

The Modernist Defense of Poetry in Prose and Verse

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## ABSTRACT

### The Modernist Defense of Poetry in Prose and Verse

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The defense of poetry is a centuries-old genre that shapes the verse of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. Arguments from the defense of poetry become models for the imagery in their poems and for their own poetic voices. These arguments include defending poesis as the ennobling essence of poetry; attacking ornament as a property of mere verse; and yoking popular poetry to the vice of over-ornamentation. By drawing together their growing frustration with the prose defense, their internalization of its priorities and prejudices, and their residual commitment to poetic ornament, this cohort of modernist poets produce a genre of poem fraught with contradiction: images of the bad poet and the ignorant masses from the defense become central to modernist poetry. Seminal texts like “In a Station of the Metro,” “Poetry,” *The Waste Land* and *Spring and All* register the defense’s actual political purpose: policing class hierarchies within the democratizing republic of letters.

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*To the memory of my grandfather.*

Introduction:

What is (the Defense of) Poetry?



## Defending Poetry Between Verse and Prose

It is characteristic of this decade that one's friends and acquaintances would rather have one defend a position at length than define it accurately in a work of art.

—Ezra Pound

No modernist defense of poetry will ever will be as famous as Philip Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (1580) or Percy Bysshe Shelley's *A Defence of Poetry* (1821). In fact, the only bona fide modernist defense, Ezra Pound's "The Serious Artist" (1913), begins by announcing the genre's fall into anachronism: "It is curious that one should be asked to rewrite Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* in the year of grace 1913."<sup>1</sup> The statement is prescient. In some fashion, most English-language defenses are a rewrite Sidney's, which itself is more remarkable for its eloquent synthesis of continental defenses than its own newness.<sup>2</sup> The defense of poetry is and has always been a forum for rehashing earlier defenses, an intertextual genre drawing from regularly rehearsed ideas about what poetry is and does.<sup>3</sup> In addition to drawing diachronically from past defenses, the defense also draws synchronically from other genres of poetry discourse, such as

<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, "The Serious Artist," *Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 41.

<sup>2</sup> The groundbreaking work excavating those influences is made by J.E. Spingarn, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Renaissance* (New York: Macmillan-Columbia University Press, 1899), 268-274. See also Cornell March Dowlin, "Sidney and Other Men's Thought," *The Review of English Studies* 20.80 (1944): 257-271. A corrective of the excesses of this trend can be found in Robert M. Strozier, "Poetic Conception in Sir Philip Sidney's 'An Apology for Poetry'," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 2 (1972): 49-60. On Shelley's sources, including his use of Sidney, see Lucas Verkoren, *A Study of Shelley's 'Defence of Poetry': Its Origin, Textual History, Sources and Significance* (Amsterdam, 1937).

<sup>3</sup> René Wellek and Austin Warren offer a good account of this basic feature: "The nature and function of literature must, in any coherent discourse, be correlative. The use of poetry follows from its nature: every object or class of object is most efficiently and rationally used for what it is . . . Similarly, the nature of an object follows from its use: it is what it does." See René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace / Harvest, 1956), 29.

the *ars poetica*, the preface, the review, the literary history or biography, and the academic study. While the form of the defense frequently changes as other genres rise and fall, the content has been relatively consistent, especially on the degradation of popular poetry—which makes the defense necessary in the first place—and the cause of that dereliction: the popularity of verse ornament and the deplorable neglect of poetry’s *sine qua non*, whether fiction-making (Sidney); imaginative sympathy (Wordsworth, Shelley); organic structure (Coleridge); or new form (Pound, Williams). All of the regular features of the genre are present in Pound’s defense: a definition of poetry (p. 42, 52, 56); an account of its socio-political role (42); a history of poetic achievement (48-49); an anthropological account of the development of language (50-51); an statement on human psychology (41); a rebuttal of attacks on poetry (47); a statement on the variety of poetic genres (45); a smattering of exempla (51, 53); a comparison between the poet and other professionals (43-45, 47); an analogy between poetry and other fine arts (51, 56); a castigation of bad poets and bad poetry (43-44, 47-48; 54-55); and an examination of the difference between prose, verse, and poetry (49-55). These topics can be traced to the different preoccupations of different eras’ entries in the genre. The catalog of poetic genres, for example, is hardly noteworthy in “The Serious Artist” but occupies considerably more space in early modern defenses and receives considerable attention in Shelley’s defense.<sup>4</sup> Modernist defenses are disproportionately invested in the last two features on my list: the problem of bad poets and, after the disassociation of verse and poetry, the relationship between poetry and prose. These

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<sup>4</sup> Shelley discusses the rise and fall of genre, from “Homer and the cyclic poets” to “the dramatic and lyrical Poets of Athens” to “the bucolic writers, who found patronage under the lettered tyrants of Sicily and Egypt.” Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry; or, Remarks Suggested by an Essay Entitled ‘The Four Ages of Poetry,’* in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2002), 518-521. Sidney breaks poets down into three kinds: hymnists or devotional poets; scientific, philosophical, or historical versifiers; and proper fiction-making poets. Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, in *Sir Philip Sidney: The Major Works*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 217-218.

topics receive far more attention in “The Serious Artist” than earlier defenses. This section will show how modernist defenses also inherit class prejudices from the history of the genre where the verse definition of poetry and bad poets represent the popular encroachment on the republic of letters.

The period I cover in this dissertation roughly corresponds to the years between the first and second publications of “The Serious Artist” (1913-1954), during which time the defense Pound outlines begins to shape the first-wave of modernist poetry.<sup>5</sup> But this story is less about influence than about the mutation of the genre of the defense of poetry from prose to verse, the classism of the defense’s anti-ornamental poetics, and the contradiction that comes from middle-class modernists’ adoption of aristocratic arguments developed to police plebeian poetry. Certainly, the modernist defense championed by Pound in the early teens can be traced through a number of prose pieces by modernist poets as well as the proxy defenses issuing from the academy by I.A. Richards, F.R. Leavis, and Stephen Spender.<sup>6</sup> To titles like “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) and *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924) can be added numerous interviews, reviews, prefaces, glosses, and other framing pieces.<sup>7</sup> But between the appearance of

<sup>5</sup> Published in three parts in *The New Freewoman* (a.k.a. *The Egoist*)—a venue for several early modernist masterpieces—Pound’s essay is not reprinted until 1954 when T.S. Eliot collects it for New Directions’ *Literary Essays*.

<sup>6</sup> The genealogy of Pound’s influence could be traced among the following works by poets: T.S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen & Co., 1920); Eliot, *The Use of Poetry & The Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933); Ezra Pound, “How to Read,” (1929; repr. in *Literary Essays*, 1970), 15-41; Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; repr., New York: New Directions, 1960), Pound, *Culture*, retitled *Guide to Kulchur* (1938; repr. New York: New Directions, 1970); William Carlos Williams, “Letter to an Australian Editor,” *Briarcliff Quarterly* 3.2 (October 1946): 205-208; Williams, “The Poem as a Field of Action,” in *Selected Essays*, 280-291 (1948; repr. New York: New Directions, 1969); Marianne Moore, “Idiosyncrasy and Technique,” in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, 506-518 (1956; repr. New York: Viking, 1986). The Eliot-filtered genealogy can be traced through the following works of criticism: I.A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (1924; repr., London: Routledge, 2001); Richards, *Science and Poetry* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1926); F.R. Leavis, *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1931), Stephen Spender, *The Destructive Element: A Study of Modern Writers and Beliefs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935); and Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945).

<sup>7</sup> For an excellent account of the “framing pieces” that modernists use throughout their careers, see John Whittier-Ferguson, *Framing Pieces: Designs of the Gloss in Joyce, Woolf, and Pound* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

“The Serious Artist” as an ephemeral article in a short-lived journal and its republication in one of the most widely read essay collections by any modernist poet (perhaps second only to Eliot’s own), something profound occurs within the constitution of the defense of poetry as a genre. Longtime the province of poet’s prose or versified essays, the defense gives rise to a genre of modernist poem that crisscrosses the work of modernist poets. All of the following are informed by the defense of poetry: “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” Eliot’s satirical self-portrait of the young lyric poet adrift in feminized American culture; Pound’s apologetic suite *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920); *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot’s meta-lyric lament of cultural decline (including the Notes), as well as *Ash-Wednesday* (1930), the exemplary hymn of the poet’s paradise regained; *Spring and All* (1923), William Carlos Williams’ bi-textual verse-prose hybrid (written largely in response to *The Waste Land*); and several titles in Marianne Moore’s first three collections—*Poems* (1921), *Observations* (1924, 1925) and *Selected Poems* (1935)—among them “Poetry,” “Critics and Connoisseurs,” “Novices,” and “Pedantic Literalist.” After these early examples, which shape the reception of the modernist poem as a genre of its own, come Wallace Stevens’ “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” (1942) and “A Primitive Like an Orb” (1948), both *ars poetica*; H.D.’s hymn to wartime poetic resilience *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944); as well as *Four Quartets* (1943) and *Paterson* (1946-1958). As an apology for Mussolini as “artifex” and the occasion for the Bollingen controversy, *The Pisan Cantos* (1948) also registers the importance of the genre. All these poems deal implicitly or explicitly with what poetry is and does (or should be and do) and/or the who or what of being a poet.

Some of the poems on the list—Moore’s “Poetry” and the titles by Wallace and H.D.—

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1996). See also the partial transcript of a conference on the defense of poetry in which Moore and Spender participate in *Harvard Summer School Conference on the Defense of Poetry, August 14-17, 1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, n.d.); and William Carlos Williams, “Is Poetry a Dead Duck?” interview by Mike Wallace, “Mike Wallace Asks,” *New York Post*, October 18, 1957.

have already been identified as defenses of poetry.<sup>8</sup> “Prufrock,” “Gerontion,” and *Mauberley* have been called defensive ruminations on their authors’ juvenilia.<sup>9</sup> The two most substantial titles on the list—*The Waste Land* and *Spring and All*—have been widely read as their authors’ respective statements on the politics of form.<sup>10</sup> But there has been only one other study of the defense of poetry as a genre of poetry, Jeannine Johnson’s *Why Write Poetry?* (2007). My work differs from hers in a few important ways, first and foremost in that Johnson is not critical of the received class bias written into the defense as a genre. Part of the reason for this, I think, is that Johnson argues that the defense is brought into verse because her poets—H.D., Stevens, Adrienne Rich, and Geoffrey Hill—bring lyric introspection to bear on the marginalization of poetry.<sup>11</sup> But the poets whose verse defenses I consider in this dissertation—Moore, Pound, Eliot, and Williams—are not lyrical poets. Their work is defined by their commitment to new forms that respond to the new world. Another key difference is that the poems I read convey their defenses through allegory rather than through argument.<sup>12</sup> (In the verse defenses I read,

<sup>8</sup> Bonnie Costello, *Marianne Moore: Imaginary Possessions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 19; Jeannine Johnson, *Why Write Poetry?: Modern Poets Defending their Art* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont-Associated University Presses, 2007), 56-150; Johnson, “Wallace Stevens’ Defense of Poetry in ‘Notes toward a Supreme Fiction,’” *Wallace Stevens Journal* 28.1 (Spring 2004): 23-37.

<sup>9</sup> Robert S. Lehman, “Eliot’s Last Laugh: The Dissolution of Satire in *The Waste Land*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.2 (Winter 2009), 67-68; Larry Scanlon, “Modernism’s Medieval Imperative: The Hard Lessons of Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*,” *American Literary History* 22.4 (2010), 845; Ronald Bush, “‘It Draws One to Consider Time Wasted’: Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” *American Literary History* 2.1 (Spring, 1990): 56-78.

<sup>10</sup> To cite only representatively: Joshua Schuster, “William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All*, and the Anthropological Imaginary,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.3 (Spring, 2007): 116-132; J. Hillis Miller, “Williams’ ‘*Spring and All*’ and the Progress of Poetry,” *Daedalus* 99.2 (Spring 1970): 405-434; Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 89-108; Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978), 148-151.

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, *Why Write Poetry?* 31-36. Johnson’s follows Margaret Ferguson’s excellent exploration of Renaissance defenses of poetry in Freudian terms. See Ferguson, *Trials of Desire: Renaissance Defenses of Poetry* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>12</sup> Johnson notes, for example, that T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams “have produced formal prose pieces in which they seek to affirm the usefulness or value or relevance of their art,” but she claims that although they “may have composed prose apologies for poetry, defending poetry in poems is not a defining feature of their oeuvre.” Because Johnson is looking for discursive arguments about poetry, she misses the allegorical defenses that for a definite thematic in Eliot’s and Williams’ poetries. That said, Johnson also locates the defense’s move from prose into verse in a conflict between creative and critical expectations. Johnson, *Why Write Poetry?* 17.

only “Poetry” contains an explicit discussion of poetry.) In other words, Johnson is interested in what poets say about poetry in poems; I am interested in how modernist poems use tropes—especially the bad poet and the ungrateful populace—to reproduce the defense’s argument in a poem’s characters and in its formal dynamics. But the most crucial difference between Johnson’s take on the defense of poetry and my own is that hers is sympathetic to poet’s perceived loss of audience and mine is critical of the class-based assumptions that set up the marginalization narrative in the first place.<sup>13</sup> To explain the poetics taken up by modernist poets, the prescient class analysis of Robert Matz’s work on the class politics of the early modern defense is more important to me than the post-Romantic marginalization narrative. Matz’s *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (2000) shows Sidney defending the old army-raising aristocrat, who subordinates poetry to politics, against the rising middle class and its humanities-oriented courtiers.<sup>14</sup> Through radical commitment to newness, modernists will also struggle to protect poetry from middle-class taste; the crucial difference is that they themselves are from mostly middle-class backgrounds.

The first part of this introduction traces the transition of the defense from prose to verse by showing how the poets who retool the genre tend to distance themselves from the prose defense as simultaneously too institutional and too populist. The modernist poem presents its defense within the poetics of new form. The second part of the introduction elaborates the class tropes of early modern and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century defenses to frame modernist depictions of the bad poet. The development of poiesis as an analogy between poetic making

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<sup>13</sup> On the mistaken assumptions about poetry’s publishing statistics and the marginalization narrative, see Craig Dworkin, “*Seja Marginal*,” in *The Consequence of Innovation: 21st Century Poetics*, ed. Dworkin (New York: Roof Books, 2008), 7-24.

<sup>14</sup> See Robert Matz, *Defending Literature in Early Modern England: Renaissance Literary Theory in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 56-87.

and divine creation has a corollary: the analogy between versification and the less-than-human “swarm.” Examining this historical parallel shows how the philosophical mandate of the defense conceals an aristocratic prejudice against the commons. The bad poet is offensive not only because he is represented as lower- or middle-class, but because he brings ornament into a world of poverty and social climbing.

Chapter One extends the trope of the bad poet into the twentieth-century defense by examining Pound’s use of classed imagery in his pedagogical texts to describe bad poets and by developing the figure of the prostitute-poetess in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and the earlier version of the poem, “He Do the Police in Different Voices.” In the section on Pound, I argue that while Pound makes many overtures to pedagogy, he views education as a stop-gap measure for the unenlightened. Developing his theory of natural inequality as put forward in “The Serious Artist” alongside his affiliation with guild socialism, I show how Pound’s project aims not only to put the bad poet in his place but also to remake him into a contrite defender of poetry. In the second section of the chapter I show how Eliot uses his female characters not only as vehicles for anti-feminist and anti-populist sentiment, but also as allegories about the vice of over-ornamentation. Tracing the analogy between the defense of poetry and discourses on cosmetics reveals how circumscribing ornament as feminine artifice in “A Game of Chess” belies Eliot’s own perverse versification. By drawing out connections between the woman before her vanity and Fresca—the promiscuous poetess in the manuscript version—I show how reading class in *The Waste Land* has depended on forgetting the prostitute as a class-crossing figure analogous to the ambitious versifier. The section concludes by showing how female speech in the poem is best understood through the anti-populist figure of the gossip in the pub

scene and her embodiment of the monster Rumor.

The second chapter is devoted entirely to the defensive motifs in Moore's poetry. The first section closely reads "Poetry" to show Moore going through the motions of the defense of poetry and checking overzealous defenders of poetry. In the second section I trace the Moore's revision of "Poetry" as evidence of Moore's anti-ornamental poetic, her anti-populist use of the "swarm" analogy, and her use of animal figures to censure the prose defense. I conclude with a reading of "Armour Seems Extra" as Moore's cautionary tale against introspective soul-baring compelled by the defense.

In the third chapter I take a broader view of modernist poetry and the Era Wars as they debate the Pound/Williams era. The first section shows how Pound's anti-populist rhetoric cuts across the political spectrum of modernists from fascist sympathizer to prophet of democracy: anti-populism limits popular agency to a choice between a benevolent elite and its malevolent double. I go on in the second section to show how Williams, drawing on the same discourse, puts a condition of self-knowledge on politicization. From his later-life interviews back to *Spring and All* and *Kora in Hell*, Williams consistently draws on a narrative of liberation to explain how self-knowing is a process of disaffection with the demos. Liberation stories like those Williams tells, I contend, undercut the egalitarian politics proper to popular democracy.

The first part of Chapter Four reveals the crowd's-eye view as the constitutive blind-spot in two key modernist poems. Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" and Williams' "At the Ballgame" show both poets writing from a position among the populace even as they disassociate themselves from it. Tracing the defense of poetry in Pound's anecdotes about the composition of his two-line poem, I analyze how the negative space created by anti-ornamental



form shows up in the poem's thematic content as well. The second part of the chapter examines how putting language at the center of politics, as modernist poets do, betrays the defense's inheritance of anti-populist republicanism and their aversion to popular speech as embodied speech. Pound's and Williams' shared arguments for the hygiene of language consistently connect the self-ornamenting masses with the scatological nightmare, as in *Spring and All* and the Hell Cantos. Pound portrays the people as the victims and agents of revolutionary violence and associates the circulation of a single word among the crowd with the specter of revolution, but he also contradictorily relies on the same circulations in his ideograms and interpellates the reader's body through his poetic.

## Ornament and its Vicissitudes

Is what I have written prose?

—William Carlos Williams

When the defense of poetry finally moves from prose to verse, the transformation happens in the matter of a few years. In 1919 Moore first publishes “Poetry,” a poem with almost every feature of a defense written in prose’s argumentative (prose) diction but arranged in uniform stanzas of syllabic lines sometimes well over the metrical limit of eight feet. Recognized immediately as an iconic modernist statement, “Poetry” bridges the gap between verse and prose and offers the most literal instance of the defense’s transition to verse. The next defensive meeting of verse and prose shows argument giving way to allegory. In 1922 Eliot adds to *The Waste Land* manuscript several pages of notes, as he later says, “with a view to spiking the guns of critics of [his] earlier poems who had accused [him] of plagiarism.”<sup>15</sup> The Notes are his way of of defending in advance of an attack. Conrad Aiken offers an objection shared by many: “if the precise association is worth anything, it is worth *putting into the poem*; otherwise there can be no purpose in mentioning it.”<sup>16</sup> Autonomy, Aiken implies, is the best defense, but the problem lies less with the documentation of borrowed lines or allusions (which Moore does as well) than the the interpretive framework Eliot supplies. The Notes annoy Aiken because they are ornamental. Half-way between pretension and tomfoolery, they take a step backward toward the prose defense; the characters in Eliot’s poem and its innovative use of different verse styles

<sup>15</sup> Eliot, “The Frontiers of Criticism,” *The Sewanee Review* 64.4 (1956), 533.

<sup>16</sup> Qtd. in Ferguson, *Framing Pieces*, 7. In the introduction to *Framing Pieces*, Ferguson offers an excellent reading of how one’s comportment to the notes indicates whether one is a so-called sophisticated or unsophisticated reader.

do a much better job of embodying the defense's argument.

In 1923, almost surely responding to *The Waste Land*, *Spring and All* fixes the defense's trajectory into allegorical content and allegories of form. The prose—containing all the features of the defense—stages the breakdown of the argumentative defense. The prose passages—chock full of elliptical dashes, sentence fragments, inconclusive revisions, frustrated syntax, and incomplete thoughts—show the features of the defense one-by-one breaking apart at the levels of sentence and paragraph. The short-lined poems interspersed through the text—with tropes like the “white” crowd and the “dark woman”—pick up the pieces. The new form of the defense has become the modernist poem and the eclipse of the prose defense has gotten underway. Not only does Williams leave the argumentative portion of the text in an unfinished state, but aside from one paragraph he never reprints anything from the prose.<sup>17</sup> Of course, beginning in 1934 and continuing on through his various selected and collected works, Williams republishes under the heading “Spring and All” some (and eventually all) of the poems without any marker for the missing prose.<sup>18</sup> Eliot makes a less successful attempt to distance himself from the Notes; as he says in 1956, they cannot be “unstuck.” They remain prose ornament enticing small minds: “They have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself—anyone who bought my book of poems, and found the notes to *The Waste Land* not in it, would demand his money back.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> After the first publication in the three hundred or so copies of the original Contact/Paris edition, the entire text of *Spring and All* is not restored until New Directions' 1970 collection *Imaginations*. The one exception of Williams' republication of a prose passage is found in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (1958). There, he notes that, while the prose participated in a fad for “typographical tricks,” the poems “were kept pure.” Williams, *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet* (New York: New Directions, 1978), 37. Miller reprints almost all of the prose (without the poems) in *William Carlos Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Edgewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 15-26.

<sup>18</sup> See the following: William Carlos Williams, *Collected Poems, 1921-1931* (New York: The Objectivist Press, 1934); *The Complete Collected Poems, 1906-1938* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1938); *Selected Poems*, The New Classics Series (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1949); *The Collected Earlier Poems* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1951).

<sup>19</sup> Eliot, “Frontier of Criticism,” 533.

Testifying more radically to the transformation of the genre, in *Complete Poems* (1967) Moore excises all but the first three lines of the original version of “Poetry,” leaving intact her more allegorical engagements with the defense of poetry. Her treatment of “Poetry” as a problem poem begins as early as 1925 when she cuts it down to a mere thirteen lines. The defense is covering its tracks as it moves from prose to verse.

By the time the modernist defense emerges, the genealogies of poetry and prose are so entangled that Pound calls addressing the poetry/prose issue “little but folly.”<sup>20</sup> On one hand prose represents the economy of language through which modernists seek to recover poetry from verse. On the other hand, prose represents the language of poetry’s enemies—scientific reason, philosophical rigor, capitalist economics, population-based sociology, religious orthodoxy, consumer culture. Prose is either non-verse or analytical language representing facts, compiling documents, or communicating opinions. Which meaning is put in play depends on whether poets are defending poetry against the poetic establishment—itsself too invested in verse ornament—or the establishment writ large, which is too invested in stripping language of everything but what is necessary for the communication of facts, accounts, rules, and wants. As far as modernist poets are concerned, then, the only recommendable quality of prose comes from its history as the antithesis of verse. Pound and Williams in particular use the simplicity of prose as a stick to beat poets who swallow the sentimentalism, flourish, and symbolism that mar the lines of the decadent 1890s.<sup>21</sup> Whereas prose’s simplest definition—not verse—had been once synonymous

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<sup>20</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> In “The Prose Tradition in Verse,” a review of Ford Maddox Hueffer’s *Collected Poems*, Pound quotes Hueffer (later Ford) as saying that “poetry should be written at least as well as prose.” For Pound, prose exemplifies clarity, precision, and efficiency to poets who are simply trying too hard to embellish their lines. When Williams complains about Eliot’s “La Figlia che Piange” in the prologue to *Kora in Hell*, it is because of “the inevitable straining after a rhyme, the every cleverness with which this straining is covered being a sinister token in itself.” It is precisely because “the perfection of that line is beyond cavil.” *Ibid.*, 373; and William Carlos Williams, *Imaginations*, edited by Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970), 25.

with prose's lacking appeal, that no-frills language now returns to illustrate the superfluities of bad poetry: namely, poetic ornament.

Ornament, as understood in the philosophy of rhetoric, "is what fills the space between what is necessary for bare communication and what is not."<sup>22</sup> The term appears frequently enough in the *Literary Essays* to have its own index heading. In "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste" (1913), for example, Pound enjoins the initiate to "use no ornament or good ornament."<sup>23</sup> To be sure, Pound has one of the century's great ears for alliteration, assonance, and consonance, but good ornamentation for Pound actually means stripping the poem as (seemingly) bare as "A Station in the Metro." Poets should instead, as he says in "The Serious Artist," get back to "a precise psychology," which is "embedded in now almost unintelligible jargon." If the poet cannot "attain this precision in verse," Pound continues, "then he must either take to prose or give up his claim to being a serious artist." Pound traces this poetic back to a luminous detail from *De l'amour* (1822) in which Stendhal derisively addresses "ses ornements appelés poétiques," or "what they call poetic ornament":

Poetry with its obligatory comparisons, the mythology the poet don't believe in, his so-called dignity of style, *à la Louis XIV*, and all that trail of what they call poetic ornament, is vastly inferior to prose if you are trying to give a clear and exact idea of the '*mouvements du coeur*'; if you are trying to show what a man feels, you can only do it by clarity.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Joy Connolly, "Virile Tongues," in *A Companion to Roman Rhetoric*, ed. William Dominik and John Hall. (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 93.

<sup>23</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 97. In "The Serious Artist," Pound quotes the French. I have taken the translation from Pound's own in *ABC of Reading*. For a discussion of the importance of Stendahl (and Flaubert) to Pound, see Richard Sieburth, *Instigations: Ezra Pound and Rémy de Gourmont* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1978), 99-101. The French reads as follows: "La poésie, avec ses comparaisons obligées, sa mythologie que ne croit pas le poète, sa dignité de style à la Louis XIV, et tout l'attirail de ses ornements appelés poétiques, est bien

The hierarchy is plain: there are the poets who can pull off prose-like “precision in verse,” then the prose writers who know better than to try their hand at poetry, and then the “versifiers” who mar poetry with “flummery” and “fustian” and do not even know enough to stick to prose but pass themselves off as real poets. In this model, verse exists in a state of exception, permissible only if made integral to the poem—in which case it is no longer ornament. Pound blames the eighteenth century:

It is precisely because of this fustian that the Parnassiads and epics of the eighteenth century and most of the present-day works of most of our contemporary versifiers are pests and abominations.<sup>25</sup>

Pound wants to silence what John Wilson calls “a feeble and monotonous fizz,” and Sidney, “a confused mass of words, with a tingling sound of rhyme.”<sup>26</sup> Pound wants to pass poetry through the test of prose: as he says in his outline of Imagism, one should “use no unnecessary word.” If ornament is by definition unnecessary, this basically means that Pound’s idea of “good ornament” is necessary ornament—i.e. no ornament at all.

Williams shares Pound’s mission to rescue poetic language from its fall into ornament. For Williams, the intransigence of symbolism degrades language: “meanings have been lost through laziness or changes in the form of existence which have let words empty.” Williams’ mission is to recover ““reality”” from even his own scare quotes:

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audessous de la prose des qu’il s’agist de donner une idee claire et précise dès mouvements du coeur; or, dans ce genre, on n’émeut que par la clarté.” Pound, *Literary Essays*, 54. Pound also cites the passage in “Vorticism” and in “How to Read.” See *Guadier-Brzeska*, 83; *Literary Essays*, 22.

<sup>25</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 54.

<sup>26</sup> John Wilson, “Tennyson’s Poems,” review of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), by Alfred Tennyson. *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 31.196 (May 1832), 722; Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, 243.

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from “reality”—such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words.<sup>27</sup>

Williams understands his mission to be colloquial, to write “in plain American which cats and dogs can read,” to use his favorite Moore quotation.<sup>28</sup> And yet Williams typifies modernists’ antagonism to popular language use: he wants to undo the associations and patterns that develop in poetry’s popular genres. Like Pound, Williams sees prose ambivalently: on the one hand, Williams “expect[s] to see prose be prose” and believes that “there is no need for it to approach poetry except to be weakened.” Prose must strip itself of its own networks of association in order for poetry to realize its limitlessness:

Prose, relieved of extraneous, unrelated values must return to its only purpose; to clarity to enlighten the understanding. There is no form to prose but that which depends on clarity. If prose is not accurately adjusted to the exposition of facts it does not exist—Its form is that alone.<sup>29</sup>

Paradoxically, poetry can free itself of all the bad things about verse only by freeing itself from prose as well. On the other hand, Williams sees prose as the language of institutional routine and mere representation in opposition to poetry’s language of new discovery and self-presence:

prose: statement of facts concerning emotions, intellectual states, data of all sorts

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<sup>27</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 102.

<sup>28</sup> Marianne Moore, *The Complete Poems of Marianne Moore* (New York: Penguin, 1967), 54.

<sup>29</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 138.

—technical expositions, jargon, of all sorts—fictional and other—

poetry: new form dealt with as a reality in itself.

The form of prose is the accuracy of its subject matter—how best to expose the multiform phases of its material

the form of poetry is related to the movements of the imagination revealed in words—or whatever it may be—the cleavage is complete<sup>30</sup>

Prose is subordinated to “subject matter,” but prose is also subordinat-*ing*. The speaker must *account* for the communicative field.<sup>31</sup> Poetry, by contrast, should capture “the movements of the imagination revealed in words” or the primal scene of a mind composing itself in language.

In this debate, the difference between poetry and prose has most often been understood as the difference between imaginative and referential language, but modernist poets who draw this distinction within the anti-ornamental defense also leverage prose against poetic genres: “crude symbolism,” “strained associations,” and “complicated ritualistic forms” recall the bureaucratic language of prose. The “multiform phases” of prose’s “subject matter” recall genre as a set of variations on a theme. Unlike verse and prose—one with its arbitrary ornamentation and the other with its adaptation to fact—poetry is a self-contained word system.<sup>32</sup> In one of her comments in the Harvard conference on the defense of poetry, Moore defines prose similarly: “in prose the object of a thought is separable from a certain indispensable word.”<sup>33</sup> She is agreeing with a statement of Stephen Spender’s: “the real difference between poetry and prose is this, I

<sup>30</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 133.

<sup>31</sup> Note the resemblance to the description of *logopoeia*. See Pound, *Literary Essays*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> On the “word system” as a modernist genre, see “Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein,” in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1981), 67-108.

<sup>33</sup> *Harvard Summer School Conference on the Defense of Poetry, August 14-17, 1950* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, n.d.), 64.



think: that prose tends to be about material which exists in our minds apart from the words that are being used.”<sup>34</sup> The difference between poetry and prose, then, is the difference between the singular act of poiesis and the pluralism of genre. In prose and verse, there are different ways of saying something, different variations on a theme. In poetry—as modernists understand it—poiesis unites thought and language to preserve the moment of creation.

*Spring and All* contains no less than four independent attempts to distinguish between poetry and prose, none of them conclusive.<sup>35</sup> Only once does Williams explicitly address whether to differentiate between them by “the external, surface appearance”—verse or no verse—a possibility displaced quickly by the theory of “a separate origin for each” in the respective faculties of the imagination and reason. The defense as a genre has decided in advance how the argument will be resolved, but the relationship between poetry and prose nonetheless takes up nearly as many pages as the Rimbaudian opening. *Spring and All* and “The Serious Artist” devote so much space to the subject, I argue, because in them their authors are vexed by prose as the language in which they have been obliged to defend poetry. After reluctantly engaging the poetry/prose divide, for example, Pound turns to the self-critical language expected in the prose defense:

I do not know that there is much use in composing an answer to the often asked question: What is the difference between poetry and prose?

I believe that poetry is the more highly energized. But these things are relative. Just as we say that a certain temperature is hot and another cold. In the same way we say that a certain prose passage ‘is poetry’ meaning to praise it, and

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>35</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 133-134; 140; 143-146

that a certain passage of verse is ‘only prose’ meaning dispraise. And at the same time ‘Poetry!!!’ is used as a synonym for ‘Bosh! Rott!! Rubbish!!!’ The thing that counts is ‘Good writing.’

Putting “good writing” in scare quotes along with “Bosh! Rott!! Rubbish!!!” suggests that Pound is still paraphrasing the stuffy British-sounding pedant, but Pound takes the same position. Shortly later the scare quotes are gone: “Good writing is writing that is perfectly controlled, the writer says just what he means. He says it with complete clarity and simplicity. He uses the smallest possible number of words.” The answer Williams gives to the question “Is what I have been writing prose?” is both very similar and very different: “The only answer is that form in prose ends with the end of that which is being communicated.” (This may explain why there are so many dropped sentences in *Spring and All*.) Whereas Pound views “good writing” as the art of brevity, Williams views prose as an artless record of the will to signify: “If the power to go on falters in the middle of a sentence—that is the end of the sentence.”<sup>36</sup> But how does Pound know when Williams, for example, has said just what he means? And what exactly does a sentence that ends in the middle communicate, unless maybe that Williams has said all he can? Both these accounts place signification at a remove from the pluralist field of communication: Pound’s writer “says just what he means” without knowing if anyone has understood, and the only thing that Williams’ “power to go on” seems to communicate is the will to write itself. The absence of addressees, however, is only part of the point: in both scenarios, the absence of addressee seems unproblematic because the hypothetical utterances have been stripped of ornament and fitted to the bare essentials of the communique. This double-absence circumscribes run-on prose,

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 140.

antithetical meanings, and poetic verbiage as the domain of the addressee or the communicative norm he/she would represent. Pound and Williams are making this shift because they are being misunderstood: understanding comes in different varieties and theirs, they are discovering, is incommunicable through regular channels.

After Pound's hyperbolic treatment of the antithetical meanings of prose and poetry, he turns to the field of misunderstanding that compels the poet into the prose defense. The sources for the obligation Pound feels should be familiar: first, the populace that throws up unconsidered usages (like 'poetry' for 'verse') and hosts antithetical meanings (like 'poetry' to praise and dispraise) and second, analytical institutions that demand poets give an account of their art. "Good writing" comes out of scare quotes a few paragraphs later in Pound's call for clarity, simplicity, and control; but not before the idea of an across-the-board standard has been turned back around on prose as a language easy to control. Pound accounts for the difference between poetry and prose by citing poetry's greater "energy," which makes the economy of prose more easily attained, but that same energy seems to come from the frustration of defending poetry in an unpoetic language:

And 'Good writing' is perfect control. And it is quite easy to control a thing that has in it no energy—provided that it be not too heavy and that you do not wish to make it move.

And, as all the words that one would use in writing about these things are the vague words of daily speech, it is nearly impossible to write with scientific preciseness about 'prose and verse' unless one writes a complete treatise on the 'art of writing,' defining each word as one would define the terms in a treatise on

chemistry. And on this account all essays about ‘poetry’ are usually not only dull but inaccurate and wholly useless.

Nevertheless it has been held for a shameful thing that a man should not be able to give a reason for his acts and words. And if one does not care about being taken for a mystificateur one may as well try to give approximate answers to questions asked in good faith. It might be better to do the thing thoroughly, in a properly accurate treatise, but one has not always two or three spare years at one’s disposal, and one is dealing with very subtle and complicated matter, and even so, the very algebra of logic is itself open to debate.<sup>37</sup>

Without needing to be held up as a model for poetry, Pound’s estimate of prose considerably drops (“a thing that has in it no energy”). Prose again evokes bureaucratic rigor and popular ejaculations, even though he will later speak again of “the graces of prose” and “the prose simplicities.”<sup>38</sup> The difference is that in one instance he is addressing prose as a language into which he has been coerced in the defense of poetry, in the other he is addressing those trying to be counted in “the census record of good poets.”<sup>39</sup> After censuring the popular misuses of the word “poetry,” quipping about prose’s lack of “energy,” and dismissing “wholly useless” *ars poetica*, Pound identifies the underlying problem: prose—or its oral analog—is and has been the only acceptable medium of self-justification. Giving an account of oneself either means condescending to the “vague” language of the people or subjecting oneself to the coercive language of institutional authority. Modernist discussions of the poetry/prose distinction like

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<sup>37</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 51, 53.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

these show how the prose defense of poetry—like poetic ornament—becomes at once too institutional, too commonplace, and too superfluous. But beneath opposition to the status-quo defense lies a more fundamental rejection of explanatory discourse and its reliance on referential language specifically used to refer to oneself or “to give a reason for [one’s] acts and words.”<sup>40</sup> As the defense of poetry moves from prose to verse, then, one observes a challenge to the conventions that determine what does and does not count as an account of the self. When Pound casually points out that “the very algebra of logic is itself open to debate,” he invites his reader to imagine a different jurisdiction. The modernist poem becomes the forum for the new logic of defense. On trial there is generic conformity understood as the conspiracy between the disorderly populace and a counter-posed institutional order.

In proposing anti-populism as the politics of modernism, I take precedent from Raymond Williams who outlines a modernist politics that cuts across partisan lines when he coins the phrase “Cultural Darwinism” in the posthumously published essay “The Politics of the Avant-Grade” (1988).<sup>41</sup> Distinct from “Social Darwinism,” yet clearly meaning to allude to the unholy

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<sup>40</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein writes, “Do not forget that a poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information.” Qtd. in Marjorie Perloff, “Presidential Address 2006: It Must Change,” *PMLA* 122.3 (2007), 657. For another endorsement of poetry as a non-referential language, see Perloff’s reading of Williams’ proto-Language poetics: “Poetry, in this larger sense that would include both ‘verse’ and ‘prose,’ is a form of writing, of *écriture*, that calls attention to words as words rather than as referents to a particular reality.” Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 111. Perloff says this view of poetic or literary language can be traced back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which differentiates between the standards of judging poetry and other discourses (and which in the first pages calls for the invention of prose). The *Poetics*, of course, is the first of many defenses responding to Plato’s challenge. But opposing the language of reference and the language of poetry requires bracketing the use of poetry by authors who clearly did mean to use the language of fact and truth-claims, such as Lucretius or Erasmus Darwin who delivered their respective philosophical and botanical tracts in verse. See Perloff, “It Must Change,” 257.

<sup>41</sup> There have been more recent attempts to set aside the left-right spectrum. Michael Tratner’s attempt to portray Eliot on “his search for the culture buried inside everyone” is unconvincing, as is his reading of *The Waste Land* as “a critique of high culture for having lost touch with the mob and the mob part of the mind.” However, his analysis of the water imagery in the poem and its relationship to the rising tide of the masses is compelling. Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics: Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, Yeats* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 170, 169.

blend of eugenics and capitalism, cultural Darwinism is the idea that “the strong and daring radical spirits are the true *creativity* of the race.”<sup>42</sup> Providing a Darwinist frame suggests modernism’s adherence to a theory of natural inequality, but the basic claim seems intuitive: modernists are elitist. Aside from implying that modernists should be populist were it not for some false consciousness on their part, talking about anti-populism seems like another roundabout way of talking about elitism. Williams’ insight lies in his identification of multiple fronts to modernism’s classism. On the one hand, modernists are antagonistic to the working class and its competing revolutionary movements based on egalitarian-democratic claims rather than individual liberty. In this sense, the survival of culture means freedom from the tyranny of the weak and the institutions that manage them. On the other hand, modernists also disdain the employer class and its emissaries—the bourgeoisie or middle class—for exploiting the working poor and, perhaps more egregiously, for withholding patronage from the fine arts while buying into consumer culture.<sup>43</sup> Williams leaves unspoken the crucial fact that almost every major first-wave modernist poet (roughly speaking, those born in the 1880s) is from middle- or upper-middle class families whose histories somehow involve the American frontier or (in Williams’ case) colonial adventure.<sup>44</sup> In other words, modernist antagonism for the lower and middle

<sup>42</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso 1989), 50.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>44</sup> Moore was raised in the household of her grandfather, a well-respected Presbyterian pastor in Missouri and Pennsylvania. Pound’s grandfather was a self-made (and unmade) man in the lumber and railroad industries of Wisconsin, for whom he was also a U.S. Representative; his father was an assayer for the U.S. Mint in Philadelphia. Williams’ father—a British-born immigrant to the U.S.—worked for a company that sold “Florida Water” cologne to markets in South America and the Caribbean (where he met Williams’ mother). Stevens’ father, born a farmer’s son, married the daughter of a shoemaker and became a prominent lawyer in Reading, Pennsylvania, a path from which his son never strayed. (Stevens is born in 1879.) Mina Loy’s father was an upwardly mobile Hungarian-Jewish tailor to the upper-class who married a middle-class English woman to save her from disgrace. H.D.’s mother taught children at the Moravian Seminary in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, while her father was an astronomy professor at Lehigh University. Eliot’s father—economically standing in the most upper of the middle class—made it to be a successful executive in the Hydraulic-Press Brick Company in St. Louis. Although the core of the canon is stoutly middle-class, this does not mean that there is no diversity in it but what there is tends to fall in the margins, either because of their age or lack of canonicity. Amy Lowell’s father, another patriarch of the Boston elites, inherited wealth from the cotton industry and became president of

classes—i.e. the populace—is an antagonism from within. Talking about elitism, which suggests an upper-class or aristocratic background, does not capture the self-reproach latent in modernist anti-populism. The frame for modernist politics that I offer here finds more meaning in the republican distinction between the few and the many. Republicanism—a political philosophy that believes stewardship of the state belongs in the hands of an educated class—has historically been invested in deeds more than wealth and in state stability more than suffrage and, hence, been strongest as an alternative to all-out democratic revolution. *The Republic* of Plato is the classic text of this sort of philosophical republicanism. The classic historical example is the American Revolution (as opposed to the all-out democracy of the French). The modernist American poets I discuss are over-determined by these genealogies, but what makes them different from previous generations of defenders is that the narrative they use to understand the dynamic between the few and the many is aspirational. Their republic—as Raymond Williams’ suggests—is made up by those who tell stories of struggle for survival and progress in the midst of mass mediocrity.<sup>45</sup>

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Harvard University. Edith Sitwell, for example, was the daughter of Sir George Sitwell and Lady Ida Denison, daughter of the Earl of Londesborough. Pulitzer-prize winning Arkansas-born Imagiste, John Gould Fletcher, was the son of a prominent Southern family whose wealth came from backing and cotton brokering. Conrad Aiken was the son of a well-to-do Harvard-trained surgeon (who later murdered Aiken’s mother before killing himself). Gertrude Stein (, who famously lived on the thrift of her cook during World War II, came from a prosperous German-Jewish family and spent her early years in Vienna and Paris with a Hungarian governess and a Czech tutor. Back in the U.S., where she was born, her life continued in ease disproportionate to her father’s income as vice-president of the Omnibus Cable Company in San Francisco, leaving them in considerable debt. Her oldest brother, however, soon became branch manager of the Central Pacific Railway and earned enough to allow his siblings pensions and to amass an impressive collection of post-impressionist and modernist artwork. For more detail, see Charles Molesworth, *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* (New York: Atheneum, 1990); Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1988); Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981); Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984); Carolyn Burke, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Joan Richardson, *Wallace Stevens: The Early Years, 1879-1923* (Sag Harbor, NY: Beach Tree Books, 1986). See also the various entries in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 54: American Poets, 1880-1945, Third Series*, edited by Peter Quatremain (The Gale Group, 1987); and *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 20: British Poets, 1914-1945*, edited by Donald E. Stanford (The Gale Group, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> The poets I discuss do not all come from recently upwardly-mobile families. T.S. Eliot descends from Boston

My use of the term anti-populist is meant to direct attention to modernists' attempt to stand outside the class struggle that Raymond Williams identifies going on between the conformist-minded Babbitt, the strike-breaking monopolist, the destitute urban masses, and the revolutionary working class. Cultural Darwinism, then, is directed against the Social Darwinism of a new middle class perceived to be failing America's middle-class morality.<sup>46</sup> Instead of celebrating the heroic explorers and frontiersman confronting the fatal environment as in Williams' *In the American Grain*, the middle-class modernist turns to the inner frontiers of the self surviving in the fatal populace.<sup>47</sup> Some of this complexity surely derives from the concern that this modernist cohort has about proving its mettle as Americans to the venerable British world of letters while simultaneously rejecting British cultural authority.<sup>48</sup> For all this, however, the most compelling explanation for modernist anti-populism comes from the omission

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gentry and a long line of Unitarian ministers and pedagogues (a tradition against which he rebelled by converting to Anglicanism). But one should not be tempted into allowing the fact that "the Eliots were the aristocrats of nineteenth-century America," as Peter Ackroyd puts it, to occlude the middle-class origins of even the American aristocrat. As Ackroyd also puts it, being an Eliot means being "part of that rising mercantile class which offered moral leadership to those who came after them." In short, if Pound, Williams, Moore, and Eliot (along with Mina Loy, H.D., Alfred Kreymborg, and Wallace Stevens) share a common middle-class ethos, the economic range among the cohort of modernist poets that I consider is less important than their shared commitment to self-betterment and community-building which they absorb from their families' civic-duty ideals and unleash on the twentieth-century's new masses and leisure class. The important thing to take away from this shared background is that the narrative of modernism—its breaking and entering into posterity, its simultaneous maintenance and resentment of the past—has a parallel in the nineteenth-century rise of the American middle class and the narratives it tells to justify that change of station. This is not a set of narratives that the modernists born on either side of the 1880s seem defined by. The older modernists seem to come from considerably more affluent families (Gertrude Stein, Amy Lowell, Edwin Arlington Robinson, William Stanley Braithwaite) or second-wave modernists, who are raised in considerably more affluent households (George Oppen, Hart Crane) or considerably less (Louis Zukofsky, Lorine Niedecker). Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot*, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Ezra Pound explicitly contrasts the two generations of businessmen in "Patria Mia." Pound, *Literary Essays*, 108-109. Williams makes J.P. Morgan play the role of Pluto in *Spring and All's* Persephone motif. Williams, *Imaginations*, 109.

<sup>47</sup> Both Williams and Eliot come from Unitarian families. For a reading of how Moore's grandfather's Presbyterian sermons affect her styles, see Patricia Willis, "Marianne Moore and the Seventeenth Century," in *Critics and Poets on Marianne Moore: A Right Good Salvo of Barks*, ed. Linda Leavell, Cristanne Miller, and Robin G. Schulze (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2005), 50.

<sup>48</sup> Herbert N. Schneidau writes that Pound, Eliot, and Joyce, precisely in their use of allusions, sought to provide a populist critique of the British upper-class idea that "the use of the classics was to mark a gentleman's education." Schneidau, *Waking Giants: The Presence of the Past in Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), vii.



necessary to preserve the republican division between, on the one hand, those who wreck their bodies in toil and those who put them to work and, on the other, that class of champions and founders whose deeds the poets sing. In order for poets to stand among the men of action, they must deny the element of poetry that connects them to the artisan class who work with their hands as well as their heads. The defense of poetry, I will argue, represents a consistent effort to shift poets from the second class—the fabricators—to the class of founders they admire in their families and in Shelley’s *A Defence of Poetry*.<sup>49</sup>

The caricatures of the bad poet, which I will elaborate in the next section, suggest a clear parallel between replacing acting with making and, as a corollary, displacing versification with poiesis. Democracy means political equality between those who work with their hands and those who work with their heads. The craftsman—of which the versifier is a species—represents a figure who dwells in that equality. In the words of Hannah Arendt, “this attempt to replace acting with making is manifest in the whole body of argument against ‘democracy,’ which, the more consistently and better reasoned it is, will turn into an argument against the essentials of politics.” The essentials of politics of which Arendt speaks are nothing less than the messy field of the thingly circulation, pluralist action, and linguistic dissemination from which modernists

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<sup>49</sup> The emphasis on making something of oneself and being part of new beginnings can be seen in the lives of Pound’s and Eliot’s grandfathers in whose shadow (or lack thereof) they saw themselves. William Greenleaf Eliot is probably best known as the founder of Washington University in St. Louis, but he also founded two private schools, reformed St. Louis public schools, and helped build up Unitarian churches in Missouri, as well as advocating for the survival of the Union and abolitionism. Thaddeus Pound was born a farmer’s son and brought with his Pennsylvania-born Quaker father to the then Territory of Wisconsin. He became a Republican Congressman (1876-1884), made and lost a fortune in the lumber business and another fortune in the railroad as he lost out to the robber-barons. In the words of Pound’s most recent biographer, David Moody, by the time Ezra knew him, all of this was behind him: “He farmed unprofitably, was to discover and bottle Chippewa sparkling spring water but made no profit on it, and would die in 1914 with no money but with much honour in the State of Wisconsin. For a good survey of the influence of the Eliot family history and its history of Unitarianism on the young Tom, see Eric Sigg, *The American T.S. Eliot: A Study of the Early Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 1-35. On Pound’s family history see A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet, A Portrait of the Man and His Work*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3; and Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, 15-17.

recuse themselves. Arendt describes the mentality:

It has always been a great temptation, for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents. . . . Generally speaking, they always amount to seeking shelter from action's calamities in an activity where one man, isolated from all others, remains master of his doings from beginning to end.<sup>50</sup>

Poiesis defines precisely this route of retreat. By admitting no plurality of genres, modernist poiesis rejects a terribly unsystematic arrangement that gives each text its meaning in relation to another and appreciates uniqueness as a variation on a theme. But this does not stop the modernist poem from becoming a genre of its own. In fact, with all the obtrusive elements of verse stripped away, the modernist poem, as a genre, brings the dialectical redefinition of poetry full circle and, all theory to the contrary, in practice redefines the poem around the concept of the line break as the only ornament that cannot be put to the prose test.

One way the defense of poetry has eradicated craftsmen from the political equation is by associating ornamentation—the craft of verse—with menial labor. The result is a peculiar overlap between the excess of ornament and the wage-earner's maintenance of a body always in a deficit of sleep, food, shelter. As in Wilson's caricature, the versifier is a figure who occupies the middle station between *homo poeticus* and species-living, a station best represented by the bad poets I described above in whose lives mix luxurious ornament, undeserved praise, and deserved poverty. Because of this peculiar association, I suggest that the ornament—the flourish

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<sup>50</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 220.

of the versifier or the stamp in the shoemaker's leather—can and should be read as a mode of political appearance without the compulsion to give an account of oneself. Ornament seems to admit no defense, which is one of the reasons why the defense of poetry must begin by disavowing it and why modernist craftsmanship often means its removal. It might seem sometimes as though anti-ornamental poetics repudiates the excesses of the leisure class or the middle-class bedazzlement by auratic artifacts, but buying into this argument misses the fact that precisely because of this association, ornamentation takes on a political dimension when donned by the purportedly undeserving. For the artisan, ornamentation is the moment to show one's uniqueness: having crafted the shoe, one adds the design stitching. For the modernist poet, craftsmanship means tearing out the embroidery. When Eliot dedicates *The Waste Land* to Pound as "*il miglior fabbro*"—the better craftsman—the gesture commemorates the excision of over two-hundred lines: poetic craftsmanship now means getting rid of unnecessary words. This idea has become so familiar to today's writers that one hardly can imagine the idea of beginning from a paucity of words. But as I hope I have shown, the idea of there being too many words comes from the idea of there being too many people who think they have something to say. The subversive dimension of ornament, it turns out, shows up in precisely that scene to which the defense of poetry returns repeatedly as the greatest threat to the defense of poetry: the impudent nobody who imperfectly adopts a style held in high regard but who nonetheless makes a believable showing. The most subversive reading of modernism that follows from this change of perspective does not aim at canonical re-organization; undoing the hold poesis has on the politics of modernist poetry does not mean finding new modernists. Undoing that hold means reading the modernist poet as just such a nobody.

The democratic challenge for poetics, I would argue, requires reading a modernist poets' defense as if he or she is simultaneously a name to be remembered and an anonymous member of a populace who has taken to a language that their community holds to be a proving ground. What I offer, in sum, is an anthropology of non-professional poetry applied to canonical modernism. To be sure, in pursuit of a popular or egalitarian hermeneutic, one might search out the poems that circulate in everyday life—poems written to mark special occasions or commemorate a death; poems written as cries for help or coping mechanisms; poems of complaint; verses penned as tokens of love and affection; poems for newspapers (once) or personal blogs; simple and not-so-simple pleas for attention. But despite the ideology attached to modernist poetry, the modernist poem is still this kind of poem. The defense of poetry that I am compelled to offer, then, approaches the modernist within this broader function of poetic language as a special language used for special things to say, whether that means “April, June, and November . . .” or “April is the cruelest month.” No matter how renowned the poet, the poetic register signals that someone wishes to be heard in a manner different from prose speech and writing. Whether the addressee is the echoing ear of posterity or a friend or family member, a lover, the local barroom, a college dorm, the internet, or a funeral party gathered at a grave, the poem is a call to attention: hear what this person has to say. If there is a defense of poetry in which I believe, this is it. The poem is a culturally recognizable assertion that one has something to say; the line break is its call to attention.

## Poiesis and the Poverty of Poetry

Thus all men, women, and children, birds, and fishes, are poets, except  
versifiers. Oysters are poets.

—John Wilson

The absence of any great modernist defense of poetry is due largely to the long-belated recognition of a fundamental incommensurability between the language expected in defenses and the language expected from poetry.<sup>51</sup> If philosophy has been a series of footnotes to Plato, the defense of poetry has been a series of footnotes to *The Republic* where Socrates, having banished poets (with a few exceptions), says that the muse may “justly return from this exile after she has pleaded her defense” in either verse or prose. “But so long as she is unable to make good her defense,” he goes on to say, “we shall chant over to ourselves as we listen to the reasons that we have given as a counter charm to her spell, to preserve us from slipping back into the childish

<sup>51</sup> The widening gap at the time between poetic and academic modes of discourse surely conspires against the production or selection of an authoritative modernist defense. As M.H. Abrams puts it, “alone among the major disciplines the theory of literature has been mainly a *branch of apologetics*.” A sounding of the depth of that gap can be taken by elaborating a little on Abrams’ quip. By invoking apologetics, Abrams means to draw a comparison between Christian apologetics like Augustine’s *City of God*, which offer Biblical exegesis in order to answer the questions of a population of skeptics, prospective converts, and lapsing believers. Certainly, Abrams’ comment registers the degree to which creative types and academic types go their separate ways in these years, as if authorial intention were as remote as God’s plan. Writing on the other side of the creative-critical divide, Louis Simpson concurs and goes a step further to say that the Beat, the Black Mountain, the Sixties Poets, and the New York School, in their politicization, came to believe “that the best literary criticism and the only kind that’s likely to last is a poem.” In other words, critics like Abrams really are meta-apologetics, culling academic criticism from the literary criticism already secreted in the author’s text. Abrams, “Belief and the Suspension of Disbelief,” in *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991), 89; Simpson, “The Character of the Poet,” *What Is Poetry? Essays from The Eleventh Alabama Symposium on English and American Literature*, ed. Hank Lazer (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 13. Hank Lazer discusses Simpson’s remarks (“very right and very wrong”) in the first pages of *Opposing Poetries, Vol. I: Issues and Institutions* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 6. For the anxiety that defensive academics might bring to their apologetics, see Douglas Mao, “How to Do Things with Modernism,” *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 26.2 (Fall 2002): 160-180.

loves of the multitude.”<sup>52</sup> The verse defense seems to be in an impossible position, immediately suspected for deploying in defense of poetry precisely the arts of persuasion that put poetry under the ban in the first place. *The Apology of Socrates*—if not every Socratic dialog—lays out how a philosophical defense should really go: eschewing the rhetorical flourishes, metrical patterns, and sentimental appeals, Socrates posits and exemplifies a philosophical language of rational argument that exists separately from the words used in any given utterance. This language of reason beyond speech is what philosophers “chant over” to themselves as a “counter charm” to poetry’s own “spell.” The poet “lays on with words and phrases the colors of the several arts in such fashion that others equally ignorant, who see things only through words, will deem his words most excellent.” Socrates fulfills the etymological truth of the apology and casts off words to reveal the underlying truth.<sup>53</sup> ‘Apology’ or ‘apo-logos’ means literally “to cast off words.” Poetry is the exact opposite. In the Platonic tradition, poetic language is ornamental and philosophical language is anti-ornamental, but just as they meet in the philosopher’s defense against poetry they will meet in the defense’s manifestation in verse.

