

# 6.

## Poetry in the Intense Now of Class Struggle

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*Who are all them people*

*Marching in a mass?*

Lawd! Don't you know?

That's de working class.

—Langston Hughes, “Sister Johnson Marches”

In the age of internet-enabled, intersectional leftism and poetics—with emphasis on poetry and critical scholarship around race, gender, class, decolonization, embodiment, and environment—what can be made of political aesthetics of the older Marxist stripe rooted in the workers’ movement?

This question lies at the heart of Mark Nowak’s 2020 book *Social Poetics* (Coffee House Press). Since *The Communist Manifesto*, the subject-object of working-class revolutionaries, the classical proletariat has been the core of a Marxist cultural dynamic. The workers’ movement was the point of reference in cultural-political works by Plekhanov, Lukács, and Benjamin. But the “social” aesthetic Nowak expresses is closer to Proudhon, Americans Langston Hughes and Mike Gold, left-Bolsheviks Bogdanov and Lunacharsky, and Bertolt Brecht. Nowak is oriented toward class struggle and its cultural front. His book connects some of this earlier history to the end of the 2010s, which was a Red Decade, a decade of coming to political consciousness after the financial crisis—with currents becoming movements in Occupy, Black Lives Matter, Bernie, and DSA. With advocacy for working class authors, subjects, and audiences for reception, *Social Poetics* belongs to the last decade’s interest in socialism and Marxism and to its protest movements on the populist left.

This essay considers the significance of Nowak’s book, his first collection of prose, and its implications for left literary practice. While Nowak’s three books of poetry are notable for their dialogues with

workers and proletarian history, *Social Poetics* speaks the language of contemporary left groupings and includes literary history, elements of criticism, and memoir. As a work of poetry pedagogy, it reinvents the academic poetry writing workshop. Part of his text is a personal syllabus of postmodern proletarian poetry and theatre, with all major examples hailing from after 1960. He then chronicles his own writing courses for workers in these recent times of “anti-capitalist” rebellion from the mid-nineties to the present. For Nowak, today’s radical writers should emulate Bud Schulberg in Watts, June Jordan in New York, and Ernesto Cardenal in Nicaragua, and what Nowak himself has done in the last two decades—when they brought tools of literature directly to workers and campesinos.

Nowak’s historical sequence is presented from a multifaceted intellectual viewpoint; it is *post-Marxist*, with an admixture of interlocutors including Gramsci, Franco Berardi and affect theorist Sara Ahmed; *intersectional*, concentrating on specific forms of oppression; and horizontalist, indicating movementist organizing, “*from below and to the left*” (Nowak’s emphasis). It is opposed to hierarchy and party. Nowak’s intellectual outlook was formed in the 1990s left anticapitalism of Chiapas and Seattle. He retains much of that period, while going beyond it to Occupy, Black Lives Matter and DSA-style leftism. The Communist Party (USA) and Amiri Baraka—who provided a fiery afterword for Nowak’s second poetry collection—shuffle on stage together as “the very old guard”; the text is more hostile toward Language Writing, another seemingly old guard.

*Social Poetics* touches on many topics, including cultural appropriation; Afropessimism; historians E.P. Thompson, Kim Moody, and Patrick Bond; theorists Antonio Negri and Alain Badiou, and Social Reproduction Theory, a post-Marxist theory of caregiving performed by the unwaged household workers. I will note how Nowak’s contemporary left approach to proletarian literature has a distorting effect in his discussion of historical examples of proletarian poems in the opening chapters; I also discuss how the lessons of politicized poetry and workerist didacticism might inform contemporary poetics and its associated politics.

*Social Poetics*, its title derived from prose by Langston Hughes, nominally starts with the 1930s proletarian moment of American literature, while avoiding the complexity of interwar mass struggles in a time of a fractious, sectarian Left and a powerful Comintern. Nowak forces both Third Period and Popular Front into Hughes’s “social poems,” which

were, by Hughes's description, "about other people's problems—whole groups of people's problems—rather than my own personal difficulties." By distinction, for Nowak, today's "social realist" poetry aligns with much-weakened trade-unionism, political currents and organizations around "social reproduction," and protest movements. But though the Party is noticeably absent, Nowak, following Michael Denning, emphasizes the "deep and lasting transformation" of American culture wrought by the "communisms of the depression," where literary works reflected the political zigzags of the time without being entirely reducible to them.

