

“There are the Alps, Fools!”

Pounding Fascism on
the UB Poetics List,
1995–2008

Assembled from the
UB Poetics List archive,
1993–2014

Edited, with an introduction,
by Kristen M. Fabians



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*“There they are, you will have to go a long way round
if you want to avoid them.*

*It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,
fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble!”*

— Basil Bunting, “On the Fly-Leaf of Pound’s Cantos”

Assembled from the UB Poetics List archive, 1993–2014

For twenty years the UB Poetics List kept having one argument it could never finish: what to do with Ezra Pound — the propagandist for Mussolini who was also the technical father of modern poetry — and with the questions he forces on it: tradition and innovation, difficulty and access, the life and the work, and whether the methods he forged before his politics can be turned to democratic use.

This book gathers that argument from some forty-five voices across thirteen years; every passage is verbatim, in the writer’s own spelling, and attributed to the member who posted it, arranged into four movements. Where a member relays another writer’s words, the words are set in quotation marks and their author named. The fuller threads remain in the archive.

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Introduction

The List Argues with Ezra Pound

A word first on the title, which is not mine but Basil Bunting's. In a nine-line squib inscribed "On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's *Cantos*," Bunting — who had loved and served Pound for the better part of a lifetime, yet who had told him to his face, in a savage letter of 1938, that his anti-semitism was "the meanest kind of envy and greed" and that "it makes me sick to see you covering yourself with that filth" — set the great, forbidding poem down before the reader like a mountain range: "There are the Alps. What is there to say about them? / They don't make sense." The lines that follow give this book its title and its argument at once: "There they are, you will have to go a long way round / if you want to avoid them. It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps, / fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble!" Pound is not a figure one can settle or skirt; he is terrain — there is no going on in modern poetry without crossing him, and no waiting him out.

No name comes back to this list more often, or with more trouble attached, than Ezra Pound's. For twenty years the room returned to him the way a tongue returns to a sore tooth — in anger, in admiration, in guilt, and above all in argument — until one member, wearily and exactly, gave the recurrence its name. "We do talk about the 'Pound problem' a lot on this list," he wrote, "and I think for many of us that's because we know precisely that we are talking about ourselves." This book is an attempt to gather that argument — not to settle it, which the list never managed and I will not pretend to, but to set its best moments side by side and let the reader see what was at stake.

The problem is easily stated and impossible to dissolve. Pound was the technical father of very nearly everything this list valued — the image, the fragment, collage and superposition, the whole modern art of condensation and of translation — and he forged those methods in the century's first decades, before the politics that would disgrace him existed to be served. Only later did he become a partisan of Mussolini's fascism and a broadcaster of anti-semitic propaganda, charged with treason for it. You cannot have the modernism without him, and you cannot have him without that history. Every poet in these pages knows it, and each has had to decide, in public, what to do with the knowledge: whether to bury him, to read through him, to quarantine the man from the work, or to admit that the quarantine is exactly the evasion that lets the poison spread.

The redemptive reading, when the list reached for one, ran like this: that Pound's own method is at war with his politics. The *Cantos* proceeds by collage, by the setting of fragment against fragment with no single measure to rule them, and that procedure — some members argued — is structurally the enemy of the order Pound craved, a democracy of materials that will not submit to one authority. Charles Bernstein had made that case at length in his essay “Pounding Fascism” (collected in *A Poetics*, Harvard University Press, 1992) — which insists that Pound's collage procedure, an autonomy of fragments that “will not submit to a unitary measure,” is at odds with the fascist order he preached — and a thread in 2008 argued it out; but it was never the list's settled view, and members made and unmade it, in their own words and on either side, for years. If the form really does undo the ideology, a left avant-garde can take up his methods without taking on his politics. If it does not — if a method carries its origins with it, and cannot be cleansed by good intentions — then the modernist inheritance is compromised at the root. That wager, not any one essay, is the hinge on which this book turns.

I have arranged the argument in four movements. The first, *The Trial That Never Ends*, is the moral reckoning — the room deciding, and failing to decide, whether and how Pound can be read at all. The second, *Make It New*, is the technical debt that even his enemies concede: what he actually taught poetry to do. The third, *The Method and the Sickness*, is the bridge — how the poets who came after took Pound's methods, and whether those methods, forged before his politics, can be inherited clean of them. The fourth, *The Argument He Left Us*, follows Pound out past himself, into the permanent questions he forced the list to keep asking: the life against the work, difficulty against access, the ethics of appropriation, the fate of the poem.

A word on the method. This book is built from many hands — some forty-five voices across thirteen years — and handled with a light but deliberate touch. From each post I have taken the passage that carries the argument, and where a post sustains its thinking I have kept it whole. Nothing is paraphrased; every word is verbatim, in the writer's own spelling. Where I cut within a passage I mark it with a bracketed ellipsis, [...], used sparingly — better a live sentence than a pruned one. The longer posts I have broken only where the thought naturally turns; a passage pursuing a single idea I let run long. Where a member's post is largely someone else's words — a private letter, a published essay, a poem, or another member's post quoted back in full — I have set that borrowed material as a block quotation, indented and without surrounding quotation marks, its author named in the note above; a few of these posts are almost pure collage, the

writer pasting in something found and letting it make his argument for him, much as Pound set the letters of Sigismondo Malatesta — and, later, the words of Jefferson and of Confucius — directly into the *Cantos*. Above each passage I set a short note, inset and in teal, naming who speaks and to what. For the labour of gathering, transcribing, and checking this archive I am indebted to Brian Kim Stefans, who served as my editorial assistant — and whose own posts the reader will meet in these pages.

There is a further gain in reading the list across a theme rather than down a single career. Any account that measures a poet's importance by the sheer volume of their posting inevitably crowns the most prolific — who were, on this list as on most, largely men — and mistakes frequency for weight. Keeping a passage because it is sharp, rather than because its author was often heard, brings a very different roster forward: a good many of the keenest interventions in these pages are by women — Wendy Battin, Carla Billitteri, Amy King, Ada Aharoni, and others — who never dominated the daily traffic but repeatedly cut to the heart of the argument. The thematic cut is, among other things, a quiet correction to the great-man habit that the archive's own volume otherwise rewards.

The reach was geographic as well as demographic. The Poetics List was never a local seminar but a room that spanned the globe, its argument carried on across continents and time zones. Ada Aharoni took part from Haifa, the Egyptian-born Israeli poet and peace researcher; Jim Andrews wrote in from Victoria, in British Columbia; the Turkish-born Murat Nemet-Nejat brought the ear of a poet who works between two languages; and the membership reached on from Britain and Italy to every quarter of the United States. There is a rightness to that spread: a quarrel over a poet who spent his own life between London, Paris, and Rapallo, and broadcast his ruin to the world from a studio in Rome, was fittingly conducted by a room scattered across the very map he had tried to redraw.

I have set the voices, within each movement, in the order they were sent, so that the reader can watch the argument develop — and, more often, recur — over the years. I have not tried to award it to anyone. The list never did; the Pound problem is not the kind of problem that gets solved, only the kind a serious art keeps having. That it kept having it, out loud, for two decades, is to the room's lasting credit.

— Kristen M. Fabians

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I

The Trial That Never Ends

Every generation re-opens the same proceeding — one member said as much — and the trial's memory is “a very specific memory, which could be defined as the forgetting of everything not a crime.” So here is the court, convened again, by a room that can neither agree on a verdict nor stop issuing summonses. The bench is stacked with irreconcilables, and deliberately: the refugee who fled Vienna the morning of the Anschluss and will not, for all the modernism in the world, let the poetry off; the reader who insists on going “through, not around,” the fascism; the plain soul who would “bury the guy and forget about him”; and the one who warns that pinning the century's evil on a single Pound is itself the tidy, scapegoating gesture of the thing we claim to hate.

What electrifies the argument is that the room knows it is arraigning itself. To defend the reading of Pound is to ask what one's own reading will swallow; to condemn him is to find the edge of one's own tolerance and stand on it. Even the great escape hatch — the “literary nullification doctrine,” by which sufficiently great art is presumed to launder the bigotry inside it, the alibi that has kept Wagner in the opera houses — is named here only so that it can be nailed shut. This is the list at its most serious: not closing the case, but refusing to let anyone file it.

Mark Scroggins, once a prospective student of Donald Davie's, adds his notice to the list's obituary thread for the British poet-critic, weighing the old man's crotchets against his lonely, lifelong defence of a Poundian poetics. The tone is wry and finally affectionate; the aside about Vendler and Ashbery is a genuine query.

My thanks as well to Ira for the Davie obituary. I remember a pleasant hour spent with him in his office at Vanderbilt University, watching him continually relight his pipe and counsel me, a prospective graduate student, that I would be better off pursuing my honors thesis on Bunting than on Robert Duncan. When I told him how fascinated I was by the eclecticism of Duncan's influences, he shook his head slowly: “Eclectic indeed — rather an eclectic *fudge*, I should say.” That was my introduction to Bunting's work. Later, he would send me a syllabus for a graduate seminar he had taught on the Objectivists, from which Zukofsky was unaccountably absent(!); “He would have taken up far too much of the semester, with too little reward,” was Davie's explanation.

I was inclined to dismiss him as an old fart at the time, an impression further strengthened by his scathing review of Williams's collected poems a couple of years later, and his casual dropping (somewhere) of the opinion that Niedecker was on a par with Dickinson — both "minor female poets." But if Davie was never quite vanguard enough for my tastes, he always remained a staunch advocate of a Poundian poetics — not a popular position in England, nor in America, where Helen Vendler takes every opportunity to berate Davie for his "unaccountable" appreciation of Pound. [Speaking of which, does anyone have a citation for the Ashbery interview where he says that Vendler told him (Ashbery) in conversation, "Of course you don't like *The Cantos*. You have to be a fascist to like *The Cantos*"?] He was always a graceful writer — not a skill valued by many American academics, nor, unfortunately, by many of those who write about poetry in America — and he was never afraid to hold unpopular opinions.

His Pound books remain useful. His *Under Briggflatts*, while highly spotty, is consistently entertaining. My personal favorite of his books is *A Gathered Church: the Literature of the English Dissenting Interest, 1700-1930*, a lovely and eclectic piece of historical scholarship and criticism.

— Mark Scroggins 26 Sep 1995 [link](#)

Marjorie Perloff answers list members urging Pound out of the canon — and a post setting his fascism beside the menace of Pat Buchanan — entering, as she notes, as a refugee from the Anschluss. Her case is historical, not exculpatory: anti-Semitism was the common weather of the 1920s, and the work of the Cantos cannot be unwritten.

But as for Pound, I think many of the postings here have been quite off the mark. Reading Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America*, about racial attitudes and nativism in the 20s, I was reminded what a horrible anti-semitic dear old Ernest Hemingway was, with that charming portrait of Robert Cohen in *The Sun Also Rises*. It has recently been shown how anti-semitic HD was, in her notebooks for *Tribute to Freud*. In fact, anti-Semitism and racism were as Michaels's shows, part and parcel of 20s postWWI culture. Very few writers escaped it. We have to try to understand why and not say let's get rid of Ezra Pound, who also happens to be one of the greatest poets of the 20th C.

I still believe — and I speak here as a refugee from Hitler whose family fled the morning of the Anschluss (March 12, 1938) of Austria — that Pound's "fascism" — most of it completely nonsensical, juvenile, and failing to understand how government works — was not nearly as dangerous as Heidegger's willed, conscious, perfectly "reasoned" Fascism. to read what Heidegger did at his own

university in order to get rid of colleagues who might have Jewish blood boggles the mind. And then there's Paul de Man. As Eliot Weinberger wrote in *Sulfur* some years ago, Pound's iniquities are not on the same scale because who the hell listened to Pound's message?? Whereas Heidegger/de Man influenced generations of students.

Jerry McGann has an essay in *Critical Inquiry* (a few years back) where he makes an eloquent case for the *Cantos* as the tragic poem of the 20th C in that it sums up so many of the terrible ideologies, anxieties, prejudices around. To call it tragic may go too far, but Jerry is right. And without the *Cantos*, I maintain there would have been no Black Mt, no Objectivism, no Ethnopoetics (Rothenberg) and performance poetry like Mac Low's, and so on down the line. So to say, as some people have on this list, let's just get rid of Pound, is ridiculous.

And if you only read people whose ideology you approve of, who shall 'scape whipping? What about a Stalinist like Neruda? Is he to be totally excused for supporting his Dictator? Shall we not read Wyndham Lewis, a worse fascist than Pound but also an incredible writer? Let's see, who's left? What about the homophobic, antisemitic passages in Baraka? And so on.

It all comes back to the vexed question about the relation of poetry to politics and that's a question that should be hotly discussed in a larger theoretical way than it is today. Robert Duncan has wonderful comments on the issue in his correspondence (not yet published) with Denise Levertov. But whatever the relationship, it can't be Love my Politics, love my poetry.

— Marjorie Perloff March 1996 [link](#)

Alan Sondheim answers James Perez, who had proposed that chronic depression made Pound "reach out" for Nazism as one more symptom of illness; Sondheim, depressed himself, refuses the alibi and closes on a mordant question. The occasion is the March 1996 quarrel over reading Pound and reading fascism.

I want to bow out of this discussion. But I must say I have chronic depression and it does not "make me reach out for anything." And if Nazism is the symptom, pray, what is the cure?

Yes, I read Pound; I wouldn't deny myself that. I read Céline. I don't have bad boys and good boys. But I read through, not around, Nazism, just as I have to have an informed reading of Heidegger say for my own work.

I would be careful about all this excusing fascism. Perhaps all fascists in Germany and Italy were chronically depressed?

— Alan Sondheim 14 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Answering a thread begun with Ada Aharoni's "just bury the guy" and Alan Sondheim's worry about acknowledging a poet's fascism, Carla Billitteri turns to a document: the journals Charles Olson kept visiting Pound at St Elizabeths, where admiration and revulsion refuse to separate. Her closing sentence is the edition's whole difficulty in miniature.

Worth reading in this context is Charles Olson's journals kept while visiting Pound in custody, published in *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeth's*, edited by Catherine Seelye. Olson had quit his government job in the wake of F.D.R.'s death and the sellout (as he saw it) of the progressive wing of the Democratic party by Truman. (Much of Olson's work had involved coordinating activities with immigrant organizations.) He was really just starting as a poet, and though *Call Me Ishmael* was written, he hadn't yet secured a publisher. Olson was fascinated by the *Cantos* and had arranged to cover the trial for *Partisan Review*. The issues raised here on the list more or less as a matter of intellectual stance take on a palpable reality in Olson's journals, enthrallment and disgust hopelessly tangled. Should Olson have washed his hands of Pound sooner than he did? (Pound credited Olson's small kindnesses at this time with saving his life.) What exactly did he learn by sitting at Pound's feet? Condemnation and forgiveness are two ends of a very long continuum of possible judgments. Here are two interesting excerpts:

From 15 January 1946:

“

... was it in here that he asked, does anyone know Westbrook Pegler? I indicated I didn't, and must have froze more than I ever have with him. He then called him "the best man they've got." And with that, for the first time, the full shock of what a fascist s.o.b. Pound is caught up with me. I guess I had to feel it on my own America before I could have a realization. For Pegler I have traveled through and understood. Pound's praise of him reveals his utter incomprehension of what is going on, and what has happened to himself. Just on a technical level, that such an ear as Pound's could permit himself to praise Pegler! What a collapse. I wondered then how long more I can hold out my hand to him as a poet and a man. I suppose I shall tell him one day I am the son of immigrants, this influx of second class citizens whom Pegler and Pound think has made impure their Yankee America of pioneers — and Biddles. That my father was killed fighting for the right of labor men to organize in unions. That decadent democracy gave me the chance to grope out of the

American city into some understanding of what life is, and how to peg a smart fascist s.o.b. like Pegler — and Ezra Pound.

”

From 24 January 1946:

“

He was quiet for a minute, working his forehead, talking down and away toward the window to his right and my left: "There was a Jew, in London, Obermeyer, a doctor of comparative of the endocrines, and I used to ask him what is the effect of circumcision. That's the question that gets them sore," and he begins to be impish as hell, "that sends them right up the pole. Try it, don't take my word for it, try it." And then, with a pitiful seriousness, turning directly toward me and says: "It must do something, after all these years and years, where the most sensitive nerves in the body are, rubbing them off, over and over again." ((It was fantastic, again the fascist bastard, the same god damned kind of medical nonsense Hitler and the gang used with the same seriousness, the same sick conviction.)) It was so cockeyed for the moment it was funny actually, absurd, and I was carried along by the swearing, swift, slashing creature.

I record it, but here as elsewhere, it is impossible to give a true impression. For at any given point, always, there is the presence of the seriousness of the man. Even in his sickest and most evil moments. He is always a man at work, examining, examining. Here, for example, on the one hand he is attacking K as a Jew, when the truth is K is making the mistakes of any young man, and Pound is god damned well lucky it is K and not the monster Griffin who is questioning him, is in charge. I could not help feeling during this whole line of Pound's, how it was precisely the Jews around him here and in the DDC who gave him some warmth and help, how it was through Tiny and K that I had got drawers issued to him, how it was K who at least had the curiosity to read his verse, and that K, in Chicago, when the bookstores said, they wouldn't carry the books of a fascist, objected and damn well told him that was the same as burning books, and plain out and out fascist. On top of that it was Rahv, another Jew, who had accepted my Yeats thing on EP, when all the blessed Christian editors took it as offering Pound an out, an intellectual excuse.

”

— **Carla Billitteri** 14 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Battin enters the March 1996 quarrel touched off by Ada Aharoni's call to bury Pound; against Alan Sondheim's principled refusal to read the anti-semites, she argues for keeping Pound in view as a warning to the self-taught and gifted. The Alan she answers is Sondheim; the tone is unhurried, self-implicating rather than accusing.

It's always seemed important to me to keep him in mind, both as great poet and as vicious politician — a warning that poetry doesn't make us what we'd like to think it does. Also a very personal warning to the autodidact and the isolated bright against the arrogance that comes with that territory — I wasn't born in Idaho in the 19th C., but grew up where his "I don't imagine America has any more idiots per capita than anywhere else" (loosely from memory) was a perverse comfort. Bad news. All that mostly entertaining early rage had to go somewhere, and there were plenty of hate-machines to absorb it. Still are. While I sympathize with Alan's refusal, I don't think it's safe to ignore this man, to rub him out of memory before we've taken him in. And his poetry caught me young & still shakes me-- *Pisan Cantos*, yes, also *Rock Drill* & many others — to the point where I can't stop asking, ever, who can afford to hide in talent or even in genius.

— **Wendy Battin** 15 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Ada Aharoni, in a thread whose subject line commands "bury Pound," answers Steve Carll's demurral that things are rarely so simple — Carll is the "you." Her remedies against a danger she takes to be live: refuse to teach Pound, and substitute Wilfred Owen. Behind Carll, a list she suspects of over-thinking the matter.

And has anyone tried to protest how it is that Pound's work, fascist and god-damned Hitlerite ... is so much discussed in this list?

I don't buy the pure methodology excuse or any other pitiful excuse.

What I suggest is — just bury the guy and forget about him, alongside his his "genius mates" Hitler and Mussolini.

— **Ada Aharoni** 16 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Alan Sondheim answers Ada Aharoni, who proposed to bury Pound and forget him alongside Hitler and Mussolini, and refuse him the classroom; against that erasure Sondheim argues everything — Pound, Céline, even Mein Kampf — must be read, since to censor is to concede the fascists their victory.

Hey, no no no... I'm sorry, but *everyone* should be read; the world is too complex to do a repeat cleansing. I've read *Mein Kampf*, Goebbels' *Michael*, most of

Céline, a lot of Pound. If we're going to ever comprehend what we ourselves are, and not just our "evil" selves, the last thing we need is censorship. (And we should not read X say "just for" the politics or to reprimand, violate — my own relationship to Heidegger is much more complex than that, for example, breaking out in other, productive directions.)

To censor, is to give in; as someone else has pointed out, the fascists have won.

There is another issue, incapable of resolution, needing discussion in the classroom, and that is the relationship of *any* biographical information to the written texts of an author. This can't be passed over; I read Céline *cold*, engrossed, sensing a violence towards myself, a violence towards him, a Europe that Heiner Muller built on. I would never say, don't read Céline; I would say, read him *most of all* - how else to comprehend the abject, resentment, burial?

— Alan Sondheim 16 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Milan Kundera's words, from Testaments Betrayed, which John Matthias typed out for the list as bearing on the continuing trial of poets like Pound. Kundera argues the tribunal remembers only the crime and forgets the work, reducing a life to criminography — the roll closing, pointedly, on Pound in his cage at Pisa.

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The pernicious influence of Orwell's novel resides in its implacable reduction of a reality to its political dimension alone, and in its reduction of that dimension to what is exemplarily negative about it. I refuse to forgive this reduction on the grounds that it was useful as propaganda in the struggle against totalitarian evil. For that evil is, precisely, the reduction of life to politics and of politics to propaganda. So despite its intentions, Orwell's novel itself joins in the totalitarian spirit, the spirit of propaganda. It reduces (and teaches others to reduce) the life of a hated society to the simple listing of its crimes.

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A little later he goes on like this, reaching back again to Kafka:

“

Tribunal: this does not signify the juridical institution intended for punishing people who have violated the laws of a state; the tribunal (or court) in Kafka's sense is a power that judges, that judges because it is a power; its power and nothing but its power is what confers legitimacy on the tribunal...

The trial's memory is colossal, but it is a very specific memory, which could be defined as *the forgetting of everything not a crime*. The trial thus reduces the defendant's biography to *criminography*; Victor Farias (whose *Heidegger and Nazism* is a classic example of criminography) locates the roots of the philosopher's Nazism in his early youth, without the least concern for locating the roots of his genius; to punish someone accused of ideological deviations, Communist tribunals would put *all* his work on the index (thus, for instance, the ban on Lukacs and Sartre in Communist countries covered even their pro-Communist writings). "Why are our streets still named for Picasso, Aragon, Éluard, Sartre?" a Paris paper asked in a 1991 post-Communist intoxication; it's tempting to answer: because of the value of their works! But in his trial against Europe, Sartre said exactly what values mean now: "our cherished values are losing their wings; looked at closely, every one of them is blood-stained"; values stained are values no longer; the spirit of the trial is the reduction of everything to morality; it is absolute nihilism in regard to craft, art, works...