In the first sentence of “The Serious Artist,” Pound’s complaint about having to rewrite Sidney channels the underlying antagonism for the defense of poetry as a prose genre beholden to the defense-making procedures laid out by Socrates. The poem that doubles as a defense is an entirely different story, and that is the story that I tell in the chapters collected here: the manifestation of the defense in modernist verse. As Pound writes in the 1912 essay “Patria Mia”: “It is characteristic of this decade that one’s friend and acquaintances would rather have one defend a position at length than define it accurately in a work of art.”<sup>54</sup> The prose defense of

<sup>52</sup> Plato *Republic* 608a.

<sup>53</sup> Plato *Republic* 601a.

<sup>54</sup> Pound, “Patria Mia,” pt. 1, *The New Age* 11.19 (Sept. 5, 1912), 445. Pound would later cut this sentence as he revises the essay into a pamphlet, which is the text in *Literary Essays*, but his meaning resonates throughout his

poetry can do only so much for those whose first language is creative rather than analytical and whose job is making rather than taking apart.<sup>55</sup> Contrasting the lengthy prose defense to the succinct poetic statement, Pound implies that poetry should be defended in its own language rather than in the deficient excess of analytical prose. But if the main difference between poetry and prose is that poetry says more in fewer words, as he argues elsewhere in “The Serious Artist,” this also means that poetry and prose share common ground. The overlap occurs in “the intellect” to which poetry adds “the passionate moment.”<sup>56</sup> As the defense moves into verse, then, the argumentative expectations of poetry are heightened. As shown by Pound’s famous dictum that “poetry should be written at least as well-written as prose” (borrowed from Ford Maddox Ford), the defense has amplified the long-time mandate to heed some kind test of reason by adding the injunction against ornament within the poem itself.<sup>57</sup> The prose test has been around for a long time. Sidney describes the test when he complains of the plethora of poems lacking in “poetical sinews” and explains how to identify them:

For proof whereof, let but most of the verses be put in prose, and then ask the meaning; and it will be found that one verse did but beget another, without ordering at the first what should be at the last, which becomes a confused mass of words, with a tingling sound of rhyme, barely accompanied with reason.<sup>58</sup>

Lacking “poetical sinews” for Sidney means lacking “reason.”<sup>59</sup> Socrates tentatively leans over

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and other modernists’ bodies of work.

<sup>55</sup> A contemporary expression of this idea can be found in *The Other Tradition*, republished as *Other Traditions*, where John Ashbery writes, “As I see it, my thought is both poetry and the attempt to explain that poetry; the two cannot be disentangled.” John Ashbery, *Other Traditions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>56</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 53

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>58</sup> Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, 243.

<sup>59</sup> For an elaboration of this idea, see John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry, contain’d in some New*

the wall around his ideal city in order to listen for the logical argument beneath the fine-sounding words of the poets. Yet Pound is not looking for the philosophical reason in poetry; paradoxically, he not only sets the anti-ornamental ban in the prose test against unnecessary verse ornament, he also makes passing the prose test a fail. Sidney permits ornament as long as it serves the underlying argument. Pound is invested in cutting ornament out of a poem, but if a poem can be “put in prose” as Sidney says, it is not much of a poem at all.

The first way in which the verse defenses I examine transfer arguments of the prose defense into poetry is by drawing on some very old tropes to personify the virtues and vices of poetry. Almost all of them will be familiar: the female monster, the swarming masses, the angelic muse, the political hell, the scatological poem. For example, the tastelessly ornamented women in *The Waste Land* and *Spring and All* symbolize the viciousness of vacuous verse, while the virgin muse of *Ash-Wednesday* and the “dark woman” at the end of *Spring and All* beatify feminine silence, the provenance of the lyric poet. The grotesque crowds in *The Waste Land*, *Spring and All*, and the Hell Cantos paint pictures of a dystopian world bereft of poetic wisdom. Others are more difficult to recognize either because they have been suppressed or because they are so very idiosyncratic. Fresca, the monstrous poetess cut from earlier versions of *The Waste Land*, figuratively rapes language with her elisions, as I will show, and evokes the Augustan image of a poetaster. And finally, Moore’s elusive or defensive animals—the pangolin, the kangaroo mouse, the basilisk—model the poet’s own self-protective maneuvers, while her pompous swan and toiling ant represent the over-ambitiousness of inferior talents and, I will argue, prose defenders of poetry.

Personifying arguments about poetry is no more novel than writing poems about poetry.

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*Discoveries never made before, requisite for the Writing and Judging of Poems surely* (London: 1704), 49-53.



What makes the modernist defense in verse distinctive is the second use of analogy poets deploy as new-form poetics stand in for political action. Pound says in 1914, “Great works of art . . . . cause form to come into being.”<sup>60</sup> Eliot makes sure readers of his 1919 defense of tradition know that “conformity” is nothing without newness: “To conform merely would be for the new work not really to conform at all; it would not be new, and would therefore not be a work of art.”<sup>61</sup> In 1922 Williams declares his mission is “the creation of new forms,” which he takes as the new standard of poetic achievement and socio-political purpose: “Nothing is good save the new.”<sup>62</sup> The radical emphasis on newness shows modernist poets’ full embrace of poiesis, which should be understood not only as the act of making, but also as an implicit analogy between making and action.<sup>63</sup> Williams explains the rationale: “A work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm.”<sup>64</sup> By emphasizing the connection modernists make between poiesis—the act of making—and political action, I certainly mean to refer to the diverse interventions staged by (or derived from) the diversity of modernist form: the ghostly meter and high allusion in Eliot; the radical juxtapositions in Pound’s Imagist *poeme*;

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<sup>60</sup> Ezra Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York, New Directions, 1970), 92.

<sup>61</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), 39.

<sup>62</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 117, 23.

<sup>63</sup> On the specific importance of *poiesis* as a term and concept in the history of poetics, see the following: S.K. Heninger, Jr., “The Poet as Maker,” in *Touche of Sweet Harmony: Pythagorean Cosmology and Renaissance Poetics*, 287-325 (San Marino, CA: The Huntington Library, 1974); Hans Robert Jauss and Michael Shaw, “Poiesis,” *Critical Inquiry* 8.3 (Spring 1982): 591-608; Nathan A. Greenberg, “The Use of Poiesis and Poiesis,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 65 (1961): 263-289; and Christopher Nealon, “The Poetic Case,” *Critical Inquiry* 33.4 (Summer 2007): 865-886. The most important reference remain E.N. Tigerstedt, “The Poet as Creator: Origins of a Metaphor,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 5.4 (December 1968): 455-488. The most comprehensive survey of the decline of mimesis that parallels the rise of poiesis is found in Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002). For perhaps the most important philosophical consideration of *poiesis*, see Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Geoffrey Friend and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000). After this, see Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Muses*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996; and Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content*, trans. Georgia Albert (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

<sup>64</sup> William Carlos Williams, “Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist,” in *Selected Essays*, 196.

Moore's arbitrarily syllabic stanzas and prose diction; Gertrude Stein's cubist still lifes and automatic writing; Loy's gyno-centric anti-lyric; and Williams' verse/prose hybrids, American idiom, or variable foot. But I also mean to point to modernists' understanding of poiesis as a process of self-making connected to preserving democracy from the tyranny of the majority. This particularly modernist adaptation of poiesis begins to show the generation's rootedness in middle-class values.

Earlier poets who invested in the defense while sharing a commitment to newness do not share the belief that they make themselves in the act of making. Sidney may have perversely adapted the Petrarchan sonnet, and Edmund Spenser may have invented a stanza form.<sup>65</sup> Wordsworth may have updated the ballad by shifting focus from narrative to psychological reflection; and Coleridge may have retrieved the accentual meter (the *Christabel* meter) in a time of the accentual-syllabic, but none of these innovations is supposed by their authors or their contemporary audiences to be an act of self-making. Early modern and Romantic defenders of poetry come up with new story-lines, new psychologies, new verse forms, but Sidney no more discovers who he is in the writing of *Astrophil and Stella* (1582) than Wordsworth discovers his philosophy by writing *The Prelude* (1850), even if both poems are in touch with autobiography.<sup>66</sup> But modernists read self-making into poiesis not only because they come from backgrounds that value self-making, but also because upward mobility requires its own defense. Criteria for that proof comes from the philosophical frame around poiesis which equates citizenship with self-knowledge and sets up the poet as someone who may have know-how—the craft of poetry—but

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<sup>65</sup> On Sidney's sonnet innovations, see Patrick Cheney, *Reading Sixteenth-century Poetry* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 153-156.

<sup>66</sup> Recall that Wordsworth is to take the "mental repose [of] one whose principles were made up." See note 17a above. On the post-Romantic fallacy of reading self-expression into the lyric, see Gavin Alexander, *Writing After Sidney: The Literary Response to Sir Philip Sidney, 1586-1640* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 193-219.

who lacks the self-knowledge required to do good as a member of the polis. As I will show throughout this dissertation, the mandate to know oneself and to signify that knowledge is a condition for political peerage that the defense adopts from a long anti-democratic philosophical tradition. In brief, the injunction against mere ornament corresponds to a prejudice against seeing the undeserving masses set up in what the elite still consider their privileged relationship to politics. A genealogy of *poiesis*—a concept crucial to the defense—traces not only the connection between self-making and self-knowing, but also outlines the class antagonism modernist poets will bring to their own representations of mere versifiers and the versa-philic populace that loves them (and sometimes to themselves). By critiquing the politics of *poiesis*, I hardly mean to call for the return of the studied arts of rhyme and meter. I do believe, however, that the line break—the absolute unit of verse—is far more political than anyone lets on and that its specifically democratic importance depends on its function as an ornament that interrupts prose phrasing and the self-knowledge test.

In the words of E.N. Tigerstedt, “the linguistic ambiguity of *poiesis* becomes an argument for elevating the poet to a middle station between God and man.”<sup>67</sup> The corollary is equally true and, I will show, equally as important to the genealogy. Whatever definition *poiesis* marks—plot-composition, imagination, new form—redefining poetry becomes an argument for ranking mere versifiers to another middle station: the poet is a creator like god, then mere versifiers are degraded and sinewless creatures like to insects. Sidney heartily takes up the analogy between the poet-maker and God the creator. For him, that seemingly “saucy comparison” nonetheless apprehends the most solemn human purpose to imitate the divine:

Neither let it be deemed too saucy a comparison to balance the highest point of

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<sup>67</sup> Tigerstedt, “Poet as Creator,” 485.

man's wit with the efficacy of nature; right honour to the heavenly Maker of that maker, who, having made man to His own likeness, set him beyond and over all the works of that second nature; which in nothing he showeth so much as in poetry, when, with the force of a divine breath, he [the poet] bringeth things forth surpassing her doings.<sup>68</sup>

The history of the analogy is traceable back through the English-language defense of poetry to Cristoforo Landino—a Florentine professor, poet, and Neoplatonist (1424-1498)—who makes the then daring comparison between poetic making and divine creation in the prologue to his commentary on Dante's *Commedia*. Yet if one finds the seed for what will become the idea of *homo poeticus*—of man as a making animal—and the paradoxical dehumanization of poet craftsmen as mere versifiers, the difference between Sidney and Landino is also instructive. For Sidney, verse-making is not only unnecessary to poetry but detrimental to poetry if taken as the definition: where verse means poetry there “swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets.” For Landino, God creates and the poet makes:

And the Greeks say ‘poet’ from the verb ‘piin’ [*poiein*], which is half-way between ‘creating’ [*creare*], which is peculiar to God when out of nothing he brings forth anything into being, and ‘making’ [*fare*], which applies to men when they compose with matter and form in any art. It is for this reason that, although the feigning of the poet is not entirely out of nothing, it nevertheless departs from making and comes very near to creating. And God is the supreme poet, and the

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<sup>68</sup> Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, 216

world is His poem.<sup>69</sup>

For Landino the analogy between God and poet is based on versification's access to the divine order of the universe precisely through all the poets' measuring and cutting that, like the carpenter, frames the poet's language.<sup>70</sup> As Julius Ceasar Scaliger (1484-1558), another of Sidney's sources, holds in his *Poetics* (1570), "verse is the property of the poet."<sup>71</sup> Only with Sidney is verse jettisoned as a necessary (if sometimes insufficient) criterion of poetry and is prose allowed into the ranks. This development sets the dialectic in motion that will eventually render both verse and prose the antitheses of poietic poetry. In the meantime, the thin line that Landino maintains between divine creation and poet-craft disappears, and the distinction between the divinely inspired poet and the mere versifier bifurcates the poetry community as if making a distinction between god and animal.

Lord Shaftesbury's *Soliloquy: or Advice to an Author* (1710) exemplifies how the theory of *homo poeticus*, not content with deifying the poietic genius, sets bad poets at the outer fringe of humanity and under what sign; namely, self-ignorance. On one hand, Shaftesbury sneers, there is the "insipid Race of Mortals . . . we Moderns are contented to call *Poets*," and on the other, "the Man, who truly and in a just sense deserves the Name of *Poet*, and who as a real

<sup>69</sup> Qtd. in M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 273. The remainder of the passage, untranslated by Abrams, goes on to elaborate divine versification in the measure and weight of syllables: "Et chome idio dispone la creature, i. el uisibile et inuisibile mondo che e / sua opera in numero Misura et Peso. Onde el propheta Deus omnia fecit numero mensura et pondere. Chosi el poeta chol numero piedi: Con la misura delle syllabe brievei et lunghe: et col pondo delle sententie et de glaffecti constituisciono ellor poema." Qtd. in Tigerstedt, "Poet as Creator," 458. On Landino, see Simon A. Gilson, "Cristoforo Landino on Dante and Florence: The Prologue to the *Comento*," in *Dante and Renaissance Florence*, 163-193 (Cambridge: Cambridge Unviersity Press, 2005).

<sup>70</sup> On the language of framing and poet-craft, see Rayna Kalas, *Frame, Glass, Verse: The Technology of Poetic Invention in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007).

<sup>71</sup> Scaligero, Giulio Cesare, *Select Translations from Scaliger's "Poetics"*, trans. Frederick Morgan Padelford (New York: Henry Holt, 1905), 17.

Master, or Architect in the kind, can describe both *Men* and *Manners*, and give to an *Action* its just Body and Proportions.” While the former have “attain’d the chiming Faculty of a Language, with an injudicious random use of Wit and Fancy,” the latter can discern the universal in the particular (as in Aristotle’s *Poetics*) and is “a very different Creature.” The encomium that follows recalls Sidney’s maker-poet, but more importantly, Shaftesbury picks up on the imperative to self-knowledge as a crucial development in the English-language defense of poetry:

Such a *Poet* is indeed a second *Maker*: a just *Prometheus*, under JOVE. Like that Sovereign Artist or universal Plastick Nature, he forms *a Whole*, coherent and proportion’d in it-self, with due Subjection and Subordinacy of constituent Parts. He notes the Boundarys of the Passions, and knows their exact *Tones* and *Measures*; by which he justly represents them, marks *the Sublime* of Sentiments and Action, and distinguishes *the Beautiful* from *the Deform’d*, *the Amiable* from *the Odious*. The Moral Artist, who can thus imitate the Creator, and is thus knowing in the inward Form and Structure of his Fellow-Creature, will hardly, I presume, be found unknowing in Himself, or at a loss in those Numbers which make the Harmony of a Mind. For *Knavery* is mere *Dissonance* and *Disproportion*. And tho Villains may have strong *Tones* and natural Capacitys of Action; ’tis impossible that true *Judgment* and *Ingenuity* shou’d reside, where *Harmony* and *Honesty* have no being.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, “Soliloquy: or Advice to an Author,” in *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, vol. 1, ed. Philip Ayres (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111.

Shaftesbury may draw from the verse-based theory of the harmony of the spheres, but his self-knowing poet indexes the modern adoption of that old philosophical dictum “that celebrated *Delphick* Inscription, RECOGNIZE YOUR-SELF.”<sup>73</sup> As in Shelley, for whom knowing oneself means knowing the other, Shaftesbury sets the poet up as someone who discerns “the inward Form and Structure of his Fellow-Creature.”<sup>74</sup> Anticipating the parts-to-whole theory of poetry that Coleridge will elaborate and the New Criticism will institutionalize, Shaftesbury shows how textual autonomy retroactively posits the god-like autonomy of the poet. Shaftesbury says, for example, that the poet “forms *a Whole*, coherent and proportion’d in it-self, with due Subjection and Subordinacy of constituent Parts,” but it is unclear whether that whole being formed is the self or the poem.

The analogy between poetic making and divine creation remains a placeholder long after the etymology is grounded in the term *poiesis*. The horrible inversion of Shaftesbury’s autonomous poetic can be found in the corollary analogy between versifier and the chaotic swarm of insects that provide an image of a mass of versifiers and the internal discord of individual poetasters. Sidney evokes the image of a “swarm” of versifiers when he undoes the connection between verse and poetry. Gabriel Harvey complains of “Genus irritabile Vatum”—that irritable (or defensive) race of poets—as “a swarme of gad-bees” and compares “the anger of a moodie rimester” to “the furie of a Waspe.”<sup>75</sup> Thomas Campion writes in *Observations in the Art of English Poesy* (1602) that “the facility and popularity of rhyme creates as many poets

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>74</sup> For the overlap between poetic sensibility and a hierarchy of sympathetic physiologies, see John Brewer, “Sentiment and Sensibility,” in *The Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, ed. James Chandler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21-44.

<sup>75</sup> Gabriel Harvey, “An Advertisement for Pap-hatchet, and Martin Mar-prelate,” *Pierces Supererogation, or A New Prayse of the Old Asse* (London: John Wolfe, 1593), 142.

as a hot summer flies.”<sup>76</sup> Lord Halifax begins his preface to *The Character of a Trimmer* (1688) by apologizing for taking up pen and ink “in an Age over-run with Scriblers, as Egypt was with Flyes and Locusts.”<sup>77</sup> Stephen Gosson’s attack on poetry and drama in *The School of Abuse* (1579) compares the poet and the “Scarabe,” to “swine,” and recalls Virgil’s “Gnat” and Ovid’s “Flea.”<sup>78</sup> Responding to Gosson (as is Sidney), Thomas Lodge picks up the comparison’s historical function to distinguish between good and bad poets: “Did you never reade (my over wittie frend) that under the persons of beastes many abuses were dissiphered? have you not reason to waye that whatosever ether Virgil did write of his gnatt or Ovid of his fley was all covertly to declare abuse?”<sup>79</sup> The characterization, however, is not simply dehumanizing. As Dennis shows elsewhere in a rare display of the connoisseurship of insult, the lack of self-knowledge leads the bad poet into a self-destructive counter-attack on his betters. Relating a conversation about “Maevius, the Scotch doggerelist,” Dennis argues that instead of “a swine into that very herd into which Legion entered” or “a biting cur,” the versifier is best understood as “an errant insect of Parnassus [or] a downright beetle of Helicon,” because “Maevius is as much below a beast as a beast is below a man.”<sup>80</sup> While animals have “instinct, which teaches it to keep out of harm’s way,” this unhappy versifying insect “taking in the dust in a lubberly and a blundering flight, beats and bruises itself against everything that is in its way, whether it is man or beast, ape or owl, bat, mouse, or brother beetle; and never fails to knock down itself by the impotent blows which it gives to others.” As the demon-possessed swine runs into the sea, so the

<sup>76</sup> Campion, *Observations in the Art of English Poesy*, in Alexander, *Selected Renaissance Criticism*, 283

<sup>77</sup> George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, *The Character of a Trimmer, Concerning Religion, Laws and Liberties* (London, 1688), 3.

<sup>78</sup> Stephen Gosson, *The School of Abuse*, 1579, ed. Edward Arber (London: Alex, Murray, & Son, 1869), 19-20

<sup>79</sup> Lodge, *A Defence of Poetry*, in Smith, *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, 1:65.

<sup>80</sup> John Dennis, undated letter, “Memoirs and Remains of Eminent Persons,” *The Monthly Magazine* 43.5 (June 1, 1817), 421



scarab beetle auto-destructs in its swarm.<sup>81</sup>

The trope dehumanizes the bad poet by classing him as a social climber using the literary marketplace as the courtier uses his patron.<sup>82</sup> Attempting to protect the printed letter from oral culture, William Webbe in his *Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586) rejects the “swarmes of Poets” that would arise if “Ballet makers, and compylers of sencelesse sonets” are allowed to come out of the pubs and “stuffe every stall full of grosse devises and unlearned Pamphlets” and “catch at the Garlande due to Poets.”<sup>83</sup> Defending quantitative verse derived from Latin prosody against English rhyme, Richard Stanyhurst (1547-1619) targets vulgar poets who mistake themselves to count among the educated and are mistaken “for learned” by the uneducated populace out of whom they come:

Good God, what a frie of such wooden rythmours [who] doth swarme in  
 Stacioners shops, who never instructed in anie Grammar schoole, not attayning to  
 the parings of the Latine or Greeke tongue, yet lyke blind bayards [dogs] rushe on  
 forward, fostring theyre vaine conceits with such overweening silly follies, as  
 they recke [reckon] not too bee condemned of the learned for ignorant, so they  
 bee commended of the ignorant for learned. Thee readiest way therefore too flap

<sup>81</sup> On Legion, see the story of the exorcism of the Gerasene demon in Mark 5:1-20, Matthew 8:24-34, and Luke 8:26-39.

<sup>82</sup> Perloff has recently made unfortunate use of this rhetoric to decry “the demand for a certain kind of prize-winning, ‘well-crafted’ poem has produced extraordinary uniformity”; the “tepid tolerance” of “the status quo” in which “thousands of poets jostl[e] for their place in the sun”; and “the recycling of earlier poetic material” in the making of “the short lyric.” See Marjorie Perloff, “Poetry on the Brink: Reinventing the Lyric,” *Boston Review* 37.3 (May/June 2012), [http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.3/marjorie\\_perloff\\_poetry\\_lyric\\_reinvention.php](http://www.bostonreview.net/BR37.3/marjorie_perloff_poetry_lyric_reinvention.php). I have quoted only from the pull quotes. See also the exceedingly generous and thoroughly convincing retort by Matvei Yankelevich, “The Gray Area: An Open Letter to Marjorie Perloff,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 13th, 2012. In her own open letter, Perloff backs away from her rhetoric in the *Boston Review*, but at the end of her reply, she also dips into the more troubling vocabulary of scatological anti-populism that I discuss in the final chapter: “The point is to come out openly *against* the self-regarding *sludge* [italics added] that passes for poetry in the commercial and media world.” Perloff, “A Response to Matvei Yankelevich,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, July 16th, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> William Webbe, *A Discourse of English Poetrie*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, vol. 1, ed. Gregory Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1904), 246.

these droanes from the sweete senting hives of Poetrye, is for the learned to applie them selves wholly (if they bee delighted with that vaine) to the true making of verses in suche wise as the Greekes and Latines, the fathers of knowledge, have done, and too leave too these doltish coistrels [kestrels] their rude rythming and balducktome ballads.<sup>84</sup>

All this talk of versifiers swarming up the hills of Parnassus evokes contempt for the parvenu, but more importantly, the aristocratic defense characterizes versifiers as a class maligned by their own craft. The self-destructive attempt at self-making contains, I think, an implicit denunciation of suffrage: the people want to participate in law-making like the versifier wants to make poetry, but their enfranchisement is their ruin. Because the craftsman is defined by the ability to make what he sets out to make, he becomes a dangerous figure for those who wish to maintain this argument: to deal with this threat, the craftsman's making must become his undoing.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge offers the most important connection between the image of the swarming populace and the specific problem of the craftsman when he attributes the touchiness of middling poets, whom he elsewhere connects to the artisan class, with "those whose dearest wishes are fixed on objects wholly out of their own power" and who on account of that impotence "become in all cases more or less impatient and prone to anger." This anger is the seed of "fanaticism" and the impetus of the swarm:

Having a deficient portion of internal and proper warmth, minds of this class seek  
in the crowd circum fana for a warmth in common, which they do not possess

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<sup>84</sup> Richard Stanyhurst, "To the Right Honourable My Very Loving Brother the Lorde Baron of Dunsanye," *The First Foure Bookes of Virgil's Aeneis* (London: Henrie Bynneman, 1583), xxxii.

singly. Cold and phlegmatic in their own nature, like damp hay, they heat and inflame by co-acervation; or like bees they become restless and irritable through the increased temperature of collected multitudes. Hence the German word for fanaticism, (such at least was its original import,) is derived from the swarming of bees, namely, *schwaermen*, *schwaermerey*.<sup>85</sup>

If for Coleridge as for Dennis, “the first defence of weak minds is to recriminate,” the second defense is to seek strength in numbers. Anti-populist prejudice against the masses, the crowd, or the demos is not only about the kind of work the people do, but their sheer numerousness. The line Coleridge draws leads directly from the frustrated versifier who lacks the ability to contemplate what is to be made with “the creative and self-sufficing power of absolute genius” and so rushes headlong into the material of poetry and becomes “the spirit of ruin.” Since Sidney, poesis has been an event in the mind—the possession of a “fore-conceit”—that distinguishes the *ex nihilo* form-making of the poet genius from the craftsman who begins with the stuff of poetry in the world: the stories, diction, genres, or techniques already available.<sup>86</sup> The prejudice against that border-lying craftsman-class crucially underwrites the nineteenth century’s vehement distinction between poesis and verse as a distinction between republican statecraft and democratic make-do. If discounting verse as a criterion of poetry becomes the hallmark of sophistication, holding onto the definition of verse becomes a tell-tale sign of the constitutionally deficient and politically ruinous masses.

Modernist contempt for the masses is well-known and one does not have to look hard to

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<sup>85</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2 vols., ed. James Engell and W. Johnson Bate, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 7 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 1:30.

<sup>86</sup> See especially Shelley, *Defence of Poetry*, 510-511.

find contempt for poet-craft. What has not been understood is the class politics behind modernists' rejection of the verse definition of poetry and their (supposed) willingness to accept prose as poetry.<sup>87</sup> The classing of the verse definition of poetry as low-brow has several sources, but Sidney certainly can be given credit for setting the course of modern poesis against versification and making room for prose in Parnassus with his relatively novel insistence in the *Defence* that "it is not rhyming and versing that maketh a Poet"; that verse is "but an ornament and no cause to Poetry"; and that one "may be a poet without versing, and a versifier without poetry."<sup>88</sup> One might begin as early as the aristocratic sixteenth-century defense of quantitative meter against the indigenous use of accent and rhyme and the early-modern prejudice against verse translation as the provenance of women writers. One might begin with the reception of Italian Renaissance poetics by radical Protestants like Sidney who may be suspicious of Catholicism' ritual ornament, itself also marked as corruptly feminine. As I will tell it, the story begins with the "Advertisement" for the 1789 edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in which Wordsworth casually remarks that Poetry is "a word of very disputed meaning."<sup>89</sup> Defining exactly what should and should not count as poetry leads Wordsworth to add the "Preface" in 1800 and then an 1802 addition of several paragraphs (pages) justifying the prosaicisms of his common-man language and the further addition of the "Appendix" against "what is usually called Poetic Diction."<sup>90</sup> The most telling moment in these pieces occurs in a footnote Wordsworth includes

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<sup>87</sup> See for example Williams' often quoted statement, "The truth is that there's an identity between prose and verse, not an antithesis." Williams, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*, ed. John C. Thirwall (New York: New Directions, 1957), 265.

<sup>88</sup> Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, 218, 233. Sidney is recuperating the distinction and fiction-making definition from Aristotle's *Poetics*. For a discussion of the pertinent sources in Aristotle, see Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 31-32, 71-72.

<sup>89</sup> William Wordsworth, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R.L. Brett and A.R. Jones (New York: Routledge, 2005), 50. See also Shelley's progressive definition of poetry, *Defence of Poetry*, 514.

<sup>90</sup> Siskin has an excellent reading of how the open-ended and provisional nature of Wordsworth's defenses of his poetics relate to the system as a genre, see Siskin, "The Problem of Periodization," 119-120.

on his usage of “poetry” (against his better judgment) “as opposed to the word Prose, and synonymous with metrical composition.” Wordsworth goes on to complain of the “confusion . . . introduced into criticism by this contradistinction of Poetry and Prose, instead of the more philosophical one of Poetry and Science.” The complaint makes sense given that the redefinition of poetry as the expression of imagination sets it in opposition to science and the language of reason. In the 1800 edition, Wordsworth reasonably concludes that “the only strict antithesis to Prose is Metre,” but in the 1802 edition he qualifies yet again “because lines and passages of metre so naturally occur in writing prose.”<sup>91</sup> This inclusive rationale is possible only because the line break does not register as a poetic ornament and because prose has not yet been cordoned off as the language of “Science” or, as he adds in the 1802 edition, “Matter of fact.” It soon will be, but although there will be further developments in the poetry/prose debate, what will not change is how the aristocratic non-verse-definition bequeathed by Sidney (and blessed by Francis Bacon) is recoded as the “more philosophical” definition. The redefinition of poetry, then, explicitly targets the popular audience as unphilosophical and, by extension, prone to treat verse as a kind of fanatic superstition or perverse fetish. When Wordsworth’s defends “language as it is really spoken by men,” for example, he calls it “a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by Poets,” who “indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle tastes, and fickle appetites, of their own creation.”<sup>92</sup> This is no longer the image of the bad poet as an artless fool or frustrated craftsman; this is the image of the versifier as a crafty interloper able to fabricate lack in order to satisfy with ornament.

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<sup>91</sup> Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 298.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

The class division that attends the definition of poetry is far more pronounced in the *Biographia Literaria*, even if (or maybe because) Coleridge concedes that all texts in verse “*may* be entitled poems,” but only in “the lowest sense.” While Coleridge flatly maintains that “there may be, is, and ought to be an essential difference between the language of prose and of metrical composition,” he also insists that there is no such thing as “the pleasure of the meter itself” and that whatever enjoyment one gets from poetry is “conditional, and dependent on the appropriateness of the thoughts and expressions, to which the metrical form is superadded.”<sup>93</sup> Verse becomes an essential feature without an essence, an ornament that must be grounded with some philosophical purpose. The class-biased subtext attached to philosophy comes out when one compares the position Shelley takes in *A Defence of Poetry* to Coleridge’s in the *Biographia*. Shelley writes that “the popular division into prose and verse is inadmissible in accurate philosophy” and that “the distinction between poets and prose writers is a vulgar error.”<sup>94</sup> While he differs from Coleridge on the necessity of verse, he follows Coleridge on the authority of philosophy. Coleridge declares, “No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher.”<sup>95</sup> Discussing Plato and Bacon as poets and Dante and Shakespeare as philosophers, Shelley writes in the same vein, “All the authors of revolutions in opinion are not only necessarily poets as they are inventors.” Shelley’s substitution of “revolutions in opinion” for “philosophers” is an apt one: being a philosopher in this context of the Platonic tradition writ large is equivalent to reforming backward popular opinion. In other words, the poet’s authority comes from the philosopher as someone who knows better than the populace. The principle has buttressed the imagination- and sympathy-building defense of the Romantics—

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<sup>93</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:11.

<sup>94</sup> Shelley, *Defence of Poetry*, 484.

<sup>95</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:25-26.

in which the populace is too self-interested and unfeeling—as much as Sidney’s Cyrus-making teach-and-delight defense, in which the courtier reader is schooled in the limits of humanism and the need for martial action. Alan Richardson puts it well: while it has become commonplace to attribute modern poetics to the emergence of Romantic values—imagination, originality, spontaneity, primitivist sympathy, social detachment, autonomy, aesthetic transcendence—“less often remarked . . . is how this seemingly rarefied and ideal conception of literature was forged, over many decades of educational experimentation and debate, within institutions and discourses aimed at the disciplining of socially subordinate populations. . . . children, women, laborers, and colonized peoples of the expanding empire.”<sup>96</sup>

J.S. Mill’s “Thoughts on Poetry and its Varieties” (1833) offers the most severe insult to the verse definition and the most revealing: if Shelley’s “vulgar error” is a mistake that can be corrected, for Mill versa-philes must be quarantined in order to establish and maintain a philosophical class within the poetry community. The essay begins by rejecting the “vulgarest of all” understandings of poetry, “that which confounds poetry with metrical composition,” and betrays a “wretched mockery of a definition . . . with which no person possessed of the faculties to which poetry addresses itself can ever have been satisfied.” In short, not understanding the difference between poesis and versification means being constitutionally incapable of understanding poetry. This less-than-human category into which versifiers and versa-philes are consigned is marvelously captured by John Wilson, the notorious Tory reviewer for satire-steeped *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, whose review of Tennyson’s *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* (1830), takes arguments like Mill’s into the ridiculous. Wilson punctuates the expansive

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<sup>96</sup> Alan Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism: Reading as Social Practice, 1780-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 261.

definition of poetry with the refrain “except versifiers,” as here: “Thus all men, women, and children, birds, and fishes, are poets, except versifiers. Oysters are poets.” Putting his finger on the unhinging of creativity and versifying, Wilson offers an accurately hyperbolic take on the philosophical exuberance of the anti-verse position: “Versifiers . . . are the sole living creatures that are not also creators.” Wilson is pastiching the sort of rhapsodic treatment of poetry found in William Hazlitt’s lecture “On Poetry in General” (1818) or, more specifically, Leigh Hunt’s review of Alfred Tennyson’s *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical* for *The Tatler*.<sup>97</sup> However, the class politics to observe are not between the Tory intelligentsia and the pro-working-class Cockney School, but between the low-genre satirist and the tragic heroism of Romantic defenders of poetry. Wilson calls out the gentile prejudice against versification and places the cult of genius talk at the center of a middle-class fantasy of upward mobility, one that the Cockneys had embarked on and which Alfred “Lord” Tennyson would make good on (being the first poet to be granted peerage). Remarkably, it takes a University of Edinburgh professor of moral philosophy to identify the class position that the middle-class versifier negatively occupies between peasant prodigy and gentile pedigree:

They, poor creatures, are a peculiar people, impotent of good works. Ears have they, but they hear not—eyes have they, but they will not see—nay, naturalists assert that they have brains and spinal marrow, also organs of speech; yet with all that organization, they seem to have but little feeling, and no thought; and but by a feeble and monotonous fizz, are you made aware, in the twilight of the useless existence of the obscure ephemerals.

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<sup>97</sup> See Leigh Hunt, review of *Poems, Chiefly Lyrical*, by Alfred Tennyson; and *Sonnets and Fugitive Pieces*, by Charles Tennyson, in *The Tatler*, no. 149 (Feb. 24, 1831): 593-594; no. 151 (Feb. 26, 1831): 601-602.



Wilson makes copious use of the time-honored comparison between bad poets and swarms of insects (that “feeble and monotonous fizz”), but later in the essay he gives a more sociological portrait, which I cite at length since I will show my modernist poets (except Eliot) catching glimpses of this figure in the mirror:

It is not easy to find out what sets people a-versifying; especially now-a-days, when the slightest symptoms of there being something amiss with them in that way, immediately subject them not only to the grossest indignities, but to the almost certain loss of bread. We could perhaps in some measure understand it, were they rich, or even tolerably well-off; in the enjoyment, let us suppose, of small annuities, or of hereditary kail-yards, with a well in the corner, overshadowed with a bourtree bush; but they are almost always, if in at the knees, out at the elbows; and their stockings seem to have been compiled originally by some mysterious process of darning upon nothing as a substratum. Now nothing is more honourable than virtuous poverty; but then we expect to see him with a shuttle or spade in his hand, weaving “seventeen hunder linen,” or digging drains, till the once dry desert is all one irrigated meadow, green as the summer woods that fling their shadows o’er its haycocks. He is an insufferable sight, alternately biting his nails and his pen, and blotching whitey-brown with hieroglyphics that would have puzzled Champollion. Versifying operatives are almost always half-witted creatures, addicted to drinking; and sell their songs for alms. Persons with the failing, in what are sometimes called the middle-classes, or even in more

genteel or fashionable life, such as the children of clerks of various kinds, say to canal or coal companies, are slow to enter upon any specific profession, trusting to their genius, which their parents regard with tears, sometimes of joy, and sometimes of rage, according as their prophetic souls see the brows of their offspring adorned with laurels, or their breeches with tatters.<sup>98</sup>

The take-away is that upper-middle and upper-class disdain for verse does not single out the destitute poet of the fields or the drunken balladeer, who either have day jobs or who outright sell verse for alms, but the middle-class poet who aspires to the republic of letters but who belongs in the workforce: “Persons with the failing, in what are sometimes called the middle-classes, or even in more genteel or fashionable life . . . are slow to enter upon any specific profession.” Disregarding the vogue for uneducated poets whose fame flatters their patrons, Wilson focuses on the unredeemable image of the first-generation university-educated son of a the social-climbing middle class (not a bad picture of Tennyson).<sup>99</sup> The versifier is produced by families who have enjoyed class mobility and who either yearn to prove their status by marveling at their “genius” offspring or who fear their progeny will be thrown back into poverty. Avoiding association with this figure and the passage therein between the lower and middle classes is, I think, the root cause of the separation between verse and poetry.

At the outset of this chapter, I pointed to the marked expansion of the poetry/prose debate in the modernist defense and the declining place taken up by discussion of poetic genres. But in fact, debating the similarity or difference between poetry, prose, and verse is a discussion about

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<sup>98</sup> Wilson, “Tennyson’s Poems,” 722.

<sup>99</sup> On “the uneducated poet” as a cultural figure of prejudice, see Richardson, *Literature, Education, and Romanticism*, 247-259.

genre; namely, about how the genres of poetry no longer matter. Whereas poetic *savoir faire* means looking into the abyss beyond language and bringing forth the word, genre begins in the opposite place, out there among the circulating texts, the bookstore recommendation, and the scribbling masses. In order to understand the modernist take on new form, one must understand that in addition to being classed, the bad poet is also a genre poet. In each of the Romantic defenses that I have cited, genre in some way marks the versifier. Wordsworth's story about the fall into genre is typical. First, there are aboriginal poets who "wrote from passion excited by real events," and then there come poets who, "perceiving the influence of such language, and desirous of producing the same effect without being animated by the same passion, set themselves to a mechanical adoption of these figures of speech" and "applied them to feelings and thoughts with which they had no natural connection whatsoever."<sup>100</sup> These poets begin in genre, not in the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling. Coleridge retells this story as the process whereby "the original poets" and their "figures and metaphors" are "stript of their justifying reasons, and converted into mere artifices of connection or ornament."<sup>101</sup> In other words, genre is a matter of received symbolism and mere ornamentation. Even Shelley's brief attack on bad poets in the *Defence* implies the connection between bad poetry and genre poetry:

I can readily conjecture, what should have moved the gall of some learned and intelligent writers who quarrel with certain versifiers; I confess myself, like them, unwilling to be stunned by the Theseids of the hoarse Codri of the day. Bavius and Maevius undoubtedly are, as they ever were, insufferable persons.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 366.

<sup>101</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 2:40.

<sup>102</sup> Shelley, *Defence of Poetry*, 534-535.

John Lemprière's 1788 gloss on Bavius and Maevius in his *Bibliotheca Classica* remains accurate for Shelley's usage: "two stupid and malevolent poets in the age of Augustus, who attacked the superior talents of the contemporary writers."<sup>103</sup> Codrus, multiplied into "Codri," is a contemporary of Juvenal apparently once known for his *Theseids* (poem about Theseus). Tracing the history behind these figures—Codrus, Bavius, Maevius—shows how the genre poet again registers the class trouble of the poetic city, but one can already see the fate of the bad poet whose name is erased as he becomes an archetype of folly.

Having become symbolic figures of the bad poet, particularly after Pope immortalizes them in *The Dunciad*, Bavius and Maevius and especially Codrus are also strongly classed.<sup>104</sup> In *The Dunciad*, which all takes place in "the cave of Poverty and Poetry," "Old Bavius" sits on the banks of the Lethe populated with "millions and millions" of souls returning to the living; his job is "to dip poetic souls, / And blunt the sense / and fit it for a scull / Of solid proof, impenetrably dull."<sup>105</sup> Their passage into the world are the bookstalls of Daniel Brown and William Mear. Here, one can retroactively discern another dimension of the classing language that will figure strongly in the Codrus source: the bad poet lives in a world of things and bodies, not thought. Several of the insults I have cited above summon images of a textual mass or the actual body of the versifier. Webbe is horrified by rhymers who "stufte every stall full of grosse devises and unlearned Pamphlets." Dennis' description of the poet-beetle's "lubberly and a blundering flight" is full of physical comedy. (Not to mention his use of the trope of the "poet ape"—also in

<sup>103</sup> John Lemprière, *Bibliotheca classica; or, a classical dictionary, containing a full account of all the proper names mentioned in antient authors* (London: printed for T. Cadell, 1788) s.v. "Bavius and Mavius."

<sup>104</sup> Shelley's use of the tropes also calls to mind the arch-Tory glazer's son William Gifford and/or the over-ornate Jacobin Della Cruscans whom Gifford satirizes in *The Baviad* (1791), which he writes as a Perseid, and *The Maeviad* (1795); that is, to the anti-reformist extremes of revolutionary sentimentality and cold-hearted royalism.

<sup>105</sup> Pope, *The Dunciad*, in *Alexander Pope: The Major Works*, ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 436, 492.

Sidney—to denounce the hunch-backed Pope, saying that “as he is in Shape a Monkey, is so in his every Action.”<sup>106</sup>) Halifax not only complains of “an Age over-run by Scriblers,” but elaborates on their prolific output: “That worst Vermin of small Authours hath given the World such a Surfeit, that instead of desiring to Write, a Man would be more inclin’d to wish, for his own ease, that he could not Read.”<sup>107</sup> Coleridge locates class rage in “the increased temperature of collected multitudes.” Wilson’s versifier is “alternately biting his nails and his pen,” not to mention wearing socks that “seem to have been compiled originally by some mysterious process of darning upon nothing as a substratum.” And finally, Shelley’s epic hacks are “hoarse.” The image comes from the first lines of John Dryden’s translation “The First Satyr of Juvenal”: “Still shall I hear, and never quit the score, / Stunned with hoarse *Codrus Theseid*, o’re and o’re?”<sup>108</sup> But when Codrus reappears in “The Third Satyr of Juvenal,” he is not among the flattering poets beloved by a Rome over-run by foreign (Grecian) poetasters: he is the original of Wilson’s caricature of the bad poet living in urban poverty. The main speaker in the satire is an acquaintance of Juvenal about to leave Rome in disgust. In his tirade he waxes nostalgic about the rural poor who know their place, lambastes the purple-robed parvenu poets aping their betters, and, confirming the heartlessness of the Roman patrons, paints this pathetic portrait of Codrus:

*Codrus* had but one Bed, so short to boot,  
That his short Wife’s short Legs hung dangling out:  
His Cup-board’s Head, six Earthen Pitchers grac’d,

<sup>106</sup> John Dennis, *A True Character of Alexander Pope*, 2nd ed. (London, s.n., 1717), 2. Ben Jonson also uses the poet-ape trope, see “On the Poet-Ape,” *The Works of Ben Jonson, with notes critical and explanatory and a biographical memoir*, Vol. 8, ed. William Gifford (London: Bickers and Son, 1875), 173-174.

<sup>107</sup> Halifax, *Character of a Trimmer*, 3.

<sup>108</sup> John Dryden, “The First Satyr of Juvenal,” in Winkler, *Juvenal in English* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 139.

Beneath them was his Trusty Tankard plac'd:  
 And to support; this Noble Plate, there lay  
 A bending Chiron, cast from honest Clay.  
 His few Greek Books a rotten Chest contain'd;  
 Whose Covers much of mouldiness complain'd,  
 Where Mice and Rats devour'd Poetick Bread;  
 And on Heroick Verse luxuriously were fed.  
 'Tis true, poor *Codrus* nothing had to boast,  
 And yet poor *Codrus* all that Nothing lost.  
 Beg'd naked through the Streets of wealthy *Rome*;  
 And found not one to feed, or take him home.<sup>109</sup>

Codrus' cupboard is bare and he gains some sympathy for it from the speaker, but only because of the foreign vermin feeding "luxuriously" on poetry's heroic innards. (Think of Spenser's *Error* and Milton's *Sin* as not only representations of the Catholic Church as Whore of Babylon than the ornament-worshiping and ritualistic populace sucking the life from the state.) However, the repugnance achieved in the *Codrus* scene depends less on the swarm of rat-poets than on the image of the mold-covered volume of Homer tucked in a rotten chest and under *Codrus*' too-small bed with his wife's legs dangling over it. The repugnance derives from the juxtaposition of ornament and poverty, a proximity that is possible only in the world of circulating bodies and things. So as the defense of poiesis tells the story of poetry by beginning with the creative scene in the poet's mind, the same defense makes poetry's thingly place in the world the beginning of

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<sup>109</sup> Dryden, "The Third Satyr of Juvenal," in Winkler, *Juvenal in English*, 149.

the end of poetry.

“The poem is not the paper, not the type, not the spoken syllables,” write Robert Graves and Laura Riding: “It is as invisible and as inaudible as thought.” Yet, they argue, “when conservatism of method, through its abuse by slack-minded poets, has come to mean the supplanting of the poem by an exercise in poet-craft, then there is a reasonable place of innovation, if the new method defeats the old method and brings up the important question: how should poetry be written?” The modernist poem exists in a state of contradiction. As Graves and Riding put it, the story of the modernist poem begins with poetry’s fall into genre and attempts to recover the ineffable moment of poiesis that exists separately from the text. Whereas Sidney’s and Shelley’s poiesis begins with the idea and moves toward the text by adding story, image, verse, metaphor, etc., the modernist poem begins in “poet-craft”—a world overrun with poetic text—and attempts to rediscover the “question” of poetry. The purpose is not to answer, but to dwell in silence: “Once this question is asked, the new method has accomplished its end.” The account of the modernist poem, in other words, describes two contradictory motions: while the *ex nihilo* scene of creation shows the poet bringing new form into the world, the impetus for that creation is the poet’s withdrawal or recoil from a world populated with textual genera. Graves and Riding get around the problem by explaining that “the new method” cannot be permitted to become a “formula” and that its principle function is “as a strong deterrent against writing in a worn-out style.”<sup>110</sup> For them, poiesis means endlessly deliberating on open-ended questions that conformist-minded individuals repress and/or displace with closed-minded answers. Their poet is a philosopher of poetry. But this does not change the fact that they have defined the modernist

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<sup>110</sup> Robert Graves and Laura Riding, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry*, in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry, and, A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, ed. Charles Mundy and Patrick McGuinness (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 10-11.

poem as a genre that denies its generic function. Interrogating the definition of poetry is the quintessential question of genre, and the overwhelming majority of modernist poems retain the most salient generic feature of the poem; namely, the line break. Moreover, the techniques or methods of composition developed in modernist poems prove far more elastic and transferable than Graves and Riding anticipate.<sup>111</sup> Most importantly, the idea of the self-destroying poem is familiar. Above, I discuss how defenders of poetry set up the bad poet as a craftsman destroyed by the messy incoherence of his artifact. Here, I think the main difference between the craftsmanship imagined by Graves and Riding and poet-eating verse is that they attribute a purpose or intention to what Coleridge complains is purposeless. The modernist is precisely the sort of poet who makes first and asks questions later, who can only understand what she is doing once she has done it.

Modernism's anti-genre poetic emerges from the theory of poiesis, but that theory does not fit modernist practice. Moore, for example, writes in syllabic counts, but when she is interviewed after receiving the National Book Award for Poetry, she speaks of her oeuvre as if it were unclassifiable: "I can see no reason for calling my work poetry except that there is no other category in which to put it."<sup>112</sup> What makes poetry unique, she implies, is precisely its resistance (actually the poet's) to being categorized or classified. For most modernists genre poetry falls into a classifiable system from the get-go.<sup>113</sup> But as Eliot points out in "Tradition and the

<sup>111</sup> Cf. Williams, *Selected Essays*, 280. Speaking in the 1948 lecture "The Poem as a Field of Action," Williams complains of a nameless "they" who pursue a tired novelty out of an intransigence to change, the same reason the old guard had resisted genuine newness: "They will copy 'the new'—but the tiresome repetition of this 'new,' now twenty years old, disfigures every journal." Evoking the then familiar World War II battle scene, Williams calls the poem "a field of action" because "so many wish rather, avoiding thought, to return to the classic front of orthodox acceptance." The only difference is that this time the cult of the new is what is being accepted.

<sup>112</sup> Moore, *Complete Prose*, 648. See also Jane Howard, "Marianne Moore, 79, Keeps Going Like Sixty," *LIFE*, January 13, 1967.

<sup>113</sup> The emphasis will continue into the postmodern era. Charles Bernstein writes in "State of the Art," "*Poetry is aversion of conformity* in the pursuit of new forms, or can be." But one should not overlook the all important



Individual Talent”—a treatise on genre in disguise—a genuinely new kind of text reconfigures genre around it. In other words, genre is not a fixed chart or matrices with discrete lineages and entries, but a mutating mode of perception, precisely the “living tradition” that he and Pound talk about. So instead of endorsing modernists’ anti-genre poetic as a jab at the verse institution or popular readers, I suggest that the antipathy to genre be understood as evidence of their own anxieties about middle-class upward mobility. Instead of allowing that the poet’s mark is left in a set of artifacts, modernists want to make a name for themselves in their transformation of the genre. In “Patria Mia,” for example, Pound speaks of a “residue” only found in works of “the real artist,” an indicator that, in the case of the genius, “there is always something in the man which does not get into his work,” which shows “why the man is always more worth knowing than his books are.” Getting to know the man behind the oeuvre, however, is only possible by looking through his body of work: “In reading the true artist’s work in bulk one is always vaguely aware of this residue.” What one discovers is a creative capital all the artist’s own, a quality ill-suited to the product-oriented publishing industry: “It is precisely the sort of man who has it in him, that is shunted out of commercialized publication.”<sup>114</sup> Later in his life, for example, Williams imagines a two volume collection of then long out-of-print experiments like *Kora in Hell* and *Spring and All* and unwritten works called “The Poem as a Machine” and “A New Way of Measuring.” According to bibliographer Emily Mitchell Wallace, these unwritten works “would have contained poems with prose to elucidate the method of the poems” or, in Williams’ words from a note on the title page found among his unpublished manuscripts, they would have

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preposition “of” (rather than “to”) in Bernstein’s definition. As he argues, American poetry is defined by a dialectic between the aversion to and desire for conformity. Bernstein, *A Poetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1. Hank Lazer makes a similar statement with reference to the politics of contemporary American poetry being “a *resistance to appropriation*: resistance to the official verse culture, the marketplace, the dominant culture, and hegemonic ideologies.” Lazer, *Opposing Poetics*, 56.

<sup>114</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, 111.

made “a complete sweep through the available material of the poems, from beginning to end, for a cohesive arrangement.”<sup>115</sup> The six-book collection would have been called, as the index is headed, *The Complete Collected Exercises Toward a Possible Poem*. Both Pound and Williams direct their reader to the creative moment in the poetic mind rather than the thing.<sup>116</sup> An early passage in *The Great American Novel* (1923) could have explained the anti-craft impulse in Williams’ projected collection: “Words are not permanent unless the graphite be scraped up and put in a tube or the ink lifted.” A little bit later Williams hits on his conclusion, which explains why he might have later abandoned his proposed project:

If I make a word I make myself into a word. Such is progress. I shall make myself into a word. One big word. One big union. Such is progress. It is a novel. I begin small and make myself into a big splurging word: I take life and make it into one big blurb. I begin at my childhood. I begin at the beginning and make one big—Bah.

What difference is it whether I make the words or take the words. It makes no difference whatever.

There cannot be a novel. There can only be pyramids, pyramids of words, tombs. Their warm breasts heave up and down calling for a head to progress toward them, to fly onward . . . It is a conspiracy against childhood. It runs backward. Words are the reverse motion. Words are the flesh of yesterday.

Words roll, spin, flare up, rumble trickle, foam—Slowly they lose momentum.

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<sup>115</sup> Emily Mitchell Wallace, “Introductory Note,” *A Bibliography of William Carlos Williams* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1968), xix.

<sup>116</sup> See also the “filament” metaphor in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. It may partly or exclusively operate upon the experience of the man himself; but, the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material.” Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 41.

Slowly they cease to stir. At last they break up into their letters—Out of them jumps the worm that was—His hairy feet tremble upon them.<sup>117</sup>

Dwelling on the permanence of the poem as a monument to the life of the poet, Williams has a vision of his rotting flesh. The impulse to tell his story from natality betrays immemorial childhood, the radically non-autonomous beginning of the human animal. More importantly, pretending to write his own story or to contain his thought in some multi-volume opus betrays the spirit of action that he takes as his life's reward. In a heart-felt piece written just after his stroke for *The American Scholar*, Williams dwells on posterity and his and a few others' lasting influence. Here, action is not realizing thought in thing, but redirecting the poem as a genre:

My will to go on with my life is enmeshed in the determination to contribute all I am worth for this. When I am convinced that I have contributed something to the art of the poem, the total poem, the poem as it did not exist before I was born, I am happy in my innermost heart and continue happy for days or months at a time, or as long as I can continue in this belief.

With candor that few modernists achieve, Williams goes on to sketch the pluralistic field of genre, the collaborative nature of poetry, and the imitative core of self-making, even if by the end of the essay he speaks of “the royal blood” of the artist and the necessarily withdraw from the materialistic world into “the family circle and groups of intimates.”<sup>118</sup>

For those invested in self-making as an answer to social conformity, the thought-into-

<sup>117</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 160.