Something akin to the severe authenticity of 30s political literature, epitomized by Hughes and Tillie Olsen, is Nowak's model of poetry constitutively antithetical to "bourgeois" or ruling class interests. (Note that this doesn't account for the bourgeois-left fusionist Popular Front period.) Nowak follows C.L.R. James's Marxist groupuscule view in *Facing Reality*, which emphasizes syndicalist worker rebellion "in ways of their own invention." To breathe new oxygen on the dying cinders of proletarian literature, his framework of dialogism, derived from Mikhail Bakhtin and Paulo Freire, places the poetry workshop in an "engaged struggle with workers centers, trade unions, and social movements in the United States and the European Union and across Latin America, and elsewhere." Instead of perfected poems these workshops produce new dialogues among workers and engaged writers. Nowak writes: "Social poetics seeks the transition of the pen or the laptop from the 'committed' author (be they journalist, academic poet, novelist, playwright, or other writing professional) to the working people themselves." His aim is a "conjunction"—a revision of Stuart Hall's "articulation"—of the poetry workshop with "the new century's expanding social struggles and social movements."

*Social Poetics* first chapter, "A People's History of the Poetry Workshop," treats three schools of people's poetry in the wake of different rebellions in Watts, New York City, and Attica. In Los Angeles Bud Schulberg—proletarian novelist and screenwriter of *On the Waterfront*—founded the Watts Writers' Workshop (WWW) in the aftermath of the 1965 riot. Organized out of the Westminster neighborhood association, the announcement—"Creative Writing Class—all interested sign below"—attracted scant attention. Schulberg: "The truth was, nobody signed up. Nobody came." Eventually locals did appear and write, with resulting poems published or recorded in *Los Angeles Magazine*, *Antioch Review*, and the Schulberg-penned documentary *The Angry Voices of Watts*. Left and more furious voices from Watts—Ojenke, Quincy Troupe, and Eric Priestley—didn't appear in the documentary or the first anthology to emerge in the wake of rebellion.

Nowak upbraids Schulberg and editors of *From the Ashes* and *Antioch Review* for aesthetic policing of the Watts poets, though it was due in part to Schulberg that the WWW became renowned. Daniel Widener's *Black Arts West* notes that thirteen radicalized members of the WWW left Schulberg's group when they saw in local Jayne Cortez, the jazz poetry legend, a surrealist-derived alternative. Troupe edited and published *Watts Poets*, an anthology of the ex-WWW radicals, without a publishing-world mediator like Schulberg. Ghetto chronicle, the anthology includes real city problems like labor conditions, street scenes, police murder, and endemic poverty. Nowak tracks publication history and themes he identifies with Afro-Pessimist concepts of "social death" and "the effects of the disregard for black life." However construed *Watts Poets* remains contemporary. Consider the social documentation and memorialization of a victim of police murder:

This book is dedicated to  
THADDEUS MORGAN BREWARD  
BETTER known in Watts as  
"FATS", "WATTS FATS"  
"FATS" was shot nine times by the L.A.  
Police Department  
on November 14, 1967, at 10:30 p.m.  
on 89<sup>th</sup> and Beach  
in Watts California.

Nowak's section on Watts ends on this violent note, connecting the poetry to Black Lives Matter and the contemporary struggle against police murder.

June Jordan enters in Nowak's discussion of New York City poetic education during the bitter teacher's strike of 1968, with black families in open revolt against teachers' union locals. Nowak addresses the failures of the education system and Jordan's pioneering alternative education work with school-age writers in New York. Her *Poetry for the People* and her populist pedagogy at UC Berkeley informs Nowak's own pedagogy at fundamental levels, but the focus here is her earlier enterprise in New York, which began on 116<sup>th</sup> St at Community Resource Center in 1967. Nowak polemically contrasts Jordan's workshops for young children

with NEA-resourced children's poetry programs first begun in New York by Kenneth Koch. He endorses Philip Lopate's verdict on Koch's book of children's creative writing *Lies, Wishes, and Dreams*: "the mass production of surrealist metaphors." The exposures of poverty and violence in the children's poetry from Jordan's workshop, later anthologized as *The Voice of Children* in 1970, by contrast documents "radical agency in the field of literature." Her poetics of unadorned truth-telling accepted the students "as creative intellectuals in their own right, young people who, under her guidance, produced quite profound poems." Jordan's anthology is part of a series of youth poetry anthologies—including Sonia Sanchez's *Three Hundred Sixty Degrees of Blackness Comin' at You* and Victor Hernandez Cruz's *Stuff*—that reimaged poetry education for children and led to poems that reveal the first buds of class consciousness.

