

# *The Wallace Stevens Journal*



**Special Issue:  
Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound**

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**Special Issue:**  
**Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound**  
**Edited by**  
**Glen MacLeod**

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# Introduction

GLEN MACLEOD

THIS SPECIAL ISSUE on Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound is also a tribute to Marjorie Perloff, who has been a valued member of the editorial board of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* since 1984. The issue began as a panel at the Modernist Studies Association conference in October 2000, which reconsidered Perloff's influential essay "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" (first published in 1982). The papers from that panel appear, in revised form, as the first four essays in this issue.

"Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" has informed the critical debate about these two poets for twenty years. In it, Perloff divides the field of modern poetry into two camps: partisans of Stevens (e.g., Helen Vendler, Harold Bloom) vs. partisans of Pound (e.g., Hugh Kenner, Donald Davie). The defenders of Stevens think of modernism as an extension of the romantic lyric tradition and define poetry primarily in terms of what it says; the defenders of Pound think of modernism as a fundamental break with romanticism and define poetry primarily in terms of how it says what it says. There is of course much more to it, but, in sum, Perloff's essay is a sharp-eyed analysis of the critical situation in the 1970s and early 1980s, and it focuses on issues that still concern poets and critics today. It is regularly included on reading lists in graduate courses on modern poetry.

What most strikes the Stevens specialist is the essay's polemical tone. Perloff was clearly championing Pound, whom she saw as the poetic underdog at the time. (That bias became more obvious when "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" was republished as the opening chapter of her book *The Dance of the Intellect* [1985], aptly subtitled *Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*.) Among other things, the essay challenged Stevensians to defend their version of modernism. Perloff's central commitment as a critic has always been to modernism and to keeping alive the modernist spirit that welcomes vital controversy. That commitment is nowhere more evident than in the provocative edge of her best criticism, of which "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" is a prime example. The essays in this issue demonstrate that it can still provoke sharp responses.

It is appropriate that Perloff's essay was itself inspired by a "wonderfully argumentative" encounter circa 1980, as she tells us in the lively reconsideration of her original argument that leads off this special issue. It

is not giving away too much to say that, in this new essay, she ultimately shifts the ground entirely, finding the relevant models for contemporary poets not in Pound and Stevens but in early T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and—characteristically stressing the importance of the visual arts to modern poetry—Marcel Duchamp. (This shift of perspective is developed in more detail in her new book *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*, published this year by Blackwell.)

Patricia Rae mounts a three-part assault on Perloff’s distinction, in her original essay, between Stevens as a poet of metaphor and Pound as a poet of metonymy. Extending her own argument in *The Practical Muse* (1997), Rae shows that Pound and Stevens share a number of fundamental assumptions about life, poetry, and the relations between them.

Douglas Mao attributes the staying power of “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” to its focus on debates (e.g., open vs. closed form, paratactic vs. syllogistic constructions) that remain centrally important to contemporary poets. But he also finds a troubling anti-intellectual slant in the rhetoric of Perloff’s essay, as well as in her more recent *Wittgenstein’s Ladder* (1996).

Alan Filreis responds to these first three papers by reconstructing the broader historical context of “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” In the 1950s and early 1960s, poetic categories were more fluid, not polarized as they had become when Perloff entered the fray. He agrees with Perloff that the situation at the beginning of the twenty-first century is once again more open, with both Pound and Stevens (and many others) available as models to practicing poets.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis finds unexamined vestiges of “genius thinking” in both Perloff’s original essay and her present reconsideration of it. Instead of asking “Whose Era?” she suggests we ask “Which Pound?” or “Which Stevens?” Better yet, we should avoid such reductive dichotomies altogether and focus more on the material basis of artistry, the “rollicking community with many players” behind every act of creation.

Vincent N. LoLordo applies the principles DuPlessis expounds (as do Mao and Filreis, in different ways), focusing on John Ashbery’s *Flow Chart* as an example of how poetry can include the social, and argues that “[t]he current debate most relevant as successor to Perloff’s formulation concerns two versions of this single poet.”

Charles Altieri challenges Perloff’s dichotomy by proposing a single Pound/Stevens era, beginning in the 1960s. According to Altieri, the two poets share a sense of the pressure of history and what he calls a “second-order lyricism.” Later poets have drawn upon both Pound and Stevens as equally useful aspects of their heritage. Altieri reads Stevens’ “Examination of the Hero in a Time of War” and Pound’s Malatesta cantos to show that both poets seek to train readers in a similar kind of responsiveness to both poetry and life.

Finally, Pound scholar Leon Surette takes issue with Perloff's characterization of modernism, arguing that, according to her own criteria, Pound himself does not qualify as a modernist. He offers his own definition of modernism, based on the spiritual aspirations of the abstract painters, in which Pound and Stevens both fit comfortably.

One conclusion to be drawn from these essays is that Pound and Stevens seem today to have much more in common than they seemed to have in 1982. As modernism recedes into history, the leading modernist poets seem more and more part of a small, select group whose differences may be less significant than their shared interests. In that spirit, let me end with one point on which Perloff and the other contributors will readily agree: it is a great pleasure to be able to include in this special issue of *The Wallace Stevens Journal* a poem by Ezra Pound's daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz.

University of Connecticut, Waterbury



*Stevens/Pound: Whose Era?*  
Charcoal drawing by Alexis W. Serio

## “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” Revisited

MARJORIE PERLOFF

THE IDEA FOR “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” came to me one afternoon circa 1980 in the course of a wonderfully argumentative conversation with two young men—brilliant, witty, and charming—I had just met at the Los Angeles home of the poet Charles Wright—Paul Monette and Roger Horwitz, both of whom were to die of AIDS, Roger in 1986 (after a long, painful illness, commemorated in Paul’s harrowing memoir *Borrowed Time*) and Paul in 1995. But in 1980, no one had yet heard of AIDS, and Paul and Roger had more *joie de vivre* than anyone I knew. Roger had received a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard with a dissertation on the French writer Henri Thomas, but had then taken the law school route so as to be able to make his options more flexible. As for Paul, he had gone to Yale, published a book of poems written very much under the sign of James Merrill and Richard Howard, taught briefly at a prep school outside Boston, turned to writing novels free-lance and, after the success of *Taking Care of Mrs. Carroll*, had come to Hollywood under contract as a writer for Universal Studios.

On the afternoon in question, we got involved in a discussion of poetry, and Paul declared that he *loved* Stevens but found Williams “trivial” and had never really “gotten into” Pound. “You must have studied with Harold Bloom,” I said. Paul was taken aback and wondered how I knew. I told him that everything he was saying about Stevens’ greatness vis-à-vis that of Pound or Williams was straight Bloomtalk. Or Bloom cum Hillis Miller cum Geoffrey Hartman—all at Yale at the time and all convinced that Stevens was *the* great modern American poet. For Paul, Stevens was the rightful heir of Keats and Shelley (his favorite poets) whereas Pound was some sort of esoteric crank, whose *Cantos* were dismissed by most Yale professors (the great bibliographer Donald Gallup notwithstanding) as incoherent. Indeed, the irony was that the Pound papers were right there at the Beinecke Library, but that no one at Yale itself seemed to be interested.

Having recently come back from my second Pound conference in Orono, Maine (the first was in 1975), I took strong issue with Paul’s evaluation. I was never one of the true Poundians, that devoted band that looked up

sources and meanings for every Greek word, Chinese ideogram, and reference to American economic history in the *Cantos*, and that was putting together the two-volume *Companion to the Cantos* (1985), whose editor-in-chief, Carroll F. Terrell of the University of Maine, also founded *Paideuma* (begun in 1972). The coeditors of this journal were two great modernist critics, Hugh Kenner and Eva Hesse. But in these years, Pound scholars were, with very few exceptions, marginalized by the academy; their poet was too much out of the mainstream and too compromised politically to be acceptable at the Yale of Wallace Stevens, and certainly not at Harvard. At Cambridge, where Frank Kermode taught Stevens, Pound was barely taught at all; British students who wanted to work on Pound—and there were beginning to be many—came to Santa Barbara to study with Kenner or to Stanford where there was, for a brief period (before my time), a convergence of interest in Pound on the part of the faculty, specifically Donald Davie, George Dekker, William Chace, and Albert Gelpi. Was the West Coast more receptive to Pound's eccentricities than the rest of the nation? Perhaps so.

The two camps, in any case, represented rival cultural/political complexes, although it would be a simplification to equate these with Left and Right since Stevens was hardly a person of the Left—indeed, in some ways was more conservative than the populist “avant-garde” Pound. Such ironies made me want to investigate the issue, and Monette's Bloomophilia (Bloom was then at the height of his influence) was the immediate impetus. In the pre-AIDS early eighties, let us remember, the twin questions *What is poetry?* (theory) and *Is this a good poem?* (practice) really mattered. Paul, later to become a noted AIDS activist, was, in those years, largely apolitical. He was not interested in Gay poetry but in Poetry, especially the Classics. *Borrowed Time*, Paul's memoir of his life with Roger, details their trip to Greece and their ecstatic response to the sacred places—Delphi, Mycenae, Delos. In the meantime, Paul's East Coast poet-scholar friends, Richard Howard, Alfred Corn, and J. D. McClatchy, were always chiding him for having given up the cloistered academic life and “sold out” to Hollywood.

In the poetic universe of Harold Bloom, the poet was, in Stevens' own words, “the priest of the invisible” (*OP* 195), the creator of “notes toward a supreme fiction.” The poetic text was not regarded, as it is now, as a social practice or intervention, much less as a cultural symptom pointing to subliminal attitudes vis-à-vis race, class, or gender. The only positioning that took place—and this is as true for Pound as it is for Stevens, was vis-à-vis the poetry of the past. Was Pound to be understood in the light of Browning or did we need to go back to Propertius and Catullus to understand him?<sup>21</sup> Had Stevens been co-opted by those (e.g., Frank Kermode) who put him squarely in the British romantic tradition, when the truth was that, as Bloom insisted, he came straight out of Emerson and Whitman? Was Eliot, who declared contempt for the romantics and Victorians, really,

as Perry Meisel argued, not so unlike Alfred, Lord Tennyson? And, closer to home, was John Ashbery, who was finally getting some recognition, even though he had been publishing poetry since 1956, more than an avatar of Stevens? Who was the “truer” heir of Pound/Williams: Charles Olson or Robert Lowell? The journal *Sagetrieb*, founded at the University of Maine at Orono in 1982 under the editorship of Carroll F. Terrell, was explicitly subtitled *A Journal Devoted to Poets in the Pound-Williams Tradition*. Later, H.D.’s name was added and only recently has the subtitle been changed to *A Journal Devoted to Poets in the Imagist/Objectivist Tradition*.

Studying poetry in these years was thus curiously a question of tradition and the individual talent. The situation began to change in the later eighties with the growing dominance of culture, race, and gender studies and the concomitant attention to noncanonical poets. Once the new paradigms took over, neither Stevens nor Pound (nor, for that matter, any straight white male modernist poet) was to fare particularly well, the interest shifting to women poets (especially Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy, and H.D.) and to the African-American poets of the early century who had been largely neglected. It was not just a matter of Pound’s Fascism and anti-Semitism, which now came under close scrutiny in a spate of books from Robert Casillo’s *The Genealogy of Demons* (1988) to Tim Redman’s *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (1991), nor was it a question of Stevens’ purported aestheticism or his own problematic use of racial tropes, the subject of an interesting discussion by Rachel Blau DuPlessis in her recent study of gender and race in modern American poetry. Rather, the value judgments made about either poet when he was still a kind of Contested Contemporary have given way to more dispassionate and “scientific” paradigms of study that inevitably subsume both poets, along with many others, under the larger heading of Modernist X or Y: Modernist Commodification (Douglas Mao), Modernist Pragmatism (Patricia Rae), Imperialist Modernism, and so on. As modernism recedes into the background, it is now regarded as an *object* of study, advocacy having given way to sober reflection on the meaning of the larger period rather than individual works.

Such a turn of events was surely inevitable, but this is not to say that it has been altogether a good thing. Once Stevens has been located in what Alan Filreis calls in his brilliant book by that title “the actual world” (1991), the poet has become more acceptable to the Left than he was in the sixties and seventies. But acceptance is just one step from indifference. Twenty years earlier, Filreis’ case, in this and in his second book, *Modernism from Right to Left* (1994), for a “quotidian” Stevens, a poet dwelling not in some rarified inner world, as had been previously posited, but in the day-to-day world of politics and war, would have raised real controversy; by the nineties, few critics wanted to argue about Stevens’ status. He was and is simply there—a “major man,” to use his own terminology.

The cooling down of the Pound case is even more striking. In his polemic *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture*, published, like Filreis' *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, in 1991, Laurence Rainey closely linked the Malatesta cantos to the cult of Mussolini and argued that when we study the *Cantos* as part of a "comprehensive engagement with the entire range of graphic culture, from graffiti to train schedules, inscriptions to advertising" (7), the *Cantos* emerges as what it is—a Fascist epic. Rainey's up-to-date assumption that writing is first and foremost a "social practice" and that hence transmission is just as important as production and reception placed the focus firmly on textual issues, especially on Pound's alterations of his Latin and Italian sources. Twenty years ago, the absence, in Rainey's study, of any kind of analysis or evaluation of the poems themselves might have caused consternation, but by the early nineties, Pound scholars of nearly every stripe were gratified by the sheer attention that Rainey had paid to the archival study of Pound, that he had produced such impressive "hard" scholarship. Even the label "Fascist Epic" did not cause furor, as it would have a generation earlier.

By the mid-nineties, the discourse had thus shifted from comparative judgment as to the form and meaning of specific poetic texts to a focus on poetic discourse in its cultural, ideological, and political manifestations. In these terms, Pound and Stevens could be linked as sharing a particular American early twentieth-century ethos and are now regularly coupled, for example in Douglas Mao's and Patricia Rae's respective studies of modernism. But linkage under the rubric of modernism inevitably breeds neglect. For if Pound and Stevens are discussed primarily to exemplify one more facet of the umbrella term *modernism*, they can be (and have been) easily replaced by any number of other poets. We are now witnessing the spectacle of Pound or Stevens sessions at MLA that try to justify their very existence by subsuming either poet under the new categories of concern such as Pound and globalization or Stevens in late twentieth-century culture.

Today, the question "Whose era?" thus seems nothing if not anachronistic, not only because of the cultural changes in the intervening decades but also because of the poetic ones. In the last paragraph of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" I said—I now blush to think how foolishly—"no one today . . . seems eager to call the first half of the twentieth century the Eliot Era. Perhaps this is the case because Eliot's poetry does not as fully pose the problem that came to obsess Modernism: whether poetry should be lyric or collage, meditation or encyclopedia, the still moment or the jagged fragment" (23). The Eliot I had in mind when I wrote this was Eliot the Monument, as created by the New Critics and Conservative thinkers of the 1940s and 1950s, the Eliot who was a self-declared Royalist, Classicist, and Anglo-Catholic. That Eliot had indeed fallen into bad repute in the sixties and seventies, and Williams, who famously claimed in his *Au-*

*tobiography* that “The Waste Land” had set us back a hundred years, was the poetic hero.

But how many poets today write in the mode of Williams? And how long can we read the poetry of John Ashbery or Charles Bernstein, Bob Perelman, or Susan Howe without hearing a distinct Eliot echo—the Eliot not of the *Criterion* and the *Four Quartets* but of “Prufrock” and “Portrait of a Lady”? If Eliot stands for one pole of modernism, the other is represented less by Pound or Williams than by Gertrude Stein and Marcel Duchamp. It is Stein’s rhythms and syntactic play we hear in the poetry of Lyn Hejinian or Joan Retallack or Harryette Mullen, even as Duchamp has paved the way for the more conceptual poetics we now find on *UBU-Web.com* and related sites.

Indeed, in the twenty-first century, the issue is no longer that of lyric meditation versus encyclopedic collage, most of our best poetry partaking of both in unprecedented ways. The focus today, once we get beyond—as I think we must—sheer subject matter, is less on genre or poetic mode than on the *language* of poetry, and that makes Eliot and Stein, each in his or her own way, the purveyors of the Flaubertian *mot juste*, such key figures. As for Duchamp, it was he who first raised an issue that has become central to poetics in the age of Web sites and cyberpoetics. “Can one make,” asked Duchamp, “works which are not works of ‘art?’ ” He posed this question not in a poem or essay or lecture but as a note among notes in the so-called *White Box (A l’Infinifif)* of 1966. And the paradox is that his own readymades—originally declared by everyone, including the artist himself, to be “not art,” are now among the most proud possessions of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

It is telling, in this regard, that at the Modernist Studies Association meeting in 2000, there were two Duchamp panels but not a single one devoted exclusively to Pound or Stevens. But I shall not make the case for a Duchamp Era or a Stein or Eliot Era. For the fact is that now that the century is over, what seems most striking is that the desire to pin down modernism—to say it is *this* or *that*—is receding in the wake of the recognition that modernism remains unfinished, a project aborted first by World War I and the two great Totalitarianisms of the 1930s, and then by World War II and the ensuing Cold War, so that only in the last decade or so have the artistic questions of 1914 once again surfaced. The connection between our “radical” poets and those of modernism can now be seen to be stronger, I would posit, than is their connection to the much less innovative poetics of mid-century. The old progress narrative, as represented in so many of our books a mere twenty years ago, no longer applies. That makes modernism once again the most exciting game in town.

Given these newly apparent links, it is just a matter of time before the sober “hard” scholarship currently devoted to Pound and Stevens will once again give way to a more speculative, subjective criticism. To begin with: what impact have Stevens’ and Pound’s respective works had on

the poetry and poetics of the later century? If Pound was a central influence on the Objectivists, the Black Mountain poets, and the Beats, he seems to have had less impact on recent poets than his programmatic avant-gardism would have led us to expect—less impact, ironically, than has Stevens. For experimental poets writing today, who have had little to say about Stevens, are paradoxically more Stevensian than Poundian in their predilection for abstract and conceptual language and ambiguous syntax rather than the “direct treatment of the thing” or the “image as an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time.” But—and this is where things get complicated—the Stevens influence has also been a mixed blessing: some of the most banal poets writing today have adopted many of his verbal tics and turned his brilliantly quirky meditative mode into a monotonous monovocalism.

The paradoxes of influence thus deserve to be reexamined. Again, Pound’s politics and economics, heavily castigated as these have been from the seventies to the nineties, will no longer seem to matter in the same way to a post-Soviet, post-Cold War generation. I have found that, in 2002, students—fascinated by Pound’s incorporation of Chinese ideograms, his skills as a translator, and his comic imitation of various dialects—do not take the discussions of usury or banking seriously, although Pound’s anti-Semitism poses more problems than ever for a literary culture now strongly opposed to racial prejudice in all its forms. It is Pound’s astonishing technique—the specter of a Man on His Feet Talking, who is capable of incorporating anything from a menu to the letters of the Chinese Emperors into his discourse—that intrigues younger readers.

Indeed—and here I stand by my earlier essay—one real difference between the receptions of the two poets is that Stevens critics continue to care about what their poet *says* even as Pound critics seem to like EP *despite what he says*. Discussion of Stevens—for example, in the pages of the *Wallace Stevens Journal*—is likely to contain words like *vision*, *imagination*, *seasonal myth*, *isolation*, *solipsism*, *self*, *identity*, and *being*. Discussion of Pound is more textual, more practical: the poet’s use of *documentary*, the *architecture* of the *Cantos*, the use of citation and *found text*, the successive versions of the *Pisan Cantos*, the visual design of the page, and so on. If neither Pound nor Stevens can be said to dominate our “era,” their differences, I would argue, remain real enough. Take any passage from Stevens, for example:

It was when the trees were leafless first in November  
And their blackness became apparent, that one first  
Knew the eccentric to be the base of design. (CP 151)

Pound, too, occasionally made the case for “design,” for the Great Crystal, or Unwobbling Pivot. But for him, the *eccentric* could never be the *base of design*; rather, “design” was something glimpsed on rare occasions only

to be dissipated in the resonating chaos that is the *Cantos*' natural element. Pound, in any case, could never have written Stevens' beautiful and moving lines any more than Stevens could or would have written the following:

I sat on the Dogana's steps  
For the gondolas cost too much, that year,  
And there were not "those girls," there was one face,  
And the Buccentoro twenty yards off, howling "Stretti,"  
And the lit cross-beams, that year, in the Morosini,  
And peacocks in Kore's house, or there may have been.  
(*Cantos* 11)

Could anyone mistake this for a passage from a Stevens poem? Surely not. Indeed, Stevens would have been the first to acknowledge the inherent *difference* that constituted the poetic world as he saw it:

From oriole to crow, note the decline  
In music. Crow is realist. But, then,  
Oriole, also, may be realist. (*CP* 154)

But the peacocks in Kore's house may also be "realist," even if not in Stevens' lexicon. It is the power of modernism to accommodate both these alternatives among a good many others.