<sup>118</sup> William Carlos Williams, untitled contribution, “Faiths for a Complex World,” *The American Scholar* 26.4 (Autumn 1957), 454, 456.

thing narrative further plays into the analogy between poetic making and divine creation by beginning the story by inviting the reader to identify with the poet in the act of making, rather than with the thing separating and relating poets and readers. By beginning the story this way, the poet of poiesis takes the reader on a detour around not only the thingness of the poem, but the body-bound the poet himself and the circulatory genre-system without which the poem would not exist. The reason for that detour comes from the middle-class origins of the modernist poet.

Chapter One:  
Classing Bad Poetry

“The Serious Artist” and Pound’s Pedagogy of the Ineducable

So for a space this puppet, this poseur, who has never read anything printed before 1890, and whose whole art consists in the imitation of one living author, instructed us and simpered of higher things.

—Ezra Pound

First published in A.R. Orage’s *The New Age*, “The Serious Artist” indexes Pound’s affiliation with guild socialism—the movement to reorganize parliament as the representative forum for self-governing industries—but Pound’s 1913 defense of poetry also exemplifies his more durable commitment to republicanism.<sup>119</sup> At its most basic, republicanism consists of the belief that the welfare of the state depends on the power of the few to check the many. Unlike oligarchy and aristocracy which vest power respectively in the wealthy and the hereditary elite, the republic enfranchises a small number of educated individuals who rule by law and check what would otherwise be the tyranny of the majority, that is, of the demos in a democracy.<sup>120</sup> But the Platonic tradition from which the defense of poetry derives also distinguishes between the

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<sup>119</sup> In the interests of economy, I will not be discussing the connection between republicanism and Social Credit, an interests of Pound’s that grew directly out of his investment in guild socialism but drew in so many aspects of his anti-usury ideology that the genealogy I trace here inevitably becomes muddled in Pound’s own muddled political economy. I will only point to the republican representative ideal in *Credit-Power and Democracy*, when Social Credit guru C.H. Douglas envisions the producer-class as a senate elected and removed by the populace: “The essential nature of a satisfactory modern co-operative State may be broadly expressed as consisting of a functionally aristocratic hierarchy of producers accredited by, and serving, a democracy of consumers.” C.H. Douglas, *Credit-Power and Democracy* (London: Cecil Palmer, 1921), 94. On the relationship between Orage and Douglas and Pound, see Leon Surette’s pithy essay, “Economics,” in *Ezra Pound in Context*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 106-114.

<sup>120</sup> For a discussion of the Platonic invention of the opposition between republicanism and democracy, see Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 68-70. For an account of political philosophy’s long-standing antagonism for craftsmen, see Arendt, *Human Condition*, 302-303; and especially Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, trans. Andrew Parker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

spontaneously enlightened—the philosopher or divinely inspired poet—and those who acquire knowledge through education. The republic imagined in “The Serious Artist” places ultimate authority in natural genius rather than the artifice of curriculum. Guild socialism’s quest to match physical or psychic predispositions to different occupations frames the theory of natural inequality that underlies the republic. Just as guild socialism thinks in terms of technical aptitude, the republic’s theory of natural dispositions focuses on different dispositions to knowledge. While the natural genius is born to make truth knowable—whether through scientific discovery, philosophical logic, or poetic revelation—the populace is divided between those who have an aptitude for education and can take a subordinate role in republican rule and those suited for jobs as merchants, craftsman, entertainers, or laborers. Education, therefore, only characterizes the middle class of the republic from which the state’s guardians—their defenders—can be taken, trained, and established as the executive arm of the enlightened genius elite.<sup>121</sup> By the same process, the educated middle class comes to identify with their betters, the few naturally in the know.

The defense of poetry is another branch of the series of footnotes to Plato and has sought to ground the poet in philosophy; arguing for poetry as a political good, then superimposing the republican class division onto the poetry community. Pound’s city of poetry is divided along the same lines as *The Republic* of Plato: the poet genius rules at a remove from editors, publishers, critics, readers, and novices, while the educated defenders of poetry minister to this ignorant class of literary craftsmen and those to whom they hawk their wares. Below I show that while Pound’s flirtation with guild socialism and his popularizing handbooks—“How to Read,” *ABC*

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<sup>121</sup> On the secluded “serious artist” as scientist, see John T. Gage, “Paradoxes of Objectivity and Argument in Imagist Theory,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 12.3 (Summer 1979), 153-175.

of *Reading*, and *Guide to Kulchur*—suggest a vindication of the poet as craftsman, his pedagogy is actually directed to those suited to education precisely because they will never be enlightened. In other words, Pound’s commitment to republicanism makes education central to his politics not because education is a great equalizer, but because education demonstrates natural inequality. The prefatory remarks in *ABC of Reading* are instructive: “ABC / Or gradus ad Parnassum, for those who might like to learn. This book is not addressed to those who have arrived at full knowledge of the subject without knowing the facts.”<sup>122</sup> Pedagogy does not concern those naturally in the know; it addresses students who gradually acquire “facts,” not real knowledge. The *ABC of Reading* comes from Pound’s “firm conviction that the only way to keep the best writing in circulation, or to ‘make the best poetry popular’ is by drastic separation of the best from a great mass of writing that has been long considered of value.”<sup>123</sup> But Pound distances himself from the popularizing project with his scare quotes and his separation of the best and the rest.<sup>124</sup> More importantly, the statement also expresses the firm conviction that “circulation” alone will not yield “the best” and that popular opinion should be considered a form of artifice, as something to be made over in the image of the elite who do not need to be taught.

Pound’s investments in Neoplatonism, Social Credit, Confucianism, Italian Fascism, and the Early Republic of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson all fall under the rubric of republicanism, as do the politics of language apparent in his early calls for precision, his advocacy of the Confucian doctrine of the Rectification of Names, and his later-life interest in Edward Coke’s *Institutes of the Lawes of England* (1628-1644).<sup>125</sup> Republican themes run

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<sup>122</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, [9].

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Michael Coyle, *Ezra Pound, Popular Genres, and the Discourse of Cultures* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

<sup>125</sup> I will offer one example of the conceptual genealogy. According to Pound, the *Ta Hio*, which he translates from the French and first published in 1928 and then, in revised form, again in 1947, dictates that “the first act of



throughout *The Cantos*. The Adams Cantos, for example, show Pound's inability or unwillingness to understand democracy independently of the reason-versus-passion ethics provided by Platonic/Aristotelean political philosophy. Socrates' ideal republic is an allegory for the ideal character in which divine reason checks timorous passion. Pound's offers Revolutionary-era Boston as an allegory for the ideal character—Adams—as a check on democratic passion. I quote from the passage describing the Boston Massacre and establishing the violent democratic fervor that John Adams will check by representing Captain Preston and the British soldiers brought to court for that first episode in the populist version of the American Revolution. Pound shifts emphasis away from the event itself first by setting the story in the courtroom where Adams stands for law and order against revolutionary violence:

(Boston about the size of Rapallo)  
 scarce 16,000,  
 habits of freedom now formed  
 even among those who scarcely got so far as analysis

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government" is "ching ming," which Confucians call the Rectification of Names and which Pound glosses in the *Ta Hio* as "precise verbal definitions" and in "Mang Tze" as "call things by their right names." Pound, *Confucius* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 31; Pound, "Mang Tze," *Selected Prose: 1909-1965* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 85. In *Cantos LII-LXXI*, comprising the "China Cantos" and the "Adams Cantos," Pound glosses *cheng ming* on a number of occasions: "des termes propres / (namely CH'ing ming)," "technical terms," "clear as to definitions / CHING," or in the words of Adams, "to show U.S. the importance of an early attention to language / for ascertaining the language." The source in Adams' *Works* for this last gloss implies the connection in Pound's mind between the Rectification of Names and republicanism: "It is not to be disputed that the form of government has an influence upon language and language in its turn influences not only the form of government, but the temper, the sentiments, and manners of the people"; or put positively, "Republics have produced the greatest purity, copiousness, and perfection of language." Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996), 333, 352, 387, 400; John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, 2nd President of the United States*, vol. 7, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1852), 249. For a general treatment of the Confucian doctrine, see Yu-Lan Fung, *History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 59-66, 369-377. For an account of Pound's changing views about Taoism and the relationship between the contemplative life and the life of action, see Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 455-457. The best survey of Confucian philosophy in Pound's work is Feng Lan, *Ezra Pound and Confucianism: Remaking Humanism in the Face of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

so about 9 o'clock in the morning Lord North [Lord North] wuz bein' impassible

was a light fall of snow in Bastun, in King St.

and the 29th Styschire in Brattle St

Murray's barracks, and in this case was a

barber's boy ragging the sentinel

so Capn Preston etc/

lower order with billets of wood and 'just roving'

force in fact of a right sez Chawles Fwancis [Adams]

at same time, and in Louses of Parleymoot...

so fatal a precision of aim,

sojers aiming??

Gent standing in his doorway got 2 balls in the arm

and five deaders 'never Cadmus...' etc

was more pregnant

patriots need legal advisor

measures involvin' pro-fessional knowl-edge

BE IT ENACTED / gov-nor council an' house of assembly

(Blaydon objectin' to form ov these doggyminis)

Encourage arts commerce an' farmin'

not suggest anything on my own

if ever abandoned by administration of England

and outrage of the soldiery



In these last four lines, Pound explains the necessity of the rule of law without passion (“sine affectu”) since the people’s passions have been inflamed (“since affectu in 1770, Bastun”).<sup>127</sup>

The city of Boston signs the passage as if into law, but only because Adams holds the pen. (The ironic phrase “habits of freedom” sums up the extent to which the populace is actually free.) The passions can go either way. The guardians, whom Socrates compares to dogs, would be dangerous if not trained properly. In fact, the whole passage is modeled on Adams’ defense of the soldiers from a populace that would just as soon lynch as convict. To naturalize the status of the individual, Pound also differentiates between the outbursts of the mob—provoked by a group response—and the individual’s animal reflexes or “endocrine human emotions.” I set aside the rich irony that the representatives of the the state’s lawful monopoly on force should be the ones to register fight-or-flight self-preservation. The point I want to make here is that the republican defense of the rule of law imagines one particular fear: the excesses of a group mind violating individual right. In short, the primal scene of the republican imaginary is the rights-bearing individual—the genealogy of which goes back to privilege—beset upon by the force of numbers. The real revolution, Pound implies, is in the courtroom where Adams checks the popular will in the name of protecting the human animal from itself. If Boston’s “16,000” at the beginning of the passage suggests its strength in numbers, Pound shows “Bastun” signing its name the republican constitution by the end of the passage: “that law rules / that it be / since affectu in 1770, Bastun.”

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<sup>127</sup> The genealogy of “mens sine affectu” goes back a passage in Aristotle’s *Politics* that puts the stakes of politics in the familiar terms divine reason versus the human animal. The addition of “that law rules,” which is not in the Adams source, suggests that Pound recognizes the passage: “He who commands that law should rule may thus be regarded as commanding that God and reason alone should rule; he who commands that a man should rule adds the character of the beast.” The rest of the passage reads: “Appetite has that character; and high spirit, too, perverts the holders of office, even when they are the best of men. Law is thus ‘reason without desire.’” Aristotle *Politics* 1287a23-1287a31.

“The Serious Artist” and other essays of the period show Pound’s republican thought steeping in the guild socialism of A. R. Orage and *The New Age*. Philosophical republicanism and guild socialism share a commitment to a division of labor based on natural disposition. The revolution in letters Pound imagines is not the mission of professors or publishers but of the self-confessed dilettante, the poet-craftsman who has renounced pretensions to genius. The pedagogical texts of subsequent decades—“How to Read” (1929); *ABC of Reading* (1934); “The Teacher’s Mission” (1934); “Date Line” (1934); *Guide to Kulchur* (1938)—are instruction manuals for the defense of poetry, still committed to the guild-model implicit in “The Serious Artist.” For example, “How to Read” and *ABC of Reading* both explicitly revisit the earlier essay, and “For a New Paideuma” (1938) culminates in an explicit call for a poetry “*sindicato*.” The class defined by its education and addressed in these texts, I argue, is distinguished by the propensity for imitation. While imitation is deleterious to the state of poetry, when bad poets adopt inferior models or steal thunder from the genuine article, the education of the unenlightened class relies upon its members being molded into defenders of poetry and archivists of technique.

As Lee Garver points out, Pound’s guild socialism is not the general-strike syndicalism of George Sorel. Invested in the right kind of hierarchy, Pound shares the “guilds’ traditional commitment to upholding the highest standards of craft and production.” The title of “Allen Upward Serious,” enlists Upward on the side of the serious poets against those Pound calls “the type of writer produced by present conditions, who keeps in the public eye by a continuous output of inferior work.”<sup>128</sup> Like Upward, another contributor to *The New Age*, Pound

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<sup>128</sup> Lee Garver, “Seafarer Socialism: Pound, *The New Age*, and Anglo-Medieval Radicalism,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 29.4 (Summer 2006), 16; Pound, “Allen Upward Serious,” *The New Age* 14.25 (April 23, 1914), 780.

reorganizes representation around professions and trades as a means of making political power contingent on natural aptitude:

1. That a nation is civilised in so far as it recognises the special faculties of the individual, and makes use thereof. You do not weigh coals with the assayer's balance.
- 1a. Corollary. Syndicalism. A social order is well balanced when the community recognises the special aptitudes of groups of men and applies them.
2. That Mr. Upward's propaganda is for a syndicat of intelligence; of thinkers and authors and artists.
- 2a. That such a guild is perfectly in accord with Syndicalist doctrines. That it would take its place with the guilds of more highly skilled craftsmen.<sup>129</sup>

As a centralized standard-bearing institution, “a syndicat of intelligence; of thinkers and authors and artists” would rein in the influence of the academy and the publishing industry, both of which Pound hated, but the guild would also limit who could count themselves as a poet. In this model, only those with some propensity for poetry would be educated into guild secrets and earn the title “serious.”

The classing tropes of “The Serious Artist” appear in several other of Pound's prose pieces, most fully elaborated in “Patria Mia.”<sup>130</sup> The expanded 1913 version shifts attention from “popular ignorance” to issues “of pseudo-artists and of a system of publishing control.” These passages are preoccupied with giving credit where credit is due. The problem, Pound says, is not

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> See “The Teacher's Mission” (1934) and “Date Line” (1934) in Pound, *Literary Essays*, 63, 77.

that “the arts” are threatened by “false priests and producers of commercial imitations,” but that “the nation will not know that the arts stay alive.” Without correcting popular misconceptions about what counts as good poetry, “the sham will grow.” The problem is compounded by Pound’s insistence that serious poetry happens outside the literary marketplace and, ideally, in a world of state-sponsored research and development:

The serious artist does not play up to the law of supply and demand. He is like the chemist experimenting, forty results are useless, his time is spent without payment, the forty-first or the four hundredth and first combination of elements produces the marvel, for posterity as likely as not.

As in “The Serious Artist,” Pound returns to comparisons between the artist and the purity of scientific research, but he also charts the rise and fall of another figure: “the tradesman.” Initially, it is difficult to tell where Pound’s poet-scientist ends and where the market-oriented hack begins, but market forces eventually drive a wedge between the two:

The tradesman must either cease from experiment, from discovery and confine himself to producing that for which there is a demand, or else he must sell his botches, and either of these courses is as fatal to the artist as it would be to the man of science.

The guild system, in which the production of poetry is coordinated and funded by the state, would provide poets with the autonomy more like that of a tenured professor at a research university (like Albert Einstein) than a commercially-oriented inventor (like Thomas Edison).

Pound is more explicitly critical of the market's degrading effect on "editors" who he says "are not by nature and inclination essentially base, [but become so] by any continuing practice of their trade." Similarly, the talents of the tradesman-poet, a figure outside the guild, are deformed by "the system of magazine publication" in which he is obliged to cater to public taste.<sup>131</sup> Even if the poet aims for posterity, success "in the periodicals or in some other branch of popular publication" will make him "nearly always dated." Having once made "revelations," the poet will "repeat the sort of effect that has succeeded" and bring about "the death and atrophy of his art."<sup>132</sup>

Yet if this poet seems initially to have a choice between commercialization or experimentation, the passage also suggests that only some poets possess the innate predisposition for artistic seriousness. The poet cannot fulfill market expectations and write lasting poetry at the same time because contemporary success dates the style in advance. Instead, what seems to determine the poetry of posterity is a cohesion in which the poet's personality comes through the work:

As Coleridge has wisely said the distinguishing mark of his work will be a sort of undercurrent, everywhere present and yet nowhere noticeable as a separate excitement. No fragment of his work will, apart, have the full significance that it has when considered in relation to the whole sum of his work.<sup>133</sup>

This work is ostensibly of less interest in discrete poems than the master's collected oeuvre. By the same token, Pound contends, "an author's verse gathered from the magazines" will be "more

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<sup>131</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, 110.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-111.



endurable when taken detached and apart.” One type of poet produces poetry and exemplifies a life that becomes a work of art itself through devotion to poiesis; another type of poet, the versifier, produces only poems. What counts in poetic experiment, then, is not the application of new technique but the sense of self discernible as an absence or openness in the textual artifact: “With the real artist there is always a residue, there is always something in the man which does not get into his work. There is always some reason why the man is always more worth knowing than his books are.” Eliot responds to this bid for personality with the depersonalization argument in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” Yet both Eliot and Pound come to the same conclusion that what counts is, as Eliot says, having a personality in the first place, or in Pound’s words: “it is precisely the sort of man who has it in him that is shunted out of commercialized publication.” For Eliot, having the it-factor means being able to sublimate (and sacrifice) the life of the individual into something greater like tradition. For Pound, the it-factor is the will to portray “the life of the artist . . . the real life of him, his self achievement in art.”<sup>134</sup>

The sort of genuine poetry described in “The Serious Artist” and “How to Read” becomes the source of imitation for countless poetasters who repackage others’ experiments for popular consumption. Pound divides poets and popular versifiers by comparing them, respectively, to the wild force of nature and the factory’s assembly line:

The whole matter is that the editor wants what fits the scheme of his number. As the factory owner wants one man to make screws and one man to make wheels and each man in his employ to do some one mechanical thing that he can do almost without the expenditure of thought, so the magazine producer

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 111. I am referring to this quip: “But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.” Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 43.

wants one man to provide one element, let us say one sort of story and another articles on Italian cities and above all, nothing personal.

The serious artist must be as open as nature. Nature does not give all herself in a paragraph. She is rugged and not set apart into discreet categories. And the 'readers' want a certain flavour of clever crime from one man, so we are told, and that man and his imitators must cease to think about life and its significance and bend all their minds on devising how crimes may be cleverly committed in 5,000 words.

In order to preserve the division between poetic creation and generic imitation, the passage finally returns to the idea of the craftsman as as a wage laborer passing himself off as a skilled artisan. The analogy between the magazine editor and the factory owner is followed by the displacement of the tradesman in the next paragraph as even the modicum of craft among contributors is taken away and replaced with the routine application of "formulae":

The magazines do not even foster good craftsmanship, for good craftsmanship, technique, in its truest sense, is the obtaining or achieving a precise relationship between the subject and the expression. Magazine technique consists in the conforming to certain formulae.<sup>135</sup>

Anti-genre rhetoric abounds: The act of poiesis that makes a poem inextricable from the oeuvre also makes it incompatible with genre. The production of genre poetry is about "conforming to certain formulae." Concealed within the predicable anti-conformist take on genre is a

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<sup>135</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, 110-111.

redefinition of “craftsmanship” as the achievement of “a precise relationship between the subject and the expression.” Whether this means saying what one means to say or putting the life of the poet into the poem, appreciating this kind of craftsmanship means reading the poem through the eyes of the author rather than through the frame of genre. If bad craftsmanship means knowing how to produce desired effects in a predictable audience, good craftsmanship means adjusting language to thought. Pound has taken craftsmanship away from the figure one meets at the beginning of the passage who works with both his hands and his head. The final image of the factory floor, in which contributors “do some one mechanical thing . . . almost without the expenditure of thought,” has replaced a scene in which the poet-craftsman divides his time between experimental and commercial endeavors. In this last scene, the craftsman is nowhere to be found as the editor and the hack play the respective roles of exploitative capitalist and mindless laborer. To be sure, Pound does not like the idea of genius mixing with genre, so much so that he reconfigures his class hierarchy to exclude “the tradesman” that occasions the passage.<sup>136</sup>

Although Pound cites Coleridge for the idea that “no fragment of his work will, apart, have the full significance that it has when considered in relation to the whole sum of his work,” Coleridge’s analogy between poetry and organic form on one hand and verse and mechanic compartmentalization on the other also informs Pound’s treatment of the poet-craftsman as a problem in the poetic community.<sup>137</sup> Just as “Patria Mia” calls for the creation of a literary

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<sup>136</sup> On the exclusion of the petty bourgeoisie and the artisan from capitalist and anti-capitalist interpellation (and the role of that exclusion in the ideological formation of fascism), see Stephen Hartnett, “The Ideologies and Semiotics of Fascism: Analyzing Pound’s Cantos 12-15,” *boundary 2* 20.1 (Spring 1993), 70-71. My thoughts on the subject, however, come from Rancière’s reading of the artisan trope in Plato’s *Republic*, see *The Philosopher and His Poor*, 3-53.

<sup>137</sup> Pound is drawing on what Abrams calls the organicist theory of poetry. On the organicist theory of poetry in the Romantic era, see Abrams, *Mirror and the Lamp*, 156-225.

“super-college” after the guild model, the *Biographia Literaria* advocates the education of the artisan class whose newly gained literacy has thrust them into the republic of letters. Coleridge half-seriously recommends a literary journal created partly to educate and partly to punish craftsmen who take to poetry: “It might correct the moral feelings of a numerous class of readers, to suppose a Review set on foot, the object of which was to criticise all the chief works presented to the public by our ribbon-weavers, calico-printers, cabinet-makers, and china-manufacturers.”<sup>138</sup> The contemptuous place to which Coleridge’s high romanticism relegates working-class verse is never more apparent than in the *Biographia Literaria*’s response to the phrase *genus irritabile vatum* and the figure of the hyper-defensive poet. Coleridge, defensive himself, deals with the insult, like Pound, by drawing on an analogy between petty versification and manufacturing. The hierarchy outlined in the following passage will provide a model for Pound’s own hierarchies of the poetry community:

Of all trades, literature at present demands the least talent or information; and of all modes of literature, the manufacturing of poems. The difference indeed between these and the works of genius, is not less than between an egg, and an egg-shell; yet at a distance they both look alike. Now it is no less remarkable than true, with how little examination works of polite literature are commonly perused, not only by the mass of readers, but by men of first rate ability, till some accident or chance discussion have roused their attention, and put them on their guard. And hence individuals below mediocrity not less in natural power than in acquired knowledge, nay, bunglers that had failed in the lowest mechanic crafts, and whose presumption is in due proportion to their want of sense and sensibility;

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<sup>138</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1:43.

men, who being first scriblers from idleness and ignorance next become libellers from envy and malevolence; have been able to drive a successful trade in the employment of the booksellers, nay have raised themselves into temporary name and reputation with the public at large, by that most powerful of all adulation, the appeal to the bad and malignant passions of mankind.<sup>139</sup>

The dangerous populism of poetry, the perversion of language, the inequality of natural dispositions, and the conspiracy of the publishing trade are all present here. The problem, as Isaac D’Israeli had elaborated in 1795, is the education of the wrong kind of person: “since, with incessant industry, volumes have been multiplied, and their prices rendered them accessible to the lowest artisans, the Literary Character has gradually fallen into disrepute.”<sup>140</sup> As Coleridge says, “language,” in order to be taught to the masses, is “mechanized as it were into a barrel-organ” so that “even the deaf may play, so as to delight the many.” Behind the selectiveness of the guild lies a nostalgia like Coleridge’s for a time that never was, when poetry was the prerogative of gifted souls like Sir Philip Sidney. The education Pound offers is also a stopgap response to the problems of mass literacy. Pound’s reticence to take up a prose defense can be traced back to the broader argument of the above passage in the *Biographia*, that those who make noisome, vociferous defenses of their poetry are not men of genius but only men of talent who have been “rendered yet more irritable by their desire to *appear* men of genius.” The difficulty telling the difference is exacerbated by the fact that the majority of poets are “mere *counterfeits* both of talent and genius.”<sup>141</sup> Coleridge’s message is this: the more a poet defends himself as a

<sup>139</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1:39-42.

<sup>140</sup> Isaac D’Israeli, *An Essay on the Manners and Genius of the Literary Character* (London: T. Cadell, Jr. and W. Davies, 1795), xv.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

poet, the more he shows his want of learning and low birth. The “Review” Coleridge proposes offers an education in one’s own inferiority: the more “ribbon-weavers, calico-printers, cabinet-makers, and china-manufacturers” know, the more they will be aware they belong in the shop, field, or factory. Pound is shrewder. Instead of fighting the losing battle keeping plebes in their proper place, Pound puts them to work in the defense of poetry.

Before modernists begin to turn away from the prose defense, Wordsworth and Coleridge are already distancing themselves from the genre in the very texts that comprise the Romantic defense. Early on in the “Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*,” Wordsworth declines “to prefix a systematic defence of the theory upon which the Poems were written.” One alternative is to turn to the poem as a statement on poetics: he and Coleridge contemplate *The Recluse* as a poem in which Wordsworth would “assume the station of a man in mental repose, one whose principles were made up and so prepared to deliver upon authority a system of philosophy.”<sup>142</sup> Another alternative can be found in the fragmentary or work-in-progress defense Wordsworth makes in the transformation of the “Advertisement” into the 1800 “Preface” into the 1802 “Preface” and “Appendix” on poetic diction. Wordsworth looks retrospectively at these framing pieces as an open system in answer to the closed systems of mechanistic philosophy. He is compelled “to add a sentiment which ought to be the pervading spirit of a system, detached parts of which have been imperfectly explained in the Preface—namely, that in proportion as ideas and feelings are valuable, whether the composition be in prose or in verse, they require and exact one and the same language.”<sup>143</sup> As Clifford Siskin has shown, the system at the time had become a genre of its own. Emerging in Enlightenment texts like David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739-

<sup>142</sup> (a) Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, 288. (b) Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Table Talk*, vol. 1, ed. Carl Woodring, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, Vol. 14 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990), 307.

<sup>143</sup> Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 370.

1740), the system had become the new standard for defensible discourse. But if Romantics are drawn in reaction to unsystematic genres like the essay, the inquiry, the fragment, the note, and the appendix, this does not mean, Siskin points out, that they are indifferent to systems. Although Romantics move away from the system as a genre, they move toward genres that foreground system-making in action and the provisional quality of practical thought.<sup>144</sup>

There is yet another reason that makes poets reluctant to take up the prose defense. Simply put, defending poetry to satisfy philosophical cross-examination takes too much time away from writing poetry. To do a defense right, Wordsworth says, “would require a space wholly disproportionate to the nature of a preface” and set him on an impossibly cross-disciplinary adventure:

For to treat the subject with the clearness and coherence of which it is susceptible, it would be necessary to give a full account of the present state of the public taste in this country, and to determine how far this taste is healthy or depraved, which, again could not be determined, without pointing out in what manner language and the human mind act and re-act on each other, and without retracing the revolutions, not of literature alone, but likewise of society itself.<sup>145</sup>

*The Recluse* goes unfinished as it is. Although the *Biographia Literaria* is understood as a defense of poetry, Coleridge is also flatly against defensive rhetoric: “Indignation at literary wrongs, I leave to men born under happier stars. I cannot *afford it*.”<sup>146</sup> Pound too recognizes, “It

<sup>144</sup> See Clifford Siskin, “The Problem of Periodization: Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Fate of System,” in Chandler, *Cambridge History of English Romantic Literature*, 101-126.

<sup>145</sup> Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, 288.

<sup>146</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 1:45. If authors did not explicitly situate a text in the genre, this does not mean they are not recognized as defenses. In an anthology called *Prelude to Poetry* (1894) and “intended as an introductory to the English poets, chiefly to their own writings in what is virtually their own defence,” the

might be better to do the thing thoroughly, in a properly accurate treatise, but one has not always two or three spare years at one's disposal."<sup>147</sup> Defending poetry has a negative return rate: "one work of art is worth forty prefaces and as many apologiae."<sup>148</sup> To put one's defense in a poem solves this problem, but the idea remains that the poet should write poetry and someone else should defend it. That is, some kinds of literary activity are labor and fit for laborers, not thinkers.

The theory of inequality that naturalizes republican class division occupies center stage in "The Serious Artist." Whether contrasting a minority of "thinking and sentient people" to the populous "fog and outer darkness" or comparing the "serious artist" to "the commoner brand . . . greatly outnumbering the serious variety," Pound consistently defends the few against the many. An important, related commonplace of republican rhetoric is that the natural genius is threatened by imitators. Here, for example, Pound outlines the guild's importance in maintaining a difference between serious and unserious poets:

Among thinking and sentient people the bad artist is contemned as we would contemn a negligent physician or a sloppy, inaccurate scientist, and the serious artist is left in peace, or even supported and encouraged. In the fog and the outer darkness no measures are taken to distinguish between the serious and the unserious artist. The unserious artist being the commoner brand and greatly outnumbering the serious variety, and it being to the temporary and apparent

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*Biographia* and the "Preface" are cited along with Sidney's and Shelley's defenses as "inevitable" entries. In the words of one late-nineteenth-century scholar, the *Biographia* is "a philosophical analysis and defense of true poetry" and an "apology for [Coleridge's] poetical career." Ernest Rhys, Introduction, *The Prelude to Poetry: The English Poets in Defence and Praise of their Art* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1894), vii-viii; and J. Macmillan Brown, *Manual of English Literature: Era of Expansion, 1750-1850* (London: Whitcombe and Tombs Ltd., 1894), 302-303.

<sup>147</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 50.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.



advantage of the false artist to gain the rewards proper to the serious artist, it is natural that the unserious artist should do all in his power to obfuscate the lines of demarcation.<sup>149</sup>

The bad poet is a master manipulator, and the popular audience is the dupe. In Pound's guild-oriented pedagogy, if poets had a code as transparent as the Hippocratic oath or the scientific method, bad poets would not pass without censure. Pound provides that code in "The Serious Artist": the serious poet "must bear true witness."<sup>150</sup> The punishment he outlines for the poet who makes "false reports" follows as, in a moment of *contrapasso*, Pound holds a mirror up to the lying poet:

If an artist falsifies his report as to the nature of man, as to his own nature, as to the nature of his ideal of the perfect, as to the nature of his ideal of this, that or the other, of god, if god exist, of the life force, of the nature of good and evil, if good and evil exist, of the force with which he believes or disbelieves this, that or the other, of the degree in which he suffers or is made glad; if the artist falsifies his reports on these matters or on any other matter in order that he may conform to the taste of his time, to the proprieties of a sovereign, to the conveniences of a preconceived code of ethics, than that artist lies. If he lies out of deliberate will to lie, if he lies out of carelessness, out of laziness, out of cowardice, out of any sort of negligence whatsoever, he nevertheless lies and he should be punished or despised in proportion to the seriousness of his offense. Albeit his lies are known

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<sup>149</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 47-48.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

to only a few or his truth-telling to only a few. Albeit he may pass without censure for one and without praise for the other. Albeit he can only be punished on the plane of his crime and by nothing save the contempt of those who know of his crime. Perhaps it is caddishness rather than crime. However there is perhaps nothing worse for a man than to know that he is a cur and to know that someone else, if only one person, knows it.<sup>151</sup>

Likening the bad poet to a bad dog recalls Socrates' analogy between educating the guardian and training a dog to know his master. The slippage between the criminal and the vulgar typifies republican anti-populism. The strange reversal in the last few sentences, retreating from ostracizing rhetoric, marks Pound's pedagogical turn to an internally conflicted self. Pound is appealing to the individual compelled in the pursuit of popularity to conform "to the taste of his time, to the proprieties of a sovereign, to the conveniences of a preconceived code of ethics." Instead, Pound would have the poet adhere to the poet's code and seek a kind of self-discovery incompatible with mass appeal.<sup>152</sup> The bad poet knows how to imitate individuality, which is part of the problem. However, as I will show, in the inter-guild hierarchy Pound imagines, the bad poet would continue to imitate as a pedagogical exercise, only do so openly. In short, the path of atonement lies through the defense of poetry as the bad poet bears witness, not to his or her individuality, but to his or her imitative nature.

An almost identical individual-conformist paradox appears when Pound offers the following aside to his readers, as if everything before had been a litany of forms of foolishness:

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>152</sup> As Gage writes in one of the most thorough readings of "The Serious Artist," Pound's demand for "scientific neutrality" is "an attempt to escape the influence of that part of the self which falsifies and distorts emotions" in order to discover "a real self hidden beneath the conventional surface." Gage, "Paradoxes of Objectivity," 155.

Also you are a fool to seek the kind of art you don't like. You are a fool to *read* classics because you are told to and not because you like them. You are a fool to aspire to good taste if you haven't naturally got it. If there is one place where it is idiotic to sham that place is before a work of art. Also you are a fool not to have an open mind, not to be eager to enjoy something you might enjoy but don't know how to. Now it is not the artist's place to ask you to learn, or defend his particular works of art, or to insist on you reading his books. Any artist who wants your particular admiration is, by just so much, the less artist.<sup>153</sup>

Pound puts his readers in a double-bind: after berating those who “aspire” to “good taste” even though they “haven't naturally got it,” he goes on to admonish those who are not “eager to enjoy something [they] might enjoy but don't know how to.” The student is essentially proven a “fool” for not being willing enough to be educated into better taste, and proven a “sham” by imitating what seems to be the better taste of others. Instead of becoming caught up in the conformity necessary to teach, the artist of true merit will most likely be found “far from the aegrum vulgus,” the “diseased rabble.”<sup>154</sup> As the bad poet is confronted with his or her own “false reports” by an in-the-know figure like Pound, this prospective student is confronted with the fact that his or her natural aptitude lies in imitation. The problem, Pound tells them, is that they have been imitating those who disguise the fact that they too are sycophantic impostors:

The only really vicious criticism is the academic criticism of those who make the grand abnegation, who refuse to say what they think, if they do think, and who

<sup>153</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 46.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 47. For Pound's translation of the expression borrowed from Aurelius Augurellus, see Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910; New York: New Directions, 1968), 239.

quote accepted opinion; these men are the vermin, their treachery to the great work of the past is as great as that of the false artist to the present. If they do not care enough for the heritage to have a personal conviction then they have no licence to write.<sup>155</sup>

The vice is hardly confined to the academy. In “Patria Mia,” ninety percent of Americans fall into this category:

Nine out of every ten Americans have sold their souls for a quotation. They have wrapped themselves about a formula of words instead of about their own centres.

They will judge nothing a priori. They will refer it to Emerson, or Mrs. Eddy, or whomsoever you will. They will not judge it for themselves. They will pretend to do so. They will hold to an opinion. Pin an American down on any fundamental issue you like, and you get at his last gasp—a quotation.<sup>156</sup>

Everyone, it seems, knows enough to pretend to have individual tastes and opinions, but very few actually do. So when Pound demands that everyone “however stupid or ignorant, must judge for himself,” it is not so much that he expects this autonomy to yield better taste as he believes it might cut down on pretenses.<sup>157</sup>

The central issue of education, then, is how to manage this strange class of imitators who

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 56. The “grand abnegation” is an allusion to the nobodies—led by Pope Celestine—who populate the fields outside the gates of hell in Canto III of Dante’s *Inferno*, to which Eliot also alludes in *The Waste Land*. (See the section that follows.)

<sup>156</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, 102.

<sup>157</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 56.

are compelled to throw themselves into poetry but do more harm as poets than good. The half guild-inspired, half modern-science notion of the specialist solves the problem by freeing the “serious” poet from having to consort with inferiors and giving middling poets a more noble purpose. In last few pages of “The Serious Artist,” Pound further breaks down the division of labor in the poetry community. There are, Pound says, three kinds of “honest work”: the work of natural genius or “the thing that will out”; the labor of prose or the “conscientious formulation,” and then a “third sort” that “savours of the laboratory” and “concerns the specialist, and the dilettante.” Outside this core, one finds the dishonest work of the hack who “interpose[s] his inferior productions between masterwork and the public” and “the person possessed of connoisseurship . . . apt to want to buy the rare at one price and sell it at another.” Although the specialist disappears from the passage—only to show up again on the first page of “How to Read”—the dilettante preserves a glimpse of this poet-turned-educator who is either a critic who “has no axe to grind for himself” or a poet who is “eager to preserve the best precedent work” by purposively confessing his lesser talents: “He will drag out ‘sources’ that prove him less original than his public would have him.”<sup>158</sup>

Pound’s pedagogy begins with a statement of natural inequality; the state’s job is to educate with a view toward best utilizing everyone’s aptitude, which means both making the best of the untalented and giving the genius free range. In this system egalitarianism is injustice. In the crucial, first part of “The Serious Artist,” Pound outlines how the equal treatment of different—i.e. unequal—individuals and groups constitutes a dereliction of duty. At first, Pound seems to offer a standard everyone-is-different argument in favor of tolerance and individual right: “From the arts we learn that man is whimsical, that one man differs from another. That men

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

differ among themselves as leaves upon trees differ. That they do not resemble each other as do buttons cut by machine.” This liberal-utilitarian strain echoes in his talk of “the good of the greatest number” and the “maximum happiness” an individual can avail himself of “without causing too great a percentage of unhappiness to those about him.”<sup>159</sup> But for Pound some people clearly do “resemble each other as do buttons cut by machine.” In another displacement of the craftsman’s manual work in “Patria Mia,” Pound writes that “a man’s mind must be hand-made and not machine made if one is to take an interest in it.”<sup>160</sup>

As Pound’s ethics of individualism becomes more pronounced so does his insistence on natural inequality. Soon he is distinguishing between those who are more human from the more animal:

From the arts also we learn in what ways man resembles and in what way he differs from certain other animals. We learn that certain men are often more akin to certain animals than they are to other men of different composition. We learn that all men do not desire the same things and that it would therefore be inequitable to give to all men two acres and a cow.<sup>161</sup>

Pound may say that “all men do not *desire* the same things,” but he really means that all men do not *deserve* the same things. His racism is palpable in the example drawn from the popular reparation slogan calling for forty acres and a mule, but whether or not Pound means to single out the Reconstruction-era redistribution, the comparison between “certain men” and “certain animals” certainly winks to someone who self-identifies as knowledgeable about who deserves

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 41-42.

<sup>160</sup> Pound, “Patria Mia,” *The New Age* 11.25 (Oct. 17, 1912), 588.

<sup>161</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 42.

what. The fundamental lesson Pound wants to convey has to do with desiring more than one deserves and politicians' indulgence of those misplaced desires out of a misplaced sense of equality:

As inequities can exist because of refusals to consider the actualities of a law in relation to a social condition, so can inequities exist through refusal to consider the actualities of the composition of the masses, or of the individuals to which they are applied.

If all men desired above everything else two acres and a cow, obviously the perfect state would be that state which gave to each man two acres and a cow.

If any science save the arts were able more precisely to determine what the individual does not actually desire, then that science would be of more use in providing the data for ethics.<sup>162</sup>

When Pound scolds conformists passing themselves off as original thinkers or artists, he posits a true individual beneath a compromised exterior. But this suffering and suppressed soul is Pound's projection of his conviction that the best poets of his generation have recognition stolen from them by their inferiors. In this discussion of what poetry can do for the state, calibrating desire to desert seems to go in only one direction, uncovering only "what the individual does not actually desire." The essay dwells on individuals asking for or getting too much, never too little. Whether in context of guild socialism's antipathy for revolutionary socialism, Pound's antagonism to women's suffrage and female writers, or his postbellum-era white racism, the underlying argument is the same: poetry's political contribution is to check the undeserving,

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 42-43.

revealing the injustice of egalitarianism.

To conclude this section, I return to Pound's theory of natural inequality. As I discuss in the introduction, prose is philosophy's logic test for ornamented language like poetry, but designating textual phenomena as ornamental has just as much to do with keeping down the undeserving as it does with stripping excess from "bare communication." When Pound faults Americans' fondness for quotation, for example, he is berating a species of offensive ornamentation. When he says that the poet who cannot attain "precision in verse . . . must either take to prose or give up his claim to being a serious artist," Pound bars the undeserving from the language of ornament in order to make poetry into a language of just reward.<sup>163</sup> Ornament among the deserving does not read as superfluous. The class-specific prejudice against ornamentation becomes evident in the anecdote of the night out with "a certain versifier." Found in "Patria Mia," Pound's story laments the decline of the rugged individual. Pound's companion is the quintessential false poet, marked by self-ignorance, effeminacy, and class trouble. He is "not wholly lacking in talents of imitation," but so effete that Pound thinks being "among men" would do the versifier good. But believing himself in the company of mere "representatives of the hated commercialism," actually two aristocratic adventurers turned clerks, Pound's companion "set[s] himself to elevating conversation" and reads them bad poetry: "So for a space this puppet, this poseur, who has never read anything printed before 1890, and whose whole art consists in the imitation of one living author, instructed us and simpered of higher things."<sup>164</sup> The poseur does not know that they are not only better read but also, unlike him, "born gentlemen." The most telling distinction is their relationship to language. While the poet ape

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>164</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, 109.



attempts eloquence, he entirely misses the eloquence of his supposed enemies, one of whom is “a natural recounter of life” while the other “wield[s] a vocabulary and a racy, painted speech that would do no shame to his Elizabethan namesake.” The story offers a damning image of the defender of contemporary poetry, but more importantly, it reveals the appellation “versifier” as class specific. Too ignoble to be decadent and too self-important to be colloquial, the versifier is a euphemism for the class outsider, someone who has overstepped their limitations and mistakes their betters for their peers. Pound’s pedagogy associates ornament with an undeserving class. Again, historical context offers a strong genealogy in which the preference for inspiration over artifice reflects the class-specific animus of middle-class poets against the influx of actual artisans into the poetry world.

Another anecdote, this time from *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935), shows the consistency with which Pound found ornament offensive in the speech of the lower-middle-class orator. Here, Pound contrasts the verbiage of a shopkeeper aspiring to eloquence with the brusque slang of a fascist innkeeper; both think of themselves as educators of a sort, but Pound is willing to listen to only one:

There is the Latin habit of discussing abstract ideas. In America this habit is restricted to the small undesirable class who write for the *New Republic* and analogous nuisances. In England it is confined to Fabians.

This habit has nothing to do with knowledge or a desire to learn. It is more or less allied to the desire for eloquence.

I have seen the Italian small shopkeeper in the midst of a verbal soar, utterly unable to attend to a waiting customer until he has delivered his

“*opinione*,” rounded out his paragraph for a customer already served.

Language for many of them seems to disgorge itself in huge formed blobs, and nothing but violent shock can impede the disgorgement of, let us say, a three-hundred-word blob, once its emission is started.

Hence the rules of the American Senate, the oriental secular tradition of leisure, etc.

Humanity, Italian and every other segment of it, is not given to seeing the FACT, man sees his own preconception of fact.

It takes a genius charged with some form of dynamite, mental or material, to blast him out of these preconceptions.

The pursuit of “eloquence” instead of “learning”; the aversion to “FACT”; the self-serving lack of self-awareness; and the use of too many words; all these prove the populace’s unfitness for politics and warrant the fascist revolution that provides the shock of genius Pound sees in Mussolini. The pro-Mussolini innkeeper understands as much and forgoes eloquence for the colloquial brevity of a slogan:

“NOI CI FACCIAMO SCANNAR PER MUSSOLINI,” said my hotel-keeper in Rimini years ago, thinking I knew nothing about the revolution and wanting to get it into my head. Nothing happens without efficient cause. My hotel-keeper was also Comandante della Piazza, we had got better acquainted by reason of his sense of responsibility, of his interest in what I was doing. The local librarian had shut up the library, and the Comandante had damn well decided that

if I had taken the trouble to come to Romagna to look at a manuscript, the library would cut the red tape.

“Scannar” is a very colloquial word meaning to get scragged. It has none of the oratorical quality of “we will die for,” but that’s what it means. And my friend M. was expressing a simple fact.<sup>165</sup>

In Lawrence Rainey’s words, this encounter with Commandante Marchetti is “a landmark in [Pound’s] understanding of fascism: Marchetti’s devotion, even his style of expression, are indices of Facism’s virtue.”<sup>166</sup> The 1923 episode involves almost the same components as the stories of his night out with the versifier and the would-be eloquent shopkeeper. All three instances involve a failed middle-class attempt to communicate. The versifier aims to teach and delight those who need no lessons in letters. The shopkeeper gets so lost in his lecture that he neglects his customers. And the innkeeper browbeats Pound as if he is a typical American tourist. In every case the characters are trying, with some frustration, to get their opinion across. The only difference amongst them is that the versifier and shopkeeper embody the undeserving use of ornament while the Fascist innkeeper speaks plainly, even vulgarly, and bears only the ornament of an official title. While Pound is forgiving when it comes to the ornamental speech of “born gentlemen,” he likes his populace without ornament: only the utterances of natural superiors and the state officials who recognize them earn his esteem.

There is, I think, a democratic alternative that can be uncovered even in “The Serious Artist.” That alternative does not come in the varied list of things about which a poet might

<sup>165</sup> Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (New York: Liveright, 1970), 26-27.

<sup>166</sup> Lawrence Rainey. *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 138.

make “reports” or the content one imagines for the shopkeeper’s soliloquy, the innkeeper’s sloganeering, or the versifier’s rant; but in the way each of those speakers believe that they have something to say that is not getting across. However different their utterances, the frame is the same frustration with not being understood or the process of communication itself. Pound’s passes over a similar dimension in his anthropology of poetic speech from “The Serious Artist” in his pursuit of a correlation between the impetus to speak and the what and how of saying:

You wish to communicate an idea and its concomitant emotions, or an emotion and its concomitant ideas, or a sensation and its derivative emotions, or an impression that is emotive, etc., etc., etc. You begin with the yeowl and the bark, and you develop into the dance and into music, and into music with words, and finally into words with music, and finally into words with a vague adumbration of music, words suggestive of music, words measured, or words in a rhythm that preserves some accurate trait of the emotive impression, or of the sheer character of the fostering or parental emotion.<sup>167</sup>

The “etc., etc., etc.” illustrates my point. Poetry’s story does not hinge on what is being communicated as he goes on to insist; the story begins with a “wish to communicate” as if from outside the community. The “fostering or parental emotion,” which Pound leaves his reader to imagine pluralistic, in some sense remains the same in every case: a desire to be heard. But the specific emotions offered in the passage are also indicative of a democratic bent to the origin of poetry. Do pain and anger—“the yeowl and the bark”—compel the urge to communicate, or is their something painful and angry about this kind of communication, and if so, might it have to

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<sup>167</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 51

do with the fact that this strange animal at the origin of poetry has no given sanction to speak, no hierarchy from which to derive authority as a speaker. In short, the example that Pound gives suggests that the primal poetic utterance is the voice of grievance. As Pound advances through his account, the vocal origin of poetic language is superseded by music, then by language, and finally by its own historical consciousness as the issue ceases to be communication and becomes the preservation of something lost along the way that was not there in the beginning “wish” of a moaning, yapping dog—a human dog. The aboriginal poetics Pound offers here may grow into “an ever increasingly complex communication” but the impetus remains the same desire to be heard or have a say, a desire that is most palpable in those supposedly undeserving of a voice. The curious thing about the populace’s desire for ornament in language, instead of a desire for education, is that rejecting knowledge as a prerequisite to political opinion is also a radically anti-hierarchical gesture. Ornament turns out to be dangerous, not because donning fancy speech allows nobodies pass themselves off as somebodies, but because their inability to pass among those in the know foregrounds the fact that language must be shared with the uneducated.

Monstrous Ladies: Ornamentation in *The Waste Land*

The Nymph, tho' in this mangled Plight,  
 Must ev'ry Morn her Limbs unite.  
 But how shall I describe her Arts  
 To recollect the scatter'd Parts?  
 Or shew the Anguish, Toil, and Pain,  
 Of gath'ring up herself again?  
 The bashful Muse will never bear  
 In such a Scene to interfere.  
 Corinna in the Morning dizen'd,  
 Who sees, will spew; who smells, be poison'd.

—Jonathan Swift

Early in “The Serious Artist” Pound makes a confession: “I take no great pleasure in writing prose about aesthetic. I think one work of art is worth forty prefaces and as many apologiae.”<sup>168</sup> Pound may make the poem more valuable than prose about poetry, but he also implies that the worth of a poem is measurable by its contribution to the defense of poetry. Few poems of the era inspire New Critic defenders of poetry like Richards or Leavis than *The Waste Land*, but the poem also takes up the defense in allegory. Specifically, Eliot attacks popular ornament through the poem’s female characters—the woman before her vanity, the typist, Lil, the gossip, the hyacinth girl, Marie, Madame Sosostriis, the Thames daughter.<sup>169</sup> Taken together

<sup>168</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 41.

<sup>169</sup> On the tendency for allegorical personifications to be female characters, see James J. Paxson, “Personification’s Gender,” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 16.2 (Spring 1998): 149-179.

these characters embody an anti-muse, a figure not unlike Pope's Goddess Dullness, which is to say, the arch-poetess producing "monsters" of verse or bad poets:

She, tinselled o'er in robes of varying hues,  
 With self-applause her wild creation views  
 Sees momentary monsters rise and fall,  
 And with her own fools-colours gilds them all.<sup>170</sup>

Interpreters of *The Waste Land* have come closest to recognizing the anti-muse when they show how Eliot juxtaposes the modern woman—obsessed with beauty products and able to utter only vacant speech—to the mythic Philomela, the violated princess of Athens turned nightingale muse. Whereas the modern woman goes dumb in the face of wrong, Philomela cunningly weaves her testimony into the tapestry her own captor delivers to his wife/her sister; even as a bird, Philomela manages to articulate the name of her accuser, "Tereu." The problem with this comparison is that the female characters represent the fallenness of modern woman only if they remain outside the classical tradition that the poem idealizes. By making the typist a comment on the new woman or by tracing Lil to a conversation between Eliot and his housekeeper, readers treat the poem as the product of Jamie Weston and George Frazer's volumes on cross-cultural myth, as the Notes imply, or as the outgrowth of Eliot's despair in the aftermath of World War I. But between mythic archetype and historical fact is literary genre, the often unacknowledged source of *The Waste Land's* female character tropes and the poem's use of multiple verse forms. For example, the pub scene is praised as a quasi-documentary account of working-class speech, not as an updated version of the Elizabethan dramatic convention of having lower characters

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<sup>170</sup> Pope, *Major Works*, 439.

speak in prose. This chapter will examine how *The Waste Land* uses updated versions of the Augustan lady's dressing room poem and the long-standing parallel between attacks on feminine artifice and poetic ornamentation.

The defense of poetry has long associated over-ornamentation with popular consumption by an audience desensitized to its own bad taste and unaware of the ease with which it is politically manipulated. In this context, the nightingale does not symbolize classical heroism so much as the specter of mass propaganda haunting versification. The nightingale is not an exemplary model of the poet's voice as in *A Defence of Poetry* where Shelley extols the symbol:

A Poet is a nightingale who sits in darkness, and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.<sup>171</sup>

In *The Waste Land*, this image illustrates the problem of ornamental language: the nightingale, like verse, has enchanted her audience. She can move them as easily to violence as to peaceable repose.<sup>172</sup> And indeed, Philomela's message woven into her tapestry incites her sister to violence. Both Eliot's modern woman and Philomela, then, are anti-populist representations: if the modern woman represents the desensitized populace charmed by beauty, Philomela and her sister Procne represent the frenzied mob as they kill Itys, the son of Tereus, and feed him to his father.<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Shelley, *Defence of Poetry*, 516. Cf. Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell-Obolensky, 1959), 154.

<sup>172</sup> Like the woman in "Hysteria," the nightingale has a "voice of evil." See Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century; Vol. 1: The War of the Words* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 235.

<sup>173</sup> On Philomela and Procne as child-murderesses, see Christina Hauck, "Abortion and the Individual Talent," *ELH* 70.1 (2003): 249.



Without a doubt, the defense of poetry has been a masculine affair, representing bad poets as effeminate versifiers or directly attacking the influx of women into the world of print.<sup>174</sup> But both poetaster and poetess are defined by the same problem of ornamental excess concealing constitutive lack. So while the poem is anti-feminist, its representations of women are animated by anti-populism. The overlap is clear in the depictions of female speech, which consists of half-vacant silences (the typist), hysteric plaints (the image-obsessed woman before her vanity), pathetic whining (Lil), idle gossip (the women in the pub), pompous gravitas (Madame Sosostris), and wistful recollections (Marie and the hyacinth girl). Take the characters away and one has the auditory image of popular din against which the poet sets his prophetic thunder-clap. Two versions of the anti-populist argument guide the representations: in one, the desensitized mirror-dweller embodies the worry that the populace is swayed by flattering images of itself, and in the other, the shouting mob pouring through the streets channels the fear of the sheer numbers of the demos. The first is gendered feminine—a passive populace hidden away quietly in domestic spaces—and the second masculine: the rapacious characters of the clerk, Albert, and Sweeney.<sup>175</sup> Taken together the argument against popular democracy is an argument against the popular extremes of desensitization and overstimulation, both stemming from an undeserved sense of entitlement. One version of the populace lacks the conviction that the other makes up for in excess, but what matters most is that these complimentary images work together to discredit populism. The problem is not that the populace is too feminine or too masculine, but

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<sup>174</sup> On the sexism ingrained in the history of poetry writ large, see Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Rachel Blau DuPlessis, *Purple Passages: Pound, Eliot, Zukofsky, Olson, Creeley and the Ends of Patriarchal Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012). On the specific overlap between anti-feminist discourse and the defense of poetry in the early modern era, see Frances E. Dolan, “Taking the Pencil Out of God’s Hand: Art, Nature, and the Face-Painting Debate in Early Modern England,” *PMLA* 108 (1993): 224-39.

<sup>175</sup> See Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 3-44.

that it shifts quickly between the two. The transformation can be seen in “A Game of Chess,” when the woman goes from preening before her vanity to threatening to rush out into the street. Actual representations of crowds in the poem confirm these two poles: “The Burial of the Dead” offers images of zombie-like victims of work and war; “What the Thunder Said” offers images of barbarian hordes destroying cities and townspeople lynching outsiders. The anti-ornamental poetic, embodied in the anti-muse trope, explains why and how the populace can be so manipulated.