For nearly seventy years Europe lived under a trial-regime. From among the great artists of the century, how many defendants...I shall mention only those who had some significance for me. Starting in the twenties, there were those hounded by the tribunal of revolutionary morality: Bunin, Andreyev, Meyerhold, Pilnyak, Veprik (a Jewish-Russian musician, a forgotten martyr of modern art; he dared to defend Shostakovich's opera against Stalin's condemnation; they stuck him in a camp; I remember his piano compositions, which my father liked to play), Mandelstam, Halas (the poet was adored by Ludvik in *The Joke*; hounded after his death for gloominess seen as counterrevolutionary). Then there were the quarry of the Nazi tribunal: Broch (he gazes at me, pipe in mouth, from a photo on my worktable), Schoenberg, Werfel, Brecht, Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Musil, Vancura (the Czech writer I most love), Bruno Schulz. The totalitarian empires and their bloody trials have disappeared, but the *spirit of the trial* lingers as a legacy, and that is what is now settling scores. Thus the trial strikes at: those accused of pro-Nazi sympathies: Hamsun, Heidegger (all Czech dissident thought, Patočka most notably, is indebted to him), Richard Strauss, Gottfried Benn, von Doderer, Drieu la Rochelle, Céline (in 1992, a half century after the war, an indignant official refused to designate his house a historical monument); supporters of Mussolini: Malaparte, Marinetti, Ezra Pound (the American military kept him, like an animal, in a cage for months under the blazing Italian sun; in his Reykjavik studio, the painter Kristjan Davidsson showed me a large photo of him: 'For fifty years it has gone with me everywhere I go'); the Munich appeasers: Giono, "Alain,

Morand, Montherlant, St.-John Perse (a member of the French delegation to the Munich conference, he was closely involved in the humiliation of my native country); then, the Communists and their sympathizers: Mayakovsky (who today remembers his love poetry and his amazing metaphors?), Gorky, Shaw, Brecht (who is thereby undergoing his second trial), Éluard (that exterminating angel who used to decorate his signature with a drawing of crossed swords), Picasso, Léger, Aragon (how can I forget that he offered me his hand at a difficult time in my life?), Nezval (his self-portrait in oils is on the wall of my bookshelves), Sartre. Some of these people are undergoing a double trial, first accused of betraying the revolution, then accused for services they had rendered earlier: Gide (in the old Communist countries, the symbol of all evil), Shostakovich (to atone for his difficult music, he manufactured rubbish for the regime's needs; he maintained that for the history of art a worthless thing is null and void; he didn't know that for the tribunal it is the worthlessness itself that counts), Breton, Malraux (accused yesterday of having betrayed revolutionary ideals, accusable tomorrow of having held them), Tibor Dery (some works of this Communist writer, who was imprisoned after the Budapest massacre, were for me the first great literary, nonpropagandistic reply to Stalinism). The most exquisite flower of the century, the modern art of the twenties and thirties, was even triply accused: first by the Nazi tribunal as *Entartete Kunst*, "degenerate art"; then by the Communist tribunal as "elitist formalism alien to the people"; and finally by the triumphant capitalist tribunal as art steeped in revolutionary illusions.

How is it possible that the Soviet Russian chauvinist, the maker of versified propaganda, he whom Stalin himself called "the greatest poet of our epoch" — how is it possible that Mayakovsky is nevertheless a tremendous poet, one of the greatest? Given her capacity for enthusiasm, her emotional tears that blur her view of the outside world, wasn't lyric poetry — that untouchable goddess — doomed one fateful day to become the beautifier of atrocities, their "warmhearted maidservant" (Baudelaire)?...To be a true poet and at the same time to support (like Mayakovsky) an incontestable horror is a scandal — in the sense of an unjustifiable, unacceptable event, one that contradicts logic and yet is real. We are all unconsciously tempted to dodge scandals, to behave as though they don't exist. That is why we prefer to say that the great cultural figures tainted with the horrors of our century were bastards; but it isn't so; if only out of vanity, aware that they are seen, looked at, judged, artists and philosophers are anxious to be decent and courageous, to be on the right side, to be right. That makes the scandal still more intolerable, more inexplicable. If we don't want to leave this

century just as stupid as we entered it, we must abandon the facile moralism of the trial and think about this scandal, think it through to the bottom, even if this should lead us to question anew all our certainties about man as such.

But the conformism of public opinion is a force that sets itself up as a tribunal, and the tribunal is not there to waste time over ideas, it is there to conduct the investigations for trials. And as the abyss of time widens between judges and defendants, it is always a lesser experience that is judging a greater. The immature sit in judgment on Céline's erring ways without realizing that because of these erring ways, Céline's novels contain existential knowledge that, if they were to understand it, could make them more adult. Because therein lies the power of culture: it redeems horror by transforming it into existential wisdom. If the spirit of the trial succeeds in annihilating this century's culture, nothing will remain of us but a memory of its atrocities sung by a chorus of children.

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— John E. Matthias 17 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Basil Bunting, writing privately to Pound in 1938, tells his old master to his face that his anti-semitism is base filth and not an arguable question — the “you” is Pound. Ada Aharoni reposts the letter as the discussion’s most telling document, praising Bunting for refusing to toe the line.

The most relevant piece of information so far, to my mind, that has been quoted in this discussion concerning Ezra Pound, is Basil Bunting's sincere, outspoken and courageous condemnation of Pound's disgusting Fascism:

”

Every anti-semitism, anti-niggerism, anti-moorism, that I can recall in history was base, had its foundation in the meanest kind of envy and in greed. It makes me sick to see you covering yourself with that filth. It is not an arguable question, has not been arguable for at least nineteen centuries... it is hard to see how you are going to stop the rot of your mind and heart without a pretty thoroughgoing repudiation of what you have spent a lot of work on. — Basil Bunting to Pound, 1938.

”

Basil Bunting was wise enough to sense how dangerous, "filthy," "rotten" and twisted Pound's fascist ideas were at the rise of Nazism. I congratulate all those

on this list who have expressed the same kind of disgust and fear concerning our own times, and have enough backbone not bend to "peer pressure" and to fashionable "cliches rags."

I am sorry to see that some of us have not learnt enough from history, as "Fascist ideas and fascist poetry pave the road to burning ovens..." After all the self-pitying lame arguments, excuses and repetitions, let's be conscientious enough to bury Ezra Pound after all. Let's rather resurrect Luther King's wise words:

"WHEN BAD MEN PLOT, GOOD MEN MUST PLAN..." (I am sure he meant good women too...)

I suggest we be choosy, and read, teach and spread, in the restricted time that is at our disposal, what can help us build a better culture and a better world toward year 2000, and not drag with us into the new century what can lead us again to gas chambers.

Cheers to Basil Bunting and Luther King! And to all those who do not just toe the line and join the herd, but rather adopt challenging attitudes, and think new, positive, constructive and nourishing thoughts like them...

"For my day is a Pomegranate
full of ruby grains -
as long as each grain
is a lifetime -
I do not care if I'm the woman
of no time ..."

— Ada Aharoni 18 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Steve Carll replies to Ada Aharoni, who urged the list to "bury Ezra Pound" and teach only positive role models. The "you" is Aharoni; Carll's warning is that her cordon sanitaire reproduces the very habit of mind — dividing the world into the good and the buryable — that fascism runs on.

Just to start, let me say that I applaud and share your clearly sincere desire to live in a post-fascist world. I also appreciate your observation that we only have so much time, and it's certainly desirable to spend that time immersed in positive, healthy ideas rather than negative hateful ones.

However, I see several very crucial dangers in the approach you suggest in your last three posts on this issue. Fascism works by precisely the kind of projection you seem to be advocating: it's so easy to project it onto a Pound, a Hitler, a Mussolini and divide the world into the bad people and the good people, and think

that if the good people bury the bad, we'll have utopia. As soon as enough good people believe this to start carrying it out, they become fascists too. You've already manifested some of this divisiveness by implying that those of us who advocate a different tack on fascism and on Pound than you are somehow spineless, have bent to peer pressure and conformist fashion (but of what sort?), that we're lame and self-pitying (do these sound like Hitler's denunciations of the "degenerates" to anyone besides me?) (Interesting also, that you seem to feel some anxiety at King's omission of women from the words you quoted, and felt the need to fill that space in for him, as if not to wish to acknowledge a possible shortcoming of one of the "good people.")

If we were all automata and could just have fascism programmed out of us, your solution would work great. However, fascism also feeds on negative emotions, and as human beings, we all have negative emotions. It's how we express them that's determinative. If we repress them, if we don't give them healthy outlets, if we make them Unspeakable, we'll end up with fascism. Because we all know how tempting taboos become. That's why I'm glad I'm not one of your students. Again, I appreciate that you want to give them positive role models, but if you're a positive role model yourself (and I'm certain you are), you should be able to talk them through Pound and have them understand where he goes wrong so they can avoid falling into the same trap. Instead I'm worried that you may have stuck their heads in the sand.

Just to end, let me reiterate that I applaud and share your clearly sincere desire to live in a post-fascist world. I also appreciate your observation that we only have so much time, and it's certainly desirable to spend that time immersed in positive, healthy ideas rather than negative hateful ones. Also, I like the lines of poetry you ended with. I hope you take the time to go back through some of the posts on this subject and try to think through them with compassion for their authors.

— **Steve Carll** 18 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Charles Bernstein, writing from the Upper West Side against the list's impulse to be done with Pound, argues that reading fascism as central to the poetics is a way back into the work, not out of it. He offers his own conversion as evidence: the political reading, far from dismissing the poems, takes Pound at his word.

Many of the poets and critics who discount Pound do not do so because of his fascism but because of a dislike for collage, parataxis, and the very strikingly rhetorical surfaces of Pound's poems. They also discount other poets, working in related modes, whose politics are quite contrary to Pound's. The converse of this

is also true, as the remarkable posts by Rothenberg, Mac Low, and Perloff, among others, have shown. In this context, I don't take the new wave of Pound criticism that regards fascism as central to Pound's poetic project to be a move away from reading Pound or as a way of undermining his significance or influence. This new Pound criticism, which in some ways incorporates aspects of what has come to be called cultural criticism, or cultural and gender studies, tries to integrate Pound's political and economic ideas with his poetic practice. Like all critical projects, this one is limited. Much of the best Pound criticism before this period tended in various ways to cauterize or surgically remove the cancerous parts of Pound's work, or career, in an attempt to save the good parts. Partly this was a strategy to "save" the work, but it was equally a forceful interpretative system, an "apolitics" of poetry if you will. (Peter Nicholls: "Most previous criticism of [Pound's] work has, from a variety of motives, sought to keep these different strands separate, tending in particular to drive a web between the 'literary' and political dimensions in his writing.")

Starting in the 1980s, critics like Nicholls (a deep lurker on this list), Rachel DuPlessis, Richard Sieburth, Jerome McGann, Burton Hatlen, Bob Perelman, and others, but most militantly Robert Casillo, tried to integrate Pound's political and economic and gender ideologies into the "tropical system" that is his poetry. In doing this, these readers were giving Pound the respect of taking him at his word, in contrast to those critics who, like well meaning relatives, were often forced to say Pound didn't know what he was talking about. The point here is not to say one approach or the other is right but to note that these approaches allow for different readings of Pound's poetry. None of this work, it seems to me, ought to drive one from reading Pound; quite on the contrary. (Possibly this may be the work of a distinctly younger generation of scholars who no longer felt that raising these issues aligned their views with those who roundly dismissed Pound in the postwar period; this earlier polarization pushed those who went to the defense of Pound's poetry to avoid dwelling on the relation it has to his politics and views on money.)

Casillo and Sieburth actually brought me back to reading Pound; that is, reading through the fascism and masculinism brought me from a passive, largely unarticulated, aversion to Pound, to an active, and ongoing, interest in all aspects of his work. Certainly I have been polemical in my essays on Pound, but not without the ironic realization that Pound relished just this sort of poetic polemicism. Reading Pound through the fascism means reading Pound in the most specific social and historical terms. It also means reading poetic forms politically, as an economy of signs; it means thinking through the implications of

poetic structures, rather than imagining them ever to be neutral or transparent. A poem including history means we must read the history too, and this history is writ in the style, in the symbolic/semiotic economy of the poem, in the material means of production, as much as in Pound's "disembodied" "ideas" — a matrix of material meanings that Christine Froula so brilliantly calls "The Pound Error": error as much in Joan Retallack's sense of typos and errancy as in political misjudgment: it's *all* there.

Poetry is not worth reading because it is comfortable or happy or understandable or uplifting, any more than history or philosophy is. Nor does reading for a politics of poetic form mean that forms are liberating; more often we find, as Ray DiPalma once wrote, that "all forms are coercive". If one starts with the assumption that a poetry should be truthful or beautiful, that its meaning should transcend the circumstances of its production — then of course talk of the politics of Pound's poetic forms will seem dismissive of Pound's work, since it pulls that work down from the heights of poetic vanity into the real-politics of the actual poem in actual history.

People say, Pound was deluded, Pound was insane, Pound was paranoid, Pound was delusional, as a way to explain away, or possibly contextualize, his fascism. I don't doubt this, but it doesn't get me anywhere. Fascism itself was (IS) delusional and paranoid, and Hitler and Mussolini and Goebbels are certifiable in my book, as are the shouting Brown Shirts pictured in *Triumph of the Will* (don't we call this "mass hysteria"?). [Highly recommended, in this context, in the recent documentary on Riefenstahl, "The Wonderful, Horrible World of Leni Riefenstahl".] I agree with Pierre Joris that what's important to understand as we approach the end of this long century is the nature of this delusion, of this insanity, that has attracted so many otherwise admirable, sometimes brilliant, people, groups, indeed cultures. Of course Pound was delusional during the period of his Radio Speeches; reading Pound means reading through these delusions, trying to come to terms with them. It doesn't mean that in making these judgments one is free of one's own delusions, or that such a reading gives a complete account of this poetic works, which demands multiple, contradictory, readings.

Pound was not just a fascist; he had different politics, and poetics, at different points in his life and even at some of the same points. Nicholls notes that from 1930 to 1937, Pound was eager to keep a dialogue open with the American Left; and earlier in his life his views seemed more Left than Right, although, reading Nicholls, one begins to see this as much as a weakness in the Life/Right distinction as an inconsistency on Pound's part. Nicholls also shows that "perhaps

the most disquieting thing about [Pound's] savage propaganda is that it was to some degree an extension of ideas that had governed the earlier *Cantos*." Indeed, Nicholls's tracings of the (de?)evolution of the practice of "authority" and "ideological closure" in Pound's work is crucial for understanding a fundamental dynamic of modernism.

Yet Pound's poetry is never simply a direct reflection of his politics; indeed, I would argue quite to the contrary that Pound's work contradicts his fascism. The fascist reading of Pound's poetic practice is valuable as one approach; it is not a final or definitive reading; as with all critical methods, it illuminates some issues while obscuring others. Of course, as Casillo's book and other Pound criticism shows, it also may push the criticism to the polemical and even hysterical, as if the critic feels she or he is wrestling with a demon more than interpreting a poem. This too needs to be historicized and contextualized before it can be judged.

Pound told Allen Ginsberg he suffered from "that stupid, suburban prejudice of antisemitism", as if he should have been immune from such a low, "suburban" consciousness. But one thing that is notable about Pound is that he does not appear to have been "personally" antisemitic, which would have been in no way unusual for a person of his generation and background. His attacks on Jews are not related to his hatred of individual Jews or his desire to be a member of an "exclusive" country club. His views of Jews are highly theoretical and structural, projecting Jewishness, more than individual Jews, as the core force in the destruction of the most cherished values of the West. This demonization is not a "stupid suburban prejudice", it is the systematic paranoia-producing ideology that has come to be called by the fascism. (Burton Hatlen: "we will all seriously misunderstand fascism if we insist on seeing it as a "right-wing" political movement. For fascism ... blended an authoritarianism usually associated with the 'right' and a 'populism' usually characteristic of the 'left'.") Marjorie Perloff is quite right to point to it in Buchanan and the fundamentalist right; they too have gone well beyond "stupid suburban prejudice", even as they bank on it. It is scary to see the degree to which fascist ideas have rooted themselves so deeply in mainstream American life, often in the guise of family values and consonance with a natural order. Pound's most fascist polemics resonate in an eerie way with the current wave of attacks on the arts, gays, the disenfranchised poor, immigrants, feminism, and the cities. I say this because there is often a tendency among Americans to exoticize fascism; Pound did his best to bring it home.

There are any number of fascist writers who are of virtually no interest to many or probably any of us on this list. And there are virulent antisemites like Céline,

whose work I like more than is comfortable to say, but which I don't find as structurally and "tropically" rich in terms of the sort of issues I am raising here.

Pound's work, it seems to me, not only allows for but provokes an ideological reading; it insists that it be read, form and content, for its politics and its ideas. And it is precisely this that is one of the *enduring* values of his work. The dystopian aspects of Pound's work are important to fully explore, even with tempers flying off the page, because he is a fundamental part of that elective tradition (thinking of Christopher Beech's useful sense of Pound's influence in his *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition*) that, as Beach and others have noted, consists mostly of poets whose politics and economics differ so radically from Pound's. But the more important Pound is for that tradition, then the more important it is to understand the disease that consumes his work, which cannot be disentangled from what is "good" about it. Nicholls, for example, notes how Pound's insistence on "making it new" made for an affinity with related fascist ideals. The significance of "the Pound tradition" requires that we interrogate it for what it excludes as much as what it makes possible: interrogate the assumptions of poetic lineages not just to acknowledge their effects but also to counteract their effects. (Perhaps one aspect of this elective tradition is a commitment to difficult writers and difficult writings; after spending some weeks lately writing about Laura (Riding) Jackson, that possibility is hard to miss.)

Marjorie urges us to "begin at home" with our political concerns, to look around at what is happening in 1996 in America. Given the context of her own life experience, her warning is all the more ominous, all the more to be heeded. But also, I would say, I hope within the spirit of her wake-up call, but also in the spirit of "debate", that in the context of this Poetics list, taking on Pound's fascism is also a way of starting at home.

— Charles Bernstein 22 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Writing to a list wary of moralising, shoemakers — "steve" at the signature — argues the "Pound problem" is never only about Pound but about poetry's inherited privilege, and the writing of poems after Auschwitz. He reasons by way of Bob Perelman and, at length, Williams; the half-addressed "you" is a list too quick to dismiss ethics as piety.

I've only been able to read the list sporadically of late, so maybe i shld keep quiet — but i can't. I agree that there is a danger of holier than thou attitudinizing in the effort to discuss the "sins" of poets. The process can easily degenerate into unproductive fingerpointing. At the same time, i'm amazed at how ready some

people are to consider any discussion of ethics as a necessarily self-righteous, misguided and "pc" sort of maneuver. We do talk about the "Pound problem" a lot on this list, and i think for many of us that's because we know precisely that we are talkinga about ourselves, and about poetry, and not just about some unexplainable rogue fascist. Perelman, for example, makes it clear in his Pound chapter that he is writing about Pound because Pound has been central to his (Perelman's) development as a poet:

"I've learned to read his language and have absorbed his fervor concerning words; I no longer want to savor decontextualized lyricism. Certainly, the vividness of his struggle ot make each word both new and true to history has been a powerful influence on poetry in America. Pound's language presenets a charged image of speed and lucidity; this charge is valuable for the future of poetry. But I want the full dynamics of Poundian light to be acknowledged; what it illuminates is always accompanied by a phobic shadow."

I think of a lot of use feel — as poets, readers, critics — that we, and poetry, *have* to deal with that shadow, that historically speaking poetry has too often assumed a privilege to itself (call it "decontextualized lyricism" if you like) that it can no longer afford. It's clear to me too that when we're talking about Pound we are also often talking, either implicitly or explicitly, about the Holocaust, about what it means to write poetry before, during, after Auschwitz. That's a fact of *our* global history that is inescapable exactly *now* as we continue to struggle with whit the question of globalness itself. But, still, when i say Pound's question is "our" question i want to say, yes, that we can't just read him as the evil other — but i also want to say that we can and should examine the man, and the poetry, carefully to see where he goes wrong. Pound is central to my understanding of poetry — there's simply no way for me *not* to ask these questions. In my own work, which deals quite a lot with the thirties, it has been illuminating (to me) to see the various personal, political, and poetical routes taken through the period of fascism's rise. I think Pound had a lot of genuine care for the plight of the world in a period of crisis — and his response was to become a fascist. William Carlos Williams, in thrall to Pound in so many ways — and sympathetic at many points to Pound's social critique — explicitly refuses this development, and launches an attack on, and extremely compelling diagnosis of, Pound's fascism — at a relatively early point, 1941. Moreover, he does this throught a reading of Pound's poetry (specifically the opening of Canto XXX) that never denies the beauty of that poetry, even as it also never hesitates to read it for its ethical and political import. The beauty of the poem, Williams concludes, is to be found in "a pleasure and pain equally balanced which we cannot resolve." We owe it to ourselves, and

to poetry, to acknowledge both that pleasure and that pain. WCW might not have been able to come to his (crucial) insight if he hadn't thought so hard about that conflict. And history isn't over yet. We've got our own historical difficulties to struggle with, and our own poetry to write.

— **Steven Shoemaker** 25 Feb 1997 [link](#)

Jonathan Mayhew tests the old doctrine that great literature automatically transcends its own bigotry — the literary nullification that would render Pound's anti-semitism merely apparent — and finds it ridiculous, even as he admits a colder, contemporary fear: that a teacher might now be sued for assigning The Cantos.

Are we at the point that teaching a work is equivalent to endorsing everything in it, or necessitates an insurance policy against anything potentially offensive therein? The weirdness of this logic also applies to the idea that by excluding a given work in course we are stigmatizing it in some awful way. No matter how encyclopedic a course is it will always exclude more than it can take in.

Sartre said it was impossible to write a good work of literature that was racist or colonialist (I am paraphrasing forgive the inaccuracy of my memory). The logic is that literature is intrinsically on the side of human liberation. It's an argument that I don't hear much anymore — the contemporary equivalent is that the *study or* teaching of literature has to further human liberation. The same argument but once removed.

Twain did not set out to write racist tracts; but racist tracts, insofar as they are taught, will probably be taught as such, with the issue of race at the forefront.

There is the famous "literary nullification" doctrine: if the work is great literature, then any anti-semitism, racism, etc... is automatically transcended. Pound's anti-semitism only *looks like anti-semitism, it is really something else. This is self-evidently ridiculous and leads to much tortured reasoning. Yet the idea that any one of us might be sued for teaching* The Cantos makes me shudder... For that matter all works of literature written in the past will come up short when measured against contemporary sensibilities.

— **Jonathan Mayhew** 20 Oct 1998 [link](#)

William Carlos Williams to Ezra Pound, March 1946, as Pound awaits his treason trial in Washington for the Rome Radio broadcasts; the “you” is Pound, and Williams won’t pretend the broadcasts were harmless. Henry Gould reposts it under the bare heading “showdowns,” adding not a word — a peer’s reckoning delivered to the man’s face.

“

And for God's sake you didn't expect anyone to *listen* to your foul-mouthed broadcasts, did you? Some listened until bored to death and then quit. Viola listened and was fed up with your ranting. I didn't listen at all, the mere fact of your broadcasting at all at such a time was enough for me. You might as well realize that there is a point in all controversy beyond which a man's life (his final card) is necessarily forfeit. A man accepts that and goes on with his eyes open. But when the showdown comes he loses his life. — William Carlos Williams, Letter to Ezra Pound, March 29, 1946. (Pound was awaiting trial for treason.)

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— **Henry Gould** 05 Dec 1998 [link](#)

The reasoning is Mark Weiss’s, offering the Kurt Waldheim analogy to argue that withholding the prize was less a verdict on the Cantos than a refusal to be seen forgiving the unforgivable. Jordan Davis reposts Weiss’s paragraph, correcting only that the honour at issue was the Bollingen, not the Nobel.

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Someone suggested that those who had denied Pound the Nobel Prize had failed to separate the work from the man. They were in fact remembering some of the more disreputable works. When Kurt Waldheim, after his UN career, was discovered to have committed war crimes there were some who objected to his being elected president of Austria — his great post-war service were apparently enough to excuse his earlier behavior as far as the Austrian electorate was concerned, but the critics felt that some things are unforgiveable and that to honor the perpetrator is to diminish the apparent seriousness of what had been done. Pound wasn't a war criminal, merely a fellow-traveller of war criminals, but that's bad enough. To deny him the prize was not so much a judgment on the *Cantos* as a decision not to be seen as forgiving the unforgiveable in the context of a Europe where passions like those who had expressed during the war were and are very much alive.