Stanford University

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, the essays collected in Bornstein; my essay "The Contemporary of Our Grandchildren" makes a case for Pound's influence on later poets as does Christopher Beach's *ABC of Influence*.

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# Bloody Battle-Flags and Cloudy Days: The Experience of Metaphor in Pound and Stevens

PATRICIA RAE

MARJORIE PERLOFF introduced a significant irony into her 1982 essay "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" by her choice of a representative text for Wallace Stevens: the "It Must Give Pleasure" section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction." For this is the place where Stevens' spokesman, the Canon Aspirin, argues against making hierarchical distinctions: his policy is to make choices not "Between, but of" (*CP* 403). With this repudiation of a divisive, and to his mind "masculine" (*CP* 227) intellectualism, Stevens seems to have anticipated the criticism produced in the twenty years since Perloff's essay showing that there is no need to assume that the poet's affinities preclude their nominal opposites. We have come to appreciate that Stevens unlocks the "stiff and stubborn, man-locked set" (*CP* 497) of binaries on which the Pound/Stevens "abyss" has been predicated: he is a philosophical poet who is also a master of formal experiment, a lyric poet who is also a poet of history, an avowed aesthete who cares equally strongly about telling the "truth."

My focus in this paper will be on just one of the many perceived distinctions between the poets Perloff highlighted in 1982, but a seminal one: the perception that "Stevens's rage for order, his need to make analogies . . . is at odds with Ezra Pound's deployment of metonymic linkages, his creation of Cubist surfaces or aerial maps where images jostle one another" (17). According to Perloff, the correlation of Stevens with metaphor and Pound with metonymy corresponded with the widespread impression that Stevens is the symbolist and Pound the realist, that Stevens is the poet of organic form and Pound the poet of fragments and disorder, that Stevens is the evader of reality and Pound someone who confronts it directly, that Stevens is the loafer and Pound the doer. I would like to summarize the challenge to such claims that has emerged since 1982 in three propositions about the poets and the subject of metaphor, propositions on the subjects of Agnosticism, Parataxis, and Truth.

A word first about the sense of the word "metaphor" on which I shall be relying, since variations in the definition have been a source of some confusion in the Pound/Stevens debate. The category I have in mind is a broad one, corresponding to its use in Roman Jakobson, Northrop Frye,

and the Aristotle of the *Rhetoric*, rather than the *Poetics*. To use Jakobson's terminology, I am concerned with the "metaphoric way" (76; my italics)<sup>1</sup> in semantics: a tendency to select words on the grounds of the similarities between them, whether those resemblances appear at the level of the signifier or signified or the sign's grammatical function. I distinguish this from the narrower sense of metaphor as "substitution" that seems to govern the critical literature on which Perloff relies in constructing the Pound/Stevens opposition.<sup>2</sup> A commitment to resemblance, I shall be arguing, or more precisely to the sharing of heavily qualified "experiences" of resemblance, unites Pound and Stevens, lending coherence to their poetic projects.

#### AGNOSTICISM

My first proposition is that Pound and Stevens are united by what Pound called an "agnostic" (*Selected Prose* 331) attitude toward the moment of creative inspiration: a moment that for both involves the "experience" of metaphor, or likeness. As I have suggested elsewhere, a common discursive context was the "new" psychology of William James, Henri Bergson, Théodule Ribot, and others, which Stevens encountered at Harvard and Pound through both T. E. Hulme and the Quest Society in London (51–61, 81–85). The essence of this attitude is a refusal to pronounce on the origins, and thus the ultimate veracity, of such experience. Though there is evidence of such an approach in Pound's early writings on the "delightful psychic experience" of the troubadours ("Psychology and Troubadours" 44), the *locus classicus* for this position is his account of the poet's apprehension of what he calls the "Image": a cluster of feelings, images and ideas, corresponding to the symbolist poet's concept for the nexus of relations, the "Idea," but *stripped of its metaphysical connotations*. As he explains carefully:

An *image*, in our sense, is real because we know it directly. If it have an age-old traditional meaning this may serve as proof to the professional student of symbology that we have stood in the deathless light, or that we have walked in some particular arbour of his traditional paradiso, *but that is not our affair*. (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 86; my italics)

This commitment to rendering experience accurately and without judgment, I would argue, is directly continuous with Pound's method in *The Cantos*, for which he cites the model of a shipman's "periplum": the record of a passing world, "as . . . seen by men sailing" (*Cantos* LIX 324).<sup>3</sup> Stevens makes similar efforts to withhold judgment about the sense of similarity, or connectedness, accompanying moments of creative inspiration. One of his most striking figures for the agnostic experience of metaphor, in his own exemplary *periplum*-poem, "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," is the blue

of sea (self) and sky (object) “roll[ing] as one” (CP 102), their contributions left blissfully intermingled. In this poem and others depicting inspired moments, he works carefully to blur the distinction between subjective and objective realities, and thus to defer judgment about the extent to which perceived relations are merely projections. In “Sea Surface Full of Clouds,” it is the motive behind the substitution of an ellipsis for a clause in the last canto: the speaker ends a series of divisive questions about the origins of metaphor by providing a blank for an answer. In “The Latest Freed Man,” it is the motive behind the studied indifference about the origins of the personified sun: whether the speaker’s renewing strength “comes directly” from himself or “from the sun [Son]” (CP 205) he perceives matters less than the fact it is what has made him free. As Patricia Parker has explained, the doctrinal poem “The Motive for Metaphor” offers an important syntactical ambiguity where the all-important “motive” is explained: it may be rooted in the “A B C of being” (CP 288), or in its opposite (80–85).<sup>4</sup>

The crucial point here is that neither Pound nor Stevens held a dogmatic view of what Ernest Fenollosa called the world’s “‘vibrations, cohesions, affinities’” (qtd. in Géfin 17). Neither was a firm believer in divinely ordained correspondences, but, equally, neither was a Nietzschean fictionalist, viewing all patterns as projections or illusions. The consequences of this insight for reading Pound may be greatest, for the “Pound/Stevens” distinction had him determined to strip his images of all symbolic associations, believing them lies. According to Perloff, who summarized a general critical perception, he was the anti-symbolist to Stevens’ symbolist.<sup>5</sup> Perloff rests her own version of this claim in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* on a passage in *The New Age* where Pound declares his intention to pursue the “constatation of fact.” Since I think she misreads it, it is worth quoting at length:

I think this sort of clear presentation is of the noblest traditions of our craft. It is surely the scourge of fools. It is what may be called the “prose tradition” of poetry, and by this I mean that it is a practice of speech common to good prose and to good verse alike. It is to modern verse what the method of Flaubert is to modern prose, and by that I do not mean that it is not equally common to the best work of the ancients. It means constatation of fact. It presents. It does not comment. It is irrefutable because it does not present a personal predilection for any particular fraction of the truth. *It is as communicative as Nature. It is as uncommunicative as Nature.* It is not a criticism of life, I mean it does not deal in opinion. It washes its hands of theories. It does not attempt to justify anybody’s ways to anybody or anything else. It calls a calf a calf, it does not attempt to prove that the proverbial “two-year” old calf should have been brought

to that age in six weeks. It is open to all facts and to all impressions. ("The Approach to Paris, V" 662; my italics)

Perloff reads this passage as an utter repudiation of the "associations" emanating from symbol, a statement that there cannot be objective similarities, homologies, or signs of connection and order in the universe and that Pound's poetry must in no way seek to suggest such a possibility.<sup>6</sup> In fact, Pound's problem is not with associations *per se*, but with *coercion about the significance of "facts" and "impressions"*—with *dogmatism* about symbolic meaning.<sup>7</sup> Poetry that "presents," rather than "comments," will be "as communicative as Nature" or as "uncommunicative as Nature"—whatever the reader's *experience* proves it to be. Pound's inclusion of "impressions" along with "facts" here is especially significant, since it underscores the point that mental experiences themselves are sufficient data for the poet, whatever their ultimate accuracy vis à vis external reality. In other words, Pound *never discounts the possibility* that the "facts" presented in poetry might suggest other-than-literal meanings ("For the initiated," he says in "The Wisdom of Poetry," they *may* serve as "a door into eternity and into the boundless ether" [*Selected Prose* 333]); he simply refuses to make the metaphysical decision on which a thoroughgoing symbolism, a poetics of substitutive, or "anagogic" (Frye 123) metaphor, rests.

#### PARATAXIS

My second proposition about Pound and Stevens is premised upon what I have called elsewhere a "reflex-action" model of creative activity: a presumption that there will be a match between how a poet represents his moment of creative insight and his chosen form (25–32). What the agnostic attitude requires for expression, as William James pointed out, is a form corresponding to *hypothesis*: a way of presenting insights as *possibly* true but subject to verification (*Religious Experience* 428). For both Pound and Stevens, one means of fulfilling this requirement is *parataxis*: the method of "presenting" materials, side-by-side, without commenting definitively on their relation to one another. This technique expresses an agnostic attitude toward relations of similarity and identity because it arrests the process of translating similarities into signs of equivalence at a stage that preserves dissociating differences. Both poets explicitly advocate structures that leave it to the reader to decide which, unity or difference, will prevail. Pound, for example, endorses the structure of the "blood-stained battle-flag[]," exemplified, according to Fenollosa, by the Chinese ideogram. In that metaphor, the "flag" corresponds to the abstract concept communicated by the ideogram, a proxy for a set of similar particulars, and the "blood" to the particulars that would be sacrificed by the concept, but that remain preserved in the ideogram's physical image. The concept, like the flag, enables one to charge forward into life; the particulars represent impediments, exceptions that might complicate the plan. In the ideo-

gram and, by extension, the ideal poem, the incipient concept and the particulars it would subsume are both evident at the same time (their “etymology is constantly visible” [Fenollosa 25]) and so the act of reading is a balance between moving forward and second guessing. Stevens’ figures for poetry advocate structures producing the same kind of tension. To him, a poem is to capture the shadow of a concept emerging in a chaos of particulars: “A small relation expanding like the shade / Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill” (CP 215). But it is to hold in a single instant the “luminous fluttering” of abstraction and qualification: the tense “concentration” of light and shade typical of “a cloudy day” (CP 396).

That parataxis is central to Pound’s poetics is not news—the road from the “two-image” juxtapositions of Vorticism through the large-scale collage-form of *The Cantos* and prose texts such as *The ABC of Reading* is well-documented—but it is worth emphasizing that the technique invites considerations of *both* similarity and difference, since the accounts setting Pound against Stevens assert that he uses parataxis to make a point about the *discontinuity* of things (“Pound/Stevens,” *Dance* 11–12). That he was inviting readers to connect, not just disconnect, is apparent from his reminder in *The ABC of Reading*: “The proper METHOD for studying poetry . . . is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one ‘slide’ or specimen with another” (*ABC of Reading* 17; see also *Literary Essays* 60). It is evident, too, in his parenthetical insertion between the juxtaposed images of a sample Vorticist poem:

The footsteps of the cat upon the snow:  
(are like) plum-blossoms. (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 89; my italics)

But the main point is that Pound’s simple juxtapositions offer no such explicit nudging. It is the very nature of parataxis, I would suggest, along with Sanford Schwartz, Laslo Géfin, and Sylvan Esh, to *avoid* assertions about the relations between its elements.<sup>8</sup> If the first impression a set of juxtaposed elements gives is one of similarity—as perhaps in the case of faces in a Metro station and petals on a bough—it simultaneously preserves differences, provoking challenges to any incipient categories the comparison might suggest. If the first impression, on the other hand, is one of difference, as in the startling juxtaposition of historical figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Benito Mussolini, parataxis encourages a closer look at the data it presents, perhaps sparking an insight into a surprising likeness. As Pound himself described the process, “We advance by discriminations, by discerning that things hitherto deemed identical or similar are dissimilar; that things hitherto deemed dissimilar, mutually foreign, antagonistic, are similar and harmonic” (*Selected Prose* 25).<sup>9</sup> One of the most compelling arguments against reading dissimilarity as discontinuity in recent Pound criticism has been made by William Skaff, who, tracing a

direct line from Pound's imagism to surrealism, points to the following description of the surreal image, from Pierre Reverdy:

"[T]he image is a pure creation of the mind. It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities. The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality."  
(186)

The key point here is that the obscurity of the relation between the juxtaposed entities is not a sign of their *impossibility* as metaphor, but of their *power* as metaphor. As Skaff puts it, this time citing Ferdinand Alquié, the paradox of surrealist images is that they represent efforts not to escape, but to expose deep connections of which we are unconscious in everyday life:

"Surrealism is not a flight into the unreal or into dream, but a [*sic*] attempt to penetrate into what has more reality than the logical and objective universe[,] . . . an immanent beyond. . . . [F]or surrealism is a question not of giving free rein to a fantasy void of sense but of unveiling the nature of things and of man."  
(189)

This unexpected unveiling is a means of realizing latent power, of changing the world, not just revealing it—a point on which I shall have more to say shortly.

If Pound's commitment to parataxis is well-accepted, the suggestion that Stevens shares that interest will be more startling. The perception of Stevens as a poet committed to a Wordsworthian "organic form," rather than to the disjunctive practice of juxtaposing fragments (itself a questionable opposition, given Wordsworth's own use of parataxis in poems such as "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal"), is one of the main oppositions Perloff cites in establishing the Pound/Stevens gap ("Pound/Stevens," *Dance* 15–16).<sup>10</sup> In his key essays on metaphor, "Three Academic Pieces" (1947) and "Effects of Analogy" (1948), however, Stevens provides a justification for parataxis, using a "reflex-action" model. "The ambiguity that is so favorable to the poetic mind," he explains (the "agnostic" attitude of which I have been speaking) "is *precisely the ambiguity favorable to resemblance*" (NA 79; my italics), and it will not be communicated through tropes of identity (such as anagogic metaphor, or symbol) because identity is "the *vanishing-point* of resemblance" (NA 72; my italics). The right kind of ambiguity will be produced, rather, at "the point" where the process of contemplating similarity "begins" (NA 78), or where "relation" first "appears" (CP 215) still fringed by evidence of difference, the point where the incipi-

ent proposition may be entertained, yet still repudiated—the point to which the mind is provoked by, among other methods, parataxis.<sup>11</sup>

Jacqueline Brogan has provided a wealth of evidence of Stevens' efforts to create this tense relationship between form and flux in her fine 1986 book, *Stevens and Simile*, which argues that simile, by virtue of its power to produce it, is the key trope in his work.<sup>12</sup> As Pound's subtle reminder of the implicit simile in imagist poems demonstrates, simple parataxis is very close, if not interchangeable, in its effect to simile, and Brogan might have extended her list of Stevens' signature techniques to include it. For Stevens clearly engages in the practice, both in two-image arrangements along the lines of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" ("The singer has pulled his cloak over his head. / The moon is in the folds of his cloak" [CP 57]; "His beard moves in the wind. / The pine tree moves in the wind" [CP 73]) and in poems offering extended series of analogues, or analogous pairs: "Six Significant Landscapes," "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," "Sea Surface Full of Clouds," "The Red Fern," "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery," "As at a Theatre." The apotheosis of this technique may be the self-conscious list of twelve analogues for a pineapple in "Three Academic Pieces"—twelve "slight incipencies" from the "tropic of resemblance" (NA 86–87).

The most dominant and significant form of parataxis in Stevens, though, involves propositions, not images. Parataxis, rather than hypotaxis, is his chosen method for exploring philosophical issues, both in his poems and in his notoriously baffling prose. Seekers of philosophical consistency will be frustrated by his habit of offering in sequence different, sometimes seemingly contradictory, pronouncements about the nature of things. The catalogue of aphorisms in "Adagia" epitomizes the practice. Other, self-conscious examples are the propositions A and B in "Connoisseur of Chaos," the "projections" A, B, and C in "So-And-So Reclining on her Couch," the startlingly contrasting assertions in "Contrary Theses I," the propositions set out "round a circle, first clockwise, then anti-clockwise" in "Three Academic Pieces" (NA 79). We see similar arrays of propositions set out and developed, on broader planes, in "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas," "Three Academic Pieces," and, of course, "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": "It Must Be Abstract"; "It Must Change"; "It Must Give Pleasure."

In all such cases, Stevens is interested in making propositions "A" and "B" function, "not like statuary, posed / For a vista in the Louvre," but as "things chalked / On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see" (CP 216). He envisions them in the same kind of productive conflict and interaction he does analogical images: in an interplay of "[c]ross-reflections, modifications, counter-balances, complements, giving and taking" (L 368). In a moment I shall offer a sample reading of some interactive propositions. Here I would simply suggest that, whatever differences there may be in the *materials* each poet habitually juxtaposes (Pound, perhaps, pay-

ing more attention to parataxis at the level of the word and historical fact, Stevens more at the level of the proposition and generalization), their mutual interest in this seminal “modernist” technique must be taken into account in reassessing the Pound/Stevens gap, because of the challenge it poses to assumptions about the poets’ commitments to an ordered or disordered universe. It is too extreme to describe Pound as repudiating order when he practices a technique designed to allow for the perception of similarity in discontinuity. It is just as unjust to call Stevens a thoroughgoing symbolist when he vows that the ambiguity he has in mind can be communicated only by suggesting resemblances, never by presuming eternal identities.

#### TRUTH

One of the justifications both Pound and Stevens offer for paratactic arrangements is that the perception of analogy can be useful, an aid to action. For Pound, the imagist poem is an equation for building useful “bridges and devices” (*Selected Prose* 332). The “periplum” on which he models *The Cantos* is a document meant to help future sailors in their navigations (Makin 57). Stevens vows in his essays that the “virile poet’s” work will “help people to live their lives” (NA 30). This interest in the practical potential of poetry is not exactly the third similarity between the poets I would like to emphasize, though it is related to it, by way of apparent antithesis.<sup>13</sup> My final point, rather, is one about their shared insistence on an attribute in metaphor that has seemed to many commentators at odds with pragmatic values: the attribute of “rightness,” or “truthfulness.” When Stevens describes the challenge of presenting analogies in poetry as “a discipline of *rightness*” (NA 115; my italics) and distinguishes between apt and inapt analogies (NA 111–14),<sup>14</sup> he invokes standards similar to those on which Pound relies in defining his ideal trope, which he calls “interpretive metaphor.” “‘[I]nterpretive metaphor’” (or the perfectly calculated paratactic arrangement Pound calls the “image”) is “‘true metaphor . . . as diametrically opposed to untrue, or ornamental, metaphor’” (Fenollosa 23 n).<sup>15</sup> It is part of “the analytical examination of truth,” rather than the falsification associated with rhetoric (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 83). In a closely related set of claims, Pound and Stevens share a sense that the analogies poetry foregrounds ought to enable the genuine “exploration” of reality (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 88), or “discovery” (Pound, *Literary Essays* 6; Stevens, *OP* 203). They object to metaphors that “*invent[] without discovering*” (*OP* 203; my italics). Both poets may owe their sense of “true” analogy to Hans Vaihinger, who established a distinction between “true . . . analogy” and the “fictitious” kind closely related to his key opposition between “hypothesis” and “fiction”: “The intent of the hypothesis,” he says, “is to *discover*, that of the fiction to *invent*” (Mead 476; my italics).

That Pound and Stevens held out some hope for truth in metaphor will not seem surprising in the light of my earlier point that neither poet

precluded the possibility of a universe of correspondences, but the insistence on truthfulness in metaphor may seem at odds with what I have been calling their “agnostic” attitude—an attitude prone to bracketing Cartesian questions about truth and illusion. The key to resolving this problem, I think, is to translate Pound’s and Stevens’ concept of “truth” in the Jamesian pragmatic sense: that is to say, as truth, not in the sense of correspondence to a pre-existing reality, but of correspondence to an as yet unmade reality. Pragmatic truth is something that “happens to” propositions when their makers attempt to live by them.