Frances E. Dolan has shown how the defense of poetry neutralizes ornamentation by consigning it to the limited domain of feminine artifice. *The Art of English Poesy* (1589) by George Puttenham—a defense cum *ars poetica*—opens the discussion of “ornament poetical” with an explicit comparison between women’s accouterments and the poet’s use of ornament:

And as we see in these great madams of honour, be they for personage or otherwise never so comely and beautiful, yet if they want their courtly habiliments, or at leastwise such other apparel as custom and civility have ordained to cover their naked bodies, would be half ashamed or greatly out of countenance to be seen in that sort, and perchance do then think themselves more amiable in every man’s eye when they be in their richest attire—suppose of silks or tissues and costly embroideries—than when they go in cloth or in any other plain and simple apparel, even so cannot our vulgar [native] poesy show itself either gallant or gorgeous if any limb be left naked and bare and not clad in his kindly clothes and colours, such as may convey them somewhat out of sight, that is, from the common course of ordinary speech and capacity of the vulgar [low]

judgement, and yet, being artificially handled, must needs yield it much more beauty and commendation.<sup>176</sup>

In Dolan's words, the passage models poetic decorum "on a gender- and class-inflected bodily propriety [which] depends on concealment to distinguish the vulgar from the great, the vernacular from poetry."<sup>177</sup> But for Puttenham, Dolan shows, these sorts of feminine self-ornamentation stray when they do not refer back to the natural beauty beneath the artifice. She goes on to trace the continuity between the defense of poetry and pamphlets on face-painting, but I want to extend her reading of the above passage. Winking to his courtier audience, Puttenham invites his reader to disrobe these decked-out dames and to imagine the naked form beneath the fancy dress. He invites his reader into the lady's dressing room and evokes an image of her before her toilet. There, he genders the singular preoccupation with ornament: women—believing in their artifice—misread the male gaze that penetrates into female artifice and surveys the natural beauty within (or lack thereof). While she believes her beauty depends on her self-enhancements, Puttenham's reader understands that expensive clothes and delicate make-up do not make a beautiful lady. Here lies the moral: verse ornament does not make a poem but may embellish what is already there. But as Dolan suggests, if the woman's self-regard is misdirected by her own extravagance, the parallel in poetry has less to do with protecting poetry from women poets than protecting the aristocratic endeavors to prove the English vernacular a suitable vessel for Roman eloquence by protecting "vulgar poesy" from "the common course of ordinary speech and capacity of the vulgar judgement." The double-play on "vulgar" represents precisely the sort

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<sup>176</sup> Puttenham, *Art of English Poesy*, in Alexander, *Selected Renaissance Literary Criticism*, 134.

<sup>177</sup> Dolan, "Taking the Pencil Out of God's Hand," 225-226.

of play of appearances that the witty male courtier gets that women and commoners do not.

Dolan argues that the defense of poetry's arguments against ornament and the discourse against women's face-painting constitute "a single debate that constructs complexly gendered limits on creativity" by figuring both versification and face-painting as "effeminate enterprises," but she also notes that the use of cosmetics represents a troubling confusion of class.<sup>178</sup> While women's advice books defend cosmetics as a means of upward mobility, polemics against upper-class women's face-painting associates the practice with prostitution.<sup>179</sup> The connection between over-ornamentation and prostituted verse can be found lurking beneath Puttenham's "madams of honour": in other words, wherever the trope of the silently nurturing muse can be found, her monstrous double is not far off.<sup>180</sup> Commenting in 1751 on lines from Alexander Pope that basically recapitulate Puttenham's advice, William Warburton offers the corollary to the standard analogy between poetic and feminine decorum when he says that one should dress the muse "in the light and modest habit of a virgin, not load her with the gaudy ornaments of a prostitute."<sup>181</sup> As tropes, the angelic muse and the female monster obviously check female creativity by making woman either the object of creative contemplation or by marking female creativity as either superficial, as above, or grotesque, as when Jonathan Swift turns the beautiful form Puttenham imagines into the gynophobic nightmare in "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed" (1731). Swift's poem is a model for understanding how Eliot does (and does not) use his female

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 224. On the different class functions of ornamentation, see Melissa Mowry, "Dressing Up and Dressing Down: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Seventeenth-Century English Textile Industry," *Journal of Women's History* 11.3 (1999): 78-103.

<sup>179</sup> Dolan, "Taking the Pencil Out of God's Hand," 231-234.

<sup>180</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman in the Attic*, 29

<sup>181</sup> The lines on which Warburton comments read as follows: "In all, let Nature never be forgot. / But treat the Goddess like a modest fair, / Nor over-dress, nor leave her wholly bare; / Let not each beauty ev'ry where be spy'd, Where half the skill is decently to hide." Alexander Pope, "Epistle to Richard Boyle, Earl of Burlington," *The Works of Alexander Pope, Esq.*, vol. 3 (London: printed J. and P. Knapton, 1751), 281.

characters to censure ornament. Corinna, the aging prostitute or “Young Nymph,” sits before her vanity at the end of the day and removes the prostheses that shore up her blasted looks. She removes “her artificial hair,” takes out “a crystal eye,” unsticks “her eye-brows from a mouse’s hyde,” spits out the “plumpers” that “fill her hollow jaws,” detaches her “set of teeth,” lets down “her flabby dugs,” unlaces “her steel-ribb’d bodice,” and slips off “the bolsters that supply her hips.”<sup>182</sup> As in the above epigraph, the next morning Corinna must reassemble herself. In the painful process of recollecting her “scatter’d Parts” Corinna reveals the imperative of female artifice: “The nymph, though in this mangled plight, / Must ev’ry morn her limbs unite.” The “bashful Muse” watches from afar and “will never bear / in such a scene to interfere.”<sup>183</sup> As if looking into the same mirror, the virgin muse witnesses the fate of “the nymph” whose accouterments can no longer conceal her ugliness. If in Puttenham’s imaginary, the toilet and dressing room are places where the beautiful female form is pleasantly concealed and accentuated, the prostitute’s rooms are a place where the sex-work-ravaged body of the underclass is unpleasantly revealed. The female characters in *The Waste Land* form a constellation around this anti-muse trope of the prostitute-poetess.

Those familiar with the facsimile transcript of *The Waste Land* in its earlier form as “He Do the Police in Different Voices” will immediately think of Fresca the poetess, who “in other time or place had been / A meek and lowly weeping Magdalene.”<sup>184</sup> In part modeled on Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* (1707) and once occupying the beginning of “The Fire Sermon,” Eliot’s nasty portrait of Fresca’s morning ritual—complete with her “needful stool”—draws from the

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<sup>182</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Jonathan Swift*, ed. Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 533.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 534.

<sup>184</sup> Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile & Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 41.

Augustan satire that Pound scolds Eliot for even trying: “Pope has done this so well that you cannot do it better; and if you mean this as a burlesque, you had better suppress it, for you cannot parody Pope unless you can write better verse than Pope—and you can’t.”<sup>185</sup> In the original draft, Fresca’s figurative magdalenism recalls another excised portion: “The Burial of the Dead” originally began with a tale told by one of several high-class rakes about his unlucky night in an upscale whorehouse as his companions finished out their Boston pub crawl. The procuress Myrtle, having declared Steve too drunk for her girls, feeds him and sends him on his way. In the final version, however, the prostitute motif has been confined to the single mention of Sweeney on his way to Mrs. Porter. What makes Fresca’s morning and Myrtle’s place so important is not just that they show prostitution as a motif in the conception of the poem, but also that they show prostitution as a scene of class mixing. Myrtle has an upper-class clientèle from the likes of “the Buckingham Club,” who have enough pull to walk away from a raid. Fresca, the poet makes clear, is living well outside what ought to have been her proper station either by birth or by character; “Magdalene” is also a decidedly classed sort of prostitute, which even may leave open the possibility that the attack is not against Fresca’s bourgeois sex life but against her being a high-class prostitute when she ought to have been a streetwalker. The point is not that prostitution can be plotted throughout the poem—including the typist episode and the Thames daughter—but that excluding prostitution from the world of the poem underwrites the common assumption that the woman before her vanity in “A Game of Chess” is unambiguously upper-class.<sup>186</sup> If the defense of poetry separates the classes of poet by redrawing class lines without

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 39, 127n. Noting how significant it is that Pound can only imagine Eliot’s intention being a parody of Pope as satirist, Lehman has written well on the reasons that Eliot revises away from the satirical mode and toward the mythopoetic frame that has dominated the poem’s reception. See Lehman, “Eliot’s Last Laugh.”

<sup>186</sup> The prostitute’s ability to cross class lines might make Eliot’s comment in the notes that “all the women are one woman” make plot sense, as if *The Waste Land* offered as a cut-up Dickensian life of the prostitute who begins as a river merchant’s daughter, moves to the city to become a typist turning the occasional trick (“Well now that’s

the craftsman troubling the separation of *homo poeticus* and *homo faber*, the prostitute-poetess is another figure of class trouble who must be excluded. The case that Eliot is chastising the conformism brought about by the convergence of the bourgeoisie and the working-class in consumer culture, depends on the exclusion of the craftsman and the prostitute. Restoring London's prostitution culture means imagining the "taxi throbbing waiting," for example, not only as the metaphorical connector between "the human engine" and Tiresias "throbbing between two lives"—the modern worker and the classical archetype—but as a space sexualized by the prostitutes who turn tricks in the backs of cabs.<sup>187</sup> Eliot does not sexualize the taxi; the taxi is already sexualized. More importantly, prostitution becomes the space that puts the modern life in touch with the classical and the masses in touch with their own double sex: passively feminine and frenziedly masculine.

In one of the very first essays on sex or gender in the poem, Philip Sicker argues that the prostitute is the governing female archetype. He defines "Eliot's prostitute" as "the seductress who is repeatedly violated and abandoned," who is "both victim and seductress."<sup>188</sup> Sicker's definition is resonant with the woman before her vanity's plea for her male companion to stay; Albert's sexual (ab)use of the pregnancy-ravaged Lil; Fresca's promiscuous reading "in a soapy sea / of Symonds—Walter Pater—Vernon Lee"; the clerk's routine visit to his so-called lover and clumsy late-night departure; and the betrayed Thames daughter for who "by Richmond . . . raised

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done and I'm glad its over"), becomes the kept woman "Fresca," who shows up a little later in life in "A Game of Chess" facing her benefactor's loss of interest and then as the domesticated Lil married to a soldier that she perhaps met on the downward arc of her rise and fall.

<sup>187</sup> Exactly when the practice begins is difficult to say, but by 1934 it was common enough that a police superintendent called taxi cabs "mobile brothels" and some taxi drivers would wait for prostitutes and their clients and refuse paying customers. Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial Sex in London, 1885-1960* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2012), 132-133..

<sup>188</sup> Philip Sicker, "The Belladonna: Eliot's Female Archetype in *The Waste Land*, *Twentieth Century Literature* 30.4 (Winter 1984), 424, 427.

[her] knees / supine on the floor of a narrow canoe.”<sup>189</sup> The story of the Thames daughter, in fact, comes from trope of the “ruined maid”: after seduction by her master, the pregnant and disgraced woman is forced into prostitution and eventually into the tumultuous waters of the Thames.<sup>190</sup> But if these figures are associated with “fornication” (Sicker’s word), they are decidedly not seductive. Furthermore, while he attempts to save Marie, the hyacinth girl, and Philomela as virginal counterpoints to what he calls “the Belladonna” (after Eliot), these figures trouble his definition. The hyacinth girl petrifies her lover as surely as Medusa. Marie’s vehemence about the Germanness of being Lithuanian summons up the belt of mixed populations that sends Europe into war and ruins the postwar peace, and Philomela’s multiple rapes in a secluded shack is the very definition of “repeatedly violated and abandoned.”<sup>191</sup> So while Sicker wishes to keep his angels and monsters separate, as Lesley Higgins writes, prostitution seems more like “a metaphor for all female activity,” whether selling sex for money, entering marriage for security, or scribbling verses over morning breakfast.<sup>192</sup> But the problem with both of these takes on prostitution in the poem is that they forget the crucial fact that prostitution is a form of work.

Although Sicker is doing archetype analysis, his reading begins with a historical connection to the analogy between cosmetics and poetics. When the “Belladonna” appears as a fictional card in Madame Sosostri’s Tarot Deck, the name—Italian for “beautiful woman”—not only refers to the deadly nightshade but also to a cosmetic made from its toxic leaves used to

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<sup>189</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1963), 64.

<sup>190</sup> Laite, *Common Prostitutes*, 33.

<sup>191</sup> I should note that while the character of Marie in the poem seems to be the speaker of the line “Bin gar keine Russin, stamm aus Litauen, echt deutch,” the historical figure on which the character is based is not Lithuanian, but Bavarian.

<sup>192</sup> Lesley Higgins, *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness: Aesthetic and Gender Politics* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002), 199.



dilate women's pupils. *Atropa belladonna* has cosmological as well as cosmetological significance. 'Atropa' and 'atropine' derive from Atropos, the Fate who chooses how a person will die, embodying *contrapasso*, the method whereby Dante connects the punishments of souls in Hell to their sins. Sicker implies as much when he writes that "the modern mind is inclined to associate the use of such a cosmetic with seduction and prostitution (painted women)" and, by extension, the fate of such fallen women.<sup>193</sup> The prostitute is not a seductress who is repeatedly violated and abandoned; she is repeatedly violated and abandoned because she is a seductress, because she uses cosmetics. So when Sicker says that Eliot "uses images of cosmetics . . . to suggest the artificiality and superficiality of the sexual experience," he gets it backwards. Cosmetics are not the vehicle for an argument about sexuality; the fallen woman is a vehicle for an argument against the deadliness of ornament. Sicker wants to make the poem "about a sexual failure which signifies a modern spiritual failure," to make the poem about some psychosymptomatic event that indexes civilization's decline.<sup>194</sup> This sort of criticism often makes over poor Tom's natural sensitivity into an indictment of the cruel world as represented by a real painted woman; namely, Vivien Eliot *née* Vivienne Haigh. Reading *The Waste Land* in such a

<sup>193</sup> Sicker, "Belladonna," 424.

<sup>194</sup> It now has become almost rote to complain about over-taxing the interpretative possibilities of *The Waste Land* and to celebrate the limits of a reading as proof of the poem's inviolable integrity. To be sure, as Eileen Wizeniter says, "we generate our own literary fantasies, wishes, and desires" and project them onto the poem. An interpretation like hers (and mine) is "not only generated in response to Eliot's text and the tradition but is also created from the patriarchal structures and modes of interpretation embedded in readers' own psyches." Suggesting that *The Waste Land* is a "swamp" for pedants to play in, Coleen Lamos echoes Wizeniter's caution a decade later, saying that it is high time the discipline examined "how literary value is produced, particularly the ways in which analyses of literary texts are tautological elaborations of cultural values that the texts are believed to embody." She holds the poem up as a mirror, calling it an "inkblot of its readers' understandings of its literary-historical moment." Wizeniter is willing to talk about what she sees in the inkblot; Lamos speeds through a reading of others reading their inkblots that is neither insightful nor reflective. Her summary treatment of "drowning" as a sexual metaphor (and perhaps metaphor for reading in this "swamp") is surpassed by Tratner's reading of the motif alongside the discourse about the rising tide of the masses. Lamos sees that same rising tide insofar as her inkblot that is more Eliot criticism than the poem itself. Lamos, *Deviant Modernism: Sexual and Textual Errancy in T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Marcel Proust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 109; Wizeniter, "Legends of Lil: The Repressed Thematic Center of *The Waste Land*," *Women's Studies* 13.1 (December 1986), 98; and Tratner, *Modernism and Mass Politics*, 167-176.

way entirely removes it from the genre play that attends the composition of the poem and shows up in Eliot's own prodigious use of different and contrasting verse styles, as if he too were a gussied up Corinna. Yes, Vivien Eliot was middle-class and aspired to gentility. And yes, she was fond of heavy makeup. And yes, she was a philanderer. And yes, she was afflicted with dysmenorrhoea (irregular menstruation) and eventually committed to an insane asylum. And yes, Eliot was complicit in her affair with the generous Bertrand Russell.<sup>195</sup> But for all the biographical connections to this woman, to trace the shadow of Eliot's first wife misses the point Gilbert and Gubar make so well: because the profession of poet is already deemed effete, impotence before the female monster is a metaphor for the male poet's defensive reaction to women seizing the poet's pen. (And yes, Vivien was an occasional versifier.) These are tropes derived from the masculinism of the defense of poetry. The poem sublimates the defense of poetry into allegory and capitalizes on the more generalized prejudice against ornamentation. The Belladonna is a prostitute-poetess, an anti-muse designing the hell of the poem's characters through verse. One must, then, see the prostitute-poetess as the distortion of the male poet's internalization of attacks on poetry effeminacy. It is not enough to invert Eliot the cultural diagnostician into Eliot the symptom; one must query the stigma attached to ornamentation in the first place, a stigma legitimated by the defense's commitment to redefining poetry as poiesis, its rejection of the definition of poetry as verse as a product of popular ignorance, and the perceived incommensurability of the work of genius and the work of genre.

Gilbert and Gubar return to Eliot frequently in *No Man's Land*, their critique of the sexist tropes with which the male poet defends his self-image from the stigma of an effete art.<sup>196</sup> The

<sup>195</sup> Vivien's affair with Bertrand Russell, in which Tom was eventually complicit, led to her and Eliot accepting generous gifts and favors from "Bertie." See Carole Seymour-Jones, *Painted Shadow: A Life of Vivienne Eliot* (London: Constable & Robinson, Ltd., 2001), 119-122.

<sup>196</sup> See Jewel Spears Brooker, "Tradition and Female Enmity: Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar Read T.S. Eliot,"

central dichotomy between the female monster and the angelic muse in *The Madwoman in the Attic* can be illustrated nicely by contrasting the monstrous ladies in *The Waste Land* and Eliot's early poems with the angelic muse in *Ash-Wednesday* to whom Eliot refers in language that beatifies her silence, her suffering, and her service: "Lady of silences / Calm and distressed / Torn and most whole"; "The silent sister veiled in white and blue" who "bent her head and signed but spoke no word"; "the veiled sister" asked to "pray for / Those who walk in darkness"; "Blessèd sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the garden."<sup>197</sup> Beholden to some divine purpose and "withdrawn / In a white gown, to contemplation, in a white gown," she rescues poetry, "restoring / With a new verse the ancient rhyme" and redeeming "the unread vision in the higher dream / While jewelled unicorns draw by the gilded hearse."<sup>198</sup> This last symbol suggests the deathly spectacle of ornament that preoccupies the women in *The Waste Land* whose caskets are cosmetics, perfumes, jewelry, negligees, corsets, ritual, witchcraft, graft, and prosthetics. The woman at the beginning of "A Game of Chess"—described obliquely through her toilet, her room, and her looking glass—is by far the most ornamented woman of the poem. But the first line's allusion to Shakespeare's Cleopatra suggests that this ornament is more tasteless than regal. Whereas Shakespeare's Cleopatra appears in public spectacle to her adoring subjects, "this Venusberg interior partakes of 'an atmosphere of Juliet's tomb'," to quote Kenner.<sup>199</sup> Eliot's character is not even a Belinda, who is at least "the moral center of an innocent dislocation of values." Simulacrum and false sophistication surround and consume her as the agent of her own undoing:

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in *Mastery & Escape: T.S. Eliot and the Dialectic of Modernism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 213-230.

<sup>197</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 91, 94, 96, 98.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 87, 90.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 153

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Glowed on the marble, where the glass  
held up by standards wrought with fruited vines  
From which a golden Cupidon peeped out  
(Another hid his eyes behind his wing)  
Doubled the flames of sevenbranched candelabra  
Reflecting light upon the table as  
The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it,  
From satin cases poured in rich profusion;  
In vials of ivory and coloured glass  
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic perfumes,  
Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused  
And drowned the sense in odours; stirred by the air  
That freshened from the window, these ascended  
In fattening the prolonged candle flames,  
Flung their smoke into the laquearia,  
Stirring the pattern on the coffered ceiling.  
Huge sea-wood fed with copper  
Burned green and orange, framed by the coloured stone,  
In which sad light a carved dolphin swam.

Never directly portrayed, the character typifies the defense's argument that excessive ornament

signifies the absence of true poetry. Insofar as she is a figure of the monstrous woman, her biggest failing is that she is not monstrous enough.

An allusion in the first line to Cleopatra's "burnished throne" in *Antony & Cleopatra* invites comparison to the ill-fated queen, whose easy virtue feminizes Antony and leads to her own self-destruction. But Cleopatra is also a figure of political catastrophe whose hysteric rule (like Dido's) brings misfortune to her people. As in attacks on democratic claims to rights, the allusion implies the character's vanity: the chair she sits in might be "like a burnished throne," but Cleopatra she is not. Moreover, she is the simulacrum of a simulacrum, since the scene to which Eliot alludes is described by Enobarbus, Antony's trusty servant. Shakespeare's Queen of Egypt is conspicuously opulent: she sits in a gold barge with perfumed purple sails and silver oars manned by invisible rowers stroking to the tune of flutes. She is attended by smiling boy slaves and a coterie of nymphet gentlewomen while "at the helm / a seeming mermaid steers" (2.2.218-219).<sup>200</sup> This description of Cleopatra, delivered by one of the low characters, is a classed moment of versification in the play. Enobarbus begins speaking in prose, as many low characters do, but when charged by Antony to convey his order to depart, he begins to impishly speak in verse (1.3.169-189). One could say more about the potentially subversive speaking position of those passing on orders and Enobarbus' description as an imitation of Cleopatra as seen through in Antony's eyes; the point here is that Enobarbus is trespassing into verse and the result is fantastically opulent. Eliot may not be intruding into poetry as is Enobarbus, but the woman is trespassing into a class to which she does not belong and her transgression is signaled by her bad taste.

The character is lost in a room devoted to ornamentation: cupids and vines on the

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<sup>200</sup> William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1995), 140.

mirror's frame; dolphins carved into the mantelpiece; a coffered ceiling fancifully called a "laquearia"; open and over-flowing jewel boxes; an equipage of powders and perfumes, aberrations of poesy's sweet smelling flowers. The room is a scene of unholy mixture as surely as "her strange synthetic perfumes, / Unguent, powdered, or liquid—troubled, confused / And drowned the sense in odours." The overwrought description condemns artifice, but the décor itself signals a class trouble critics are happy to ignore. For example, when Thomas Michael LeCarner refers to "the elegant description of the boudoir" and within a few sentences transfers the adjective to the room itself, referring to "the elegant boudoir, an emblem of upper class society," he mistakenly assumes that Eliot is obeying the rules of decorum by describing a high-class character in high-class prosody.<sup>201</sup> The "boudoir" is not elegant, nor is it exclusively "an emblem of upper class society." The room has nice things in it—a marble-top vanity, a mantelpiece, a candelabra, paintings, and other wall-hangings—but it is also a mess: the perfume bottles are unstoppered, the powder boxes are open, the jewelry cases are too small, and there is so much on the walls that they seem about to collapse in:

And other withered stumps of time  
 Were told upon the walls; staring forms  
 leaned out, leaning, hushing the room enclosed.<sup>202</sup>

This disorder and excess is more emblematic of the courtesan than the dame of honor. The messiness of the scene anticipates the typist's cluttered apartment—her "drying combinations touched by the sun's last rays" as they hang in the window, her "divan (at night her bed)" piled

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<sup>201</sup> Tomas Michael LeCarner, "T. S. Eliot, Dharma Bum: Buddhist Lessons in *The Waste Land*," *Philosophy and Literature* 33.2 (2009), 406.

<sup>202</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 56.

with “stockings, slippers, camisoles, and stays.”<sup>203</sup> Both rooms summon the classed double-meaning of “slut.” The difference between the two scenes is that the demi-Cleopatra is meant to appear opulent, though a melange of tacky decor lurks beneath the high-class effect of the poetic diction. The defense of poetry attributed to Eliot requires that he be read as a serious critic of culture—in this case, upper-class decadence—but attributing this sort of seriousness to Eliot also means transferring the aura of the verse to the character, exactly the sort of enchantment that makes verse dangerous. Meanwhile, Eliot the satirist mocks the aspiring courtesan by composing the scene according to her distorted self-image and, in the same gesture, mocks the reader whose own cultural aspirations have led them to take appearances for granted and to read the spectacle of riches as the emblem of breeding.

Mis-classing the scene is akin to the tendency to pass over the colloquial meaning of “nightingale” attached to the painting of “the change of Philomel, by the barbarous king” in favor of the myth as another counter-point to the fallenness of the modern woman:

Above the antique mantel was displayed  
 As though a window gave upon the sylvan scene  
 The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king  
 So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale  
 Filled all the desert with inviolable voice  
 And still she cried, and still the world pursues,  
 ‘Jug Jug’ to dirty ears.

The phrasing bears out the unfavorable comparison, since the poet introduces the myth with a

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 61.

contrast (“yet there”) and brings the nightingale tragically into the present: “And still she cried, and still the world pursues.” That the scene is one of transformation shows Philomela representing the monster ever-present in the angelic virgin just as Cleopatra, whom “holy priests / bless . . . when she is riggish,” represents the angel ever present in the seductress.<sup>204</sup> But the classical allusion also plays off a modern colloquialism: “nightingale” is nineteenth-century slang for “prostitute.”<sup>205</sup> Originally derived from the idea of selling “love” at night, by the turn of the century “nightingale” also plays off the popular prostitute-rumor about Florence Nightingale, who makes her name tending wounded soldiers during the Crimean War and later fights to shift focus away from criminalizing prostitution and toward its socio-economic causes. The term “nightingale” is bound up with the stigma of women’s work, not only as a reference to the oldest profession but also because nurses—at the bottom rung of the domestic service trade—commonly also engaged in prostitution.<sup>206</sup> The reference is also bound up with the stigma of women poets. “Sweeney Among the Nightingales,” more overtly using the slang meaning, refers to Elizabeth Barret Browning’s “Bianca Among the Nightingales.” Sweeney’s romp puts Bianca and Browning among “Rachel *née* Rabinowitz” and “the lady in the [Spanish] cape.”<sup>207</sup> The crux

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<sup>204</sup> The story of Philomela begins as the princess is taken from her kingdom by her brother-in-law Tereus, who promises to bring her for a visit to her sister Procne. Tereus, overcome with lust, rapes his sister-in-law, imprisons her in a shack in the woods, and cuts out her tongue so that she cannot bear witness against him. Philomela, however, secretly weaves the story of her abduction and rape into a tapestry, which Tereus cannot read and so brings to his wife as a gift. Her sister discovers the message woven into the tapestry and frees her sister. Together, they take revenge by killing Itys, Tereus and Procne’s son. Not only that, they feed Itys to his father in a banquet. Upon discovering what has happened, the enraged Tereus chases after Philomela and her sister who, to escape, are transformed into the nightingale and the swallow. Tereus, to pursue them, turns into a hoopoe, a crowned bird named after the sound of its call and in the same group of birds as the kingfisher. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 134-42.

<sup>205</sup> The cultural background of the nightingale is treated at length in Jeni Williams, *Interpreting Nightingales: Gender, Class and Histories* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997). While several commentators on “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” have noted the double usage, no one I know has speculated on the possible military resonance of the slang.

<sup>206</sup> Laite, *Common Prostitutes*, 33; Carol Helmstadter and Judith Godden, *Nursing Before Nightingale, 1815-1899* (Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2011), 10.

<sup>207</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 49, 50.



is female speech. In “Gerontion,” which Eliot wanted to use as a preface to *The Waste Land*, the modern nightingale is decisively denied script: “Vacant shuttles / Weave the wind.”<sup>208</sup> If the demi-Cleopatra figure is made into a pseudo-nightingale, she does not sing:

Footsteps shuffled on the stair.  
 Under the firelight, under the brush, her hair  
 Spread out in fiery points  
 Glowed into words, then would be savagely still.<sup>209</sup>

The character is no great female monster and no virgin muse. When she does finally speak the aura created by the verse will break as she confronts a man who has too long been read as her husband, rather than her john, because of the assumptions made about her class.

Like the atmosphere of the room, the allusions are confused, which is the point. *The Waste Land* takes place in a no man’s land of shifting borders and confused categories. April is fecund and foetid. Marie is Lithuanian, “echt deutsch.” The character opposite the hyacinth girl is neither living nor dead. (Later in the poem, the living and the dead will be changing places.) The intertextual matrix connects popular ditties and arcane classics. Philomela is depicted in the very moment of transformation. The scenes in the poem are set almost entirely at “the violet hour,” either morning or evening. The desk clerks and secretaries watch the clock “like a taxi throbbing waiting.” Tiresias is both man and woman “throbbing between two lives,” a blind seer. The typist is half machine. Phlebas the drowned Phoenician sailor lives on between Gentile or Jew. The speaker on the road to Eumaus is unsure whether the figure “gliding wrapt

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 56-57.

in a brown mantle, hooded” is “a man or a woman.” The poem’s religious cosmology contemplates Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism. The river scenery is a mixture of Mississippi and Thames. *Tristan and Isolde* is a German opera made from an Irish story. *Hamlet* is an English play about the prince of Denmark, and so on. Yet interests in all this border-crossing and in-betweenness—usually spinning out into historical context (World War I or industrialism) and metaphysical-psychological depths (archive and archetype)—have not sufficiently recognized the degree to which class-crossing forms a crucial component of the poem’s characterology. These interests have also not paused to question whether ornament is also subject to the same ambiguity and, if not, why. With this in mind, I find it curious that readers have almost ubiquitously preserved the class lines between the woman character at the beginning of “A Game of Chess” and the women in the pub scene discussing Lil. Because the poem is so thoroughly indecorously eclectic, I find it suspicious that this line also falls between the most elaborate verse constructions (highly enjambed blank verse) and the most prose-like and realistic treatment of Cockney speech (supposedly taken straight out of the mouth of Eliot’s cleaning woman). Confining this character to the upper class, in effect, means protecting upper-class decadence (and the critique of it that implies a culturally elitist solution) from the one figure from the underclass who can also make this tacky room make sense plotwise: the upwardly mobile prostitute who has gained the means to afford a room like this and who has taken it quite too far.

In 1922, the courtesan is most assuredly a declining tradition, but this is not necessarily a room from the twenties. (Pound put it at “1880.”) But that may be the point: the character is living out a self-image from the past: by the twenties, the quasi-acceptability of the courtesan had

been replaced by vice crusades. Eliot uses blank verse to give a cosmetic treatment to this cosmetic-obsessed woman before her vanity. Eliot's perverse versification is misogynistic, but also seductive (much like the Notes). The lesson is not about *femme fatales*, bad sex, or even women poets, but the "*hypocrite lecteur*" whom defenses of poetry have always worried will be seduced by precisely this use of ornamentation. Eliot imitates the character's skewed self-image and invites readers to class the character by the verse ornament rather than picking up on other cues that not only read as upwardly-mobile middle-class, but suggest that she has a more sordid background in a world of rat-infested alleys and dice-games. Her answer to the frantic question about what to do "now" (implying some change of state) has almost always been read as a wife's sexually frustrated response to her sexually unresponsive husband: "I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street." The line continues, adding "with my hair down," but the line break invites a literal reading. (Moreover, a woman without a hat and with her hair down in the street still reads as prostitute.) Sometimes selling sex allowed single women to gain considerably more wealth individually than the male-supported middle-class household. Turning tricks was often also a way for working women to augment income from their respectable day jobs, perhaps as typists. Being a prostitute also did not mean that a woman would not end up married with a family and living the bourgeois life the male character sardonically imagines for her. The point is not only that the prostitute crosses class lines in the way that this character seems to have done (especially when one consults "He Do the Police in Different Voices"). The point is also that in order to assume that this is an elegant upper-class room, one must entirely forget about the high-class prostitute.

Another piece of evidence suggestive of some class trouble in the scene comes from a

more careful reading of the pseudo-dialog between the above passage and the pub scene. In the conventional reading, this dialog is a domestic spat. The reasons for believing so stem from the last four lines of the section which paint a picture of bourgeois married life, an ennui of hot baths, taxis, games of chess, and social calls.<sup>210</sup> But these last few lines are delivered only after a string of asynchronous and sardonic replies that makes determining the parting tone far more difficult than readers have allowed. The lines do suggest the hollow routine of a well-to-do couple, but are they necessarily descriptive of the life of the speakers? (It is no help that the very best versions of this reading draw on Eliot's biography.)<sup>211</sup> However, the initial plea to stay and the threat to walk the street suggest that the exchange could be situated in a relationship between a former streetwalker with dreams of respectability and an upscale john who knows better:

‘My nerves are bad to-night. Yes, bad. Stay with me.

‘Speak to me. Why do you never speak. Speak.

‘What are you thinking of? What thinking? What?

‘I never know what you are thinking. Think.’

I think we are in rats' alley

Where the dead men lost their bones.

‘What is that noise?’

The wind under the door.

<sup>210</sup> The difference of the last four lines is also attributable to their having been literally borrowed from the unpublished “The Death of the Duchess,” a Prufrock-like take on Hampstead ennui. See Eliot, *Facsimile*, 106.

<sup>211</sup> For instance, Gilbert brilliantly situates the phrase “rats’ alley” in the parlance of trench warfare and reads “dead men [who] lost their bones” as an image of unburied bodies at Gallipoli, among them Eliot’s friend Jean Verdenal. See Sandra M. Gilbert, “‘Rats’ Alley’: The Great War, Modernism, and the (Anti)Pastoral Elegy,” *New Literary History* 30.1 (Winter 1999): 179-201.

‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’

Nothing again nothing.

Only the assumptions about the speakers based on the preceding description prevent this exchange from being read as a cross-class exchange between an economically dependent woman (why should one assume “psychologically”?) who feels her welfare threatened and the contemptuous mind-wandering and cavalier indifference of a cultured other. In other words, the high-flown language and lofty allusions in the initial section prevent the scene from appearing in all its messy close-quarters’ class contact, but in the dialog the Miltonic diction is in the process of breaking down. The first four lines are exact pentameter, but the interjection of the poet’s unspoken retorts break in eight and seven syllables. The exchange of the next two lines tallies an even pentameter again, but the spell is broken and the exchange becomes increasingly irregular:

‘Do

‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember

‘Nothing?’

I remember

Those are pearls that were his eyes.

‘Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?’

But

O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag—

It’s so elegant

## So intelligent

The blank verse of the previous description of the vanity breaks down, first into dramatic pentameter (as in Shakespeare), and then, after the eight-syllable rat-alley line, into free verse. The oral transcription of the aspirated chorus to a popular ragtime tune suggests the character keeps less than high-class company or sets the scene in an apartment building where, perhaps, the typist's gramophone turns out the tune. Finally, the last stanza uses alternating rhyme and drifting iambic pentameter ("And if it rains, a closed car at four") to mock the suggestion of respectability and to highlight the threat to "rush out . . . and walk the street" as the real fear of a kept woman faced with the prospect of being cut off:

'What shall I do now? What shall I do?

'I shall rush out as I am, and walk the street

'With my hair down, so. What shall we do tomorrow?

'What shall we ever do?'

The hot water at ten.

And if it rains, a closed car at four.

And we shall play a game of chess.

Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.<sup>212</sup>

Given the previous replies' less than factual register, having a late morning and calling for a "closed car" (a very new selling point at the time and, as I said above, a scene of prostitution) do not point to an upper-class lifestyle but the petty bourgeoisie's aping of their betters. Finally,

<sup>212</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 57-58.

although there were boarding house servants (like Amanda in the Fresca episode), waiting for a knock upon the door with “lidless eyes” hardly sounds like a scene from the *beau monde*. In short, the scene does not convey bourgeois ennui so much as the female character’s desire for it mocked in hyperbole by her companion.<sup>213</sup> This leaves the game-of-chess line as the only indication of a shared day-to-day, but this line is hard to take literally (and few have). Eliot’s note directs the reader to “the game of chess” in Thomas Middleton’s *Women Beware Women* (1653), which is both literal (a stuffy distraction from the love-making going on upstairs) and figurative (the moves the lovers are themselves making). In the domain of literary allusion, the line is a stab at the clichéd hypocrisy of the upperclass through the female characters’ longing for and imitation of decadence. The other lines, in fact, do describe the morning routine of Fresca, the poetess suppressed in the final version of the poem.

Fresca is a walking cliché of late mornings, new styles of cabs, and late-night callers, and she is explicitly censured for her social climbing. Waking late to “the sun’s inclining ray,” Fresca takes a late “steaming bath,” perhaps at ten o’clock.<sup>214</sup> She dislikes sleeping alone and, to pass the time, “scribbles verse of such a gloomy tone”; the demi-Cleopatra insists, “Stay with me.”<sup>215</sup> The cherubs on the standards are even reprised as the nymphs of the toilet as “to the steaming bath she moves, / Her tresses fanned by little flutt’ring Loves.”<sup>216</sup> Fresca’s scene opens and closes with a reference to the Philomela myth: she is “aroused from dreams of love and pleasant rapes,” perhaps inspired by the painting, and shortly after an almost identical image of rats and

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<sup>213</sup> The original title for “A Game of Chess” was “In the Cage,” an allusion to Henry James novella about precisely this sort of social aspiration. For a brief elaboration of that allusion and the class dynamic it introduces, see James Edwin Miller, *T.S. Eliot’s Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1977), 78-79.

<sup>214</sup> Eliot did not take Vivien’s suggestion that the “hot water at ten” be revised to “hot water bottle at ten.” Eliot, *Facsimile*, 13.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

bones, the nightingale's song intrudes: "Twit twit twit twit twit twit twit / Tereu tereu / So rudely forc'd. / Ter."<sup>217</sup> The scenes differ mainly because one is in blank verse and takes place in the morning (after the lover has not stayed) and the other is in heroic couplets and takes place at night (as the man is leaving).

Instead of a townhouse or mansion, the close-quartered room with its closed door and seemingly public stairway seems more reminiscent of the boarding house in "Gerontion" (where Fresca first appears) in which the upwardly mobile middle class and downwardly mobile gentry mix.<sup>218</sup> The fact that strains from a popular tune—"O O O O that Shakespeherian Rag"—drift through the middle dialog certainly ill fits a scene from Anthony Trollope. Eliot leads his audience into this misreading by using blank verse and tony word choice like "Cupidon" (when cupid would do), "laquearia" (for which Eliot offers a reference to a passage in Virgil's *Aeneid* describing the roof in Dido's palace), and "sylvan scene" (for which Eliot also offers a reference, this time to Satan's approach on Eden in *Paradise Lost*). Many readers, finding the poem as a whole over-ornamented, have not considered that the passage is deliberately over-done to mimic the overwrought decor it describes.<sup>219</sup> In the same fashion, the sing-song lines of the typist episode mimic the typist's ho-hum acceptance of the clerk's "unreproved, if undesired" pawing.<sup>220</sup> So too Madame Sosostriis seems the sort to pronounce 'clairvoyant' with a self-important French accent "clairvoyan-te." "So rudely forced" is another moment of ventriloquy.

The how-rude gloss of the Philomela story reduces rape and dismemberment to a failure

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>218</sup> The lines borrowed from "The Death of the Duchess" also register an unpleasant meeting of the classes insofar as the "knock on upon the door" is the "they" that is "the chambermaid": "Could we address her or should we be afraid? / If it is terrible alone, it is sordid with one more." The "we" is definitely not a married couple, even if they are definitely upper-class. Eliot, *Facsimile*, 107.

<sup>219</sup> Paul Morrison, for example, writes that "the poem itself resembles nothing so much as the private gallery world it represents: it too is so much bric-à-brac or bricolage." Morrison, *Poetics of Fascism*, 89.

<sup>220</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 62.



of politeness. The phrase appears in two forms. In “A Game of Chess” the phrase is as above, but in “The Fire Sermon,” originally after the Fresca scene, the violation has been doubled as elision forces the lines into an entirely unnecessary shape: “so rudely forc’d.” If one returns to “He Do the Police in Different Voices,” the initial appearance of the phrase turns out to be the male character’s recollection of something his lady friend has said or would say. There is a second person aside before the Philomela lines: “Above the antique mantel was displayed / In pigment, but so lively, *you had thought* / A window gave upon the sylvan scene.”<sup>221</sup> Fresca, who dreams of “pleasant rapes,” is precisely the sort of character to look at the Philomela myth and say, “So lively.” She is also the sort of poet who makes “forced” into “forc’d,” a versifying no-no for modernists like Eliot.<sup>222</sup> A wrenched accent (“carvèd dolphin”) appears in the demi-Cleopatra episode, and elision appears twice more, in reference to Fresca’s “practic’d powers” as she pens letters in verse and in reference to her Belinda-like self-regard as “to the steaming bath she moves, / Her tresses fanned by little flutt’ring Loves.”<sup>223</sup>

Whether the woman before her vanity is a prostitute by allegory or plot, Fresca is explicitly a whorish poetess. But she also seems to live in a different age than her night-time counterpart. Instead of the candlelit ambiance of the 1880s, Fresca’s flat is outfitted with an electric bell that “brings brisk Amanda . . . with coarsened hand, and hard plebeian tread.”<sup>224</sup>

Whereas the demi-Cleopatra is poised for self-destruction, Fresca chatters away in a letter about

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<sup>221</sup> Eliot, *Facsimile*, 39. My italics.

<sup>222</sup> Eliot is no Imagist, but he largely holds to Pound’s advice against letting “rhythmic structure . . . destroy the shape of your words, or their natural sound, or their meaning.” Pound, *Literary Essays*, 6. I know of only one other instance in which Eliot deliberately uses an accent to fix pronunciation. In *Ash-Wednesday* he makes the understandable specification: “I renounce the blessed face.” Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 85. I know of no other instance of elision.

<sup>223</sup> Eliot, *Facsimile*, 39. This sort of description of hair recalls the archaic “Cupidon” peeking from the standards, the nymph’s pantheon in *Rape of the Lock*, and the scene on Cleopatra’s barge.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

how much “Lady Kleinwurm chattered” at her dull party. If there is an identity between the characters, it is this: not only is “so rudely forced” or “forc’d” something Fresca might say or write, a turn-of-the-century courtesan or kept woman is also the sort of woman Fresca might fantasize being. They have in common not only their aggressive sexualities but their class trouble as well:

Fresca! in other time or place had been  
 A meek and lowly weeping Magdalene;  
 More sinned against than sinning, bruised and marred,  
 The lazy laughing Jenny of the bard.  
 (The same eternal and consuming itch  
 Can make a martyr, or plain simple bitch);  
 Or prudent sly domestic puss puss cat,  
 Or autumn’s favourite in a furnished flat,  
 Or strolling slattern in a tawdry gown,  
 A doorstep dinged by every dog in town.  
 For varying forms, one definition’s right:  
 Unreal emotions, and real appetite.  
 Women grown intellectual grow dull,  
 And lose the mother wit of natural trull.  
 Fresca was baptised in a soapy sea  
 of Symonds—Walter Pater—Vernon Lee.  
 The Scandinavians bemused her wits,

The Russians thrilled her to hysteric fits.  
 From such chaotic misch-masch potpourri  
 What are we to expect but poetry?  
 When restless nights distract her brain from sleep  
 She may as well write poetry, as count sheep.  
 And on those nights when Fresca lies alone,  
 She scribbles verse of such a gloomy tone  
 That cautious critics say, her style is quite her own.  
 Not quite an adult, and still less a child,  
 By fate misbred, by flattering friends beguiled,  
 Fresca's arrived (the Muses Nine declare)  
 To be a sort of can-can salonniere.<sup>225</sup>

The quintessential bad poet, Fresca is an impostor celebrated by impostors. Whether her being “by fate misbred” points to her own self-mythology, because she is not of the society in which she finds herself or to the author’s misogynistic take on her being “in other time or place . . . a meek and lowly weeping Magdalene,” the passage indeed puts prostitution at the forefront of Eliot’s depiction of female sexuality. Fresca’s “eternal and all consuming itch” links together the not-so angelic muse, the kept woman, and the streetwalker—“Or prudent sly domestic puss puss cat, / Or autumn’s favourite in a furnished flat, / Or strolling slattern in a tawdry gown”—as if venereal disease were the ontological condition of female ambition.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> Eliot, *Facsimile*, 41.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

The reveal in the Fresca episode is not gynophobic and scatological as in Swift's poem "The Lady's Dressing Room." In the very first few lines, she takes her "needful stool" as "Richardson / eases her labour till the deed is done." Fresca is not disgusting because she shits and sleeps around or because of "the good old hearty female stench" disguised under "odours, confected by the cunning French."<sup>227</sup> She is disgusting because she's literate. She reads on the toilet and in the bath. She "explores a page of Gibbon as she eats" and then "devours" her letters. This is the inverted image of Codrus whose Homeric tomes feed the rats: here, the whorish poetess feeds on her literature. The problem is not what she does, but how she talks about it and the self-importance she performs:

"My dear, how are you? I'm unwell today,  
 And have been, since I saw you at the play.  
 I hope that nothing mars your gait,  
 And things go better with you, than with me.  
 I went last night—more out of dull despair—  
 To Lady Kleinwurm's party—who was there?  
 Oh, Lady Kleinwurm's monde—no one that mattered—  
 Somebody sang, and Lady Kleinwurm chattered.  
 What are you reading? anything that's new?  
 I have a clever book by Giraudoux.  
 Clever, I think, is all. I've much to say—  
 But cannot say it—that is just my way—  
 When shall we meet—tell me all your manoeuvres;

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 39.

And all about yourself and your new lovers—  
 And when to Paris? I must make an end,  
 My dear, believe me, your devoted  
 friend”.

In the margin Pound writes, “Rhyme drags it out to diffuseness.”<sup>228</sup> But that is the point, especially since there is no enjambment here or anywhere else in the episode. (Compare: “Reflecting light upon the table as / The glitter of her jewels rose to meet it.”) Fresca is not repugnant because of something wafting under her skirts as in Swift’s *Celia*. There is no ecstatic scatological reveal; Fresca is not horrible because of “things, which must not be expressed, / When plumped into the reeking chest, / Send up an excremental smell / To taint the parts from whence they fell.” Her monstrosity is not genital. She is a mouth with words (and food) in it, a manicured hand with a pen. The glottal darkness of the laughing women in “Hysteria” is not the lens with which one should view this character. In fact, the whole gynophobic nightmare motif in *The Waste Land* distracts from the real horror attached to women’s speech. In the typist episode, the narrator invites his reader to listen for the cry of a figure whose non-consensual sexual “assault” implicitly makes her chosen to be the modern Philomela but who has only “one half-formed thought,” hardly an “inviolable voice”: “Well now that’s done; and I’m glad its over.” Marie wistfully recollects sledding as a child, the hyacinth girl’s story is interrupted by her lover’s own recollection. Madame Sosostriis offers her reading through a stuffy nose. The Thames daughter’s sad story is the picture of self-inflicted victimhood: “My people humble people who expect / nothing.” The demi-Cleopatra’s hysteric speech is full of questions, threats,

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 39.

and commands but elicits no response. Aside from Fresca only one character manages to wield speech like a true female monster: the gossip in the pub scene, the most loquacious and least discussed female figure in the poem.

If ornament is deceptive in the first half of “A Game of Chess,” its absence is deceptive in the second half. The first misreading is buttressed by the allusion-steeped lines oriented around the Belladonna archetype as seen through colored glass; the second misreading comes from the idea that Eliot is opening a window onto history. The two halves of the section have been kept together by the Notes’ reference to “vegetation ceremonies,” whether keeping to Eliot’s sources or exploring the sociological symbolism of barrenness, impotence, and abortion: the reader “experience[s] two kinds of sterility: the sated, synthetic richness of the upper class and the unclean, vacuous smugness of the pub women.”<sup>229</sup> At the very least, the pervasiveness of this binary warrants its reconsideration.<sup>230</sup> Readings of Lil—mother of five at thirty years old—as the face of “the pullulating breeding of the masses” are compelling, but they do not depend on reading the first section as a comment on population decline among the affluent. The vulgar biological reproduction of lusty husbands and submissive wives does not mean that the couple at the beginning is barren.<sup>231</sup> Rather, the two sections are classed by the use and abuse of ornament.

<sup>229</sup> Rodgers, “He Do the Police,” 53.

<sup>230</sup> The following are examples of those who assume that the figure is plot-wise meant to be upper-class: Kenner, *Invisible Poet*, 152-157; Lamos, *Deviant Modernism*, 112; Christina Hauck, “Through a Glass Darkly: ‘A Game of Chess’ and Two Plays by Marie Stopes,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 21.1 (Summer 1997), 112; George Williamson, “The Structure of *The Waste Land*,” *Modern Philology* 47.3 (February 1950), 199-200; Jennifer Sorensen Emery-Peck, “Tom and Vivien Eliot Do Narrative in Different Voices: Mixing Genres in *The Waste Land*’s Pub,” *Narrative* 16.3 (October 2008), 336-337; Audrey T. Rodgers, “‘He Do the Police in Different Voices’: The Design of *The Waste Land*,” *College Literature* 1.1 (Winter 1974): 53; LeCarner, “T. S. Eliot, Dharma Bum,” 406; Albert Gelpi, *A Coherent Splendour: The American Poetic Renaissance, 1910-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 128; Miller, *T.S. Eliot’s Personal Wasteland*, 75, 84. The assumption often implicitly relies on reading Tom and Viv into the scene and sometimes explicitly ventures into biographical evidence. Gelpi, for one, says the contrast between “the neurasthenic sexlessness of a cultured, upper-class couple with the mindless promiscuity of the cockneys in the pub” is “clearly autobiographical” Gelpi, *Coherent Splendour*, 128. Even if there is an autobiographical component, locating the class difference between the two couples in “A Game of Chess” wholly misses the class tension within Eliot’s marriage.

<sup>231</sup> According to Margot Norris, Lil’s monstrosity also indexes a very specific anti-populist discourse of the time by

In this respect, the two worlds are brought together by female artifice. Again, when it comes to the pub scene, the form misleads, taking the reader into history and seeming to leave behind the archetypal mode. Helen Vendler, for example, extols the veracity of the gossip about Lil: “Eliot’s genius was to listen to what his maid said, write it down, and make it poetry.”<sup>232</sup> In Eileen Wiznitzer’s words, “What Vendler does not point out is that because the poetic surface of the pub scene itself seems to be authentic and because it suggests an authentic scene of working class life, it functions cosmetically and conceals the texts implicit ideology.”<sup>233</sup> Wiznitzer tries to restore Lil to archetype, drawing on the myth of Lilith, Adam’s first wife. For me, the importance of the pub scene does come from its lack of ornamentation, which does not conceal the poem’s ideology so much as hold a mirror up to the over-ornamented lady—a mirror in which she views the naked face of toothless Lil.

Understanding the use of the over-ornamented woman as a trope to criticize over-wrought diction and those who employ it, explains why the pentameter begins to break down as the demi-Cleopatra begins to speak. She reveals her vulgar side (her sexually aggressive side), but her lines also begin to reach over into prose as the iambic foot disappears into monosyllables and the lines repeatedly breach past hexameter. The facade is falling apart and when it does, the long face of Lil is there to greet the reader. Lil, wholly without any cosmetics, appears through the

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showing Eliot connecting her tooth-loss and the calcium deficiency caused by her several pregnancies. Hauck is more detailed than Norris in her study of Lil as an index of Eliot’s concern with the class differential in postwar birthrates. Hauck also makes the most compelling reading of the hypothetical upper-class couple’s exchange as symptomatic of the decline in upper-class fertility due to latent homosexuality, female sexual aggression, and even upper-class abortion, which Hauck says may lie behind the Philomela reference, i.e. to the child-murder of Itys by his mother Procne. See Norris, “The Trace of the Trenches: Recovering Modernism’s World War I” in *America’s Modernisms: Revaluating the Canon, Essays in Honor of Joseph N. Riddel*, eds. Kathryn V. Lindberg and Joseph G. Kronick (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1996); Hauck, “Through a Glass Darkly,” 109-119.

<sup>232</sup> Helen Vendler, *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 78.

<sup>233</sup> Wiznitzer, “Legends of Lil,” 95.

un-metrical, un-rhyming long lines of tap-room gossip. The pub scene's prosaic lines suggest the early-modern dramatic convention of leaving low characters out of verse, and yet the celebrated realism Eliot brings to the scene twists plain diction away from Romantic sympathy-building. While the reader is led toward that pathos by being invited to feel for Lil's destitution, she is not the central character. The central character is the crass gossip doing all the talking. She summons an upper-class contempt for vulgarity that negates whatever sympathy might be extended to Lil. In the transition from opulence to chatter, "A Game of Chess" reworks the grotesque reveal of Swift's "A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed," but in the actual conversation going on in the pub scene the reveal works in the opposite direction. Whereas Swift's aging prostitute takes out her false teeth along with her glass eye, fake eyebrows, cheek plumpers, Lil has stubbornly refused these self-enhancements. So while the shift within the section pulls away the blank verse to reveal images of rats, alleys, dead men, dice games, and a sordid back-story for the characters' history together, Lil's friend the gossip is trying to get Lil to put her face back on. The point is not that every woman is a prostitute at heart. Lil and her namesake, the Biblical Lilith, are defined by their sexual refusals. Rather, the suggestion is that beneath every ornamented woman is a working-class family of seven.

If Fresca versifies the gloomy nineteenth-century courtesan, the gossip paints the picture of decrepit Lil. Specifically, she tells a friend about telling Lil to become the "nymph" in Swift's poem, to enter the world of feminine self-enhancement:

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—

I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,

HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME



Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.  
 He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you  
 To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.  
 You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,  
 He said, I swear I can't bear to look at you.  
 And no more can't I, I said, and think of poor Albert,  
 He's been in the army four years, he wants a good time,  
 And if you don't give it him, there's others will, I said.  
 Oh is there, she said. Something o' that, I said.  
 Then I'll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.  
 HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME<sup>234</sup>

Like the demi-Cleopatra, Lil is described obliquely. Albert and her friend are averting their eyes. Berated by another woman for letting herself go and not having got dentures to please her army husband Albert, Lil is a paradigmatic victim of patriarchy, which not only demands male domination of women but the dissolution of female friendship before the male gaze.<sup>235</sup> Prematurely aged from her pregnancies and abortion, Lil is a matrix for the poem's anti-populism, anti-feminism, and anti-ornamentalism. For Wiznitzer, Lil is also informed by a mythic dimension: Lil is a modern version of Lilith, Adam's first wife turned demonic monster. According to Jewish folklore, after Lilith refuses to lie beneath Adam, she takes refuge among the demons at the edge of the Red Sea. When God's angels tell her that she must either return or

<sup>234</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 58.