This survey of itinerant poet-teachers practicing the organization of writers' workshops after popular rebellion concludes with Celes Tisdale's anthology of poems from Attica Prison, *Betcha Ain't: Poems from Attica*. Tisdale's workshops at Attica began eight months after the historical riot, with the raw intensity of the violent suppression of the movement still palpable. Poems here expose life inside the prison. Brother Amar (George Robert Elie) writes in "Forget?":

They tell us to forget Golgotha we tread  
scourged with hate because we dared  
to tell the truth of hell  
and how inhuman it is within.

Other poems Nowak presents recount "the bloodiest day of the revolt":

They came tearless  
tremblers  
apologetic grin factories  
that breathed Kool  
smoke-rings / and state-prepared speeches.

And from John Lee Norris's "Just Another Page (September 13-72)":

A year later

And it's just another page

And the only thing they do right is wrong

And Attica is a maggot-minded black blood sucker

Nowak, excavating these high moments of the prison form of proletarian literature, calls these poems, in Joy James's terms, "neo-slave narratives."

In "People's Workshops" Nowak reconstructs three examples of established writers and their pedagogy with the oppressed of their nations in the Third World. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's theatrical work in Kenya with the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Center defined "good theatre as that which was on the side of the people." The bridge between chapters is Ngugi's youthful encounter with the onetime Soviet-aligned Langston Hughes, who also, of course, preferred "people's culture over official state culture." Nowak discusses Ngugi's "community-based" play *Ngaabika Ndeenda* (*I will marry when I want*), and the workers and peasants involved in the rehearsals and production. Workers revised the original script, giving more centrality to factory exploitation. Discussions about how to plot the drama led to political economic inquiry into the workings of the multinational shoe factory where many found employment. Ngugi is quoted to sloganeering effect: "Democratic participation even in the solution of artistic problems." For his work with Kamiriithu, Ngugi would spend a year jailed. A later play *Maitu Njugira* (*Mother sing for me*) never received a performance license from the Daniel arap Moi's government. Kamiriithu closed as a result. One outcome of Kenya's decolonization was the defeat of left struggles and cultural projects like these.

Nowak travels to Ernesto Cardenal and Mayra Jimenez's *talleres de poesia* in 1980s post-revolutionary Nicaragua. The revolutionary—rather than formally decolonized—government in Nicaragua made possible the previously mentioned modification of the state-sponsored poetry workshops Cardenal encountered in Cuba. Jimenez and Cardenal now brought people into the workshops who had no formal experience in poetry. This Cardenal-Jimenez principle—of "the primacy of working-class and campesino art"—is indispensable for Nowak, yet their *foco* approach led to the eventual demise of the workshops, which were in tension with competing state programs that featured established poets and writers.

The poems of Cardenal's workshops were translated by Kent Johnson in *A Nation of Poets: Writings from the Poetry Workshops of Nicaragua*.

Manuel Urtecho's poem "Malvina" reads,

I won't write you today  
like I used to in the city.  
I know tomorrow is Valentine's Day  
and we won't be together.  
The mountain is as dark as your hair.  
The night birds sing  
their mysterious songs.  
Coffee Shells are washed away  
by the Blanco River.  
My jaw is stiff with the cold.  
The butt of my rifle is freezing.  
In ambush we wait for the Contra.

This poem, which recalls Brecht, is one of various formal approaches encouraged in the Cardenal workshop format: "The poems did not need to be written from a single perspective, about a specific subject matter, or in a single revolutionary style." The themes Nowak discusses in the poems include broad ones like love or self-determination, which he addresses according to Marxist feminism.