Pragmatic hypotheses may have the effect of transforming the very world against which they are tested: they “emerge from facts,” but also “dip forward into facts . . . and add to them; which facts again create or reveal new truth . . . and so on indefinitely” (James, *Pragmatism* 101; my italics). The very act of formulating the hypothesis results in the “discovery” of previously unrealized realities.<sup>16</sup> The special relevance of this vision for Pound’s and Stevens’ understanding of truth as a property of metaphor is suggested by James’s numerous references to the essential role played by the perception of analogies in the process of changing reality. In *A Pluralistic Universe*, he represents the transformation of the world as being a matter of discarding old categories and perceiving “new kinds of sameness” (152). The “pluralistic universe” is an alternative to the fixed, monadic world of the symbolists, a place where the process of analogy making and unmaking, associating and dissociating, ordering and dissolving, never stops (see Rae 74 and Sutton).

It is just this kind of “truth,” I would argue, that Pound and Stevens grant to their “right” or “interpretive”<sup>17</sup> metaphors. Both poets dwell on metaphor’s function to effect “metamorphosis” (Pound, *Literary Essays* 431; Stevens, *NA* 45, 72). Both imagine poetry as a “presentation” of possibilities, rather than a “description” of what is already there (Pound, *Literary Essays* 6; Stevens, *CP* 339). Echoing James, Stevens contends that the most desirable analogies spawn a “universe of reproduction” that “is not an assembly line but an incessant creation” (*NA* 73). And, as I have been suggesting, paratactic arrangements and similes are the best means of producing such energy, since, resolving nothing for the reader, they leave it to her to choose provisionally the priority of similarity over difference, or vice versa, and to test it out. Thus the reader of Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” might choose to proceed with a sense of humanity’s shared fragility with spring blossoms and perhaps later to counter with a conviction about the much greater degree of control humans have, as compared with blossoms, over their environment. An American reader of Pound’s Canto XXI, interested in perpetuating the ideals of the founding fathers, might embrace a perceived similarity between Jefferson and Cosimo de’ Medici (Jefferson, like his Italian counterpart, might be conceived as a man committed to creative patronage), or, on reflection, to assert their difference (Medici’s vision was the natural product of a rich cultural environ-

ment; Jefferson had nothing comparable to inspire him).<sup>18</sup> It is for the reader, in other words, to determine, and thus, perhaps, through her own ensuing actions to create, Pound's famous "repeats in history" (*Selected Letters* 210). Pound's sense of this potential for self-transformation—for the reader's realization of his or her own latent powers—is evident from his earliest imagist theory, where he envisions the perception of a pair of analogous images, the Image, producing a "sudden growth" in the consciousness (*Literary Essays* 4). The Image, he says, is an equation for a mood, or state of mind—something that, as we have seen Skaff explain, brings latent states into full-blown existence (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 92). Of the critics who have taken this (surrealist) hope as hermeneutical instruction, Frank Lentricchia has given perhaps the most eloquent summary of what it is to interpret Pound. The ideogram, he says, is

a stark juxtaposition that yields its significance in some third, unnamed thing to be construed (imagined, created), by an active reader in the process of interpretation, whose own imaginative life will be the force which brings Pound's cultural hope to realization, and who is charged with voicing the poem's otherwise unvoiced vision, with making the diagnosis, distributing Pound's medicine. . . . Pound's critic becomes the reader as modernist, comaker of *The Cantos*, and coworker in the enterprise of culture-making. (219)

Stevens clearly shares Pound's sense that the perception of similarity in dissimilar things can be a means of transformation:

If resemblance is described as a partial similarity between two dissimilar things, it complements and reinforces that which the two dissimilar things have in common. It makes it brilliant. When the similarity is between things of adequate dignity, the resemblance may be said to transfigure or to sublimate them. Take, for example, the resemblance between reality and any projection of it in belief or in metaphor. What is it that these two have in common? *Is not the glory of the idea of any future state a relation between a present and a future glory?* The brilliance of earth is the brilliance of every paradise. (*NA* 77; my italics)

His juxtapositions and strings of similes have the potential to effect such transformation by inspiring recognition and, in many cases, self-realization. The reader bears the responsibility of recognizing similarities, and also differences: "That strange flower, the sun, / Is just what you say. / Have it your way" (*CP* 85). So when "The Red Fern" invites us to contemplate the "large-leaved day . . . difficult fern . . . paternal flame . . . dazzling, bulging, brightest core . . . furiously burning father-fire" (*CP* 365),

we may choose to be swept up by a perception of the masculine force coursing through creation, or to be calmed by a sense of the cool green difference-from-fire of leaves and ferns. The bloody battle-flag may flap in the breeze, but it may also be countered by thoughts of peace, tranquility, and passivity. The series of similes in "As at a Theatre" has similar potential:

Another sunlight might make another world,  
Green, more or less, in green and blue in blue,  
Like taste distasting the first fruit of a vine,  
Like an eye too young to grapple its primitive,  
Like the artifice of a new reality,  
Like the chromatic calendar of time to come.

It might be the candle of another being,  
Ragged in unkempt perceptions, that stands  
And meditates an image of itself,  
Studies and shapes a tallowy image, swarmed  
With slight, prismatic reeks not recollected,  
A bubble without a wall on which to hang. (OP 118–19)

The overt similes and conditionals make this a more coercive arrangement than Pound's historical juxtapositions, but they dare the reader in a similar way, suggesting resemblances and patterns she may, through recognizing, realize. She may be inspired to create a new world, to let go of the hampering apprehension produced by the first taste of a thing, to see reality with the eyes of a child, to burn like a newly lit candle, to conceive of a provisional new self. Or she may be held back by the many complicating differences preserved through the similes, by a sense of the fragility of flames and newly conceived selves. As Brogan describes the effect of the Stevensian simile, "Although [it] may well undercut the possibility of oneness, or being, or correspondence, *it is also the means of positing their possibility*" (154; my italics).

There is similar potential for self-discovery and self-realization in Stevens' paratactic arrangements of propositions, "chalked / On the sidewalk so that the pensive man may see" (CP 216). These "contrary theses" frequently take the form of alternative metaphysical judgments about the origins of perceptions, particularly perceptions matching human desire. One typically classifies such perceptions as willed illusions, while the other affirms their accuracy. "It could be that the sun shines / Because I desire it to shine or else / That I desire it to shine because it shines" (OP 113). The "Crow," with his ugly song, "is realist"; "But, then, / Oriole," with his optimistic chirping, "also, may be realist" (CP 154). Or, to select an example of such a pairing from Stevens' paratactic prose, it could be that "the intensification of the sense of reality *creates* a resemblance," or that "the in-

tensification of reality *by* resemblance increases realization" (NA 79; my italics). Since neither proposition, in such cases, is given grammatical precedence over the other, neither attains the status of dogma. Each one stands on its own and both stand together, provoking the same questions as startlingly different images or "disjunctive" facts. Are these propositions irreconcilable alternatives? Or is there something that unites them? Is there an account of things that might subsume both of them? After a while, contemplation might produce the counter-intellectual insight that these contraries are oddly similar. They both describe states of affairs motivated by other states of affairs. They are both compatible with a world where to imagine a thing is to help realize it. Our hearts may swell with the possibility that both statements are true, and we may be motivated to act to affirm our desires. Meditating over such contrary theses in parataxis, and entertaining the "relation" that emerges, unexpectedly, like "the shade / Of a cloud on sand, a shape on the side of a hill" (CP 215), we may find ourselves, in short, appreciating Stevens' most frequently articulated, and inspiring, paradox, which itself challenges a key assumption underlining the Pound/Stevens divide: that the imagined and the real, the thing beyond us, and ourselves, might be one.

So yet another of the binaries underpinning the proclamation that Pound and Stevens are incompatible turns out, by their own measure, to be a false one: the opposition between metaphor and realism, figuration and accurate mimesis. Stevens' analogies, no less than the shadowy patterns emerging in Pound's "aerial maps," have the potential to function performatively, both to distort and to mirror the world. They do not "evade" reality, but help to create it.<sup>19</sup>

It would be against the spirit of the poetics I have been describing to insist on the identical nature of Pound's and Stevens' accomplishments. My suggestions about their similarities will undoubtedly provoke counter-arguments pointing out their differences. It could be countered, for example, that the different materials the poets juxtapose far outweigh any likeness based in their general attraction to juxtaposition, that Pound's interest in historical specifics will always set him apart from the more abstracted Stevens. It could be argued, too, that Stevens is less successful in matching his expressed conception of poetic knowledge with his art, that, despite his agnosticism about correspondences, he depends heavily on the dogmatic practice of anagogic metaphor. Coming as it does out of a very different context than the one in which Perloff originally formulated the Pound/Stevens divide—the British and Canadian academies of the 1980s and 1990s, where Pound and Stevens seemed more a part of literary and intellectual history than part of a living tradition of American creative writing—my perspective may place excessive emphasis on theories of creative activity and too little emphasis on the impressions of style. What the three areas of similarity I have been discussing point to, nonetheless, is that the borderline dividing "Pound/Stevens" in 1982 effaced the poets'

powerful shared antipathy to some of the key distinctions it implied: particularly those between metonymy and metaphor, parataxis and lyric, reality and the imagination. One of the most important lessons we've learned in the past two decades may be that the agnostic and pragmatic spirit of their poetry is more interesting than what divides them, a "shadowy relation" within a modernist tradition to which both belong.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jakobson explains his notion of the "metaphoric way" in the following: "The development of a discourse may take place along two different semantic lines: one topic may lead to another either through their similarity or through their contiguity. The metaphoric way would be the most appropriate term for the first case and the metonymic way for the second, since they find their most condensed expression in metaphor and metonymy respectively" (76). That Jakobson's understanding of the tendency encompasses the kind of montage structure found in Pound is affirmed by his own classification of "filmic similes," or "lap dissolves," as metaphoric (78).

<sup>2</sup>For Frye's account of the four stages of metaphor, which include juxtaposition and simile as well as "anagogic," or substitutive, metaphor, see *Anatomy of Criticism* 123–25. Charles O. Hartman offers a comparatively broad use of metaphor in "Cognitive Metaphor," where he argues that all metaphors, including anagogic ones, should be conceived as analogies (327). In *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle states "the simile . . . is a metaphor differing only by the addition of a word, . . . ; it does not say that this is that" (397). This differs from the *Poetics*, where he characterizes it, more narrowly, as a mode of substitution (see Maeder 46 and 218 n 4). Maeder points especially to 1457b and 1458a, where Aristotle conflates terms derived from *metapherein*, "to carry across, transfer," and *metatitein*, "to place across, replace, supplant, substitute."

<sup>3</sup>For further support for the practice of viewing *The Cantos* as record of an experience, see Yee, 255.

<sup>4</sup>Comparable efforts to efface the status of perceived relations shape Stevens' fulsome description of the experience of metaphor in "Credences of Summer," where "evasion" (CP 373) may be the effect of metaphor, or of allowing only a single metaphor, instead of many in succession, and the ambiguously phrased proposition about the status of mystical correspondences ("intimations of immortality" [NA 75]) sensed in an object on the mantelpiece in "Three Academic Pieces" (see the analysis of this passage in Rae 193). Stevens' general essays on poetry underscore the point in their insistence that the poet's task is one of rendering his "sense of" the world, rather than the final truth about it (see NA 119, 121).

For another striking correlation between Stevens and Pound in their retreat from metaphysics, compare the passage cited from *Gaudier-Brzeska* to Canto X of "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," where Stevens eschews claims about poets ("fops of fancy") apprehending mystical forests for a more cautious description of poetic knowledge: knowledge of "a tree that bears / A semblance to the thing I have in mind" (CP 17).

<sup>5</sup>Among the dogmatic statements about Pound's anti-symbolism, the most important for Perloff seems to be Schneidau's in "Wisdom Past Metaphor." Schneidau contends that "the combination-and-contexture function" of metonymy, "not that of similarities among things" (17; my italics), is the basis of Pound's ideogrammic method, and he cites D. S. Carne-Ross about Pound's resistance to methods of substitution: "Pound is

not polysemous; his first level doesn't point beyond itself" (14). Perloff cites Schneidau, Carne-Ross, and Hugh Kenner, among other critics, in "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" 9–10. Esh, who shares my view that this account of Pound is incorrect, cites its formulation by Max Nänny, "Context, Contiguity and Contact in Ezra Pound's *Personae*," and John Steven Childs, *Modernist Form*.

<sup>6</sup>Perloff cites the phrase " 'constatation of fact' " in *Poetics of Indeterminacy*, 160. For the extremity of her resistance to the possibility that Pound might be attempting to suggest an ordered, interconnected universe, see her criticism of Daniel D. Pearlman's attempt to find coherent patterns in *The Cantos*, 157. Describing Pound's appreciation for Rimbaud, she relies on a binary opposition between Rimbaud's "metonymic displacements" and "symbols pointing beyond themselves" (162); I would suggest that the first of these, for Pound, retained the capacity potentially to "point beyond themselves" to other, similar things.

<sup>7</sup>In listing Pound's anti-symbolist statements, she dismisses as rhetorical overstatement Pound's specification "to use a symbol *with an ascribed or intended meaning* is, usually, to produce very bad art" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 86). In fact, it is precisely *dogmatic* symbolism (Yeats would call it "allegory") that he objects to. See *Gaudier-Brzeska* 85. The merely suggestive is not problematic for him.

Note also the wording of another passage frequently cited in arguments claiming that Pound repudiates symbol: "*Symbols*.—I believe that the proper and perfect symbol is the natural object, that if a man use 'symbols' he must so use them that their symbolic function does not obtrude; so that *a* sense, and the poetic quality of the passage, is not lost to those who do not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk is a hawk" (*Literary Essays* 9). Although Pound is determined not to use language in such a way as to force a symbolic (in the sense of other-than-literal) reading of the facts he presents, it is clear that he wishes to allow for the possibility that they have associations with things other than themselves.

<sup>8</sup>See Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism*: "[I]t is a mistake to distinguish sharply between metaphor and ideogram" (86). Géfin defines the ideogrammatic method as "the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated particulars capable of suggesting ideas and concepts through their relation" (27). Sylvan Esh cites a potentially useful distinction from Hans Osterwalder, regarding the potential for arrays of fragments to function metaphorically: "whereas fragments taken from [a] common linguistic field are metonymic in effect, those in absentia from such a public realm function otherwise. . . . In *The Waste Land*, for example, the Countess Marie Larish's autobiography, or the phrases in Sanskrit, do not belong to the common code, and so function within the text primarily as the projection of equivalences, that is, metaphorically" (138). Since the fragments making up *The Cantos* are drawn from different cultural, temporal, and linguistic spheres, they would seem to qualify as metaphoric in effect, i.e., as inviting considerations of similarity.

<sup>9</sup>Which of similarity or difference impresses first, or anywhere down the line, will depend greatly on the reader; in both cases, the upshot is what Sanford Schwartz has called an ongoing "dialectic of form and flux" (62). For a sample of the kind of reading process in which perceptions of similarity and difference endlessly disrupt one another, see Rae 78.

The potential for perceiving analogies in Pound's early *Imagiste* poems and in the *Cantos*, whether repeats in history, in syntax, or in sound, has been amply demonstrated by Sylvan Esh, Peter Makin, Lazslo Géfin, and Hugh Kenner ("Self-similarity, Fractals, Cantos") among others. The seemingly random details Perloff cites as evidence of Pound's resistance to design (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 155–99) ought perhaps, then, to be contemplated from a *more distant* perspective, which enables us to see them as differences that challenge *identification*, but not necessarily *similarity*.

<sup>10</sup>Note especially Perloff's point about collage-technique having its "direct opposite" in Wordsworth (*Dance* 15). I am grateful to Mark Jones for teaching me about the importance of parataxis in Wordsworth's provocative poetics.

<sup>11</sup>Stevens also expresses his vision of the simultaneous preservation of incipient concept and particular in the poem "Thinking of a Relation between the Images of Metaphors," where the fisherman's eye, in which a dove resembles the category of "dove," also preserves the individual dove's idiosyncratic appearance (*CP* 357). He celebrates a similar moment in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": one of "stop[ping] to watch / A definition growing certain and / [of] Wait[ing] within that certainty" (*CP* 386). See also "The Course of a Particular": even "though one says that one is part of everything," ultimately "There is a conflict, there is a resistance involved" (*OP* 123).

<sup>12</sup>In support of her search for such structures, Brogan cites the following passage from a 1940 letter Stevens wrote to Hi Simons:

"The chord destroys its elements by uniting them in the chord. They then cease to exist separately. On the other hand, discord exaggerates the separation between its elements. . . . As between reality and the imagination, we look forward to an era where there will exist the supreme balance between these two. (*L*, 363)" (117)

<sup>13</sup>In stating that there has been a practice of dissociating pragmatism and truth, I am thinking here of the pragmatism debates of the 1980s and 1990s, with Rorty at their center, in which there was considerable debate over whether a pragmatic approach to propositions allows for efforts at verification. Jamesian pragmatists such as Cornel West have argued against Rorty's position that pragmatism precludes concerns about the relative truthfulness of propositions.

<sup>14</sup>Stevens expresses an interest in catering to the reader "for whom the effect of analogy is the effect of the degree of appositeness," the reader to whom "in the vast association of ideas there [might exist] for every object its appointed objectification" (*NA* 114), a view that allows for the symbolist presumption about eternal correspondences. If poetry "did nothing but satisfy a desire," he insists, it "would not rise above the level of many lesser things": "Its singularity is that in the act of satisfying the desire for resemblance it touches the sense of reality, it enhances the sense of reality, heightens it, intensifies it" (*NA* 77).

<sup>15</sup>Cf. "Cavalcanti," *Literary Essays* 162, "Affirmations: As for Imagisme," *Selected Prose* 344, and Pound's general definition of what it means for art to be "interpretive," "Psychology and Troubadours": "An art is vital only so long as it is interpretive, so long, that is, as it manifests something which the artist perceives at greater intensity and more intimately than his public. . . . [T]hey will attend him only so long as his statements seem, or are proven true. If he forsake this honour of interpreting, if he speak for the pleasure of hearing his own voice, though they may listen for a while to the babble and to the sound of the painted words, there comes, after a little, a murmur, a slight stirring, and then that condition which we see about us, and which is cried out upon as the 'divorce of art and life'" (37-38).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Albert Einstein's and Werner Heisenberg's views of the function of hypothesis, as cited in Géfin 32-33.

<sup>17</sup>Ethan Lewis has pointed out that the term "interpretive" suggests some alteration of reality: "To *interpret*, of course, is not to describe but to reconstruct: to reconceive with added perspective; or represent in comprehensible terms" (199-200).

<sup>18</sup>For fuller readings along these lines, see Rae 96-97; Makin, 67, 71-72; Géfin 39-40; O'Driscoll, 186-87.

<sup>19</sup>There is a treatise to be written rereading Stevens' notion of "evasion," particularly the phrase "the intricate evasions of as" (*CP* 486). Evading one reality may mean

"going out" into another, fresher one, for which the recognitions of "as" are responsible ("of" here signifying "belonging to").

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# How to Do Things with Modernism

DOUGLAS MAO

LET US BEGIN with a very basic question about the text we are here to revisit: What, exactly, did Marjorie Perloff accomplish in giving her critical interrogative the form “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” A few paragraphs into that influential essay, Perloff herself supplies a straightforward answer, writing of her wish to respond to Harold Bloom’s suggestion that “The Pound Era” (Hugh Kenner’s name for the period of modernism) be replaced with the equally tendentious “Stevens Era” or “Age of Stevens.” According to the Perloff of 1982, the split between proponents of the former and advocates of the latter is “neither an idle quarrel nor a narrow sectarian war between rival academics”; rather, its very existence “raises . . . central questions about the meaning of Modernism—indeed about the meaning of poetry itself in current literary history and theory” (486). With this last point I heartily concur (even though her own contribution to this forum suggests that Perloff now doubts its pertinence), and I hope it will be clear that in attending closely to the rhetoric of “Pound/Stevens” in the following pages, I aim less to offer a (very late) counter-assessment than to consider how that rhetoric illuminates questions about modernism and poetry still very much with us.