<sup>235</sup> See Wiznitzer, "Legends of Lil," 95-96.

lose a hundred of her demon children to death every day, Lilith preferred the punishment to submission in marriage. Lilith takes revenge by attacking babies, especially male babies. Working from Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of Lilith as the female monster who must suffer for her rebellion against patriarchy, Wiznitzer argues that Lil's not doing anything about her blasted looks is a rebellion against "patriarchal definitions of attractive or appropriate female behavior" and her self-inflicted abortion "takes power and control over her own body and biology." Like Lilith, Lil represents "women whose legends have been concealed, repressed, fragmented, revised, and silenced by a masculinist tradition." Lil reveals that silence in her self-destructive refusal of cosmetics, prosthesis, reproduction, and ornament. What is at stake in privileging this sort of rebellious silence against the chattering gossip? Wiznitzer is listening for a particular story of dis-identification: "although a woman tells Lil's story . . . she neither creates that story from a 'female' perspective nor from a perspective that is supportive of Lil."<sup>236</sup> But the poet is hardly on the side of Albert as Wiznitzer suggests, and while the gossip may enforce gender stereotypes, she also represents both the gendered poles of anti-populism: her complicity with flag-waving aggression is captured by her willingness to take Albert's service as justification for his rapaciousness; her encouragement of Lil's self-enhancement endorses female submissiveness. If Lil is an updated version of Lilith, the gossip is a version of the monstrous multitude depicted in "What the Thunder Said."

The poem's monstrous reveal occurs in the last section where the Cleopatra figure is found transformed dwelling in a "decayed hole among the mountains," her ornament stripped away and her Medusean character revealed. The parallels are well known: the demi-Cleopatra brushes her hair, like this witch-like figure: "A woman drew her long black hair out tight." Bits

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 95.

of popular tunes float through the Cleopatra scene. Here, there is only the strange sound of hair brushing: “And fiddled whisper music on those strings.” There, “Cupidon” peek out from the “fruited vines.” Here, “bats with baby faces” crawl “head downward down a blackened wall.” In Carol Christ’s words, the “empty cisterns in exhausted wells” and “blackened walls” in the last line represent “the collapse of civilization as an engulfment within an exhausted and blackened vagina.”<sup>237</sup> But the earlier cave imagery, the gaping and twisted mouths of cave-dwelling “hooded hordes,” is decidedly anti-populist:

Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that cannot spit  
 Here one can neither stand nor lie nor sit  
 There is not even silence in the mountains  
 But dry sterile thunder without rain  
 There is not even solitude in the mountains  
 But red sullen faces sneer and snarl  
 From doors of mudcracked houses<sup>238</sup>

These “mudcracked houses” are the first of several tomb images: the “cracked earth” and “empty cisterns in exhausted wells”; “this decayed hole among the mountains”; the yard of “tumbled graves” around an “empty chapel.” Whether in the womb-like tomb or tomb-like wombs, one finds the populace: “red sullen faces sneer and snarl” out of the earthy fissures that contort the body so that (like a foetus) “one can neither stand nor lie nor sit.” The most striking collapse of the anti-feminist frame comes in the alliterative line, “Dead mountain mouth of carious teeth that

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<sup>237</sup> Carol Christ, “Gender, Voice, and Figuration in Eliot’s Early Poetry,” in *T.S. Eliot: The Modernist in History*, ed. Ronald Bush (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 41.

<sup>238</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 68.

cannot spit.” While this image can surely be seen as another blasted vagina-dentata, it also conflates a “mountain mouth” of stalactites and stalagmites with the sneering and snarling faces trying to get up enough saliva to spit in contempt. The image recalls the mob in the first line of the section—“After the torchlight red on sweaty faces”—which recalls the zombie-like docility of the crowd in “The Burial of the Dead”:

A crowd flowed over the London Bridge, so many,  
I had not thought death had undone so many.  
Signs, short and infrequent, were exhaled,  
And each man fixed his eyes before his feet.<sup>239</sup>

But the rotten-toothed cave full of spit-less mouths also takes the reader back to Lil, the working-class mother of five who has lost her teeth. In Wiznitzer’s words, “Lil is Eliot’s wasted land.”<sup>240</sup> If so, she is written by the gossip.

I will not rehearse another contrast between Lil and Albert and the supposedly upper-class wife and abstracted husband; nor do I want to set Lil up as a figure of “a botched civilization” as in “an old bitch gone in the teeth,” Pound’s personification from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*.<sup>241</sup> Nor even do I want to retrace the female artifice theme as it morphs from cosmetics and perfume to false teeth and chemically induced abortion. I want to focus on the gossip, Lil’s chatty friend, as a different genre of female monster: Rumor. If the nightingale moves with a solitary song of love (or recrimination) and finds her listeners passively enchanted

<sup>239</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 55.

<sup>240</sup> Wiznitzer, “Legends of Lil,” 97. Wiznitzer is paraphrasing Annette Kolodny’s reading. See Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 6. Wiznitzer also explicitly connects Lil to the “empty chapel, only the wind’s home.”

<sup>241</sup> Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 188.

(or stirred to violent revenge), Rumor is participatory speech: made from the collective tongues of the populace.<sup>242</sup> In *The Aeneid*, she appears as a giant unsleeping bird whose feathers are made out of “as many tongues speaking, as many listening ears.” Her purpose is not vicious, but curious: she is “as tenacious of lies and evil, as she is messenger of truth.” She is present at Dido’s death:

Her Attendants saw the deadly Stroke,  
 And with loud Cries the sounding Palace shook.  
 Distracted from the fatal sight they fled;  
 And thro the Town the dismal Rumor spread.  
 First from the frightened Court, the Yell began,  
 Redoubled thence from House to House it ran:  
 The groans of Men, with Shrieks, Laments, and Cries  
 Of mixing Women, mount the vaulted Skies:  
 Not less the Clamour, than if ancient Tyre,  
 Or the new *Carthage*, set by Foes on Fire,  
 The rowling Ruin, with their lov’d Abodes,  
 Involv’d the blazing Temples of their Gods.<sup>243</sup>

(IV: 954-966)

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<sup>242</sup> Rumor is never the object of false worship, as in *Dullness*, and she is not an abominated womb—as in the half-woman, half-brood Error and Sin. Rumor has no petrifying gaze as does Medusa, no voice like the Sirens. She does not fit into Gilbert and Gubar’s female monster trope. For Gilbert and Gubar’s connection between the the sixteenth-century’s satire of actual women writers, Swift’s scatological poems, and Pope’s and Swift’s goddesses *Dullness* and *Criticism*, see *Madwoman in the Attic*, 30-36. However, I think there is cause to partially separate the specific satires and scatological poems that target women of the age from the image of a female monster that is most assuredly meant to target a quasi-transcendental demos.

<sup>243</sup> Virgil, *Aeneis*, trans. John Dryden *The Works of John Dryden*, vol. 5; *Poems: The Works of Virgil in English*, ed. William Frost (1679; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 483.

The auditory imagery runs throughout “What the Thunder Said.” “What is that sound high in the air,” the poet asks, answering, “Murmur of maternal lamentation.” The scene shifts to “hooded hordes swarming / Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth.”<sup>244</sup> Rumor even attends (via Chaucer) the Dantean image of the masses from “The Burial of the Dead.”

The first image of the populace in *The Waste Land* is taken from the canto in Dante’s *Inferno* devoted to those who have chosen to neutrally follow, rather than choose a course of action for which they might be praised or blamed. Their punishment fits their crime, and they dwell between life and death outside hell’s gates, never allowed entry. Never having really lived, Virgil tells Dante, they “have no hope of death.” Eliot’s image, which he says in the notes also derives from the Limbo canto, circles back to conformity as the cause of political strife as the noisy multitude follows “an ensign, which whirling ran so quickly that it seemed to scorn all pause”:

Here sighs, plaints, and deep wailings resounded through the starless air: it  
made me weep at first.

Strange tongues, horrible outcries, words of pain, tones of anger, voices  
deep and hoarse, and sounds of hands amongst them . . . .

And I, who looked saw an ensign, which whirling ran so quickly that it  
seemed to scorn all pause;

and behind it came so long a train of people, that I should never have  
believed death had undone so many.<sup>245</sup>

<sup>244</sup> Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 67.

<sup>245</sup> Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Aitken Carlyle, Thomas Okey, Philip H. Wicksteed (n.l.: Modern Library-Random House, 1932), 23.

The image reappears in the last scene in Rumor's whirling twig-temple at the unfinished end of Geoffrey Chaucer's *House of Fame* (c.1380). Like the prostitute-nymph without her accouterments, the House of Rumor is the Temple of Fame's un-ornamented double, the description of which strongly resembles Dante's scene outside the gates of hell with one important exception. While Dante chastises the followers whipped this way and that by martial favor, Chaucer's mob grasps after news of love:

I herde a grete noise withalle  
 In a corner of the halle,  
 Ther men of love tydings tolde,  
 And I gan thiderward beholde;  
 For I saw rennyng every wight,  
 As faste as that they hadden myght;  
 And everiche criede 'What thing is that?'  
 And som sayde, 'I not never what'  
 And whan they were alle on an hepe,  
 Tho behinde gonne up lepe,  
 And clamben up on other faste,  
 And up the nose on yen caste,  
 And troden faste on otheres heles  
 And stampe, as men doon after eles.<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The House of Fame*, in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Alfred W. Pollard et al. (London: Macmillan and Co., 1904), 584.

In this class one not only finds the gossip but Fresca too: “What are you reading? anything that’s new?” “Literature is news that STAYS news,” writes Pound.<sup>247</sup> If so, Rumor is modernist poetry’s true monster—and the modernist poet’s true anti-muse—because she is always there with a new answer to “What thing is that?” or to those who want to know “What the Thunder Said.”

If *The Waste Land* makes the ornamented woman into a figure of the prostitute-poetess, her promiscuity is less sexual than linguistic. With the poem’s eclectic sources and style shifts, *The Waste Land* is also a promiscuous text. Eliot summons Rumor, but he also takes her many-tongued wings as inspiration and, as if in answer to his homage, the poem’s reputation precedes it. The allegorical defense offered by *The Waste Land*, however, also tests the reader by inviting him or her to allow the verse form to determine how they visualize the scene. When Eliot describes the failure of the Notes, he does so in terms reminiscent of the demi-Cleopatra episode, only instead of perfume and powders confusing the senses, it’s the allusions and references:

Instead of beginning, as he should, in a state of sensitivity, he obfuscates his senses by the desire to be clever and to look very hard for something, he doesn’t know what—or else the desire not to be taken in. There is such a thing as stage fright, but what such readers have is pit or gallery fright.<sup>248</sup>

Writing on modernists use of “framing pieces,” John Whittier Ferguson reads the passage for the class division introduced by the Notes:

It is not fear that affects the more discriminating audience in the box seats.

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<sup>247</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 29.

<sup>248</sup> Eliot, *Use of Poetry*, 150-151.



Calculated to induce unnecessary cleverness on one hand and an uneasy sense of being ‘taken in’ on the other, Eliot’s notes instantly divide the public into distinct groups. . . . To spend too much time chasing Eliot’s references or to rely too obviously on his thematic guides is to confess oneself . . . unable to read the poem without its author’s help, prone to ‘pit or gallery fright’ in the face of challenging art.

So instead of “looking very hard for something” or worrying about being “taken in,” the reader Eliot wants begins in “a state of sensitivity.” The author occupies voices that are also trying too hard because of their alienated relationship to poetic language. Kenner, reading of the typist episode, points out that while the language of the scene is “out of touch” with the way the clerk or the typist might talk, “the diction . . . reflects the words with which the participants might clothe, during recollection in tranquility, their own notion of what they have been about.”<sup>249</sup>

Kenner suggests a similar point about the demi-Cleopatra episode when, quoting the first lines, he flatly states: “This isn’t a Miltonic sentence, brilliantly contorted.” But it seems to be and that is the point: the reader must be taken in by the appearance of Miltonic lines in order to set up the reveal. Eliot attacks bad poetry by writing ingeniously bad lines of poetry after the fashion of characters who, like Fresca, come to poetry as outsiders. Eliot notes elsewhere that “an artisan who can talk the English language beautifully while about his work or in a public bar, may compose a letter painfully written in a dead language bearing some resemblance to a newspaper leader and decorated with words like ‘maelstrom’ and ‘pandemonium.’”<sup>250</sup> Kenner cites the

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<sup>249</sup> Kenner, *Invisible Poet*, 169.

<sup>250</sup> Qtd. in Kenner, *Invisible Poet*, 83.

passage to explain the typist episode, and it is just as good of a description of the first section of “A Game of Chess.” If so, these crucial sections of *The Waste Land* are written as if by “an artisan.” Eliot is inspired by the bad poet.

Chapter Two:  
Moore Defending Defensiveness

## Crossing Over and Doubling Back: Moore's "Poetry"

Grace Schulman: *Three lines?*

Marianne Moore: Yes. POETRY . . . I, too, dislike it: there are things that are important beyond all this fiddle. Then I prolonged it: Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in it, after all, a place for the genuine. But I said, "The rest of it seems to be padding."<sup>251</sup>

Marianne Moore has been called the token women of the male-dominated modernist canon or, in Betsy Erkill's words, "*the* modernist woman poet male modernists chose to sponsor and admire."<sup>252</sup> T.S. Eliot, for example, pays her poetry the backhanded compliment that "one never forgets it is written by a woman; but . . . one never thinks of this particularity as anything but a positive virtue."<sup>253</sup> More censoriously, Randall Jarrell writes in a 1945 review that, "Miss Moore" is not "the greatest living poet," but she "writes better poetry than any other woman alive."<sup>254</sup> These comments show Moore fulfilling a second kind of tokenism: minor poet among major poets. Admittedly, she may even occupy that position in this dissertation.<sup>255</sup>

<sup>251</sup> Grace Schulman, "Conversation with Marianne Moore," *Quarterly Review of Literature* 16.1-2 (1969), 160.

<sup>252</sup> Betsy Erkill, *The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 102.

<sup>253</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Marianne Moore," in *The Critical Response to Marianne Moore*, ed. Elizabeth Gregory (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), 46.

<sup>254</sup> Randall Jarrell, "Poetry in War and Peace," in Gregory, *Critical Response to Marianne Moore*, 139.

<sup>255</sup> The text of Moore's that would vie for masterpiece status has an instructive fate. From 1945 to 1954, at a time when others in her cohort are publishing some of their most celebrated works—H.D.'s *Trilogy*, Ezra Pound's *The Pisan Cantos*, Williams' *Paterson*—Moore labors away in the uncelebrated genres of fable and translation. When her more than three-hundred page verse translation *The Fables of La Fontaine* (1954) is finally published, it is quickly replaced by a scant eighty-odd page selection. The revised full version goes to press again only once in 1964. While several critics explain the turn to La Fontaine's fables as Moore's way of dealing with her mother's death and the aftermath of World War II or as the natural outgrowth of her predilection for animal motifs and moralistic diction, her masterpiece is precisely the sort of project that falls outside the realm of genuine poetic work. In the early modern era, one should add, the bias against translation may also have had to do with its association with women writers.

However, whereas previous critics have drawn distinctions between masculine original genius and Moore's conformity to stanza and rhyme, or have make her representative of minor poets, I argue that Moore does not work in a different politics of form than her male peers. Moore shares their anti-populist and anti-ornamental poetic. She does, however, come to the defense without Williams, Eliot, and Pound's bellicose rhetoric.

Moore's gender has been an implicit problem for critics from R.P. Blackmur's complaint that "no poet has been so chaste" to Carolyn Burke's objection to Moore's "narrow range of feeling."<sup>256</sup> However, since second-wave feminists have called into question the assumption women poets should engage feminine sexuality—as does Stein in *Tender Buttons* or Loy in *Songs to Johannes*—readings of Moore have shifted away from her unsettling sexlessness and toward her canny negotiation of a scene that fetishizes the masculinity of genius. In Heuving's words, Moore gives "an active response to her engendering" but "refuses to enact the conditions of her second-rate status, even to complain about them."<sup>257</sup> It is Moore's critics, not Moore herself, who mark defensiveness as feminine. Moore's awareness of being scrutinized gives her a productively ambivalent take on the stakes of the difference between being defensive and taking up a defense. That ambivalence is the subject of this chapter. Below I read Moore's "Poetry" as a counterintuitive rejection of the analytical mode of prose and defense of poetic defensiveness. Unlike her male cohort, Moore's problem with the defense is the masculine posturing the genre encourages. Her poems do not gender defensiveness or naturalize its feminization as the reaction of a woman to the male critic's gaze. For Moore, defensiveness is a genuine response to poetry's perceived decline and deserves to be written about rather than

<sup>256</sup> Qtd. in Jeanne Heuving, *Omissions Are Not Accidents: Gender in the Art of Marianne Moore* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 18. Heuving gives the best survey of this sort of reception of Moore's work.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 19, 20.

hidden beneath inflated self-importance and fantastical ambition (as in, “a poem containing history”). When Moore begins “Poetry” with “I too dislike it,” her indefinite pronoun includes poetry, the poem, and the defense. She not only defends poetry but dwells on the compulsion to defend.

Male modernists are interpellated into defense by their identification with the patriarchal rubrics of poetic achievement, but Moore participates in the project with wry self-awareness. Noting the patronizing exceptionalism in the attitude taken by male modernists and their New Critical devotees toward Moore, Ellen Levy shows how the male poets’ concern to keep Moore in her place as a “minor poet” reflects their own anxiety over modernist poetry’s own minority.<sup>258</sup> The token woman, Levy argues, is a mirror in which male modernists encounter a version of the gendered expectations they foist on themselves: to be masters of an effete art, to restore poetry’s generic dominance, to stand as bulwarks against the end of civilization.<sup>259</sup> In her paradoxical minor-major status, they encounter the self-negating dimension of their mission to popularize a poetry that defines itself against popularity. “The place of the token woman,” Levy writes of Moore, “is the place of this negation: she represents minority in the space of majority.” Moore’s poetry analyzes the hyphen between minor and major for her male peers. Even later, as Moore dwells on the poet manqué, her male peers write prophetic tracts (Pound in Pisa), self-aggrandizing family histories (*Four Quartets*), and assume the personage of whole cities (Dr. Paterson). In “Armor Seems Extra” she writes of her own hollow men, ornate suits of medieval

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<sup>258</sup> Bonnie Costello also notes male poets’ use of Moore as a mirror in which to admire and defend themselves: “Moore’s first defenders, mostly fellow poets, tended to present her in terms of their own current obsessions. To Aldington she was an imagist, to Zukofsky an objectivist. Pound linked her with Laforgue and the art of ‘logopoeia’; Eliot with ritual and classicism. She became the heroine of Williams’s *Spring and All*, where he praised her for precisely the qualities he was trying to achieve. Stevens read Moore as a new romantic, like himself.” Costello, *Marianne Moore*, 11.

<sup>259</sup> Ellen Levy, “‘No Poet has been so Chaste’: Moore and the Poetics of Ambivalence,” in *Criminal Ingenuity: Moore, Cornell, Ashbery, and the Struggle Between the Arts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 45.

armor: “I should, I confess / like to have a talk with one of them about excess, / and armor’s undermining modesty / instead of innocent depravity.”<sup>260</sup> Advocating what appears a decorous appeasement of gendered expectation (“modesty”), she criticizes those who would reinforce the binary of “innocent depravity” by making her, like Mina Loy, a *femme fatale*, that safe inversion of the angelic muse. Instead she describes the “excess” she finds in the ornamentation of masculine defensive armor. She “confess[es]” her dislike for the masculine poetic bravado of making introspection into a spectacle.

Criticisms of Moore’s depthlessness or lack of feeling should, then, be read as criticisms of Moore’s failure to participate in what Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz have called “bad modernism.”<sup>261</sup> If male poets and their *femme fatales* collectively form a canon of sinners around the badness of modernism, Moore, the saint, has been excluded.<sup>262</sup> Moore’s bad side is not on the surface, but it does come through in the way she uses the surface of her poems. Moore’s style—a mix of prose diction and syllabic stanzas—accomplishes a *détournement* of the formalism for which she is censured: in Jarrell’s words, her “analytic” method and her “syllabics.”<sup>263</sup> The complaint suggests that Moore has taken the worst from both poetry and prose. In her prose diction, she removes herself to “the farthest level of abstraction,” while in her poetic line—all syllable and no accent—“the crude natural rhythm of the primitive emotion has been restrained away to nothing,” even her rhymes are “hard to feel or even to find.” But Jarrell’s main complaint is that Moore’s poetry is not narrative enough: her poems are “a state rather than a

<sup>260</sup> Moore, *Complete Poems*, 152.

<sup>261</sup> See Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, eds., *Bad Modernisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>262</sup> Williams’ remarks in his autobiography offer a clue as to why she can never make the same showing as the naughty Mina Loy or cerebral Gertrude Stein: “Marianne was our saint—if we had one—in whom we all instinctively felt our purpose come together to form a stream. Everyone loved her.” No major poet of modernism has ever been canonized out of love. William Carlos Williams, *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 146.

<sup>263</sup> Jarrell, “Poetry in War and Peace,” *Critical Response*, 139.

process.”<sup>264</sup> She has taken the descriptive language of prose without having taken what makes story-telling and argument-making exciting: the play of anticipation and fulfillment in the plot’s climax or the argument’s resolution. She has taken the same dynamic out of verse by eschewing the rhythms of accentual-syllabic meter. The problem with Moore, then, is that she is not invested in the narrative of bad modernism. This does not mean she does not share modernist poetry’s anti-populism and its anti-ornamental poetic. Rather, Moore views the compulsion to tell a story or make an argument as part of the compulsion to defend: she does not make her new form into an occasion for the defense of poetry.

Some critics have attempted to redeem this prosaic quality of Moore’s poetry by inserting it into a modernist narrative of prose-poetry as a genre-busting innovation.<sup>265</sup> I will show shortly how deep is Moore’s ambivalence to prose. There have also been several recent attempts to recuperate Moore’s syllabic lines.<sup>266</sup> But *Spring and All* provides the basic retreat from reading her syllabics as a testament to the arbitrary line-break and move toward insisting on some meaningful “source” for her poetic:

I believe this is possible as I believe in the main that Marianne Moore is of  
all American writers most constantly a poet—not because her lines are invariably

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<sup>264</sup> Jarrell, “Poetry in War and Peace,” *Critical Response*, 139.

<sup>265</sup> On the prose poem as a progressive genre-breaking genre, see Margueritte S. Murphy, *A Tradition of Subversion: The Prose Poem in English from Wilde to Ashbery* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 9-96. For Moore as a precursor to prose-poetry, see Roy Fuller, *Owls and Artificers: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (New York: Library Press, 1971), 50; Melissa Kwasney, “Introduction,” *Toward the Open Field: Poets on the Art of Poetry, 1800-1850* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), xxii.

<sup>266</sup> Most proponents of this reading of her style rest their case on simple reflection in the poem of historical events, such as World War I or film. Bazin, for example, imputes the difference between Moore’s free verse experiments in the 1920s, which she says “critique the commodity phantasmagoria of an expanding consumer culture,” while saying that “the rigid syllabics of these earlier poems bear the traces of the trauma of human conflict.” See Victoria Bazin, *Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 66. For a pairing of Moore’s syllabics with cinematic experiment, see Susan McCabe, “Marianne Moore: Film, Fetishism and her ‘Ballet Mécanique’,” in *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 184-226.



full of imagery they are not, they are often diagrammatically informative, and not because she clips her work into certain shapes—her pieces are without meter most often—but I believe she is most constantly a poet in her work because the purpose of her work is invariably from the source from which poetry starts—that it is constantly from the purpose of poetry. And that it actually possesses this characteristic, as of that origin, to a more distinguishable degree when it eschews verse rhythms than when it does not. It has the purpose of poetry written into [it] and therefore it is poetry<sup>267</sup>

Critics still explain away the arbitrary quality of Moore's syllable counts and stanzas by retroactively pushing their significance off the page's "shapes" and into Moore's psyche. For some readers of "The Fish" or "Those Various Scalpels," for example, the syllabic breaks suggests violence against the body, respectively soldiers' bodies and the woman's body which respectively speak to Moore's status as another of the many modernists responding to the machine-made carnage of World War I and her implication in the gender politics of her time.<sup>268</sup> But what if the line breaks' being arbitrary is part of the point? Indeed, Moore seems to dramatize the arbitrariness of the line break by being so fastidious about implementing her counts and being so willing to revise them. My reading of "Poetry" treats Moore's style as a violent disruption of the continuity of prose and the subjectivity it implies. Rejecting the logical argument of the prose ideal and the impassioned self-disclosure of the lyric ideal, Moore takes issue with the prevailing expectations of the defense and its poetry. While Moore's poetic

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<sup>267</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 145.

<sup>268</sup> See Bazin, *Marianne Moore and the Cultures of Modernity*, 64

straddles the defense's transition from prose to poetry by breaking down the difference between them, she also uses line breaks to conspicuously ornament her poetic texts and set them apart from lyric's subjectivity-making discourse.

Five decades of extensive revision to "Poetry" (1919-1967) offers an excellent example of the defense's shift from prose to verse.<sup>269</sup> Prose in style but divided into syllabic lines and uniform stanzas, "Poetry" literally versifies the prose defense. I quote the original 1919 five-stanza version of the poem published in *Others* and collected in *Poems* (1921) and, in later iterations, in *Observations* (1924) and *Selected Poems* (1935):

I too, dislike it: there are things that are important

beyond all this fiddle.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it,

one discovers that there is in

it after all, a place for the genuine.

Hands that can grasp, eyes

that can dilate, hair that can rise

if it must, these things are important not because a

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<sup>269</sup> First published in the last issue of *Others* magazine (1919); republished in The Egoist Press' *Poems* (1921), Moore's first collection; with some small revision in The Dial Press' *Observations* (1924) and Faber's *Selected Poems* (1935); the *Collected Poems* issued by Faber/Macmillan (1951); and in the author's "Notes" to Penguin's *Complete Poems* (1967); the five-stanza version of "Poetry" is the best known and most regarded. There are two principle shorter versions, one thirteen-line, abortive experiment in free verse in the 1925 edition of *Observations* and the three-line radical in the 1967 *Complete Poems*, the standard collection today. There is also a middle-length version that first appears in the 1932 anthology by Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson, *The New Poetry* and then reappears in Louis Zukofsky's didactic defense, *A Test of Poetry* (1948). Two studies of the publication history are invaluable: Bonnie Honigsblum, "Marianne Moore's Revisions of 'Poetry,'" in *Marianne Moore: Woman and Poet*, ed. Patricia C. Willis (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation-University of Maine, 1990), 185-222; and Jeffrey D. Peterson, "Notes on the Poem(s) 'Poetry': The Ingenuity of Moore's Poetic Place," in Willis, *Woman and Poet*, 223-242. Both draw from the groundwork done by Willis and Clive E. Diver, "Bibliographical Numbering and Marianne Moore," *PBSA* 70 (1976): 261-63.

high sounding interpretation can be put upon them

but because they are

useful; when they become so derivative as to

become unintelligible, the

same thing may be said for all of us—that we

do not admire what

we cannot understand. The bat,

holding on upside down or in quest of something to

eat, elephants pushing, a wild horse risking a roll,

a tireless wolf under

a tree, the immovable critic twinkling [twitching] his skin like a

horse that feels a flea, the base-

ball fan, the statistician—case after case

could be cited did

one wish it; nor is it valid

to discriminate against “business documents and

school-books”; all these phenomena are important.

One must make a distinction

however: when dragged into prominence by half poets,

the result is not poetry,

nor till the autocrats among us can be  
     “literalists of  
     the imagination”—above  
     insolence and triviality and can present  
  
 for inspection, imaginary gardens with real toads  
     in them, shall we have  
 it. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,  
     in defiance of their opinion—  
 the raw material of poetry in  
     all its rawness and  
     that which is on the other hand,  
     genuine then you are interested in poetry.<sup>270</sup>

Almost all of the major generic features of the defense are here: the definition of poetry and its purpose; a psychology of taste; an anti-populist rejection of poetic norms; a statement on the relationship between poetry and prose; a division of the poetry community into good and bad poets. But Moore’s poem is also full of double meaning and ambiguity. For example, the idea that “we / do not admire what / we cannot understand” censures difficult and/or over-wrought poetry—in other versions of the poem, “unknowable” or full of “conscious oddity.”<sup>271</sup> But she is also citing the inability or unwillingness to appreciate “what / we cannot understand.” “Critics

<sup>270</sup> Marianne Moore, “Poetry,” *Others* 5.6 (July 1919), 5.

<sup>271</sup> Marianne Moore, “Poetry,” *Observations* (New York: The Dial Press, 1925), 31; Moore, “Poetry,” *The New Poetry*, ed. Harriet Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson (New York: Macmillan, 1932), 416. See also Bonnie Honigsblum, ed., “Variorum Edition of ‘Poetry,’” in Willis, *Woman and Poet*, 203-222.

and Connoisseurs” and “In the Days of Prismatic Color” make the point more clearly by addressing those who fail to tell the difference between meaningful “complexity” and “unconscious fastidiousness,” between the genuine article and ostentatious craftsmanship.<sup>272</sup> The miscellany that follows is framed as an illustration of Moore’s argument, although whether one is or is not supposed to “understand” and “admire” the “case[s]” is unclear: the bat, elephants, horse, and wolf strive to survive and stay true to themselves, which seems like a good thing, while the irritable critic too reserved to be “risking a roll,” the dumb “base- / ball fan,” and the calculating “statistician” seem hardly as important as they believe themselves to be. When Moore follows “all these phenomena are important” with a “however,” she further suggests that the point lies elsewhere than in this perplexing list. The psychological statement (“we / do not admire what / we cannot understand”) has disguised proscription as description. In fact, many people can and do admire what they cannot or do not understand—like her list—but in the terms of the defense, that is part of the problem.

Moore is playing off the expectations brought to the defense, such as the idea that evidence supports claims. The ambivalence with which she briefly engages the distinction between poetry and prose is another example. On first reading, she seems to scold those who “discriminate” against prose. If earlier defenses make exception for some prose as poetry, Moore seems to call for an anything-goes acceptance of even “business documents and // school-books” or, as in another version, “trade reports.” This initial reading, which critics posit as Moore’s meta-commentary on her own prose diction, neglects the dismissiveness and brevity with which she treats this particular feature of the genre of the prose defense. First, the lines pick up where the first two sentences leave off: there, she corrects the mistaken prejudice against poetry, and

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<sup>272</sup> Moore, *Complete Poems*, 39, 41.

here she corrects the mistaken prejudice against prose. But the cursory treatment of the prose problem, I argue, has less to do with un-prejudicing her audience and more to do with her compulsory satisfaction of the expectations brought to the genre.

A defense of true-to-form defensiveness, “Poetry” gives up on prose. After gesturing to the “fiddle” of the prose defense—“case after case / could be cited did / one wish it”—Moore makes a cursory pass at another convention of the genre, troubling the relationship between poetry and prose. Concluding the periodic sentence with the off-hand declaration, “all these phenomena are important,” she really means that they are not nearly as important as her reader believes. This shift in tone puts the mention of prose alongside things that she is admitting are important, but in which she is not taking the same level of interest as her reader. Her exasperation with the prose/poetry question comes through in the source she provides for the lines, a passage from Tolstoy’s *Diary*:

Where the boundary between prose and poetry lies, I shall never be able to understand. The question is raised in manuals of style, yet the answer to it lies beyond me. Poetry is verse: prose is not verse. Or else poetry is everything with the exception of business documents and school books.<sup>273</sup>

While one might argue that all texts might find a place in Moore’s poetic, her affinity for Tolstoy’s verbal equivalent of throwing up one’s hands suggests otherwise.<sup>274</sup> In either case, she accepts prose on different grounds than Tolstoy: while his either/or treats prose as non-verse or

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<sup>273</sup> Qtd. in Moore, *Complete Poems*, 267. The famous statement from the thirteen-line version, “art is not an enigma,” likely also borrows from Leo Tolstoy’s attack on new poetics in *What is Art?* where he disapprovingly quotes Jules Huret, “There should always be an enigma in poetry, and the aim of literature—it has no other—is to evoke objects.” Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?* trans. Aylmer Maude (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1904), 82.

<sup>274</sup> For commendation of Moore’s eclectic sources, see Holley, *Poetry of Marianne Moore*, 16.

the language of institutions, she includes even the most institutional examples. Moore's re-purposing of texts from newspapers, scientific magazines, guidebooks, encyclopedias, and etiquette manuals might indicate a broadened definition of poetry, but the point of re-purposing them is to undermine the establishment-thinking that determines their original function. In short, Moore is open-minded about the poetic possibilities of unpoetic texts, but her intervention relies on the difference between the poetic and prosaic function of an utterance. As she says in the 1919 version, one must demand poetry defined "in defiance of their opinion." She opposes the prevailing opinion about what goes into a defense of poetry.

For Moore, like Pound and Williams, the defense has two fronts. On the one hand, the bad poet and the over-ornamental language of verse represent the threat from within. On the other hand, the philosopher sets prose up as the antithesis of verse: prose is poetry stripped of ornament and put to a logic test. By the time Moore writes her defense, defenders can hardly undo the bias against ornamental diction, but they are also becoming restless in the argumentative confines of the philosophically oriented defense. Moore's distaste for analytical prose makes "Poetry" even more remarkable since the length of some of her lines and her diction evoke discursive prose. If Moore's reputation as a forerunner of prose-poetry causes some critics to under-interpret the syllabic and stanzaic regularity of her poems, the urge to meet the argumentative standard of the defense causes other critics to miss her subversive use of connectors like "however"; "not because . . . but because"; "nor"; "must"; "if . . . then"; "shall"; the depersonalized use of "one"; and the exemplary flourish of the colon. Moore seems to make truth claims, support them with evidence, and reach a conclusion, but she hardly offers a tight argument. The opening claim may be set in the impersonal "one," but she uses it to offer a

testimony rather than a hypothesis. The evidence is difficult to interpret, and the argument is tautological: important because useful, useful because important. Her definitions of poetry are paradoxical.<sup>275</sup> After the high-stakes description of hair-raising experience, intrepid animals, and demanding the genuine “in defiance of their opinion,” the last line reduces the poem to discovering whether or not one is “interested in poetry.”

The conflicted state of the defense—turning against prose and toward poetry—manifests itself in different versions of the class Moore refers to as “the autocrats among us” in the 1919 version of the poem and in the final 1967 version (in the notes) as simply “the poets among us.”<sup>276</sup> The first version implies the masculine posturing that Moore distances herself by using the term “autocrats,” even as she also places herself among them. The second version seems to have erased the censure implicit in the word choice. But the real difference comes in how the relationship to “half poets” changes: “autocrats” seems to extend the idea of “half poets” who drag poetry “into prominence,” while “the poets among us” seems to decidedly differentiate between “half poets” and “the [real] poets among us.” But both autocrat-poet and real-poet, I argue, are figures of the defender of poetry: both have to overcome “insolence and triviality,” qualities of the touchy race of poets. If the first line can be read not only as a complaint about bad poetry but the tediousness of defending poetry, passing through “perfect contempt” to “a place for the genuine” means getting over the the shows of outrage and pedantic proofs of the prose defense and getting back to defensiveness. Moore is both censuring the overzealous defender of poetry and rescuing defensiveness. Poetic self-reproach is authentic and so is having to defend oneself. In both versions, each of the versions something must offer be offered “for

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<sup>275</sup> Costello, *Marianne Moore*, 21.

<sup>276</sup> Honigsblum, “Variorum,” 205; Moore, *Complete Poems*, 266.



inspection.” Moore’s decision to replace the self-reproachful “autocrats among us” with the self-congratulatory “poets among us” makes more sense: both have the character of a defender of poetry. The “insolence and triviality” that define them come from being frustrated with the state into which poetry and the world have fallen. Poets have to get over the hyper-analytical touchiness that impedes change. The defender of poetry must treat the defense like a poem: as an occasion for “the genuine.”

If the defense maintains the us-or-them mentality of the embattled upper ranks of the poetry community, this does not mean that Moore is incapable of seeing her remonstrances as part of the problem. In an early, ambiguous moment in “Poetry,” Moore implicates herself in the defensiveness the poem first identifies: “all this fiddle” means both the bad stuff of mock poets and the defensive text of “Poetry” itself.<sup>277</sup> Founding a new community of real poets means putting aside formal defenses of poetry and defensive posturing, but “it” now also refers to the discussion upon which the author is about to embark (yet again). If Moore acknowledges her complicity with the “autocrats,” the same self-awareness sets her apart from them and, ultimately, allows her to glimpse the poetic ideal: it is not a world without defenses. Even the triumphant “imaginary gardens with read toads / in them” are intended “for inspection.” One comes upon “a place for the genuine” through, not in spite of, “perfect contempt.” In other words, poets must defend poetry from the inauthenticity of the prose defense, while remaining true to what is “genuine” in their defensiveness. The physiological phenomena—grasping hands, dilating eyes, and hair standing on end—register the adrenaline-filled, fight-or-flight responses of a cornered poet. The exclusions Moore makes in her adoption of the prose defense are patently modernist: inferior but popular poets must be banished and verse artifice must be disallowed in

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<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 24.

order to promote poetic naturalism. But “Poetry” also calls on poets to declare independence from the prose defense and its artifice in order to discover defensiveness as a poetic moment. The problem will lead to a revision of “Poetry” that leaves only the moment of discovery, stripped of all the features reminiscent of the prose defense.

“Armor Seems Extra”: Defending Poetry and Defining the Self

My own revisions are usually the result of impatience with unkempt diction and lapses in logic, together with an awareness that for most defects, to delete is the instantaneous cure.

—Marianne Moore, “Idiosyncrasy and Technique”

What is poetry? there are as many answers to this question as there are minds that take an interest in it; for in the attempt to answer it each of us is perforce thrown back upon that unformulated philosophy which is an essential aspect of his inmost self.

—Edmond Holmes, *What is Poetry?*

Pursuing new form, Moore revises “Poetry” almost to the end of her life. Even the “longer version” included in the “Notes” to *Complete Poems*, which replaces the falsely titled “original version,” bears evidence of revision. No less than seven distinct texts appear, disappear, and reappear in the poem’s publication history as Moore stewards the poem through four different principle versions: the dynamically spaced stanzas of six, almost rhyming lines roughly 19, 19, 11, 5, 8, and 13 syllables long in the five-stanza version; the brief foray into right-justified free verse in the thirteen-line version; the fifteen-line, three-stanza version in which syllabic lines are reintroduced in a different count (roughly 8, 14, 11, 19, and 16); and the three-line version cut down to only this:

I, too, dislike it.

Reading it, however, with a perfect contempt for it, one discovers in

it, after all, a place for the genuine.<sup>278</sup>

The chronicle of “Poetry” typifies the modernist crisis of form: a single poetic statement given multiple shapes and rhythms. Moore even experiments with paratextuality, offering three different versions of the note to the poem, and, as Hugh Kenner says, making the real final version “a footnote to an excerpt of itself” or, as another reader says, an excerpt of a footnote to itself.<sup>279</sup>

If Moore’s revision of the poem suggests authorial privilege taken to an extreme, the publication history of these changes also index how much “Poetry” is a shared enterprise.<sup>280</sup> Williams, who edits the last issue of *Others* in which the poem first appears, speaks through it by setting it immediately after his bitter opening screed against detractors. Alfred Kreymborg, the regular editor of the magazine, selects it among four others of Moore’s poems for republication in *Others for 1919: An Anthology of the New Verse* and writes his own homage poem “Poetry.” H.D. and Bryher (Annie Winifred Ellerman) edit *Poems*, Moore’s first collection, which reprints the *Others* version. Harriett Monroe and Alice Corbin Henderson’s invitation to contribute to their popular anthology, *The New Poetry*, occasions the three-stanza version. A long-time admirer of fellow St. Louis-born, east-coast educated Moore, Eliot edits *Selected Poems* for Faber and decides where “Poetry” falls in the volume’s order. His role may influence Moore’s

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<sup>278</sup> Moore, *Complete Poems*, 36.

<sup>279</sup> See Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World: American Modernist Writers* (New York: Knopf, 1975), 1432; Peterson, *Marianne Moore*, 231.

<sup>280</sup> Robin G. Schulze, “Introduction,” *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 22-23.

reversion to the longer version. Conrad Aiken and Louis Zukofsky also select the poem for their respective anthologies (albeit different versions). While Aiken's *A Comprehensive Anthology of Poetry* (1929, 1944) takes the five-stanza version, Zukofsky reaches back for the three-stanza poem in *A Test of Poetry* (1948). Almost all of the major editorial figures of the period seem to have a hand in the publication of the poem at some point or other. Pound, the only player on the scene who does not seem to play a direct role, arguably provides the theory behind the poem's final three-line version, a testament to "Imagist technique" that "reveal[s] the image-within-the-image."<sup>281</sup>

This core tenet of Imagism relies on an anti-ornamental poetic. Composition, as Pound insists in his account of "In a Station of the Metro," revision consists of excision. Moore shows the principle in practice in the above epigraph: "for most defects, to delete is the instantaneous cure."<sup>282</sup> Specifically, of the three-line version of "Poetry," the excised portions turn out to be so much "padding" or "fiddle." Applying the anti-ornamental poetic against the secondary features of the defense, she leaves only the moment in which she discovers herself in her own definition of poetry. Yet by placing the longer version of the poem in the footnotes, Moore also invites her reader to ruminate on the deletion itself. Taken together, the new version and the longer version in the notes tell a story about self-knowledge gained through having defined poetry for oneself in "perfect contempt" for the prevailing notions of poetry, the popularity of "Poetry," and one's own sense of self: the Moore of 1967 can recognize ornament that the 1919 Moore could not.

But the idea that defining poetry leads to self-discovery predates "Poetry" and the migration of the genre from prose to verse. In 1900, this true-to-oneself poetic is already

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<sup>281</sup> See K.L. Goodwin, *The Influence of Ezra Pound* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 157-158. See also Honigsblum, "Revisions of 'Poetry'," in Willis, *Woman and Poet*, 185-222.

<sup>282</sup> Moore, *Complete Prose*, 507.

emerging in the prose defense, which recognized that in this context defining and defending are the same. The first sentence of Edward Holmes' 1900 pamphlet, *What Is Poetry?* celebrates the plurality of definitions of poetry as proof of poetry's cultivation of free-thinking individualism:

What is poetry? there are as many answers to this question as there are minds that take an interest in it; for in the attempt to answer it each of us is perforce thrown back upon that unformulated philosophy which is an essential aspect of his inmost self, a philosophy which emancipates him from the control of all schools and sects, and in expounding which (so far as it admits of exposition) he tells the story of his heart and makes confession of his faith.

Defining poetry—half of defending poetry—gets at “that unformulated philosophy” that defines the person. Every definition of poetry “is as real and true as the individual life which it summarizes and the personality which it expresses and reflects.”<sup>283</sup> The nineteenth century closes with the recognition that defending and defining poetry mean giving an account of oneself, one's personal philosophy. The twentieth century opens with this insight being taken to its logical conclusion. If defending poetry means that one “tells the story of his heart and makes confession of his faith,” there is no real difference between poetry and its defense, provided one cast off “the control of all schools and sects.” The idea persists that poiesis stands for self-making as much as the invention of new poetic forms.

As I argue in the previous section, almost all of the major features of the defense are present in Moore's poem. Only three regular features of the genre are absent in “Poetry” but present in Pound's prose defense, “The Serious Artist”: a comparison between the writer of

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<sup>283</sup> Edmond Holmes, *What is Poetry?* (London: John Lane, 1900), 1.

poetry and some other profession or intellectual discipline; a history of poetic achievement with exempla; and a gesture to poetic genre.<sup>284</sup> Of these, the last is the most significant omission.

“The Serious Artist” contains only a brief remark about satire being “the delineation of ugliness” in compliment to “the cult of beauty.”<sup>285</sup> Williams’ treatment is more characteristic: he blames

genre for skewing whatever “excellence” can be found in popular poetry: “Nearly always some quite accidental and therefore unimportant genre which such a work shows will be found to be the cause of its popularity.”<sup>286</sup> Elsewhere, he defines genre as “subject matter,” saying that

“when a poet . . . begins to devote himself to the *subject matter* of his poems, *genre*, he has come to an end of his poetic means.” The issue of “subject matter” brings the problem of genre full circle since, according to Williams, it accounts for “the form of prose” as well.<sup>287</sup> The turn

against genre is not new. In 1910 J.E. Spingarn, the influential Renaissance scholar declares:

“We have done with the *genres*, or literary kinds. Their history is inseparably bound up with that of the classical rules. . . . fixed norm[s] governed by inviolable laws.”<sup>288</sup> His contempt expresses

a Romantic rejection of neo-classical formalism. But while modernists distance themselves from genre in this sense, they are deeply invested in new forms of poem and new ways of classifying

poetry. Pound divides poetry into three categories: *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, *logopoeia*. Moore

herself, as I have said, came to associate the future of poetry, in which she participated, with the

anti-generic, saying that “the only reason [she] know[s] for calling [her] work poetry at all is that

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<sup>284</sup> These features can be found elsewhere. Moore compares the poet and “the scientist” frequently. See Moore, “The Art of Poetry IV,” interview by Donald Hall, *The Paris Review*, no. 26 (1961), 65-66. See also “Old and New Masters in Literature,” *New York Times Book Review*, October 12, 1919.

<sup>285</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 51.

<sup>286</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 344.

<sup>287</sup> Williams, *Selected Essays*, 288; Williams, *Imaginations*, 133.

<sup>288</sup> (a) J.E. Spingarn, “The New Criticism,” in *Criticism in America* (New York: Haskell House, 1924), 28. (b) Cf. Irving Babbitt’s lucid distinction between formalist and vitalist understandings of genre in *The New Laokoon: An Essay on the Confusion of the Arts* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1910) 245-250.

there is no other category in which to put it.” Of course, the fact that she makes this statement upon receiving the National Book Award suggests that her texts are hardly unclassifiable. Modernist poetry studies treats the breakdown of genre as a strength of modernism (rather than critics’ inability or unwillingness to apply genre to modernist poetry) because of its own institutional anti-populism: the ease with which the populace accepts more of the same by a different name implies a weakness in genre-poets’ appeal to pre-existing tastes and the genre-poem’s offer of a variation on a theme. The problem with genre is the problem of democracy. As Williams puts it, “There is, in a democracy, a limit beyond which thought is not expected to leap.”<sup>289</sup> Genre ruins individual initiative. Moore gives one of the most succinct explanations for the prejudice when, responding to a request to “analyze her sentence structure,” she says, “My instinctive reply might have seemed dictatorial: you don’t devise a rhythm, the rhythm is the person, and the sentence but a radiograph of personality.”<sup>290</sup> She is being “dictatorial” in answer to the tyranny of majority opinion.<sup>291</sup> Writing genre poetry, then, means either misrepresenting oneself for gain or revealing oneself as deeply unoriginal. The defense of poetry responds by figuring the poet as reclusive, as in “The Serious Artist,” and by enjoining poets to reveal the truth about themselves. With genre out of the way, the defense promises, the poet can find a more truthful expression of him/herself, which offers a more authentic expression of the actual diversity of the human race.<sup>292</sup>

The bias against genre poetry, the fickle treatment of the poetry/prose distinction, and the use of traditional verse forms and high-flown poetic diction are all bound up with issues of self-

<sup>289</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 340.

<sup>290</sup> Moore, *Complete Prose*, 396.

<sup>291</sup> As Costello puts it, “Moore believes in decorum, but an ultimate decorum that does not exclude or falsify.” Costello, *Marianne Moore*, 16.

<sup>292</sup> On the connection between rhythm and race, see Michael Golston, *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).



presentation or “decorum.”<sup>293</sup> All of these features of the defense’s rhetoric can be explained by connecting the prejudice against poetic ornament to class politics, with class understood as not only economic but sociological. Anti-ornamental poetics enters political territory when the popular predilection for ornament becomes the sign of a collective character deficiency. The result is a set of double standards. Defending poetry is counter-productive, except in a poem. Prose is poetry, except when extraneous. Stripping away excess makes good poetry, unless there is nothing there to begin with. Being oneself is good, except when one is not really very interesting.

By the end of Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” “personality” turns out to be, like ornamentation, superfluous:

Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.<sup>294</sup>

Eliot has merely added another level to the hierarchy of poets: there are good depersonalizing poets (like himself), not-so good personal poets (like the self-psychoanalyzing Aiken), and then there are the punters. In “The Function of Criticism” (1923), Eliot divides the “true” from the “second-rate artist”:

There is accordingly something outside of the artist to which he owes allegiance,

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<sup>293</sup> To be sure, one might call on a Foucaultian politics of self-making to justify the anti-genre turn or cite Jacques Derrida’s pithy remark about the quasi-racist imperative against mixing genres. Judith Butler offers an excellent critique of the limits of poiesis as self-making in Butler, *Giving and Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 3-40. John Frow has an excellent critique of the idea that genre operates by restricting cross-genre mixing. See Frow, “‘Reproducibles, Rubrics, and Everything You Need’: Genre Theory Today,” *PMLA* 122.5 (2007), 1627-1628.

<sup>294</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 43.

a devotion to which he must surrender and sacrifice himself in order to earn and to obtain his unique position. A common inheritance and a common cause unite artists consciously or unconsciously: it must be admitted that the union is mostly unconscious. Between the true artists of any time there is, I believe, an unconscious community. And, as our instincts of tidiness imperatively command us not to leave to the haphazard of unconsciousness what we can attempt to do consciously, we are forced to conclude that what happens unconsciously we could bring about, and form into a purpose, if we made a conscious attempt. The second-rate artist, of course, cannot afford to surrender himself to any common action; for his chief task is the assertion of all the trifling differences which are his distinction: only the man who has so much to give that he can forget himself in his work can afford to collaborate, to exchange, to contribute.<sup>295</sup>

The distinction of the poet rests on middle-class morality: self-betterment through selfless community-building, propelled by the belief that one is part of a special community.<sup>296</sup> The “second-rate artist” remains caught up in “trifling differences” because he is preoccupied self-ornamentation: like Milton’s Eve, he loses himself in his reflection, rather than seeing his image in those around them. Misquoting Reinhold Niebhuur in “Idiosyncrasy and Technique” (1956), Moore offers some similar wisdom: “The self does not realize itself most fully when self-

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<sup>295</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 68-69.

<sup>296</sup> Peter Stallybrass and Alon White write of the middle-class self-regard: “Bourgeois democracy emerged with a class which, whilst indeed progressive in its best political aspirations, had encoded in its manners, morals and imaginative writings, in its body, bearing and taste, a subliminal elitism which was constitutive of its historical being. Whatever radical nature of its ‘universal’ democratic demand, it had engraved in its subjective identity all the marks by which it felt itself to be a different, distinctive, and superior class.” Qtd. in Raymond D. Tumbleson, *Catholicism in the English Protestant Imagination: Nationalism, Religion, and Literature, 1600-1745* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 131.

realization is its most constant aim.”<sup>297</sup> Those in the know are circumspect about “self-realization,” the others try too hard. As Eliot suggests in “The Function of Criticism,” these romantic naval-gazers are oddly complicit with the rabble (who do not try hard enough):

My belief is that those who possess this inner voice are ready enough to hearken to it, and will hear no other. The inner voice, in fact, sounds remarkably like an old principle which has been formulated by an elder critic [Matthew Arnold] in the now familiar phrase of ‘doing as one likes.’ The possessors of the inner voice ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust.<sup>298</sup>

Eliot and Matthew Arnold, whose essay “Doing as One Likes” from *Culture and Anarchy* asked for the working class, middle class, and aristocracy to all put forward their “best self,” all share the belief that poetic integrity and political responsibility come from the removal of some untrue quotient in one’s personality. There is only one proviso: “But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.”<sup>299</sup> One must already be somebody in order to become oneself through “common action.”

Moore begins her review of Stevens’ *Harmonium* for *The Dial* in 1924 declaring that “some writers are entirely without imagination—without that associative kind of imagination certainly, of which the final tests are said to be simplicity, harmony, and truth.”<sup>300</sup>

Embellishment, the lack of “simplicity,” comes from being “without imagination.” Elsewhere in the review she is explicit:

<sup>297</sup> Moore, *Complete Prose*, 509.

<sup>298</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 71.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>300</sup> Moore, *Complete Prose*, 91.

One is not subject in reading him [Stevens], to the disillusionment experienced in reading novices and charlatans who achieve flashes of beauty and immediately contradict the pleasure afforded by offending in precisely those respects in which they have pleased—showing that they are deficient in conscious artistry.<sup>301</sup>

By including “novices” with “charlatans”—both half-poets—Moore confounds the inexperience of the neophyte and the mischief of the practiced dissembler. Ironically, while she decries the lack of “conscious artistry,” the offense of the “charlatan” is precisely the use of artifice. In her review of *Hymen* by H.D., Moore begins with a dictum, “artificiality is an evidence of some kind of dishonesty,” and declares that “respect for the essence of a thing makes expression simple.” This simplification is akin to “life denuded of subterfuge”; that is, achieving naked simplicity does not mean refraining from artifice but undoing some original disguise.<sup>302</sup>

The defense links new form with personal freedom. Undoing genre in order to discover one’s own “rhythm,” setting aside conventional definitions of poetry to discover one’s own “unformulated philosophy,” dropping the pretensions to “personality”; in the defense these actions free the self. This appealing myth censures those who fail in this self-emancipation. Not only are they incapable of selfhood; given political responsibility, they are downright dangerous. But why should the lack of self-development be represented by those who cannot tell the difference between the essential and the extraneous parts of language? The answer rests in the slippage between the “novice” and the “charlatan.” Both are marked by an achievement that turns against them as they take their “flashes of beauty” too far “and immediately contradict the

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 95-96.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

pleasure afforded by offending in precisely those respects in which they have pleased.” The same is true when it comes to the mere versifier, poet laureate, or over-taxing genius: the too-much-ness of their line—too florid, too popular, too heady—reveals a misunderstanding of poetry or a misdirection of its purpose. The rhetoric of over-ornamentation consists of targeting these displays of excess as failures of essence. Moreover, rather than allow for impropriety owing to the “novice’s” ignorance, anti-ornamental poetics posits a malicious intent or an ill nature to the “charlatan,” the bad poet.

In “The Serious Artist” Pound addresses the irrelevance of intention in matters of “bad art,” which he defines as “inaccurate art” or “art that makes false reports”:

If an artist falsifies his report as to the nature of man, as to his own nature, as to the nature of his ideal of the perfect, as to the nature of his ideal of this, that or the other . . . of the force with which he believes or disbelieves this, that or the other, or the degree to which he suffers or is made glad; if the artist falsifies his reports on these matters or any other matter in order that he may conform to the taste of his time, to the properties of a sovereign, to the conveniences of a preconceived code of ethics, then that artist lies. If he lies out of a deliberate will to lie, if he lies out of carelessness, out of laziness, out of cowardice, out of any sort of negligence whatsoever, he nevertheless lies and he should be punished or despised in proportion to the seriousness of his offence.<sup>303</sup>

Whether through mendacity, irresponsibility, or dullness, for Pound false poetry comes of a desire to “conform” to a poetic or political power.

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<sup>303</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 43-44.