The South African worker poetry anthology *Black Mamba Rising*, from the 1980s, represents—for Nowak—the "apex" of proletarian poetry, underscoring his theory of a progressive history of proletarian poetry across the century. A product of the Durban Workers' Cultural Local, *Black Mamba Rising* collects "mass meeting" poems by Temba Qabula, Mi S'dumo Hlathshwayo, and Nise Malange. Qabula's "Praise Poem for FOSATU" personifies the trade union confederation in surging imperatives: "Strangle them and don't let loose. / Until they tell the truth as to why they suck the / Workers Blood." Durban Workers' Cultural Local followed up with another anthology, *Izinsingizi: Loudhailer Lives (South African Poetry from Natal)*. For Nowak Nise Malange's work speaks to "social reproduction" and a student strike poem is cited as evidence:

Life continued until August 11<sup>th</sup>  
Wednesday  
There was a slight drizzle  
When the students started rebelling  
And before long the puppets arrived with teargas  
And guns

Parents and relatives are murdered on the way home from work in a poetic retelling of Soweto “from below.” Malange’s “Nightshift Mother” “documents a day in the life of a South African cleaning woman.” But after initial praise for DWCL volumes, Nowak sees women and motifs of women’s work as largely excluded from “the male-dominated anti-apartheid workers’ resistance poetry of these mid-1980s anthologies.”

In a talk delivered at the trade union confederation FOSATU, Qabula and Hlatshwayo write: “we must create space in our struggle—through our own songs, our own slogans, our own poems, our own artwork, our own plays and dances. At the same time, in our struggle we must also fight against the cultural profit machines.” This direct style of the proletarian first person plural *we*, a poem or manifesto speaking of and for the workers’ movement and its independent political infrastructure, briefly recapitulates the political aesthetic of Nowak’s opening chapters. Qabula and Hlatshwayo’s poetry “hearkens back to the poetry from Watts”:

We  
Have dared to fight back  
Even from the bottom of the earth  
Where we pull wagons-full of gold  
through our blood

Nowak concludes that workers “want to tell their stories,” but these have been appropriated “by neoliberalism and racial capitalism, by whiteness, by colonialism and neocolonialism.” This claim is unconvincing since their stories have just been shown in verse anthologies.

In later chapters Nowak chronicles his union activism as a writing teacher. “New Conjunctions” provides a Raymond Williams-style

keyword entry for *workshop*; rather than the MFA programs of Iowa or Cornell, Brown or Mills, it denotes a history of drudgery and suffering in isolated rooms. Labor intellectual Nowak diffuses elite university creative writing back to the working-class of historical factories. He chronicles his two syndicalist “formations” — the Union of Radical Workers and Writers and Worker Writers School — as “articulations” in the Stuart Hall sense of the term (Hall: “the form of a connection or link than can make a unity of two different elements”), balancing self-determination and collective action, tendency literature unified with labor deeds. Worker-writer Nowak records a late-90s union campaign at Borders — the poet’s bottom-up experience of the book industry — in Minneapolis, a drive with some mix of local successes before Borders’ bankruptcy.

The chapter title “Imaginative Militancy,” taken from historian Kim Moody, is, Nowak says, “a term that gives equal weight, in equal balance, to how we think about the conjunction of aesthetic practices and political action.” In this chapter, his “*from below and to the left*” horizontalism of the aesthetic and the political is given extended treatment as a perpetual Freirean dialogue, a “slow insurrection” of cultural pedagogy. He relates his experiences with Amiri Baraka at a CPUSA conference, concluding that in Baraka’s one-sided example the political and the aesthetic were “and would always be in militant conjunction.” Digressive and accretive, Nowak moves ahead — commenting in an aside on the imaginative militancy of electing “Democratic Socialists” like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez — arriving at Arundhati Roy’s Occupy Wall Street speech calling for “justice, not just for the people of the United States, but for everybody.” Nowak endorses Roy’s view at the time that ephemeral Occupy introduced “a new imagination, a new political language, in the heart of Empire.”

Nowak’s vivid depictions of his workshops offer a formula for working-class poetry pedagogy. He encounters a group of unionists, activists, or a workers’ cultural center audience. They write a poem with labor or social content based on the model of an ode, a haiku, or a pantoum. Embraced by his self-consciously small but durable formation of proletarian poetry, some participants continue with their poetry. A poem by a participant is later read or transmitted at a protest, press conference, occupation, or strike, a literary extension of class struggle. The pattern behind it all is Nowak’s teaching of Tillie Olsen’s poem “I want you women up north to know,” a poem based on Felipe Ibarro’s letter to the editor in *New Masses* exposing the garment factory working

conditions in 1934 San Antonio:

Catalina Rodriguez, 24

Body shriveled to a child's at twelve,  
catalina rodriguez, last stages of consumption,  
works for three dollars a week from dawn to midnight.  
A fog of pain, thickens over her skull, the parching heat  
breaks over her body,  
And the bright red blood embroiders the floor of her room.  
White rain stitching the night, the bourgeois poet would say,  
white gulls of hands darting, veering,  
white lightning threading the clouds  
this is the exquisite dance of her hands over the cloth