I should also stress that I have no doubt about the sincerity of Perloff’s desire to counter Bloom in 1982. Today, the effort to subsume modernism (if not all worthwhile literature) under a larger romanticism might seem a little fantastical, but twenty years ago one might not have been sure how extensive its consequences would be. The paragraph from *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* containing Bloom’s suggestion actually begins, “I think that Stevens here ventures the crucial formula for American Romantic poetry, including even Eliot, Pound, and Williams at their infrequent best: it must make the visible a little hard to see, which is one of the great achievements of Whitman and Dickinson” (152). Indeed an important strategy of this phase of Perloff’s work lay in its use of Bloom’s very notoriety to make a case for the poetry most distant from the meditative romantic lyric. Modernism, Perloff implied, might be in danger of erasure as long as works like “Notes toward a Supreme Fiction” were reflexively privileged over works like the *Cantos*. What I do wonder, however, is whether putting “modernism” into the picture did not insure that Stevens

would lose the “era” contest just as certainly as Bloom’s framework guaranteed that he would win it. For if we have to choose between Pound and Stevens when naming the age of modernism as such, then the impresario, poet, manifesto-writer, essayist, journalist, translator, and boundlessly energetic center of the London vortex seems manifestly to exert a stronger claim than the often deliberately peripheral lawyer of Hartford. It seems obvious that Pound simply *did* a great deal more than Stevens to promote that group of texts and artists we now identify as modernist—as even Bloom was aware when he tossed out, *en passant*, his revisionist proposal.

This matter of what Pound did for modernism in terms of general promotion is not one upon which Perloff touches explicitly, though it is one leg of Kenner’s argument for “The Pound Era” and a point of common knowledge (among students of modern poetry) upon which Perloff tacitly relies. Much more explicitly absorbing to Perloff is the other leg of Kenner’s case, the very reasonable claim that if the time must be defined by what was evidently new in the texts of literary Anglo-American modernism, the palm must again go to Pound, the formal innovator, rather than Stevens, the purveyor of left-justified tercets in blank verse. Perloff never declares outright that Stevens’ strength is matter and Pound’s manner, but the principal theme of her essay is that Stevens’ partisans praise him for content (albeit of a very restricted and peculiar kind) while Poundians push their candidate on the ground of form. “Bloom’s value judgments . . . refer always to what the poet is saying rather than to how he says it. The poem’s sound structure . . . is treated as a mere irrelevancy” (489)<sup>1</sup>; Stevens’ derogation of Williams for being more “‘interested in the way of saying things than in what he has to say’” leads, in Kenner’s view, to “‘one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in literary history’” (492); Herbert Schneidau, also playing for the Pound team, emphasizes “the *how* rather than the *what* of poetic discourse” (496).

Supported by two decades’ worth of new scholarship, of course, one might poke holes in this argument: one might point to the substantial body of work concerned with Pound’s economics or Stevens’ syntax to show how inadequate are formulations pitting a Pound with nothing to say against a Stevens with no compelling way of saying.<sup>2</sup> One might also linger over the opposition just as Perloff frames it, however, to notice that this second leg of Kenner’s case for the Pound era, like the first, is tightly bound up with the question of doing. The implication throughout Perloff’s essay, after all, is that by helping to break the old formal patterns, by opening the look and feel of English-language poetry to so many new possibilities, Pound once again did more to make the era in question an era at all. According to Perloff, Poundians “regard Modernism less as a continuation of Romanticism than as a very real rupture with it” (505), whereas “those who regard Stevens as the great poet of our time” admire his “re-statement, in chastened, qualified, and ironic form, of the Romantic position, his Emersonian . . . or Coleridgean . . . or Keatsian . . . ethos” (498).

Again, one may rightly object that this characterization has never applied to all partisans of Stevens, or does not any more. And yet only the most intransigent Stevensians will deny that their poet's modernism can sometimes feel like a nothing, which is not there, or a nothing that is.<sup>3</sup>

Should we therefore accept the implication that when it comes to doing, Pound's form trumps Stevens' content? In truth, there are at least two good reasons to do so, in spite of the fact that in ordinary life we tend to associate meaningful doing with the meatiness of content rather than the contingency of mere form. One reason why the connection between form and doing compels regard is that, as theorists since and before Victor Shklovsky and Jan Mukarovsky have insisted, the poetic or literary world is unlike the world of ordinary life in being *essentially* occupied with the how of saying.<sup>4</sup> A change in form arguably represents a change in the what of poetry *qua* poetry after all, because the poetic, or the literary, is defined by a refusal of the vehicle to fade into transparency as we absorb the tenor.

A second reason why changes in form have a particular affinity with doing, however, is simply that meaningful action is most easily demonstrated where there has been an alteration of reality that we can see, hear, or touch. Because there is no seeing, hearing, or touching apart from form, formal innovations seem to stand as their own evidence, whereas arguments respecting novelty in content can go on interminably. This second affinity between form and doing applies to the quotidian world as well as the world of poetry, of course, but it works more potently in the latter, where the marks of doing appear right on the page in front of us, in the visible letter rather than the abstract spirit. It is worth noting that one of the other themes of Perloff's essay is the intenser materiality of Pound's method—its nurturing of concrete particulars (495), its affinities with collage (499), its "essentially spatial" character (499), its disposition toward usefulness ("like Jefferson's plough," in Kenner's words [496]), and above all its ontology as a kind of thing in itself. "For Stevens," Perloff observes, "Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed" . . . ; for Pound, form *is* that reality" (497).

One might imagine that a poem with spatial and material inclinations rather than temporal and transcendental ones would be unusually static, but in this essay and elsewhere Perloff tries hard to counter such an inference. Following the lead of Pound himself, who made much of Ernest Fenollosa's suggestion that nouns are really just nexuses of verbs, she insists that the *Cantos* is utterly dynamic because the world it replicates is a world in motion, a world of doing rather than repose. Near the end of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" she remarks that the "*how*, for Poundians, . . . becomes more interesting than the *what*" because poetry's "processes imitate," or should imitate, "the processes of the external world as we have come to know it." She then goes on to disclose what has perhaps been the motor of her argument all along, noting that Pound's supporters "return to the Aristotelian definition of *poiesis* as *mimesis praxeos*, the imitation of

an action" (506). "The imitation of an action": 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.

In a moment, we will inquire further into what Perloff means when she asserts that Poundian poetry replicates the processes of the world, but we might first pause to recall that Pound's notable doing encompassed not only a change *in* form (an alteration of what poems look like), but also a change *toward* form—a critical transvaluation that makes a dominant criterion in assessing a poem's value the degree to which it distinguishes itself from patterns, shapes, styles already in existence. The revolution in taste in which Pound assumed so large a role was far from the first in English-language poetics, of course, but it was arguably *the* moment at which it became possible to esteem a new way of saying preeminently and explicitly for its newness, rather than its fidelity to reality or ordinary speech, its capaciousness, its elegance, or other qualities that novelty might support.

With this in mind, we can see more readily how the positioning of Bloom as principal heavy of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" carries an importance undiminished by the recession of his kind of Oedipal influence study. More generatively interested in the continuity of literary discontinuity than any other critic, Bloom no less than Perloff believes that the writer who matters is the one who makes new, which is to say that when Perloff assigns him (along with J. Hillis Miller, Frank Kermode, and Helen Vendler) the slogan "MAKE IT OLD" (498), she seems really to want to call attention to a sense in which his own principles demand a vote for Pound. What Perloff perhaps misses, however, is that Bloom prefers Stevens not because Pound's agon with the past is less intense, but because it is less subtly (that is, more visibly) conducted—and for this very reason less successful. "The visible" should be "a little hard to see": Bloom remains unimpressed by the Poundian change in form, that is, because his scheme of values is largely unaffected by the Poundian change *toward* form. In this, he follows Stevens, whose 1951 remarks on the division between poetry " 'modern in respect to what it says' " and poetry " 'modern in respect to form' " Perloff quotes. The first kind, Stevens avers, " 'accepts a banality of form as incidental to its language,' " whereas the second has given rise to many poems " 'in which the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation or similar aberrations. These,' " Stevens concludes magisterially, " 'have nothing to do with being alive' " (492).

To return, in any case, to the aligning of Poundian poetics with *mimesis praxeos*. On one side of the opposition Perloff constructs, we find form and doing; on the other, content and—what, actually, if not navel-gazing? Early on in "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" Perloff hints that the missing term might be "thinking," inasmuch as she finds a "neatly reductive version of

the anti-Pound myth" in a quotation from Lucy Beckett's 1974 book on Stevens. "'Aware of technique only, not of the poet's responsibility to the disciplined use of language,'" Beckett writes, Pound

is hardly aware at all of the poet's responsibility in respect of thought. . . . [T]he *Cantos*, that colossal attempt to master reality with *persistence of method* rather than with *persistence of thought*, remains the saddest of modern defeats. (486–87)

One might read the ensuing pages of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" not as a critique of this characterization as such but rather as a reversal of its valence. For if the business of poetry is the handling of words instead of the sharing of thoughts, if in poetry a change in form represents a change in content, then what Beckett reads as a defeat must instead be regarded as a triumph. Persistence of method, Perloff would be arguing, always trumps persistence of thought on the terrain *proper* to poets, let contests respecting the world outside end how they may.

The problem with such an interpretation of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" is that Perloff is by no means ready (nor should she be) to concede extra-poetic reality to the Stevenses and the Blooms. On the contrary, she insists that poetry "must . . . relate to the whole of a man's life in the real world" (491) and that on this score Poundian poetics succeeds just where romantic lyric fails. Whereas the former's processes replicate those of the authentic world out there, she argues, the latter's fixate on those of the mind in here; whereas in Poundian poetics the poet's consciousness figures only as an element in the process of composition, the romantic lyric takes that operation also as its principal subject. Underlying the distinction, one might say, is a basic epistemological divide between (romantic) idealists and (Poundian) anti-idealists, the idealist locating bedrock reality in experience, the anti-idealists in a physical matter or Being ultimately anterior to mediation by the senses. The opposition may be hoary enough in the discipline of philosophy, but for Perloff this does not affect its pertinence to twentieth-century poetry, which seems to divide naturally between hypotactic renderings of the mind's swervings and paratactic evocations of the world in its pre-organized (but organizable) facticity.

Nor does faultiness with respect to its emblematic poets diminish the binary's force. Many readers—I think immediately of Patricia Rae—have since shown how this schematization oversimplifies Stevens' and Pound's theory and practice, but in 1982 Perloff was able to consolidate its imaginative hold by demonstrating its vitality in extant criticism. In the middle section of her essay, she cites testimony to Pound's resistance to inwardness from D. S. Carne-Ross, Guy Davenport, Donald Davie, and Kenner, then remarks in her own voice that to make connections among Pound's allusions is "to discover, not a cluster of possible meanings"—the record of an interpreting consciousness—"but rather the way the *structure* of

Pound's long poem works." She goes on to cite Eva Hesse on Pound's "disjunctive presentation of 'factual atoms'" and the neatly anti-Bloomian doctrine of Richard of St. Victor that the soul "cannot 'delight in itself'" (Canto XC) "as well as Hesse's observation that in Pound, 'Syntax yields to parataxis. . . . Pound juxtapos[es] concrete particulars that he considers meaningful in the conviction that they will speak for themselves.'" Perloff next notes with approval "Kenner's assumption . . . that the formal structure of a work—in this case, the Cubist surface upon which items are arranged in 'transparent overlay'—is itself meaningful"; and she rounds out matters with Herbert Schneidau, insisting that Pound's preference for the metonymic over the metaphoric—his belief that "the cherry tree is *all that it does*"—is "a revolutionary break-away from metaphoric habits in composing poems" (493–96).

These sorts of claims appear in many defenses of what Perloff and others have variously called open, experimental, radical, avant-garde, anti-Symbolist, impure, anti-epiphanic, and logopoeic form,<sup>5</sup> and they are almost always marked, as they are here, by a certain ambivalence about whether the best thing about such form is its refusal of mastery, its newness, or its adequacy to reality. About the refusal of mastery I will have more to say below, but we can notice right now how both novelty and truth are saluted in, for example, the last quotation from Schneidau. Schneidau's implication, after all, is not only that a "revolutionary break-away from . . . habits" is almost always to be prized, but also that Pound's action- and surface-oriented appreciation of the cherry tree ("is *all that it does*") is more essentially faithful to that object's reality than, say, any symbolist or associationist fantasia. To be sure, invoking novelty and truth as determinants of worth is not a habit peculiar to partisans of the paratactic or logopoeic. It is hard to imagine many literary critics these days wholly disavowing originality as a virtue, and while Truth as such still has a shady reputation, there are few ready to praise writing that seems to get the world wrong in some fundamental way. Yet the conflation of newness and truth often does carry a particular *historical* charge when invoked on behalf of Perloff's kind of composition. Or, more exactly, when deployed *against* the kind of writing that serves as the vast other to that composition, the kind that involves not merely the laying out of "factual atoms" but also the proposal and defense of various ways of organizing those atoms, conducted in accordance with common standards of logic and ordinary procedures of argument.

The historical charge I have in mind remains implicit through most of Perloff's polemics, but it does break out into the open here and there. One such moment comes in a section of her 1996 study, *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, in which Perloff contrasts Ludwig Wittgenstein's involvement in the Great War with Bertrand Russell's campaign against the same. Unfolding her case against Russell's adherence to a philosophical inquiry that Wittgenstein allegedly showed to be bankrupt, Perloff asks at one point,

"[I]s Russell banking on a rationalism that is part of his aristocratic Whig heritage, a rationalism that has proved to be increasingly unable to cope with the upheavals of the twentieth century?" (36). In its framing context of twentieth-century poetics, this rhetorical question recalls that for many writers, one motive for choosing the paratactic-logopoeic-impure over more traditional forms lay in the apparent inadequacy of reason and the discursive structures that supported it—whether this inadequacy was understood as a transhistorical fraudulence or a failure to meet the pressures of the modern world specifically. When in 1941 Max Horkheimer marked the early twentieth century as the time of "The End of Reason," he meant in part to recall how the Third Reich, as a late synecdoche for the age, undid rationalism's credibility simply by overwhelming civilized debate, discourse, and diplomacy with violence—how its unapologetic retrogression administered a death blow to narratives of progress, Whiggish or otherwise, that saw humanity inexorably led *ad astra* by the powers of lucid thought.<sup>6</sup> Writers such as T. E. Hulme, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and Pound himself at times invoked a hard-edged classicism against the roiling of romantic emotions, but most students of modernism understand this to be a kind of rearguard action in an age in which unreason seemed unquestionably to take the lead. From the perspective that locates the essence of the twentieth century in its large-scale catastrophes, the period seems—pace the romantics and what they thought they were up to—the one in which the irrational truly came (back) into its own.

What this means is that Poundian poetics could affiliate itself with the essence of the modern, and with doing rather than the failure of doing, in a sense additional to the two already named. It is not only that the method of the *Cantos* is associated with a change in form (a more visible doing in poetic texts themselves) and a change toward form (a transformation of critical standards under which visible doing attained an unprecedented importance). It is also that insofar as Poundian poetics refused the syntax of logically ordered propositions identified with reason and logical argument, it seemed willing to confront the irrational modern age on its own terms, willing to choose as its weapon something closer to the age's own extra- or anti-rational modes than the confidently syllogistic strategies inherited from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse. Doing may or may not have opposed thinking in some essential way, as far as early paratactic poetics was concerned, but doing something worthwhile in the early twentieth century *could* mean opposing thinking in the sense of old-fashioned syllogistic reasoning and moral suasion.<sup>7</sup>

(One could, of course, challenge the idea that the true relation between reason's alleged exhaustion and the new poetry was one of initial problem and eventual solution. With respect to Pound in particular, one could argue that formal innovation was driven by a more or less wholly intraliterary sense of the burden of the past, if not by sheer personal cantankerousness, and that Pound found in the reverses of reason a kind of ex post

facto legitimation for inventions whose initial attraction was simply that they were inventions. This counter-narrative would be supported by the delay between Pound's development of an ideogrammic method, through the 1910s and 1920s, and his naming and theorizing of that method, beginning around 1929. It would be undercut, on the other hand, by the observation that early formulations such as the Luminous Detail [1911] and the Image [1912], not to mention remarks on the ideogram as early as *Gaudier-Brzeska* [1916], already indicate an affinity for the kind of understanding that comes in revelatory flashes rather than from the patient working through of logical arguments. Deciding for either narrative, however, would leave unaffected the point that Poundian poetics' *claim* to an essential modernism has long been bound up with anxiety about the limitations of rational discourse.)

The apparent limitedness of its sway was not the only problem with reason, however. For if, in Horkheimer's formulation, one face of the "End of Reason" could be discerned in the violent unreason of National Socialism, the other appeared most spectacularly in that regime's exorbitant rationality—in its demonstration, above all through technologies of genocide and mass manipulation, that the progress of systematic thinking need not mean the progress of social good.<sup>8</sup> The paradox of reason in the time of modernism, in other words, was that it had come to seem at once superseded and coercive. In recent years, of course, this premise has received powerful reinforcement from the postcolonial critique of reason as the Enlightenment's most efficacious gift to imperialism, and it is instructive, but not surprising, that in the Wittgenstein book Perloff scores her best hit against Russell simply by quoting that philosopher's justification of "the process by which the American continent has been acquired for European civilization" (35).

In promotions of open form, meanwhile, there may be no point more relentlessly pressed than that closed form mimes, and in so doing colludes with, repressive political structures. Taking up the matter of Pound's politics in a speech reprinted in his 1999 collection, *My Way*, for example, Charles Bernstein insists that "the meaning of [the formal] innovations [of *The Cantos*] can be adequately appreciated only after we consider the context of their fascist roots," then unfolds this appreciation as a distinction between a "hierarchical and phallogocentric" montage (what Pound set out to achieve) and an open, politically promising collage, "a field of many voices without the fulcrum point of any final arbitration, *listening not judging*" (what Pound in fact achieved). According to Bernstein,

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. . . . Every grain or strain or swatch has its own claim to truth . . . as part of the democracy of words and cultures and histories, all impossible

to exhaust or rank. . . . The present flourishing of a formally innovative, open, investigative poetry—a poetry that refuses to take subject matter, syntax, grammar, or vocabulary for granted and that rejects simple and received notions of unity of conceit, closure, and prosody—is unprecedented in its scale in American literature. (160–63)<sup>9</sup>

For poets such as Bernstein, the polyvocality of open form is inseparable from its paratactic inclination, its resistance to what he takes to be closed or traditional form's will to impose a particular point of view on the reader. Defenders of the latter kind of form, of course, might retort that works claiming to lay out grains and swatches of reality non-judgmentally are as coercive as their overtly judging counterparts, only perhaps more stealthily so, since the very process of selection will always be ideologically inflected. From this perspective, it is the proponents of open form who perform the more damaging reification, making the text an order to whose dictates the reader must submit instead of an element in a conversation, an edict foreclosing dissent instead of a proposal exposing itself to refutation (the very refutation that paratactic or metonymic writing tries to evade). Against these points, the proponent of open form might counter in turn that the real mystification inheres in the Habermasian pretense that all people could have equal access to the conversation, when in fact this is impossible.<sup>10</sup> The other side might then demand why the proper response to this problem should be a putatively polyvocal text instead of a more directed documenting of the mechanisms of deprivation. And so on and so on.

Wherever these sorts of debates wind up on particular occasions, and however wearying they may be for those who take either poetic autonomy or the impossibility thereof as a given, the conflict continues to shape the theory and practice of poets. This is one reason why Perloff's 1982 characterization of the debate retains its importance, even though scholars have lately proven more willing to acknowledge the claims of both Pound and Stevens, and even though the most interesting poets writing today complicate or undo the opposition between open and closed, avant-garde and traditional, paratactic and syllogistic. Another reason why Perloff's 1982 treatment of the debate remains significant, however, has to do less with poets specifically than with intellectuals generally, and with the meaning of thinking in the modern world.

To see how this is so, we might recall that the open-closed or paratactic-syllogistic debate really does originate, in significant measure, with Pound's own mistrust of traditional modes of reasoning and argument. Consider, here, his praise in the *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) of the anthropologist Leo Frobenius, whose "value . . . to civilization" lies not in "the rightness or wrongness of this opinion or that opinion" but in "the kind of thinking he does," in his way of "mark[ing] out . . . the difference between knowledge

that has to be acquired by particular effort and knowing that is in people, 'in the air' " (57). According to Pound, Frobenius' "archaeology is not retrospective, it is immediate," as exemplified by the story that he

looked at two African pots and, observing their shapes and proportions, said: if you will go to a certain place and there digge, you will find traces of a civilization with such and such characteristics.