In “To Statecraft Embalmed,” Moore mixes novice and false poet together, offering an image of poetic justice for the dissembling poet. The poem is addressed to the Egyptian god Thoth, inventor of writing, represented as an ibis (or sometimes baboon-)headed “necromancer.” The poem is one of Moore’s critical takes on World War I and the failure of diplomacy, which becomes so much “moribund talk.” This vapid speech along with the movement of the creature —“half limping and half-ladyfied, you stalk about”—should recall the swan and the ant in “Critics and Connoisseurs.” But contextualizing the poem solely as political commentary on the war neglects the way the abuse of language suggests a parallel with the unserious artist.<sup>304</sup> Moore most likely composes the poem, which is first published in the December 1915 issue of *Others* at a moment of heightened interest in mummification. The titular reference to embalming recalls the 1913 discovery of a cemetery of mummified ibises in an Egyptian excavation site, Abydos.<sup>305</sup> The following year saw the practice of embalming ibises in Egyptian ritual burial become the subject of several academic and popular articles. Mummified birds were displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A 1913 *National Geographic* article in its September 1913 issue provides much of the detail of the poem, mentioning “clay sarcophagi,” discussing the ibis’ role in the transmigration of souls, suggesting in the hieroglyphic what Moore calls the “faint zigzag inscription” or boustrophedon, offering a picture of a stuffed version of the bird, and lavishly describing the “burial garments” as being of “the finest texture” and “finest needlework.”<sup>306</sup> When Moore calls the bird a “necromancer” she is referring to the bird’s embodiment of Thoth, who the article distinguishes as “the great magician who invented the

<sup>304</sup> See Joyce, *Cultural Critique*, 37-40.

<sup>305</sup> See W. Leonard S. Loat, “The Ibis Cemetery at Abydos,” *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 1.1 (January 1914), 40.

<sup>306</sup> See Camden M. Cobern, “The Sacred Ibis Cemetery and Jackal Catacombs at Abydos,” *National Geographic Magazine* 24 (September 1913), 1048-1050.

formulae which, given to Isis, gathered together the scattered parts of the mutilated body of Osiris and worked the miracle of revivification.”<sup>307</sup> Most remarkably, if this is the source for the poem, it may divulge the “secret” that Moore says the bird should conceal under its “hard / plumage”:

There is nothing to be said for you. Guard

Your secret. Conceal it under your “hard

Plumage,” necromancer.

O

Bird, whose “tents” were “awnings of Egyptian

Yarn,” shall Justice’ faint zigzag inscription—

Leaning like a dancer—

Show

The pulse of its once vivid sovereignty?<sup>308</sup>

As the article states, as well as being the sign for Thoth’s name, the ibis is “the hieroglyphic for ‘the soul.’”<sup>309</sup> If not here, knowledge that the ibis hieroglyph denotes the heart would have been available in most literature on Egyptian mythology and culture. An often quoted passage from an ancient Greek source relates how the ibis came to represent the heart (or soul or conscience) because “when it is seen sitting with its neck bent forwards, and its head concealed under its wings, [it] resembled the form of the heart.”<sup>310</sup> This is precisely the pose in which Moore leaves

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 1046.

<sup>308</sup> Moore, “To Statecraft Embalmed,” *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse* 1.6 (Dec. 1915), 104. See also Moore, *Complete Poems*, 35. No notes are ever added to the poem and the quotation marks disappear in subsequent versions. If there is a source for them, it may lie in exhibition material.

<sup>309</sup> Coburn, “Sacred Ibis,” 1046.

<sup>310</sup> Qtd. in James Cowles Prichard, *An Analysis of the Egyptian Mythology* (London: John and Arthur Arch, 1819),

the animal, as if performing a vivisection of the soul:

Slow

To remark the steep, too strict proportion

Of your throne, you'll see the wrenched distortion

Of suicidal dreams

Go

Staggering toward itself and with its bill

Attack its own identity, until

Foe seems friend and friend seems

Foe.

Again, Moore gives her reader an aphorism about the dangers of introspection resulting from a need to prove oneself without being forthright. “Guard / Your secret,” she says, addressing a figure part neophyte and part impostor that there is “No / Virtue in you—alive and yet so dumb.” Again, Moore implicates ornament in the problem: the bird’s “hard / Plumage” should keep safe its secret—vapidity—but the same display disguise the ibis from itself in the process, confusing enemy and ally.

Eliot and Pound foreground poetry’s classical culture-building tradition. Richards adopts the secular humanist replacement-for-religion defense from Matthew Arnold. Williams imagines a New World of poetry. The Chicago School sees out the pathos of the salt of the earth. Moore stays well away from these exchanges in her prose, the bulk of which is review-oriented and only occasionally as polemical as her male peers’. Nonetheless, she frequently ruminates on the

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129. See also Thomas J. Pettigrew, *A History of Egyptian Mummies* (London: Longman, 1834), 205.



aesthetics of tokens, trinkets, and trifles.<sup>311</sup> She also treats the defense of poetry in the poems around or related to “Poetry” in the *Selected Poems* and *Complete Poems*, such as “Critics and Connoisseurs,” “Pedantic Literalist,” “Novices,” and “When I Buy Pictures.” But several of her best-known animal poems are no less engaged in the defense of poetry, specifically the differentiation between natural and artificial defenses. In “The Jerboa,” the kangaroo mouse “honors the sand by assuming its color . . . in its flight from danger.” In “The Plumed Basilisk,” the helmeted lizard “as you look begins to be a / nervous naked sword on little feet.” In “The Pangolin,” the armadillo-like anteater, Moore makes the climax of the poem an analogy between the “armored animal” and “bedizened or stark / naked, man, the self, the being we call human, writing-master to this world.”<sup>312</sup> These are creatures whose defenses are both organic and ornate, as Moore writes of the pangolin, “Armor seems extra. But for him . . . [is] not.”<sup>313</sup> Rather than distinguishing between the core of poetry and its ornamental exterior, Moore blurs the lines between truth and embellishment.<sup>314</sup> Her descriptions of animals, for example, resemble her description of art-objects representing animals. The “odd creatures” to which she is drawn, as Costello says, “work against the curve of the general, the average.”<sup>315</sup> Moore also makes ornament a property of some species’ natural defenses. Her chameleon-like animals dissemble, but they do so naturally, because that is what they are. Unlike touchy poets, whose protests earn her “perfect contempt,” this true-to-form defensiveness earns her affection. Indeed, the bad defenders of poetry identified in “Poetry” show up as pompous animals like the monkey and the swan.

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<sup>311</sup> Costello, *Imaginary Possessions*, 17.

<sup>312</sup> Moore, *Complete Poems*, 119.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>314</sup> See Kirstin Hotelling, “‘The I of each is to the I of each, a kind of fretful speech which sets a limit on itself’: Marianne Moore’s Strategic Selfhood,” *Modernism/modernity* 5, no. 1 (1998): 75-96.

<sup>315</sup> Costello, *Marianne Moore*, 22.

Over the centuries, defenders of poetry, when attacking their own, often use animal metaphors to convey their contempt: swine, dogs, reptiles, kestrels, apes, and especially swarming insects—bees, gnats, and flies.<sup>316</sup> Pound, for example, calls the bad poet “cur,” “apelike,” and “swinelike”; “contemporary versifiers” are “pests and abominations.”<sup>317</sup> Sidney—the originator of the phrase “poet ape”—offers the most instructive use of these tropes when he divides “right proper” poets from “mere versifiers” who are like a swarm of insects. This happens at the moment in the *Defence* where Sidney disassociates poetry and verse, which is “but an ornament and no cause to Poetry,” and posits the possibility of prose (fiction) as poetry. Following an account of religious and philosophical poetry—both of which instrumentalize the medium—the passage ends by identifying mere versifiers, those who lack both the convictions of psalmists and lovers of wisdom and the imaginative genius of real poets:

These [third category of poet] be subdivided into sundry more special denominations. The most notable be the heroic, lyric, tragic, comic, satiric, iambic, elegiac, pastoral, and certain others, some of these being termed according to the matter they deal with, some by the sorts of verses they liked best to write in, for indeed the greatest part of poets have apparelled their poetical inventions in that numbrous kind of writing which is called verse: indeed but apparelled, verse being but an ornament and no cause to poetry, since there have been many most excellent Poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>316</sup> See my discussion of the trope in the Introduction. The reptile trope, which I do not discuss there, can be found in James Beattie, “On the Report of a Monument,” *The Poetical Works of James Beattie*, ed. Alexander Dyce (Boston: James R. Osgood, 1871), 145-152.

<sup>317</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 44-45, 54.

<sup>318</sup> Sidney, *The Defence of Poesy*, 218.

Moore quotes from this passage in her review of Stevens: “That ‘there have been many most excellent poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that never need answer to the name of poets,’ needs no demonstration.” In this history of insult, the image of a swarm of versifiers reveals the political bias of the genre: the swarm is the populace. Indeed, the animus against an over-populated Parnassus appears in other comparisons. In *The Dunciad* (1728), Pope writes of the horde of poet apes: “Now thousand tongues are heard in one loud din, / The Monkey-mimicks rush discordant in; / ‘Twas chatt’ring, grinning, mouthing, jabb’ring all.”<sup>319</sup> Likewise, Beattie attributes the “salamander-fame” of his poetaster to “the brainless crowd.”<sup>320</sup>

Moore’s bad poets appear in overtly defensive postures, but they are also popularizers. In contrast to the evasive diving and hiding of the basilisk, the invisibility of the background-blending of the desert mouse, or the impenetrable curl of the pangolin, her bad poets put their defenses on display. In “Poetry” they have “dragged [verse] into prominence.” A clear example of how characters from the defense of poetry make it into her poems can be found in “In this Age of Hard Trying, Nonchalance is Good” where the defender of poetry appears in the guise of a shaman story-teller. He is recognizable because of how his speech contrasts with prose diction and accesses the so-called literalism of the imagination:

“Taller by the length of  
 a conversation of five hundred years than all  
 the others,” there was one, whose tales  
 of what could never have been actual—

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<sup>319</sup> Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope: A One-volume edition of the Twickenham text with selected annotations*, ed. John Everett Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), 390.

<sup>320</sup> Beattie, “On the Report of a Monument,” 147.

were better than the haggish, uncompanionable drawl

of certitude; his by-

play was more terrible in its effectiveness

than the fiercest frontal attack.

The staff, the bag, the feigned inconsequence

of manner, best bespeak that weapon, self-protectiveness.<sup>321</sup>

All sorts of phenomena are valid, Moore has told us, even defensiveness “in all its rawness.” Yet these poems emphasize the difference between “the haggish, uncompanionable drawl // of certitude” in a lengthy prose piece and “that weapon, self-protectiveness.” The result of “a conversation of five hundred / years”—perhaps the defense—poets have learned the titular lesson: “hard trying” and “frontal attack” are blunt instruments—better to offer truth in the disguise of “feigned inconsequence.”

In “Pedantic Literalist” the prose-poetry divide manifests as the difference between “loitering formality” and a “spontaneous core.”<sup>322</sup> Likewise, “ambition without understanding” or “conscious fastidiousness” (as opposed to “unconscious fastidiousness”) makes for foolishness in “Critics and Connoisseurs.” Here, Moore offers images of an ant and a swan which connect prose bombast with the bad kind of analytical defensiveness associated with prose:

I remember a black swan on the Cherwell in Oxford,

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<sup>321</sup> Moore, *Complete Poems*, 34.

<sup>322</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

With flamingo colored, maple-  
 Leaflike feet. It stood out to sea like a battle-  
 ship. Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were  
 the staple  
 Ingredients in its  
 Disinclination to move. Finally its hardi-  
 hood was not proof against its  
 Inclination to detain and appraise such bits  
 Of food as the stream

Bore counter to it; it made away with what I gave it  
 To eat. I have seen this swan and  
 I have seen you; I have seen ambition without  
 understanding in a variety of forms. Happening  
 to stand  
 By an ant-hill, I have  
 Seen a fastidious ant carrying a stick  
 north, south, east, west, till it turned  
 on  
 Itself, struck out from the flower-bed into  
 the lawn,  
 And returned to the point

From which it had started. Then abandoning the  
 stick as  
 Useless and overtaxing his  
 Jaws with a particle of whitewash, pill-like but  
 Heavy, he again went through the same course of  
 procedure. What is  
 There in being able  
 To say that one has dominated the stream  
 in an attitude of self-defense,  
 In proving that one has had the experience  
 Of carrying a stick?<sup>323</sup>

If the reader did not catch how the poet looms over the swan, who picks up her scraps, the ant anecdote leaves no question of the low regard in which Moore holds connoisseur and critic. Lest there be any confusion about the allegorical nature of the poem, Moore connects the two images with an aggressive address to her vain reader: “I have seen this swan and / I have seen you; I have seen ambition without / understanding in a variety of forms.” Because defensive, the swan’s ambition is no more than to prove self-worth, trolling back and forth like a battle ship “in an attitude of self-defense,” showing off its misplaced “hardihood.” Coupled with the pointless exchange of the ant, these two figures resemble the animals, birds, and insects in *The Fables of La Fontaine* (1954), which Moore spends a decade translating. One of the most common

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<sup>323</sup> Moore, “Critics and Connoisseurs,” *Others* 3.1 (July 1916), 4-5.

character types in those stories is represented here: the creature who lacks knowledge of some particular weakness, usually arrogance, that another animal can so easily see. The figures listed in “Poetry” —bat, elephants, horse, wolf, critic, sports fan, and statistician— are driven by some futile pursuit. Feeding themselves, beating the heat, scratching an itch, catching the play; these may be natural things to do, but they are also exercises as useless as the over-discriminating study of “bits / Of food” in the stream and the difference between “a stick” and “a particle of whitewash.” Maybe these states can be made poetic, but Moore finds them prosaic. In the case of swan and ant, their relationship to prose is tenuous but present: their selectivity mockingly recalls prose as the language of analytical rigor and the back-and-forth movement of the ant calls to mind the strophing of prose or the boustrophedonic pacing of the prose page.

Just as in “Poetry,” an anti-conformist poetic aligns the over-ornamented clap-trap of “half poets” with the pedestrian uses of prose, so too “Critics and Connoisseurs” articulates a need to separate the essence of poetry from ornament. Here is its first stanza:

There is a great amount of poetry in unconscious  
 Fastidiousness. Certain Ming  
 Products, imperial floor coverings of coach  
 Wheel yellow, are well enough in their way but I  
                   have seen something  
 That I like better—a  
                   Mere childish attempt to make an imper-  
                   fectly ballasted animal stand up,  
 A determination ditto to make a pup

Eat his meat on the plate.

The “childish attempt” to make a dog act like a person is the essence of poetry. The “Ming / Products” are not.

In closing I would like to examine one later poem of Moore’s, “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” (1951). In 1964 Moore calls the poem “merely a protest against decadence, over-aestheticism and sybartism”—in short, ornament. The poem is another rumination on poetics, containing the often quoted line about “Illusion” being more “precise” than “precision” as well as an unmistakable reprise of “I, too, dislike it”: “No wonder we hate poetry.” For Ellen Levy, the poem’s armor-talk is about “self-effacement” and “potential for violence,” a theme Moore succinctly captures in the phrase “that weapon, self-protectiveness.”<sup>324</sup> The central armored figures in the poem are unadorned “knights...without the addition / of wreaths and silver rods, and armor gilded / or inlaid.” They have learned Niebhur’s lesson about selfless self-realization: “They did not let self bar / their usefulness to others who were / different,” and avoided being “excessive / in being preventive” by refraining from “writ[ing] an ordinall [sic] of attributes to enumerate / what they hate.” The final two stanzas’ image of the unadorned mirror-like breastplate is a characterization of defensiveness. In the unornamented armor one can see oneself reflected, paradoxically protected only when facing this intimate enemy, what she calls “self-determination” earlier in the poem and associated with the striving of the minor poet. The poet addresses the plain medieval armor:

I should, I confess,  
like to have a talk with one of them about excess,

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<sup>324</sup> Levy, “No Poet,” 69.



and armor's undermining modesty

instead of innocent depravity.

A mirror-of-steel uninsistence should countenance continence,

objectified and not by chance,

there in its frame of circumstance

of innocence and altitude

in an unhackneyed solitude.

There is the tarnish; and there, the imperishable wish.

A recent, inspired reading of the poem defines “the imperishable wish” as an enduring hope that, despite the “tarnish” of error, “we may yet grow up, and that some form of education may contribute to that growth.”<sup>325</sup> As White and Carson write, the poem separates the prevailing meaning of “continence” as “prudery” from “an ideal, unfallen, chivalric idea of . . . a finely tuned, live balance between ardor and restraint.”<sup>326</sup> The lesson to be learned about this decorous form of heroism, they argue, takes the reader back to the beginning of the poem where Moore warns against “gifted scholars [who] lose their way / through faulty etymology.”

The poem's very first image connects over-analysis to over-ornamentation when the poet mistakes her wristwatch—just then becoming fashionable—for “a pest,” a great moth:

At first I thought a pest

Must have alighted on my wrist.

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<sup>325</sup> Heather Cass White and Luke Carson, “A Variety of Hero: Marianne Moore's Romance,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 34.4 (Summer 2011): 75.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

It was a moth almost an owl,  
 Its wings were furred so well,  
 with backgammon-board wedges interlacing  
 on the wing—

like cloth of gold in a pattern  
 of scales with a hair-seal Persian  
 sheen.

The “furry” moth makes the poet notice the hair on her own arm. She recalls her “apish cousins” falling into language through ambition: “Once, self-determination / made an ax of a stone / and hacked things out with hairy paws. / The consequence—our mis-set / alphabet.”<sup>327</sup> White and Carson rightly connect the decorative design of the moth wings to the “gilded / or inlaid” armor of “excess.” But in the context of Moore’s attack on the bad poet—a character also associated with insects and monkeys—Moore seems to see herself reflected in the image the over-ornamenting poet. The meaning of “armor’s undermining modesty” might be that, as a life-long novice, even the poet genius is humbled by an encounter with her own “imperishable wish,” to learn mastery. Moore asks in “Critics and Connoisseurs,” “What is / there in being able / to say that one has dominated the stream in an attitude of self-defense; / in proving that one has had the experience / of carrying a stick?” “Armor’s Undermining Modesty” might answer: a retreat from the bustle of things and people and into an “unhackneyed solitude.”

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<sup>327</sup> Moore, *Complete Poems*, 151.

Chapter Three:

Pound/Williams: Whose Era?

## Us-or-Them Anti-Populism and the Era Wars

The problem of education, then, among Negroes . . . is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst.

—W.E.B. DuBois

Although contested, Hugh Kenner's designation of the decades from just before World War I to World War II as "the Pound Era" is accurate, not necessarily because Pound contributes so concretely to so many modernist ventures as Kenner argues, but because Pound's biography—because so troubled—best represents the overlap of incommensurable political views—liberalism and fascism—within the broader rhetoric of anti-populism used to justify those views and to justify modernist poetry. Although Pound is now most well known as the American fascist poet, when he leaves the United States in 1908, the young scholar and critic takes with him a strong sense of civic responsibility and a Jamesean-style cosmopolitanism. In the nineteen-teens, the author of "The Serious Artist" distinguishes himself as William Butler Yeats' secretary and would-be adviser; a lecturer at the clubs, societies, and parlors in and around Cambridge, Oxford and London; and an advocate of the retrospectively unoriginal movements, Vorticism and Imagism, and one of the most opinionated American exiles. By the early nineteen twenties, the impresario has become a foreign correspondent for the *Dial* and an early promoter of James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and Ernest Hemingway. In these acts, poetically speaking, Pound is part of the rear-guard, committed to the progressive ideology of radical poetry but wary of the

end-of-art cant of the European vanguard. Politically speaking, Pound moves in an milieu of Stirnerite anarchist-individualists like *Egoist*-founder Dora Mardsen, Irish nationalists like Yeats, socialists like Orage of *The New Age*, the salon-holding bourgeoisie in which he meets his wife Dorothy, and the flamboyant elitism of ex-patriots.<sup>328</sup> By the end of the twenties, Pound has left London after the *Blast* debacle and, after a few years in Paris, has found his way to a villa outside the Italian town of Rapallo where he embraces the Italian Fascist dictatorship of Benito Mussolini, whom he idiosyncratically understands as an artistic genius of statecraft.<sup>329</sup> However, what makes Pound so offensive in these middle-years is not his support of a dictatorship, which is so common in the early thirties that *The Nation*, the U.S.'s major liberal periodical, published a half-serious series entitled "If I Were Dictator." At the end of the day, what makes him so villainous are his cranky, crackpot prose articles and the hate speech he begins to weave through the *Cantos*.

By the time Pound is in his sixties, the erstwhile author of the *Adams Cantos* (1940) is an inmate of St. Elizabeth's mental hospital in Washington, after having been ruled mentally unfit to stand trial for the charge of treason brought against him for his anti-American, pro-Fascist broadcasts on Radio Rome during World War II. The only words extant from his indictment hearing point to the continued overlap in Pound's mind between American-style liberty and Italian fascism: everything he had said and done on behalf of Mussolini, he had done to "save the

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<sup>328</sup> For accounts of Pound's early affinities for the ideas of Max Stirner, see Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics and the First American Avant-garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 74-79. For an account of the influence of individualist anarchism on Pound's later views, see David Kadlec, *Mosaic Modernism: Anarchism, Pragmatism, Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 17-23. For an account of Pound's shift toward a more authoritarian individualism, see Michael H. Levenson, "Egoists and Imagists," in *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908-1922* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 63-79.

<sup>329</sup> See Tim Redman, "The Turn to Fascism," in *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 93-121.

Constitution.”<sup>330</sup> Rebuked for his fascism and antisemitism; defended on the grounds of free speech; and touted as a case study for the formalist separation of poetic achievement and political message, Pound’s follow-through on the ideas in “The Serious Artist” ends up damning poetry, not saving it. Taken together, Pound’s indictment and *The Pisan Cantos* (1948), which is awarded the Congressionally-sponsored Bollingen Prize, generate numerous headlines, articles, and readers’ letters in organs across the political spectrum, including *PM*, *Politics*, *The New Masses*, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, *The Nation*, and *The Partisan Review*. The poet that begins as the picture of modernist rebellion ends up the poster-child for everything reactionary and backward about the poetry community.<sup>331</sup>

By the time Theodore Adorno says in 1949 that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” the case of poetry is all but decided.<sup>332</sup> If the meaning of Adorno’s statement is open to debate, the meaning of those who have quoted it over the years is not: after the mass dehumanization of Jews and other minorities in Nazi death camps, poetry can no longer claim to be a force for good in the world. It has failed at its post. Pound’s claim in “The Serious Artist” that defending poetry does not befit a modern-day poet has proved portentous in a way few could have foreseen: the time for the defense of poetry had come to an end, not because it had proven

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<sup>330</sup> See *A Casebook on Ezra Pound*, ed. William Van O’Connor and Edward Stone (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1959), 23, 25.

<sup>331</sup> For the range of attacks on Pound, see especially Isador Schneider, “Traitor or Holy Idiot?” *New Masses*, December 11, 1945; the various contributors’ replies to Schneider’s invitation in “Should Ezra Pound Be Shot?” *New Masses*, December 25, 1945; Charles Norman, “The Case for and against Ezra Pound,” *PM*, Nov. 25, 1945; and the publicity-hunting pieces by Robert Hilyer, “Treason’s Strange Fruit,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 11, 1949 and “Poetry’s New Priesthood,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 18, 1949. For a more comprehensive collection of postwar commentary on Pound’s poetry and politics (which unfortunately does not include the *New Masses* articles), see O’Connor and Stone’s *Casebook*. For retrospectives emphasizing the fall-out from the Library of Congress’ award of the Bollingen Prize to *The Pisan Cantos*, see Robert A. Corrigan, “Ezra Pound and the Bollingen Prize Controversy,” *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* 8.2 (Fall 1967): 43-57; and Karen Leick, “Ezra Pound v. ‘The Saturday Review of Literature’,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 25. 2 (Winter 2001-2002): 19-37.

<sup>332</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Sherry Weber NicholSEN and Samuel Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 30.

its case, but because poetry had become categorically *in*-defensible. In fact, if the antisemitic ideology that structures Nazi expansionism also shapes Pound's *Cantos*, modernist poetry is virtually complicit in the final solution. His "poem containing history" brings out the primal scene of the defense. Pound has abused poetry in precisely the manner that poetry's most venerable attacker, Plato, fears: he puts his magisterial command of language in the service of a propaganda campaign that had real and terrible effects. Although not at all what Kenner intends when he calls it Pound's era, placing Pound at its center is apt because his career best illustrates the obsolescence of a centuries-long defensive discourse. Based on the Horatian and Aristotelean idea of poetry's unique ability to teach and delight, poetry offers valuable lessons to patrician and plebe—or so the story goes. In the hands of would-be great men, well-wrought poems offer heroic exemplars and cautionary tales that transform meek into mighty and cowl the hubris of the powerful. In the hands of the people, the same imaginative verse builds the faculty necessary for a tolerant and just society safe from hate-mongers and demagogues. To say the least, the *specula principum* that Pound offers Mussolini falls on deaf ears.<sup>333</sup> More importantly, neither he nor his modernist peers manage to provide the populace with a sensibility strong enough to resist the excited speech and passionate appeals of demagogues. Just the opposite in Pound's case: hardly exercises in good-heartedness, his vitriolic lines swell with disdain and paranoia.

No, unlike his predecessors in the defense, Pound does not foreground poetry's ability to edify the everyman, to build community, or to convey worldly wisdom. To common readers, he prefers to emphasize the need for education *about* poetry without inviting them into the fold—

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<sup>333</sup> For a reading of *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* and the Adams *Cantos* as mirrors for princes, see Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Jefferson and/or Adams: A Shifting Mirror for Mussolini in the Middle *Cantos*," *ELH* 55. 2 (Summer 1988): 505-526.

much like Bertrand Russell, who explains to the layman how important the theory of relativity is for those who have no hope of ever comprehending more than the ABCs of physics.<sup>334</sup> To those in-the-know, which presumably include only genuine world-shakers, Pound emphasizes poetry's liberal purpose: its ability to provide glimpses into the mysteries of "man, mankind and the individual," the building-blocks of both "civics" and "ethics." Yet, as Pound implies in "The Serious Artist," the average person could never become a master of poetry because he is ultimately poets' and politicians' object of mastery. Yielding "lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man," poetry is "a science, just as chemistry is a science." The poet, a kind of technocrat, offers his or her insight into the human condition to those who best can use it to manage the body politic.<sup>335</sup> Pound's idea of liberty is meritocratic; freedom is something to be earned. In short, Pound's biography holds to its liberal thread insofar as it puts peerage before equality and remains anti-populist through and through.

Whatever Pound's avowed politics, his basic demeanor is aristocratic. For example, in "The Constant Preaching to the Mob" (1916), he expressly rejects efforts to popularize poetry as "charlatanry" or "ignorance." "It flatters the mob," he writes, "to tell them that their importance is so great that the solace of lonely men, and the lordliest of the arts, was created for their amusement."<sup>336</sup> Accentuated by the alliterated *l*'s and parallel construction, pairing "the solace of lonely men" and "the lordliest of the arts" captures the anti-populism bound to the defense of poetry: poetry connects social alienation, which leads to self-understanding, to cultural and

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<sup>334</sup> See Bertrand Russell, *ABC of Relativity* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1925).

<sup>335</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 41-42.

<sup>336</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 63, 64. Pound is adapting George Saintsbury's famous closing to "The Permanent and Temporary in Literature": "For what is true of mankind is true of mankind's works: and should be truest of the noblest of those works, Art and of the noblest of the Arts, Literature." Saintsbury, *Collected Essays and Papers of George Saintsbury, 1875-1920*, vol. 3 (London: J.M. Dent, 1923), 364. See also Moore's notable appreciation for Saintsbury, "Literature the Noblest of the Arts," in *Complete Prose*, 114-116.



political superiority. Poetry is for those not of the crowd who prefer private contemplation over public spectacle. But as the most aristocratic or “lordliest” branch of the fine arts, poetry also means more than navel-gazing. Poetry can transform a wealth of personal reflection into public good, all without ever requiring rubbing elbows with the masses. The idea that self-knowledge gained through contemplation leads to political maturity is a staple of the Confucian, Platonic, and republican sources of Pound’s political philosophy. Tellingly, this particular piece of Pound’s is penned as a response to a lecture by John Masefield, later to become Poet Laureate of England, on the class-division of English poetry’s historical audience into “the lettered and the unlettered.” Alice Corbin Henderson, who reported on the talk for *Poetry*, appreciates Masefield’s attempt “to bridge the gulf that has separated poetry from the people.”<sup>337</sup> Pound, in contrast, sees no “gulf.” Poetry is not for the people and that is that.

Pound does not go through the motions of a teach-and-delight defense, but the main argument of the defense of poetry has never been poetry’s edifying qualities. The defense has always argued that poets are not of the people and therefore cannot be judged by them. Since its appearance in English literature, the defense of poetry has consistently treated *homo poeticus* as a race of its own, distinct and superior to the mere human animal and its herd mentality. Pound is no different. The difference between Pound and his predecessors is his wholesale embrace of the genre’s elitism, his willingness to drop any pretense to edifying the uninitiated into peerage of any sort. In the place of paying lip-service to bridging the gap between poetry and the people, the modernist defense puts an us-or-them ultimatum: one is either for poetry or against it, and never more against it than when embracing popular poetry at the expense of its radical instantiations. Few poets draw the line as sharply as Pound, and his unequivocalness is why it is

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<sup>337</sup> Alice Corbin Henderson, “Mr. Masefield’s Lecture,” *Poetry* 7.6 (March 1916), 301.

his era: he is its arch anti-populist, and anti-populism frames both liberal and conservative answers to the threat posed by popular rule.

The conspiratorial secret society, the party within the party, the bureau full of civilians, betrayers of the cause, and hacks: each of these figures fills an aristocrat's dystopia in which the best have been usurped or undermined by the unworthy who either fail to recognize the threat they pose or whose unabashed social climbing disrupts the natural order. Pound, in his own writings, repeatedly poses this same choice between the good few and the bad few: between poet-prophets preaching justice and Jewish financiers conspiring against the good of the many; between private-interest capitalists and social-credit wonks like himself; between know-nothing, cold-hard-facts communists and hot-blooded, do-something fascists; between the Amy Lowells of the world and his motley group of rebels allied against the mediocre. This rhetoric pervades political discourse of the era. Like Pound, partisans on each end of the political spectrum repeatedly put the same ultimatum to the people—that fictional addressee that nonetheless responds in real voices. Whether political, economic, intellectual, artistic, or identitarian, the choice is the same: either rule by a benevolent power elite or exploitation by its corrupt or middling counterpart. Henry Ford pits the good industrialist working for the betterment of Main Street against the bad Jewish financier working his Zionist machinations.<sup>338</sup> Communist party brass justifying purges by casting their rivals as leaders of “a party within the party.”<sup>339</sup> To lesser degrees, dissent among advocates for African-American and women's rights also called on this anti-populist rhetoric. W.E.B. DuBois touts “the Talented Tenth” as rescuers of the African-

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<sup>338</sup> See Henry Ford, *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem*, a reprint of a series of articles in *The Dearborn Independent* (Dearborn, Michigan: Dearborn Publishing Co., 1920).

<sup>339</sup> For uses of the idea of a party within the party, see J.T. Murphy, “Introduction,” *The Errors of Trotskyism* (London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1925) and the circular letter by the Executive Committee of Local New York, SPA to Members of Local New York, SPA, *New York Call*, May 8, 1919.

American population from the thrall of ragtime, blues, and Tuskegee: “The problem of education, then, among Negroes . . . is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst.”<sup>340</sup> Targeting ballot-minded suffragettes in the “Feminist Manifesto,” Mina Loy called on women to “cease to place your confidence in economic legislation, vice-crusades & uniform education” and “that pathetic clap-trap war cry Woman is the equal of man.”<sup>341</sup>

The Earl of Cromer, Evelyn Baring, gives a particularly representative illustration of the rhetoric in his essay, “On the Government of Subject Races.” Both the opposing camps of the good imperialist taking up England’s “civilizing and moralising mission” and the bad imperialist of “the commercial school” harming the long-term interests of imperial rule “by sacrificing moral principle on the altar of pecuniary gain” are animated by the Englishman’s native sense of individualism. As such they are preferable to the “communitarian spirit” on the continent, a breeding ground for pass-the-buck bureaucratic inefficiency, sheepishness, and “democratic tyranny.” Cromer points to the case is Italy, whose state-sponsored imperialism is a “means of material self-enrichment”; namely the enrichment of “a poverty-stricken population.”<sup>342</sup> What makes Baring’s essay such a good example is that he is upfront about his anti-democratic sensibility. Giving too much consideration to the people, he argues, leads to both continental and colonial backwardness, to social welfare democracy and to Oriental despotism. In short, the various villains and muddlers these attacks single out lead back to the people and their unsuitability to govern.

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<sup>340</sup> W.E.B Dubois, “The Talented Tenth,” in *Writings*, ed Nathan Higgins (New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1986), 842.

<sup>341</sup> Mina Loy, “Feminist Manifesto,” *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), 153.

<sup>342</sup> Evelyn Baring, Earl of Cromer, “The Government of Subject Races” (1908), in *Political and Literary Essays, 1908-1913* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9-10.

Just as Pound's early egoism is continuous with his fascism, anti-populism cuts across the diversity of first-generation modernist poets' positions on poetry and politics. Eliot represents his self-consciously reactionary allegiance to classicism, Anglicanism, royalism, tradition, and orthodoxy as an answer to what he saw as the popularity of *vers libre*, liberal humanism, cosmopolitanism, and the general tide toward heterodoxy. Pound represents his support of fascism as an answer to the specter of communism; he frames his make-it-new poetics as an answer to both the hang-it-all avant-gardes on the continent and the watered down imagism in the States. Moore, sometimes represented as exemplifying a quasi-democratic poetics, is an ardent member of the Republican Party, and due to her upbringing in the house of her grandfather, a noted Presbyterian minister, tends to suspect the public sphere. Like Stevens and Stein, she was a staunch opponent to the New Deal and social welfare, the great fruition of the popular reform movement in the US.<sup>343</sup> Even Williams, the genuinely liberal-minded poet from suburban New Jersey, bases his authority on the anti-populist belief that he is one of the very few Americans of his time who really understands what democracy means.

Pound and Williams—the two poets I discuss at length in the sections that immediately follow—seem to be on opposite ends of the political spectrum, but their poetics registers the same anti-populist assumptions, particularly when it comes to the idea that the average person does not know who he is or what he is about. The opening passages of *Spring and All* are directed to a third-person reader who must have his true identity shown to him by the poet: unlike “all writing, up to the present, if not all art, [which] has been especially designed to keep up the barrier between sense and the vaporous fringe which distracts the attention from its

<sup>343</sup> See Luke Carson's "Republicanism and Leisure in Marianne Moore's Depression," *Modern Language Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2002): 315-342. For the prevailing attitude toward Moore's politics, see Stephen Burt, "Paper Trail: The True Legacy of Marianne Moore, Modernist Monument," review of *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. Grace Schulman, *Slate*, November 11, 2003, [http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2003/11/paper\\_trail.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/books/2003/11/paper_trail.html).

agonized approaches to the moment,” *Spring and All* will show the reader “what he is at the exact moment that he is.”<sup>344</sup> From *In the American Grain*, an analogous claim is made on behalf of the American psyche: “I do believe the average American to be an Indian, but an Indian robbed of his world.”<sup>345</sup> Pound, almost as invested in an Americanist pedagogy, did not believe that the common readers of poetry could do more than learn from their betters, a subject I discuss at length in my chapter devoted to the pedagogical impulse in “The Serious Artist.” From the most conservative to the most liberal, the point is not who did and who did not identify with the people; the point is that modernists’ shared prejudicial rhetoric draws from the long-standing anti-populist politics of the defense of poetry. This is never more true than when these same poets turn on a more popular peer, the next generation of upstart, or the critical over-appreciation of mini-poets. Whether by name, association, or generalization, the aforementioned poets and many other big names in modernist poetry sometimes (and sometimes often) played these roles for one another. Anti-populism, then, should not only be thought of as something that radical poets direct outward toward the mainstream. Anti-populism is also a constitutive element in how these poets understand their relationships with one another. Finally, as I discuss below, anti-populism is also an organizing principle in the reception and canonization of modernist poetry.

The range of anti-populist rhetoric puts in perspective the most recent ascent of Williams as the progenitor of “the Other Tradition,” a heritage contra Pound and Eliot. In modernist poetry studies, the “Era Wars” begins with the publication of Kenner’s 1972 masterpiece *The Pound Era*. Kenner’s appreciation of Pound’s historic influence is now best remembered as an inaugural study of the introduction of Chinese and Japanese poetics and poetics into Anglo-

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<sup>344</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 89.

<sup>345</sup> Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York: New Directions, 1925), 128.

American literature. But at the time, Kenner was also attempting to dislodge the then common belief in the “Age of Eliot” held throughout the forties, fifties, and sixties.<sup>346</sup> Although some critics of the next generation see Kenner as the anti-political progenitor of “the Pound industry,” *The Pound Era* remains a counter-cultural jab at conservative pro-Eliot critics like Russell Kirk and like-minded conservative intellectuals who have their own anti-populist axes to grind, not only with the liberal academy but the dominant conservatism as well.

The Era Wars truly begin, however, in 1977, when Harold Bloom attempts to redirect Kenner’s success. Hoping to recontextualize modernist poetry as a continuation of (rather than a break with) American Romanticism, Bloom suggests that “the Age of Stevens” or “the Stevens Era” replace Kenner’s formulation.<sup>347</sup> This almost offhand suggestion in Bloom’s book is followed a couple of years later by Marjorie Perloff’s article “Pound/Stevens: Whose era?” (1982). This is not an “idle quarrel nor a narrow sectarian war between rival academics,” assures Perloff. Which era one sides with implies different answers to “central questions about the meaning of Modernism—indeed the meaning of poetry itself.”<sup>348</sup> Being pro-Stevens means tacitly asserting that a poem’s content or argument makes it poetry, particularly its fittingness as a statement on the times/embodiment of the spirit of the age. Being pro-Pound means holding that, while content should not be ignored, poetry is really about making new forms.<sup>349</sup> The

<sup>346</sup> The assertion of the “Age of Eliot” dates back at least to the 1940s; by the time of Eliot’s death it was widely accepted enough to be included in several obituaries: see “T.S. Eliot, the Poet, is Dead in London at 76,” *New York Times*, Jan. 5, 1965; Conrad Aiken, “T.S. Eliot,” *Life*, January 15, 1965. The earliest use of the phrase I have found is in Robert Hilyer’s 1949 attack on Eliot, “Poetry’s New Priesthood” for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, June 18, 1949. By this time Hilyer could already use the phrase to mock contemporary critics. Its most prominent use is by conservative academic Russell Kirk. Before the publication of his 1971 biography *Eliot and his Age* (New York: Random House, 1971), Kirk had often called his manuscript, “The Age of Eliot.” Kirk, “English Letters in the Age of Boredom,” *Shanandoah* 7, no. 2 (Spring 1956), 3.

<sup>347</sup> Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 152.

<sup>348</sup> Marjorie Perloff, “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” *New Literary History* 13.3 (Spring 1982): 486.

<sup>349</sup> See Mao’s discussion of Perloff’s essay in “How to Do Things with Modernism,” 162-163. For a critique of the over-simplistic schema of the contrast, see Patricia Rae, *The Practical Muse: Pragmatist Poetics in Hulme, Pound and Stevens* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1997). Mao’s essay, first delivered on a panel

implication is a staple of left and liberal politics of poetry: breaking the given rules of poetry allows the progressive individual to abscond from counter-progressive social norms and the subjects malformed by them. The ripples of poiesis spread through the world and activate the creative powers of humankind.<sup>350</sup> As Williams' indicates in 1939—as Pound had in 1914 and the Era Wars would in the second half of the century—new forms entail a new hierarchy of poetic making: “A work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm.”<sup>351</sup> Modernist critics are likely to get behind the second half of the statement—that new poetic structures posit possible new worlds—but the first part is just as crucial: political progressivism is the measure of poetic relevance.<sup>352</sup>

In *Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981), Perloff coins the phrase that comes to separate lyric, romantic, or symbolist modernists like Eliot, Auden, and Stevens from the radical poetics of

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revisiting Perloff's essay on its twentieth anniversary, has been exceedingly important in my understanding of the stakes of the debate and, to a degree, constitutes the latest contribution to the Era Wars, particularly when read alongside Charles Altieri's ungenerous response in “The Fate of the Imaginary in Twentieth-century American Poetry,” *American Literary History* 17.1 (2005), 70-94. This chapter lacks the space to devote adequate attention to Mao's critique of modernists' and modernist studies' association of “form” and “doing” (poiesis) with political action; his identification of “the clerkly anxiety” of poets and critics; and his just suspicion of “the felt marginalization of the intellectual and the compensatory maneuvers it inspires.” I will say this: making defensiveness into a symptom shared by poets and critics suggests that they might get over their anxiety about being on the side of thinking (not doing) by embracing their intellectualism. But as argue in the Introduction and Chapter One, for poets who have internalized a prejudice against craftsmanship and genre—as well as critics who have internalized a prejudice against educated and uneducated alike—intellectualism is also a symptom framed by class antagonism. Mao, “How to Do Things,” 173, 174.

<sup>350</sup> I take this to be behind Altieri's defense of Perloff's pro-form, anti-content message. For example, Altieri writes that modernists “thought form could provide modes of felt coherence more comprehensive than anything reason's mapping of differences might be able to elaborate” and that “emphasizing the synthetic force of formal energies might provide aspects of identification, modes of satisfaction, and possibilities of self-reflection that provide alternatives to self-images giving reasoning its power within social life.” Altieri is looking to poetry through both Romantic and modern defenses, seeking in it “alternative ways of producing connections,” “different possibilities for how humans [understand] agency, and “a new freedom in responding to the world” as everyone comes to understand themselves as *homo poeticus* or to access “one's own constructive powers.” Altieri, “Fate of the Imaginary,” 73.

<sup>351</sup> Williams, “Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist,” *Selected Essays*, 196.

<sup>352</sup> Perloff writes, for example, that Pound and his fellow-travelers “return to the Aristotelian definition of *poiesis* as *mimesis praxeos*, the imitation of an action.” Mao notes that “one can hardly imagine such an imitation failing to be active and vital itself, and it exerts a powerful appeal on us because what we would think of as its ready alternatives—inaction, torpor, mere navel-gazing—are rarely held in high regard.” Qtd. in Mao, “How to Do Things,” 163.

Stein, Moore, Williams, Zukofsky, and especially Pound. Drawing from a poem by John Ashbery, Perloff opposes the mainstream tradition (with which Bloom identifies) and “the Other Tradition.” If the former looks backward and stymies poetic creativity, the latter looks forward to a poetry detached from the referential language of content and engaged with the materiality of the text, but progressively attached to the poem as a world of its own that can bring other worlds into being. But when Ashbery reasserts his ownership of the phrase in his 1989-1990 Charles Eliot Norton lectures, *Other Traditions*, Williams emerges as the front runner in explicit opposition to both Eliot and Pound. Setting aside the form-content hermeneutics in play here, what is striking about each of these shifts—from Eliot to Pound to Stevens (back to Pound) to Williams—is that each represents a rejection of whomever passes for the most popular modernist poet: each intervention is predicated on an underlying objection to the very idea that modernist poetry can provide a definitive author who can become popular and embody the era’s poetics at the same time. There is certainly a basic, entirely understandable desire to resist the canonical centrality of an ultra-conservative like Eliot, a fascist and antisemite like Pound, a navel-gazer like Stevens, and a primitivist like Williams.<sup>353</sup> Since each contender has been male, there is also an understandable worry that sexism plays a part in the idea of a master poet.<sup>354</sup> But the simplest answer to this fidgety process of centralizing the canon is that something about the era—its pervasive anti-populism—has been carried over into its study, so that it has become impossible for a modernist poet to become popular without seeming to betray the antipathy for popular

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<sup>353</sup> I am thinking less of Walter Benn Michaels’ reading of Williams’ nativism in *Our America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995) than I am of Rachel Blau DuPlessis’ reading, see DuPlessis, “‘Darken Your Speech’”: Racialized Cultural Work of Modernist Poets,” in *Reading Race in American Poetry*, ed. Aldon Lynn Nielsen (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 43-83.

<sup>354</sup> For an attempt to address this problem and make a case for H.D., see Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). For a more academic treatment of the subject, see Cristanne Miller, *Cultures of Modernism: Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, & Else Lasker-Schüler* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007).



poetry that establishes the base of the modernist defense. In short, these several counter-assertions indicate the academic adoption of modernist poetry's counter-cultural styling. On the surface, they may seek to evade the unpopular aspects of the prevailing author and to keep the modernist canon up-to-date with changing values, but in essence, they defend the anti-populist foundation of modernist poetry.<sup>355</sup>

A similar conviction may lie beneath the desire to rescue the young modernist poet from his or her better-known but more conservative middle-aged self and the impulse to save the pre-World War I revolutionary avant-garde from the post-war's reactionary high modernism.<sup>356</sup> Yet these efforts also fail to recognize how consistent anti-populist rhetoric remains from the prewar to postwar discussions of aesthetic formalism to democratic-minded postmodern politics of form. Again, Pound's case is instructive: the beliefs he expresses in his critical prose of the early teens can be traced up through in his later works, *The ABC of Reading* (1934) and *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935). Pound's dalliance in anarchist individualism in the nineteen-teens is continuous with his self-appointed mission to "save the Constitution." And when Pound finally (supposedly) recants his antisemitism to Allen Ginsburg by saying that it was a "stupid, suburban prejudice," it is precisely because hating Jews now seems so middle-brow to him, so pedestrian,

<sup>355</sup> For attempts to alter the perceived antithesis between modernism and mass culture, see Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*; and Catherine Turner, *Marketing Modernism between the Two World Wars* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003). For an attempt to locate "badness" as constitutive of the modernist enterprise, see Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "Introduction: Modernisms Bad and New," in *Bad Modernisms*, 1-17.

<sup>356</sup> In addition to Peter Burger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1974) and Andres Huyssen's *After the Great Divide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), see also Marjorie Perloff's preference for the Eliot of "Prufrock" rather than *The Waste Land* and her preference for the works of Williams' so-called French Decade (the 1920s) as opposed to *Paterson*. Perloff, "Avant-Garde Eliot," *Twenty-First Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 7-43; "'Lines Converging and Crossing': The 'French' Decade of William Carlos Williams," in *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 109-154. Similar arguments are made about Moore's late-life poetry, especially her revision of "Poetry"; see Hugh Kenner, "Disliking It," *A Homemade World* (New York: William Morrow, 1975), 101; Robert Duncan, "Ideas of the Meaning of Form," *Fictive Certainties* (New York: New Directions, 1955), 89-105; and John Slatin, *The Savage's Romance: The Poetry of Marianne Moore* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986).

that it deserves his contempt.<sup>357</sup> Perhaps more importantly, then, Pound can represent this era of poetry because the basic view of the populace to which he gives voice is shared with many of his poet peers despite the differences between his hate-speech and other poets' more modulated tones. In short, the perspective on art and life expressed in Pound, the author of the only proper modernist prose defense, reveals the radicalization of the genre's anti-populism, a politics of modernism that cuts across the right-left spectrum of first-wave modernist poetry and continues into its postmodern lineage.

For those on Perloff's side of the Era Wars, charting modernist politics does not mean naively syncing up authors' social commentary with the messages conveyed in their poetry. Yet their spectrum of modernist politics still ranges from bad, illiberal politics to the good, progressive politics, only instead of offering biographical evidence of a poem's political valence, postmodern politics of form contrast the conservatism of tradition-oriented texts like *The Waste Land* to the radicalism of experimental texts like *Tender Buttons* and *Spring and All*. Eliot's use of so many mainstream classical allusions—his homage to the canon—is seen as a reactionary attempt to pick up the pieces of a shattered civilization and fractured self, i.e. “these fragments I have shored against my ruins.”<sup>358</sup> By contrast, Stein, Williams, and Moore (and sometimes Pound) are said to attempt a revolutionary break with the traditional poetic line, conventional notions of grammar and syntax, the singular perspective of representational art, the false distinction between poetry and prose, or the strangle-hold of logical progression. Like the continental avant-gardes, these anti-Eliots probe the limits of language and the limitlessness of

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<sup>357</sup> Michael Reck, “A Conversation between Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg,” *Evergreen Review* 55 (June 1968): 29. Factually speaking, Pound's antisemitism was anything but pedestrian. Whatever he absorbed from his upbringing in suburban Philadelphia, the antisemitic tradition from which Pound consciously drew was esoterically rooted in medieval anti-usury laws and the long-standing genteel antisemitism of London's literati.

<sup>358</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems*, 69.

post-genre forms. They reach toward the post-lyric, explore the lower-case letter and comma-less sentence, envision the cubist eye, compose hybrid texts, and swerve through paratactic juxtapositions. According to politics-of-form studies, these strategies countervail hegemonic structures of thought and cultivate a democratic frame of mind. Pound plays such an important role in this debate because of the incommensurability between the reactionary content and revolutionary form of his poetry. What is at stake is not the Stevens' camp defense of content or the Poundian tradition of new form, but how much self-knowledge matters in reception history. Both sides of the Bollingen controversy, for example, praise and censure authorial intention: those who defend the *Cantos* praise Pound's technical mastery, while those who censure the poem cite the intended message, which is indisputably pro-fascist. Separating aesthetics and politics, Pound's apologists argue that he knows what he is doing formally and treat the content as an unfortunate idiosyncrasy. Rejecting this sophistry, the anti-apologists argue that Pound knows what he is doing in the content and, later, that the form is another instantiation of Pound's essentially fascist personality. No where in this back and forth is there room for a political unconscious of the poem to come in conflict with the conscious intention of the author. What is at stake is the possibility of unconscious good for the simple reason that the value system in which the debate happens continues to hold onto the defense's philosophical inheritance: that knowledge makes good citizens of poets and that what is unknown (about oneself or what one makes) is the source of bad politics.

Responding to the late-90s wave of Pound criticism that sought to further the critique of the New Critical separation of form and content, Charles Bernstein's lecture "Pound and the Poetry of Today" offers an excellent example of politics-of-form theory in practice and its

underlying stakes. On one side, critics who reject separating form and content as a defensive gesture argue that totalitarianism defines both form and content of the *Cantos*. On the other, Bernstein argues that Pound's poetry is valuable not despite the contradiction between content and form, as Pound's formalist defenders argue, but because that contradiction shows how a poem can read against the author's intentions. Bernstein begins by discounting Pound's claim that the *Cantos* "contain history"; the seemingly quasi-Spenglerian effort to offer a hierarchical survey of cultural achievement from fifteenth-century Rimini, to ancient China, to the Early Republic of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams is, Bernstein argues, more remarkable for its failure than its success—as if poetry had rebelled against the fascist poet's intentions. Pound may have tried to offer a diagnostics for cultures' rise and fall, but he ended up with a text that does less to "contain history" than to explode its narrative pretensions. Instead of synthesizing his sources, Pound's method of composition pulverizes civilization's monuments. The structure(lessness) of the poem makes sure that its content does not cohere into a story; post-war poets recognize the contradiction and follow suit. They respond to Pound—and take responsibility for their share of modernism—by showing how his poetic actually militates against fascism, pointing the way instead to a democratic poetry:

So contemporary poetry's response to Pound is to enact a poetry that does not fragment for the sake of a greater whole but that allows the pieces to sing their own story—a chordal simultaneity at pains to put off any coherence save that found within its own provisional measure. Every grain or strain or watch has its own claim to truth, not as one of the "luminous particulars" . . . but as part of the democracy of words and cultures and histories, all impossible to exhaust or

rank.<sup>359</sup>

In other words, Pound's era might be our own, not because of his role as a promoter of some of the greatest modernists as Kenner claimed, but because he was the problem that postmodern poets have been obliged to engage. Their engagements "understand that our poetical practices have political and social dimension in terms of form over and above content."<sup>360</sup> With one important exception, this is similar to saying that overt prejudice is more easily recognized and therefore less dangerous than its institutional or unconscious variants that covertly disseminate prejudicial forms of thought: for Bernstein, at least as far as Pound is concerned, the source of political good lies in what he does not know he is doing. Poundian apologetics began by separating form and content in order to distinguish Pound's brilliant technical know-how from his dreadful politics, the result of his madness or his having been deprived of good influences while abroad. Then, a generation of scholars attempted to undo the form-content binary and discovered that the *Cantos*' dialectic of enlightenment had secreted the poet's totalitarianism in the form of the poem as well: Pound may not have known what he was doing, but it all came from the same bad seed. In both cases, what is unknown is cause for censure. Bernstein differs from both these camps in that he asks us to treat what Pound does not know he is doing as a source of political good: the *Cantos* as a historico-textual phenomenon that exposes the gap between self-knowledge and poetic knowing. Pound may not know what he is doing, but the poem does because it is not the product of a solitary genius but of the plurality of readers who have understood what the poem does for the genre.

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<sup>359</sup> Charles Bernstein, "Pound and the Poetry of Today," *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 162.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

The passage's working definition of "democracy" is important, since it brings out the stakes of Bernstein's intervention. At first glance, the possessiveness of Bernstein's language seems to suggest an analogy between an ideal democratic state and the individuated "pieces," "grain[s] or strain[s]" of the *Cantos*, each having its "own story," "its own provisional measure," "its own claim to truth."<sup>361</sup> In Bernstein's defense of radical poetics/critique of multiculturalism, "State of the Art," he flatly states his preference for "poetry that insists on running its own course [and] finding its own measures."<sup>362</sup> In another essay on Pound, "Pounding Fascism," he again contrasts Pound's attempt at a total poem with "a unitary measure, hierarchically predetermined" with the textual object made of "fragments . . . which insist on making their own time and space, their own poem: never yielding to the totalizing of the autocratic arbitrariness of their place but allowing their own whole to come into being, . . . a coherence of the displaced—disseminated and desecrated—making a home where it is to be found."<sup>363</sup> The anthropomorphic language here invites reading this image of the *Cantos* as a manifestation of the democracy that Pound has internalized and which comes through despite his efforts to impose law and order; doing so makes Bernstein's monadic vision resemble the image in Pound's aphoristic homage to fascism: "A thousand candles together blaze with intense brightness. No one candle's light damages another's. So is the liberty of the individual in the ideal and fascist state."<sup>364</sup> But the crucial difference is that Bernstein's possessives lay claim within the egalitarian space of democracy, whereas Pound's vision begins with the light of the individual's special knowledge. Pound is

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<sup>361</sup> Susan Vanderborg notes a similar rhetoric in the essays collected in Bernstein's *Content's Dream*. See *Paratextual Communities: American Avant-garde Poetry since 1950* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 91. For Perloff's critique of similar possessiveness in "open-field poetics," see "The Changing Face of Common Intercourse," *Radical Artifice*, 34.

