New Masses* article, "Literary Gelding," reflects that Fearing viewed avenues such as the Book-of-the-Month Club to be creating a further divide between the novice attempts of many writers and those writers who were deemed by the Club to be "marketable" to the masses. His desire for financial stability in the face of such competition led him to conclude that there existed a

³ *10 Story Book*, established in 1901, contained prose and illustrations, with themes running closer to soft-core porn as compared to other short story magazines such as *The Black Cat* (Henry Miller was first published in *The Black Cat*) or the more prestigious, *Short Stories* (Mullen 146).

“grotesque” element in the presence of competition within the arts, resulting in “works of art [that] tend to destroy or invalidate each other” (qtd. in Barnard 53). Facing competition from all media avenues and coupled with the Depression’s financial straits, the 1934 poem “No Credit” finds the poet proselytizing that “None but the fool is paid in full; none but the broker, none but the scab is certain of profit” (*CP* 105). Never sympathetic to the surrounding culture that produced both fodder for his work (Rakosi considered Fearing a prophet of events) and at the same time restricted his ability to succeed, Fearing would write in “Reading, Writing, and the Rackets,” published in 1956, that “[n]ews, common sense, good literature—these are whatever the voice of communication unanimously, and often, say they are” (“Reading” xv). Bitterness concerning the struggles for financial achievement eventually drew Fearing into blaming the media industry that had once furnished the material for his most accomplished poetry. While it seems that in his earlier poetic efforts as well as his success with *The Big Clock*, Fearing was at times able to pacify this mysterious “voice of communication;” in most cases, though, he suffered through a mute welcoming. “Kenneth Fearing may have been too practical when he used to say,” noted M. L. Rosenthal, “that books of poetry should be printed on some edible substance; the fewer copies sold, the more the author would be able to eat” (136).

Evolution of poetic form occurs across Fearing’s first fifteen years in New York City. In undergoing this poetic transition, Fearing began incorporating contemporary culture in order to enliven what he considered a stagnant form of literary expression. An evident argument that both Nathaniel Mills and Rita Barnard formulate by joining Fearing with German social critic Walter Benjamin has obvious grounds due to the relational use-value Fearing placed on the integration of art and cultural milieu. Expounding on Benjamin’s “The Artist as Producer,” Terry Eagleton emphasizes that in order for the artist to rise above the din of modernity, recourse to popularized social forces is needed:

[T]he revolutionary artist should not uncritically accept the existing forces of artistic production, but should develop and revolutionize those forces. In doing so he creates new social relations between artist and audience; he overcomes the contradiction which limits artistic forces potentially available to everyone to the private property of a few, Cinema, radio, photography, musical recording: the revolutionary artist's task is to develop these new media, as well as to transform the older modes of artistic production. (61–62)

Inculcating a reflection of everyday urbanity into literature brings a new vitality to the author's efforts. In every essential sense, Fearing emblemizes Eagleton's delineation of the modern artist. Outlining his own philosophy of writing in the foreword to *Collected Poems*, Fearing makes it clear that new media is the essential element in revitalizing artistic creation: "[t]he idea underlying my poetry [...] is that it must be exciting; otherwise it is valueless. To this end it seemed to me necessary to discard the entire bag of convention and codes usually associated with poetry and to create instead more exacting forms [...] based on the material being written about" (qtd. in Stephan 163). Fearing's adoption of his new codes incorporates mass industry in subject and structure thereby paralleling the ideas of Benjamin. As one critic agrees, "Benjamin and Fearing understood that objects and the pitches that sell them were here to stay; so revolutionary writers needed to learn to use both effectively" (Rabinowitz 394). While Fearing sees the changes modernity has brought about in the homogenization of the individual through its drive to engulf society and make it conform, he is just as critical of the individual's failure to revolt against this type of mass behavior.