Cut from the same cloth as Olsen's polemical collage poem of some of capitalism's injustices, an elegy by New York Taxi driver poet Seth Goldman's remembers his colleague Doug Schifter's death by suicide in 2018, as ride-sharing companies, with New York politicians in hand, mowed down the taxi industry. Nowak describes a New York Taxi Workers Alliance (NYTWA) protest where Goldman read his elegy. The situation epitomizes the practical result of his workshop as cultural "tactic":

You can't get away from your sixteen-hour days  
Up the FDR home in your filthy car.  
Doug could only drive so far.

Nowak notes that the following day "New York City became the first major city in the United States to pass legislation instituting a cap on ride-hail services like Uber and Lyft."

Nowak is teacher, editor, publisher, and critical interpreter of his students' poetry. To give one signal example, Somali nurse Nimo Abdi's poem—interpreted through Jacques Ranciere's book on 1830s French

workers, *Proletarian Nights*—expresses “the insurrection of love.” Nowak writes that this love is “held in common by nurses, domestic workers, teachers, therapists, and other workers in the contemporary care-giving industries.” Adopting Ranciere’s cultural interpretation of the 1830s revolutionary workers in France, Nowak claims those upheavals were “precisely what my students were attempting to do.” Abdi’s pursuit of a nursing doctorate is called a “revolution, discreet and radical” in Ranciere’s phrase.

In “Transnational Poetry Dialogues” Nowak discusses his organization of poetry workshops with a UAW local in Minnesota. In the historical hour of town-killing plant closures in the Rust Belt, Nowak engaged some unionists in a successful workshop. He then tried to recreate his St. Paul poetry workshop with other shuttering locals, but his call for an American-Canadian poetry dialogue between UAW locals fell on deaf ears in a time of the decomposition for the working class itself. Radical poetry syndicalism was out of place when the working class couldn’t cohere, let alone create a culture capable of broader political influence or hegemony. But the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA), a powerful union, answered Nowak’s letter and he conducted workshops at Ford plants in Port Elizabeth and Pretoria. Nowak’s poetry workshop formed a concrete link in proletarian solidarity across continents.

Yet in South Africa there are odd consequences of Nowak’s post-Marxist politics of intersectional correctness. During his experiences with NUMSA unionists, he hails the path of one of his workshop participants, Zingiswa Losi, from factory floor worker to leader of the largest confederation of South African trade unions, COSATU. Nowak develops an extended tribute to Losi, noting that her election as a woman is a “milestone” in South African trade unionism. He then briefly mentions her former union NUMSA’s “split” from COSATU. But NUMSA, her former union, was *expelled* after refusing to campaign for the African National Congress (ANC), post-Apartheid South Africa’s party of capitalism. NUMSA still snubs president Ramaphosa, one-time man of the left, who isn’t invited to the annual commemoration of the Marikana miners, who were massacred on strike in 2012, with Ramaphosa a part-owner of the mine and instigator of the killings. Losi has taken sides in a struggle, which is effaced in Nowak’s moralizing, intersectional telling. The actuality of trade unionism, today co-opted and integrated into state politics, is never addressed in this labor union story. Instead Nowak’s politics emphasizes international unionism or struggles for territorial or factory autonomy like those in Chiapas or at Zenon Manufacturing in Argentina.

Like Proudhon, Nowak is progressive and reformist. He doesn't account for retrogressive and reactionary developments in the present or previous situations of class struggle. Rather than the slow insurgency of cultural forms, there has been a destruction of labor in the U.S. Perhaps his highlighting of Social Reproduction Theory is a weak form of acknowledging this fact. While the text's controlling idea is workerist culture, it also emphasizes unwaged household work, sometimes conflating waged public and private sector work with unwaged care. Conceptual vacillations like these, however brief, start to border on tergiversation. In another example of abandoning the old cause, Nowak criticizes Stuart Hall's notion of articulation for its unintended association with being called "articulate." Nowak loses the Marxist specificity of Hall's idea — balancing self-determination and collective action — in a high-minded revision of it as a "conjunction." Once *articulated*, the class in-itself becomes a class for-itself "capable of establishing new collective projects," writes Hall, in one of his straightforwardly Marxist passages.