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— Jordan Davis 16 Jul 1999 [link](#)

Kevin Killian, filing the sixth instalment of his gossip-bright dispatch from the Orono conference, lands on a young scholar's paper and its book — Gregory Barnhisel's study of how James Laughlin and New Directions kept Pound sellable after the treason broadcasts. The earnest question beneath the diarist's swoon: how a disgrace became cultural capital.

"Bern Porter was too far gone to speak, and the whole room smelled. I went back again, same story." What a horrid interview, and I thought I'd conducted some duds. I told Quint that Bern Porter had been very obliging to me when I'd queried him regarding the life of Jack Spicer. And how far apart the worlds of Berkeley and Maine really are. It was odd indeed how there was a Maine connection to everything. Then I read on the Poetics List that Bern Porter can be glimpsed in the film of Stephen King's *Thinner*, which I remember seeing when it came out. A gypsy plays a trick on him. How ironic! In any case the panel wasn't the time or place for any of us to express our doubts about Porter's legacy, he had died so recently it would have been like stomping on his grave. But I keep looking at those "Founds" and just not seeing anything but warmed over *Mad* Magazine surrealism. You could assemble a million of them and they're not going to assuage your guilt, not if you have a shred of decency left in you. I wondered if Porter had come to Maine in penance, because you always have to wear long underwear there which must be so uncomfortable. I missed someone else give a paper on Ashbery, and another fellow gave a talk on James Laughlin's poetic career. This fellow was cute in a preppy sort of way, in his early 30s I imagine and I was sorry to have missed a chance to hear him talk more. At the Q & A Marjorie Perloff raised her hand and said, "This question is for Greg there ... Greg, you stated that James Laughlin was okay with being passed over for the awards and prizes and recognition. Well, I knew him well-extremely well-we were close-and" — voice darkening—"he was not okay with that." Greg defends his position, and Marjorie shakes her head, whether in disbelief or in sorrow I don't know. Really it wasn't even a question. I hate those panels about "Beginning in the 1940s," they might as well do a paper on Jewel at American Poets of the 1970s conference and say, well, she was alive in the 1970s. Now, looking at my program, I see that the man's name (who was so handsome, like a track star at Mineola Prep) is Gregory Peter Barnhisel of Duquesne, and his book-coming out in February-will be called *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound*. It promises to answer the question I have always asked myself, how was it that after the disgrace of the Fascist broadcasts, Laughlin was able to keep Ezra Pound's name alive through marketing, even to the extent of managing to increase its cultural

capital, partly I suppose by romanticizing the image of the old man locked up in the mental ward in DC, etc., so that's another book to look forward to.

— **Kevin Killian** 31 Jul 2004 [link](#)

II Make It New

Set the crimes aside for the length of this movement — the list itself could never manage it for more than a paragraph, but the argument now and then requires it — and look only at what Pound handed poetry to work with. Even those who cannot stand the man pay the bill: the flat commandment that “to write poetry is to condense,” the ideogram with its overlay of “image on image, of phrase on phrase,” the fragment (which one poet here suspects Pound stumbled on while blue-pencilling the sprawl out of *The Waste Land* — Eliot's monument was, in part, Pound's edit), and the versions from the Chinese and the Anglo-Saxon that, “for all his howlers,” put a new music and a new plainness into English.

These are the tools the rest of the century built with. The movement gathers the room trying to say precisely what the method was and how it runs — and, already, flinching at the suspicion Movement III will make its whole business: that a technique can smuggle a politics, that the epic distance and the voice of authority do not come apart from the collage that carries them. You do not get the machine without the man who tuned it.

Writing to a correspondent he addresses as Bill, Ira Lightman defends the proposition that Pound, not Zukofsky, is the genuinely musical ear — able to do counterpoint rather than merely namecheck Bach. The passage extends a poetics manifesto Lightman had circulated to the list; the tone is technical and combative.

However, I always answer specific questions. Stockhausen is a European composer of similar age and period to Cage; Stockhausen uses some process and chance, but he has also periodically stopped to ask what he has learned from his chance works, and has always also composed very carefully chosen work. My point in my manifesto was simply to allege that a lot of poets want to call themselves *musical* because they get Cage, or free jazz, as a theoretical gesture, but not as a physical experience of sound. That poets allied to Zukofsky think he and therefore they are musical when Zukofsky may namecheck Bach, but is a million miles further away from Bach than, for example, Pound, in understanding how to balance and combine cadences and sound, or how to do counterpoint. To take one example, Pound's use of monosyllables in the early *Cantos* is, it seems to me, a technical feat as difficult as musical composition; by his careful sense of context, dialect and etymology he places words in his poetry so that they interrogate and are interrogated by other words and lines *both rhythmically (picking*

up certain assonances) and semantically (looking at what the word might mean and has meant); this creates a kind of counterpoint, or slowing of time, as the mind remembers previous words and lines and mentally plays them in a kind of double-exposure; just as, when listening to Bach, one can hear phrases recur but in reverse or a different octave, and one thus hears phrases inside each other. If you then look at how Zukofsky uses monosyllables in the opening sections of A, you find not remotely the same complexity (it's as if he's trying to copy the surface of Pound without understanding the structure).

Cage wanted to use randomness in order to defy connections with the past, to be new in that way. Stockhausen manages a similar break but also stands equal with past composers, creating equivalent *complexity* by balancing not so much phrases but cadences, working not in time and rhythm but physical space. I can't describe it better than that; I just get a huge sense of space, with a sound coming from above, then left, then throughout the whole space. Cage wanted to get his audience to feel space, eg 4'33", but Stockhausen can actually sculpt it.

— **Ira Lightman** 01 Feb 1995 [link](#)

Rob Hardin, posting under the handle Carnography, is midway through an appreciation of poets who invent technique to protect artifice rather than dispel it, and reaches for Pound's Cantos as the case in point — obscure on the page, wholly audible to the ear. The tone is the connoisseur's, delighted and unabashed.

I've been reading Raymond Roussel's *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, and find myself agreeing with his thoroughly *arbitrary* approach to technique. I thought of Houdini, Stravinsky ("I limit myself in order to free myself) and Austin Clarke ("I load myself down with chains and then try to get out of them"). In the work I love most, there is usually the sense that the music of the words is deliciously self-sufficient: it pulls you along, sometimes in spite of the so-called subject. And in the iconography of the writers I love (early Auden, Bob Perelman, Dennis Cooper, Campion, Laura Riding Jackson, Robert Desnos, Max Jacob, John Wieners, Bernhard, Michelet, Crashaw, Huysmans, Ballard, etc etc) there is often the sense of a de Chirico landscape, of sound providing the treadmill for a procession of charged but cryptic material. They feel like chamber music written by Joseph Cornell.

Scriabin called his Ninth Sonata "a sonata of insects," and defined insects as "kisses of the sun come to life." There is just such a paradox, it seems to me, in the "Cadmus of the golden prow" section of Pound's *Cantos*: hard little bits of granite imagery, and yet there is sound, there are still "pale ankles moving." Few know

what he is talking about (though I was once fool enough to annotate the entire thing in pencil), but everyone can hear what he sees.

Jumbled, inarticulate notes, perhaps.

But here's another thought: Roussel was gay at a time when popular wisdom equated homosexuality with perversity and madness. My theory is that Roussel was forced to create a cryptic mechanism, a code, to delineate his passions and desires. In formulating said code, he created a technique that was invaluable to everyone from the surrealists to Robbes-Grillet.

My question: Though some poets reinvent techniques in order to destroy artifice and return to the language of ordinary speech (Wordsworth, Whitman, Kerouac), don't other poets (Ashbery, Mallarmé, Unica Zürn, *de Quincey*) invent new techniques in order to *protect* artifice, destroy so-called ordinary speech, and avoid the obvious?

Or are both points of view mere excuses for revelling in the texture of language itself?

— Rob Hardin 04 Jun 1996 [link](#)

From Peter Baker's introduction to his anthology Onward, sent to the list by Rod Smith while Baker was travelling; the passage enlists Pound's instruction to his Italian translator as the type-case of an immanentist faith that words carry the essence of their referents — for Baker, the myth of transparency underwriting mainstream verse.

“

Poetics is a vast, ancient, yet understudied field. Except, of course, for poets. Yet many if not most poets would probably assent to the proposition that one's poetics can be deduced from the poem. A statement on poetics presents immediate difficulties within such an aesthetic, because it risks being seen as ancillary to the production of the poem, and may, in fact, misrepresent the implicit poetics in the poet's work. Given these risks, many poets choose reticence as their primary mode of statement, with the limit of reticence approaching silence, often accompanied by an attitude of active disdain.

Belief in an implicit poetics can be seen to derive from an immanentist theory of language, or the idea that words bear direct relation to what they represent, even carrying a little bit of the essence of the thing in the word. Such immanentist theories deriving from the religious tradition ("and the word was with God and the word was God") drove William of Occam, in the twelfth century, to propose the complete separation of

word and referent, in his philosophy of nominalism. Jacques Derrida is often thought to represent such a nominalist viewpoint in his philosophy of deconstruction (see my *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn*). Ezra Pound's language theory is explicitly immanentist, as when he instructs his Italian translator of *The Cantos*: "Don't worry about the meaning of the poem. Translate accurately line by line. The meaning is inherent in the material." Pound's poetics in *The Cantos* thus demonstrates what I call (in *Obdurate Brilliance*) the "myth of transparency," or the ideology of direct apprehension of the surrounding context from the text of the poem. Without worrying too much (right now) about the accuracy of labels, much of what is called mainstream poetry today operates either knowingly, or usually unknowingly, out of this model of transparency. Anthologies of poetics by mainstream poets are thus usually concerned with craft and technique — how the poem is put together — when the poet is not discussing where he or she went on his/her last vacation or MacArthur grant to gather material. The poem's meaning is either inherent in the material (themes) or what it represents (nature). This view of poetics as purely practical and personal both derives from and sustains the poetic practice variously termed workshop or MFA verse, and can be found exemplified in every issue of the *AWP Chronicle*.

In the past twenty-five or so years vibrant alternatives in the theory and practice of poetry have risen out of the movement known as Language poetry.

Following the "radical modernism" of Stein, Zukofsky and others, in Charles Bernstein's appellation, or what Marjorie Perloff has called "the other tradition," this practice has as one explicit goal, quoting Zukofsky, "to stop the gaze on words as things." By now, Language poetry has been around long enough that, like deconstruction or Mt. Pinatubo, it no longer exists, but its practitioners, many of them represented here, are still very active and its effects, as John Ashbery indicates in his interview, may be even more interesting than the initial productions of those associated with the movement. Literary history (which H. R. Jauss terms "conceivably the worst medium through which to display the historicity of literature") is already at work deriving a genealogy to explain the transition between the "radical modernism" of Stein, Zukofsky and others, and the Language poets. Materials for such a genealogy are generously represented here in the selections by John Ashbery and Robert Creeley, as well as those of Clark Coolidge and Bernadette Mayer.

There is no raw material.

So Harry Mathews begins his contribution. Mathews, a member of the *Ourvoir de littérature potentielle*, or OULIPO group, brings impeccable credentials to his theorizing, or non-theorizing, of the production of the poem. As with Lyn Hejinian's already-classic essay, "Against Closure" (revised and expanded for publication here), Mathews' statement is a kind of manifesto, reminiscent of the radical modernism of Andre Breton and early surrealism. Manifestos are less concerned with explanation than with demonstration; they attempt not to analyze, but rather to make manifest artistic practices and attitudes.

Looking at the materials assembled here, I have been struck that there are two clear poles, or limits, or borders, to their expressive strategies. If the manifesto is one such border, the other is collage. Some of these collage assemblages, such as those of Charles Bernstein and Nicole Brossard, were created or at least shaped explicitly for this collection. Others are the results of collaborations between the poets and/or the editor and/or the editor's friends, notably Rod Smith, Lee Ann Brown, and Peter Gizzi.

The relation of poetics to poetry always to some extent resists explanation.

Yet we are drawn to explore it as part of a life commitment to poetry, a commitment those in the present volume recognize under the sign of necessity, Beckett's "all that I can, more than I could." Each poet's approach also necessarily involves questions of individual history and practice while somehow managing to ground the communities of poets and artists actively committed to the creative imagination. This volume emerges from these multiple communities and hopefully will serve as a resource for those already involved in the work and those yet to come.

”

Or, as Bernadette Mayer likes to say, "Onward."

— Rod Smith 09 Jul 1996 [link](#)

In a thread commemorating James Laughlin — the New Directions publisher Pound once told to give up poetry and print his friends — David R. Israel takes up Patrick Pritchett's "making it new": the "it," he proposes, is antiquity itself, an Ancient Future recovered by immersion in the old. His closing "so much depends" nods, past Laughlin, to Williams.

James Laughlin was heir to an immense Pennsylvania steel fortune. He was also a poet and lover of literature. It's fair to say he did as much for American poetry in

this century as anyone — publishing, and keeping in print, Pound, Williams, HD, Henry Miller, Kenneth Patchen — the list goes on forever.

The story goes, as Laughlin himself relates in his marvelous *Pound As Wuz*, that he went to sit at the feet of the master in Rapallo in the late 30's. Pound, however, advised him to give up poetry and start a publishing company that would print Pound and Pound's pals. The rest is history, as they say. And fortunately, Laughlin disregarded Pound's advice about poetry. He kept at it, producing several books of spare, lyrically direct poems that were delicate without being precious. His death is indeed a great loss. American poetry owes him a debt which can only be repaid by keeping faith with his commitment to making it new.

— David R. Israel 13 Nov 1997 [link](#)

Carlo Parcelli — writing to David, and posting through R. Gancie's address — elaborates modernism's war on cultural fragmentation and singles out Pound: the poet who all but invented the mode yet could not, by his own admission, hold the Cantos together — a failure Parcelli reads as his profoundest fidelity to our historical condition.

Both modernism and postmodernism for me legitimate themselves by presenting modes for addressing conditions which engage other segments of the culture, be they psychoanalytic, scientific, philosophical, political, sociological etc. This I find to be the chief value of both. What distinguishes modernism is its treatment of fragmentation and specialization that it saw rocking Europe during and after World War I by attempting to remake culture in the poet's image. The moderns attempted to either create a new synthesis and/or to reinvent what they perceived as the old one. In fact there are both of these elements in all the moderns because all the moderns implicitly understood the value of historical context. The problem became to discover a new world within the individual voice of each poet profound enough to compensate for the what was perceived as the bankrupt condition of the world in which they found themselves. There is nothing poetically unique in that except that the moderns (at least the one's I'm thinking of here) used available texts, literally anything they felt relevant, as their actual materials. The thematic unity of David Jones' brilliant poems maintain a certain structural continuity as well by primarily limiting themselves to material from three historical sources. Olson on the other hand was at home with historical shards seeing quite accurately that history itself was only a jumble of fragments upon which any coherence was largely imposed. Pound interests me most, not only because the *Cantos* are probably the best of all the modernist works, but because even though he more or less invented the modernist mode, possibly

coming to certain realizations as he edited Eliot's *Ur-Wasteland*, he was also ill-suited temperamentally to the task of stanching the fragmentation of a culture. Pound begins the *Cantos* in medias res almost as though coherence will someday present itself out of the mists like Ithaca to the wandering Greeks. I'm exaggerating a great deal here by ignoring the large poetic and intellectual experience Pound brought to the *Cantos*, but it still remains that he finally admitted that he could not make them cohere. It was through this ethos of failure of the poem's thematic structure that Pound made his most important discoveries and created the *Cantos'* most enduring passages. In the end Pound even more profoundly than Olson reflected our true historical condition by incorporating fragmentation and failure in a work of art which in so many ways paralleled the failure of his own personal history. Pound among all the modernists became an historical figure for better or worse and did it, in part, by resisting (to the point of madness) the unsculpturable lessons of his own chosen materials in the end succumbing, like the *Cantos*, to the very fragmentation he sought to overwhelm.

By the time we get to the PostModernist, Olson is their true Penelope because we are prepared to accept the now overwhelmingly obvious condition of fragmentation. This is utterly legitimate; in fact it shows good sense. I'm just not certain that the role of poets is to show good sense. In this era of 'good sense', scientific method, modelling (not of the runway type), standardization, globalization, digitization etc., with all the dreams of the futurist's clean fascist lines realized, poets will have little or no role to play. They will have no role no matter how impeccably elegant their constructs, and no matter how much hermeneutical precision they achieve, no matter how fashionable they make formal and contextual randomness.

— Carlo Parcelli 01 Feb 1998 [link](#)

Henry Gould, in a thread on Pound's borrowed motto dichten = condensare, answers Michel Delville's point that the German dichten really means to seal or caulk, not to condense. Gould takes the pun seriously, folding the seal into Pound's hunger for the poem as minted emblem — his father's trade at the mint doing the metaphor's work.

Could you explain this interesting concept a little further? Are you saying that Pound's idea — behind this expression *dichten* = *condensare* — is to preserve unity or wholeness?

It seems to me, and as some others have already pointed out, the basic point Pound is making here is: "to write poetry is to condense", i.e. to sharpen, shorten, achieve precision and depth through brevity. Perhaps this is assuming too many a

priori Poundian sentiments. Are you suggesting that Pound may also have been playing with this other meaning of "dichten" — to set a seal? I think the image of "setting a seal" was extremely important to Pound — he was always aiming for the effect of a visual emblem on a number of levels — a Renaissance, iconic imagism. I'm not sure how your focus on achieving unity & wholeness relates to the word "condensare", but I can understand the sense of an author "setting a seal" on a work — the overall, pervasive, unique signature — the "total" icon. His father worked for the mint; Pound made Pound notes cohere as heavy crystal; with all the arch-reactionary elements of authorial "totality" set up against the non-visual, ultra-verbal splurge of Joyce or Stein.

...but what were you saying? I mean, how does the whole equation imply preserving unity or wholeness? Is it that the process of condensation leads finally to "setting the seal"?

— Henry Gould 26 Feb 1998 [link](#)

Don Wellman, in a thread on metaphor, analogy and immediacy, accounts the Cantos a poem built by super-position and turns it political: where Pound's crystalline overlay drains difference toward the totalitarian, Deleuze and Guattari's sliding plateaus produce it — for Wellman a crucial difference between modernism and postmodernism.

What is politically or socially interesting to me about metaphor and analogy is the way they their use can direct some one's thoughts, help some one see. A bad simile is a wonderful attack on reason — a refusal to allow the irrational to become rational, wonderfully irreverent with respect to a too precious sense of how language is supposed to work. My sense of that irreverence is direct. I like it.

I wrote earlier that a "grammar of metonymic overlays is that of the *Canto's*..." — by this I meant no more than the major structural device in the *Cantos* is the overlay of image on image, of phrase on phrase, passage on passage. Pound himself uses the word super-position to describe his method of composition in his "Vorticism" where he also attaches both symbolism and synecdoche, of I remember. From this I derive the notion that it is the overlay of one field of images (or allusions) on another that creates structural metaphors or what he calls the "forma" in his essay "Medievalism." — near the end of the *Cantos*, he likens each overlay to the facets of a crystal — the point seems to be a centered overlay of transparent forms — something he experienced "enlightenment" — only intermittantly — politically, as differences become drained of their particular importance he becomes more totalitarian. By contrast, deleuze and Guattari, as their plateaus slide over one another, they produce differences.

To my understanding, this is one of the crucial differences between modernism and postmodernism. The structural metaphors, metaphors of process, in modernism as represented by the *Cantos* are marked by both reverence and quasi-scientific notions of rationalism. Pound, again in "Vorticism" calls his method more like calculus than algebra, hence his denigration of easy connections between meaning and figures of speech like synecdoche. Still it seems to me that metaphor blossoms in ways that transcend or thread or cause energy to run through the planes of his composition. We see the rose in the steel dust. Christine Brooke Rose is much better on this than I am ...

I for one can not see such roses or vortices as directly as he did — as he hoped — they do not exist objectively for me. The form does not constrain my indirection and flight of association and I prize instead that flight — that becomes my direct experience, one of decentered flight, one of play ...

— Don Wellman 17 Mar 1998 [link](#)

Carlo Parcelli, in a thread on erasure that Pierre Joris had opened by naming it one of modernism's two governing modes, arrives — after a detour through Husserl, Kant and quantum theory — at his own genealogy: Pound found the form of the Cantos in cutting Eliot's Waste Land down to its luminous details.

Yes, and Heidegger could be seen as a kind of pivot here and antidote to both a naive realism and positivism. It's Heidegger the phenomenologist as much as Heidegger the existentialist and it springs from his understanding of the futility of Husserl's approach where Husserl intends to peel away the inefficient aspects of languages relation to the 'real' by applying a mode of discourse that he has systematically unraveled from the sclerotic accretions of centuries and to eliminate the need for ever proliferating sets of meta-contrivances while acknowledging the contingent demands of time. Thus *Logical Investigations* is in its own way a very absorbing failure. Husserl kept freezing (trapping) the entity he wanted to free in his language, a natural result of analysis or verbal vivisection. I find Kant useful here in that he insists *ding an sich* cannot be captured through in its wholeness (see Bohm). It always struck me that he was quite presciently saying, and there are plenty of writers who have winnowed the same idea so it's no big deal here, that knowledge is contingent. Schopenhauer among other things covered Kant's flank by foreseeing the need to address questions arising from what he called 'naive realism.' These same fundamental questions above were at the heart of the philosophical revival in the physics community around quantum theory in the late twenties and early thirties (see Heisenberg, *Physics and Beyond*. also Hansen, Bohr, Feyerabend, Putnam, Quine etc, etc, ad nauseam)

and not surprisingly have been unconsciously fundamental to the debate leveled by conservative elements in the scientific community as well as the Cartesian left of Noam Chomsky and Alan Sokal against Deconstruction and Postmodernism. The problem is these factions (with the exception of Chomsky who is simply an unabashed Cartesian) ignore the roots of Decon/Postmod in European Transcendental Philosophy and the philosophical debate such as that which resulted in the Copenhagen Interpretation surrounding discoveries in quantum mentioned above. The criticism from Gross, Levitt, Sokal et al also lacks a sense of play, that is a sense of/for art which is found in Derrida, Foucault, Latour or as an artist might say the freedom to simply say it, whatever it might be. As Pierre suggests art and especially poetry has a huge stake in this. Mallarmé, Pound, Olson, (well the list is immense) have all sensed that the fragment provides an alternative epiphanic glimpse at an essence. The Pinsky/Howe debate touched upon some of these issues. I've always suspected that Pound came to possibilities of the fragment, at least in part, when he 'edited' the *Wasteland* erasing long, narrative passages while maintaining enough of Eliot's text to provide a series of 'luminous details.' I like to think that the enervated harmony of personal anguish in the context of historical anxiety that is the *Wasteland* as we know it, must have continually stunned Pound (and suggested a form for the *Cantos*) as he simply went about cutting much of Eliot's personal narrative away. We haven't looked at translations of ancient texts which exist only in fragments, in the same way since the moderns. Derrida and deconstruction as well as postmodernist writers are familiar with all the threads I awkwardly touched upon above. In this their contribution if not entirely unique (e.g. The Frankfurt School) is in direct and oblique ways highly supportive of art and poetry in particular in a world that largely doesn't give a damn. Erasure is a preposterous notion to, say, a Cartesian rationalist or a pragmatist. What is left out can't be measured. Unlike a mathematical equation, The elidings do not follow rules and the result is evocative and not necessarily 'elegant' though Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* certainly qualifies as both.