Of the style characteristics most attributable to Fearing's poetry is this very direct incorporation of mass culture, and predominantly, newspaper print media. The aura that permeates many of Fearing's poems, as fellow poet William Rose Benét once noted, "[is] like nightmares induced by New York newspapers and modern civilization" (qtd. in Kunitz and

Haycraft 444). Critic Sy Kahn interprets Fearing as a poet who “feared and disdained the power of these media to shape opinion, to obliterate thinking and to emasculate writing; some of his novels and much of his poetry are born of his apprehension and outrage at the spectacle of man’s mind manipulated and controlled by the giant voice of mass communication” (133). Kahn imposes too harsh an interpretation on Fearing’s sociopolitical stance by limiting the apparent diversity of the author’s work to simply methods of expressing fear and outrage. Fearing’s methods, I would argue, follow many modernists of the 1920s who were purposefully adopting media culture for artistic purposes.

Throughout *Angel Arms* are a kaleidoscope of scenes and locations in the poems that prevent meaningful interaction between fellow human beings. This distance arises, in many cases, from the inundation of the senses by the superficial glamour of mass culture. In some instances, it is a paradigmatic character’s inability to “[tear] himself loose from that all-embracing, pristine unconsciousness which claims the bulk of mankind almost entirely” (201), as put forth by C. G. Jung in *Modern Man In Search of a Soul*. Jung argues that the modern man is a rarity since only he is aware of his position in the modern age; however, and as certain Fearing characters seem to illustrate, the average man functions “almost as unconsciously as primitive races” (Jung 201). Human interactions occur, in many cases, within recognizable locations, such as parks, diners, coffee shops, jail cells, and train stations, thereby instilling in the poems the unspoken social connotations of typical behavior for each environment. Environment is paramount: the spaces created leave the reader aware of a void between the characters and the setting. “Andy and Jerry and Joe” illustrates how three Fearing characters are unable to make a connection between the rush of the world around them and their own internal confusion. They fail to link conclusively their inner thoughts to the outer realm as they observe without participating:

We were staring at the bottles in the restaurant window,

We could hear the autos go by,
We were looking at the women on the boulevard,
It was cold,
No one else knew about the things we knew.
We watched the crowd, there was a murder in the papers,
the wind blew hard, it was dark,
We didn't know what to do,
There was no place to go and we had nothing to say,
We listened to the bells, and voices, and whistles, and cars
We moved on,
We weren't dull, or wise, or afraid,
We didn't feel tired, or restless, or happy, or sad.
There were a million stars, a million miles, a million people,
a million words,
A million places and a million years,
We knew a lot of things we could hardly understand.
There were liners at sea, and rows of houses here, and clouds
that floated past us away up in the sky.
We waited on the corner,
The lights were in the stores, there were women on the streets,
Jerry's father was dead,
We didn't know what we wanted and there was nothing to say,
Andy had an auto and Joe had a girl. (CP 61)

Between the three men and their surrounding environment exists what Henri Lefebvre might label an "abstract space." The creation of abstract space, Lefebvre explains, is the indefinite

position of social labor once removed from the process of production, thereby disrupting the flow of social life (49). Sitting in a restaurant, or out on the street corner, the three men stare blankly upon the system of capitalism carrying the city rapidly forward. The buzz of the metropolis encompasses them as autos, bells, lights, and pedestrians, all entering and fading from their perception. No emotional connection occurs. Communication between Andy, Jerry, and Joe becomes superseded by the complete breakdown of individual awareness and direction: “We didn’t know what we wanted and there was nothing to say.” Dialogue exists only in a subordinate position in many of Fearing’s poems; instead, the inhabitants of his poems are confused and appear oppressed, as in the conclusion of “Invitation,” where the multitudes push to achieve their own desires, but gain nothing:

We will be urged by the hunger of the live, trapped by the relentless purposes
of millions,

With the millions we will know this, and we will forget,

We will be aroused, we will make love, we will dream, we will travel through
endless spaces, and we will smile across the room. (*CP* 78)

Although the libido is often present in Fearing’s poetry, it carries no consequence nor drives any lasting personal progress; the millions “forget” as quickly as they become aware of their entrapment; and, ultimately, the “endless spaces” divide individuals into rooms filled with silence. Lefebvre makes clear that abstract space can be manipulated by “authorities” to control the masses, and Fearing exemplifies a similar thought through the idea of being trapped, or controlled, by external and unseen forces. Additionally, Lefebvre questions the “silence of the ‘users’ of this space,” wondering “[w]hy do they allow themselves to be manipulated in ways so damaging to their spaces and their daily life without embarking on massive revolts?” (51). Fearing’s collective answer (“we will be urged by reality confused

with dream")⁴ is demonstrated in his work through the inundation of the senses and the erasure of the self.