Nowak's vantage point in our present populist leftisms, which lack mass political formations, cannot capture the historical specificity of his intricate syllabus of radical worker, prisoner, and peasant poetry. Crucial elements of the "slow insurrection" of political-aesthetic forms are sometimes missing. Nowak approaches Watts without discussion of the broader, long-term cultural efflorescence there from rebellion to renaissance, as Mike Davis and Jon Wiener document in their recent book *Set the Night on Fire*. The people's cultural movement has persisted in and around Leimert Park up to the present. With respect to Attica, he neglects how the disillusionment described by the Attica prison poets ("and the only thing they do right is wrong") derives from the defeat of an upsurge of constructive organizing that took place before and during the riot. Instead of a concerted development of this history and its expression, Nowak considers today's theoretical affinities in this prison poetry, while their historical representations of prisoner Leninism are removed and at a distance from our own.

In regard to Nicaragua, Nowak doesn't account for the seizure of state power in the development of the diverse poetry workshops there. He's weaker on state politics than activist ones. For all his formation in the anti-globalization 90s and early 2000s, Nowak misses the other side of those times, the heterodox left governments in Bolivia, Brazil, and Venezuela, with Cuba and Nicaragua as their models, where the old dialectic of worker and campesino agency still obtains, yielding political surprises in the face of global setbacks for the Left in national and regional politics.

Nowak's assignment of Social Reproduction Theory to workers' movement poetry of South Africa deemphasizes waged, productive labor, drawing attention to unwaged or unpaid labor. His workerist orientation is sometimes a merely nominal one, while the accent falls on race, gender, and class. Yet the South African poems depict the power of labor union and confederation to defeat *the* class enemy and establish a better material life. These 1980s poems don't reflect our time's post-Marxist ideologies so much as the historic base of the revolutionary movement in South Africa in its final hour of struggle against the U.S.-backed apartheid government. The weapon-like words of Hlathwayo's poem "Black mamba rising," first published in *FOSATU Worker News*, call for the defeat of capital. The workers' movement and the South Africa Communist Party gave coherence to a fulgurant poetic culture. Here a historic force in the form of a large-scale factory labor movement and conditions of national liberation is framed by Nowak according to a problem of contemporary left poetry politics concerning the representation of women in journals and anthologies.

Nowak's social movement poetry within weak structures of 21<sup>st</sup> century political militancy "recreates" workerist poetics in its better moments. *Social Poetics* encourages preference for writers of working-class background. All of this should be welcomed. But Nowak's eclectic, presentist viewpoint misses the actual variety of left-literary politics that informed the historical workers' movement. In the 30s, to return to Nowak's beginning, leftism or sectarianism effecting the subordination of art to politics was one position in the polemical field of the proletarian cultural moment. In Nowak's handling, the examples of poets, thinkers, and events tend toward amorphousness: intersectionalism plus Antonio Negri-derived labor absolutism dominates here; concepts derived from Afropessimism, Social Reproduction Theory, and Marxist pedagogical theories of discourse there. Careful distinctions or conceptual reconstructions of terms like "racial capitalism" would clearly be helpful. I remain unconvinced by the nominal "anticapitalism" of now dominant intersectional post-Marxism because there isn't a strong sense of the classical subjective formations of anticapitalism, the workers' movement's warring sides of Communists, Anarchists, and Social Democrats.

Expanding from Nowak's strengths, I suggest that proletarian poetry's history begins with reference to what Tom Paulin calls the poetry of radical republicanism, the reservoir of egalitarian liberty themes, as well as affect, voice, and form on which the workers' movement poets drew. In the historical workers' movement, a workers' poetry developed, and

bourgeois-bohemian cross-pollination was the cultural rule with political tendency literature. The survival and continuity of the Communist Party after the Second World War and the Marxism of the New Left and 1960s social movements extended proletarian poetics to a new generation. A progressive portrayal breaks down with the defeats of labor in the 1980s and 1990s and the U.S. victory in the Cold War. These routs of both Social Democrats and Communists have created a novel period for politicized worker poetics these past decades, with trade union consciousness and internationalism no longer a “spontaneous” idea. It is here that the recreative workerist aesthetic in Nowak is entirely apt.