— Carlo Parcelli 06 Dec 1998 [link](#)

Murat Nemet-Nejat, exchanging with Lucas Klein over whether translation is inherently exploitative or racist, distinguishes the exploitation of a language from contempt for a people, enlisting Pound's Cathay as evidence. He answers Klein's suspicion that Pound used "prejudices about China as a prop"; the occasion is the 2004 Pound/Yasusada translation debate.

Not really. The exploitation I am referring to is of language. The racism discussed in this thread is towards people. A text in another language can be exploited for

many reasons, one of which may be racism, that is to say, implying its inferiority. The other language can also be seen as superior, possessing a quality the host language does not possess. Pound's translations, particularly "The Seafarer" and a few from the Chinese are of this kind. I believe that Pound's Chinese translations in *Cathay* (particularly "A Merchant's Letter") are attempts to bring Dante's visual clarity into English, which he could not directly do. He had to decouple that clarity from its Christian content, which exists in Dante. Hence, the attraction of Chinese poetry: a godless Dante.

— **Murat Nemet-Nejat** 09 Jul 2004 [link](#)

Answering Thomas Savage, who argued Canto 45 is "simply about usury" and innocent of Jews, Murat Nemet-Nejat refuses the separation: the same line holds the ugliness of Pound's coinage "usura" and the borrowed music of "The Seafarer" at once. His closing figure — living with both, letting neither erase the other — offers no relief.

Listening to this passage, "With usura hath no man a house of good stone," I remember asking myself, why doesn't Pound say "usury"? In a way, everything is centered around this word. For Pound "usura" is a concept, like the concept of "jew."

On the other hand, the same line, its inversions and the word "hath," represents a new music in English, out of his translation "The Seafarer."

In other words, in Pound the most annoying and the most breath taking may be at the same place.

— **Murat Nemet-Nejat** 05 May 2005 [link](#)

Skip Fox, in the life-versus-work thread, answers another poster's remark about the hierarchy running through Pound with the counter-figure of periplum — the sailor's horizon against the cartographer's God's-eye map. He will not grant Pound the leveler's humility, catching him in the crow's nest, droning even as he sees clearly.

Re: Pound's 45th (Latin, Old English, what's against nature, etc.) and his insistence of a human perspective in poetry.

No reason to argue (I wouldn't if there were, necessarily), but the opening of the *Cantos*, with the alliterative repetitions and clustered stops mid-line (whatever the hell you might call the phrasing that steps down hard on certain words — an alliterative cluster with a noun say — then creates a slight pause which might be similar to but not quite the domestic mid-line caesura we've come to know) sounds more beholden to Pound's "The Seafarer" and Old English reading, than the repetitions (at the beginning of line mostly, like the 23rd Psalm &c.) and

archaic (King James) word forms in Pound's 45th Canto. I've always associated such cadences with the Old Testament and realize that its sway (with the rest of the Bible) was profound during the lifetimes of many of the artists listed in the piece.

But, again, no big deal.

Contra naturum (again Latin, *linqua franca* of the day), in fact, parallels Dante's treatment of sodomites who he places in the same pocket (or environs) of the inferno due to his (and Pound's) belief that sodomites and usurers partake in an act which displays a central ignorance in understanding: money is sign of value, not an object or service of value itself (like corn, teaching, lanterns). Both simulate the creation of value wrongly, according to Pound.

Olson's *Encounter at St. Elizabeth's* is a lovely example of a post-modern (he's the first in Eng. to use the term) liberal writer engaged with a man who opened up twentieth-century poetry in many ways but who was also deeply (tragically?) confused. In an essay on Pound ("GranPa, GoodBye"), Olson feels that Pound's emphasis on sight as the central means of knowing was detrimental and removed (and in this he way might argue as well with Zuloofsky's *Bottom on Shakespeare* ... it will be interesting to read Silliman on this text in his blog) when placed above the "sound" of the human in close engagement/encounter with the particular ("close" in fact is a favorite Olson word to emphasize an intimacy of engagement — it was also the last word of the 4th book of *Paterson* and the "place" Huck Finn found himself in before tearing up the note). It's a lovely book made of Olson's notebook entries after each visit. Not that I really needed the permission to hate a large element of Pound's thinking (and perhaps person) but this is certainly a book which shows both the love, respect, and hate that Olson had for Pound. (Perhaps I needed it; my son is named Benjamin Ezra — after Pound as well as Browning's poem "Iben Ezra.")

Which gets to the other point someone made, that there is always a hierarchy in Pound (he called it the "conspiracy of intelligence" and it's more of a merited aristocracy than anything in Yeats or Eliot). Yet Pound was also responsible for insisting on a human perspective over a God-like perspective in poetry (and all apprehension): *periplum* (how a sailor sees the seaboard coming over the horizon) rather than cartographer's (god's) perspective. Thus Malatesta's post bag is in historical jumble (according to the academic). But Pound was not temperamentally predisposed (as Olson was?) for a total leveling. I never "see" him at ship level. At best he's in the crow's nest (describing the exact hue of light

on the water, droning on about inferior races and Social Credit, writing beautiful hymns on questionable subjects, being upheld by a lizard, etc.).

Olson's central indictment: "he does not seem to have inhabited his own experience" (*Collected Prose*, p. 146), seems ripe for discussion. (The fact that his anti-Semitism doesn't mesh with his treatment of individual Jews might even be a place to start.)

— Skip Fox 05 May 2005 [link](#)

Chris Chapman enters the 2008 Pound threads sidelong, proposing The Cantos as a Gothic edifice and reading Pound's deliberate archaism — the "translationese" of Cathay and The Seafarer — through George Steiner's After Babel. His quieter thesis: consecration was Pound's method, not his object; he was an iconoclast first.

The Pound threads are very interesting and I'm looking forward to reading both Zhaomin Qian and Michael Heller's books. *Cantos* as Gothic? I like this idea. I've been wondering how to introduce the location of Sermione into a discussion of Pound's editorial imagination. That was where he edited *Wasteland*. A more 'Goth' locale there isn't.

Perhaps we might think about what Pound was consecrating instead of how we must best consecrate Pound? A dialectic understanding of the man and his work still seems the best for doing the latter.

I do wonder about what Pound was visioning forth. It changes it seems-

Riding and Graves' understanding of Pound's "Ballad of the Goodly Frere", its "imitated antiqueness" and all, reminds me of George Steiner, where, in his Babel book, he talks about the translationese of *Cathay* and *The Seafarer* as being purposeful archaisms he used to instantiate putatively false and alternative and virtual memories of what it is that had been unwritten in history, to make the unwritten history present in his poetry, to make *The Cantos* a poem containing history.

"The translator can manipulate anachronisms for special effects" (Steiner 367). Steiner discusses *Cathay* and suggests that that Charlie Chan tin-pan voice is used to create "a general phenomenon of hermeneutic trust" with his readers out here in the far far west (377). Pound and his readers conspire, Steiner says, through their ignorance, to learn something new. The point though may not have been to learn much about China at all. Pound accepted Fenollosa's manuscripts skeptically in Sarojini Naidhu's London apartment. So it seems.

Steiner also argues that Celia and Louis Zukofsky's *Catullus* is anything but homage. Rather it is a linguistic collage that aims to "project possible futures" (370). They learned this technique, Steiner suggests tacitly, I think, by studying *Cathay*.

Consecration is a part of Pound's motive — but not its object. He was an iconoclast first, non?

"We endure, we endure creatively due to our imperative ability to say 'No' to reality, to build fictions of alterity, of dreamt or willed or awaited 'otherness' for our consciousness to inhabit. It is in this precise sense that the utopian and the messianic are figures of syntax." (*After Babel* xiv)

So when it comes to a question of what Pound was consecrating we could do worse than to think about how he used translation.

— Chris Chapman 17 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Gabriel Gudding adjudicates between Mike Heller and Charles Bernstein over whether Pound's work is genuinely heteroglossic in Bakhtin's sense; his surprising verdict is that the Cantos fail — too much the speech of elite literary culture — while the wartime radio broadcasts, with their self-parodic viciousness, qualify.

Mike Heller's take on polyglossia in EP is akin to Bakhtin's thoughts on heteroglossia in novelized genres.

Upshot is, at least in Bakhtinian terms, Mike Heller is more right, CB less so: EP's work is not truly "polyvocal" in any fully Bakhtinian sense.

Bakhtin formulates heteroglossia as NOT just about many voices. It's a spectrum of many registers, a huge part of which is humor.

Bakhtin provides a list of descriptors for what is heteroglossia, insisting that heteroglossia is "permeated with laughter, humor, elements of self-parody." Those are elements sorely lacking in ep cantos. (This as found in "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology of the Study of the Novel," as found in a few places, but I'm looking at is in David Duff's edition of *Modern Genre Theory*).

More importantly EP's cantos reinforce rather than revise literariness and poeticalness — and assert a national epic past and a national epic distance. Most importantly, they are the speech (or "a" speech) of official elite literary culture. They are not the speech of the "low," which is what MB says is a great part of dialogic heteroglossia as he formulates it.

MB also insists that tragedy was always a polyglot genre and that polyglossia always existed — so merely containing many voices is NOT itself some kind of structural radicalism.

In short, *The Cantos* are not poly- or heteroglossic.

But Pound's *radio broadcasts* are. It's in the radio broadcasts — as texts — that Pound becomes heteroglossic in a truly Bakhtinian sense. (I've only read them, not listened to them). His sick humor — racist, murderous, paranoid, whackjobby, yet weirdly self-parodic — really comes to the fore. If you can consider the radio speeches "permeated with laughter, humor, elements of self-parody," you can see them as more dialogically polyglossic in a Bakhtinian sense. This coupled with the fact that they are both oral and written "text."

Those who've read *The Cantos*, especially *The Pisan Cantos*, and who've not yet done so, might also read Leonard W. Doob's 1978 *Ezra Pound Speaking: Radio Speeches of WWII* by Greenwood Press. It contains, as far as I know, the only collection in print of EP's war era speeches. The collection is not quite exhaustive, but almost all of them are there.

In appendix 4 Doob "in serious jest" describes the speeches as "The Poor Man's Cantos." These are in some ways the real footnotes to the *Cantos*, esp the Pisans.

Doob's appendices are interesting. Charts provide rough plot of his topics and types of persons/institutions mentioned.

There is a 22 page glossary and index of names.

It appears the only copies left new are hardbound.

— **Gabriel Gudding** 19 Feb 2008 [link](#)

III

The Method and the Sickness

Here is the bridge — and here is where the book wins its case or loses it. If Pound's methods are the common property of the whole experimental tradition — if, as one member flatly says, you cannot “imagine *A* or *Maximus* in a world without the *Cantos*” — then the left avant-garde that lives on those methods owes an accounting for the inheritance. The redemptive plea, entered on the list more than once, runs like this: the collage form is structurally democratic, an autonomy of fragments that will not kneel to the very authority Pound spent his life demanding, so that the technique, properly understood, is quietly at war with its inventor's politics.

The room did not simply nod. The best thing in the movement is the resistance, most of it packed into one extraordinary week of February 2008, when the list tested that hopeful claim to destruction: that a collage structure carries “origins and uses that it cannot be cleansed of simply by removing overt content”; that it is “not the elements in the work which make it fascist or not, but the manner in which Pound personally binds them into fasces” — the bundle from which fascism takes its very name. Threaded through it is the counter-lineage the list kept holding up: the Objectivists, Zukofsky and Oppen, as the “good” descent from Pound, the heirs who took the method and left the sickness in the will. Whether the method can be taken clean is the question the movement leaves open — because the list left it open.

Jerome Rothenberg, replying in March 1996 to Tenney Nathanson's query about the last of Pound's trials, sets out his recurring paradox: Pound's truest heirs were the poets furthest from his politics — Olson, Duncan, Mac Low, the Objectivists. John Matthias saved the post and, a year on, sent it back to the list with Rothenberg's blessing.

This is in reply to Tenney's query about my own statement that the the most telling impact of Pound's work was on poets who politically, morally, might have been at the greatest distance from it. To start with my own experience — growing up when I did — the presence of Pound in the late 1940s was, to say the least, a bewilderment. I was stunned by much of the poetry, both by how it read (the language of it) and by what I heard it saying: anti-war & anti-capital & powerful too in its presentation of a way, a means, of approaching & hoping to shape the world through the poet's means, the poetry itself. I was about 16 years old at a

first reading of him & shortly thereafter — along with the reading — came the awarding of the Bollingen & the tremendous fuss that that stirred up (close to fifty years ago). With that we were aware also of the extent of Pound's fascism &, as became clearer over the years, the viciousness of the anti-semitism in his World War II broadcasts — a lunacy of language common to the fringe of homegrown fascists who were also in his entourage. My own first published piece of writing was a letter to the New York Post (a different NY Post at that time) in which I lamented what I thought had happened to Pound and what had become (as it still seems to be) a conundrum around the man & the work the man had given us. There was a lot I didn't know then but knowing it would certainly not have made it easier.

I was never, in any sense, a Poundian, since there were too many other threads & lines coming into my awareness to allow a focus (in that sense) on any single individual. But the observation of Pound's impact — on myself & others — began shortly after that: the observation that those who were most significantly building on Pound's poetics & actual poetry were not the crazies & the fascist hoods of the John Kasper variety, etc., but poets like Kelly, Olson, Duncan, Mac Low, Blackburn, & before them the whole gallery of "Objectivists" or — from other directions — any number of European and Latin American writers — all of them (as I understood it) with a political and moral sense (coming out of World War II) that was strongly anti-fascist, strongly in opposition to the totalitarian barbarisms for which Pound (in the years of his fascist infatuation) had become a minor flunky. In their context Pound became, remained a vital force — the proof, through them, of what was right & germinal about him and the proof, conversely, of what was evil -- & banal in Hannah Arendt's sense — in his succumbing to the "fascist temptation."

What Pound offered and in some sense made possible wasn't divorced from the political but wasn't at the same time tied to what became HIS politics. It was a demonstration of how the political — as history — could enter the body of the poem — how the poem could thrive on what Ed Sanders (many years later & clearly drawing on Pound) spoke of as "data clusters" defining a new "investigative poetry". I don't need to go on with this, I think, except to note that it was (as far as I can recollect) not the little fascists who learned from this but poets who by disposition and, I believe, commitment were looking for a way out of the fascist & totalitarian nightmare that had threatened to overwhelm our world. And there was also — stronger in Pound than in most other forerunners in the North American context — a sense that history & poetry could be redefined, opened up and certainly renewed, and that for this Pound himself (as Charles B., I

think, points out in his Pound essays) was a stepping-stone, a guide to things that his fascist leanings would have finally precluded. He was clearly the most extraordinary translator we had by then produced — not only pointing to Albigenian Provence and to a sense of China speaking to the present, but (coming like Césaire and the other Negritude poets) from the likes of Frobenius, forming one of the links (but only one) to an African past as a pinnacle, too, of the creative human spirit. It is not to say that this was — all of it — of Pound's doing but that he helped to set much of it in motion — much of what, coming after him & (in some sense in spite of him) — became essential to our present work.

And, finally, I would point out what was — for myself & others — the lesson of Pound's failure — the lesson of the poet who had in the long run betrayed his poetry. It is a terrible thing to say and it is, I think, a terrible possibility that faces all of us. But it is Pound who also says it best, from the "pull down thy vanity" voice in Canto 81 to the still more telling voice (where he was already into his silence, depression) in Canto 116:

I have brought the great ball of crystal
 who can lift it?
 Can you enter the great acorn of light?
 But the beauty is not the madness
 Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me.
 And I am not a demigod,
 I cannot make it cohere.

I can read this, anyway, as both a confession of failure (and of betrayal — of himself & us) and at the same time a triumph of whatever is there speaking through him.

— **Jerome Rothenberg** 17 Feb 1997 [link](#)

Henry Gould defends Mutlu Konuk Blasing's Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry — her study of Frank O'Hara, Elizabeth Bishop, John Ashbery, and James Merrill — against listmembers who dismissed it for those four chosen poets, restating her thesis fairly. The assumptions are the Pound — Olson inheritance itself — that new technique is progressive, that certain devices cut straight to truth — and the question beneath: who, resisting them, has earned the name postmodern.

People shouldn't be dissuaded from reading the Blasing bk on the basis of the 4 poets she covers. Some people seem to have some kind of ESP: simply list some names and they will get the gist of the book right away and come up with a much longer list of writers who should have been included. I've probably misread & misrepresented the thing anyway. Her 4 poets are not a "canon"; her bk is not a

"magisterial" historical survey; she has a very specific argument to make, and it's not a simple anti-langpo diatribe, she critiques "New Formalism" on the same lines. Suffer with me while I try to restate what I see as this argument very briefly: Pound, and Olson after him in particular, have had a very strong influence on post-WWII American poetry; it's an approach to making poetry which carries certain assumptions about art which have become rote — blinders — for succeeding generations of poets. Some poets, on the other hand, resist, qualify, or ironize these assumptions, and these poets (using 4 as examples, not exemplars or icons) can properly be called postmoderns. What are these assumptions? That technical innovation is inherently politically progressive/correct (i.e. free verse is liberating — an early example); that there are techniques which blow away the conventional mists of rhetoric & reveal truth (i.e. the Chinese ideogram, or Olson's "process"). Blasing's postmodernists resist the simple identification of style & politics, technique and artistic progress; and she cites specific statements made by each of them, in essays or interviews, which support the idea that there was some conscious differentiation going on (citing them along with interpreting specific poems). Ron Silliman, if I understood his response to this correctly, acknowledged that the Language poets, among others, do carry on the Pound/Olson "modernizing project" to some degree; and then he made a specifically political analysis of this, linking Blasing's kind of argument (divide and conquer?) with reactionary attacks in the 50s (C. Greenberg). This I suppose implies Blasing is one of the "bad guys"; but she's writing literary history: in which context, it's ultimately irrelevant whether Poundian modernism's aesthetic choices are good or bad. The question is, were there some poets who went in a different direction, and questioned these assumptions? If so, shouldn't THEY be called the POSTmoderns, and not those "avant-garders" who carry on MODernism?

It's easy to make fun of these kinds of "academic" issues; it's easy also for poets to rail against the power of critics, and raise the banners of the poor uncanonized multitudes out there. But maybe more talented poets might get read and heard if they themselves didn't rehash and repeat the hackneyed & half-baked critical jargons that pass for "movements", "techniques", etc.

— **Henry Gould** 04 Feb 1996 [link](#)

Steve Carll answers William Northcut, who asked how Pound's work, "fascist and goddamned hard-assed as it is," could still have made the humane possibilities of language poetry thinkable. Carll glosses Bernstein's essay Pounding Fascism, then ventures his own formulation: the released text outran the fascist who made it.

Bernstein has an essay in *A Poetics* called "Pounding Fascism (Appropriating Ideologies — Mystification, Aestheticization, and Authority in Pound's Poetic Practice)" (whew) which, although one could maybe argue that it relies on the notion of "pure methodology", as I see it simply makes the point that "some work may usefully evade any single social or political claim made for or against it because of the nature of its contradictions, surpluses, and negations."

Or, Pound the fascist could also be Pound the artist because both were Pound the human being and neither the fascist nor the artist fully disappeared at the presence of the other; they formed this hybrid which created *The Cantos*. But the artist tricked the fascist because the poetic text, once released, escaped the control of (the artist too, but more importantly:) the fascist.

— **Steve Carll** 12 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Michael Boughn replies to Karen or Peter Landers — who traced a line from Whitman through Pound to Olson only to call Pound its weakest link — granting the objection and overturning it: the road runs through the Cantos either way. His sharper point is historical: yesterday's New Critics and today's "new correct critics" share the wish to dictate what others read.

Yeah, but try to imagine *A* or *Maximus* in a world without the *Cantos*. Can't be done. You may not like the road, but that's how you get there.

The funny thing is, 30 years ago the attack on Pound came from the New Critics. Part of the courage of Pound's then readers — Duncan, Blaser, Creeley, Olson, Rothenberg, etc.--was their willingness to stand up to that authority's dismissal of Pound as a fascist loony, and insist that there was something essential to be learned in reading this work. Maybe one similarity between the old new critics and new correct critics is that both are more interested in telling other people WHAT to read, rather than helping them augment HOW they read. Read RP Blackmur on Crane (as Thomas Yingling has it) then read Jane Smiley on Twain. Same old same old.

— **Michael Boughn** 18 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Replying to Paul Naylor, who cited Barry Ahearn's chronology to ask whether Zukofsky's "A" could be imagined without the Cantos, Michael Boughn enlarges the claim past influence: Pound made the field of possibility in which the Objectivist epic could happen at all — the repellent father one cannot disown.

Thanks, Paul, for clarifying the compositional chronology, but my claim is more general. Not that Zukofsky was specifically inspired by the *Cantos*, but that that larger work of poetry that Jerry Rothenberg refers to — the epic, history, economics, and where it led Zukofsky — arose out of a world of possibilities that Ez, bless his ornery, repulsive soul, was crucial in helping create. We owe him that, however much we may hate his politics. It's one of those weird father things. I wonder if Zukofsky doesn't also make his turn away from that and toward his family at least partially in response to his reading of Pound? What Pound inadvertently has to teach us about reaching and over-reaching.

— **Michael Boughn** 18 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Steven Shoemaker posts a passage from his dissertation on the Objectivists, reconstructing William Carlos Williams's furious 1941 essay Ezra Pound: Lord Ga-Ga! — his reply to finding himself named in Pound's fascist radio broadcasts — where two opposed theories of American culture collide; the judgements quoted here are Williams's own.

The poem's central figure, Elsie, "reared by the state" and "sent out at fifteen" to work for "some doctor's family" (presumably Williams's), is able to lay ironical claim to the title "pure product of America" precisely because of the "dash of Indian blood" that contributes to her mixed pedigree. In Williams's theory of American culture, which is in direct conflict with Pound's cultural ideal, miscegenation is the American version of purity. The "ungainly" and tormented Elsie "express[es] with broken / brain the truth about us" (107). In keeping with this view, James Clifford reads this poem and its central figure, Elsie, as emblematic of the "ethnographic modernity" characterizing twentieth-century culture. As Clifford observes, Williams is writing from a stance "off center among scattered traditions," as he is compelled to occupy a "truly global space of cultural connections and dissolutions" (4). But Williams also identifies the resistance to Elsie's "truth" as central to American culture. By the time *An "Objectivists" Anthology* was published, Williams had already elaborated this point at some length in the poetic prose of *In the American Grain* (1925), which, like the poems before us now, conducts an examination of American culture, often based on a writing through of the documents of American history. *In the American Grain* develops a view of American culture that values efforts toward

"contact," while criticizing the culture's pervasive fear of the immediacy of "touch." This fear of touch, in Williams's analysis, is closely related to fear of the ethnic "other": "Do not serve another for you might have to TOUCH him and he might be a JEW or a NIGGER" (177). Further, it is especially tied to the fear of miscegenation:

Do you realize the fascination of the white woman who had twin nigger babies has for us? They accused the woman of having had intercourse with the apartment's colored elevator boy. Her husband abandoned her at once, of course, — charming man. But you know Mendel's law; they discovered there had been a darky in his family six generations before! Be careful whom you marry! Be careful for you can NEVER know. (177)

In Williams's reading, Mendel's law of genetics is something like a law of American culture. It will do no good to deny our hybrid nature as Americans because, in time, even our most "recessive" traits will out, our deepest cultural secrets be revealed.