Fearing's poetic attention revolves around "the emptiness of the idealizations that drive self-delusion in modern culture" (Nelson 109), as his characters and their environments demonstrate. Delusion with the world brought on by the flashy grandeur of modern advertisements leaves the city inhabitant unresponsive to their environment. But more importantly, Fearing propels his works with what Nathaniel Mills believes is a "critical questioning of capitalist society" (24). The motivations behind consumer expenditure are the types of questions addressed in Fearing's 1935 poem, "When The Fuse Burns Down:"

[...], what can be done with a Lydia Pinkham ad?

What reply can you give to the pawnclerk's decent bid for your silverware?

How are you to be grateful as "Thrift" glares out, in a hundred thousand watts,
 across the ghetto nights; reassured, as the legless, sightless one extends
 his cup; who can be surprised, why, how, as the statesman speaks for
 peace and moves for war? (*CP* 121)

The Lydia Pinkham medicinal product is touted as once being one of the most intensively advertised "women's tonic" in America (Ryley 288), but it is not in the product itself that Fearing is interested but the advertisement—and in particular its uselessness when the pressing reality of another great war looms on the horizon. The high wattage of the thrift store light points the way to thrifty deals on yesterday's dreams and acts as a constant reminder of the emptiness behind the images of success and beauty promoted in copious forms of media. The repeated questioning of the reader emphasizes a media trait; it is a fundamental element of marketing utilized by Fearing who "probably learned [repetition] not from the study of classical prosody but from the observation of advertising techniques"

⁴ "Invitation" (*CP* 77).

(Milner 34). The poem questions where the reader will be left when everything has proven as useless as a Lydia Pinkham advertisement.

Seclusion of self permeates his protagonists who refrain from emotion, are devoid of great depth, and are obscured as individuals by the commodity culture. The narrator of any given poem also compounds these traits through a failure to reveal any internal characteristics. Fearing himself avoids exposure; topics such as death and murder abound in his poetry, yet we get no form of sentimentality. Instead, people are executed, murdered, and die off without the slightest drop of poetic anguish, as in “Jake,” where a gambling buddy is hardly in his grave—“Good-by (forever), old poker-face”—before the remaining gang are making plans for the next poker meeting: “See you at Joe’s next Saturday night” (*CP* 84). Alan Wald emphasizes Fearing’s choice to leave his characters in a taciturn state, noting that Fearing’s “self-conscious experiments were solidly tempered by [the] social necessity [...] that he should refrain from depicting characters whose political consciousness was in advance of the mass of the citizenry” (*Exiles* 323). Additionally, Wald suggests that Fearing “recognized the pettiness and artlessness of his poetic characters’ lives, and he could be acrid and vindictive in his mockery” (*Exiles* 323). There are no heroes to carry forth the flag of individuality because the necessary traits to produce such actions are nullified through the environment around them, as the poem “Now” demonstrates: “Now that we know life: / Breakfast in the morning; office and theater and sleep; no memory; / Only desire and profit are real; / Now that we know life in our own way” (*CP* 65). These people own no historical past that might generate a cultural identity. Unable to extend beyond the monotony and repetition generated as the byproduct of desire and profit, Fearing’s characters are sandwiched between slogans and news reports, glamorized as the final scenes of a movie gone wrong, and packaged as the mechanically reproduced products by which they delineate their inconsequential lives.