Yet many proletarian authors, in the sense of *ideological viewpoint*, should be counted beyond Nowak’s worker-identity poetry. Proletarian or socialist literature is a perspective not reducible to the class identity of an author, a point once made by literary arms-manufacturer Lenin. If Nowak’s poetic revolutionary syndicalism in post-Marxist expression is too restrictive to capture the political aesthetics available to poets in this earlier period, what can it tell us about our own time? As a politics, syndicalism was historically reactive in periods of defeat and demoralization; ideologically and organizationally loose, it was not always socialist, but often one-sided with an aversion to larger politics. Its application today, given the historic balance of political forces, would lead to tailism of the leftish Democrats. It is already thus with DSA, an organization Nowak seems to embrace along with spontaneous labor actions.

Most of all: The global situation that labor faces of a defensive holding on is lost here. Holding on does not last forever; fingernails dug into a cliff for two or three generations break. Difficult labor organizing must take place today on a terrain of economic composition absent in the book. Perhaps another and unforeseen proletarian situation of a rough-and-ready breakthrough to socialist politics will be the rule of the future. It would not get its poetry from the past. It is the proletarian perspective that keeps this total view of the class struggle in mind, from economic subject and structure to interstate system dynamics of American empire, trade, and war.

Nowak’s reference to Social Reproduction Theory and its opposition to political economics of wage and value strikes an odd note, given his emphasis on workerist culture and labor movement dynamics. Social Reproduction Theory, as Elena Louisa Lange demonstrates in a trenchant critique, doesn’t specify the effective reproduction of capital

and labor in the relations of production. Reproduction becomes a concept for an array of issues around the home and environment, gender and sex. This theory and the associated theoretic hodgepodge in Nowak's book are a sign of this historical stretch. With labor in such disarray, it follows that a variety of post-Marxist and alternative theories would proliferate.

Today the problem of proletarian poetry is that this cultural form lacks anything approximating the historical subject-object of a radical labor movement or an anti-colonial nationalist movement, from which the left of poetry might evolve, to which said left of poetry would refer. The bailouts and holding patterns of the last decade renewed interest in economic Marxism, but they also propped up superstructures of post-Marxist and left-liberal academia. The labor movement needs positive reconstruction, and Nowak is contributing to that. A return of the politics of Marxism, *after* what Alain Badiou calls "the failure of classical revolutionary politics," remains unavailable without radical labor. The political sectarianism of contemporary poetry demands a further comment. As I write, the dynamics of its internet-enabled leftist cancel culture seems to grow stronger. Nowak develops a conception of proletarian poetry in our time of identity politics; the author of the text should be of working-class background, while writing for and about the class struggle conceived in terms of today's democratic socialism, labor movement dynamics, and gender-based and racial oppression. Contemporary anticapitalism is the loose unity of these perspectives. Yet it is by any number of measures, as Terry Eagleton put it in 2006 essay on Leninism, "a backsliding." Internet and street protest derived, with links to labor, today's nominal anticapitalism lacks a positive political program or project of any meaningful scope in terms of the movements of the past. Weirdly some of this one-time critical language has been adopted by capital and state in a "woke" reorganization of culture from above. Today's groupuscule leftisms and poets scale to a middle-class protest phenomenon, with participant numbers and property damage in episodic demonstrations interpreted as signs of impending revolution.

Chris Nealon makes out the poetics adjacent these current years of radical protests and their online culture in a recent academic essay. But he concedes the poetry he convokes wants coherence beyond a "poetry with enemies." These anticapitalist poets, he thinks, can't name the singular class *enemy*. The avant-garde of the exclusionary liberal cultural dominant, the personal is now hyper-political. The strong historical effect of proletarian poetry—paradigmatically in Langston Hughes's poetry "about other people's problems"—was by contrast a unifying solidarity against human exploitation. It was a poetry of the

movement of the immense majority. Despite Nowak's shortcomings in advocating an aristocratic proletarian poetics—his anachronistic interpretation of popular struggles, his restricted concept of proletarian perspective in literature, his contradictory mélange of labor movement and Social Reproduction Theory, his nominal use of concepts—he carves out some space for the consideration of a poetic left distinct from “anticapitalist” forms of pessimistic enmity. His is a poetics not of enemies but of solidarity with actual working people, a solidarity that comes from awareness of all those vulnerable to state, corporate, and military power. *Social Poetics* has done some political work on the poetic left by clearing out a few stables of academic creative writing pedagogy. While Nowak's substitution of the new orthodoxies of intersectional post-Marxism for the inapparent political aesthetics of MFA programs is a product of the times, his work envisions writers trained for class struggle rather than literary advancement and the social media influence sought today.