As was the case. In event proved. (60–61)

Or we might recall, still more pertinently, these moments from Pound's 1935 *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*:

I am not putting these sentences in monilinear syllogistic arrangement, and I have no intention of using that old form of trickery to fool the reader, any reader, into thinking I have proved anything, or that having read a paragraph of my writing he KNOWS something that he can only *know* by examining a dozen or two dozen facts and putting them all together. (28)

Any thorough judgment of MUSSOLINI will be in a measure an act of faith. . . . (33)

You can't *prove* by Euclid what Mussolini intends to do the year after the year after next but you can use some sort of common sense or general intuition. (93)<sup>11</sup>

Few critical shortcuts are more reprehensible, to my mind, than the one that uses Pound's fascist allegiances to discredit his poetics *tout court*, and it is certainly disheartening that most readers remain unaware how fantastic and wishful his understanding of Mussolini's program really was. At the same time, however (and here I agree with Bernstein's basic premise), debates on the politics of form will necessarily be impoverished where they forget that one condition of Pound's Fascist turn was the ideogrammic intuitionism elaborated in passages like these—his belief that the way to know things was not through careful analysis of as much information as one can possibly gather but via epiphanies experienced in the presence of luminous details. This cento of quotations provokes special discomfort, of course, because it suggests unusually starkly how a suspicion of syllogistic discourse, and an accompanying advocacy of the extremely paratactic or metonymic ("something that he can only *know* by examining a dozen or two dozen facts and putting them all together"), can serve authoritarian purposes even in spite of broadly antiauthoritarian intentions. It suggests, in other words, that Bernstein misses the most crucial point about "the fascist roots" of Pound's innovations when he attempts to separate montage-as-intention from collage-as-result.

What made Pound's inclination toward intuitionism particularly dangerous in the 1930s, of course, was that it remained tethered to an obsession with the kind of figure theoretically presented by Benito Mussolini, the man of action who goes out and does things rather than merely thinking about them. Seeking such figures in the past, Pound was led to develop a famously curious pantheon, headed by a fifteenth-century condottiere whose allure lay in the uniting of martial swagger with exactly one cultural achievement, the commissioning of an edifice arguably embodying the classicizing spirit of the Renaissance.<sup>12</sup> In the world of the present, however, Pound found an idol made to order for his imagination, a man who not only proposed to lead admired Italy into a second renaissance but also seemed, to the world at large, the single great instance of a person getting things done in an otherwise rudderless age. Mussolini's own propaganda identified fascism with "an ideal of force in action" that made it "the characteristic doctrine of [its] time" (25–26), and the point carried so widely and successfully that it touched, briefly, even writers as distant as Stevens in Hartford.<sup>13</sup> If in the *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* passages trust in Il Duce seems naturally paired with mistrust of syllogism, this is so because both are associated with an action that advances (in contrast to a thinking that paralyzes) and by extension with the essential modernness that the age demanded. Mussolini seemed a consummately modern leader because the reputed swiftness and efficiency of his doing matched the temper of an accelerating world; Pound's modernness was enhanced, if not exactly secured, by his belief that knowledge arrived at slowly might have to be discounted as knowledge.

Instructively, something like Pound's admiration of action (though nothing of his admiration for phallogocratic politicians, let alone authoritarian regimes) informs Perloff's treatment of Russell and Wittgenstein in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*. Perloff begins this discussion by citing Russell's admission, in a letter, that Wittgenstein's discoveries had weakened philosophy's hold on him, and that his own antiwar efforts had provided him "'a new and less difficult ambition, which [seemed to him] quite as good as the old one'" (qtd. in 26). Thus empowered to cast Russell's pacifism as an attempt to fill the void left by intellectual failure, Perloff goes on to render Wittgenstein's direct participation in the war as a praiseworthy plunging into the thick of things—an action lent broad moral sanction by its very activeness, even where its specific effects might be morally questionable. "Wittgenstein," she writes,

never had the slightest doubt that it was his duty to fight. Not that he had any rational argument for war or for German "rights." . . . He had faith neither in the official British position that the war was being fought to "save" civilization, nor in the antithetical conviction, animating Russell's wartime writings, that the war would spell the "flaming death of our civiliza-

tion"—a conviction that was a central article of faith of British intellectual thought throughout the war and its aftermath. . . . Even as Russell was producing pamphlet after pamphlet analyzing the causes of war, the likely results of this particular war, and the steps that might have been taken to prevent it, . . . Wittgenstein longed, not for national or cultural "improvement"—an improvement he regarded cynically as, in any case, absurd and impossible—but for his own improvement, both mental and spiritual. His hope was that war might, as he put it, "turn [him] into a different person." The war, he told a nephew many years later, "saved my life; I don't what I'd have done without it." . . . The paradox is that, whereas Russell felt a need to renounce philosophy because of the war, a war he studied from the sidelines, Wittgenstein's actual war experience became one of the mainsprings of his philosophy. (26–27)

The anti-intellectualism, or rather intellectual self-deprecation, informing this passage and the chapter as a whole is as astonishing as the suggestion, everywhere reiterated, that Wittgenstein's willingness to go out and kill others (if necessary) for the sake of self-actualization exerts some claim to moral superiority over Russell's pacifism. Disconcertingly evocative of the Reagan-era-and-after wisdom that Vietnam combatants were nobler than antiwar activists *simply because* they participated in the action rather than remaining at home, Perloff's rhetoric participates in a long-standing, and very American, tradition of despising thinking on the firm and simple ground that it is not doing. The phrase "intellectual thought," with its appearance of internal redundancy, reinforces Russell's removal from the reality of the masses; the reference to studying "from the sidelines" compounds the intimation that Russell marginalized himself right out of credible contribution to debate about the conflict; and the piling on of phrases in "pamphlet after pamphlet analyzing the causes of war, the likely results of this particular war, and the steps that might have been taken to prevent it" plays upon the widely known fact that there is no point in talking, talking, talking, when one can be acting.

A few pages later, Perloff repeats the same maneuver more expansively,<sup>14</sup> in order to pave the way for the additional claim that Wittgenstein's urge to self-actualization partook of a broader German vision of war as "the quest for authenticity and self-fulfillment" (39). As far as I can tell, Perloff registers the brutality of this position, its definitionally unethical disregard for others, only once in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*: in the middle of a sentence from seven pages further on that runs, "By this time [1945], of course, the notion of war as *Flucht nach vorne* [flight forward] had been utterly discredited, and yet Wittgenstein was still trying to 'become a different person,' still insisting that philosophy could be only a method, not a science, because it has nothing to discover." Philosophy with nothing to dis-

cover? In context, the point is less dramatic than it may sound, but it leads into a genuinely extraordinary culmination: "Wittgenstein understood, as many of his exegetes have not, that the study of philosophy could not make one a better person" (46). The ethical pretensions of philosophy over the centuries having been disposed of with a wave, we see that the only thing that can make one a better person, or at least allow one to chase one's authenticity authentically, is a plunge into the action.

In turning thus to a moment in Perloff's more recent work, I do not mean to suggest that Wittgensteinian poetics (or Steinian, or Poundian, for that matter) has some essential affinity with fascistic or militaristic modes of thought—although I do, naturally, think it militates against the claim that such poetics is inherently *antiauthoritarian*. Still less do I mean to try to tarnish Perloff's credentials via the expedient of the f-word, since—quite apart from its general despicableness—such a tactic would perfectly misrepresent the political position that has inflected Perloff's work throughout her vital career. I hasten to point out, in this regard, that at the Modernist Studies Association forum from which these essays emerged, the author of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" (having listened generously, kindly, and patiently to a shorter version of this piece) told me that the only thing that troubled her about the talk was my alacrity in linking the modernist privileging of doing with fascism. Given the omissions required by the format, this was a fair objection.<sup>15</sup> And yet the very horror of the authoritarian implicit in Perloff's response confirms, rather than undercuts, a key lesson of the Wittgenstein-Russell chapter: that even those with the strongest antipathy to a politics of coercion may be tempted to deploy rhetoric in which action serves as its own justification and in which whatever person or point of view is being opposed is condemned less for being wrong than for being on the side of not-doing. Perloff unapologetically makes Wittgenstein a hero in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, but one does not have to make heroes to adopt this method. One need only assume that one's audience will, as a matter of course, mistrust any party plausibly identified with inaction, unsuccessful action, or even the thinking-through that might subject action to delay.

Perloff's disquiet about intellectualism, though clearly founded upon an age-old opposition between thinking and doing, owes something also to a particular historical condition—a burden of social role that she shares with Ezra Pound and, significantly, with anyone likely to be reading this essay. For Pound's obsession with those who did things, like Perloff's mistrust of Russell, is part of a story encompassing thousands of writers since the time of Carlyle and Emerson (at least) and continuing today: the story of the perceived marginalization of literati, artists, intellectuals—even, in a sense, of educated persons *qua* educated persons—under modernity. Pound always found painful the truth that it is hard for a single individual to alter the course of history, but even more painful was the recognition that it could be extra hard for someone whose doing time was

cut into by the time required for thought and whose scope was limited by a social organization that tended to separate the intelligentsia from the class of social managers.<sup>16</sup> The fear that drove Pound, in other words, was that one might never be able to do precisely *because* one knows how to think. Call this the anxiety of the clerks or what you will, it is a fear that affects virtually everyone whose vocation lies in the production of knowledge or ends-oriented analysis rather than operations of an executive or a technical kind. And it is a fear that makes itself felt—strongly in texts such as *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, less aggressively but still tellingly in texts such as “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?”—wherever there seems a chance for the intellectual or artist to assert that she (or someone) has been of the party of doing, after all.

The realm of imaginative writing in which this anxiety has arguably been most potent, once again, is radical poetry—in part because poetry's post-nineteenth-century marginalization within public consumption inclines it to sympathy with the urge to remake society; in part thanks to the association between form and doing discussed above; and in part because of other accidents of literary and extra-literary history. Yet the ongoing concerns of poetry are not the only reason to reflect on the clerkly anxiety materializing in Perloff's 1982 essay. Another is that one of the major events of literary and cultural study since 1982 has been an efflorescence of scholarly work on this very subject, carried out by some of the most influential critics and theorists now writing. Certainly, the question has been in play for a long time: one can trace a kind of line from Jonathan Arac's charting of its mid-nineteenth century vectors in *Commissioned Spirits* (1979) back to the mid-century Trilling circle's effort to elucidate the powers of a liberal imagination in unimaginative times, and from there further back to books such as Wilson's *Axel's Castle* (1931) and the Julien Benda volume that inspires my shorthand for the anxiety at issue, *La trahison des clercs* (1927).<sup>17</sup>

Still, when one thinks of how in recent years Gerald Graff, John Guillory, Andrew Ross, Michael Bérubé, Cary Nelson, Bruce Robbins, and others have reset the very terms in which it is possible to speak of criticism, it becomes clear that the last two decades will be remembered as a period when scholars of literature and culture explored with unusual commitment the history of their institutions, the psychology of publicity and disenfranchisement, the politics of canon building, and the consequences of academic professionalization—a period when (for mostly good rather than narcissistic reasons) one of the most interesting topics to intellectuals was the social organization of intellectual life. One of the pertinent lessons of “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” then, lies in the way it enacts as well as describes a problem that has been of surpassing interest to literary and cultural study between 1982 and 2002 and to which scholars of modernism may want to continue to devote special attention.

A corollary of this last point is that as we continue to survey the passions and principles that drove the modernists, we may wish to consider a little more seriously what happens when we conceive of Pound's historical "moment" as not distinct from our own but continuous with it. Certainly, this suggestion construed broadly might enjoy more credibility at this moment than it would have even a few years ago, now that there is so much talk of postmodernism's displacement by—of all things—a renovated modernism. In her own contribution to this forum, Perloff asserts that poets at last stand poised to reclaim the thread of a modernism held in abeyance (rather than provoked) by the catastrophes of the twentieth century, and this proposal jibes with recent trends in architecture, design, and the visual arts, where postmodernism as style is increasingly disavowed as a sorry aberration, almost literally a lapse into the non- or anti-artistic. What I am proposing that we recognize, however, is not that our time and that of high modernism "really are" one (either intra-artistically or in the largest historiographical terms), but rather that for some purposes in the study of art, literature, and culture it will be beneficial to take into account the persistence of conditions such as the felt marginalization of the intellectual and the compensatory maneuvers it inspires.

One consequence of keeping this felt marginalization before us, I think, will lie in a certain reorientation of our understanding of the modern in "modernism"—a term that, problematically, marks newness as a salient feature of both the works it embraces and the period for which those works are supposed to stand as synecdoche. We have already seen how the term's privileging of formal novelty has been used to make the case for the Pound era,<sup>18</sup> but there is also a content side to this presence of the modern in "modernism," an implicit direction to focus on the ways in which the century's allegedly unprecedented acceleration of life emerges as subject matter. Unlike the form side, the content side is only minimally involved in the demarcating of canons these days (since it is now clear that almost any text can be shown to be responding strongly to acceleration), but it does insure that questions of the form, "How does this work address changes in technology, in social organization, in x, in y, in z?" remain the mainstay of inquiry into the relation between modernism and the world that produced it.

To keep the anxiety of the clerks before us, however, is to recall that the drive to make new proceeded not only from a need to capture the explosive doing putatively redefining life in general, but also from concerns about action more or less specific to the (loosely and shiftingly constituted) social group responsible for most twentieth-century artistic and critical production. I do not think that this recognition solves the problems that arise when "modernism" slips from the name for a set of texts or features to the name for a whole period, but I do think that if we are going to accommodate ourselves to this slippage (and neither it nor the term "modernism" seems likely to go away any time soon), we will serve liter-

ary history more honestly by keeping the “modern-” component pointing in as many directions as it plausibly can.

One of the oddities of this essay, clearly, has been that in spite of its appearance in the *Wallace Stevens Journal*, it has had much less to say about the second member of the dyad “Pound/Stevens” than about the first. The moral appears to be that we need to accept Perloff’s and Kenner’s judgments respecting the name of the era, after all—that if Pound no longer looks like the best candidate on the ground that he did more, he yet takes the honor because his encounters with doing, thinking, and heroism were unusually dramatic and consequential. We may not think it a good idea to name the period after anyone, but if forced to, it appears, we will do better to look to Pound than to Stevens, or Eliot, or Stein, or any other contender.

I do not think there is any way of refuting this intimation, exactly, but I might at least nod to the possibility that sheer breadth need not necessarily render Pound’s anxiety emblematic. At least as interesting vis-à-vis the problem of doing and thinking was the early Eliot’s embrace of the hapless neurasthenic as both lyric speaker and lyric topic, and the same could be said about Stein’s obsessive insistence that she had done more for modern writing than just about anybody. Or, for that matter, about Auden’s perpetual return to the question of what poetry could possibly do for people in a world of violence and pain. During the discussion period at the MSA forum, I proposed that we try out the phrase, “Age of Auden,” by way of acknowledging how that poet’s work speaks to another crucial aspect of the clerkly anxiety, its way of modulating from anger about the circumscription of one’s powers into guilt about the same and back again.

And then, of course, there is Stevens. If less consistently concerned about the political conditions enveloping poetry than Auden or Pound, Stevens was still famous for the vigor with which, from “Sunday Morning” through his last poems, he pursued the idea that the poet’s function was to help organize the world; if less provocative than Stein or Eliot with respect to the relations between language and people in a time of crisis, he was more overtly occupied than they by poetic discourse’s capacity to transfigure the vastness he called “reality.” Like Pound, also, Stevens found a lot to think about in the figure of the hero,<sup>19</sup> and one of his last publications finds him revolving shrewdly the problem of specialization of social function. In a piece called (with an evocation of Emerson) “The Whole Man: Perspectives, Horizons,” he observes that the “all-round men” of yesteryear were as much the product of “the pressure of society itself, the developing forces, the demands and permissions of people adapting themselves to the circumstances in which they find themselves” as the “technicians” who were growing increasingly dominant under modernity (*OP* 287–88). Nor will the scholar of Stevens lack for texts specifically concerned with the figure of action in a world of meditation. Offered a chance to revisit “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” I first thought of building my paper around Stevens’ lamentably underread 1948 poem “The Bouquet,” which presents

as fascinating a treatment of blunt doing and sinuous thinking as any to be found anywhere. I would like to close by glancing at the lineaments, at least, of this extraordinary text.

In the first four sections of "The Bouquet," Stevens does one of the things he had learned to do best by the middle of his career, representing the contemplation of a physical object (the bouquet of the title) from a hundred nuanced epistemological positions, capturing with inimitable exuberance the restlessness of the mind's encounter with matter: "Of medium nature, this farouche extreme / Is a drop of lightning in an inner world, / Suspended in temporary jauntiness. / The bouquet stands in a jar, as metaphor, / As lightning itself is, likewise, metaphor / Crowded with apparitions suddenly gone / And no less suddenly here again" (CP 448). And so on for thirty-four intricate tercets. The final section of the poem, however, consists of only these two stanzas, sharply different from what has preceded:

A car drives up. A soldier, an officer,  
Steps out. He rings and knocks. The door is not locked.  
He enters the room and calls. No one is there.

He bumps the table. The bouquet falls on its side.  
He walks through the house, looks round him and then  
leaves.  
The bouquet has slopped over the edge and lies on the  
floor. (CP 452-53)

No longer the percept that grips mind and eye (and therefore no longer the central power in the universe of this poem), the bouquet has become merely a fragile thing in an implicitly fragile domesticity, subject to inadvertent violence from the same kind of person whose work under certain circumstances (why is he entering this house?) is directed violence. And as goes the bouquet, so goes "The Bouquet." The rhythmic and dictional splendor of the first four sections is not simply canceled by the flatness of this final one ("If the previous stanzas were pure Woolf or Joyce," writes Patricia Rae, "these words are pure Hemingway" [199]), but that miracle of verbal intricacy seems more delicate now that it is shadowed by the kind of threats that had encircled the pianist-poet in "Mozart, 1935" ("If they throw stones upon the roof / While you practice arpeggios, / It is because they carry down the stairs / A body in rags" [CP 131-32]). In that earlier poem, Stevens had advised the poet, "Be thou, be thou / The voice of angry fear, / The voice of this besieging pain" (CP 132), making poetry if not a remedy, at least a keening that might alleviate. In "The Bouquet," however, the threat remains squarely disjunct from aesthetic experience. Again, the first four sections are not assumed into the final one, but posed against it, a tissue of the beautiful (swirling, evasive, far too complex for

the memory to hold except in traces) that seems at once victim and opponent of whatever it is that happens at the close.

But what, exactly, happens there? Recalling that Stevens had recently written a series of poems celebrating the heroism of the common soldier, the reader may wonder whether imputing malevolence to *this* poem's soldier does not mean succumbing to (very precisely) an overactive imagination. It may be so; and yet the soldier's intentions do not, finally, alter the fact that his vocation and his disarranging of the bouquet identify him with those cruder transactions of life against which the filigrees of imagination may be powerless. The question remains: Are we to feel a heightened allegiance to subtle poetry and complex feeling—to all the gorgeous nuances of which the mind is capable—on account of their removal from the soldier's blundering, or does "The Bouquet" enjoin a colder assessment of this kind of contemplation, a marking of its utter dispensability to a world whose routine is brute force? The problem is clear, and the anxiety is clear, but no clear answer emerges. The mutual silence between the final section and the preceding ones sustains the question as question, suspending it in perplexity as the bouquet was once suspended in jauntiness, leaving on both exquisite thinking and plain doing the imprint of uneasy uncertainty. Here, perhaps, the most eloquent parataxis.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Perloff, Bloom takes no interest in questions such as whether it would matter if Stevens had written "poor" or "paler" instead of "pauvred" in a line from "It Must Give Pleasure" V: such questions, she insists, "have no real bearing on what Bloom takes to be the only question a Great Questioner should ask, namely, what is it that Stevens tells us in this poem?" (489–90). To a degree, of course, Perloff is on to something: a work does tend to require a healthy dose of visionary humanism if it is to attain greatness on Bloom's scale of values. Yet Perloff also seems to ignore her own prior quotation from Bloom, in which much is made of another Stevensian dictional choice: "Aspirin," in the name Canon Aspirin, which Bloom links to aspiration. Surely, Bloom could have offered a relevant reading of "pauvred" given space; surely, it is unreasonable to expect any critic to account for every word in a text under consideration.