"Mass culture is at once the site of oppression and manipulation" in Fearing's world, suggests Alan Wald, it is "also the place where resistance occurs as Fearing uses mass culture forms to expose the industry" (*Writing* 120). Oppression leads to silence, which becomes the unavoidable characteristic of protagonists such as Andy, Jerry, and Joe; many times this silence is the only normalized social behavior expected. The series of four "Aphrodite Metropolis" poems make obvious through the title the ensnared relation between love and pleasure and the central element of the city—market induced consumption. The oppression and manipulation that Wald highlights is present in "Aphrodite Metropolis (3):"⁵

Harry loves Myrtle—He has strong arms, from the warehouse,
 And on Sunday when they take the bus to emerald meadows he doesn't say:
 "What will your chastity amount to when your flesh withers in a little while?"
 No,
 On Sunday, when they picnic in emerald meadows they look at the Sunday
 paper:
 GIRL SLAYS BANKER-BETRAYER
 They spread it around on the grass
 BATH-TUB STIRS JERSEY ROW
 And then they sit down on it, nice.
 Harry doesn't say "Ziggin's Ointment for withered flesh,
 Cures thousands of men and women of moles, warts, red veins, flabby throat,
 scalp and hair diseases,
 Not expensive, and fully guaranteed."

⁵ Fearing wrote four different "Aphrodite Metropolis" poems in 1926 and over the course of their different places of publication the order of their numbering changed (in *The Quarter*, (3) was titled "Aphrodite Metropolis (2)"). Ryley, in *Kenneth Fearing Complete Poems*, follows the numbering order in *Angel Arms*.

No,

Harry says nothing at all,

He smiles,

And they kiss in the emerald meadows on the Sunday paper. (*CP* 26)

Like Andy, Jerry and Joe, Harry, the warehouse laborer is only revealed through what he does not say; Myrtle is nearly nonexistent in both her silence and submission to Harry. The emerald meadows, suggest an escape from the claustrophobic city environs. The poem reads almost like an advertisement for Ziggin's Ointment, with Harry and Myrtle acting as showroom dummies, incapable of expression outside their faux environment, surrounded by millions of ads. Fearing creates a space where "desire and needs are uncoupled, then crudely cobbled back together" (Lefebvre 309). They cannot revolt—they remain apparently oblivious to their consumer-infused environment, nor is it even clear if Myrtle knows of Harry's love. Harry fails to speak; he merely smiles and mechanically kisses Myrtle as they sit, separated from nature by the Sunday newspaper that functions as a barrier between their physical contact with the natural world in this ironic urban pastoral.⁶

The "Aphrodite Metropolis" poems are voyeuristic in that the poet examines from a distance the relationship of the two people endeavoring for an authentic human connection. Fearing would write years later in an unpublished manuscript that, "[i]t is a misconception that a writer seeks to tell anyone about life. He writes not to inform, but to find out about it" ("Untitled"). What the writer discovers and conveys across the four poems about Harry and Myrtle is that their love is a sham (revealed in "Aphrodite Metropolis (4)" when Harry gets a

⁶ Fearing's consciousness of the dichotomy between the suburban and urban is revealed in a letter from Oak Park to his wife in New York City in which he contrasts the difference between the two environments: "This suburban life and suburban psychology is so wildly different from what we are accustomed to in NY that—that—hell" ("Letters").

dose of the clap from Myrtle, "Harry was nobody's fool"). The reader is encouraged to view Harry's thoughts in terms of the advertisement printed in the newspaper the two "lovers" share. Their society, as Guy Debord might consider, has reached "the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life. Not only is the relation to the commodity visible but it is all one sees: the world one sees is its world" (42). Instead of revealing his love for Myrtle, as the first line intimates, we see instead how the flaws of Myrtle's body have become commodified. Harry's continued attraction to Myrtle could be dependent, so it seems, on the ability of the skin ointment to prolong her beauty. Through the poet's interweaving of the newspaper advertisement, we could conclude that Harry exhibits for Myrtle what Horkheimer and Adorno would term, a "taste [that] derives its ideal from the advertisement, from commodified beauty" (126), leaving Myrtle—and her slowly withering skin—just a reflection of the market's intended image of a woman. The ointment advertisement holds a greater impact on the characters of a metropolitan love poem: Harry and Myrtle become defined, even manipulated, through a product advertisement produced for unnamed multitudes and promulgated via the mass-mediated newspaper.