<sup>362</sup> Bernstein, *A Poetics*, 1.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>364</sup> Ezra Pound, "A Visiting Card," *Selected Prose*, 306.

averse to conformity because he wishes to impose new forms; Bernstein says, “*Poetry is aversion of conformity* in pursuit of new forms, or can be.” Aversion here is generated by conformity—by living among and with forms—much as the possessives are drawn out in pursuit of new forms (in the plural) that fragment in their newness. Pound still seeks the image of himself in his poems; Bernstein knows the self contains multitudes—or rather, that the self cannot quite contain them.

“These People are Human,” or Democratic “Bull” Williams

But what is natural to the Papuan and the child is a symptom of degeneration in the modern man. I have made the following observation and have announced it to the world: *The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use.*

—Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” (1908)<sup>365</sup>

The ascendancy of Williams in the latest decades of the Era Wars has been accompanied by a corroborative ascendancy of politics-of-form studies. Far from being novel, issues of form have long been crucial to the politics of the defense, from aristocratic experiments in quantitative verse, to the Protestant modernity of blank verse, to the folksy nationalism of English rhyme, to the Frenchness of the heroic couplet, to upper-class antipathy for working-class doggerel, to the American idiom as anti-iambic. In fact, almost everything known as poetics comes from different schools of defense: the politics of the defense *are* the politics of poetics. So although Williams is the modernist known for having articulated the connection between decisions made about poetic form and sides taken in political struggles, he is by no means the only or first to do so, nor even the first poet of the era to do so. When Eliot takes on free verse in “Reflections on *Vers Libre*” (1917), initially appearing in the Fabian Society’s *New Statesman*, he discounts the movement’s poetic pretensions in the same breath as he dismisses self-determination and the Russian Revolution: “*Vers libre* does not exist, and it is time that this preposterous fiction followed the [Bergsonian] *élan vital* and the eighty thousand Russians into oblivion.”<sup>366</sup> What

<sup>365</sup> Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime,” in *Crime and Ornament: The Arts and Popular Culture in the Shadow of Adolf Loos*, ed. Bernie Miller and Melony Ward (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2002), 30.

<sup>366</sup> Eliot, *Selected Prose*, 31.



Williams does, then, is give democratic content to the argument for “new forms.” Williams agrees with Eliot about free verse; he even seems to agree with him about the Russian Revolution, which he parodies in the opening pages of *Spring and All*. For both poets free-versists and Bolsheviks are know-nothing idealists. For the anti-populist defense, proving oneself lacking in self-knowledge—specifically, whether what one is doing is really and truly new—means failing the double test of political and poetic peerage.

Williams’ current reputation, then, is due to his successful self-fashioning as a poet who knows what he is about in contrast to Eliot and Pound, whose classical allusions and U.S. popularity become symptoms of America’s debilitating lack of self-understanding. Williams’ vernacular idiom—so the story goes—cultivates an essentially democratic frame of mind and reveals poetry’s corruption by ex-patriots and Euro-philistinism.<sup>367</sup> Throughout his career, the half-British doctor frequently defines himself in opposition to Eliot especially, particularly after he becomes an British citizen and converts to Anglicanism. (Pound likes to call Williams “Bull,” half short for “Bill” and half “John Bull.”) In a 1950 interview, for example, instead of Eliot’s tradition and orthodoxy, Williams makes a case for breaking the rules in order to bring about a conversion “far more liberating to the mind and the spirit of man.” But before turning to Eliot, the answer Williams gives when asked what makes “the American language . . . so different” takes him to “a young man . . . employed by Standard Oil.” Neither Eliot nor the corporate employee know who they are, and Williams is there to tell them:

*Interviewer:* Well, what do you think there is about the American language that is so different? You’ve done more in American than anybody.

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<sup>367</sup> Williams’ call could still be heard loudly in the early 1980s. See Diane Wakoski in “Responses to Frederick Turner,” *The Missouri Review* 5.2 (Winter 1981-1982), 180-183.

*Williams:* Well, our lives are lived according to a certain rhythm, whether we know it or not. There is a pace to our lives, which largely governs our lives. There's no question about it. You take a young man who is employed by Standard Oil. Well his life is set to the pace of Standard Oil. He may deny it and think that's a lot of baloney, but it ain't! That's its pace, and the language they speak is his language, that's the way you live. It's my job to take it as I find it. I'm no reformer. I take what I find, I make a poem out of it. I make it into a shape which will have a quality which is no longer you. It's come out of you, but I've objectified it. I've given it a form, a human habitation and a place—you know, the Shakespeare stuff.

And it is so. You have to objectify your life, as I've said over and over again. The pianist sits in front of the piano and plays it. He doesn't fall into the strings. He sits there apart and makes a melody of it. So it's up to me. These people are human. I don't fight with them because I don't agree with their ideas. I accept them because they're my friends, because I like their qualities, and because they have an overall quality which is American which they can never recognize unless the artist or the philosopher, but I think largely the artist, presents it as an entity to them, gives them something to believe in, which the artist must do.<sup>368</sup>

Let me paraphrase: others are set in their ways, which although wrong should be left alone.

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<sup>368</sup> Williams, "An Interview with William Carlos Williams," by Emily M. Wallace, *Massachusetts Review* 14.1 (Winter 1973), 146-147

Williams' wants to show his interviewer that he is not out to reform the know-nothings, but his qualification is even less democratic-minded. What better reason to argue than disagreement? (If anything, democracy means a lot of fighting over ideas, especially ideas that are out of touch, unsubstantiated, or *prima facie* wrong.) Lastly, there is a bias to the answer Williams puts in the mouth of the young man who works for Standard Oil. Might he not agree that much of his life is set to the pace of his corporate employer or the ding-dong hose? The resistance Williams anticipates is really about the worthwhileness of this or that life rhythm. Again, the jaded corporate gopher or gas station attendant might agree, but Williams does not give him the chance. They are "human," and he is *homo poeticus*. The issue is not that Williams is complaining about the ignorance of the average person: there is an average ignorance. The issue is that he claims self-knowledge for the poet and makes newness the path to politicization. The narrative of progress makes Williams an exception to the rule of popular degradation, or as he says in 1930, "the unmitigated stupidity, the drab tediousness of the democracy, the overwhelming number of the offensively ignorant."<sup>369</sup>

Williams' democratic politics sets up the populace—the demos, the crowd, the masses—as a place where people do not know themselves. Promising universal emancipation through knowledge, his narrative of progress nonetheless—as a narrative—requires someone to play the role of the unemancipated multitude. Stories of progress toward liberty, then, maintain the demos as a place below political peerage. In short, liberation through self-discovery is really a story about liberation from the demos. Williams' fancies himself defender of the people, but his democracy is not popular.<sup>370</sup> Popular democracy means not having to make good on the right to

<sup>369</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 350.

<sup>370</sup> For an account of Williams' fraught relationship with leftism and his association of "the spirit of democracy" with American "liberalism," see Milton A. Cohen, "Stumbling into Crossfire: William Carlos Williams, *Partisan Review*, and the Left in the 1930s," *Journal of Modern Literature* 32.2 (Winter 2009): 143-158; and Williams to

politics, not having to prove oneself smart enough, wealthy enough, or tolerant enough to deserve citizenship. Like Pound, Williams looks for the senatorial knowledge of the few to save the many from themselves. As Williams continues to answer the question, he turns from Standard Oil to Eliot's religion, and paints a picture of a people divided too much by "religious tenets" and not enough by the differences between "the American language" and "the British language":

We don't know what to believe in. We divide over our religious tenets, unfortunately, unhappily, so that, largely speaking, I never attempt to touch that. I don't attempt to do what Eliot did, go over and take the British religion and make that as his great tenet of life. That's not my business. I'm not that.

Ritually-minded Eliot charms the American public with his un-American line. But because neither the Standard Oil employee nor Eliot breaks out of the norms that define him, neither knows who he is.<sup>371</sup> More importantly, Eliot's conversion contributes to divisiveness because of the frame of mind produced by "the restricting formulations" of ritualism and the repetition of traditional poetic lines:

The conventions of speech and the conventions of art, of the poetic line—let's be specific—carry over not only the traditional, which is good (I mean, after all, who can escape the great tradition of the British language?), but they carry over the restricting formulations of that language. They even modify the thought of the language. The forms modify the thought.

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the Editors of the *Partisan Review*, April 1936, in *Selected Letters*, 157-158.

<sup>371</sup> Pound fares no better with Williams. In a statement published in the same issue of *Massachusetts Review* as the above interview, Williams writes, "All he [Pound] has done is put other, not even new, material into his copied forms." Williams, "A Study of Ezra Pound's Present Position," *Massachusetts Review* 14.1 (Winter 1973), 118.

That's why the priests of all sorts, the priest, generally speaking, whether Christian or otherwise, sticks to ritual, because he knows if he can get those people to repeat that ritual, they are caught. They are snared, for life, for good or for evil, whatever it may be, but they are snared.

Nowhere in Williams' world is there room for genre as variation on a theme or freedom in restraint. Here, the interview takes an abrupt turn back to the American scene. The American line is defined by the story of democracy as American destiny:

And I feel that in a democracy, in a [*sighs*] life that the paleontologists tell us has only existed consciously 700,000 years or something of that sort—a very brief thing—there's a lot yet to discover in the way we behave and what we do and what we think. And the way we discover it is to be iconoclast, which means to break the icon, to get out from inside that strictly restricting mold or ritual, and get out, not because we want to get out of it, because the secret spirit of that ritual can exist not only in that form, but once that form is broken, the spirit of it comes out and can take again a form which will be more contemporary. So, I think it is our duty as Americans, our devotional duty, let's say, to take out the spirit that has made not only Greek and Latin and French poetry but British poetry also, and which restricts us when we're too stern about following their modes, and put it into something which will be far more liberating to the mind and the spirit of man, if I'm going to be philosophic in that sense. Back of it all, that is the theory. And for that, you have to go into structure, the structure of the line itself.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> Williams, "Interview," 147-148.

Williams uses narrative to make his case: the would-be “iconoclast” begins in a state of nonage, beholden to an “icon” and trapped in “that strictly restricting mold or ritual,” whatever it may be.<sup>373</sup> An implicit choice is made: “break the icon . . . and get out,” or give oneself over to “priests of all sorts.” Do the former and gain self-knowledge that will aid human progress; do the latter and withdraw from the real “devotional duty” of the American citizen.

Williams moves from the agnostic but divided “we” to the iconoclastic “we” through a series of pronominal shifts that tell the story of disidentification with the ignorant mass. From the divided “we” that does not “know what to believe in” to “these people”—corporate employees and religious devotees—Williams wrests his “I think,” out of which he cultivates a new us and them: on the one side, those who take up “our duty as Americans” and “those people” who are “snared” by various dogmas. Overwriting popular democracy, in which all are equal insofar as “we don’t know what to believe in,” Williams imagines the American race as the stewards of democracy for a human species he telescopes back into caveman times. In the end, Williams may productively decenter the pious Anglo-American tradition, but the sweeping evolutionary mission he puts in its place is no less deific. The logic is clear but faulty: being more democratic means being more free; being more free means being a more evolved human being. The problem is that democracy is not only about freedom from institutions. In fact, democracy cannot do without precisely the institution that Williams is attacking: the agnostic rule of an all-too-human people. Defending democracy as an enlightened institution must take

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<sup>373</sup> For another version of this narrative, see the following statement in another 1950 interview: “Poetry is in a chaotic stage. We have to reject the standard forms of English verse and put ourselves into chaos on purpose, in order to rediscover new constellations of the elements of verse in our time. We have to break down poetry into its elements just as the chemists and physicists are doing. In order to realize ourselves. In order to reform the elements.” “Talk with William Carlos Williams,” by Harvey Breit, *The New York Times Book Review*, January 15, 1950.

the anti-populist turn that Williams does here, because the narrative of progress must retain the populace as a place of ignorance and superstition. The average human being will never be an above-average citizen, and as long as the defense of democracy and democratic poetics rests on the transformative powers of new form, the anti-populist argument against democracy will always be waiting in the wings. Listen, for example, to where the note of lament falls in Williams' interview: "And I feel that in a democracy, in a [*sighs*] life that the paleontologists tell us has only existed consciously 700,000 years or something of that sort—a very brief thing—there's a lot yet to discover in the way we behave and what we do and what we think." Being human appears earlier in the passage: "So it's up to me. These people are human. I don't fight with them because I don't agree with their ideas." The defense of poiesis is alive and well: other people are only human; the poet is something more.

The disconnect between Williams' poetry and his ideas about the American idiom (or the variable foot) is well-documented.<sup>374</sup> His version of American exceptionalism and supporting use of racist and primitivist tropes have also received attention. His tenuous analogy between ethnic miscegenation and textual hybridism is mostly a thing of the past now that the vogue for hybrid studies has passed, and circumspect revisions of multiculturalism have become commonplace.<sup>375</sup> But the anti-populism transferred from modernist poetry to modernist poetry

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<sup>374</sup> Perloff, for example, calls Williams "a genuinely democratic poet" for all the usual reasons *except* his purported use of a vernacular idiom. Indeed, as she goes on to show, "Williams' poetry is not, in fact, natural and lifelike." Perloff, "Lucent and Inescapable Rhythms: Metrical 'Choice' and Historical Formation.," in *What is a Poet? Essays from the Eleventh Annual Symposium on English and American Literature*, ed. Hank Lazer (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1987), 99. See also Perloff's "'To Give Design': Williams and the Visualization of the Poetry," *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Northwestern University Press, 1996), 88-118.

<sup>375</sup> See Robert von Hallberg's response to Walter Benn Michaels' imputation of nativism to Williams. Almost certainly on the side of Pound and not Stevens, von Hallberg draws a parallel between Williams' composition of hybrid texts composed of both verse and prose and the poet's celebration of racial and cultural mixing. Echoing Williams' formulation, von Hallberg argues that Williams could not have been the nativist that Benn Michaels claims and should not be lumped together with Calvin Coolidge and other cultural conservatives because he was invested in hybridity: "Hybridity meant the invention of new subjects, of new life forms," not the reactionary

studies continues to augment Williams' reception and the politics of form. The sign of political peerage across the great divide between modernism and postmodernism remains self-knowledge conveyed through a story of liberation.<sup>376</sup> To be sure, displays of this kind of knowing have become more sophisticated, so much so that the ironic admission of limited self-knowledge, multiple subjectivities, and defining self-contradiction have become the privileged sign of being savvy about how selves work. But Williams not only points to the anti-populist limit to the democratic politics attributed to radical poetics, he also shows how this prejudice emerges among middle-class modernists vying for recognition and from the problem modernists have when they look back on their old work as they strive to make it new. In the remainder of this section I turn the liberation story that shows up in *Kora in Hell's* prologue and in the passage of *Spring and All* immediately preceding Williams most well-known articulation of "new forms, new names for experience." In these earlier contexts, the culture of competitive self-knowledge can be seen in action as Williams answers other poets' attempts to tell him what he does not know about himself, his poetry, or the world. Williams changes the terms of the defense by

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preservation of poetic or cultural purity. Indeed, as Perloff says, von Hallberg's response indicates his definition of poetry: Williams activated "the revolutionary dimension of artistic expression" in such a way that he could not be classed with the mainstream views on race and immigration. Von Hallberg, "Literature and History: Neat Fits," *Modernism/modernity* 3.3 (1996), 116. For excellent elaborations of Williams indulgence in racial tropes, see Aldon Lynn Nielsen, *Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 72-82; Christopher North, *Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 147-162. For critiques of the possibility of things hybrid to transcend identity politics and the persistence of racist tropes in Williams, see Michael Borshuk, "'A Synthesis of Racial Caress': Hybrid Modernism in the Jazz Poems of Williams and Mina Loy," in *Rigor of Beauty: Essays in Commemoration of William Carlos Williams*, ed. Ian B. Copestake (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 255-272.

<sup>376</sup> See the remarkably unremarkable reception of *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, edited by Cole Swensen and David St. John (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009). Swensen and St. John claim to bridge the radical-traditional divide. The reviewers are unimpressed, see Ron Silliman, "Wednesday, June 24 2009," <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2009/06/american-hybrid-is-important-book-but.html>; and Stephen Ross, "A Space Filled With Moving," review of *American Hybrid*, ed. Swensen and St. John, *The Oxonian Review* 10:1 (October 12, 2009), <http://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/a-space-filled-with-moving/>. A critique of the persistent American exceptionalism attached to hybridity-talk can be found in Andrea Actis, "'Exquisite Hybridizations' and the Gentrification of Forms," *The Poetic Front* 3 (2010), <http://journals.sfu.ca/poeticfront/index.php/pf/index>.



being unapologetic in the face of one's detractors, but in order to forgo defending himself, Williams needs attackers. When he lacks them, he provides them himself.<sup>377</sup>

*Spring and All* establishes its defensive rhetoric in the very first paragraphs and rarely deviates from bellicose apologia. The text opens with several paragraphs addressing the distribution of self-knowledge among an antagonistic or indifferent audience, a reader to be rescued, and the author holding out his hand. The very first two sentences categorically disassociate the popular taste and the new poetic: "If anything of moment results—so much the better. And so much the more likely will it be that no one will want to see it."<sup>378</sup> Williams goes on to set himself up as an answer to the "constant barrier between the reader and his consciousness of immediate contact with the world." This "barrier" is maintained by the reader's preoccupation with retrospect and anticipation: "the thing he never knows and never dares to know is what he is at the exact moment that he is." *Spring and All* holds the answer: "To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force—the imagination. This is its book. I myself invite you to read and to see."<sup>379</sup> In between the opening paragraphs and this salutation Williams gives voice to his attackers:

What do they mean when they say: "I do not like your poems, you have no faith whatever. You seem neither to have suffered nor, in fact to have felt anything very deeply. There is nothing appealing in what you say but on the contrary the poems are positively repellent. They are heartless, cruel, they make fun of humanity. What in God's name do you mean? Are you a pagan? Have

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<sup>377</sup> On the idea of a "vocational neurosis" that provokes poets to confront internalized anxieties about poetry, see Johnson, *Why Write Poetry?* 31.

<sup>378</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 88. See also "The Sonambulists" (1929) in which Williams writes, "Surely excellence kills sales." *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>379</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

you no tolerance for human frailty? Rhyme you may perhaps take away but rhythm! why [sic] there is none in your work whatever. Is this what you call poetry? It is the very antithesis of poetry. It is antipoetry. It is the annihilation of life upon which you are bent. Poetry that used to go hand in hand with life, poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation. You moderns! I cannot understand this work. You have not yet suffered a cruel blow from life. When you have suffered you will write differently?"

The Romantic defense of poetry rests on poetry's cultivation of tolerance and sympathy through the exercise of the imagination. This accuser targets "moderns" as anti-romantics, twentieth-century versions of the Augustan satirists who "make fun of humanity" and have "no tolerance for human frailty." But Williams does not have the sense of humor of a satirist. And the prose bears all the hallmarks of a Romantic defense as Williams' writes of "enlargement—revivification of values" and "consciousness . . . enlarged by the sympathies and . . . the imagination."<sup>380</sup> Surveying Williams' disavowal of verse forms and his refusal of poetic diction, the accusation finally rests on his lack of experience. Basically, Williams does not tell enough stories about human tragedy because he has no story to tell of himself. There may be little storytelling in the poems (with the exception of "To Elsie"), but Williams does tell his story in the prose and in the departures represented by the form of the poems. Like Shelley's Prometheus, his story has suffering at its heart.

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<sup>380</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 117, 120. Years later Randall Jarrell applauds Williams for many of the same qualities that this accuser faults Williams for lacking, see Jarrell, "Introduction," *Selected Poems*, by William Carlos Williams, rev. ed. (New York: New Directions, 1968).

In his response to the above accusation, Williams singles out the idea that he has not suffered enough and answers the question of experience with a counter-accusation:

Perhaps this noble apostrophe means something terrible for me, I am not certain, but for the moment I interpret it to say: “You have robbed me. God, I am naked. What shall I do?” —By it they mean that when I have suffered (provided I have not done so as yet) I too shall run for cover; that I too shall seek refuge in fantasy. And mind you, I do not say that I will not. To decorate my age.<sup>381</sup>

Each side tries to outdo the other in the contest for self-knowledge. Here, Williams wraps his counter-attack in a self-admonishing defense. Unlike his interlocutors, he is aware of his faults. They have no defense for being so defensive. Reading the accusation symptomatically, Williams strips away the Romantic defense of poetry like another ornament and reveals the lack for which it compensates. The difference between Williams and his interlocutor is that Williams knows he is among the frightened masses who “seek refuge in fantasy” and that he fights against being swallowed up by them. Putting this mock exchange at the beginning of *Spring and All*, Williams frames the entire text as a prolonged defense. He does something similar in the “Prologue” to *Kora in Hell*, quoting private letters from H.D., Pound, and Stevens about his poetry (none of them about *Kora*) in order to go on a counter-attack: their poor understanding of his work is a symptom of their poor understanding of themselves. Williams’ identity as a poet is constituted in opposition others’ opinions about who he is, what poetry is, and how the two should relate to one another. The accuracy of the criticisms of Williams’ work is not the issue, the point is that Williams show that he knows who he is and that others do not.

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<sup>381</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 88-89.

The regular features of the prose defense follow Williams' Rimbaudian prolegomenon about the arrival of spring: the censure of bad poets or "the traditionalists of plagiarism"; the attack on the popular definition of poetry as verse; the relationship between poetry and prose; the supremacy of poesis or "imagination"; the history of poetic achievement (from Shakespeare to Moore). When Williams lays out the modernist defense of poesis, juxtaposing "new forms" and "new names for existence," he does so within another narrative of liberation. The difference is that this version of the story shows Williams, like his reader, divided between retrospect and anticipation. Looking back on *Kora in Hell* (the "*Improvisations*"), Williams says that "their fault is a dislocation of sense, often complete" and that "it was the best [he] could do and retain any value to experience at all." Looking forward, he realizes that "the values there discovered can be extended." The religious convert like Eliot adapts himself to an established creed, the modernist convert does not change his beliefs, but his attitude toward them. Williams attains autonomy in the story, but in the moment when Williams is looking back on his work, he allows himself a moment of pluralism in which he realizes that he "was somewhat mistaken—ungenerous." The entire narrative is framed by his frustration with the expectations of the prose defense that demands "acquisitive understanding" and "intellectual steps" instead of "experience":

I think often of my earlier work and what it has cost me not to have been clear. I acknowledge I have moved chaotically about refusing or rejecting most things, seldom accepting values or acknowledging anything.

because I early recognized the futility of acquisitive understanding and at the same time rejected religious dogmatism. My whole life

has been spent (so far) in seeking to place a value upon experience and the objects of experience that would satisfy my sense of inclusiveness without redundancy—completeness, lack of frustration with the liberty of choice; the things which the pursuit of “art” offers—

But though I have felt “free” only in the presence of works of the imagination, knowing the quickening of the sense which came of it, and though this experience has held me firm at such times, yet being of a slow but accurate understanding, I have not always been able to complete the intellectual steps which would make me firm in the position.

The frustration with logical argument, the periodic breakdown of the prose, and the scare quotes mark the modernist poet’s antagonism for the conventional defense of poetry. His poems prove what he cannot explain, but they also force him into a confrontation with what it means to be a poet whose texts circulate without always a defense waiting in the wings:

So most of my life has been lived in hell—a hell of repression lit by flashes of inspiration, when a poem such as this or that would appear

What would have happened in a world similarly lit by the imagination

Oh yes, you are a writer! a phrase that has often damned me, to myself. I rejected it with heat but the stigma remained. not a man, not an understanding but a WRITER. I was unable to recognize.

I do not forget with what heat too I condemned some poems of some contemporary praised because of their loveliness—

I find that I was somewhat mistaken—ungenerous

Life's processes are very simple. one or two moves are made and that is the end. The rest is repetitious.

Williams has internalized the attack on poetry and feels the pressure to defend himself in philosophical terms as an “understanding,” which is exactly what he does. In *Kora in Hell*, he begins “to understand” what he is doing. But he repents his condemnation of “loveliness”—the polish of ornament—in precisely the part of the story when he does not know what he is doing. The moment of stasis in the story—the part “lived in hell”—is also the place where Williams seems to appreciate species life, the compulsory repetition and cyclical processes that are only inadequately punctuated by “one or two moves” or a few “flashes of inspiration.” No longer retrospective and not yet anticipating his new mission, Williams is in “the eternal moment,” which is as close as he gets to self-reproach for having attacked other poetries: “I find that I was somewhat mistaken—ungenerous.” The moment is short-lived, but the point stands: to reach the egalitarian side of democratic politics, freedom must be subordinated to the sense of being complicit in popular ignorance. If knowledge separates the democratic community into leaders and followers, the limits of knowledge hold the egalitarian community together. Unlike liberty and knowledge that offer self-understanding, neither equality nor ignorance have a story to tell.

As I said, the moment is short-lived. Williams goes on to conclude the story of his liberation from this “hell,” as he discovers his own genre. Looking back on *Kora in Hell*, he “find[s] that the values there discovered can be extended.” Finally, he looks forward to “the creation of new forms, new names for experience” and again rejects popular taste in ornament

for “a state in which reality plays a part”:

The *Improvisations*—coming at a time when I was trying to remain firm at great cost—I had recourse to the expedient of letting life go completely in order to live in the world of my choice.

I let the imagination have its own way to see if it could save itself. Something very definite came of it. I found myself alleviated but most important I began there and then to revalue experience, to understand what I was at—

The virtue of the improvisations is their placement in a world of new values—  
their fault is their dislocation of sense, often complete. But it is the best I could do under the circumstances. It was the best I could do and retain any value to experience at all.

Now I have come to a different condition. I find that the values there discovered can be extended. I find myself extending the understanding to the work of others and other things—

I find that there is work to be done in the creation of new forms, new names for experience

and that “beauty” is related not to “loveliness” but to a state in which reality plays a part<sup>382</sup>

Williams defends *Kora in Hell* based on what the poems there teach him about himself and his power to affect “a world of new values” with his poetic at the center. In fact, Williams has not

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 115-117.

broken with genre so much as he has defined a genre for himself. There are two ways to read this. On the one hand, Williams is judging everyone by his own standard: knowing himself, he shuns meeting others on their own terms. On the other hand, everyone else is judging Williams by their own standards: knowing themselves, they shun meeting him on his terms. The only problem is that Williams is other than himself.

The story Williams tells is clear-cut, if the prose is not. There is the Williams before the letting go—"letting life go completely in order to live in the world of my choice"/ "let[ting] the imagination have its own way." Then, there is the Williams after, a poet who has discovered himself or "what [he] was at." Finally, there is the Williams of "new forms," who understands himself and is able to use what he has learned to test "the work of others and other things" (such as his attacker in the first pages). This is the poet with a mission for whom "there is work to be done." Resting the defense on poetry's redemptive powers means taking for granted that something about the human condition needs redeeming.<sup>383</sup> He remains so committed to these ideas that one finds them from *Spring and All* to *Paterson* which he calls "a search for the redeeming language by which a man's premature death . . . might have been [!] prevented."<sup>384</sup> But who is the old Williams that the new Williams overcomes? The story of him burning his Keats imitation is certainly poignant. The answer I suggest has less to do with actual changes in style than with the sense Williams gives of having gone from middling to making a difference.<sup>385</sup>

The "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell* offers another version of Williams reflecting on his past work. One finds many of the same features: an attack on Eliot, the rejection of poetic ornament,

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<sup>383</sup> On the redemption strain in (and on) literary modernity, see Leo Bersani, *Cultures of Redemption* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>384</sup> Qtd. in Stephen J. Tapscott, "Williams's *Paterson*: Doctor and Democrat," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, vol. 8 (1978), 93.

<sup>385</sup> See Williams, *Autobiography*, 58-61.



and a defensive frame. This time, however, Williams does not paraphrase a detractor; he makes a unified front from letters to him by Pound, H.D., and Stevens. In one letter, H.D. expresses her concern that Williams is not quite being himself in “March,” a poem that appears in *Sour Grapes* (1921). Here is Doolittle:

I don t know what you think but I consider this business of writing a very sacred thing! I think you have the “spark” am sure of it, and when you speak direct are a poet. I feel in the hey-ding-ding touch running through your poem a derivitive [sic] tendency which, to me, is not you not your very self. It is as if you were ashamed of your Spirit, ashamed of your inspiration! as if you mocked at your own song.

Williams responds flippantly at first—“Oh well”—dismissing Doolittle’s notion of “sacred,” which he says “has lately been discovered to apply to a point of arrest where stabilization has gone on past the time.” Then he grows truculent: “There is nothing in literature but change and change is mockery. I’ll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please and it ll be good if the authentic spirit of change is on it.” Then he relents on the point of “the hey-ding-ding” but rejects what he finds offensive, that H.D. thinks she knows what he is about better than he does:

But in any case H.D. misses the entire intent of what I am doing no matter how just her remarks concerning that particular poem happen to have been. The hey-ding-ding touch was derivitive [sic] but it filled a gap that I did not know how better to fill at the time. It might be said that that touch is the prototype of the

improvisations.<sup>386</sup>

Here, Williams is the one who does not know himself. Self-knowledge and its lack pervade the letters Williams quotes and his responses to them. Pound challenges Williams' entertainment of an American poetic: "What the h--l do you a blooming foreigner know about the place." He should be thankful for having "enough Spanish blood to muddy up [his] mind" and offset the qualities of the American line. Williams' merit is "opacity," which saves him from "fizz, swish, gabble, and verbiage." Pound, self-depreciatingly but proudly characterizing himself as uber-American "snob," displays a level of ironic circumspection that Williams discounts in his retort. The issue of who knows oneself better also shows up in the letter from Stevens: "I am only objecting that a book that contains your particular quality should contain anything else." Williams' "tantrums [are] not half mad enough." In short, Williams is faking it. In reply, Williams likens Stevens to "a Pennsylvania Dutchman who has suddenly become aware of his habits and taken to 'society' in self defence," a figure not unlike the re-characterization of the attacker in the opening of *Spring and All*. In this round of competitive self-knowing, Williams is fighting a losing battle, and most readers of today would agree that he does not come into his own until *Spring and All*.

When Williams distances himself from *Kora in Hell*, he says that "their fault is their dislocation of sense, often complete. But it is the best I could do under the circumstances." In *Kora*, he distances himself from *Sour Grapes* or "March," "a prototype of the improvisations." The "hey-ding-ding," which refers to his loud apostrophes to the personified spring month, "filled a gap that [he] did not know how better to fill." Something is missing in each in that his

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<sup>386</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 13.

old self suffers from a “condition” like his reader, neither knowing how potent they really are. In both cases, self-knowledge comes after the fact and divided between regret and steadfastness. But let me point to a parallel between the “Prologue” and the passage in *Spring and All*. Above Williams agrees with H.D.’s comment about his generic line but says that “it filled a gap that I did not know how better to fill at the time.” The retrospective Williams is capable of genre thought, which I suggest offers entry into egalitarian thought, i.e. a poem is a poem is a poem. When the progress-oriented defender of poetry returns, these moments are swept aside as he decides that he has been right all along. The line about “new forms, new names for experience” is often cited, but rarely is its anti-ornament corollary: “and that ‘beauty’ is related not to ‘loveliness’ but to a state in which reality plays a part.” Taken together, these quotations offer a glimpse of egalitarianism as Williams hits on a brilliant account of what genre does: it fills “a gap” that one “does not know how better to fill at the time.” Here, genre is not getting in the way of self-knowledge, but filling a gap in know-how. Genre picks up where the Williams-esque leaves off. For Williams, this filler is necessary; for H.D., it is ornament. In the understandable tendency to tell Williams’ story of poetic development the way he does, this moment falls by the wayside: the awkward encounter between Williams and his old self, about whom he is more than a little defensive. Understanding the politics of modernist poetry means telling the story of modernists as a middling poets who comes into their own only by actively suppressing the “derivative” self-understanding they absorb from rubbing elbows with the masses.

By calling attention to modernist anti-populism in Williams, I do not propose that modernist studies comb the archive for popular democrats writing accessible verse or fighting for the rights of the people.<sup>387</sup> My contention is that the other side of democratic discourse—

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<sup>387</sup> Taking an example from a more contemporary movement, the poetry slam illustrates the problem of promoting

egalitarianism—has no foothold in the politics of poetic form as presently conceived. The idea of democracy that animates the politics of form is too committed to narratives of politicization like those Williams tells that require setting the populace up a repository for ignorance. Offering the liberation story as proof of peerage undercuts the idea of democracy as a form of government that assumes equality. Instead, Williams suggests that the liberation story can also be read as the protest of those who have been relegated to a state of nonage.

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popular art-forms. Accepting a paradigm that champions the popular against the elite precisely because it is popular forces us to choose, for example, between Harold Bloom's charge that the slam is "the death of the art" because it is "judged by an applause meter," a statement that betrays his own aristocratic inclinations, and the hyperbolic reply of some who, like Scott Woods, would make the slam "the embodiment of the idea that art belongs to the people and not to institutions or fashion-makers" and the "ultimate democracy of art." Bloom's depiction of the audience as "various young men and women in various late-spots are declaiming rant and nonsense at each other" is the picture of anti-populist reaction. But Woods' celebration of a liberal democratic alternative to the un-democratic classroom relies on an understanding of democracy as a participatory scene that encourages assent and dissent because, as opposed to other forms of poetry consumption, at the slam "you might be able to influence the course of the event with your participation." In fact, he adds, "Slam encourages this thinking a great deal." Whether participating as a performer or audience member, Woods' appeal locates democratic equality in openness to participation and liberation from the norms of poetry consumption. In short, choosing between Bloom's closed Western canon and the open forum of Scott's slam is not a choice one should feel obliged to make. Harold Bloom, et al., "The Man in the Back Row Has a Question VI," *Paris Review* 42.154 (Spring 2000), 379; Scott Woods, "Poetry Slams: The Ultimate Democracy of Art," *World Literature Today*, vol. 82., no. 1 (2008), 19.

Chapter Four:  
Damnation by Ornamentation

## Subways, Stadiums, and the Crowd's-eye View

This is / the power of their faces

—Williams, “At the Ballgame”

Politicizing the critical preference for Eliot, Pound, Stevens, or Williams has been possible only because of an enabling mislocation of modernist politics. The definitive ground for comparison should not be a poet's relationship to Romanticism (as Bloom would have it) or his/her commitment to radical poetics (as Perloff would have it), least of all a poet's own purported preference for content or form.<sup>388</sup> The politics of modernist poetry should be located in modernists' shared use of anti-populist rhetoric to defend whatever poetics or politics they put forward. By re-establishing the continuity between the rhetorical tactics of modernists whose political allegiances are as diverse Pound and Williams—a fascist sympathizer who praises liberty and a self-identifying democrat who disparages popular doings—the prejudice that animates anti-populism comes to the fore: an aversion to seeing oneself as part of the general populace, as one voice among many, as another face in the crowd, as an equal. This anti-egalitarian bias makes use of the narrative of liberation, but only because a sense of equality initiates modernists' poetic encounters with the populace. What is at stake in the modernist defense of poetry, then, is not the possibility of a popular poetics but the possibility of maintaining a commitment to newness while simultaneously combating social inequalities attached to how some people, including poets, use language.

In this section, reading first Pound's “In a Station of the Metro” (1913) and then

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<sup>388</sup> See Bloom, *Poems of Our Climate*, 152; Mao, “How to Do Things with Modernism,” 161.

Williams' "The crowd at the ballgame" from *Spring and All* (a.k.a. "At the Ballgame"), I will bring out the modernist poet's anti-egalitarian myopia: he is at once part of the crowd and incapable of recognizing himself in it. In order to evade affiliation, Pound and Williams aestheticize the mass by conflating its beauty and power with individuation, thereby neutralizing its collective movement which they take to be a sign of impotency. Examining the anecdotes Pound gives about the composition of "In a Station of the Metro" and Kenner's interpretation of the poem, I will argue that anti-populism haunts the slippage between the individual and the crowd in the poem and determines the symbolism of the final image of petals. Examining Williams' ballgame poem will make it further possible to delineate the misuse of language that marks the populace as a political idea. In the second section, I will show how the repulsive bodies and speech in the *Hell Cantos* (1925) place the bad poet at the rotten heart of bad politics. This section will also draw a parallel between Pound and Williams insofar as *Spring and All* contrasts mere sexual reproduction with enlightened, autonomous art-making.

The Imagist mini-masterpiece "In a Station of the Metro," especially as read in *The Pound Era*, demonstrates an aversion to a crowd-level perspective. The exchange takes place without the rampant display of contempt for the masses that is so common to Pound. In fact, the poet ostensibly aestheticizes the urban bustle around him. Here is the poem in its entirety, with the its title doubling as a first line that may locate the speaker's position as much as it situates the image that follows:

IN A STATION OF THE METRO

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough.<sup>389</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Pound, *Personae*, 111. I have used the final version of the poem which first appears in *Lustra* (1916) and which

As Kenner puts it in *The Pound Era*, “the ‘plot’ of the poem is the mind’s activity, fetching some new thing into the field of consciousness.” As opposed to “reproducing what is seen,” the poem’s action consists of “setting some other seen thing into relation,” such as the final image of petals clinging to the branch of a flowering tree after the rain has knocked them from the rest of the flowers.<sup>390</sup> Although politics are far afield of his work, Kenner’s distinction between creative act that makes the poem and the mere reproduction of an urban scene has a political parallel. After a struggle to find the right words—as Pound relates in the anecdote from which Kenner works—the poet captures the experience of having been touched by some passersby. But part of the beauty of the figures in the poem is due to how unaware they are of their own faces. Self-knowledge separates the poet from them: the poet apprehends a beauty in them that they do not.

Kenner almost touches on this disconnect when he identifies the echo of classical descents into the underworld: “not any crowd . . . but a crowd seen underground, as Odysseus and Orpheus and Koré saw the crowds in Hades.”<sup>391</sup> Following through on this reading takes Kenner to a brief moment in which Persephone appears in Canto CVI: “Dis’ bride, Queen over Phlegethon [a river in Hades], / girls faint as mist about her.”<sup>392</sup> A more ready parallel can be found in Canto I and suggests the final consequence of the classical frame. As Pound dramatizes in his retelling of Odysseus’ sacrificial summoning of the dead Tiresias, inhabitants of the underworld do not know who they are unless their life’s memories—lost in the crossing of the

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Kenner reads in *The Pound Era*. For a study of the different print and manuscript versions and Pound’s move away from the typographically experimental original version, which breaks both lines into “rhythmic units” by separating blocks of words with unusually wide spaces, see Randolph Chilton and Carol Gilbertson, “Pound’s ‘Metro’ Hokku’: The Evolution of an Image,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 36.2 (Summer 1990), 225-230.

<sup>390</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 186.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*, 185; Pound, *Cantos*, 772.



Lethe—have been restored by blood sacrifice or “bloody bever.” The depiction of that apparition is decidedly unsettling:

Dark blood flowed in the fosse,  
 Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides  
 Of youths and of the old who had borne much;  
 Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender,  
 Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads,  
 Battle spoil, bearing yet dreory arms,  
 These many crowded about me: with shouting,  
 Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts;  
 Slaughtered the herds, sheep slain of bronze;  
 Poured ointment, cried to the gods,  
 To Pluto the strong, and praised Proserpine;  
 Unsheathed the narrow sword,  
 I sat to keep off the impetuous impotent dead,  
 Till I should hear of Tiresias.<sup>393</sup>

The 1912 two-line poem aestheticizes the crowd by comparing it to the quietly feminine blossom petals; a decade and one world war later, there is a dangerous and hungry vacancy to the faces, mostly men killed in war. These two representations—one beautiful and the other ugly—both distance the poet from the crowd. But there is still a lot of work to do to articulate the defensive mechanisms that set the poet’s depiction in motion.

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<sup>393</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 3-4.

Familiarity with Pound's anecdote about the composition of the poem—his having been moved by the face a beautiful woman and then another and another—causes Kenner to make a crucial decision about the referent of “these faces” to which he bends his reading. Here is Kenner: “And carrying forward the suggestion of wraiths, the word ‘apparition’ detaches these faces from all the crowded faces, and presides over the image [in the last line] that conveys the quality of their separation.” “Petals on a wet, black bough” refers to how “these faces” are set apart from what Kenner oddly calls “all the crowded faces.” These “crowded faces”—as if having too many features as well as numbering too many—make no appearance in the final image. Where they might appear has been replaced by a void, “a wet, black bough.” But setting aside the anecdote, “these faces” might just as easily refer to all the faces “in the crowd.” By this light, the faces that make up the “apparition” are not separate from some other category of face but elements in the kaleidoscopic movements of the metro station crowd.

Besides the influence of the anecdote, there are two possible reasons for Kenner's reading, the first is his grammatical and metrical treatment of the double preposition “of . . . in . . .” Depending on how the iambic-based hexameter of the first line is scanned, the grammatical elements take on different relationships to one another. First, as would be consistent with Kenner's reading, one might demote the accent iambically falling on “of” and promote the otherwise unaccented “these,” thereby making the third foot into a pyrrhus and the fourth into a spondee: and, because of the now-enhanced natural caesura falling between the third and fourth feet of hexameter lines, conceptual stress will fall on “these faces”: “The á p | parí | tion of || thése fá | ces ín | the crówd.” The line finishes with a restored iambic that pulls “in the crowd” back to modify “these faces.” Second, as would be consistent with a more metrically

strict reading, one might allow the cadence of the first two iambic feet to determine the rhythm of the rest of the line (and defer the caesura): “The á | parí | tion ó | these fá | ces ín | the crówd.” The iambic stress now falls regularly on “of” and brings out the ambiguity of the double preposition. The reader is impelled to ask whether the apparition is the entire crowd of faces or the experience of being among them. The fourth foot remaining iambic, it now emphasizes the peculiarity of a crowd’s composite “faces” rather than the specificity of certain faces. The caesura, if there is one, now falls within the fifth foot, inviting “in the crowd” to be read as an anapaest foot of its own: “these fá | ces || in the crówd.” Doing so frees the preposition from the referents in the line and, like the first-line, suggests the speaker’s situated observation of the scene. Finally, the initial regularity of the first line now brings out the disruption of the iambic by the strong trochaic beginning of the second and last line.

The second reason for Kenner’s decision to take “these” to denote specific petal-like faces in the crowd is both simpler and deeper: he has taken the poet’s face out of the equation. In the reading I offer, when the poet gestures to “these faces in the crowd,” the opposition should not be understood to lie within the crowd itself—as if between “these” and “those”—but between the plural “these faces” and an implied singular, “this face.” Another omission in Kenner’s reading suggests the unrealized importance of the dynamic at the thematic and grammatical level: while “faces” is plural, “apparition” is singular. Kenner treats this as evidence of a narrative displacement: the poem is not about Ezra’s urban experience of a singular-plural phenomenon but the poet’s tranquil recollection of the scene; “apparition,” he says, “reaches two ways, toward ghosts and toward visible revealings.”<sup>394</sup> The poem happens between the memory of the plural referents and the singular image in the last line. Underlining

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<sup>394</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 187.

the narrative of poetic advancement through Pound's liberation from mimetic representation, while drawing on the poet's referential account, Kenner's reading takes "apparition" to refer only to the haunting appearance as those distinctly striking faces blur into a unitary image before the poet's mind's eye. In my reading, however, the aporia between the singular appearance of the crowd and the plurality of its constituent faces suggests that Pound's romantic intention to immortalize these subway-riding Beatrices has been thwarted as those few beautiful women blur into the faceless passersby. Even if "these faces" is meant to single out some, they stand out together. Either way, the "apparition" is a paradox: a faceless entity made up of multiple faces—just as, I will argue, the last line's image is flowerless though it is made of petals. There is, however, a way to resolve the problem: so far, I have been ascribing a coherent logic to the grammar, but what if the singular form of "apparition" is a displaced singularity that originates in the poet's inability to see his own face in the crowd? What if the poet is the ghostly reflection of "these faces"?

What is disconcerting about the specter around which the poem is built is this: in the apocryphal world of the poem, it is interpretively impossible visualize a face for each figure without taking a face away from some other constituent. To give a face to the singular image-memory of a series of beautiful women, one must take it away the more humble countenances who are not recalled to the poet's mind. To give faces to the actual women Pound undoubtedly saw, one must not see the Beatrician vision.<sup>395</sup> And to give faces to the individuals in the crowd, one must take them away from the gendered image of the feminine apparition. When one introduces the poet into the mix, it gets interesting. To give the poet a face, one must give the

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<sup>395</sup> If one takes as a response Williams' two-line poem "Spring" from *Sour Grapes* (1921), the poet's deathly regard of his own apparition in the mirror must turn into a comedy of self-love: "O my grey hairs! / You are truly white as plum blossoms." Williams, *Collected Poems*, 1:158.

crowd the face of the “apparition,” and to do that, one must take the individual faces away from the those that make up the crowd. Either this or the poet must determine the singular quality of the apparition. In other words, either the people in the crowd are ghosts or the poet is. The missing or half-there face that puts the others in relation is either the face of the crowd or the face of the poet. The slippage between singular and plural, the idea that there are not enough faces or too many, the ghostly in-between in which the poem happens; all these qualities of the poem’s structure indicate how fraught is the modernist attempt to aestheticize the mass. This only becomes more certain by the last image of the poem to which I now turn. If the first line deals with the vagaries of anti-populism endemic to the defense, the second line deals with the complimentary anti-ornamental bias.

The possibility of the poet being seen as well as seeing has never been part of the story of the poem’s composition. Then again, the story—which basically amounts to seeing beautiful women in the subway and struggling to write a poem about it—has never been part of the poem.<sup>396</sup> But the chief reason for the invisibility of the poet, I think, has been the loveliness of the image in the third line. Imagining the poet in the scene, observing like Dante the the wrecked senses of the straphangers, adds a sinister quality unfitting the poem’s whimsical tone and the lovely image of blossoms. In any case, an analogy between flowers and faces, whatever the context, takes some of the brooding quality out of the underworld analogy by implicitly feminizing the “faces” in the first line. Nonetheless, if the whole purpose of Imagism is clarity

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<sup>396</sup> There are two versions of the anecdote. The first published occurs in “How I Began” (1913) and, I think, takes the gender of the faces for granted: “I got out of train at, I think, La Concorde and in the jostle I saw a beautiful face, and then, tuning suddenly, another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face and then another beautiful face.” The second in “Vorticism” (1914) specifies: “a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman.” Ezra Pound, “How I Began,” *T.P.’s Weekly*, June 6, 1913; Pound, “Vorticism,” in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 86. “How I Began” is reproduced in facsimile in Noel Stock, *Ezra Pound: Perspectives* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Comapny, 1965), 1. “Vorticism” is first published in *The Fortnightly Review*, September 1, 1914.

and precision, should “petals” be taken as a metonym for flowers? And if whole flowers—including stem, center, stamen, pistil—are absent from the poem, what does this do to the analogy between petals and faces?

Undoubtedly like many readers, when Kenner encounters the final image he sees something of an apparition: “Flowers, underground; flowers, out of the sun; flowers seen as if against a natural gleam, the bough’s wetness gleaming on its darkness, in this place where wheels turn and nothing grows.”<sup>397</sup> Yet one might as easily make sense of the image by inferring the cause for the wetness and taking the preposition “on” very literally. These are individual petals loosed from their blossoms by a strong rain and stuck to the wet tree branches. To be sure, the color-splotches of the petals that the poet summons are meant to evoke the previous line’s vaguely defined faces. Certainly, this aesthetic coup launches the poem into an oriental symbolism. Indeed, Pound refers to the *hokku* in his anecdote, but he also launches the poem passed the classical symbolism in “Laudantes Decem Pulchritudinis Johannaе Templi” (1909).<sup>398</sup> What these celebrations of the Japanese poetic cause critics to overlook is that besides the haiku, Pound also refers to classical seventeenth- and eighteenth-century debates on the excess of poetic ornament. In these debates, ornament is typically represented by the flower as in flowery language or the exchangeable meanings of “posy” and “poesy.” In short, the absence of flowers in the poem thematically conveys the Imagist rejection of ornamentation, which Pound has taken over from the defense of poetry. The poem is a poeticization of the defense. It is not surprising Pound uses it to make points about his poetic.

From the Renaissance, if not earlier, the defense of poetry has distinguished between

<sup>397</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 185.

<sup>398</sup> For a comparison between the two poems, see K.K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound’s Personae* (1926) (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 153, and Chilton and Gilbertson, “‘Metro’ Hokku,” 231-232.

poetry proper and mere verse, between the substance of poetry and its ornamentation by the addition of meter, rhyme, metaphor, figure, and diction. Elsewhere I will discuss this history in detail; here, I want to focus on the application of the distinction, since the difference between poems versified and poetry made and has been the single-most important criteria for justifying rank in the poetry community or, in some extreme cases, maintaining membership at all.

(Sidney, remember, dismisses the swarm of versifiers “who never need answer to the name of poet” because verse is “an ornament and no cause to poetry.”)<sup>399</sup> Like Pound’s, Kenner’s use of the trope follows the pattern. Attempting to rescue Poundian Imagism from less sophisticated versions and to mark the sophisticated understanding he himself brings to Imagism in *The Pound Era*, Kenner explicitly dismisses the anti-ornamental gist of Imagism: “its specifications for technical hygiene . . . can be followed by any talented person.” Kenner is referring to the three principles of the movement as itemized in “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” (and reiterated word for word in “Vorticism”):

1. Direct statement of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.<sup>400</sup>

The first two concern the over-ornamentation of locution and round-about expressions and verbiage. The third connects all that is extraneous in poetic language to the regular beat of meter. If the extraneousness of ornament might have suggested the wild, arbitrary addition of garlands

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<sup>399</sup> Sidney, *Defence of Poesy*, 218, 233.

<sup>400</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 3.

to a poetic line, this dig at over-metrical verse recasts ornament as the unexciting rigor of the uninspired novice. For Pound and Kenner both, the movement's initial utility in separating good and bad poetry and poets is quickly turned inward on Imagism itself, separating Imagists like Pound from Amy Lowell, whose version of the movement he called "Amygisme." Kenner affirms the distinction, adding his own dig at contemporary students of modernism: "All the confusion about Imagism stems from the fact that its specifications for technical hygiene are one thing, and Pound's Doctrine of the Image is another. The former, which can be followed by any talented person, help you to write what may be a trivial poem. The latter is not applicable to triviality."<sup>401</sup> The rhetorical landscape of Kenner's reading consists of precisely those broad strokes I outlined in the first section: there are the very few good Imagists, the few bad ones, and then there is the populace that cannot tell the difference between "a trivial poem" and the the "Doctrine of the Image."<sup>402</sup>

As I discuss above, the "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell*, which contains critical exegesis of several of the improvisations, and the prose passage of *Spring and All* that recounts Williams' coming-of-age as a poet both set the poet face to face with his former self. Pound's accounts of how "In a Station of the Metro" came to be also draw on the narrative of liberation and show Pound showing his readers how he also came to be in the year-long process of composition. The poem is literally the capstone in an article entitled "How I Began" (1913), where Pound first gives an account of the poem. The most commonly cited version of account, which Kenner uses, occurs in "Vorticism" (1914). Pound's recollection of the scene and his struggle to capture begins succinctly:

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<sup>401</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 186.

<sup>402</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 54.



Three years ago in Paris I got out of a ‘metro’ train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation . . . not in speech, but in little splotches of colour.<sup>403</sup>

From here the “Vorticism” account launches into Pound’s ideas about impressionist painting too over-determined for discussion here, but when Pound returns to the context of his reminiscence—a reiteration of the principles of Imagism—the poetics embodied in the poem intersects the anti-populism indexed by it. The point of Imagism is to put an end to the mass of “bad writing” that had come before: “All poetic language is the language of exploration. Since the beginning of bad writing, writers have used images as ornaments. The point of Imagisme is that it does not use images as ornaments. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language.”<sup>404</sup> The poem’s *logos*—word, speech, language, or reasoning—is located in a domain in which ornamentation is barred. In its absence, the poet is free to explore and to make new. Kenner made this the centerpiece of the poem’s ethic:

Words set free in new structures, that was the Symbolist formula [that Pound’s Imagism set out to reform, by deleting its self-indulgences, intensifying its

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<sup>403</sup> Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 86-87.

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

virtues, and elevating the glimpse into the vision]. And as we move through the poem, word by word, we participate as the new structure achieves itself.<sup>405</sup>

The missing face of the crowd occupies the same ghostly nowhere as the extraneous ornament: as the crowd is haunted by a missing face, ornament haunts the poem. The space cleared of ornament becomes the setting for the creative event.

The much less known account of the metro poem's genesis, "How I Began," is an uncollected essay from a 1913-issue of *T.P.'s Weekly*. While the particulars of the occasion are almost identical, some alterations deserve mention. The "Vorticism" account specifies that the faces are women's faces, with the exception of a child's; but in the *T.P.'s* account, Pound leaves the gender ambiguous, probably under the heterosexual assumption that beauty will read feminine. The "Vorticism" account also gives more attention to the "splotches of colour" and the analogy between poetry and painting. The *T.P. Weekly* account gives more importance to the haiku. But both accounts introduce the poem with references to de-ornamentation and both follow the poem by commenting on who can and cannot understand it:

Then only the other night, wondering how I should tell the adventure, it struck me that in Japan, where a work of art is not estimated by its acreage and where sixteen syllables are counted enough for a poem if you arrange and punctuate them properly, one might make a very little poem which would be translated about as follows:—

"The apparition of these faces in the crowd:  
Petals on a wet, black bough."

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<sup>405</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, [183], 187.

And there, or in some other very old, very quiet civilisation, some one else might understand the significance.<sup>406</sup>

The poem Pound finally writes cannot be understood by his contemporaries because they judge a poem “by its acreage.” “In a Station of the Metro” has been translated into English, and something has been lost. In “Vorticism” Pound places a more practical “unless” on the poem’s appreciation:

I wrote a thirty-line poem, and destroyed it because it was what we call work “of second intensity.” Six months later I made a poem half that length; a year later I made the following *hokku*-like sentence:—

“The apparition of these faces in the crowd:

Petals, on a wet, black bough.”

I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought.

In one version of the anecdote Pound’s immediate readers are placed at a linguistic remove: they are reading a translation. In the other version, they are allowed their provincialism and rote forms of meaning-making, but Pound’s deference is unconvincingly out of character; either way, one will only understand the poem unless one has already “drifted” away from the norms of taste. The poem thus also acts as a test, a bar: no one will get it who has not already got the gist of anti-ornamental poetics.