<sup>2</sup> Though I will not review the secondary literature on these poets here, I will share some data—suggestive rather than rigorous—respecting scholarly attention to these two poets over the past few decades. Consulting the *MLA Bibliography* for citations counting "Pound, Ezra" or "Stevens, Wallace" as keywords, I garnered the following results:

Period	References to Pound	References to Stevens
1991–2000	628	407
1980–1990	987	463
1971–1980	761	432
1963–1970	244	183

Pound's numbers are higher every time, but the proportions notably vary: he leads Stevens more than two to one in the 1980s, but by scarcely more than fifty percent in the 1990s. No less interesting than Pound's edge, perhaps, is the consistency of Stevens' figures—though we may wonder where both of these poets are headed in the years to come. For the five years 1991–1995, Pound shows 374 references and Stevens 247; for the next five years, Pound drops to 254 and Stevens to 160.

<sup>3</sup>“To posit that ours is, in Harold Bloom's words, the Age of Stevens,” Perloff adds, “is to believe that, as he puts it, ‘Modernism in literature has not passed; rather it has been exposed as never having been there’ ” (504).

<sup>4</sup>Perloff offers a précis of Russian Formalist (and other) treatments of the specificity of poetic language in *Wittgenstein's Ladder*, 52 ff., but does not endorse the Formalist claim. On the contrary, she premises her Wittgensteinian poetics on that philosopher's affinity for language as ordinarily used, just as in “Pound/Stevens” she prefers conditions in which the “Romantic and Symbolist distinction between literary and ordinary language is . . . blurred” (506).

<sup>5</sup>Most of these terms can be found in the preface to Perloff's *Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*, a collection that opens with a slightly amended version of “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?”

<sup>6</sup>The essay begins, “The fundamental concepts of civilization are in a process of rapid decay. The rising generation no longer feels any confidence in them, and fascism has strengthened their suspicions” (26). Further on, Horkheimer writes more expansively: “What fascism does to the victims it selects as examples for its unlimited power seems to defy all reason. Its tortures transcend the power to perceive or imagine; when thought attempts to comprehend the deed, it stiffens with horror and is rendered helpless. The new order contradicts reason so fundamentally that reason does not dare to doubt it. Even the consciousness of oppression fades” (44).

<sup>7</sup>On this front, Stevens' poetics absolutely cannot be positioned as a foil to Pound's. In a 1936 lecture called “The Irrational Element in Poetry,” for example, Stevens comments that it “is becoming easier every day to say that we are irrational beings,” and though he initially unpacks this claim with reference to a *fin-de-siècle* sense of exhaustion in the arts (which prompted a turn to the irrationals of Freud, Mallarmé, and Rimbaud), he soon reveals his central occasion to be widely current fears for the health of civilization: “If you are not a communist, has not civilization ended in Russia? If you are not a Nazi, has it not ended in Germany?” He goes on to insist, in a manner that anticipates his observations on the pressure of news in “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words,” that the irrational in poetry does not seek to escape from the “pressure of the contemporaneous” (*OP* 225, 229–30)—the irrational in social and political life—but actively resists it. Here, as in many schools of Poundian poetics, poetry's weapon against unreason is an unreason of its own.

<sup>8</sup>“Reason . . . is as indispensable in the modern technique of war as it has always been in the conduct of business. Its features can be summarized as the optimum adaptation of means to ends, thinking as an energy-conserving operation. It is a pragmatic instrument oriented to expediency, cold and sober. . . . When even the dictators of today appeal to reason, they mean that they possess the most tanks. They were rational enough to build them; others should be rational enough to yield to them. Within the range of Fascism, to defy such reason is the cardinal crime” (28).

<sup>9</sup>The point does not originate with Bernstein, of course. In “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” Perloff quotes Denis Donoghue's 1973 remark on the *Cantos*: “They are an attempt not to impose one man's will upon a reading of time but to enter into such intimate liaison with fact, with time, with history, with the luminous details which history offers, that the result is a rhythm, a profound sense of life which surely consti-

tutes meaning' " (503). Perloff stresses the "indeterminacy" of Pound's epic in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, in *The Dance of the Intellect*, and elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup>Or the proponent of open form might counter that (in Bernstein's phrasing as quoted by Perloff) the "'trouble with the conduit theory of communication (me → you) is that it presupposes individuals to exist as separate entities outside language and to be communicated at by language.'" According to Perloff, the Language poets resist this theory by taking "poetic discourse to be, not the expression in words of an individual speaking subject, but the creation of that subject by the particular set of discourses (cultural, social, historical) in which he or she functions" (*Dance* 219–20).

<sup>11</sup>I should acknowledge that I have brought most of the Frobenius material together with the three quotes on Mussolini elsewhere; see *Solid Objects*, 173–75.

<sup>12</sup>The condottiere was, of course, Sigismondo Malatesta, who commissioned the architect Leon Battista Alberti to fashion what became the Tempio Malatestiano from an existing Gothic church.

<sup>13</sup>In 1935, Stevens wrote to Ronald Lane Latimer, "But that Mussolini is right, practically, has certainly a great deal to be said for it," though he added even here that "Fascism is a form of disillusionment with about everything else" and merely "a transitional phase," not a true "stage in the evolution of the state" (*L* 295). This quotation and the one from Mussolini I again crib from *Solid Objects* (83, 214).

<sup>14</sup>"Wittgenstein had always had a distaste for pretentious chit-chat on philosophical subjects, for pontificating generalizations on questions of metaphysics and ethics, but the war years . . . intensified this particular aversion to what we would call, in current parlance, bullshit. . . [W]asn't a penchant for *transzendentes Geschwätz* [transcendental twaddle] finally the quality in Russell that Wittgenstein found hard to stomach, the former turning out books, pamphlets, essays, and lectures with whirlwind rapidity and sounding off . . . as to what England should or shouldn't do (or might have done), what philosophy consists of, and so on, even as the latter published almost nothing during his lifetime and was never satisfied that he had formulated a given question quite correctly?" (31–32).

<sup>15</sup>The overly compressed remarks to which I refer do not appear in the present essay. I should also note that the discussion of Wittgenstein and Russell appearing in this version was not included in the original talk.

<sup>16</sup>Hence the appeal, for Pound, of a Confucianism that in so many of its details seemed to run counter to his own preferences and instincts.

<sup>17</sup>In spite of his earlier championing of Julien Benda, as Vincent Sherry notes, Pound greatly disliked *Trahison* (whose English translator, incidentally, was Richard Aldington), because its polemic was directed against political intervention by intellectuals. To Wyndham Lewis, Pound wrote in 1936: "'time for concerted action IS. Manifesto against TREASON OF THE CLERKS'" (qtd. in Sherry 218 n 34).

<sup>18</sup>Moreover, it now seems (on the evidence of her contribution to this forum) that Perloff wants to use the consecration of newness in "modernism" to promote an account of twentieth-century poetry in which the use of more traditional forms is no longer retrogressive or unfortunate—as it was in "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?"—but irrelevant or invisible. When the opposition at issue was Pound versus Stevens, less clearly avant-garde writing could seem at least to retain a foothold, even if Stevens' rapprochements with old forms were reprehended. By making the great alternatives Stein and early Eliot, on the other hand, Perloff moves to edge right off the map the kind of poetry she thinks less worthwhile.

<sup>19</sup>A point noted by dozens of critics and that Stevens himself stressed when, in a late poem, he numbered his "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" among the proofs that he had not "lived a skeleton's life, / As a disbeliever in reality, / A countryman of all the bones in the world" (*OP* 117).

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## Stevens/Pound in the Cold War

ALAN FILREIS

[W]e can't believe past the form to the matter.  
—Randall Jarrell on Stevens, 1951

*The impossibility of the simplest.*  
—Bob Perelman, "Chronic Meanings"

PATRICIA RAE BEGINS her reading of parataxis in Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound by conceding that success in this venture would be "startling." It is that. Joining those who urge change in the perception of Stevens as an organic poet, I do agree with everyone in this issue<sup>1</sup> that organicism has been used by Stevensian critics as a weapon against the poetics of the fragment. But in this project—discerning how Stevens stacks up against the " 'intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open and emotionally volatile structure' " (M. L. Rosenthal qtd. in Perloff 1982, 495) of Poundian poetics—need we go so far as to speak of a truly "*mutual interest in*" parataxis (Rae 150; italics added)?

For Rae's purposes, to be sure, parataxis refers generally to a *mode* (that category larger than *style*) of presenting materials side by side without definitive comment on the relation. Yet in such discussions we finally return to a linguistic ground, working at the level of the stanza, within the stanza, at the line; there it is difficult for me to see the mutual interest. In some poems of the late forties, such as "Description without Place" (1946), "A Primitive Like an Orb" (1948), and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949), Stevens did use what might be called a section-to-section paratactic structure. Reading across a poem's sections can be a discontinuous, asequential experience, although at crucial moments, such as at the appearance of the Canon Aspirin in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (1942), we sense a sequential setup—part of a movement. Some poems' sections function in non-narrative series without meta-comment, and it is true that the qualities of meditation in these poems do not meet usual lyric expectations. Or, seriality provides a way of organizing a long lyric poem in many parts through a succession of meditative jumps and cuts between sections. But in Stevens, notwithstanding "The Man with the Blue Guitar," with its superficial<sup>2</sup> structural debt to cubism, these are more of-

ten deliberate jumps than quick cuts, and readers of such poems do not experience the sensation of unanalyzed juxtaposition *within* a section.

Helen Vendler has written of "Description without Place" that it is a "centaurlike poem, half abstract discussion, half wish-fantasy," with no connectedness joining "these two detached poles of the unreal" (267). I have argued elsewhere that in that poem there is a "middle term of the real"—to wit, the politics of postwar planning, new American fantasies of geopolitical dislocations that are instructive rather than destructive (Filreis 1991, 151–86). But even if Vendler is right to read the poem's rhetoric in the way she does, it is not particularly helpful now to label the disruption between the rhetorics of abstract discussion and of wish or desire a form of parataxis.

Rae is nonetheless game, taking up the Stevens bat against the best Poundian fastball. This version of "Whose Era?" is a fun but unwinnable pastime. As Douglas Mao suggests when he observes that Stevens was bound "to lose the 'era' contest" from the moment Perloff chose to stage it (161)—and as Perloff in her own reconsideration implies by pointing out that "pairing" Stevens and Pound tends to dumb down what modernism was *and is*—it does not suit the Stevens Era well to force Stevensian rhetoric (in Vendler's sense) into a Poundian critical language. This is what Perloff wants us to know about her own view of the situation eighteen years after she published "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" in *New Literary History*.

I want to observe first, admiringly, that Perloff responds now to the memory of that polemical moment (1981–82<sup>3</sup>) with a personal assessment, a *memory* really, of the original urge to ask which poet gets to name the era, such a frankly reductive question. Thinking about then-contemporary poets working in the Stevens mode, Perloff is right to trace the pedigree of Paul Monette's unfortunate training at Yale, a site she calls "the Yale of Wallace Stevens," where avatars of Poundian cyclonic history, including Hugh Kenner, were unacceptable. With due respect to Harold Bloom as aura-making teacher and mentor, and to the influential "sign" of James Merrill and Richard Howard as shapers of an environment (Perloff, "Revisited" 135), I observe that Monette's post-baccalaureate contact with Perloffiversity on the opposite coast offered him a richer sense of his linguistic options just as, with the onset of AIDS, he began to face a great strain on the will to represent selfhood *in extremis*. The tense counter-presences of Perloff/Bloom in Monette's life as a writer present us with a compelling and still-relevant model of Pound/Stevens: the full range of aesthetic alternative, a valid modernist legacy—not mutually exclusive yet by no means merely convergent within the postmodern language project.

Perloff's keenest contribution has been to remind us implicitly that in the sixties, seventies, and for a few years in the eighties, the Stevensians actively suppressed the Poundian mode, and for reasons that are political.

By “political” one refers here not merely to the poetry wars waged between and among sects of academic insiders, but also to the greater battle over which perception of American cultural styles would dominate. Perloff is in this sense a political critic. The construction of Stevens and the use of Stevens as the ultimate weapon of organicism (by those who sought to derive “imagination” from words and, in the lyric as a genre, a “true nature” of the self) has made it difficult to see clearly back to the crucial era before the weapon was forged. So let us look back.

Prior to Bloom (1977), Vendler (1969), and Joseph Riddel (1965), when among devotees of theme-oriented rhetorical readings of Stevens were a number of solid, critically sensitive but uninfluential, provincial men such as Frank Doggett, the Stevens field was relatively open. Indeed in the fifties and early sixties there was no clear sense, among critics but crucially also among poets, where Stevens categorically fit. Were we marking the forty-fifth year of this debate rather than the twentieth, we would be celebrating a generative moment (circa 1957) when poets themselves were reading Stevens more or less *as they needed to*—and not, by the way, in contradistinction to Pound. We would find that Stevens’ influence on practicing poets was diverse, unpredictable, creative—not at all polarized in a way that later, understandably, drove Perloff to put the Pound stake back in the ground in 1981–82, Hugh Kenner having preceded her by a decade with *The Pound Era* of 1971.

Take the poet Frederick Eckman (b. 1924), for example. In 1957 Eckman reviewed Charles Olson’s *Maximus* and mentioned William Bronk in the context of Olson’s sphere. Assuming that Bronk was a member of the Corman/Creeley/*Origin* group, Eckman expected him to write a Pound-Olson line, but then found Bronk to be a “disciple of Wallace Stevens—the best, in fact, that I have seen.” Both observations stood. Eckman apparently sensed no particular contradiction. Bronk could unparadoxically seem Poundian in the capacious Olson medium—and Stevensian (Eckman 395).

In the summer of 1954, Frank O’Hara had written angrily to Karl Shapiro in defense of Kenneth Koch against a nasty review Shapiro’s *Poetry* had published by hip poet-anarchist, and former leftist, Harry Roskolenko.<sup>4</sup> Among Koch’s “literary crimes” was that he wrote “*lazy verse*,” wasting his talent for constructing “a rare combination of words” by leaving it all unassembled (Roskolenko 1954, 233). Tracing for Shapiro a clear “precedent[]” for Koch’s style, O’Hara suffers no “Whose Era?” pangs whatsoever, putting together Koch’s twin influences—“early Stevens” and the work of Benjamin Péret,<sup>5</sup> the surrealist exile from Dadaism whose anti-poetic style never eschewed Dada—in what was for O’Hara an uncomplicated aesthetic grounding. The “rare combination of words” had to be left as is, deemed sufficient. There was a combinative literary history of modernism that led directly to it. A line was straight that would seem eccentric only later. Such demotic yet fantastic phrasings as the following would stand comfortably, in Koch’s aesthetic, alongside Stevens’:

The bird lies in wait for a bug and it's the broom that  
got you gasman  
Your wife's hair will be white as sugar  
and her ears will be unpaid bills  
(“Spilled Blood,” Péret 39)

In the offending review Roskolenko had complained that Koch's poems do not *rise* to the level of “the bric-a-brac of poetry” (Roskolenko 1954, 233). In this allusion to Stevens' modernist method as it had been scorned by Robert Frost (“‘The trouble with you is you write about bric-a-brac’ ” [qtd. in Brazeau 160]), Roskolenko was declaring his preference for a version of what O'Hara described as a merely “pleasant” collagist technique, randomly chosen stuff that was lovely in its inoffensiveness. O'Hara knew Roskolenko would never call Stevens' phrase-collecting impulse a function of laziness. Instead of ceding to this interpretation of modernist legacy the ground Stevens had gained, O'Hara sought to reclaim it and to reassert its radicalism. Koch's “very original poems have little to do with the restful and pleasant bric-a-brac [Roskolenko] seems to prefer. . . . Mr. Koch intends to ‘make it new’ ” (O'Hara 349). Both parties to this disagreement sensed that a great deal was at stake, as apparently did Shapiro, who otherwise disliked printing rejoinders to rejoinders. Roskolenko countered with yet another piece, knowing full well that O'Hara was arguing not just for Koch but programmatically for “Koch's kind of poetry.” Perhaps “bric-a-brac” indicated an undue maturity; the verbal accidentalism of Koch and O'Hara was “still infantilism” whether “you call[ed] it avant-garde or rear-guard” (Roskolenko 1955, 177). O'Hara had implied that Stevens/Frost was not the apt binarism. The argument had to be waged elsewhere. Roskolenko's misreading of Stevens made his dismissal of the new poetry moot. Quoting Roskolenko in his epigraph—Koch “‘has a rare combination of words rattling about in his skull, but it is difficult to call any of his word combinations the bric-a-brac of poetry’ ”—O'Hara noted that it was “amusing to think of the number of gifted (even great!) poets my epigraph applies to” (O'Hara 349). O'Hara's move against Roskolenko was canny. Yet it was made on behalf of a view of a lineage that was innocent of Stevens' disconnection from the new poetry of “word combinations.”

Just as innocent was Babette Deutsch's assessment of the lyric, technique-obsessed communist poet Genevieve Taggard, who in her lovely *Slow Music* (1947) was paying a “tribute to that delicate craftsman, Wallace Stevens” (4). With such a compliment, Deutsch was using Stevens to draw Taggard back into the fold. And in what seems now an odd convergence of taste and of tastemakers, Randall Jarrell—elsewhere, just then, Jarrell was observing that in Stevens' poetry “we can't believe past the form to the matter” (342)—wrote a letter to Robert Lowell to report that Hannah Arendt, of all critics, had been reading Stevens' verse (probably

*The Auroras of Autumn*) and that, like Jarrell himself, she had liked it.<sup>6</sup> Robert Duncan, in his regular correspondence with M. L. Rosenthal, cultivated such open-field relationships. In 1959 Duncan described one of his new poems as “a derivation from Stevens”: “I find few readers,” he wrote Rosenthal, “who think I am deriving from Stevens where I think I am.” Another poem in the same group was “derived” from Gertrude Stein. Such aesthetic splitting was not a problem. The Stevens/Stein in Duncan coincided but did not necessitate binarism, although perhaps it is worth noting that Rosenthal had seen the Stevens tendency in Duncan whereas he had to be told of the Stein.<sup>7</sup>

Judson Crews (b. 1917), editor and publisher of avant-garde magazines in the thirties, forties, and fifties (*Vers Libre*, *Motive*, *The Flying Fish*, *Suck-Egg Mule*, *The Deer and Dachshund*, *The Naked Ear*, and others), was—and is—a wonderfully anomalous poet: he was a surrealist who disavowed the surrealists’ formalist tendency; he wrote politically radical poems; in a profile, under the heading “Politics,” he checked “NONE” (Crews 1988, 136); his poems at mid-century, such as “Elegy” in the mimeographed magazine *Iconograph* (c. 1950), framed some sort of commentary on the repressive conditions of the time:

Now I have been  
 plaguing the American embassy  
 for days—to do something  
 something drastic  
 send me home in chains—anything.

To get me out of this waste  
 merely that I might be  
 in New York—that I might say,  
 “The hat’s a crime, really,”  
 “The chili’s far too hot.”