Meaningful value from the newspaper media and its contents is short lived. The broader scope of mass production reveals that the media "produce their own negations. [The media] know themselves to be inferior, ephemeral, throw-away, decadent, even while they are all-pervasive and seemingly all-powerful" (Brantlinger 41). Fearing encapsulates media's duplicity through the contrast between the hoped for longevity of beauty proffered in the ointment advertisement and the short-lived tragic relationship between another has-been romantic couple. The headline, "GIRL SLAYS BANKER-BETRAYER,"⁷ demonstrates how

⁷ Horkheimer and Adorno address the issue of how mass culture incorporates the tragic by arguing that "mass culture gives tragedy permanent employment as routine" (122–23); furthermore, the attention to calamity prevents the critique that mass culture avoids truth if they circumvent the reality of affliction. Fearing's

the newspaper touts the disaster of the lives of two people while supporting the preservation of the flesh through the Lydia Pinkham advertisement. The newspaper headline and the ointment advertisement contrast the precarious position in which Myrtle is placed: she may win the momentary affection of Harry but become a jaded lover, or, alternatively, by protecting her chastity she may lose Harry's affection. "The less the culture industry has to promise and the less it can offer a meaningful explanation of life, the emptier the ideology it disseminates necessarily becomes," posits Horkheimer and Adorno (118). Fearing expresses similar sentiments in "X Minus X," revealing a persistent emptiness after the media-created desires have run their course and left no lasting contentment: "Even when your friend, the radio, is still; even when her dream, the magazine, is finished; even when his life, the ticker, is silent; even when their destiny, the boulevard, is bare; / [...] / Still there will be your desire, and hers, and his hopes and theirs, / [...] / Your curse and his curse, her reward and their reward, their dismay and his dismay and her dismay and yours—" (CP 97). The repetition accents mass culture and its devaluation of human experience, defying any "unique existence" (253), the loss of which Benjamin laments in "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility."

Additionally, Fearing alternates between perspectives in the "Aphrodite Metropolis" poems, providing the reader with different angles of the love relationship, but he still demonstrates how it is defined by mass culture. In "Aphrodite Metropolis (2)," we are immediately *shown*—rather than told or even witness to the fact—that "Myrtle loves Harry," but it is written for public display, perhaps near a subway advertisement, as the poem suggests. Myrtle's love for Harry is never outrightly declared but is produced as a romanticized slogan, and it is an elusive love, "sometimes hard to remember:"

incorporation of a tragic newspaper headline incorporates the reality of the world equalizing with its brutality any significant romantic notions the poem may have conveyed.

So write it out on a billboard that stands under the yellow light of an 'L'
 platform among popcorn wrappers and crushed cigars,
 A poster that says 'Mama I Love Crispy Wafers So.'
 Leave it on a placard where somebody else gave the blonde lady a pencil
 moustache, and another perplexed citizen deposited:
 'Jesus Saves. Jesus Saves.' (CP 25)

Human emotion is obscured in the visual pollution of the city until it becomes incorporated into the mass language of advertising slogans and "Myrtle loves Harry" is only remembered as a two-dimensional billboard promoting its truth to the masses. In a sense, the poem reveals that the one way of bringing into existence human qualities is to adapt to the methods now used in what Bourdieu calls "the field of cultural production." By producing love, or the concept of love, on a publicized billboard or placard, the artificial reality of their love is presumptively created, but has become commodified just as easily as sweet crackers and religion.⁸ Love as commodity or for a product endorsement extricates the emotion from the individual and places it on the open marketplace, as a French journalist observed in "Love in America" (1938). This article analyzes the American obsession with the dream of the ideal love: the word love "penetrates one's subconsciousness like the name of some unguent to cure heartaches or athlete's foot. It fits in with the other advertisements, and one feels tempted to write to the broadcasting station for a free sample of his thing called Love" (de Sales 95). Media's appropriation of love is merely commodifying a fundamental human emotion of the larger culture industry.

⁸ While elements of religion in Fearing's poetry is beyond the scope of this project, there can easily be drawn a Marxian connection with the placement of this particular religious "slogan." "Theories of mass culture usually lead to the problem of religion" (82), argues Patrick Brantlinger and Fearing's incorporation only serves to place religion into a category of the culture industry.