History, then, must acknowledge the importance of cross-cultural contacts: "History must stay open, it is all humanity" (189). The problem with conventional history, according to Williams, is that it "follows governments and never men," "portray[ing] us in generic patterns, like effigies or patterns on sarcophagi" (188). In contrast to Pound's "great man" theory of history, Williams's emphasis on the individual is as likely to figure forth an Elsie as a John Adams. Like Reznikoff's, Williams's revisionist histories would be written from the ground up. In *An "Objectivists" Anthology*, these "grounded" histories serve, through the mechanisms of ideogrammic juxtaposition, as critiques of Pound's approach to history and culture. Indeed, Williams's criticism of history would have as an offshoot a related critique of Poundian aesthetics, and politics, that is directly relevant to our concerns here.

This critique took shape over a period of decades, but didn't receive full expression until 1941, when Williams was outraged to find that he had been mentioned by Pound during one of his radio broadcasts from fascist Italy. Williams's response took the form of an essay entitled "Ezra Pound: Lord Ga-Ga!" in which Williams argued that during his exile in Italy Pound's foolish tendencies had undergone "an apotheosis at the hands of a bigger fool than he," i.e. Mussolini (16). Pound was now "a case for the psychiatrists," but his insanity was "the result of deficiencies, long apparent to his friends, that have finally overthrown him" (16). Williams's diagnosis delves far back into Pound's character and behavior, drawing on theories Williams had been formulating for some time. He begins by

applying his own "touch" thesis from *In the American Grain*. "I have often observed that in certain sensory areas," Williams writes, "Ezra Pound completely lacks perceptivity" (17). In Williams's reading, Pound is a kind of child prodigy, a "spoiled brat" like "all those bright boys and girls who enter college at the age of twelve and ... go mad soon after reaching puberty." Outside their field of specialty, Williams claims, such geniuses tend to "go astray," and to "fall back on authority" (17).

Pound is indeed a "great poet," "one of the most gifted the New World has produced," but "his great force came from the narrow restrictions of his mind — giving it impact, but, alas, at what a cost" (17). For Williams, "All Pound's perceptions are literary and if taken as such have their value"; but again, there is a corresponding, and overwhelming, deficiency: "What he lacked was a knowledge of man, plain and simple" (20). In his desire for a system of "rule by the few" (20), Pound,

... has never had any love for or understanding of the people themselves, the great leaven of the world without whose tonal tides to support them all men become tyrants and beasts in the end. Ezra had no inkling of such matters, the starved and the defeated, nothing but complete contempt for them. He merely wanted to replace the lying, thieving rule by his own 'enlightened' one ... (21)

Williams is writing, in 1941, out of a direct concern with the danger of fascism, the danger that "all men [might] become tyrants and beasts in the end." The specific object of his critique at this point is Pound, the man, but before long this analysis brings Williams to a remarkable meditation on the opening of Canto XXX, which has already concerned us here.

The Canto is introduced as Williams moves from discussing Pound's generalized contempt for "the people" to examining his enmity for specific ethnic groups, particularly the Jews. At this moment, Williams introduces Pound's "Compleynt," just as Zukofsky had presented it for consideration nine years before in the pages of *An "Objectivists" Anthology*. "Pound," Williams observes, "has written some of the loveliest verse of our century of which not any has more haunting beauty than the opening lines of Canto XXX" (22). Here Williams quotes the opening of the "Compleynt," drawing particular attention to the lines "Nothing is now clean slayne / But rotteth away." Williams observes: "It is a fascinating theme and a magnificent poem representing, I think, Pound's main philosophic tenet" (22). This tenet, in Williams's summary, runs: "Keep what is 'good,' keep what is lovely. Let all that is ugly be clean slain". Since much of the "world today" is "sloppy and mushy in its very essence," it must be "clean slain, slain — done away with, killed,

slaughtered as were the Spanish rebels." This slaughter is an act that would, for Pound, be "about of the same nature as the drainage of an obscure swamp in Africa or the Amazon" (22). Again, the allusion is to Mussolini's swamp-draining exploits, as well as to fascist Italy's role in the bombing of Spanish rebels during the Spanish Civil War. Williams has no difficulty making a direct link between Pound's "Compleynt" against Pity and real-world acts of political violence. He attends to the formal beauties of the poem-as-object, but reads it also in relation to "the dialectical necessities of its day" ("The New Poetical Economy" 269).¹ The conclusion to which Williams is brought by this dialectical reading is that Pound's plaint expresses nothing less than the desire to "kill all democracy" (22).

As the essay continues, it becomes clear that Pound's "Compleynt" is an important crux for Williams, that he has read the poem many times, and meditated on it over a period of years. He sees the poem as a kind of key to the dilemma of "how to read" Pound which has continued to perplex so many literary critics. Williams wonders whether the poem's "secret" is perhaps "a pleasure and a pain equally balanced which we cannot resolve" (23). "[T]he beauty of the poem is death," Williams concludes, and what is at stake is "the body of humanity ... in all its multiplicity and obscurity ..." (23). For Williams, the resolution of Pound's dilemma requires "perceptions of which [Pound] is largely incapable, humiliations which he cannot know" (23). Williams's critique of Pound, and his poem, involves a fundamentally political reading that circles back to Williams's criticism of conventional history and the inter-ethnic fear haunting American culture. As Brian Bremen has argued, Williams's approach to history develops an aesthetic insisting on "the continuation and development of struggles for mutual recognition" (198). Or as Williams put it in *In the American Grain*, the crucial insight — with the "body of humanity" hanging in the balance — is that "We are, too, the others" (41).

— Steven Shoemaker 20 Jul 1999 [link](#)

My editorial assistant — who cannot, it seems, be kept from the manuscript long enough to alphabetize a bibliography — reads over my shoulder, spots the Bollingen quarrel Joan Houlihan and Mark Weiss are trading, and is off: never a man to leave an argument at a walk when he can whip it to a gallop, he takes Bernstein's Pounding Fascism and rides it clean over the cliff. If the Pisan form truly dissolves the man of the broadcasts, then there is conveniently no "man" left to answer for anything at all — a tidy vanishing. One does wonder where the bodies went.

I tend to think we're revolving around the old issue of the "Politics of Poetic Form" here since, in someone like Bernstein's reading of the *Pisan Cantos*, the form of the poem actually undermines what would be the non- or supra-poetical work of

the "man." That is, it seems the essays by the man, which we take to be a literary product of Pound as the "man of action" don't find their fulfillment or their natural corollary in his poems, which one would consider the works of the "man of thinking." So talk of the "man" is split here since we know this person two ways, via an activity which we normally associate with biography — what the guy did when he wasn't writing poetry — and the activity we normally associate with the "work," that seemingly isolated ("art-for-art's sake"), timeless artifact. If we are to take Bernstein's reading of Pound in "Pounding Fascism" seriously, we wouldn't have any "man" left over to hold against the prize or the literature — the split would be too profound.

If you want to imagine a gross exaggeration of what this paradigm suggests (though who's more exaggerated than Pound), imagine Robert Mapplethorpe leading a double life as a Washington lobbyist, or some Xtian rightist, pushing for something like strict policing of the internet, mandatory short haircuts for men under the age of twenty, prayer before every meal, or well just imagine him being some sort of obsessed (sexually repressed) outsider politico pushing for centralized, conservative values (and symbols) that run up against his art work. Then, when it is time to offer him a prize, you would be in the position of asking whether the "work" is the same thing as the "man". It's not unimaginable that even a Mapplethorpe could be split this way, since there are all sorts of breaks like this in twentieth century art, it seems, such as:

Why wasn't Robert Smithson an environmentalist? (I know because I read his writings, but it's surprising.)

Why does Clarence Major prefer the poetry of John Berryman over the "New American" poets? (cf. Mackey on Major in *Discrepant Engagement*).

What are Ian Hamilton Finlay's political views? (I.e. why is he, who in many ways seems so much milder in temperament than a Bruce Andrews, more clearly agrarian-rightist-revolutionary and someone like BA a leftist?) Who, then, becomes the more "elitist" artist, the rural aristocratic Finlay or the urban cosmopolitan Andrews? And why do the poetics of a Marxist like Hugh MacDiarmid seem invariably more conservative than Finlay's?

A recent one I came across: apparently the German painter Gerhardt Richter was the prophet of pop art back in the day, introducing or at least championing Warhol and those folk, but now he seems to clearly on the monumental side — large-scale abstract paintings, with a near classical sense of balance, or perhaps romantic sense of sturm and drang — with someone like Kiefer in opposition to the "democratic" vision of someone like Polke. How does that happen?

Why are poets like Drew Milne and Jeremy Prynne, the former of whom is a recognized Marxist scholar, more or less perceived, by the Americans aware of their work, as somewhat reclusive, decidedly "highbrow" poets (I think in the tradition of Thomas Gray)? (My question is also whether Milne recognizes any sort of camaraderie among the American language poets since his introduction to the anthology of Marxist literary criticism he edited with Terry Eagleton seemed to suggest a parallel series of ideas, despite the very different temperament.)

(Sorry to present an exclusively male list here, but nobody comes to mind right now as presenting this sort of dilemma, though I guess Moriko Mori, who's a bit young to be well known, walks a pretty interesting line between conservative "Buddhism" and her techno-narcissistic-adoration.)

Actually, more women do come to mind: why is Barbara Kruger using techniques explored by proto-fascist artists, including some of their color schemes, to present purportedly progressive feminist propaganda? Is this art or social work?

— **Brian Kim Stefans** 28 Jul 1999 [link](#)

Excerpts Amy King posted from Bernstein's essay Pounding Fascism. Bernstein argues that Pound's fascism, far from disqualifying him, has been laundered into the fatherly voice of cultural authority — and closes on the dialectical trap by which every easy verdict, exculpating or condemning, hands fascism the day. Polemical, as Bernstein knew Pound would relish.

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For Pound's fascism is all too easily censured, as by slap on hand, while the fascist ideas that infect his poetry and poetics seep unnamed into the orthodox cultural theory and criticism of this society.

Pound's fascism, far from hindering the canonization of his poetry by American literary culture, has been a major factor in its acceptance. Stripped of its obnoxious overttness, Pound's fascism becomes the stern but fatherly voice of authority, measuring by the Pound standard the absolute worth of the cultural production of all the societies of earth, the ultimate Core Curriculum. Without its righteously Eurocentric and imperiously authoritative undercurrent, the formal innovations of Pound's poetry would have contributed to its marginalization. This is evident from the relative marginalization of much of the formally innovative poetry of, sic, *The Pound Era*. Pound's status, far from being jeopardized by his political ideas, is enhanced by them.

I do not, however, equate Pound's politics with Pound's poetry. *The Cantos* is in many ways radically (radially) at odds with the tenets of his

fascist ideals. In this sense, Pound has systematically misinterpreted the nature of his own literary production; refused, that is, to recognize in it the process he vilified as usury and Jewishness. This blindness to the meaning of his work, to how in significant ways it represented what he claimed to revile most, contributed not only to the rabidness of his dogmatism but also to the heights of magnificent self-deception and elegiac confusion that is *The Cantos* at its best. [...] Pound, or part of him, wished to control the valuation of the materials he appropriated by arranging them in such a way that an immanent or 'natural' order would be brought into being. As Pound seems to acknowledge in the final movements of the (for the moment) standard version of the poem, *The Cantos* never jells in this way. For Pound this was a measure, no matter how ambivalent he may have been about the evaluation, of the failure of *The Cantos*. [...] Pound's great achievement was to create a work using ideological swatches from many social and historical sectors of his own society and an immense variety of other cultures. This complex, polyvocal textuality was the result of his search — his unrequited desire for — deeper truths than could be revealed by more monadically organized poems operating with a single voice and a single perspective. But Pound's ideas about what mediated these different materials are often at odds with how these types of textual practices actually work in *The Cantos*.

Pound's fascist ideology insists on the author's having an extraliterary point of 'special knowledge' that creates a phallic order (these are Pound's terms) over the female chaos of conflicting ideological material. As Robert Casillo points out in his study of Pound's antisemitism, Pound contrasts the phallogentric/logocentric unswerving pivot (citing Wang in canto 97: 'man's phallic heart is from heaven / a clear spring of rightness') with the castrated and nomadic Jew. Jews are the purveyors of fragmentation and therefore the dissolution of fixed hierarchical cultural values (the Jews, says Pound on the radio, want to 'blot out the classics, blot out the record'). Again, Jews, as usurers and in league with the Commies, represent 'an indistinct, rootless, destructive mass' eroding the agrarian ideal of homestead, of nature and private property (values Pound equates with order, clarity, telos). [...] As Casillo concludes, 'Pound turned to Fascism because he shares not only its deep fear of indeterminacy' — of the vague, inchoate, and incommensurable, of all that is mysterious or ambiguous or unknown — 'but also its central desire, which is to banish the indeterminate from social life ... And as in Fascism, in Pound's work the ultimate sign of such fearful [indefiniteness] is the Jew.'

What grotesque views for someone whose work is filled with indeterminacy, fragmentation, abstraction, obscurity, verbiage, equivocation, ambiguity, allegory; who has made the highest art of removing ideologies from their origins and creating for them a nomadic economy whose roots are neither in the land nor in the property but rather in the abstraction of aestheticization and the irresolution of the jarring harmonies of incommensurable sounds. As Richard Sieburth has noted, the ultimate irony of *The Cantos* is that all its irreconcilable elements can be reconciled only in the abstract, by the authority of the author, on credit. Indeed, the real economy of *The Cantos* is the one Pound constantly struggled to repress and to lay bare: the economy of reader and writer and book; the economy of language not as Logos but as exchange. [...] Neither do I wish to ignore the warning implicit in these considerations: that aesthetic processes can be used for a variety of purposes; that to understand a work requires interrogating its motivations and social context. It is always revealing to ask of a work: what does it serve and how? The answer to this question, however, is not identical to what the worker's intentions may be. A response to this challenge is that some work may usefully evade any single social or political claim made for or against it because of the nature of its contradictions, surpluses, and negations. Perhaps this is the most positive thing that might be said of Pound's poetic works.

But perhaps fascism has won the day, anyway. When Pound the great artist is excused for his politics, fascism has won. When Pound's politics are used to categorically discredit the compositional methods of his poetry, fascism has won. When Pound's poetry is exalted and his politics dismissed as largely irrelevant to his achievement, fascism has won. When Pound's politics are condemned, his poetry acknowledged or ignored in passing, but sanitized forms of his ideas prevail — the virtue of authority, property, and the homestead ('family values'), the sanctity of the classics, the condemnation of the nonstandard in favor of 'the plain sense of the word' and the divine right of the West (or East) to harness and bleed the rest of the world — fascism has won.

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— Amy King 15 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Michael Heller posts a passage from his own Uncertain Poetries answering Charles Bernstein's essay "Pounding Fascism," which had tried to prise Pound the technician from Pound the fascist. Heller suspects its real business is to license language-centred writing's descent from Poundian poetics, and — reading the Cantos as gothic — hears their vaunted polyvocality as one chorus mouthing the same verities.

I've been following the Pound discussion — let me add a couple of cents. In *Uncertain Poetries* (Salt 2005), I have an essay, "The Narrative of Ezra Gorgon Pound," which a bit tongue in cheek suggests reading the *Cantos* as a 'gothic,' so as to get at how Pound's ideas about history and politics are deeply entwined in his technique — it includes a bit of a rejoinder to my good friend Charles's "Pounding Fascism." I post this excerpt from the book, since it gets at the nub of the argument the way I see it:

"We might usefully compare Pound's troping of history with the poetics of poets such as George Oppen or Robert Duncan for whom historical contingency is continually registered in the voice, suggesting that history can never be entirely read as 'the past', nor as the present either, and so, in order to be meaningful for the present, must be passed through an active vocalizing subject. In Oppen or Duncan, the strata of history as a series of weights on the being of the poet, no longer remain discrete but are cumulative and so prevent anything as straightforward as Confucist re inscription of historical maxims. At the same time, conscious revisionism or admittance of known error are luxuries these poets must deny themselves; in Duncan's case, because the event or its linguistic signature is the gateway for entrance into a living past which is all process continually working itself out in times and individuals; in Oppen's, because today's word is burdened with the totality of historical knowledge. Their 'vigilance' is of an entirely different order from that of Pound's.

I want to conclude my discussion with a brief look at what we can say about Pound's methodology in terms of present day practice of poetry. My spring board is a recent essay by Charles Bernstein in *Sulphur* entitled "Pounding Fascism" in which Bernstein attempts to save Pound the technician from Pound the fascist. Let me say at once, that I suspect the motive behind this essay has less to do with Pound than with Bernstein's revising of literary history in an attempt to valorize, it would seem, language centered writing as it leans on or is beholden to Poundian poetics.

Bernstein begins with the claim that Pound's fascism, "far from hindering the canonization of his poetry by American literary culture, has been a major factor in its acceptance. (C. Bernstein, 99)" Now I know of few mainstream or

establishment studies of Pound that support this view the very places it ought to be encountered if Bernstein is correct; in fact, the 'technical' side of Pound is what is praised in even as conservative a critic as Blackmur who, en passant, insists that even as we admire Pound's craft, we ought to drop the notion of Pound as a thinker or literary critic.

Bernstein goes on to say, and this is the crucial issue, that he does not "equate Pound's politics with Pound's poetry. *The Cantos*, and other of Pound's work, are in many ways basically at odds with the tenets of Pound's fascist ideals. (C. Bernstein, 99)" They are at odds, according to Bernstein, because "the 'hyperspace' of Pound's modernist collage is not a predetermined Truth of a pan cultural elitism but a product of a compositionally decentered multiculturalism...a polyvocal textuality...the result of his search for deeper truths than could be revealed by more monadically organized poems operating with a single voice and a single perspective. (C. Bernstein, 100)"

Now it is most probably the case that if Pound were a maker of 'monadically organized' poems, if he had written in the style of D'Annunzio for example, few in the American literary establishment would have insisted on his canonization. On the other hand, if one perceives *The Cantos* as something like a gothic, its 'multiculturalism' is an illusion, its "polyvocal textuality" a chorus of foreign sounding voices all mouthing the same rules and verities. If you accept this point of view, then Bernstein's analysis leaves one major question still begging, the one I have tried to develop in this paper: whether Poundian techniques, in particular the cultural plundering, revising and activity of selection induced by the search for history's repeats, the absence of a clearly defined authorial voice, tend to undermine fascist tendencies or aid in furthering them.

At this point, my own answer to the question must be necessarily quite tentative, but my argument goes something like this: Recent studies of the aesthetics of fascism (such as Friedlander's mentioned above) acknowledge not only the fascist need for rigidity, its fears of social and cultural disorder, but also demonstrate how fascism creates imagery and phantasms and other machinery for the generation of fear and anxiety in order to maintain itself. These are what Elias Canetti, in speaking about fascism, calls "the adjacency of construction and destruction".

The mechanisms of fascism not only respond to the indeterminate but use it, feeding it back into the social system, creating anxiety and paranoia in order to maintain and accomplish political purposes. Friedlander describes this as "the fusion of kitsch and death" where through aesthetic devices, anxiety and

authority are everywhere and nowhere, a blend of domestic, mythic and archaic materials which produce a disembodied gotterdammerung of calculated effects.

I would suggest that *The Cantos*, seen as a gothic, approximate, on the linguistic level, this technology of fascism. Pound, as he selects from history and rewrites where necessary, may in fact be operating his own Orwellian Ministry of Truth (or as Plato would probably call it, The Ministry of Poetry).

For what most effectively maintains a totalitarian state of mind is not unassailable logic but unassailable 'thought'. And thought is first of all unassailable when 'authorship' is put in doubt, when history seems like a series of repeats, and texts are no longer the products of writers but historical inevitabilities. The sense of historical inevitability, as both Froula and Michael Andre Bernstein point out, is precisely what Pound sets out to achieve through his maskings and erasures of authorship. And it is this troublesome legacy which has been raised to an unexamined and somewhat mystical status in much contemporary theory of writing and reading.

As in the gothic, Pound's poem has elided the very rule of 'sincerity' he set for himself. For sincerity demands in a sense accountability, and accountability demands an author or voice. *The Cantos* like *Pym*, obscures authorship, not because of its polyvocal texture, but because the gothic form must trade, not on believability but on a vicarious believability, the emotional conviction that this dangerous stuff called history is safely happening to you. The gothic thrall, the fictive aura of terror inspired by Poe's stories, is close to the dramaturgy of Pound's poem with its parade of decisive heroes performing their deeds. I would add that these kinds of emotional tonalities may not be far from that which the Leader creates when he tells the crowd how powerful it is and its members believe it."

— **Michael Heller** 17 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Chris Stroffolino answers Amy King, who had read an earlier post of his as "assuming an attack position" against Charles Bernstein. He reframes his quarrel not as an assault on Bernstein but as unease with how thoroughly Pound's assumptions have been naturalised in American poetry; the setting is a 2008 thread on cultural studies, poetics and the MLA.

I'll respond to the "opportunistic and pointless" charge... In my response to David, I was primarily curious in the language of that piece of journalism he was quoting. I hadn't really been following this thread that deeply, so forgive me if I missed some history, but I was mildly (but genuinely) curious (still am) who wrote the

piece, as I couldn't tell in David's post when the MLA journalist's writing stopped and David's own commentary started. I thought asking David to talk more about it would be an interesting entry into the conversation about Pound and such (since I'm less interested in Pound than in the issues that often come up when his name is evoked).

Regardless of who wrote that piece (the one that begins with the Hussein reference), I was curious about what the writers' attitude/stance/agenda, what-have-you- might be, because it's interesting for me to hear what others (alive) think, and put-forth, when they use words like 'cultural studies' and 'poetics' — hotly contested words and phrases in certain circles that I sometimes have to put an appearance in...

Anyway, even if I may end up largely disagreeing with the author of that piece, I also have to admire the intelligence that made the 'inappropriate' leap from Hussein to whomever was head of the MLA before Perloff- So I tried in that post to parse out what he was saying. I guess I don't see what is 'opportunistic' or 'pointless' about that... Yeah, maybe because my piece tried to be somewhat playful (as I was thinking about the two allegedly opposing views---"cultural studies" and "poetics" — I felt I had to try to balance the "deadly serious" tone with a playful one to find that balance), my tone could be read as flippant.

But I'm curious about how (or why) what I wrote can be taken as "assuming an attack position"... I distrust the naturalization of many aspects Pound's poetics (I'm not even talking about the fascism issue here, though that may play a part) in contemporary American poetry, and I find myself confronting it, almost daily, in my work as a teacher, poet, and other writing (not so much in my music, coz the Pound-assumptions aren't so much an issue there). Sure, there will be times I catch my self spouting a Poundian-ism here and there, or find points of agreement with Vendler, Perloff, Bernstein, and others,

but I do agree with those who argue that contemporary poetry is still understood too narrowly (I'm trying to avoid the word 'boring') and want to encourage students (and others who may be skeptical toward "poetry") to realize that "poetry" can have a wider range than many spokespeople for it acknowledge or admit (whether 'mainstream' or whatever...), to say nothing of what others who never really read much poetry (besides say "My Papa's Waltz" and "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers") often reduce it to... In short, that poetry can accomodate their most profound needs if they need those needs accomodated.