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<sup>406</sup> Pound, “How I Began,” The passage more fully reads: “For well over a year I have been trying to make a poem of a very beautiful thing that befell me in the Paris Underground. I got out of train at, I think, La Concorde and in the jostle I saw a beautiful face, and then, tuning suddenly, another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face and then another beautiful face. All that day I tried to find words for what this made me feel. . . . I could get nothing but spots of colour. I remember thinking that if I had been a painter I might have started a wholly new school of painting.”

The aversion to seeing oneself in the crowd finds its corollary in the politics of anti-ornamentation. As Kenner suggests (after Pound), in contrast to ornamentation the opening of form to “new structures” cannot be taught, while the “specifications for technical hygiene” or de-ornamentation “can be followed by any talented person.”<sup>407</sup> Pound says almost the same of ornament in his account of his metro poem: “One is tired of ornamentations, they are all a trick, and any sharp person can learn them.”<sup>408</sup> Anyone with a head on his shoulders can learn to add ornament and to take it away. Having something left over is a different story. Self-knowledge separates the poet from the passersby. Self-knowledge also separates the middling poet from the master. Pound conveys this self-awareness in his theme and in accounts of the poem. Like Moore’s ultra-revised “Poetry,” the poem’s pared down state dramatizes the author’s acute intellect and displays the poetic philosophy that sets modernists apart from those who dissolve into the background.

Identifying the unconscious of anti-populism as an *aversion* to the crowd-level perspective means trying to look through modernists’ blind spot, but I do not mean to ascribe a false consciousness to middle-class poets’ self-understanding so much as to class the disembodied gaze from which they view the crowd. The ghosts that Pound sees are reflections in the mirror. The beautiful faces that Pound sees are unaware of their place in the design, and so is Pound. The point is not that there are card-carrying members of the commuter class who can see their own face in the crowd or that Pound should have had some different view of the masses. (Obviously, he should have had different views about a lot of things.) The point is this: being open to the beauty in crowds presumes sameness as the backdrop, out of which faces emerge

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<sup>407</sup> Kenner, *Pound Era*, 186.

<sup>408</sup> Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 88.

only transiently. The poet aestheticizes the crowd's ignorance of its beauty from that same space of popular ignorance. The unconscious aversion to seeing oneself is also an unconscious desire to be dissolved "in the crowd."

The anti-populism in the poems of *Spring and All* relies on the contrast between the autonomy of the Indian maiden or the Negro jazzman and the ugly hegemony of white America. While most studies of Williams have focused on the racism and primitivism of Williams' nonwhite characters, his representations of whites are significant for their alternation between passive and aggressive stereotypes: his white women are either prudish or slutty and his white men are either reticent or bellicose.<sup>409</sup> But as much as we know about Williams' primitivist racism, few critics are critical of Williams' trope of pallid America, most likely because few are suspicious of his anti-populism. Because the American Indian and the African-American are screens onto which Williams projects an escape from society, his nonwhites are not part of a community. The jazz-band leader in "Shoot It Jimmy!" is set against the his white audience who "can't copy it," not among his "orchestra."<sup>410</sup> Elsie, who has "a dash of Indian blood," is "reared by the state and / / sent out at fifteen to work in / . . . the suburbs."<sup>411</sup> Whites, however, are frequently portrayed as a ugly community: the target of advertisements on the Interborough Rapid Transit; "the dynamic mob" drawn into "movie houses" and "cathedrals"; the unseen bodies filling "sweaty kitchens" and "swarming backstreets."<sup>412</sup> In the last poem the beauty of the "Arab / Indian / dark woman" is literally opposed to the white populace:

Crowds are white

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<sup>409</sup> In the "Jacataqua" chapter of *In the American Grain*, Williams writes of "the spiritual barrenness of the American woman" and of American men who are "bursting for lack of sexual satisfacion." Williams, *In the American Grain*, 181, 182.

<sup>410</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 131, 130.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>412</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

as farmers  
 who live poorly

The “dark woman” is “rich / in savagery.” Crowds *are* white. Williams word-choice is steeped in racialized class prejudice as the blankness of the white community becomes a property of the crowd, the image of a populace distributed in urban, rural, and suburban landscapes. From the white people in city subways, to the poor farmers’ community, to the suburbs where Elsie is sent, the whites in these poems are an invasive species. If Williams treated the American Indian as a member of a community destroyed by “mountain folk from Kentucky / or the ribbed north end of / Jersey,” his racial anti-populism might transcend primitivism. Instead, whiteness becomes a euphemism for sameness and justification for misanthropy.

“At the Ballgame” oscillates between aesthetic and grotesque images of the white crowd, between the awful power of the mass and its impotence. The entire poem reads as follows:

The crowd at the ball game  
 is moved uniformly  
  
 by a spirit of uselessness  
 which delights them—  
  
 all the exciting detail  
 of the chase

and the escape, the error  
the flash of genius—

all to no end save beauty  
the eternal—

So in detail they, the crowd,  
are beautiful

for this  
to be warned against

saluted and defied—  
it is alive, venomous

it smiles grimly  
its words cut—

The flashy female with her  
mother, gets it—

The Jew gets it straight—it

is deadly, terrifying—

It is the Inquisition, the  
Revolution

It is beauty itself  
that lives

day by day in them  
idly—

This is  
the power of their faces

it is summer, it is the solstice  
the crowd is

cheering, the crowd is laughing  
in detail

permanently, seriously  
without thought<sup>413</sup>

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<sup>413</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 147-149.



In the course of the poem, the initial awful admiration of the mass, having been repeatedly qualified, cannot conceal Williams' aversion to the scene before him. If "the crowd . . . is moved / uniformly," they are "beautiful" only "in detail." The change is registered by the pronoun shift: "they" become an "it" as the poet elaborates the threat. Whereas in "Station of the Metro," the move from individual to plural is given some spectral beauty, this dissolution of individuals in a mass is plainly ugly. The individuation Williams brings to "the power of their faces" is his way of neutralizing the crowd's strength in numbers. Thankfully, whatever "lives / day by day / in them" does so "idly." No, this picture of virile ignorance and vacancy is not meant to argue for the crowd's political awakening which would be political disaster akin to the intolerance of the Spanish Inquisition or the militancy of the October Revolution. But although Williams' points to scenes of rape, murder, pillage, and torture, the crowd gathered to watch America's pastime is defined by the violent use of language: "its words cut." Identifying with "the flashy female" and "the Jew," Williams hears cat-calling and hate speech in the noise of the cheering fans. Behind their words, he hears mass indoctrination: the national pastime, then, saves the country from mass politics. But the crowd's absorption in "the escape, the error / the flash of genius" is not the only catharsis in the poem: the poet is also exorcising his place in a crowd that should be "saluted and defied." This is not the "regenerative violence" that Williams extols elsewhere.<sup>414</sup>

Offered from the perspective of someone in the stands looking from among the fans but who can neither participate in the excitement nor imagine his face in the crowd, the poem betrays the fundamental blind-spot of modernist anti-populism. The poem does not to lead the way to a

<sup>414</sup> Williams' use of the phrase "regenerative violence" comes from, *In the American Grain*, 130. For an elaboration of the concept in the context of American *mythopoiesis*, see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973). For Williams' exploitative use of exotic American others to elaborate his poetics, see Nielsen, *Reading Race*, 72-82.

more meaningful sense of a community that includes different perspectives like the poet's but entrenches the opposition between the free-thinking individual and the group mind.

Like Pound's metro poem, the poetic perspective is activated by contemplating the crowd as an other from within its very midst. Indeed, both their titles might be read as designations of precisely the perspective disavowed in the body of the poem: "*In a Station of the Metro*," "*At the Ballgame*." Both poems aestheticize the experience they report by individuating the members of the crowd and, in the process, repressing the sameness that establishes the image in the first place. Neither poet shows himself in the act of disentangling himself from the scene; instead, they project difference among the crowd and in so doing clear a place for the narrative of liberation. For them, the crowd is a whole lesser than its parts. The populace, the offstage entity from which the crowd draws, is not even a whole. The point is that being of the masses means never being the hero of a story, not even the tragic hero of a fall. The image of "petals on a wet, black bough" describes a moment after the rain. The photographic capture of the baseball fans leaves them "permanently, seriously / without thought." As Williams says in "To Elsie" (or "The pure products of America"), America's white trash has "no / peasant traditions to give them / character."<sup>415</sup> There is not an anti-populist narrative: narrative is anti-populist. The crowd may break out into a mob and wreak havoc. Popular taste may change. The population may shift demographic. The masses may rise up and overthrow the government. But because these actions are spontaneous, the basic elements of storytelling are moot: anticipation, delay, and fulfillment define the individual's struggle to break free and become himself, but in these poems, the crowd's movements are determined by the train schedule or the plays of the game. Pound and Williams even undercut the spontaneity of popular action by attributing revolutionary

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<sup>415</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 131.

outbursts to the effects of agent provocateurs or the propaganda mill, just as they attribute changes in taste to the manipulation of taste-makers. Behind each image in the anti-populist spectacle, no matter how animated, is a populace continuing its routines ad infinitum. Behind each image of hegemony and homogeneity is an ideologically incoherent body politic. Seeing oneself in the crowd is, then, an uncanny recognition of the same constitutive incoherence of oneself. The excess and deficiency attached to ornamentation is nothing more than the pursuit of a coherent subject, the first step is imagining the populace as a unified front: anti-populism could not tell the story of dis-identification and self-discovery where there is no identity in the first place. If there is such a thing as identifying with the populace, it is only as a response to the anti-populism that creates these images of the crowd.

## Ornament, Excrescence, and the Public Health of Language

Politicians: fahrts of the multitude.

—Ezra Pound, “Definitions”<sup>416</sup>

Better than an analysis of straight-forward politics, the defense of poetry shows that the populace’s political misadventures come back to something as simple as poor taste. It is no coincidence that in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, echoing Matthew Arnold’s dictum about culture being “the best that has been thought and known,” Pound offers a meritocratic dictum of his own: “A good government is one that operates according to the best that is known and thought.”<sup>417</sup> The poor taste implied by anti-ornamental poetics most forcefully presents in the discourse around the health of language.<sup>418</sup> Pound explicitly connects bad taste, bodily processes, and the ills of popular governance in the 1929 *New York Herald Tribune* article “How to Read, or Why”:

Has literature a function in the state, in the aggregation of humans, in the republic, in the *res publica*, which ought to mean the public convenience (despite the slime of bureaucracy, and the execrable taste of the populace in selecting its rulers)? It has.<sup>419</sup>

The scatological motif runs from the “slime” of city sewers to “the public convenience”—a

<sup>416</sup> Pound, “Definitions,” *Selected Prose*, 213.

<sup>417</sup> Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1993), 79; Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, 91.

<sup>418</sup> For an early theoretical assertion of the relationship between populist language and “contagion,” see Gustave LeBon, *The Crowd* (1805; New Brunswick: Transactions Publishers, 1995), 149.

<sup>419</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 21.

British colloquialism for the public toilet—to the pun on “execrable” and excretion. Like the poet in the Hell Cantos, poetry must wade knee deep through “the slime of bureacracy” and put up with “the execrable taste of the populace in selecting its rulers.” The populace is as responsible for its misgovernment as its bodily waste. Quipping about “the execrable taste of the populace” for “the slime of bureaucracy” is Pound’s way of saying that politicians spew shit and the people eat it up. Poetry’s role in the state, then, like the Neoplatonic poet wielding Medusa’s shield to make his way out of Pound’s hell, is to cut through the “the corruptio, foetor, fungus, / liquid animals, melted ossifications, slow rot, foetid combustion, / [and] chewed cigar-butts.”<sup>420</sup>

If poetry is the way out of propaganda, the way lies through form, not content. Poetry’s political function, Pound goes on to say, is not about “coercing or emotionally persuading, or bullying or suppressing people into the acceptance of any one set or any six sets of opinions as opposed to any other one set or half-dozen sets of opinions.”<sup>421</sup> Poetry should not exploit the populace’s vulnerability to manipulation. Historically, poetry’s coercive power is attributed to the versifier’s abuse of ornament, and when Pound goes on to argue that poetry should reclaim the firmament of language from its putrefaction, he too associates shit-talking politicians with the bad poet’s over-ornamented line:

[Poetry’s function] has to do with the clarity and vigour of ‘any and every’ thought and opinion. It has to do with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself. Save in the rare and limited instances of invention in the plastic arts, or in mathematics, the individual cannot think and communicate his thought, the governor and legislator cannot act

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<sup>420</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 63.

<sup>421</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 21.

effectively or frame his laws, without words, and the solidity and validity of these words is in the care of the damned and despised *literati*. When their work goes rotten—by that I do not mean when they express indecorous thoughts—but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot.<sup>422</sup>

Without policing poetic ornament, language becomes more and more indistinguishable from so much noisy flatulence: “the application of word to thing” goes “rotten,” then the very ability to think “goes to pot.” Poetry performs the prose test: stripping away the linguistic excess which conceals deficiency, poetry cultivates “the clarity and vigour of ‘any and every’ thought and opinion.” But poetry’s non-partisan, even democratic, contribution is not the break with ideology that Pound makes it out to be. Putting language at the center of politics is a quintessential anti-populist move precisely because doing so quarantines popular speech and the politician’s rhetoric. Putting language at the center of politics in the name of maintaining the intellectual caliber of public discourse is another republican check on democratic participation. Controlling what counts as intelligent speech also has been a way of policing access to politics and justifying the disenfranchisement of purported inferiors. The defense of poetry that puts language’s cross-disciplinary importance at the center of poetic responsibility targets the same massive base of the populace with whom most poets spend their days, that is, the lower and middle classes. This does not mean that public culture is not aversely affected by the language of commercial advertising and propagandistic circumlocution. But it does mean that the

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<sup>422</sup> Ibid., 21.

maintenance of language as the “medium” for politics is not neutral territory.

The Hell Cantos offers images of the unholy mix of poetic ornament and political speech. There, politicians literally talk shit as the poet steepens his description in rhyme: “Addressing crowds through their arse-holes, / Addressing the multitudes in the ooze.”<sup>423</sup> David Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson—the names rendered into ellipses below—are also monstrously ornamented by their scat, their bodies distorted by their distorted speech:

Io venni in luogo d’ogni luce muto;  
 [I came to a place mute of all light]  
 The stench of wet coal, politicians  
 . . . . . e and . . . . . n, their wrists bound to  
       their ankles,  
 Standing bare bum,  
 Faces smeared on their rumps,  
       wide eye on flat buttock,  
 Bush hanging for beard,  
       Addressing the crowds through their arse-holes  
 Addressing the multitudes in the ooze,  
       newts, water-slugs, water maggots,  
 And with them . . . . . r,  
       a scrupulously clean table-napkin  
 Tucked under his penis,  
       and . . . . . m

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<sup>423</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 61.

Who disliked colloquial language,  
 Stiff-starched, but soiled, collars  
     circumscribing his legs,  
 The pimply and hairy skin  
     pushing over the collar's edge,  
 Profiteers drinking blood sweetened with sh-t,  
 And behind them . . . . . f and the financiers lashing them with steel wires.<sup>424</sup>

Other offenders follow: “the press gang,” “the pusillanimous,” “sadic mothers,” “agents provocateurs,” “the murderers of [Padric] Pearse and [Thomas] MacDonagh” (Irish poets and executed leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising), “bigots,” “the vice-crusaders, fahrting through silk, / waving the Christian symbols,” “unamiable liars,” “slum owners,” “usurers,” “pandars to authority,” “pets-de-loup” (scholars), “orators,” “preachers,” and “monopolists.” In Pound’s convoluted world-view all of these figures abuse language: they are “the betrayers of language,” “the perverters of language,” and ultimately, “the obstructors of knowledge.”<sup>425</sup> In one commentator’s words, “*The Cantos* makes up a poem about voices, and here human voices have turned into farts, simulations of oratory with intestinal gas, a complete disarticulation of speech.”<sup>426</sup> Pound’s contempt also comes through the dramatic increase in rhyme—internal rhyme, half-rhymes, alliteration, assonance, and consonance. Setting aside the s-consonance, listen to the alliterated *b*-sounds and *u*-assonance: “their wrists *bound* to / their ankles, / Standing *bare bum*, / Faces smeared on the *rumps*, / wide eye on flat *buttock*, / *Bush* hanging for *bear*, /

<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 61-63.

<sup>426</sup> Daniel Albright, “Early Cantos I-XLI,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1999), 78



Addressing crowds through their arse-holes, / Addressing the *multitudes* in the *ooze*.” When compared to the prosaicism of the preceding canto about Confucius, this prolific and profligate rhyming calls attention to the disconnect between the politicians’ messy bodies and their mannered dress and speech: one with “a scrupulously clean table-napkin / Tucked under his penis”; another “who disliked colloquial language, / Stiff-starched, but soiled, collars / circumscribing his legs, / The pimply and hairy skin / pushing over the collar’s edge.” Hell is a place of perverse decorum. Their scrupulous dress only makes their disfigured bodies and disgusting enunciations more grotesque.

Bringing together suspicions of popular rhetoric and poetic ornament, the defense of poetry doubles up poetry’s political function: policing bad poets is the intra-disciplinary version of poetry’s extra-curricular policing of politics. This counter-attack depends on the assumption that, regarding the abuse of language, the average member of the populace is either an accomplice or a dupe. I emphasize: an accomplice *or* a dupe. In the first scene of hell, celebrated usurpers and frauds address “the crowds” and “the multitudes in the ooze.” In the opening scene of the second Hell Canto, Pound comes full circle back to the populace: following the political leaders as “the cowardly inciters to violence” are the white-collar professionals or “back scratchers in a great circle,” and following them is the mob “with daggers, and bottle ends, waiting an / unguarded moment”:

the courageous violent

slashing themselves with knives,

the cowardly inciters to violence

. . . . n and. . . . .h eaten by weevils,

. . . . . ll [Churchill?] like a swollen foetus,  
     the beast with a hundred legs, USURA  
 and the swill full of respecters,  
     bowing to the lords of the place,  
 explaining its advantages,  
     and the laudatores temporis acti [praisers of the past]  
 claiming that the sh-t used to be blacker and richer  
 and the fabians crying for the petrification of putrefaction,  
 for a new dung-flow cut in lozenges,  
 the conservatives chatting,  
     distinguished by gaiters of slum-flesh,  
 and the back scratchers in a great circle,  
     complaining of insufficient attention,  
 the search without end, counterclaim for the missing scratch  
 the litigious  
 a green bile-sweat, the news owners, . . . . s  
     the anonymous  
 . . . . . ffe, broken  
     his head shot like a canon-ball toward the glass gate,  
 peering through it an instant,  
     falling back to the trunk, epileptic,  
 et nulla fidentia inter eos,

[and no trust among them]  
 all with their twitching backs,  
 with daggers, and bottle ends, waiting an  
 unguarded moment;<sup>427</sup>

Rhyming represents the abuse of language by various characters in Canto XIV. Here in Canto XV, trifling, bombastic, or manipulative speech defines these lesser denizens of hell: submissive “respecters . . . explaining”; “the laudatores temporis acti” waxing nostalgic about the color of feces; “the fabians crying for the petrification of putrefaction”; “the conservatives chatting”; “the back scratchers in a great circle, / complaining of insufficient attention.” This litany of ideologues and nepotists culminates in the image of a mob about to beset the defenseless: “with daggers, and bottle ends, waiting an / unguarded moment.” Having been taken in by the politicians of Canto XIV, the populace is beset upon by itself and the cycle continues.

Anti-populist rhetoric justifies its prejudice by pointing to the body as the locus of personal and political vulnerability. The lust for ornament enfeebles the mind, and the crowd is weaponized into mob. Those good souls attempting to save the people from themselves must fight against an alliance between the populace and its self-appointed manipulators or promotion-from-within idiots. The bad poet—over-skilled in technique and/or wanting in character—represents this figure who is both capable at giving the people what they want and incapable of knowing what it is that he gives them.

In addition to being a vivid image of political catastrophe, hell is also a place where the

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<sup>427</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 64-65. For interpolations, see Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 66-67.

poet decisively separates himself from the populace as a repository of nobodies. Hell brings out what is at stake in the defense of poetry: the prospect of oblivion. In hell, not only is sympathy out of place, so are proper names. Begging through the veil to be remembered, the “unwept, unburied” Elpanor in Canto I at least has “a name to come.” Hell is a dustbin and a sewer for those who should be unremembered with contempt. This is one of the reasons Pound gives for replacing the names of Wilson, Lloyd George, and others with ellipses. Living in infamy is too good for them; hell is being blotted from the record and set among the nameless. He writes in a letter to John Lackay Brown in 1937:

Re your p. 2: that *section* of hell precisely has *not* any dignity. Neither had Dante’s fahrting devils. Hell is not amusing. Not a joke. And when you get further along you find individuals, not abstracts. Even the XIV-XV has individuals in it, but *not* worth recording as such. In fact, Bill Bird rather entertained that I had forgotten which rotters were there. In his edtn. he tried to get the number of ..... correct in each case. My ‘point’ being that not even the first but only last letters of their names and resisted corruption.<sup>428</sup>

The very consonants and vowels of their names are subject to rot. Elsewhere, Pound again connects bad politics to mendacious language and human waste, saying that the “bog and sewage” of every administration after Rutherford B. Hayes has been more taken in by “forgeries and falsifications”: “Great is their reward in hell. A future enlightened public will give them their just sentence and their name will be slime for posterity.”<sup>429</sup> The memorializing function of

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<sup>428</sup> See Terrell, *Companion*, 65.

<sup>429</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 265.

poetry must be withheld from the undeserving.

Ugly bodies represents vicious souls; ornamental language signifies mendacity, and human feces stands for popular love of excess. Bad poets may not show up explicitly, but the features of bad poetry do. Through the Radio Rome broadcasts Pound puts ornamental language at the center of bad politics using a set of familiar analogies with parasites, disease, and feces. In “The Serious Artist,” Pound compares “contemporary versifiers” (or their works) to “pests and abominations” because of their “flummery”—useless ornament, trappings, or trifles. In a 1934 review of Laurence Binyon’s translation of the *Inferno*, Pound again associates ornament with “excrescence,” an abnormal growth on the body as from a disease, saying approvingly of Binyon’s prosody “any kind of rhyming excrescence or ornament would be out of place in the *Commedia*.”<sup>430</sup> In the Hell Cantos, the hero turns his shield adorned with Medusa’s head, the Aegis, against hell’s pestilence to make a path through “the bog-suck like a whirl-pool” as the snakes “hissing, held downwards” devour the “maggots” that make hell’s floor.<sup>431</sup>

There are a few instances in the Radio Broadcasts that illustrate the crossover between filth, ornament, and the abuse of language. In one broadcast, Pound calls the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper’s Magazine*, and Scribner’s “dung heaps of perfumed pus” and “the stink of stale perfume . . . the deadly gasses which finally poison.”<sup>432</sup> In an invective against usury, “the feverish distribution of tidbits among a privileged few” is “the glitter of scum,” meaning that the power elite is so greedy that shit seems like jewels.<sup>433</sup> Elsewhere Pound uses language from “The Serious Artist” to describe “the ruin of language” perpetrated by academics, financiers,

<sup>430</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 210.

<sup>431</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 66.

<sup>432</sup> Pound, “*Ezra Pound Speaking*”: *Radio Speeches of World War II*, ed. Leonard W. Doob (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), 93.

<sup>433</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

Washington insiders, editors, journalists, and “the hosts of Belial and Jewry”:

Waaal, can't get it all into one discourse. But if there is still some campus note yet invaded by the hosts of Belial and Jewry, not wholly squashed under the dung-flow from Wall Street and Washington, I suggest you start taking notes and figures. Figure out this affair of the ruin of language, the falsification of all reports in the well paid magazines, the falsification of newsprint.<sup>434</sup>

Each figure represents the demonic mirror-image of “a [counter-]conspiracy of intelligent men” who, Pound says in another broadcast, are the only ones who could save the world.<sup>435</sup> But behind each figure is the rhetoric with which he has attacked bad poets: “Bad art is inaccurate art. It is art that makes false reports.”<sup>436</sup>

Pound's defenses of “a purge” and “the RACIAL solution” are also first explored in the context of bad poets.<sup>437</sup> In a 1934 text called “Teacher's Mission,” he calls for “a wholesale death and/or deportation of a great number of affable, suave, moderate men.” Again, language from “The Serious Artist” makes an appearance:

“Artists are the antennae of the race.” If this statement is incomprehensible and if its corollaries need any explanation, let me put it that a nation's writers are the voltmeters and steam-gauges of that nation's intellectual life. They are the registering instruments, and if they falsify their reports there is no measure to the harm that they do. If you saw a man selling defective thermometers to a hospital,

<sup>434</sup> Pound, “*Ezra Pound Speaking*,” 93.

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>436</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 43.

<sup>437</sup> Pound, “*Ezra Pound Speaking*,” 62, 153. For a survey of the “stages” of Pound's antisemitism, see Casillo, *Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 4-8.

you would consider him a particularly vile kind of cheat. But for 50 years an analogous treatment of thought has gone on in America without throwing any discredit whatever on its practitioners.

For this reason I personally would not feel myself guilty of manslaughter if by any miracle I ever had the pleasure of killing Canby [editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*] or the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and their replicas, or of ordering a wholesale death and/or deportation of a great number of affable, suave, moderate men, all of them perfectly and snugly convinced of their respectability, and all incapable of any twinge of conscience on account of any form of mental cowardice or any falsification of reports whatsoever.<sup>438</sup>

The Hell Cantos shows how Pound associates the degradation of language with fleshy vulnerability and the conspiracies of the few. But the original corruption of political language comes from the poet who has shirked his duty and failed to maintain the health of language: “if they falsify their reports there is no measure to the harm that they do.” Bad poets do more harm than all the war profiteers, Jewish conspirators, and bad presidents combined. The middling versifiers, whether falsifying intentionally or from ignorance, do not appear in the Hell Cantos because they are everywhere. Their presence is conveyed through the use of rhyme and the conceptual analogy between the glittering appeal of ornament, the fetor of human sewage, and the perverse, diseased, parasite-ridden bodies of the populace. Pound’s epidemiological metaphors and his vocabulary of “vermin,” “rot,” “stink,” “pests,” “slime,” “dung,” “excrement,”

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<sup>438</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 58.

“muck,” “mud,” “parasites,” and “lice” grow out of his anti-ornamental, anti-populist poetic.<sup>439</sup>

Defending poetry may not give rise to Pound’s other prejudices, but he certainly expresses them in the same language. Pound’s antisemitism is intertwined with the betrayal of false poets.<sup>440</sup>

Few poets compete with Pound’s spleeny rhetoric and take the health of language to such unhealthy lengths. Yet “A 1 Pound Stein” (1935) shows Williams aligning anti-ornamental iconoclasm and a purified poetic vernacular when he says that Stein “has gone systematically to work smashing every connotation that words have ever had, in order to get them back clean.”<sup>441</sup> Williams uses the motif copiously in the essay, extolling “the disinfecting effect of the Stein manner” and insisting, “It’s the words, the words we need to get back to, words washed clean.”<sup>442</sup> At times, critics otherwise sensitive to the rhetoric of purifying language have endorsed Williams call to clean up poetic language.<sup>443</sup> Williams most often uses this language, like Pound, to distinguish his poet-allies from frauds that he does hesitate to name. In his prose, epidemiological metaphors appear most frequently when Williams is championing Moore and Stein whose unornamented lines he contrasts to Eliot and Pound’s use of allusion. Williams claims that Moore has a penchant for “wiping soiled words or cutting them clean out, removing the aureoles that have been pasted about them or taking them bodily from greasy contexts.” Evoking at once the surgical removal of a tumor, the secularization of sacred iconography, and an end-of-hours’ wipe-down, Williams shifts back and forth between the metaphors of surgery, ritual ornament, and cleanliness.<sup>444</sup> The same essay on Moore goes on to liken her purgation of

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<sup>439</sup> For an extended analysis of Pound’s preoccupation with infectious disease in the context of his antisemitism, see Casillo, *Genealogy of Demons*.

<sup>440</sup> For the relationship between Pound’s conspiratorial anxiety and his antisemitism, see Casillo, *Genealogy of Demons*, 295.

<sup>441</sup> Qtd. in Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 114.

<sup>442</sup> Williams, *Selected Essays*, 163.

<sup>443</sup> Perloff uses several of these quotations approvingly. See Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 114.

<sup>444</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 317-318.



language's impurities to a restorative acid bath:

With Miss Moore a word is a word most when it is separated out by science, treated with acid to remove the smudges, washed, dried and placed right side up on a clean surface. Now one may say that this is a word. Now it may be used, and how?

It may be used not to smear it again with thinking (their attachments of thought) but in such a way that it will remain scrupulously itself, clean perfect, unnicked beside other words in parade.<sup>445</sup>

Writing as if Moore were preparing her poems for the menagerie or the archivists shelf, the figurative acid bath recalls the emergence from hell in Canto XVI: "And I bathed myself with the acid to free myself / of the hell ticks, / Scales, fallen louse eggs."<sup>446</sup> In the 1930 essay, Williams applauds Stein's having stripped her language of the "dead weight of logical burdens" and scientific and philosophical "fetishes of unspeakable abhorrence." She has transcended "that paralyzing vulgarity of logic" or "the scholastic viewpoint . . . with whose effects from generation to generation literature has been infested to its lasting detriment."<sup>447</sup> This constellation—"dead weight," "fetishes," "paralyzing vulgarity," "infested"—suggests the same troubling link between popular usage, linguistic corruption, and the weakness of the body-bound masses. This time, however, prose is the ornamental language. Williams logic is plain. Ornamentation leads to sensory death: "The goal is to keep a beleaguered line of understanding which has movement from breaking down and becoming a hole into which we sink decoratively

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<sup>445</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>446</sup> Pound, *Cantos*, 69.

<sup>447</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 346-347.

to rest.” Ornament is a coffin. If brain death is the intended meaning, the metaphor also hides a prejudice against the body as the ornament to the soul.

Like Pound, Williams makes use of rhyme’s degraded status to attack the conspiracy between the mass, commodity culture, and government bureaucracy. In “Rapid Transit” from *Spring and All*, Williams offers some found poetry from the IRT, a juxtaposition of a public announcement about crossing the street and an advertisement for “Outings in New York City.” The poem begins with a scare tactic: “Somebody dies every four minutes / in New York State.” The factoid is followed by advice to the pedestrian from the alliteratively titled “Careful Crossing Campaign” with its alliterated message (possibly Williams’ interpolation): “Cross Crossings Cautiously.” Williams offers the prose translation: “Do not get killed.” Addressing the population, like propaganda, the p.s.a. shocks with fear of death and cultivates obedience using ornamental language. The artifice is transparent to Williams, as is the advertisement for “the Great Parks / Pelham Bay for example . . . with bathing, boating, tennis, baseball, golf, etc.” The strap-hanger is lured with a cliché: “Acres and acres of green grass / wonderful shade trees, rippling brooks.” The freedom to roam is illusory; the population is again confined by prescribed paths:

Take the Pelham Bay Park Branch  
of the Lexington Ave. (East Side)  
Line and you are there in a few  
minutes

Interborough Rapid Transit Co.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 147.

Williams lets the institution sign, as in the “Careful Crossing Campaign,” show the message passing between non-person and non-person: the state or the corporation and the population statistic. Rhyme and symbol are the medium.

The proscenium of *Spring and All* showcases Williams scatological treatment of poetic ornament. There, Williams’ Rimbauldian diatribe against mimesis culminates in a messy end of days. The farcical story of biological evolution and fleshy apocalypse may be rhetorical, but Williams nonetheless identifies with his reader about the banality of representation by reveling in anti-populist contempt for the human animal:

Every step once taken in the first advance of the human race, from the amoeba to the highest type of intelligence, has been duplicated, every step exactly paralleling the one that precede in the dead ages gone by. A perfect plagiarism results.

Everything is and is new. Only the imagination is undeceived.

The reproduction of fleshy bodies is derivative. After “invoking a wild apocalypse that strips everyone’s race and culture”—as one of the few readers of this passage puts it—Williams heaps contempt on the humanist paradise.<sup>449</sup> This is his version of the hell on earth, and it too is fetid with human stink:

This final and self inflicted holocaust has been all for love, for sweetest love, that together the human race, yellow, black, brown, red and white, agglutinated into one enormous soul may be gratified with the sight and retire to the heaven of heavens content to rest on its laurels. There, soul of souls, watching its own

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<sup>449</sup> Cf. Schuster, “Anthropological Imaginary.”

horrid unity, it boils and digests itself within the tissues of the great Being of Eternity that we shall then have become. With what magnificent explosions and odors will not the day be accomplished as we, the Great One among all creatures, shall go about contemplating our self-prohibited desires as we promenade them before the inward review of our own bowels—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera . . . and it is spring—both in Latin and Turkish, in English and Dutch, in Japanese and Italian; it is spring by Stinking River where a magnolia tree, without leaves, before what was once a farmhouse, now a ramshackle home of millworkers, raises its straggling branches of ivorywhite flowers.<sup>450</sup>

The vision is a pastiche of the attack in the apostrophic preamble to *Spring and All*, which criticizes Williams for having “no tolerance for human frailty” and for stripping away too much poetic ornament: “Rhyme you may perhaps take away but [not] rhythm!” In short, Williams is mocking the humanist’s defense of poetry. Holding up the human animal as “the Great One among all creatures,” the humanist wants to resuscitate “poetry that interpreted our deepest promptings, poetry that inspired, that led us forward to new discoveries, new depths of tolerance, new heights of exaltation.”<sup>451</sup> But for Williams this means “contemplating our self-prohibited desires as we promenade them before the inward review of our own bowels—et cetera, et cetera, et cetera . . .” Instead of pretending that the “magnificent explosions and odors” of the human essence are perfume, Williams envisions a reawakening of poetry throughout the world’s languages. The final image contrasts the organic growth of nature with the damnable industry of

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<sup>450</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 91.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

man: against the backdrop of factory workers squatting in an abandoned farmhouse by “Stinking River” (presumably because of the mill), “a magnolia tree, without leaves . . . raises its straggling branches of ivorywhite flowers.” Poetry grows despite the wasteland. The flowering tree promises a new world, but not for the proletariat.<sup>452</sup> In the image, there are two distinct dimensions: the poet glimpses a beauty others cannot; meanwhile, the proletariat wreck the pastoral scene.

*Spring and All* consistently associates filth, depravity, ignorance, and ornament. In “To Elsie,” drop-of-Indian-blood Elsie decks herself out in “cheap / jewelry” to attract “rich young men with fine eyes” because she, an orphan removed from her more colorful roots, has fallen under the influence of mainstream white America and its materialistic culture. Her embodiment of excess and lack holds a mirror up to society: her messy body—“her great / ungainly hips and flopping breasts”—makes her self-ornamentation grotesque. She is “expressing with broken // brain the truth about us.” Her perverted destiny as a native American is a message to middle-class suburbanites like Williams who live alienated from their own destiny as American natives. The gaudy necklace hanging in her cleavage and her promiscuity, the poem suggests, degrades the world and her in it:

her great

ungainly hips and flopping breasts

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<sup>452</sup> The only reading of this passage I can find of this moment is in Schuster’s essay on the “anthropological imaginary.” Schuster claims that Williams is adopting “the strategy of the avant-garde manifesto writers . . . of calling for the destruction of the past as a way to generate the future.” While that may be, Schuster goes on to read the scene as evocative of potlatch: “The ritual act of destruction can be understood as a radical redistribution, but also as a way of conjuring authority.” Schuster does not explain how the destruction of commodities can be thought of as redistribution and the off-handed comparison suffers from the fact that potlatch in the culture to which Schuster refers—the Kwakiutl—and according to Franz Boas, whom Schuster cites repeatedly, sometimes involved the destruction of slaves. To be sure, Schuster’s emphasis falls on “conjuring authority,” but in that case, this act of regenerative violence establishes the poet as the potentate. Schuster, “Anthropological Imaginary,” 125; Boas, *The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1897), 357.

addressed to cheap  
 jewelry  
 and rich young men with fine eyes

as if the earth under our feet  
 were  
 an excrement of some sky

and we degraded prisoners  
 destined  
 to hunger until we eat filth.<sup>453</sup>

*In the American Grain* lays out the conceit: “Ornaments of woven moosehair! There is the Indian. We are none. Who are we? Degraded whites riding our fears to market where everything is by accident and only one thing sure: the fatter we get the duller we grow.”<sup>454</sup> Elsie’s costume jewelry disgraces what ought to have been her native garb.<sup>455</sup> The connection between ornament and degradation comes through even more strongly in the portrayal of white trash earlier in the poem. In the rural parts of “Kentucky / / or the ribbed north end / of Jersey,” Williams imagines a population of “deaf-mutes,” “thieves” “old names,” “devil-may-care men”

<sup>453</sup> Williams, *Imaginations*, 133.

<sup>454</sup> Williams, *In the American Grain*, 108.

<sup>455</sup> “A Negro Woman” uses the almost identical trope: a woman “unaware of her mission, a mission which requires the white poet’s presence to be made manifest.” She too is defined by her messy body: “the bulk / of her thighs / causing her to waddle / as she walks.” Nielsen, *Reading Race*, 77; and Williams, *Collected Poems*, 2:287.

and “young slatterns.” During the week they are “bathed / in filth,” but Saturday night they go out on the town and debase themselves in “promiscuity”:

to be tricked out that night  
 with gauds  
 from imaginations which have no  
  
 peasant traditions to give them  
 character  
 but flutter and flaunt  
  
 sheer rags—succumbing without  
 emotion  
 save numbed terror  
  
 under some hedge of choke-cherry  
 or viburnum—  
 which they cannot express—<sup>456</sup>

These “mountain folk” bear the same tacky ornaments as Elsie: instead of understanding natural beauty, they show off their bad taste and copulate in the bushes.

In his essay on Stein, Williams equates being “democratic” with being “local (in the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience),” but these lost souls are desensitized to the

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<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 132.

indigenous character of America.<sup>457</sup> The urban populace fares even worse. In “Light Becomes Darkness,” Williams groups together the church-going townies and the cinema-loving masses, both being “the dynamic mob / whose female relative / sweeping grass Tolstoi / saw injected into / the Russian nobility.” The ornament of religious ritual may have become the “efflorescent” bedazzlement of the lurid “movie houses,” but the crowd sits in the same “selfspittle”:

Nightly the crowds  
with the closeness and  
universality of sand  
witness the selfspittle

which used to be drowned  
in incense and intoned  
over by the supple jointed  
imagination of inoffensiveness<sup>458</sup>

The populace will have its glittering spectacle in any medium. The moral repugnance with which Williams treats the working class who want to dress beautifully is the driving metaphor of a statement on bad poetry from *Kora in Hell*: “Men in the direst poverty of the imagination buy finery and indulge in extravagant moods in order to piece out their lack with other matter.”<sup>459</sup> Here the “poverty of the imagination” among bad poets leads to compensatory self-ornamentation. “To Elsie” and “Light Becomes Darkness” make use of the same trope: the

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 350.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 35.



presence of ornament among the poor becomes an allegory for popular taste in poetry and the poor taste of the poets who cater to it.

“Station of the Metro” and “At the Ballgame,” as I argue above, show how anti-populism conceals the modernist poet’s implication in the crowd’s eye view. Pound and Williams also implicate their own bodies in their representations of the populace, by which I am not referring to Pound’s germophobia or Williams’ romanticizing miscegenation, but to their ambivalent fear of and desire for the violence of language. When Williams talks of the “flashy female” who “gets it” and “the Jew” who “gets it straight,” his own language is violent, as if he knows and feels the impulse of the men in the stands. When he imagines the mating habits of the “pure products of America,” his tone betrays a mix of sad desire and rueful disgust. In Canto XVI Pound predictably makes popular revolution the result of mass propaganda, but the way he does so could also be taken as an allegory for the way the Cantos’ craftsmanship reflects Pound’s own circulation among the demos. Café talk provides the frame for his introjections, snippets from a lecture by Lincoln Steffens, and an a funny story about accents told in an accent that hinges on the flowery (French) pronunciation of “revolution”:

Dey vus a bolcheviki dere, und dey dease him:

Looka vat youah Trotzsk is done, e iss

madeh deh zhamefull beace!!

“He iss madeh deh zhamefull beace, iss he?”

“A Brest-Litovsk, yess? Aint yuh herd?”

“He vinneh de vore.

“De droobs iss released vrom de eastern vront, yess?”

“Un venn dey getts to deh western vront, iss it

“How many getts dere?

“And dose doat getts dere iss so full off revolutions

“Venn deh vrench is come dhru, yess,

“Dey say, “Vot?” Un de posch say:

“Aint yeh heard? Say, ve got a rheffolution.”

The story is about the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in 1918 between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers, in which Russia made a separate peace. The Bolshevik explains that when the Austro-Hungarian and German troops on the Eastern Front are transferred to the Western Front, news of Russia will sweep through the Axis countries, inspiring revolution there, and finally they will translate their “revolutions” into a French “rheffolution.” The Communist Revolution happens through the circulation of bodies and ideas as do the Cantos: Pound—no friend of communism—makes the Bolshevik’s retort into a joke about the power of single word. The Germans and Austro-Hungarians come “full of revolutions” and proselytize to the French, but they cannot understand the pronunciation, “Vot?” One thing leads to another and the “posch” proletariat soldiers accommodate the French with an aspirated “rheffolution.” Ostensibly told to Pound by German speaker or a Yiddish character like Yusef in the Gibraltar episode in Canto XXII, the meta-joke hinges on the idea that the actual revolution is lost in accents within accents: the story begins with an exchange between a Bolshevik and an Italian. The Italian says, “Looka vat youah Trotsk is done, e iss // madeh deh zhamefull beace!!” The Bolshevik mimics the Italian’s accent, “He iss madeh deh zhamefull beace, iss he?” His own accent reads decidedly

Russian: “De droobs iss released vrom de eastern vront, yess?” He goes on to explain the cultural capital of the revolution by imitating the German’s imitation of a French accent: “‘Dey say, ‘Vot?’ Un de posch say: / ‘Aint yeh heard? Say, ve got a rheffolution.’” But the speaker adds yet another layer by using the French “posch” or “posh” to describe German soldiers putting on a French accent.<sup>460</sup> The passage is a story about words carrying ideas, bodies transporting words, ideas given different accents, and accents imitated by different speakers.

The second ideogram tells a simpler version of the story. Drawing from Steffens’ account of Lenin’s orating to “a thousand,” Pound relates the events in Palace Square in which a soldier in the White Army kills the lieutenant who commands the guard to fire into the assembled revolutionaries. A word circulates through the square: “Pojalouista,” or a formal pardon-me that the soldiers use to try to disperse the crowd.<sup>461</sup> Pound criticizes this abuse of the power of words: “And that was the revolution . . . / as soon as they named it.” Pound gives his summary judgment in an American accent: “That’s the trick with a crowd, / Get ’em into the street and get ’em moving.” The image should be familiar: bodies circulating under a banner, “revolution,” recalls the scene in the *Inferno* outside the gates of hell:

And I, who looked saw an ensign, which whirling ran so quickly that it  
seemed to scorn all pause;  
  
and behind it came so long a train of people, that I should never have  
believed death had undone so many.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>460</sup> Lincoln Steffens discusses the Bolshevik propaganda of “revolution” as “the world word” in his *Autobiography*, from which Pound draws elsewhere in the passage (or at least a lecture that later included in the *Autobiography*). Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (1931; Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2005), 752.

<sup>461</sup> Cf. David Farley, *Modernist Travel Writing: Intellectuals Abroad* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010).

<sup>462</sup> Dante, *Divine Comedy*, 23.

And yet Pound's opus builds this movement into the structure of the ideograms. The Cantos' democratic poetics are secreted in the thematics of circulation with which Pound layers passages like these: Pound's style resembles the rumor-spreading populace that he mocks. The democratic poetics also lie in the body Pound requires his reader to use to unpack these accents: the difference, for example, between the Italian's "Aint yuh herd?" when he asks about "deh zhamefull beace" and the Bolshevik's punchline when he imitates the Italian and the German soldier breaking into a French accent: "Aint yeh heard? Say, ve got a rheffolution." Reading *The Cantos*, in other words, is a physical experience: the sensation of hell depends on the rhyme that Pound brings to the description; the sensation of the belt of mixed populations depends on the accents Pound transcribes. He may put language at the center of his politics and, in his defense of poetry, he may contrast the divine intellect with the messiness of human waste. He may champion the living tradition buried under the dead letter, but he puts the living body at the center of his poetic. And he does violence to the habits brought to the poem: *The Cantos* cannot be sight-read for sense. *Logopoeia*, he says, "employs words not only for their direct meaning, but . . . takes count in special way of habits of usage, of the context we *expect* to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play." This most often cited gloss for the term suggests that *logopoeia* is an archeology of the common use of a word. But "the dance of the intellect among words" actually takes place in the mouth or in "the domain of verbal manifestation."<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>463</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 25.

## Conclusion: Modernist Poetry's Democratic Genius

When individuals are increasingly insecure as a result of an economic crisis or of the ravages of war, when conflict between classes and groups is exacerbated and can no longer be symbolically resolved within the political sphere, when power appears to have sunk to the level of reality and to be no more than an instrument for the promotion of the interests and appetites of vulgar ambition and when, in a word, it appears *in* society, and when at the same time society appears to be fragmented, then we see the development of the fantasy of the the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free from division.

—Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy”

The defense of poetry brings anti-populism to the modernist poem as praise and censure index the modernist poet's preference for genius over genre. At the same time, modernist poets are themselves of the populace and inspired by it; and for all their genre-bending experiments, they consistently elect the line break. But if anti-populism describes the way modernists talk about poetry but not the way they write it, this does not mean that modernist poets should have offered more populist representations of the people or that modernist studies should reorganize the canon around a poet of the people. Rather, the anti-populism of the modernist poet should be read as the incorporation of democracy's ideological incoherence. Contrary to the author-making elaboration of modernists' own theories of poetry, the democratic poetics of modernism

illustrates a more fundamental incoherence: The popularity of modernist poetry universalizes its self-selecting elitism. Modernist genius is inspired by antagonism for the poetry community and the bad poet. And the modernist poem is a genre marked by the proliferation of line breaks far more than the smattering of prose sometimes between them. Finally, in a democratic poetics, the modernist poem is the forum in which democracy's nobody makes a claim to genius. The poet genius of modernism is not based on the continued relationship between poiesis and philosophy or divine revelation, but on the cult of personality from which populism earns its bad name.

According to contemporary usage and theory, populism is a political movement defined by the people's identification with a charismatic leader whose power derives from the ability to mobilize a mass against a special-interest group, a minority, or an elite.<sup>464</sup> Ernesto Laclau writes:

In order to have the “people” of populism, we need something more [than an underprivileged *plebs* or communitarian *populus*]: we need a plebs who claims to be the only legitimate *populus*—that is, a particularity which wants to function as the totality of the community.<sup>465</sup>

What distinguishes populism's plebiscite-as-populace from the democratic demos is the manner by which the people are given voice. In the latter, Laclau notes, the people petition the government with a list of demands which can be addressed individually and mediated through representation. In the former, he argues, those demands are sublimated into antagonism: the people have become a political identity defined in opposition to a government perceived as

<sup>464</sup> On the central role of the charismatic leader in studies of populism, see especially Francisco Panizza's survey of the literature on populist movements. Panizza, “Introduction: Populism and the Mirror of Democracy” in *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, ed. Francisco Panizza (London: Verso, 2005), 18-28.

<sup>465</sup> Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 81.

intransigent and corrupt. Above all, the people of populism are beholden by their reflection in an anti-government figurehead typified by the charismatic leader. There are obviously no charismatic leadership in poetry the way there is in politics; instead, poetic communities fixate on genius. As Laclau points out, discourse on populism has most often treated the phenomenon as a pathology, a limit case in which all that is bad about the masses comes to a head. Indeed, the discourse on populism—or *against* populism—is less significant as a prophylaxis for the authoritarian personality than for promoting slippage between democratic identity and demagoguery. What begins as a critique of popular dictatorship frequently ends as an indictment of mass psychology. Juxtaposing the stigma of populism with modernist poetics' contempt for popular taste shows how lucrative the rhetoric can be outside politics proper. In short, anti-populist discourse imputes an ism to whatever seems popular: whatever circulates popularly bears populist potential.

The solution is not a forced separation of politics and poetics: both modernism and the defense of poetry are formed in concern about the overlap of popular taste and the will of the people. Nor is the solution to purge of genius theory from poetics. If the defense of poetry identifies poetry with poesis and excludes versifiers by imputing to them a failed claim to the title of poet, the modernist poet shows that the claim to genius once used to denigrate lower- and middle-class poets has become their claim to politics. Like the populist leader, the modernist poet is a nobody who ventures into politics without pedigree or credential. The poet in Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* is an aristocrat protecting politics and poetry from courtier versifiers and the populace they represent; the modernist poet may continue to exclude the versifier and privilege

singular genius over popular genre, but he or she does so as a beneficiary of upward class mobility and a member of the populace. If certain names of modernist poets have been granted renown, this does not mean that the modernist poet does not remain a figure who toils in obscurity in an unpopular genre. The Eliots, Pounds, and Williamses, in other words, are democracy's nobodies interrupting the in-the-know citizen of republican political philosophy, just as the modernist poem is an interruption of the defense of poetry. Their claim to genius is proven in the poem rather than in the prose treatise, but so proven, they also testify to the potential of the populace and raise the specter of populism.

As I have shown in my readings of modernist poems that take up the defense of poetry in verse, there is a tension between the demands of the defense of poetry as a genre of philosophical prose, based on logical argument, and the demands of poetry as a genre based on the rhetorical grab of the line break. To be sure, both Sidney's defense and its Romantic inheritors trouble philosophical prose with rhetorical flourish, but the identification with philosophy, which becomes even stronger with Wordsworth, Shelley, and Coleridge, hardly characterizes the modernist poet. While the prose defense defines poetry with an eye to the good-citizen curriculum, the poem that takes up the defense in verse is not so much a hybrid genre as a forum in which the anti-populism of the defense clashes with the populist stigma that political philosophy in the Platonic tradition imputes to poetry. Modernist texts such as "Poetry," *The Waste Land*, *Spring and All* and *The Cantos* subscribe to the anti-populist theories that find populist threat in everything popular, but in practice the poetry pushes back against the defense's attempt to remove the genius and the masterpiece from circulation among bodies and genres. Yet



modernist poets take public transit, go to baseball games, pass through the museum, hear tell of gossip, hang out in cafés, and people-watch. That modernist studies has come to endorse this or that claim to genius while others go unheard does not mean that the politics of self-presentation differs between the bona-fide and the would-be genius.

Claude Lefort argues that, whereas the prince or the noble once gave power a body, embodying the divine in the human form, a democracy is “a society without a body.”<sup>466</sup> Yearning for the unity of divine and human once proved in the flesh of the monarch or the aristocrat, populist identity becomes the meeting point of democracy and totalitarianism as the fantasy of a unified people attaches to the body of the charismatic leader. To be sure, this unholy union demands critique, but so does the anti-populist reaction. Lefort treats populist identification as a mass character deficiency: for him, populism happens when the people give in to the desire to fill democracy’s void with the false security of firm answers to unanswerable questions and sweeping explanations of an uncertain state of the world, as if populism consists wholly of a mass abdication of inquiry, deliberation, and intellectual integrity. In his thinking, democracy is at best an experience of indeterminacy that leads, he says, to “a process of questioning” becoming the implicit ground of togetherness because “no one has the answer to the questions that arise.”<sup>467</sup> However, in bad times, this state of suspension provokes a nostalgia for hierarchy: ideology with its promise of restoring order to chaos offers a new version of the prince in a unified people and their demagogue. But the neutral language of “questions that arise” is as misleading as the singular status of the prince as the medium between divine and human. The

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<sup>466</sup> Claude Lefort, “The Question of Democracy,” *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. by David Macey (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

philosophical polity, as the defense of poetry evinces, addresses the outsider in an adversarial language of critique that provokes defense precisely by promoting questioning. Lefort cannot imagine that the democratic citizen is in his political philosophy a subject of cross-examination.<sup>468</sup> What he thinks of as a power vacuum that may be filled with a body only to the detriment of ongoing inquiry is precisely the place in which the demos must speak. The poet offers an alternative model to the threatening image of the plebe as prince, a.k.a. the charismatic leader. Unlike the prince who centralizes power, the poet of poiesis is that historical figure who embodies the divine fiat in human endeavor by stepping into the center from the wings. Lefort's suspicion of the demos as a host of victims taken in by ambitious politico is plain, but as in the above epigraph, the figure of "vulgar ambition" that becomes "the embodying power" comes from the populace: he is the nobody who gains the people's ear without performing the qualification and nuance that typify philosophical critique.

Neither a populist poetic nor popular poetry, then, is the answer. Because anti-populism—the ideological turn in political philosophy—conceals a mistrust of democracy, the answer to the defense of poetry's ingrained classism is the incorporation of genius and genre into a democratic poetic. If the genius still represents a connection between the divine and the human, genre extends that connection to the community. Williams romanticizes the body of the dark woman while revolting from a white population that consists of bodies repeated en masse: his poetic is formed in and by the new demographics of suburban expansion, but his idiom—which he calls after Moore "plain American"—comes from his songless takes on lyric genre. Pound

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<sup>468</sup> Of this line of thought, Laclau writes: "The difficulty with Lefort's analysis of democracy is that it is concerned with liberal-democratic *regimes*, and does not pay due attention to the construction of popular-democratic *subjects*." Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, 166.

aestheticizes bodies in a crowd as apparitions but imagines popular politics as a scatological nightmare. Yet as I show above in the final chapter, his epic thematics rely on the circulation of stories through different kinds of speaking bodies: more subtly than Eliot's satirical take on the epic, the genius of these moments revises the hero-centered storytelling of Homer's classics. If the modernist defense has determined that genius trumps genre, a democratic poetic would seek out moments that are about genre, not in order to affirm tradition and conformity over the celebrated revolutionary break, but in order to illustrate the disparities between theory and practice that testify to the incoherence that makes democracy so dangerous to political philosophy. In the end, the modernist poet's anti-populism may be inherited from the defense, but to censure the hypocrisy or false consciousness of the modernist poet in the name of popular/ist poetry mean foreclosing on the democratic promise of just that incoherence and missing how anti-populism can be and often is the political philosopher's own version of populist rhetoric. Democratic poetics is not about identifying with the people of populism in a fantasy of unification. Democratic poetics is about identifying with the incoherent and ever-changing demographic and the psyche produced in and among its populace.

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