Similar to the news captions and billboard advertisements in the “Aphrodite Metropolis” poems, Fearing’s use of tabloid headlines demonstrates how media diverts attention from and then silences the voice of the individual. Fearing uses one of his most famous characters, Jack Knuckles, to show how the newspaper dehumanizes the individual, making ephemeral one’s importance, and then disregarding the person in lieu of the next breaking news. The subtitle to the poem quickly establishes that Jack Knuckles is a dead man walking, “But Reads Own Statement at His Execution While Wardens Watch.” Condemned to die for a murder he claims not to have committed, he has his last opportunity for his voice to be heard:

HAS LITTLE TO SAY

Gentlemen, I

Feel there is little I

Care to say at this moment, but the reporters have urged that I

Express a few appropriate remarks.

THANKS WARDEN FOR KINDNESS

I am grateful to Warden E. J. Springer for the many kindnesses he has shown
me in the last six months, (*CP 22*)

Even before we hear Knuckles’s voice, the upper case headlines informs us as to what has transpired. The poem oscillates between media and human communication and as soon as his speech builds momentum, he is silenced. Fearing uses these interruptions “to create a sense of the helplessness of the individual” (Halliday 398).⁹ As the breaks in the dialogue continue,

⁹ Halliday’s article appears intended to mainly draw attention to the much neglected poetry of Fearing.

Published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, this is one of the few journal-length articles to give significant analysis and a close reading of Fearing’s poems. Perhaps echoing Rita Barnard (1995), who is not cited in the article, Halliday, after quoting the 1929 poem, “Angel Arms,” comments, “It’s as if a whole Nathaniel West

the headlines begin to drift away from the topic of the execution, since "the newspaper is an image of the total structure of the city"; and, it provides the reader with "a discardable daily sampling of the world" (Fisher 251). Cast aside for the newest headlines, Knuckles has played his part in what might be called the mediafication of the individual. The attention given to the execution is completely diverted as the headline "samples" another image by posing the question, "WILL RUMANIAN PRINCE WED AGAIN?" This international business—based on real events surrounding an affair by the Romanian Crown Prince—diminishes the murder in front of the local Bloomingdale's department store to merely a momentary sensationalized media event, as Knuckles passes rapidly from media attention just as quickly as his execution extinguishes his life:

[...]. If I

Could only be given another chance I would show the world how to be a man,

but I

"I AM AN INNOCENT MAN," DECLARES KNUCKLES

Declare before God gentlemen that I am an innocent man,

As innocent as any of you now standing before me, and the final sworn word I

POSITIVE IDENTIFICATION CLINCHED KNUCKLES VERDICT

Publish to the world is that I was framed. I

Never saw the dead man in all my life, did not know about the killing until

BODY PLUNGES AS CURRENT KILLS

My arrest, and I

Swear to you with my last breath that I

Was not on the corner of Lexington and Fifty-ninth Streets at eight o'clock.

novel were compressed into two pages. I wonder if we glimpse a streak of craziness in the young Kenneth Fearing" (397).

SEE U. S. INVOLVED IN FISHER DISPUTE
EARTHQUAKE REPORTED IN PERU. (CP 23)

The insistent presence of the capitalized headlines creates a rivalry between Knuckles's account of the events and the trial verdict, thereby placing media as a final authoritative voice in the life of the individual. Fearing's structure also brings attention to the broken voice of Knuckles with the repeated abrupt line ending, "I," drawing attention to his last efforts to keep his remaining autonomy as he is squeezed in between the headlines. As we anticipate hearing Knuckles's own version, the line-breaks disrupt the rhythm, preventing continuity in the attempt to convey his message. Even more, the headlines play a similar part in halting the flow of the individual's thoughts by interjecting, correcting, and then finally directing the reader's attention elsewhere.