Yet Crews simply considered Stevens one of the “obvious influences” on his work (Crews 1988, 137). (As with Bronk, *per* Eckman, another influence was Olson.) Crews’ “Elegy” draws its surrealist politics from Stevens’ “A Dish of Peaches in Russia” (1939), a poem that for many years seemed only to reinforce, by way of critics such as Randall Jarrell, Stevens’ reputation as an apolitical modernist addicted to geo-aesthetic dislocations. Is it an act of American ignorance or keen internationalist randomness to place a dish of peaches in “Russia”—peaches that are “large and round, / Ah! and red”—and then to claim that “such ferocities could tear / One self from another”? That the speaker audaciously sees these peaches “as a lover sees” them, and consumes them “With my whole body” (CP 224; italics added), seemed to indicate to Crews a way out of a political dilemma introduced by surrealist practice just then. Place a horse in Russia in a

poem of 1950. See if *he* comprehends reality. Yearn simultaneously for the bohemian freedom of New York where one can *say*, in writing, that a hat is criminal. But then, it seems, it *is* a crime, there, *here*, in the land of aesthetic freedom. Where in the world of cold war are we? Or, as Stevens puts it, "Who speaks?" The subject endowed by political consciousness is unclearly delineated. Is it the "animal" that is for Stevens the Russian refugee? These are expressions of odd internal exile. (The same can be said of Stevens' "The Men That Are Falling" of 1936, a poem in which a Francoist rebel declines into the Dickinsonian room.) Stevens' effect on Crews is not in the language per se, rather, surprisingly, in the way he felt at liberty to pronounce "Politics: NONE" while harassing the American embassy, eschewing cold-war binarisms, and committing himself to the impoverished life of avant-garde publishing and poetics. Stevens liberated Crews from his jar-in-Tennessee problem:

In Russia I saw a horse  
walking on ice  
as if he did not  
understand himself  
nor the world about him

In the fifties Stevens floated freely among the spheres of influence. Before the time of the Great Stevensian Consolidation, poets who would not have expected to depend upon Stevens' writing in fact did, while others who might have taken the Stevens "side" in the Pound/Stevens fracas of 1981–82 seemed able, earlier, to misplace him or forget him without trauma. Anthony Ostroff was one of those who momentarily forgot him and, tellingly, this came in a special issue he helped edit that featured three non-Poundian poets. In a number of the *Beloit Poetry Journal* of 1953, a pamphlet in which poems by Galway Kinnell, Anthony Ostroff, and Winfield Townley Scott were accompanied by an essay each poet used to introduce his work didactically, Ostroff gestured toward the use of Stevens as Exhibit A in the aesthetic casebook against Pound. But then he suppresses his New Critical sourcework in Stevens. Pondering what "drives the writer in his activity," he observed, "It is no doubt a *rage to order* his experience (to quote *Austin Warren's* excellent term)" (italics added). Then, almost quoting—but without attribution—Stevens' essay "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words" (1942), with its idea of the "pressure of reality," Ostroff continues to work along the imagination/reality continuum: the perfect poetic apolitics, that which speaks in a social vocabulary. The poet "knows well enough" that "politics exist, that the order he effects is not of the world itself but only of what appears to be his responses to it. Yet he must, to continue his activity, behave as if it were a world outside himself he criticized, weighed, organized" (Ostroff 13).

John Berryman seemed unbothered by what he took to be a neutral fact of reputational ebbing—that Stevens' influence "is failing" (56). Yet this was 1956, just when the young John Ashbery, indebted to Stevens as obviously as to Stein, was really getting noticeably underway. Who knew? It would not have been impossible for Berryman to know that in fact Stevens' influence was on the rise. But that is not the point, for Berryman's mistaken judgment came with an impeccably neutral Pound/Stevens pedigree: he had directly opposed the lining up of poetic sides, a tactic he pointedly dubbed "guilt by association" (qtd. in West 158), a key Cold War phrase with its anti-anticommunist connotation. Berryman had circulated and then published a letter making this case, and therein used this provocative phrase; enthusiastically signed by many others, it had provoked Robert Hillyer's attack on Pound's Bollingen Prize.

In the months and years after the Bollingen controversy, when modernism was under fire and the ideologically less assailable Stevens (Filreis 1991, 242–77) could be enlisted to help defend against diverse antimodernist barbarians, the pairing of Stevens and Pound was a procedure not only unproblematic but politically astute. If Stevens could help in the defense against the enemies of poetry, so be it. One of the most resolute antagonists of this time—a far more resourceful antimodernist than Hillyer—was Stanton Coblentz (1886–1982). Traditionalist critic, conservative anthologist, science fiction writer, author of twenty-one books of metrically regular lyric poems, and for many years (1933–1960) editor of *Wings: A Quarterly of Verse*, Coblentz argued that the cold war that must be waged against communism was also a fight for poetic freedom from the tyranny of modernism (Coblentz 17). Securing Pound's work from the likes of Coblentz, the young Hayden Carruth invoked Stevens. Decrying those who attacked not merely Pound but all modern poets, Carruth wrote in August 1949 that the enemies of Pound were the enemies of poetry; the attack on modernism also targeted Stevens (and William Carlos Williams). Carruth believed that antimodernists threatened the civil liberties of those who cared about the idea of the modern, going "even to the extent of invading literary debate" by way of "public, if not directly political, action against most working critics and poets today" (Carruth 280).

Stevens might even be "discovered" in the project of rolling back conformist culture. In a review of the *Rock Drill* section of *The Cantos* (1956) for *Partisan Review*—an omnibus titled "The Poetry of Suburbia" that also considered Ashbery's *Some Trees*, Richard Wilbur's *Things of This World*, and Adrienne Cecile Rich's *The Diamond Cutter and Other Poems*—the poet Horace Gregory positioned Pound as a figure positively defying the suburban mode of verse of the day. Gregory quoted an exclamation from the *Rock Drill* jacket: "To hell with cookie-pushers who think poetry is a bun shop and are busy making éclairs" (551). This sentiment is used approvingly as a "timely and convincing" message excoriating American conformity, drawn tonally from the vivacious post-Victorian spirit of Pound of

his early London days but relevant to the due critique of dreary workshop-lyric styles at midcentury. The same review refers to the crucial “be-lated ‘discovery’ of Wallace Stevens” and to Stevens’ wit and inventiveness, which sustains new poetry such as Ashbery’s, offering a similar means of critiquing the cookie-pushers of the Ike Age (551, 545).

For Hugh Kenner, back in 1960, it was not Eisenhower who had inaugurated the deep cultural freeze but Richard Ellmann. The original impetus for *The Pound Era* was Ellmann’s pre-emptive declaration of the Joyce Era. Of course Stevens as a contender was not in the picture originally. Joyce/Pound was to be the main event, Ellmann’s Joyce *versus* Kenner’s Pound. *James Joyce* (1959) was greeted by what Kenner saw as a wicked “conspiracy of approval” among those who did not understand the real “intellectual legacy” of modernism. Kenner referred to Ellmann’s “abomination,” and then, to certify his admitted paranoia, found that only the right-wing *National Review* would give him space in which to proclaim that Ellmann “heralds a 20-year ice age in Joyce studies” and that *James Joyce* “mark[ed] the triumph of the Vested Interests”<sup>8</sup> over the writing’s specific importance. This political action committee sought, in effect, Americanization and, worse, the personalization of Joycean modernism. Kenner tried to counter with “Art in a Closed Field” (1962), insisting that *Ulysses* was “a set of pieces and some procedures for arranging them.” He knew the Joyce Political Action Committee showed little interest in such constructivist principles. In “Art in a Closed Field” he added Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and Robert Creeley to the context and turned for affirmation to the *Cantos*. Kenner courted studies of Joyce that would “scare the proprietors of the Joyce Industry half to death”—although, he noted, “their powers of recuperation must not be underrated” (Kenner 1960, 261).<sup>9</sup> But he knew that it was too late; a hegemonic version of Joyce already dominated. Only a certain Pound could correct it. Kenner began even then to plan *The Pound Era* in his mind, writing in letters to *Poetry* editor Henry Rago, Shapiro’s successor, that he would take “Ezra’s career as the central image and act in what is simultaneously *la nouvelle vogue* and the conclusion of something that started a century and a half before.”<sup>10</sup> The formulation seems to me an important predecessor to Marjorie Perloff’s conclusion today: we must see modernism as an unfinished and still-relevant project, and it was never unreasonable to use Pound as the reminder of this.

While actively corresponding with Pound in the mid-fifties and constantly thinking of (and often in) the Poundian mode, the young Hugh Kenner was preparing to write a piece in which Stevens would be paired with—of all poets—E. A. Robinson; Kenner was interested in their common *metrical effects*!<sup>11</sup> At least at this point, Hugh Kenner himself would not have said, as Doug Mao has summarized Perloff, that “Stevens’ strength is matter and Pound’s manner” (161). Kenner simply took “manner” to be the reason why one would undertake to comprehend the modernist legacy. Perloff effectively guesses that if Pound had directly commented on Stevens

he would have pointed out Stevens' contentlessness—and that, I think she would conclude, is just one of the ironies of the preoccupation in Bloom's Stevens with what Stevens' poems *say* (as opposed to *how* they say it). The difference between Douglas Mao and Patricia Rae on one hand and Marjorie Perloff on the other may be merely that the two younger critics think as a result of this revelation that you can go back to Stevens and look interestingly at the *how* of what he says, while Perloff, on the other hand, does not. The archive shows that Pound addressed this issue directly; Perloff seems to be affirmed by this evidence.

Kenner took pains to quote verbatim to Rago of *Poetry* from some of the letters he was receiving from Pound. At the time of Stevens' death in 1955, Pound wrote to Kenner that it was " 'My unlettered impression, that [Stevens] lived 75 years and never SAID anything.' " A double asterisk here takes us to a Poundian annotation: " 'if so, what?' " and " 'what is his literary proportion . . . ?' " Pound suggested that Kenner cajole Rago to induce Williams to write a commentary on Stevens. Williams "should be put up to considering the question, 'what did Stevens succeed in saying?' " Pound feared that if Williams found out that "Ole Ez is behind the instigation," Williams would lose sight of Stevens for "Ez's imputation of Steven's [*sic*] cultivated emptiness."<sup>12</sup>

Perloff had seen that Williams could be made to stand in as an acceptable modernist go-between. Well in advance of her recent new interest in the early Eliot (*21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism* 7–43), she observed that in the Pound/Stevens quandary it was Williams who "bridged the gap between the two by finding a third party to vilify . . . of course, T. S. Eliot." Pound himself sensed that Williams was the right modernist to ask if Stevens was interesting for *how* he said what he said, in a way that could make the question of *what* Stevens said irrelevant to the final judgment of him. "William Carlos Williams," wrote Perloff in 1982, was "able to appreciate Stevens's 'discipline' even as he admired Pound's experimentation and invention" (506).

"What prompts those who believe in the Stevens Era," Perloff asked twenty years ago, "to ignore or dismiss Pound?" (486). Now the answer is fortunately that, *once again*, they do not. I have given a glimpse at a literary history of modernism in the fifties as an era in which poets variously did not make this choice of suppressions. Perloff is surely right that bringing Stevens and Pound linguistically together other than for polemical purposes now does disservice to a productively specific history of modernism as it is inscribed in contemporary writing. The question "whose era" is "nothing if not anachronistic," and in her commentary Perloff urges us to consider the program entitled "9 poets reading themselves through modernism" held at the Kelly Writers House during the 2000 Modernist Studies Association conference as a telling instance of this poetic development.

I was disappointed that Bob Perelman did not choose Stevens as his modernist for that program; understandably, he chose Louis Zukofsky.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps it is still too soon for Perelman to declare himself a Stevensian as well as, of course, a Poundian. The first two chapters of *The Trouble with Genius* (1994) make evident Perelman's debt to the Poundian aesthetic. On the other hand, the prose-poem "Money," which is in part the story of a poor poet who to his delight discovers that poetry is (literally) a kind of money, offers a hilarious satirical critique of Stevens' ideas about language, through his aphorism, "Money is a kind of poetry" (*OP* 191). The first part of Perelman's "Money," prior to the introduction of the poor poet, is a mock struggle over linguistic ownership between the poet—not the poor poet in the poem, but Perelman—and Stevens. Perelman wants to exchange Stevens' poetic rhetoric for poetry dollars. The poem quotes Stevens without quotation marks—but only up to eleven lines, at which point Perelman knows fair use will have been exceeded. Stevens tried to lure him over the line, beyond the point where Stevens' rhetoric could be legally and thus invisibly inscribed in Perelman's own writing (Perelman 1993, 33–36).

Perelman, though troubled by genius, remains decidedly influenced by the Pound era; the Stevens exchange rate has seemed rather high. And yet Stevens' alluring line sometimes rhetorically (and tonally) fills out the paratactic quality of the movement between and among lines. One hears this here and there in Perelman's series of poems in blank-verse six- and seven-word enjambed couplets, which for a few years was his major mode. Perhaps Patricia Rae is right after all to look for an ongoing Stevensian parataxis—not in Stevens, though, but in a Stevensian language poet! The Perelman with a keen ear for Stevens is perhaps most in evidence in his pre-elegy for Lee Hickman, who had contracted AIDS. In this poem, "Chronic Meanings," unenjambed five-word lines abruptly stop even if the idea or image the line conveys continues on. It was, Perelman has said, "an attempt on my part to see what happened to meaning as it was interrupted" (Perelman 1996). The effect, I think, is the paratactic variation of the rhetoric of Stevens' meditations, with abstraction introduced by the strictly self-imposed word-counting procedure rather than by means of organic sensibility:

The single fact is matter.  
 .....  
 I am, the irrational residue.  
 .....  
 The heroic figure straddled the.  
 The clouds enveloped the tallest.  
 .....  
 Until one of us reads.  
 .....

Voices imitate the very words.

.....  
The impossibility of the simplest.

(Perelman 1993, 61–64)

“Modernism as I . . . want to understand it,” Perelman observed in a prefatory remark to his presentation of Zukofsky, “is really an ongoing project in the contemporary writing scenes. . . . [T]he way that postmodernism can dismiss ambitions in writing and dissolve them all into a mere kind of unmotivated paratactic difference is pretty boring, and I don’t find the practice of writing boring at all” (Perelman 2000). Perloff contends that it is clear that the issue is no longer “that of lyric meditation versus encyclopedic collage, most of our best poetry partaking of both in unprecedented ways” (“Revisited” 139). Such work seems to augur a period in which the fate of Stevens’ poetry is somewhat like the one I have described prior to the ossifying of the aesthetic-political positions—a time in which poets engage Stevens’ meditative styles as their practice happens to urge it, not to contradict the idea of writing “as a set of pieces and a procedure for arranging them,” nor to dismiss Pound, nor necessarily to piece the fragments together.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The “Pound/Stevens Revisited” panel at the Modernist Studies Association conference held in Philadelphia, October 2000. This paper was written as a response to the papers presented at this panel.

<sup>2</sup>I have argued elsewhere that the structure of the poem owes as much to the rhetorical forms of left-right debates in the poetry wars of the 1930s (Filreis 1994, 248–90).

<sup>3</sup>The essay was first presented as a paper in 1981, then first published in 1982.

<sup>4</sup>Letter from O’Hara to Shapiro, August 13, 1954, Poetry Magazine Papers, 1954–61, box 26, folder 11. Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

<sup>5</sup>Benjamin Péret, one of the original group of Surrealists, seceded from Dada in 1924 and remained faithful to Surrealist principles until his death in 1959.

<sup>6</sup>Letter from Randall Jarrell to Robert Lowell, undated [c. 1951]. Items 629–75, Robert Lowell Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

<sup>7</sup>Letter from Robert Duncan to M. L. Rosenthal, November 4, 1959. Rosenthal Papers, New York University, Fales Library. Duncan was in part responding to Rosenthal 1959. Cited with the permission of the Literary Estate of Robert Duncan.

<sup>8</sup>Letter from Hugh Kenner to Henry Rago, January 1, 1960. Poetry Magazine Papers, 1954–61, box 18, folder 20, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

<sup>9</sup>Kenner was referring specifically to Kevin Sullivan.

<sup>10</sup>Letter from Hugh Kenner to Henry Rago, November 16, 1961. Poetry Magazine Papers, 1954–61, Box 18, folder 20, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

<sup>11</sup>Letter from Hugh Kenner to Henry Rago, August 11, 1955. Poetry Magazine Papers, 1954–61, box 18, folder 14, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

<sup>12</sup>Letter from Kenner to Rago, August 11, 1955. Poetry Magazine Papers, 1954–61, box 18, folder 14, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.

<sup>13</sup>The Pound/Stevens panel convened one afternoon while the “9 poets” program ran over the course of three evenings. None of the nine experimental poets chose Stevens’ work as means by which to describe their relation to modernism. Lyn Hejinian spoke on Stein, Ron Silliman on Williams, Joan Retallack on Stein and Wittgenstein (adding John Cage), Charles Bernstein on Walter Benjamin, Rachel Blau DuPlessis on Woolf, Erica Hunt on Beckett (adding James Baldwin), Jena Osman on Charles Reznikoff, Perelman on Zukofsky, Rae Armantrout on Dickinson. See <[www.english.upen.edu/~wh/9poets.html](http://www.english.upen.edu/~wh/9poets.html)> for recordings.

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# Genius for Sale!

RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS

*We have been taught  
Love is a god  
White with soft wings  
Nobody shouts  
Virgins for sale  
Yet where are our coins  
For buying a purchaser  
Love is a god  
Marriage expensive  
A secret well kept  
Makes the noise of the world*  
—Mina Loy, 1914

**D**EEPLY IMBEDDED VESTIGES of genius thinking—a constitutive assumption of literary study—need to be brought to the surface and examined with an eye to constructing long-term, effective resistance. Literary history is, even now, still invested in genius theory rather than in alternative understandings of agency on an individual level and of “self”-fashioning through cohorts on a more collective level. Whether an idea of “genius” is romantic or modernist in implication, “genius” impedes our carrying out possibilities for adequate literary histories and relational readings. Furthermore, “genius thinking” may still allow a reader to slide lightly along the following very familiar glissade—genius is best found in a great, and generally white, man. Whenever active now (not overtly), whenever implicit (more usually), this ideological slide offers the distinct possibility of constructing a literature, and a curriculum of literature, without women and without writers colored differently than the unmarked “white.” “Genius,” as an ideology motivating the diminution, loss, or discounting of numerous practitioners, producers, and performers, has produced, and continues to produce, some serious effects. Whose era, indeed!

Returning to Marjorie Perloff’s Pound/Stevens essay, as she herself does here, becomes an occasion for such considerations because of the distinct differences in emphasis between the two essays, twenty years apart.

Perloff's vital 1981 intervention (it was first presented in 1981, then published in 1982, and then republished in 1985 in *The Dance of the Intellect*) was to "answer" the monist establishment of the figure "Stevens" within university study of modern literature by the binarist addition of another figure, "Pound," posed as an opposite pole for the university study of modern literature. In other settings for reception (such as poetry groups and practitioners), settings expressed in writing by something such as Robert Duncan's (still uncollected) *H.D. Book*, important practitioners were understood as working in multiple, interactive, pluralized relationships, for H.D. was not used as a singular "genius" figure by Duncan. But in university, professional reception, what remained unexamined in Perloff's essay is the notion of single or double "great" figures as the bearers of, the focal consolidators of literature. Perloff did not address this question in 1981; doing so was not her goal. Besides, Perloff's original essay had learned a great deal from both Harold Bloom and Hugh Kenner—from Bloomean poetic agons, from Kenner's singular lens as well as his own binarist thinking, and from the "genius theory" undergirding the positions of both critics. The secret plot of the original Perloff essay is dialectical: Bloom is thesis, Kenner is antithesis, and Perloff is synthesis, for both critics in the full bloom of their kenning appear sublated in Perloff.

My *typo du jour* is *cutlure* for *culture*; this has been going on for about five years now, doctor. So the doctor says to me, take it seriously. Cut lure is the instruction, not only the symptom. What is the lure of these two great men? What is the psychic attraction of the embattled face off between them? That reified Us vs. Them binary itself is an act—a thrilling act of cohort and coterie building. But what happens if, as a poet, one is involved with both Pound and Stevens and others besides? Then one lives a model much more like the anti-Bloomean argument of Christopher Beach: that writers deliberately choose multiple influences and affiliations from at least other writers (not to speak of other art forms and social ideologies) and work through their meanings for writing continuously and continually.

Perloff's first paragraphs in "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" use the term "great": "these two great Modernists"—"of course Pound and Stevens are among the four or five great American poets of the century" (*Dance* 1). She is acknowledging the common sensical pluralism that might ignore, as overly "sectarian," the quarrel—with its stakes, investments, and meaning—between the Kenner and Bloom-laden structuring of modern poetry that she was about so influentially to foreground in her essay. A very different kind of literary history could have come out of the words "four or five"—something rather like a jostling field of affiliations, rather than a staged joust. But I am going to start again with the term "great" and move differently, pushing this term to its primary buried assumption, one that I see underlying her first essay even when it is unspoken, perhaps unintended by Perloff.