But, oh no, now I might be doing nothing more than "Assuming a Defense Position." Well, so be it. The long and short of it is, re: your point (stutter, stutter)

— Some of my disagreements with Bernstein for instance are probably well-documented somewhere, but we do agree on some things (like, for instance, the need to argue about poetics and/or culture in a public context, and try to be entertaining about it in one way or another), and that argument sometimes becomes an "argument against argument" (or we'd probably all be dead by now)... and we may disagree over MUSIC, the meaning of music, the kind of music we like, or even play, but such disagreements, if respectful and playful, do not mean we couldn't sit on a panel together...

Maybe Amy, we then disagree on the meaning (or feeling) of play and respect (now those two 1967 "Queen of Soul" hits are going through my so-called head) and that's why I'm asking you now

— **Chris Stroffolino** 17 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Kenneth Sherwood's words — a plea, prompted by a student's question about the modernists and women, to read Pound through his most searching heirs rather than convict him by label. Gabriel Gudding reproduced the passage to answer it, taking the student's side and finding Sherwood too quick to hear bad faith; it is quoted here as Gudding quoted it, under dispute.

“

Last week, an undergraduate exchange student asked me "Isn't it true that the modernists were against women?" What I hear behind this question as behind some of the comments and observations to the list of late is a desire to dismiss a writer on political grounds. The hurling of labels, whether political/ideological or simply scatological is never a very promising beginning to a dialogue, presuming that is one wants to enter a conversation rather than merely blow off steam.

Attempting to celebrate the poetry by severing it from the politics or simply dismissing the poetry on account of the politics ... two sides of the same evasive coin. Why not reflect on the complex negotiations with Pound in some of his better readers? Oppen at the Mediterranean shore listening to EP discuss the "boss," Zukofsky reconciling his personal friendship.

I'm reminded of this Bernstein follow-up to the poetics list of many years ago: <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/essays/poundbern.html>

Rachel DuPlessis cultural poetics essays (Propounding Modernist Maleness, *Modernism/Modernity* 9.3 (2002) 389-405) model, on a different ideological vector, ways of reading in and through the politics.

How much of the ideological "antipathy" towards Pound is based on a reading of the politics of and within the poetry? How much reflects the received wisdom about his radio broadcasts? Let's not reduce the list to the equivalent of a CNN Presidential Candidate likability poll. Whether one would rather have a beer with Ezra Pound or Mina Loy is really not the question. Or, I should say, is not a question I find very promising. Who, besides Ben Friedlander, has actually listened to the polemical broadcasts?

”

— **Gabriel Gudding** 18 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Michael Heller, replying to Amy in a thread on Charles Bernstein's re-reading of Pound, resists her either/or: he suspects Bernstein enlists Pound's collage — its decentered multiculturalism — to underwrite language-centred poetics, when to Heller's eye the Cantos only counterfeit polyvocality in the service of a settled elitism. The "you" is Amy.

First, I don't "claim" but say "I suspect the motive behind this essay etc..." I suspect this because Bernstein does say that "'hyperspace' of Pound's modernist collage is...the product of a compositionally decentered multiculturalism... a polyvocal textuality," terms often deployed as a critique by the language-centered poets against other more mono-vocal poetries (read $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ if you doubt me). Further, I have spent the better part of the essay, some 20 pp. describing how Seiburth, Froula (even Kenner, as I read him) and Michael Andre Bernstein show that, indeed, the *Cantos* is in fact presenting "a predetermined Truth of pan cultural elitism." And even more, as I go on to say in my piece. Bernstein's "claims" about Pound's canonization are not in agreement with the historical record. Bernstein turns the criticism of Pound upside down. As a technician and craftsman he was honored, as a political thinker (including the fascism, the economics, the monetary policies — you name it) that Bernstein says led to his 'acceptance) was almost always negatively critiqued.

"Also, your argument on Pound seems to require an either/or position — Either Pound's poetry uses the authorial voice of 'fascist aesthetics' successfully or it legitimately uses the polyvocal textuality that supports/explores the indeterminate and its uncertain possibilities (& becomes a gothic?)."

I say that — in keeping with the analysis so many others have made — that the "multicultural" IS an "illusion," an illusion because what looks like polyvocality says the same thing over and over. This is not just my idea, but that of so many of

the best commentators on Pound. Again, you take a point that I consider to be worth speculating about and turn it into something hard and fast. I say a question is begged as to "whether Poundian techniques, in particular the cultural plundering, revising and activity of selection induced by the search for history's repeats, the absence of a clearly defined authorial voice, tend to undermine fascist tendencies or aid in furthering them." It's a question--

— **Michael Heller** 18 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Jim Andrews takes up Charles Bernstein's claim that the collage form of The Cantos is "basically democratic" and so absolves Pound. Answering Bernstein and glancing at Murat Nemet-Nejat, he grants collage its liberating force but denies any form carries a politics of its own — offering flarf, that magpie harvesting of the web, as a Poundian method turned exploitative.

I have been reading the fury of arguments around Pound the last two weeks, or so, with some bemusement because to me they have the quality of a discussion about the weather, whether winter or summer is good or bad. Let me explain.

a) To me, there is no doubt that any argument about American poetry today would have been impossible without the existence of Ezra Pound. Or, if we could conceive his non-existence, our concepts of American poetry would have been so different that it would be impossible for us to imagine them. This importance goes beyond good or bad poetry, beyond which of Ezra Pound's poem are good or bad. It has to do with the shaping of thought, what a poem is or can be, what a translation is or can be, what diction in a poem is or can be, etc. Olson, Creeley, Spicer, Duncan, Williams, Zukofsky, etc, etc., are all children of Pound, more than Eliot ever was. He brought a sense of liberation, the entitlement of the poet over language, to poetry which very few of us would like to close the door and leave behind (Gabriel, do you think your wonderful, fantastic *rhode island notebook* could have been written without Pound? How many "experimental" poets today could simultaneously appreciate and support poets as diverse as Frost, Eliot and Zukofsky?).

b) As a human being (at least as a political human being), Pound was a creep. His appellation as "insane" was obviously a legal fig leaf used to prevent him from going to jail and having the key thrown away, even being executed, something achieved by poets (Jews, enemies, friends) who honored his contributions as a poet.

These contradictions are facts. I do not see exactly what these arguments are doing, except making poets feel good about themselves for liking and admiring a

poet whose political views are loathsome to them. For example, Gabe, what was the exact purpose of your original post which I think started these discussions. Do you want to stop teaching American poetry after Emerson and Whitman? Do you really think there was a conscious conspiracy to "canonize" Pound as a male chauvinist, phallic icon? Is it not rather that a number of poets, some of them quite different, were instinctively drawn to him, used and defended him, something still going on, including among women writers, as Alison's and Amy's posts here demonstrate?

As for Charles's claim that the collage structure is basically democratic (therefore, as a creator Pound not a fascist): I can see how the collage structure of *The Cantos* has something to do with the liberating, opening impact of Pound as a poet, though I do not think it is nearly the only thing. But I do not think a poetic form does, can contain a political stance per se. It can function very differently, with different social impacts, in the hands of different poets. Let me give a recent example: the flarf practice of harvesting words and references from the web for ironical/poetical purposes is utterly within the framework of collage (also quite Poundian). But this decoupling of references from their autonomous place and existence (with little awareness that this is being done) is deeply exploitative, offensive to me.

— **Jim Andrews** 20 Feb 2008 [link](#)

David Chiot, amid the argument over Pound and fascism, offers the fasces itself — the bundle of rods bound to the axe — as a figure for how the Cantos are made: the fascism lies not in Pound's materials but in his will to bind them, the will to dictate his heirs did not share.

I think if one reads the definition of the fasces given below, one has an idea of a possible different approach to the structure of the *Cantos*. A binding together of the elements, the rods, to the axe (axis) to give the "strength in unity." I've been writing and thinking about this in terms of Pound's ventriloquism, uses of masks (influence of the Greek and Noh theaters) and his great lifelong interest in Confucian Authoritarianism as well as the fascist period which developed later in his life. The issue of treason is very important — Pound was charged indicted and faced prison, if not having been adjudged mentally incompetent to stand trial so to speak.

The treason comes from his KNOWING BETTER WHAT WAS GOOD FOR AMERICA — which he of course had left very long ago. The ventriloquism and masks are related with Pound's "personae," in which the "documentary" aspects

of his materials are transformed in to an Epic Docu-Drama, a "soap opera" of serial *Cantos*, — (i don't mean soap opera disparagingly)-

Montage, whose greatest theoretician and practitioner may still well be the Jewish Gay Soviet Marxist Sergei Eisenstein, was also greatly influenced by the Chinese ideogram, which Eisenstein studied in some detail and writes of in his essays. The equating of montage with being "less liberatory" as it were than collage I think would greatly surprise Eisenstein.

Also Pound is not as "Euro-centric" at all as Bernstein makes out — indeed the new association with Chinese poetry begun by Bernstein and Perloff is an example of over a century's such studies, interests, translations, exchanges among Chinese and American writers and writing in which Pound played a large role in the West. (And one might ask what sorts of conflicts this new association raises with China's imprisoning so many poets and artists — if their civil and human rights are or not a question in this--)

It is not the elements in the work which make it fascist or not, but the manner in which Pound personally binds them into fasces of the *Cantos*. This is why so many poets the world over have been influenced and inspired by Pound in spite of his personal politics and prejudices — they have learned from him without having Pound's drive to become a Dictator, the "Great Communicator" or "Mr Know-it-All" dictating "poetry and public policy" to the masses.

The fascism of Pound was defeated, he was charged with treason and rather than being embraced due to his fascism, shunned by great many readers and writers the world over for this. What has gained him his recognition is his contributions to writing — as Murat pointed out, this list would not exist without Pound's work.

Pound's sense of having failed with the *Cantos* in the sense of their not ultimately cohering is something learned by a great deal of Twentieth Century efforts towards creating a "Total Work." Not even Einstein was able to realize the Einsteinian Unified Field Theory.

This is a fascist era in the US, and rather than denying fascism as it operates in a work or is found in groups and persons, one needs to study this, in order to more clearly see and hear the fascism all around one.

The radio broadcasts of Pound are a prototype of Talk Radio and cable news and the Memri disinformation and censored newspapers. Propaganda is so prevalent it becomes invisible, taken for "the way things really are" rather than for the manner which they have been designed to appear. Pretty much most of the discourse one hears and sees and reads is in varying degrees directed and

controlled by these voices, images, words, discourses all round one, even in the ways one may imagine one is "resisting" or embracing things which announce themselves being "oppositional the unquestioning acceptance of Authority is disturbing.

How many "natural" thoughts and responses are not the result of a lifetime of training? How many words does one read and silently nod in agreement without really wondering what they may mean as they are being used?

How does this function to create every more conformity and acquiescence to Authority, in every area of life? "Question Authority" becomes ever more displaced by "don't question Authority" — and questions to do with poetry and politics as with everything else become reduced, as Orwell predicted, to ever smaller vocabularies of catch phrases and doublespeak.

— David Chirot 21 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Amy King, re-sending a post Yahoo had swallowed, presses the 2008 rePound question: can a form be lifted clean of the politics that bore it? Answering Mike (Michael Heller) and Murat Nemet-Nejat, quoted below, who held that form carries no politics, she turns Pound's own collage — her goad is rap — against his craving for a single authoritarian voice.

No more need be said? It's all settled now, and still, I wonder --

Form, which I understand evolves from a group of people trying to say things another way and usually bears out political implications — a way that gives voice to their experience or an attempt to (simplistically said w apologies) say something apart from or new to the status quo — can later be divorced from its content (i.e. the overt and/or implied political matters)? So when I decide to rap my poems (sans content about the urban African American experience), I will in no way evoke the associations and political implications from which that form was born and used? I will only be conjuring the 'unpolitical' or "neutral" aesthetics associated with that use? The form may not "contain a political stance, per se", but it certainly carries political weight and implications that people associate with the form itself. Remove its content, the form still has origins and uses that it cannot be "cleansed" of simply by removing overt content.

As for Pound using collage, the implication is not only the "opening" Murat refers to below, but also, that by employing it, Pound is betraying his own desire for the Fascist ideal of one unified authoritarian voice. And here we are going in circles ...

— Amy King 22 Feb 2008 [link](#)

My assistant — a Rutherford boy, raised, he will remind you, a few doors down from Dr. Williams — turns up with a fistful of questions and not the faintest intention of answering one: can Williams be booked for anti-semitism alongside Pound and Eliot, and by what rot did Pound's ornate machinery of beauty hollow from within? The interrogation proceeds by hedged parenthesis — "in Switzerland (I think)" — and arrives, with ceremony, at no verdict whatever. He calls this tossing out questions; I call it leaving the room before the bill comes.

I have a lot of vague thoughts on this matter, being both of mixed ethnic origin and from Rutherford, NJ (as I never tire of telling people, WCW's son was my doctor when I was a lad, and in high school I would occasionally feign illness as a pretext for intelligence missions). I don't remember reading about his collaboration with a Chinese white supremecist, nor have I read the letters that speak of circumcision, which are no doubt pretty ridiculous and stupid, though it is worth remembering that, of all the "major modernists", Williams was (to me) the most seriously compromised by his lack of "sweetness and light" in Arnold's phrase — i.e. despite his education in Switzerland (I think), at Horace Mann and in Pennsylvania, he was pretty lacking in the "humanities" but often, to his credit, seemed to go out of his way not to be cosmopolitan in the way of Pound. He at least felt bad enough about his suburban disposition to downplay his own role as an unacknowledged legislator — i.e. he classed himself as a "dog among dogs." In any case, here are a few rambling questions regarding this subject (no answers):

1. if he never created a "positive" image of a civilization or culture that didn't include Jews, in the sense of a new Italy or Europe, could he be classed with the anti-semitism of Eliot or Pound, who wrote extensive tracts on the subject?
2. to say that Williams, like Pound, had "Jewish friends" hence he was not anti-Semitic is, yes, a bit weak (an older saw than the ginzu), but what were the value systems of these Jewish artists that Williams supported, values that he knew and recognized — such as in Ginsberg's *Howl* -- and how did they run counter to a classically contoured, Euro-centric, authoritarian — in any case "passeist" — image that Pound and Eliot threw up against the miscegenation that would be the inevitable result of liberal capitalism? I somehow think that Zukofsky's leftism was modified for Pound by his choice, in the famous "Mantis" sestina for example, to utilize very old forms, or the "luminous detail", method in putting forth his image of civilization — indeed, LZ seemed to believe that "civilization" had its glories that were worth preserving, in opposition to say the pessimism of much continental writing. (LZ was also a faultless highbrow.) But what could be similarly modified in the writing of Ginsberg — didn't you more or less have to take the whole range of values or leave them?

3. could Williams, who took pains, I tend to think, to differentiate from a Puritan, self-policing sensibility — hence his attraction to Ginsberg — be put under the same microscope as a Pound or Eliot? That is, even if he had a better side to him that recognized anti-Semitism, especially in 1939, as something one does not want to humor as a political disposition, isn't it possible that he also rejecting this self-negotiation in favor of the "potency" of language — after all, this is the guy that sprinkled exclamation points in poems about flowers. He kind of liked to curse; the Calibanic strain was quite strong with him (to echo Obi Wan).

4. on the note of racial slurs and things, I noted in my Philly Talk much to the chagrin of the audience that there was a way that my Asian friends and myself used to pick on each other in high school that was, for me, therapeutic, involving those very ethnic slurs that we were often only on the receiving end of. Which isn't to say we became racist, since we just used to pick on each other to sort of poke at the wound. A little later in life, this has grown, for me, into an identification with Korea and the Korean people in a sort of direct but failing way, such that I often, to myself, refer to Koreans as "my people" and Korea as "my country" or whatever, and so when I hear of a North Korean submarine washing up on the South Korean coast, I think, "what are my pathetic little people doing now"? I've only been there once, and of course I am not "Korean," but then again I exercise a certain freedom possible to "Americans" to be that other at least if it gives me comfort. Obviously this is just an interior play, something about exchangeable identities, and so forth. I also tend to have words like "gook" and "chink" floating around in my consciousness quite often, not in conversation but in private thought, often on the verge of finding their way into print, and sometimes they do get there — why not? I don't tend to think of this so much as "self-hatred" or hatred for an other, so much as a play on identity, a way of erasure through signature, etc. So in contrast to the interpretation of Williams use of expletives as "ironic," it seems to me a different reading is possible. I.e. Williams had a pretty strong memory of his Jewish grandfather — isn't pretty inevitable that we would have to read a relationship to this ancestor of his in any terminology that he uses that would seem to class him with the anti-Semites, the oppressive "other"? Whose voice is he using at this moment?

5. what about Williams' relationship to Catholics — those "Catholic bells"? I don't know the history well enough, but Rutherford now is pretty heavy with Catholics (I was raised a Catholic), but I would guess that it was a phenomenon just in the making in Williams' time. I tend to think Williams — who fetishized the word better than any "American" before him — seemed to fetishize everything from, again, flowers to potatoes (to the "e" in potatoes) to too young girls to ethnic

minorities (cf. Mackey's well-known essay on his exclamation-point riddled poem on jazz music). This seems to be where the Polish mothers meet the wheelbarrow, in a specific over-riding ontology — what is there is not me, etc.

As a last note, I tend to be wary of the granting of letters a confirmation of the potency of the panoptic gaze, which is to say that a consideration of the contexts of letters demonstrate that they hide as much as they seem to "reveal." I'll have to look those letters up, but considering that Williams map of a "civilization" is one that would have to be more often surmised than can be found elaborated linearly — that he just wasn't a systematic thinker — his idiotic banter on the sidelines with a guy like Pound — whose system of thought was pretty ornate but tremendously corrupted by his hatred and prejudices, considering that the system was centered around ideas of beauty and wisdom, such that we would have to believe this hatred quite intense for it to survive, and hence his depression when he finally realized how intense this hatred was (it suggests to me Carlyle's discovering upon the death of his wife that he was quite a cad — another Puritan sensibility run amock) — could be taken in many ways, perhaps even as the sort of masculinist sparring that we know of that leads to an agreement in terms that are often less than agreeable. Pound overwhelmed him more often than not.

I have no answers to the above questions in general, just thought to toss them out. I would suspect, I suppose, that Williams would behave differently if he were in Rome in 1939, or that his letters would be somewhat different, but since both his humanism and his anti-semitism were not really challenged by much more than what he read in the papers — i.e his imperative to decide was not quite as strong as for a European — then much of this is speculation.

Anyway, I got to get back to work.

— **Brian Kim Stefans** 15 Jul 1999 [link](#)

IV

The Argument He Left Us

Pound survives his own trial by turning into the standing occasion for the list's deepest recurring questions, and the last movement follows him out into open country. Because he is the limit case — the greatest technician and the worst man, the two facts refusing to be filed apart — he is where every general argument ends up: whether you may judge the work by the life (“if you judge the value of literature by the character of its authors, how many good books will be left standing?”); whether difficulty is a locked door or an open one; whether lifting found and appropriated material is an ethic or an alibi; whether there is any such creature as “poetry itself,” scrubbed of origins and uses.

These are not Pound's questions alone; the list argued them under a hundred other names. But Pound is where they sharpen to a point, because with him nothing stays merely aesthetic. “Any argument about American poetry today,” one member writes, “would have been impossible without the existence of Ezra Pound.” There it is: the problem, the gift, and the reason the room could never once let him alone.

Jackson Mac Low, closing a long autobiographical post that traces his correspondence with Pound from 1938 into the 1950s blow-up — and his diastic erasure Words nd Ends from Ez — arrives at the thread's hard-won position: a life is not integral, and neither idolatry nor obliteration will answer for Pound.

So why am I still conflicted about the bastard? I think it's obvious. He wasn't *only* a fascist, and only a relatively small proportion of his poetry is fascist. (Of course this sounds like “she's only a *leetle bit* pregnant.”) But could it be that what Pound told Allen Ginsberg when he visited him in Venice — that it was “a stupid suburban prejudice!” — was really what he thought it was? Could THAT have led to supporting Mussolini & even Hitler?

I think Major Douglas & his Social Credit (a version of money reform that was dripping with antisemitism — not *all* money reformers are antisemites — had as much to do with it as Pound's moving to Italy. (I think he met Douglas before leaving London.) The whole concatenation of Western “populism”, the Silver Movement, &c., had as much to do with the turn toward fascism. (Ez had all too much in common with Pat Buchanan! Curiously, there were even hints of interest in Bolshevism around the time of *An Objectivist Anthology*!)

The fact is that Pound could be a fascist and also write wonderful poetry — even *after* turning into a fascist! People are not integral. Certainly Pound wasn't (and neither am I). One is a different person at different times. What I referred to once — much to my surprise — as "the spirit of Ezra Pound" was not that of a fascist. Tho he may have thought that he was writing a populist-reformist anticapitalist-fascist montage when he was writing the *Cantos* (& I think even this was sporadic) turned out to be a collage poem such as few if any had written before. (Thanks, Charles, for ponting this out, despite the fact that you hate Pound much more than I do!) It certainly *doesn't* "all cohere!" [...]

When I wrote *Words and Ends from Ez* in the early 1980s, I was fully aware of Pound's fascism & antisemitism, but I still found much of his poetry — the nonfascist parts — inspiring. I think many of us — especially my younger friends who are called "language poets" — learned a great deal from Pound. The whole process of juxtaposing disparate elements within the space (in all senses) of a poem was given to us primarily by him and his b[^]ete noir Stein! How he'd gnash at that sentence!

I think the contributions of the dadaists & surrealists to this kind of poem-construction were minor compared to those of Pound.

& he taught many *different* groups of poets — not only the imagists, the objectivists, and the projectivists — new ways of making poems and of making *verse*. It's incredible when one thinks of the lineages of poem-makers descending from EP! (Think, for instance, of Pound-Olson-Duncan ... !) Think of all the ears he taught to hear (*helped* teach — remember how many of us learned as much or more from Stein--& also, in my case, in approaching hearing and the putting together of disparate things, Cage — especially his music of the early 1950s).

Would he have been as great a teacher — even to those of us who came to reject as much as we accepted — if he'd not have been such a fucking authoritarian? Probably for some — but that authority thing is what often drives teachers — good & bad.

One cannot obliterate Pound because he was in so many ways a fascist (in so many ways, he wasn't!) or Heidegger because he was for a very short time a Nazi (for a much much shorter a time than Pound was a fascist). I've recently learned that not only Arendt but also Celan! visited Heidegger in his late years. We cannot be totalists about poets and philosophers any more than we can be about society. Like Whitman, we all contain multitudes.

— Jackson Mac Low 18 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Henry Gould, answering Keith Tuma in a thread on M. K. Blasing's Politics of Postmodernism, relays the thesis — American poetry since Whitman has always fused technique with politics — and its charge against the "Poundian" line: that it mistakes anti-rhetoric for unmediated truth. The Merrill epigram he cites, angels against a god, does the work.