Fearing's use of an exact location for the alleged crime scene is worth explaining. Nathan Mills has noted that "Fearing conspicuously locates Knuckles's crime at a specific corner in Manhattan: he could have opted for a fictional address, but he selects the corner at which Bloomingdale's department store is located" (Mills 26). The relationship between department stores and newspapers is hinged upon the former's purchase of advertisements to promote consumerism and frequent customer patronization. One department store owner noted in 1904 that "The newspaper of today is largely the creation of the department store" (Leach 43). While "Jack Knuckles Falters" does not contain direct references to advertisements as in the "Aphrodite Metropolis" poems, the indication of Bloomingdale's as a locus of consumerism is obvious. Another crucial connection between Fearing's reference is that the city trolleys also transferred at the Bloomingdale intersection and at one time all the trolleys were covered with Bloomingdale advertisements; significantly, "the El train station at 59th Street became known as the Bloomindale's stop because there were signs for

the store everywhere you looked." At one point, ads for Bloomingdale's were all over the city, they literally "blanketed" the city with their quaint marketing tactics (Traub 40–41).

Returning to the poem, the headlines create an intermittent flow in the Knuckles speech and change how the reader processes the poem by bringing the reader into collusion with the media. Incorporating the blocked titles prods the reader's eye to be drawn to each headline before they have time to read and assimilate the lines between. When first looking at "Jack Knuckles Falters," it is difficult not to quickly drop through the lines of the poem to the capitalized sentences—similar to scanning the page of a newspaper before reading the details. The larger headlines encourage the scanning over of Knuckles's speech as the poem illustrates the subverting of the human voice for the voice of the media. Benjamin sees this development of disorder and the "loss of connection" as being constructed by the newspaper in order to meet a characteristic of the reader: "The scene of [...] literary confusion is the newspaper; its content, 'subject matter' that denies itself any other form of organization than that imposed on it by the reader's impatience" ("The Newspaper" 741). Impatience, Benjamin suggests, arises from the feeling that the reader is left out of the events occurring around them and their quick scanning of the news is an effort to locate an event or opinion that coincides with their own. The contrast between Knuckles's faltering speech and the rapidity of the inserted headlines heightens the tendency of the news to introduce the next sensation, illustrating the speed at which the modern American society progresses, leaving Knuckles's voice effaced by media.

Fearing does more than just picture an American setting: he also captures the excessive pace of the American cosmopolitan life through scenes of Jack Knuckles's execution, Harry and Myrtle's cosmopolitan relationship, and the life of the businessman. The pace of society, for Fearing, resembles what Adorno has suggested is an intertwining *pas de deux* relationship of mass culture and modernism (Huyssen 57). In Fearing, we find

Zowie did he live and zowie did he die,

[...]. (CP 109)

The rapid fire of the poem's lines match the pace at which the narrator loses all he has gained and becomes submerged within the realm of a white-collar assembly line. The man's attempt to live a private life in which he can feel like an individual is overrun by the outside forces of capitalism. He partakes of all the recourses that are allowed: home, bank, and entertainment. All fail him because the "poem suggests that a life made up entirely of *Erlebnissen* [momentary sensations]—of repeated motions and purchases that, in the end, add up to nothing—can have no distinctive personal character" (Barnard 112). The starkness of the poem, along with the quick and biting short phrases, suggest that Fearing's critique is not just of a system that debilitates its workers but the critique also instills a sense of fear of the power behind such an environment in which he observed so many people revolving.

True to Fearing's style, the death of the protagonist in "Dirge" lacks any poetic mourning for the loss of individual life. Instead we are presented with a myriad of faces lacking identity of their own; it is only the large corporations that receive identification. The poem references the *New York Evening Post* and the Brooklyn-Manhattan Transit Corporation, signifying that the poem's argument revolves around the impression that the individual remains just a statistical figure of consumption in the circulation of newspapers or a fare-payer for public transport. The nameless pallbearers carry away the nameless protagonist:

With who the hell are you at the corner of his casket, and where the hell we
going on the right-hand silver knob, and who the hell cares walking
second from the end with an American Beauty wreath from why the
hell not,

Very much missed by the circulation staff of the New York Evening Post;

deeply, deeply mourned by the B.M.T. (*CP* 110)

The poem is intentionally composed without sympathy for the protagonist's struggles and demise, with "who the hell are you," and "where the hell we going," and "who the hell cares," and "why the hell not," all converging over the body of the cultural victim in a typical Fearing method of "image-making by listing and repetition" (Milner 27). In one sense, "Dirge" is a modernist reversal of Edward Arlington Robinson's "Richard Cory." Instead of the illustrious image of Richard Cory—admired by the townsfolk as he walks through town, secretly discontented, and ending his own life one summer's evening—Fearing's character is beaten, whopped, and "blooied" through the city, having everything taken away from him when all he wanted was to maintain "a personal pride in the / certain, certain way he lived his own, private life" (*CP* 109).

It is easy to suggest a parallelism in Fearing, both on a professional and a personal level, as well as his poetry. While I find most of Fearing's poetry to be consciously devoid of biographical elements, it would be impossible to irradiate completely the author's presence from the work. He once told his son that when writing novels, "he always wrote himself in as a minor character in order to keep the main character from being Autobiographical" (qtd. in Ryley xvi), revealing his awareness of the narcissistic nature of the author. If we take his poem "John Standish, Artist" (with even the slightest notion of biographical inclusion) the protagonist as artist forces himself amidst the nameless multitudes he apparently abhors:

If I am to live, if I am to breathe,
 I must walk with them a while, laugh with them, stare and point,
 Pick one and follow him to the rotted wharves,
 Write my name, under his, in gray latrines, "John Standish, artist,"
 I must follow him, stumbling as he does, through the docks, basements,
 tenements, wharves,

Follow him till he sleeps, and kill him with a stone. (CP 64)

This poem reveals a relationship between the artist and his subject that is subjective to the artist forcing himself into examining the depths of distraught human conditions. We could imagine that John Standish is a disturbed Jacob Riis, observing the "other half" of society in order to gain his desired artistic material. There is also a sense of superiority (perhaps class-related) that Standish exhibits over his victim, a mere dock-laborer. Class observation becomes the focus of the artist's work; Fearing himself was an observer of the city, but to say that Fearing was empathetic towards his audience would likely be aggrandizing the reality of his personality. In his perception of his relationship with his audience, Fearing would claim in a 1939 issue of *Partisan Review* that "[w]hen I am engaged in the business of writing I do not have any particular audience in mind. When I am not writing, I can afford to realize that every writer must have in mind, whether precisely or vaguely, an audience of people who have approximately his own background, experience, and temperament" ("The Situation" 34).¹⁰

Early in his career, Fearing's focus rested on the portrayal of a society filled with individuals depicted in an almost skeletal fashion. His characters are masked in their environments, with billboards and tabloid headlines and consumer slogans to replace the muscle, tendons, and flesh of fully developed citizens. Fearing opportunely embraced a multitude of literary avenues; yet, his most poignant work surfaced in poetry that depicted, in his blasé and cynical tone, the existence of the individual within the consumer society.

Towards the end of his life, when driven to find full-time employment, Fearing would write

¹⁰ In the same article, Fearing would gratefully conclude that his audience "could be described as liberal middle-class." However, in 1949, Leonard Unger, a reviewer of Fearing's work, *Stranger at Coney Island and Other Poems* (1948), was a bit more critical of who Fearing's readers were. Unger hypothesized that Fearing's readers might be "the New York citizen of sensibility and imagination, who is obviously an intellectual but who doesn't have time really to specialize in being an intellectual" (511).

in an application letter to Leather Industries of America, Inc., that while freelance work was his trade of choice, the uncertain nature of the work compelled him to search out a more stable means of income. Far from the successful ending he may have occasionally dreamed about in the 1920s and 30s,¹¹ he may have thought, with an ironic grimace, of his 1938 poem, “Literary,” in which he mocks his own profession by diminishing it to a fill-in-the-blank advertisement located toward the back of a trade magazine: “Writing must be such a nice profession. / Fill in the coupon. How do you know? Maybe you can be a writer, too” (*CP* 147).

¹¹ In Oak Park, while editing and writing his novel and sending off poetry and short stories for quick publication, Fearing ended one of his letters to his wife by telling her, “When I’m not dreaming about you, I’m dreaming I’ve become a Mcmillionaire,” and he signed the letter “Pete McRockefeller” (“Letters”). These inclinations toward a wealthy life may have been instilled at a young age by his tightfisted mother who married five times, each husband being a wealthy Protestant (Rakosi 91). Regardless of the origins of his wealthy aspirations, Fearing pursued almost all open avenues available to writers, but never to the level of success to which he inwardly desired.

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