Does the author actually read Olson, Language poets? The "close readings" are only of the 4 authors I mentioned (Ashbery, O'Hara, Bishop, Merrill). As a critic, she's taking the long historical view; but part of her argument is that American poetry, from at least Whitman, has ALWAYS conflated technique with politics. And when "Poundian" modernists combine this with the rhetorical equation "anti-rhetoric = truth/nature/reality" they are assuming certain things about poetry which "her" postmodernists cannot assume without question. She quotes Merrill from an interview saying that the poets he admires "write like angels; Pound tries to write like a god." I.e., Pound believes his writing purifies rhetoric out and transcribes the real; the postmodernists, on the other hand, are skeptics writing with an awareness of the inherent persuasion — that every speech act is both indeterminate and politically implicated — in poetry. Rhetoric is both unavoidable, and is a link with the communal means of making poetry which have always been available.

— **Henry Gould** 03 Feb 1996 [link](#)

John Matthias, granting that Pound cannot honestly be un-read, transcribes from Milan Kundera's Testaments Betrayed; in the chosen lines Kundera anatomises the "spirit of the trial" that shrinks an artist's whole life to a docket of crimes and numbers Pound among its defendants. Matthias offers it amid the continuing trial of poets like Pound.

I don't know...Ric Caddel quotes an eloquent letter from Bunting to Pound that couldn't be improved on. But then Bunting also wrote of the *Cantos*: "There are the Alps... / you will have to go a long way round / if you want to avoid them." Wendy Battin says "I don't think it's safe to ignore this man." It's also not possible. How can someone choose not to read "The River-Merchant's Wife," "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," Canto 2, Canto 47, Canto 81, etc.

I've been reading Milan Kundera's *Testaments Betrayed* these last couple of days & found some good things about the trials, in every sense, of writers in our century. In the Chapter called "Paths in the Fog" Kundera's focus is Kafka. On pp. 225-240, however, he begins to generalize with a rather surprising paragraph on Orwell's *1984* [...] I didn't mean to type out so much; nor do I agree with everything Kundera says. But this is certainly all worth thinking about in the context of the continuing trial of poets like Ezra Pound.

— John E. Matthias 17 Mar 1996 [link](#)

Messerli, writing back to Ron Silliman after provoking the list over Szyborska's Nobel, defends the distinction between storytelling and poetry and reaches for Pound — the passage on Flaubert and Maupassant from the early essays — to press it home. He loves the story, he says, and holds it apart from the poem.

You're quite right about the comments you made about translation. It is hard to truly evaluate a poet on the basis of translation, although I do think — particularly with a good translation (which this may not be) — one can get a fair sense of the work, and in some (few) cases it can actually make the work seem MORE interesting. Perhaps the excellence of Swedish translation of Szyborska's work accounts for the award — although the Nobel committee has certainly made some atrocious choices in literature over the last decade.

I was, of course, being intentionally provocative yesterday, for several reasons. At times there seems to be a kind of unstated notion on the list, a kind a passive notion that all poetry is the same, and no distinctions need be made, that we should never talk about the "quality" of a poem.

More importantly: although I can enjoy a good dildo as much as the next man and woman, it does seem that it would be fun, occasionally, to turn our attention back to poetry and the discussion of it.

I think "Hitler's First Photograph" is particularly bad, however. I interpret the poem as a mildly ironic construction with two possible ideas behind it:

1. That all children (and human beings) have the potential for great evil, and
2. Given the "cutsey" childlike attentions of the adults, that whatever happened to the young Hitler boy, the culture helped to instill.

Both of these ideas are a bit facetious: Certainly we may all have the potential for great evil, but fortunately there are not that many Hitlers. And although the culture may have instilled many of ideas that led to Hitler's actions, it was not committing the vast atrocities without him.

But what I object to even more than the thematics is the METHOD of the poem. It relies simply on the one word — Hitler. Without that, the entire work would collapse. If you said the Strauss baby, for example, the poem would be truly trite. But Szyborska relies solely on the recognition by her readers that this is not just ANY child, but the monster himself.

In short she has created a little construct that relies entirely upon the reader's agreement before he has even uttered the first word of the poem. There is no discovery of anything in this poem; it is all pre-determined before we have even begun. We will react as we do because the poem hits at the point where the reflex is inevitable.

For me poetry (writing in general) is always a discovery, an uncover-ing, if you will, of questions more than answers, particularly since it engages the very medium through which we receive and comprehend the world. There is no room for reflex actions or pre-conceived constructs in order for the poem to truly exciting.

Storytelling it is — as Henry Gould has responded. But I go with Pound every time: "Flaubert and De Maupassant lifted prose to the rank of a finer art, and one has no patience with contemporary poets who escape from all the difficulties of the infinitely difficult art of good prose by pouring themselves into loose verses." At another point, Pound makes clear that he dismisses poets who are merely telling stories by chopping up their lines into verse. For me storytelling (which I love) and poetry are quite different arts.

This is only one poem, however, and I make no claims to know Szyborska's oeuvre. But certainly none of the poems I read (admittedly only seven short poems!) could compare with the poetry of Lorine Niedecker (another so-called "homey" poet) or William Carlos Williams, or George Oppen, or Louis Zukofsky, of Ezra Pound, or Paul Celan, or Benjamin Péret, or Marina Tsvetayeva, or Tchicaya U Tam'si...the list could go on for a long while: all poets who never received the Nobel Prize.

— Douglas Messerli 05 Oct 1996 [link](#)

Jeff Hansen, spurred by a Talisman exchange between Perloff, Warsh and Schwartz on poetry and politics, reaches his fourth and last proposition: that the conviction poetry must have political impact is Pound's most durable and most dangerous bequest. Having argued verse alters no voting bloc, he warns that the poet who enters politics as a poet courts the totalitarian temptation.

At least since Milton, poetry in the English language has made various attempts to influence politics. None more extreme than Ezra Pound's. While I abhor Pound's politics, he has been the most successful Modern poet in terms of catching the ear of power. I believe that we are still living in the shadow of his ambition: We still believe that, if poetry is to matter, it must have a political impact.

This is dangerous. Politics by its nature is compromise. Poetry by its nature is not. Politics in the democratic sense is formed by groups of people haranguing, compromising, grandstanding, and fudging. Poetry by its nature is more dogmatic.

Poetry is radically creativity. From the ground up. This sort of creativity can only happen when a few are in charge and the rest are forced to shut up. (Revolutions I don't believe have accomplished anything in terms of redistributing wealth, power, and liberty to the disenfranchised. Day in day out political work has.)

Poets who enter politics in their capacity as poets run the risk of falling to the temptation of totalitarianism.

— **Jeff Hansen** 28 Oct 1996 [link](#)

In a review reposted by Jeffrey Jullich, the novelist Alexander Theroux condemns Ashbery's obscurer work by folding it into a lineage of willful difficulty he judges morally indefensible — Pound, Stein, Olson, Zukofsky — whose impenetrability, he argues, betrays writing's whole purpose as communication. The tone is contemptuous polemic.

Along with his arbitrary use of punctuation and grammar — he will sometimes use a period and sometimes not (Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, innovators all, never once, to my recollection, chose to be so precious and pointlessly ungettable) — can become nothing less than infuriating. I would even assert it is morally indefensible. For a writer to write codswallop? Jabber? Try on these lines from the prose poem "The Ascetic Sensualists":

"Only a small edge of dime protected the issued utter blank darkness from the silver regal porch factory inscribed pearl-handled revolver raped gun to the ultimate tease next to the door fifth gum. Your Balzac open the foot scrounge lamp tube traffic gun. Gun is over, war banished, tottering lamp gun. Hic the perfect screw slow giggles to be sky raffia. The person or persons molested."

Such impenetrable poems, reminding one of the likes of Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, the queen of tautology, and yam-in-the-mouth Charles Olsen, a total fraud, and Louis Zukofsky of whose uncircumscribable poem A critic Hugh Kenner once admiringly pronounced, "Critics will take a thousand years to solve it" — he meant this as praise — are nothing less than irresponsible, at least to my mind and defeat the whole idea of writing as an act of communication. Ashbery's major Zukofskian effort in my opinion is "Europe" ("He had mistaken his book for garbage" is one of its apposite lines), except for the wordy, paragraphoidal last

efforts in *Three Poems*, which include "The New Spirit," "The System" and "The Recital," which remind me more than anything of the late poet John Berryman's impossibly dull literary criticism, impenetrable walls of gibberish and jargon. I am certain Ashbery is incapable of a lyric poem. With such an obfuscating drive, how is it even possible?

— Jeffrey Jullich 30 Apr 2003 [link](#)

My assistant surfaces again, uncertain to the end whether he is standing at a lectern or a confessional, and confesses the poet his "first great poetic love." The contradiction — peace-seeker; Mussolini's broadcaster — he waves off as Icarian, and I have let the word stand, wax and feathers and all, so the reader can gauge the altitude at which a critic will forgive his first love anything.

The writings of Ezra Pound have been traditionally associated with the late James Laughlin's avant-garde publishing venture New Directions, and volumes such as his 1949 "collected" poems *Personae*, his sprawling epic *The Cantos*, his thick book of *Translations*, and the slim, tidy distillation of *Selected Poems* with its forbidding, purse-lipped profile of the poet, have been foundational, strangely comforting features on poetry lovers' shelves for decades. Containing Pound in a single, albeit huge, volume that made claims to completism seemed impossible, and yet Richard Sieburth — best known as a critic and translator of Holderlein — has done an amazing job of finding and logically arranging nearly everything that Pound wrote that could be called a poem or translation, including the juvenalia of "Hilda's Book" — written for fellow University of Pennsylvania student Hilda Doolittle — to the late, moving elegy, first published in 1971, that he wrote for the brother of one of his St. Elizabeths acolytes, but which Sieburth clearly intends for Pound himself: "Out of the turmoil, Mother of Grievs receive him, / Queen of Heaven receive him, / May the sound of the leaves give him peace, / May the hush of the forest receive him." (1203) That Pound could figure himself as a seeker of peace while being, infamously, a virulent anti-Semite and supporter of Mussolini, is just one of the conflicts that make this volume compelling; but except in the rich chronology and footnotes that Sieburth provides (there is, sadly, no introduction), practically none of this social context make its presence known beyond proclivities of style: the poet's always precise, even "macho" meters, the near absence of any intimate or autobiographical tone, and his Puritan impatience with "Symbolist" ambiguities — he was set on curing the world of the decadent "nineties." That Pound famously considered his life-work, the 800 page *Cantos*, a "botch" — and took to referring to himself as a "minor satirist" during the last years of his life as he suffered crippling depressions — makes the verve, optimism and confidence of such undertakings as the reversionings of Guido Cavalcanti

and Arnaut Daniel (however shackled by 19th century conventions), the robust, still fresh “Cathay” sequence, the metrical displays of “Tenzzone,” “Dance Figure” and “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” and the innovative “Homage to Sextus Propertius” — all from his richest period before the 1920s — right through his passion for translating Sophocles and Confucius’ *Classic Anthology*, seem like an Icarian flight primed for a great, however morally distressing, fall — one that took some of American poetry’s very thirst for hearty, internationalist undertakings with it. Pound believed that all mankind needed to know of literature could be contained in a two-foot shelf, and he set out translating, for a country he thought had yet to ascend out of “barbarism,” those works that were missing; his own place on that shelf might not be that thick — all-in-all, many of these pages are taken up by trivial sequences like the “Alfred Venison” poems (Cockney ballads in support of his “social credit” ideas) and the social farce of “Moeurs Contemporaines,” idiosyncratic “readers” versions of Sophocles and Japanese Noh plays, and the Confucian works which crave simplicity and wisdom but are clearly the products of a didactic, irascible and fatally undialectic iconoclast: “He said: problem of style? Get the meaning across and then STOP.” (731). Yet one can’t help to think that the appearance of this volume, which seems streamlined, coherent and *responsible* compared to the many pages of *The Cantos* that are barely readable due to stylistic infelicities and political excesses — compare his work on the *Analects* to the “American President Cantos” — will give readers of American poetry a sense of starting over, of renewed energy in resorting through the horrific details of a long, ideologically wounded century and the myriad luminous details of a few millennia of European and Asian literature.

— **Brian Kim Stefans** 20 Aug 2003 [link](#)

Murat Nemet-Nejat, in a thread on the life versus the work — answering Mary Jo Malo, who urged judging the work apart from the artist — refuses to sever the two. Pound is his hard case: the usury rants, echoing caricatured Jews, he cannot stomach, yet no one has said truer things about American poetry, and he means to live with both.

I do not understand the concept that there is no relationship between a writer and his/her work. Why is he or she writing then? This relationship does not mean a biographical narrative. It may be related to a political event or obsession or an object of curiosity, etc.

This does not mean that the reader has to see the work by charting biographical parallels. In my case, a few poets I admire and am deeply affected by are offensive as human beings to me, including in aspects of their work. For instance, I can not stomach Pound's rants about usury, always with echoes of Jews with big

noses. Despite that, there is nobody who has said truer things about American poetry than Pound. I have to live with both, neither erasing the truth of the other.

— **Murat Nemet-Nejat** 05 May 2005 [link](#)

Alexander Dickow, in an August 2006 thread on poetry, philosophy and audience, quotes back in full the post he means to answer — the words are Jason Quackenbush's, who argues that poetry is at bottom entertainment and lays the "high art" cult of obscurity, which discards immediacy, chiefly at Pound's door. Deliberately polemical.

“

"Philosophy ought only to be written as a form of poetry." ~Ludwig Wittgenstein

Marjorie Perloff asserts the compliment, that Poetry ought to be written only as a form of philosophy, in *Wittgenstein's Ladder* saying it follows from the first, which it doesn't, but oh well, if you go through life expecting valid moves of logic from critics, you're going to be very disappointed.

I'm bringing this up because i think there's a tendency for people to want to connect poetry to something "deeper" and casting about for that "something deep" they light naturally on philosophy because philosophy is confusing and weird and decorated with all sorts of erudition besides, and if you don't understand it but intelligent people seem to, then it must be deep, right? except that's a trap that could lead one to assert that star trek the next generation is deep. It is not, nor is philosophy.

What's my point? Poetry is entertainment. That's all it's ever been. It's a way of holding the attention of an audience in order to communicate something. That's my biggest beef with language poetry and a lot of the composite sleight of hand stuff that is going on in the neo-concrete poetry/digital poetry/conceptual poetry/vispo people in the wake of the american tree. For some reason it's become acceptable in the pursuit of poetry as political statement or piece of high art to ignore it's function as entertainment and in the process completely disregard immediacy as a measure of quality. Granted, immediacy can be construed as a function of literacy, but only up to a point.

Once one has moved beyond the general familiarity with a canon and a tradition that is to be expected of someone engaged in a literature, the criteria of immediacy returns and only so much obliqueness and "openness" to a text can be tolerated before one has to say that it is boring and stupid. There is a lot of boring, stupid work in the world, and I think a general disdain for a certain amount of immediacy is the result. At some

point early in the twentieth century, and I think Ezra Pound is largely to be blamed for this in poetry — although it is certainly not limited to that, a contrapopular "high art" meta-aesthetic was instituted that, whatever else was going on in various movements, can be traced over the course of the development of various american arts. When I say meta-aesthetic, I'm referring to what is obvious in the work of the rank and file priests, monks, and nuns, and not the stated aims of the bishops and cardinals following from the likes of Pound, Picasso, and Schoenberg.

I think that a large percentage of work that is trying to be adventurous has chosen obscurantism and obfuscation in place of immediacy as a means of concealing the work's essentially anemic semantics. It has been allowed to do so largely because to the uninitiated, work that is adventurous is often indistinguishable from work that is incomprehensible. I think this is the sort of problem that leads lesser light like Kenneth Goldsmith to say things like "The 20th century avant-garde liked to embrace boredom as a way of getting around what it considered to be the vapid "excitement" of popular culture." Nonsense. The twentieth century avant-garde is full of exciting work, not the least of which most of the output of Goldsmith's "king of boredom" Jackson Mac Low. people who think that all there is to adventurous work is to strip the work of the immediacy (the immediacy that is present in unadventurous work through it's cliché nature) are missing the boat completely. To be disoriented by a work and to have to figure out how to address it, is not to say that the work shouldn't try to compel it's viewer or reader to try to address it. That's one of the chief functions of the size of abstract expressionist paintings, to pick an oft misunderstood example. A rothko, were it the size of a postage stamp, would suck because it could easily be ignored. But rothko's enormous canvases demand attention, as do Mac Low's "twenties" poems to give an example from poetry, works i return to constantly not because they are obscure or because i expect to find something deep there, but because i still don't know quite how to describe how they make me feel. I don't know how they do it, but they draw me back and demand that I deal with them on some level. I think part of it has to do with the fact that one is forced to read aloud repeating phrases over and over again trying to get the silences timed right. But it's such a cunning trick on Mac Low's part to force the reader into that. It gives a work that might otherwise be meaningless, pretentious, and obfuscating it's own boringness, an immediacy that isn't, ironically, immediately apparent.

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— **Alexander Dickow** 22 Aug 2006 [link](#)

Barry Schwabsky answers Luke Schlueter, a newcomer asking what Pound meant by his line to Harriet Monroe that "poetry should be as well written as prose." Quoting Pound's obituary for Ford Madox Ford, Schwabsky locates the dictum: "prose" is the discipline of Flaubert, the target the stilted diction of late-Victorian verse.

Pound got his dictum from Ford Madox Hueffer (subsequently Ford). In his obit for Ford, he wrote that "for the ten years before I got to England there would seem to have been no one but Ford who held that French clarity and simplicity in the writing of English verse and prose were of immense importance as in contrast to the use of a stilted traditional dialect, a 'language of verse' unused in the actual talk of the people, even of 'the best people', for the expression of reality and emotion." Thus, "prose" here means, essentially, the tradition of Flaubert, and the condition of poetry he was responding to was that of late Victorian verse — he specifically mentions Robert Bridges and "the useful, but monotonous, in their day unduly neglected, as more recently unduly touted, metrical labours of G. Manley Hopkins." And he also mentions his own early efforts, "when my third volume displayed me trapped, fly-papered, gummed and strapped down in a jejune provincial effort to learn...the stilted language that then passed for 'good English' in the arthritic milieu that held control of the respected British critical circles."

— **Barry Schwabsky** 07 Dec 2007 [link](#)

Sam Hamill, writing to Paul Nelson from Buenos Aires and forwarded by Nelson to the list, answers Gabriel Gudding's announcement that he teaches Pound as an abomination; Hamill runs the roll of compromised authors to ask where such a reckoning would end. He grants Pound's disturbance and insists on the genius.

“

This kind of stuff makes me crazy. It's reason #1423 why I didn't want to go into teaching, despite being a good teacher.

1. If you judge the value of literature by the character of its authors, how many good books will be left standing? Villon the Thief, Marlowe the Assassin, Li Po the Drunk, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Coleridge, and on and on... How many Southern writers were not racist, including Faulkner? How many Japanese writers did not despise the Chinese and Koreans and vice versa? How many classical authors were not sexist — virtually the entire body of Greek classics is deeply so. Should we scrap Prufrock and *Four Quartets* because Eliot was a bigot?

2. The reason Ez spent ten years in silence and never completed his plan to edit the *Cantos* ("cutting them by 1/3rd") is that he suffered profound guilt over having "been seduced by stupid suburban prejudice" that also seduced two or three generations of his peers — including the notion that WWI was a product of "Jewish bankers and arms-dealers of Europe."
3. Are the *Cantos* NOT worth study? Is the *ABC of Reading* NOT worth reading? Is his *Confucius* NOT the first decent Master K'ung in English? Is "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" NOT a major poem? Are Pound's essays on prosody NOT ground-breaking? Did his *Cathay* translations (and Imagism) NOT shape 20th century American poetry? Did his *Cavalcanti* & *Spirit of Romance* NOT reaffirm the importance of Provence in the history of western literature?
4. I believe that Ezra Pound's deeply disturbed personality produced rampant paranoia and his boundless megalomania. But it also produced genius.
5. Pound's rants over Rome Radio were despicable, but also, very clearly, were a product of a serious emotional breakdown. They are the ravings of a mind overrun by hysteria. That's a sickness.
6. The MLA formula quiz is a reductio ad absurdum. You can't mine gold with a spoon.
7. "Abomination" is, like beauty, in the eye of the beholder. And it's a word that is often used in reactionary preachings of the born-again church, the anti-semitic church, the racist church, the fanatical homophobic church — it is a loaded word.
8. Whether or not this guy likes it, Ezra Pound is THE father of modern American poetry. And as I say in my own Pisan Canto, "Whatever you say about him is true." INCLUDING his famous generosity toward poets and artists of every stripe (yes, including Jewish ones like Zukovsky).

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— Paul Nelson 15 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Mark Weiss answers a newspaper piece rebranding Pound a "misunderstood poet" and Maria Damon's rejoinder that his politics are all too well understood. He widens the frame to the economy of reading monstrous artists — Eliot, Wagner, Gesualdo — and lands on the driest settlement: we read them, we admire the work, we do not invite them to dinner.

Almost everyone takes exception to Pound's fascism. There are a fair number of artists that one probably wouldn't like much in person who are nonetheless great artists, despite their politics. I'd personally put in that category almost all theistic writing, let alone the casual antisemitism of Williams, Spicer, Eliot, the anglo-Irish snobbery of Yeats, Wagner's general obnoxiousness and of course his antisemitism, Céline, Gesualdo's murderousness, etc. ad nauseam. Which is to say that artists aren't much different on average from the rest of humanity. We go to them for their artistry and whatever corners of wisdom they may have quarantened off from their viler pieces. We try to understand the connection of their monstrousness to their work in order to better understand each. We try not to see them as just this or that, but as complex beings (as we'd wish to be seen ourselves) We grit our teeth a lot. We don't invite them to dinner.

And thankfully there are a few one can actually admire as human beings.

— **Mark Weiss** 16 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Gabriel Gudding, returning to a welter of indignant replies, answers Alison and the others who charged him with dismissing Pound and reducing him to power and fetish. In sustained mock self-reproach he defends teaching Pound as a case study in literary consecration, and refuses the very idea of a poetry itself.

Why does this listserve so often remind me of a right wing AM radio call-in show? Fascinating how when Pound's advocacy of pogroms and systematic assassinations is even *mentioned*, certain people (was it really 8?) jump up to ensure that those considerations are not really connected in any meaningful way to Pound's "work" or the reception of his work — and that bringing that up as meaningful is in fact a good way to be pretentiously called simplistic and dismissive.

I return from a weekend of poetry in Chicago with friends to find a welter of indignant responses to the suggestion that Pound's canonicity is about power, legitimation, and fetish rather than Pound as genius, progenitor, misunderstood and emotionally complicated father.

I learned from this flurry of indignation that by refusing to teach Pound as an object of adulation, I am dismissing him. I learn that I am simplistic to explore Pound in relation to structures of literary power.

Yes, how simplistic of me to try to show my students that Pound's consecration was a function of many different dynamics, including the sociology of author-as-fetish, the manufacture and use of symbolic goods in academe, repeated attempts to elide class and racial hatreds, the effacement of anti-semitism, the history of fascism's relation to aesthetics, and the erasure of the ways symbolic capital is produced and policed in small literary communities. How simplistic of me.

How ridiculous of me to suggest to students that a more instructive set of footnotes to, say, *The Pisan Cantos* isn't merely Sieburth's apologetic, almost comically Nabokovian apparatus, but instead Sieburth's elisions and excuses taught in tandem with Leonard Doob's transcriptions of EP's radio speeches. How foolish of me to encourage students to not simply believe Sieburth's celebration of Pound, but to consider Sieburth's position as an actor with a vested economic interest in deploying a specific rhetoric designed on the one hand to augment and mystify his object of study and on the other to reframe if not outright efface its more horrifying aspects. And to show that Sieburth's tactics are not peculiar to him alone but are evidence of a common structural tactic deployed by many others in 1946, 1951, 1954, 1957, 1963, 1971, 1977, 1983, 1996, 2001, 2003, 2008 (and just yesterday on this list).

In fact, how dare I use Pound as a case study by which to examine the sociology of the belief in charismatic legitimation. How dare I use Pound to study the sociology of literature:

I should be using Pound to study Pound. This is about venerating authors, not helping students understand the world.

Pound should be studied to study the greatness of Pound.

Pound was begotten, not made!

Interesting, too, to see all the posts seeking condescendingly to remind me that Pound is complex. Hmm, ahh!, how could I have somehow missed that Pound was complex? Maybe I just need to read Canto XIII again. Gosh, I must have missed all of his trenchant economic ideas and his sociopolitical critique and how they suggest the evils of oligarchy capitalism, war, and the military-industrial complex.

Alison — in a telling example of a common trope used by celebrants and believers — actually goes so far as to call his thoughts on these points "prophecies."

These "prophecies" were ideas cribbed from numerous sources. Further, they were descriptions of conditions already inhering, not those to come. Calling them prophecies is a convenient way of diverting not only any deeper understanding of EP's rhetoric, but also how deliberate he was in the construction of his texts, as well as his construction of himself as an author. For example, his "prophecies" about the arms race were in part cribbed from Charles Trevelyan, circa 1914.

Alison's suggestion that I "focus so narrowly on dynamics of power that they obscure the experience of the poetry itself" is an interesting attempt to reformulate my post. "Poetry itself." If it is narrow to encourage students toward a disciplined understanding of a host of phenomena surrounding a text, rather than just pretending to a pure exegesis and appreciation of the text-qua-text, then I'm narrow. What I refuse to do is credit the unexamined existence of a "poetry itself," which Alison speaks of. I've frankly never been able to find this mythic "poetry itself" Alison speaks of. I've found a few "poetries themselves," each one, for better or worse, wholly invested in a system of symbolic goods and social profit — and the worst and most dishonest systems are those that perform a pretense of aesthetic autonomy by insisting on a "poetry itself."

Regarding Canto XIII. To whomever it was who suggested I just need to read XIII again in order to get my head screwed on straight: If that bit of orientalism is somehow meant to serve as self-evidence of EP's greatness, very good, enjoy your orientalist postcard. Enjoy your everlasting thirteenth cookie.

But literature isn't my religion. And if its yours: good, enjoy it. But stay off my porch with your pamphlets. I don't teach religion. And I don't buy yours, Mr. Eliot.

My word. Is literature as a religion really this alive and well (read necrotic and festering)?

Where's my Nicene creed?

— **Gabriel Gudding** 17 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Murat Nemet-Nejat, watching the 2008 rePound quarrel with a bemusement he likens to arguing about the weather, addresses Gabriel Gudding, who had started it. He holds both halves at once: the whole line from Olson to Zukofsky are children of Pound, and Pound the political man was a creep — neither fact softening the other.

I have been reading the fury of arguments around Pound the last two weeks, or so, with some bemusement because to me they have the quality of a discussion about the weather, whether winter or summer is good or bad. Let me explain.

a) To me, there is no doubt that any argument about American poetry today would have been impossible without the existence of Ezra Pound. Or, if we could conceive his non-existence, our concepts of American poetry would have been so different that it would be impossible for us to imagine them. This importance goes beyond good or bad poetry, beyond which of Ezra Pound's poem are good or bad. It has to do with the shaping of thought, what a poem is or can be, what a translation is or can be, what diction in a poem is or can be, etc. Olson, Creeley, Spicer, Duncan, Williams, Zukofsky, etc, etc., are all children of Pound, more than Eliot ever was. He brought a sense of liberation, the entitlement of the poet over language, to poetry which very few of us would like to close the door and leave behind (Gabriel, do you think your wonderful, fantastic *rhode island notebook* could have been written without Pound? How many "experimental" poets today could simultaneously appreciate and support poets as diverse as Frost, Eliot and Zukofsky?).

b) As a human being (at least as a political human being), Pound was a creep. His appellation as "insane" was obviously a legal fig leaf used to prevent him from going to jail and having the key thrown away, even being executed, something achieved by poets (Jews, enemies, friends) who honored his contributions as a poet.

These contradictions are facts. I do not see exactly what these arguments are doing, except making poets feel good about themselves for liking and admiring a poet whose political views are loathsome to them. For example, Gabe, what was the exact purpose of your original post which I think started these discussions. Do you want to stop teaching American poetry after Emerson and Whitman? Do you really think there was a conscious conspiracy to "canonize" Pound as a male chauvinist, phallic icon? Is it not rather that a number of poets, some of them quite different, were instinctively drawn to him, used and defended him, something still going on, including among women writers, as Alison's and Amy's posts here demonstrate?

As for Charles's claim that the collage structure is basically democratic (therefore, as a creator Pound not a fascist): I can see how the collage structure of *The Cantos* has something to do with the liberating, opening impact of Pound as a poet, though I do not think it is nearly the only thing. But I do not think a poetic form does, can contain a political stance per se. It can function very differently, with different social impacts, in the hands of different poets. Let me give a recent example: the flarf practice of harvesting words and references from the web for ironical/poetical purposes is utterly within the framework of collage (also quite Poundian). But this decoupling of references from their autonomous place and existence (with little awareness that this is being done) is deeply exploitative, offensive to me.

— **Murat Nemet-Nejat** 19 Feb 2008 [link](#)

Afterword

The argument, now

Let me be blunt, since the book has been patient. What the list circled for twenty years was never a housekeeping problem — where to shelve a bad uncle — but the live wire of the whole modernist settlement: the suspicion that the century's most advanced art and its foulest politics were not accidental roommates but one household. Marinetti wrote the recipe and served it to Mussolini; Wyndham Lewis admired the wrong man in print and spent a decade walking it back; Céline turned genius inside out into anti-semitic pamphlets; Heidegger kept his party card and his silence. The scandal was never that a great artist held vile views. It was that the newness and the vileness kept arriving in the same crate.

And now — this is the part that should keep one up — the argument has simply changed address. The poets have gone quiet; the fascists have not. On Boxing Day of 2003 a knot of the Roman far right squatted a state building and christened themselves CasaPound, the House of Pound — not for the ideogram, heaven knows, but for the usury cantos and the Salò broadcasts. *Fascists of the third millennium*, they call themselves, cheerfully. Read that again. While the avant-garde that lived off Pound's inventions files him under Settled Embarrassment, the only people who still *mean* him are blackshirts with a reading list. The left let go of the rope; the right caught it, and moved into the house we had left the lights on in.

We have not, since, produced his equal for trouble — a poet whose gift and whose disgrace were cut to one size (Baraka comes nearest, for Poundian reasons: the same formal daring, the same ugly detour through anti-semitism). But I suspect the type has thinned less from our virtue than from our shrinkage. Pound stood trial for treason because a poem was once thought to bear on the fate of a state; we no longer fear the political poet because we no longer believe the poem can wound. That is the quiet horror beneath the quarrel, and why I have gathered it: the list kept faith with the one proposition the age has let drop — that how a poem is built and what its builder believes may be a single question, and a consequential one. The Alps have not crumbled. Someone in Rome is living in them, and has hung the washing out. The least we can do is not stroll past and call the summit deserted.

— Kristen M. Fabians

Biographical Notes

Brief lives of the contributors quoted in these pages.

A few passages quote figures from outside the list, identified in their headnotes and not listed here: William Carlos Williams, Basil Bunting, Milan Kundera, and Alexander Theroux.

Ada Aharoni Ada Aharoni is an Egyptian-born Israeli poet, novelist, sociologist, and peace researcher who taught at the University of Haifa and the Technion. She is the founder and world president of the International Forum for the Literature and Culture of Peace (IFLAC), established in 1999, and the author of numerous poetry collections and historical novels, including *The Second Exodus*.

Jim Andrews Jim Andrews is a Canadian digital, visual, and sound poet and programmer based in Victoria, British Columbia. He is best known as the creator and longtime publisher of vispo.com, a foundational site for electronic and kinetic poetry, and his interactive works *Nio* and *Arteroids* are widely cited in the field of electronic literature.

Peter Baker Peter Baker is a literary critic and professor of English at Towson University, specializing in literary theory and modern world literature. He is the author of *Obdurate Brilliance: Exteriority and the Modern Long Poem* and *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn*, and the editor of the anthology *Onward: Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*.

Wendy Battin Wendy Battin (1953–2015) was an American poet whose first collection, *In the Solar Wind*, was selected for the National Poetry Series. She was also the author of *Little Apocalypse* and received a Discovery/The Nation Award along with NEA and Ingram Merrill fellowships. She taught at institutions including MIT, Smith College, Boston University, and Connecticut College, where she directed the Contemporary American Poetry Archive.

Charles Bernstein Charles Bernstein is a central figure of the Language poetry movement and co-founder, with Bruce Andrews, of the influential journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978–1981). He co-founded the Poetics Program at SUNY Buffalo and the Electronic Poetry Center, later becoming the Donald T. Regan Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. His many books include the poetry collection *Girly Man* and the essay collections *Content's Dream* and *A Poetics*, and in 2019 he received the Bollingen Prize for American Poetry.

Carla Billitteri Carla Billitteri is a poet, critic, and translator, and an associate professor of English at the University of Maine, specializing in modern and contemporary poetry and poetics. She is the author of the critical study *Language and the Renewal of Society in Walt Whitman, Laura (Riding) Jackson, and Charles Olson: The American Cratylus* and has translated contemporary Italian poetry.

Michael Boughn Michael Boughn is a poet and scholar who earned his Ph.D. at SUNY Buffalo, studying with John Clarke and Robert Creeley, and later taught at the University of Toronto. With Victor Coleman he co-edited Robert Duncan's long-gestating *The H.D. Book*, and he compiled an early descriptive bibliography of H.D. His poetry includes *Cosmographia: A Post-Lucretian Faux Micro-Epic*, shortlisted for the Governor General's Award, and the ongoing *City* series.

Steve Carll Steve Carll is a San Francisco-based experimental poet and editor who edited the little magazine *Antenym* in the 1990s, publishing work emerging from and adjacent to the Language poetry school. Further biographical detail is not readily verifiable.

Chris Chapman A contributor to the SUNY Buffalo Poetics List and a poet active in the experimental, post-Language milieu of the 1990s and 2000s. Further biographical detail could not be reliably verified without risk of confusion with others of the same name.

David Chirot David-Baptiste Chirot (1953–2021), born David Lawrence Harris, was a Milwaukee-based visual, sound, and mail-art poet best known for his "rubbing"-based found visual poetry and asemic work. Largely self-published and circulated through international mail-art and online avant-garde networks, his oeuvre was praised by figures such as Jerome Rothenberg.

Jordan Davis Jordan Davis is an American poet and critic associated with the later generation of the New York School, having studied under Kenneth Koch at Columbia. He founded the poetry magazine *The Hat* with Christopher Edgar and has served as poetry editor of *The Nation*. His books include *Million Poems Journal* and *Shell Game*, and he co-edited *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch* and the anthology *Free Radicals: American Poets Before Their First Books*.

Alexander Dickow Alexander Dickow is a bilingual American-French poet, translator, and scholar, and Associate Professor of French at Virginia Tech. His poetry collections include *Caramboles*, *Trial Balloons*, *Rhapsodie curieuse*, and *Appetites*, and his scholarly work includes *Le Poète innombrable*, a study of Cendrars, Apollinaire, and Max Jacob. As a translator from the French he has rendered Henri Droguet's *Clatters* into English and received a PEN/Heim Translation Fund grant for his work on Sylvie Kandé.

Skip Fox Skip Fox is an American poet and Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, where he taught creative writing and twentieth-century British and American poetry. Associated with experimental and post-Language poetics, he began writing in the wake of *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* and steeped himself in Olson, Snyder, Duncan, and Creeley. His collections include *Wallet*, *Delta Blues*, *Stormy Mondays*, and the selected volume *Sheer Indefinite: Selected Poems, 1991–2011*, and he has also compiled an annotated secondary bibliography of Creeley, Dorn, and Duncan.

Henry Gould Henry Gould is a poet who spent some 45 years in Providence, Rhode Island before returning to Minnesota, author of a long serial poetry project including *Stubborn Grew*, the *Island Road* cycle, and the *Ravenna Diagram* trilogy. He co-edited the Rhode Island literary magazine *Nedge* and edited an edition of the poet Edwin Honig's work.

Gabriel Gudding Gabriel Gudding is a poet and essayist known for satire and experimental hybrid forms, author of *A Defense of Poetry* (winner of the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize), the book-length road journal *Rhode Island Notebook*, and *Literature for Nonhumans*. A recipient of *The Nation*'s Discovery Award, he is a professor of English at Illinois State University, where he teaches experimental poetry and poetics.

Sam Hamill Sam Hamill (1943–2018) was an American poet, essayist, and translator who co-founded Copper Canyon Press in 1972 and served as its editor for more than three decades. A prolific translator of classical Chinese and Japanese poetry, he published numerous collections of his own verse and essays. In 2003 he founded Poets Against the War in response to the impending invasion of Iraq, mobilizing thousands of poets in protest after declining an invitation to the White House.

Jeff Hansen Jeff Hansen is a Minneapolis-based experimental poet who works in an asemic, visual mode; his publications include the collection *100 Hybrids*. His identity here is inferred from the shared experimental-poetics milieu and could not be definitively tied to the Poetics List participant of the same common name.

Rob Hardin Rob Hardin is an American experimental fiction writer, poet, and musician associated with the avant-garde press Fiction Collective 2. He is best known for *Distorture*, a collection of transgressive, densely stylized prose, and has also worked as a composer and session keyboardist.

Michael Heller Michael Heller is an American poet, essayist, and critic closely associated with the scholarship of Objectivist poetry. His critical works include *Conviction's Net of Branches: Essays on the Objectivist Poets and Poetry* and *Speaking the Estranged: Essays on the Work of George Oppen*, and he edited *Carl Rakosi: Man and Poet*. His many poetry collections include *Accidental Center*, *In the Builded Place*, *Exigent Futures*, and *Telescope*, and he is also the author of the memoir *Living Root*.

David R. Israel A poet and contributor to the SUNY Buffalo Poetics List, active in experimental online poetics communities of the 1990s and 2000s. Specific credentials could not be reliably verified from available sources without risk of confusion with others of the same name.

Jeffrey Jullich Jeffrey Jullich is an American experimental poet based in New York, author of *Portrait of Colon Dash Parenthesis*. His poetry and criticism have appeared in the *Boston Review*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, and other journals of the innovative-poetry world.

Kevin Killian Kevin Killian (1952–2019) was a San Francisco poet, novelist, playwright, and critic, and a co-founder of the New Narrative movement alongside writers such as Robert Gluck and Bruce Boone. With Peter Gizzi he edited Jack Spicer's collected poems, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me* (2008), which won an American Book Award, and with Lewis Ellingham he wrote the definitive Spicer biography *Poet Be Like God*. His many books include the story collections *Impossible Princess*, a Lambda Literary Award winner, and *Little Men*. He directed Small Press Traffic and helped sustain the Poets Theater in the Bay Area.

Amy King Amy King is an American poet, editor, and professor whose collections include *Antidotes for an Alphabet*, *I Want to Make You Safe*, and *The Missing Museum*. Active in feminist literary organizing, including work with VIDA: Women in Literary Arts, she teaches at SUNY Nassau Community College.

Ira Lightman Ira Lightman is a British poet, public artist, and text and visual artist known for large-scale public-art poetry commissions across northeast England and for interactive and digital work, and he served as a Digital Poet in Residence at the Poetry School. He is also widely known as a "poetry sleuth" who investigates and exposes plagiarism in the contemporary poetry world, a role profiled by *The Guardian* and the Poetry Foundation.

Jackson Mac Low Jackson Mac Low (1922–2004) was a major American avant-garde poet, composer, and performance artist, celebrated as a pioneer of chance-operational and systematic (aleatoric) methods in poetry, allied with John Cage and the Fluxus movement. His many books include *Stanzas for Iris Lezak*, *The Pronouns*, *Representative Works*, and *Twenties*. In 1999 he received the Wallace Stevens Award from the Academy of American Poets.

John E. Matthias John E. Matthias is an American poet, translator, and editor and Professor Emeritus at the University of Notre Dame, where he long served as poetry editor of the *Notre Dame Review*. His extensive body of work is gathered in a multi-volume Collected Poems from Shearsman Books, encompassing both his shorter lyrics and his ambitious long poems. He is also an accomplished translator, particularly from the Swedish.

Jonathan Mayhew Jonathan Mayhew is a scholar of modern and contemporary Spanish poetry and a professor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese at the University of Kansas. His books include *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch*, *The Twilight of the Avant-Garde: Spanish Poetry 1980–2000*, and *Lorca's Legacy: Essays in Interpretation*.

Douglas Messerli Douglas Messerli is a poet, editor, and publisher who founded Sun & Moon Press, growing out of the journal *Sun & Moon* (begun 1976), and later Green Integer, two of the most influential presses of American experimental and international literature. His own books include the poetry collection *River to Rivet: A Manifesto* and the multivolume autobiographical *My Year* series, and he edited the anthology *From the Other Side of the Century*. He received the American Book Award for Publishing in 1998 and was named an Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by France.

Paul Nelson Paul E. Nelson is an American poet based in the Pacific Northwest and the founder of the Cascadia Poetics Lab (formerly SPLAB) and the Cascadia Poetry Festival. A practitioner of organic poetry, the serial poem, and the recorded interview as a poetic form, his books include *American Sentences*, *A Time Before Slaughter*, and the interview collection *American Prophets*. He serves as literary executor for the late poet Sam Hamill and is associated with the anti-war Poets Against the War milieu.

Murat Nemet-Nejat Murat Nemet-Nejat is a poet, essayist, and translator best known for editing and translating *Eda: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry*, a landmark introduction of modern Turkish poetry to English-language readers. He has also translated poets such as Ece Ayhan and Orhan Veli and written his own poetry, including the long poem *The Spiritual Life of Replicants*.

Carlo Parcelli Carlo Parcelli (1948-2025) was an American poet and founding editor of *FlashPoint: A Multidisciplinary Journal in the Arts and Politics*. He is best known for his book-length Poundian epic *Deconstructing the Demiurge*, and he served as Beat Poet Laureate of Maryland from 2017 to 2019.

Marjorie Perloff Marjorie Perloff (1931-2024) was one of the most influential American critics of modernist and avant-garde poetry and poetics. The Sadakichi Hartmann Professor of English Emerita at Stanford University, and earlier a professor at the University of Southern California, she authored foundational studies including *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, *The Futurist Moment*, *Radical Artifice*, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, *21st-Century Modernism*, and *Unoriginal Genius*. Across these works she championed experimental writers from the Futurists through the Language poets, and she served as president of the Modern Language Association.

Jerome Rothenberg Jerome Rothenberg (1931-2024) was an American poet, translator, and anthologist who coined the term "ethnopoetics" and edited the landmark cross-cultural anthology *Technicians of the Sacred*, along with *Shaking the Pumpkin*, *America a Prophecy*, and the *Poems for the Millennium* series (with Pierre Joris). A prolific poet associated with deep image, performance, and Jewish and Indigenous poetics, he taught for many years at the University of California, San Diego.

Barry Schwabsky Barry Schwabsky is an American art critic and poet who serves as art critic for *The Nation* and has long co-edited international reviews for *Artforum*. His poetry collections include *Opera: Poems 1981-2002* and *Trembling Hand Equilibrium*, and his critical books include *Vitamin P* and *The Widening Circle: Consequences of Modernism in Contemporary Art*.

Mark Scroggins Mark Scroggins is a poet and literary critic best known as the biographer of the Objectivist poet Louis Zukofsky, author of *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* and the critical study *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge*. A longtime professor of English at Florida Atlantic University, he has also published poetry collections such as *Torture Garden: Naked City Pastorelles* and *Red Arcadia*, along with essays on modern and contemporary poetics and a critical study of the fantasist Michael Moorcock, *Michael Moorcock: Fiction, Fantasy and the World's Pain*.

Kenneth Sherwood Kenneth Sherwood is a poet and scholar of contemporary and digital poetics who helped develop the Electronic Poetry Center during his graduate work at the University at Buffalo. He is a professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where his research addresses sound, performance, and networked digital poetics.

Steven Shoemaker Steven Shoemaker is a literary scholar and lecturer in English at Yale University who has also taught at Harvard, the University of Virginia, and Connecticut College, where he directed college writing. He is the editor of *Thinking Poetics: Essays on George Oppen* and has published scholarship on modernist poetry, including work on Ezra Pound and Walt Whitman.

Rod Smith Rod Smith is an American poet, editor, and publisher based in Washington, D.C., where he is a central figure in the city's avant-garde and Language poetry scene. He edits *Aerial* magazine, runs Edge Books, and manages Bridge Street Books. His poetry collections include *Deed*, *The Good House*, and *Touché*, and he co-edited *The Selected Letters of Robert Creeley*.

Alan Sondheim Alan Sondheim is an American new-media artist, poet, critic, and musician best known for pioneering "codework," writing that fuses natural language with the syntax of computer code, and for his long-running *Internet Text* (begun 1994). His work is widely anthologized in electronic literature, and his papers are held at NYU's Fales Library.

Brian Kim Stefans Brian Kim Stefans is a Korean-American poet, digital-media artist, and critic, and a professor of English at UCLA. He is known for early web-based digital poetry such as *The Dreamlife of Letters* and for critical works including *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics*, and he founded the /ubu and Arras new-media poetics sites.

Chris Stroffolino Chris Stroffolino is a poet, critic, and musician associated with the post-Language and New York School-inflected experimental poetry scenes, author of collections including *Stealer's Wheel* and the critical study *Spin Cycle*, and co-editor of *An Anthology of New (American) Poets*. He earned a Ph.D. from SUNY-Albany and taught at institutions including St. Mary's College of California, Mills College, and Laney College. He also played keyboards on the Silver Jews album *American Water*.

Mark Weiss Mark Weiss is an American poet, translator, editor, and anthologist, and the founder of Junction Press. He edited and translated the major bilingual anthology *The Whole Island: Six Decades of Cuban Poetry* and co-edited *Across the Line / Al otro lado: The Poetry of Baja California*, and his own poetry collections include *Intimate Wilderness*, *Fieldnotes*, and *As Landscape*.

Don Wellman Donald Wellman is a poet, translator, and editor who founded and edited the annual anthology *O.ARS*, which gathered language-centered, visual, and Latin American avant-garde poets. His poetry collections include *Fields*, *The Cranberry Island Series*, and *Roman Exercises*; he has translated Antonio Gamoneda, Emilio Prados, and Yvan Goll, and taught for many years at Daniel Webster College.

Sources

The posts these passages are drawn from, in the order sent. Excerpts are verbatim; the full messages remain in the UB Poetics List archive. 57 in all.

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