Genius is a model long vital to the construction of literary study. Taken to be a natural endowment, a grandeur, a largesse, something stupefying and awe-inspiring, worship-worthy, it has been a central term of praise since the literary and philosophical theorizing of romanticism. "As a figure, the genius—whose gender is always unquestionably male—embodies energy, creativity, originality, inspiration, and the capacity to bring meaning to matter, to transform the world around him. . . . It is the sign of the divine in a rational and secular Enlightenment world." Here Barbara Will sums up the romantic model and then its extension into the "[h]igh modernist discourses of creativity, originality, and authorial autonomy" that also draw upon genius notions (Will 3, 4). This model is a persistent undercurrent in our formation as readers. One "secret well kept" (to cite the Mina Loy epigraph) is that genius can snow-blind readers, saturating us with an ideology about authorship and literature very difficult to perceive and to address, and undermining any sense of material forces in the production of artists or artworks and in dissemination/reception. This is parallel to the link between sexuality and market for Loy's "Virgins." "Genius" thinking is like a secret claim, a narcissistic, unspoken vice (or vise?), internally nurtured by authors themselves, whether this internalization serves them well or ill or unevenly. It is also easily and naturally assumed and projected by critics of literature, even if they do not speak its name. So genius thinking is ideologically persistent even if, in Raymond Williams' terms, it is residual, and thus genius thinking remains very difficult to dissolve.

To begin to resist these barriers to thinking about the material basis of subjectivity we might, experimentally, glance at a different site, a much more needy constructed subject place: Loy's "Virgins." Mina Loy's 1914 poem "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" remarks incisively that Virgins with dowries (money settled upon them at marriage) become thereby the only young women worth marrying. Why choose a poor wife when you can have a rich one? Those without "coins" will writhe in sexual frustration, possibly masked by prurience, and live pathetically, curtained and housebound. In her analytic poem, Loy makes clear that Virgins stay virgins neither by personal choice nor by social preference but as the result of their being constructed and held in a specific economic system of gender. The social place and personal subjectivity of a female are created and pressured by material conditions, signaled in theme by such relentless words as "purchaser" and "expensive." The role of ideology masking this arrangement Loy lucidly, if baldly expounds: love is supposed to be transcendent and soft, not about the hard facts and hard coins that drive this marriage system. But the poem discovers that love is not this way. "Virgins for sale" (22)—an economic system around gender very often criticized in early modernist feminist analysis of the marriage market—creates unbridgeable categories—virgin on one hand, married woman on the other. This category is "unbridgeable," of course, only under a historical system

(now obsolete in the liberal pockets of the world) that bars or punishes sexual activity to the female outside of marriage and makes it difficult or impossible for a woman to have an independent life or income.

Genius is the same as these virgins. It is equally hard to hear the cry "Genius for Sale!" since "Nobody shouts" (22) that phrase either, yet it has driven our sense of literature and value. The notion of a materially rooted formation for the making of writers is made difficult by virtue of the obfuscating notion of transcendence within the concept of "genius." Indeed, Mina Loy in "Apology of Genius" does not apply the same materialist considerations to her portrait of the outcast artists that she did to her virgins, but apotheosizes the "sacerdotal clowns" beyond normal life who "forge . . . Chaos / to that imperious jewellery of the Universe /—the Beautiful—" (77–78). Perhaps we could say about genius what Theodor Adorno said about the lyric—social forces are imprinted there, but in reverse: the more we think genius is transcendent, away from matter, the less it is. The more we think it is individual, the less it is. The more we think it is the unique property of a few, the less it is.

It is generally hard to see "genius" as a subject position because "genius" is supposed, by definition, to be socially transcendent, unmoored to and unmired by the social and material world. Genius is awarded the status of a mental exemption even to those skilled in materialist thought. It is protected from critique by its own ideological power. Yet "genius" as cultural accolade and social subjectivity operates like a sweepstakes that few will win, despite their exceptional endowments and work, or attempts to do work. Forces besides talent, inclination, brilliance intervene: social locations of all kinds—time or era, place of birth, channelings due to gender, race, class, position on the globe, and finally even sheer luck combine to make a "genius" in the sense in which that word is commonly used. This is also the argument of the empirical, demystifying *Genius Explained*, by Michael J. A. Howe, a book that sets forth plain-spoken studies in the psycho-sociology of inventors (engineers, scientists, musicians, writers). Howe argues for a dialectical social learning theory to explain outstanding achievement: people of exceptional talents formed by and forming circumstances that they pursued with a drive to work. In literary study, it would be useful to substitute (for the biologic category of "genius") materialist notions of artistic agency, forged in psychological and social struggles driven to or focused on cultural production and using ancillary institutions (presses, coteries, canons, conferences) as part of the professional arsenal.

Perloff's reflection on her "Pound/Stevens" essay (2000), published here twenty years after the first was written, changes the terms of the first considerably, even drastically. She summarizes the contemporary mode for literary study (of modernism, as of other fields, too) as based on social contextualizations and the meanings of ideological, institutional, and social location for artworks. For one example, she is attentive to the institu-

tional basis of the literary reputations of Stevens and Pound. In the new essay, she comes close to proposing the kind of generative mixage that literary history could become. For contemporary literary history has begun to absorb the nuances of post-romantic and post-modernist critical theories and studies in poetics concerning artistic practice: theories of cultural production, of canon, of ideology and discourses in the creation of literary artifacts, of the interplay between institutions of literariness and any particular text; of the pedagogies of poetry; of apparatuses of *poesis*. Perloff's reconsideration of her own work is connected to many recent cultural analyses of poetry communities, practices, economies, and social fields—tasks already, sometimes concurrently accomplished by such critics as Walter Kalaidjian, Barrett Watten, Nathaniel Mackey, Ann Vickery, Jed Rasula, Maria Damon, Michael Davidson, Libbie Rifkin, Aldon Lynn Nielsen, Lorenzo Thomas, Ron Silliman, Alan Golding, Peter Quartermain and myself. All make implicit or explicit critiques of genius theory for literary history, substituting cohort interactions and readings of affiliative networks instead of singular haloed figures.

Here are some examples from this rich critical terrain. Nathaniel Mackey overrides "genius" and its singular magisterial works as organizing tools for accomplishment by noting that "[c]reative kinship and the lines of affinity it effects are much more complex, jagged, and indissociable than the totalizing pretensions of canon formation tend to acknowledge" (3). By proposing new mixes of writers with an eye to constructing *métissage* in reception, he precisely challenges "preconceptions regarding who belongs where and with whom" (21) and structures his literary criticism as the analysis of nexus affiliations that have been constructed by his intervention. The word "nexus" (extending but critiquing terms like "movement" or "group") is proposed in *The Objectivist Nexus*—"a linkage among production and transmission . . . a three dimensional model of participation, production, and reception over time" that emphasizes mutual interactions of poets (and critics)—even negative and unpleasant interactions—in the construction of their poetry and poetics (DuPlessis & Quartermain 21, 22). In her studies of artistic networks and key writers, Libbie Rifkin is able to reject claims of "individual genius" in authorship by proposing analyses of institutionalizing activities and practices that she calls "career," accomplishing this even in the face of the implicit claims to genius made by two of her chosen authors (Charles Olson and Louis Zukofsky). She contrasts a static entity (author—I have extended the term by saying "genius") with a writer's active, changeable, mobile, and strategic set of artistic choices and *coterie* activities (career).

Marjorie Perloff's "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" was perhaps necessarily speaking from a loose and lightly held genius theory. It did so "naturally" in its notable proposal to pluralize the traditions available for consideration by each literary study—to add the objectivist tradition as equally central alongside the symbolist, to name this tradition within lit-

erary criticism, as David Antin and Charles Altieri were concurrently doing. Perloff asked “whether [modern] poetry should be lyric or collage, meditation or encyclopedia, the still moment or the jagged fragment”—the “should” is value-laden with her polemical interest in the Pound side of things (*Dance* 23). The stylistic/formal terms she proposed—lyric meditation vs. encyclopedic collage—are classic and helpful. The binary is in equal measure tempting and satisfying, especially pedagogically, where it has done enormously useful classroom service, offering strong summary categories defined by their stylistic markers.

Yet still it is arguable that those categories were, from their inception, too inflexible to accommodate the range of modern and contemporary poetry. By 1965, both George Oppen and Jack Spicer had, differently, “invented” the practice of seriality—a way of structuring a long, sectional yet lyric poem as a series of meditative leaps, paratactic in relation, and thinking or meditating serious issues without narration, but rather by a kind of rhizomic, discrete tacking from point to point (Keller 242–43, in part citing a letter from DuPlessis). One could argue that seriality solved the problem of form “haunting” modernism (Perloff 4). Remixing Perloff’s binarist terms (lyric meditation vs. encyclopedic collage), serial works could well be defined as meditative collage—a description crossing the binary of stylistic traits. Thus, with the mode of seriality, many poets had already made syntheses of the Pound/Stevens opposition about twenty years before this opposition was critically enunciated. Individual figures in the contemporary period also have worked specific syntheses of these two apparently separate strands; Michael André Bernstein argues, for example, that Robert Duncan synthesized the Poundian strand of “political judgments” with the Stevensian strand of lyric meditation (185). Furthermore, these poets of seriality (or meditative collage) were not simply contemporary or after-modern; it is possible to argue that in certain modernist works meditative collage offered an important intellectual and stylistic route sixty years before the Pound/Stevens binary was enunciated. The seriality of Mina Loy’s “Songs to Joannes” (1917), the seriality of Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), the seriality of Stevens’ “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” (1917), of “Six Significant Landscapes” (1916), or even, perhaps, of “The Man with the Blue Guitar” (1937) all suggest that lyric and collage, fragment and meditation were mixed and simultaneous within poems of early modernism, not necessarily seen by poets as an either/or choice.

Given the impact of her essay, however, nothing could have been more moving to me, after many years of hearing Marjorie Perloff’s trenchant and energetic interventions at conferences than to hear, at the Modernist Studies Association Conference II in 2000, how her “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” essay came to be written. Perloff wrote it, she reports, embattled against a Yale critical establishment and its genteel assumptions of value against which she (gender is hardly irrelevant here) posed an activ-

ist alternative. Perloff's brilliance lay in placing Harold Bloom and Hugh Kenner, particular champions of particular modern geniuses, on a seesaw, of which her essay was fulcrum. This is particularly striking since it displaces Kenner's own binary in *A Homemade World* (1975): his was Williams vs. Stevens. The mythological figure of choice for this essay is that of Justice, the woman with the scales, who can weigh justly, without peeking through the blindfold. To produce herself as Justice with oversight over Genius was an elegant, powerful move.

In the eighteenth century, says the redoubtable J. A. Cuddon in his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, "[genius] acquired the meanings of a man's innate ability, as opposed to what he could learn." Thus, in our period of modernization and modernity with greater access to education and mobility, "genius" was defined as independent of factors of formation. So at root, the idea of genius clashes with the idea of modernity. "In the Romantic period . . . people were beginning to think of a genius as a person of exceptional powers, and this is the approximate meaning we accept today"—these are powers of "intellectual, imaginative and creative ability of an outstanding order, and with remarkable powers of original speculation and invention" (366). Although this critic is capable of shrewd irony, acerbic puncturing of pretension, and witty turns, this definition is spoken in awe.

Genius, or great man theories, will definitionally exclude the materialist matrix of literary production for a biologic one—genius is "given" at birth, a gift from a mini-god or genie; it is in your genes. (Biology is of course made of matter, but the implications of these theories are static, finalized, unchangeable, which is not a materialist position.) For "genius," etymologically speaking, is pulled back to generation. Some of this etymology offers somewhat more social meanings, but still ones bounded by biology. As traced by Penelope Murray: genius is "originally the spirit of the *gens* (the family)," then occurs as a "tutelary spirit embodied in each man," and not only in men but in peoples and places with presiding deities (2–3). In the eighteenth century, the word shifts from a spirit that all possess to "an extraordinary creative power . . . the prerogative of a highly selected and privileged few" (3). One of the stories of lineage, descent, genealogy that literary history tells is, at base, a biological metaphor based in a kind of neo-Aristotelian homunculus theory. "A hen is only an egg's way of making another egg," said Samuel Butler. So much for the maternal contribution to the egg. (I actually just typed "ego.") And although no woman and no melanin-rich person is ipso facto excluded from being a genius, "genius" as an idea is rather patriarchal and pretty white in its deep structuring ideologies. This is because such "others" as women and people of color and non-elite classes are ideologically proposed to be more burdened with, more taxed with "matter," more mired in their bodily manifestations of difference and unable to claim transcendence. Yet as with many such patriarchal/white structures, the exclusionary assumptions as-

sociated with “genius” thinking seem strategically to recede as one names them. The assumptions become coy and self-demeaning, nicely apologetic, even feminine, claiming that the unbending rigidity and exclusions with which one taxes genius-thinking are rather ideologies in the act of the critic who calls attention to this phenomenon (down, bad girl!), not in the ideology of genius itself.

As an ideology in the reception of art, genius is so rejecting of women practitioners that one might assume Christine Battersby’s feminist history of the idea of genius, a first try at “the full story of gender bias in the concept of genius” (7), would end with the rejection of that concept completely. Yet this does not happen. Rather Battersby produces a feminist critique of the idea—gamely surveying Western philosophy to show how genius as a concept was based, through the centuries, in “cultural apartheid” (3), or the denigration, discounting, prejudice against, misogyny toward and exclusion of women from “genius” by central definitions of that term. To recuperate the idea of genius, though ironizing it with quotation marks, Battersby separates the idea of genius into five separate strands and points to the one strand that, in her view, could still be used by feminist reception: a “female ‘genius’ is not some kind of elite being, different from other (ordinary) women. . . . A female ‘genius’ is, instead, a woman who is judged to occupy a strategic position in the matrilineal and patrilineal patterns of tradition that make up culture” (157), and who, in reception, is deeply linked to historical conditions, not set above them. Thus the role of reader reception and collective need is given pride of place to assess the strategic interventions of writers. “A female genius is a construct created as we, the feminist consumers and critics, look back at the past, create a new tradition, and project ourselves and our values towards the future” (161). This strategic figure of the female artist does not, in my view, need to be called “genius,” especially after Battersby shows at length the baggage with which this the idea is burdened.

Let me redefine the precise nature of this debunking. Genius—defining the word as high capacities of various kinds—is certainly an endowment of some people, probably many more than we know of or can acknowledge. That this human capacity exists I am not questioning. I hardly doubt that some people are brighter and more clever and creative than others; in any event, I have run into some. But my topic here differs. What I doubt is that “genius” is a thoroughly and unquestionably helpful organizing tool for thinking about literature. Genius taken as a literary accolade or descriptor is more usefully seen as a subject position constructed in particular material and ideological conditions—a subject position notably active in production and reception. Being able successfully to enter or engage this subject place by the right combinations of social location and achievement, or being awarded the palm of genius by a critic-reader, makes for powerful cultural magic.

The suggestion that genius is a subject position carefully fabricated by artists is indebted to Bob Perelman's witty and discerning *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky*, a book "reading modernist genius as a career construct" (217). No longer transcendent, trans-historical, and the unimpeded expression of greatness, that is, no longer seen within a romantic set of assumptions, genius, for Perelman, is not an endowment, but a construct, a set of events and choices made by writers with desire and a strategic intentionality. Genius is an institution of artistic practice, carefully cultivated, maintained, chosen, re-chosen, affirmed, and protected. This is a vital materialist finding. The main event of "genius" as a career trajectory is the longterm investment in totalizing, encyclopedic works "written to be masterpieces," works of deliberate difficulty, functioning as calling cards toward the tautological "admittance to the guild of the genius" (3, 15) —a site that offers big advantages for permanent reception. Yet despite his demystifying analyses, Perelman does not "want to conclude by simply urging that genius be critiqued and put in the museum" (227) although, as with Battersby, this is a plausible analytic outcome of his book. Rather he wants to recuperate the notion of work, big works embodying "immense social and aesthetic ambitions" (227), even if such works are riven by contradictions between social ambition and aesthetic difficulty. However, it is not clear that one must retain the name "genius" for this, rather than the word "work" or "struggle."

For there is indeed "trouble with genius"—to extend Perelman's title. Genius prevents contextualization and historical making of art and artists from being seen fully, even as the term, as Perelman deploys it, foregrounds the constructed nature of the career of achievement. Hence genius theory still blocks a contemporary literary history. Indeed, even the analysis of "modernism" does not demand the underpinning of "genius theory," given that at least several modern artists, in a variety of keys, proposed ways of trumping "genius" either by reversions to older ideas, or by gender critiques that have some force.

One might begin to see this in the bitter peroration in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Woolf outlines strictly, incisively, and with a lacerating ironic anger the material constraints on genius in her England: class and gender. Strategically citing from *The Art of Writing*, by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, and thus couching her quill as his, he says for her: "the theory that poetical genius bloweth where it listeth, and equally in poor and rich, holds little truth." (He/she does not mean that ability is lacking, but access and class/gender blind judgments produced by meritocracy.) "It is—however dishonouring to us as a nation—certain that, by some fault in our commonwealth, the poor poet has not in these days, nor has had for two hundred years, a dog's chance" (111). In this way she offers a critique of genius theory. "That is it," she continues. "Intellectual freedom depends upon material things. Poetry depends upon intellectual freedom" (112). Genius (high potential) is born everywhere, but the mate-

rial conditions for its ripening, flowering, being effective, and being effectively organized intersects with powerful, and not powerless, social locations.

Or one might begin to analyze modernist ambivalence to genius by the different critique that T. S. Eliot proposed. Eliot also has a social, collective, but nonmaterialist sense of the situation of writing, for when the word “genius” is used in his 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” it means the pre-eighteenth century “creative genius” of “[e]very nation, every race,” rather than individually outstanding practitioners (47). This moment in early Eliot resists “genius” thinking, resisting the standard use of the word “genius” since the eighteenth century. His essay is a muted intervention against individualist genius thinking, or praise of a singular “man” for his originality, his “novelty,” “those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else” (49, 48). Thus “talent”—a word chosen exactly by Eliot as the degraded opposite of “genius”—rests precisely in knowing that art is beyond the “private mind” of the artist and never assumes the liberal theory of progress and improvement in the cultural field. To become an artist for Eliot is, arguably, to purge genius—to purge individuality, originality, invention, newness. An artist—in this well-known program—will “surrender” the self in order to “develop or procure the consciousness of the past.” He will, that is, surrender the illusion of individual genius for the older vision of the genius of the race—a complicated, not entirely lovely formulation that displaces elitism from the individual to certain particular collectivities (Eliot 52). In any event, for Eliot at this moment in his career, genius thinking was a hangover from the romanticism from which he was trying to extricate himself.

William Carlos Williams, too, is ambivalent to genius, willing both to mock it fondly and to gather a particular version of its force to himself. For in his c. 1916 poem “Danse Russe,” being “the happy genius of my household” (87) is not really being the transcendent genius, but rather being something like the sparky male genie of the household, central and yet displaced by the baby, by the sleeping family, by his own loneliness. Genius has again been refocused and has become the spirit of the place, a generative, phallic but somewhat ignored male creature. This is a modernist suburban ballet of the odd man out, the deliberately minoritized New Jersey equivalent of the convention-shattering ballet of Stravinsky, Diaghilev, and Nijinsky—*Le Sacre du Printemps*. Genius may be longed for, but the longing is carefully managed in self-mockery that still is a kind of hopeful self-admiration, and he dances “naked, grotesquely” (86), and all alone.

In discussing the Pound/Stevens/era question, not only the issue of the great binary, and its implicit genius theory, should be noted. The temporality of “era” should be discussed, although this term is not, of course, Perloff’s, but comes from Hugh Kenner. *The Pound Era* not only offers one of the provocations for Perloff’s essay but is an intellectual influence upon

it. That temporality—that a great poet should “own” a whole era—is Kenner’s imperial triumphalism at its most egregious. It is a conservative ideology of dominance, a geopolitical application to the cultural field.

What does Perloff notice about Kenner and what does she not? Her argument pointedly decries that Kenner dismisses “Stevens in 2 of his almost 600 pages” (2) (actually, Stevens is mentioned on four pages, but of course, this is not a quarrel with the gist of Perloff’s observation). But my next remark is this: Perloff’s Kenner is given without his own ambiguities; it is a move familiar in polemical essays, but worth resisting. Kenner takes Stevens to task for word play parallel to the games of “Edward Lear,” and this is cited by Perloff (Kenner 517). But Kenner also resists Stevens because he does not construct a “*paideuma*” (the prime aura-word in a Poundian universe—a sense of history justly measured; Kenner 517). Further Kenner sees Stevens as self-divided, a bifurcated writer (Kenner borrows from Zukofsky here)—a writer capable equally of making “a machine made out of words” (obviously a Kenner-Zuk accolade) and of rerunning “Lycidas” (clearly not the way to go; Kenner 405). Here, though characteristically flippant and glancing, Kenner is not entirely unsympathetic to Stevens. He finds, predictably, that what is wrong with Stevens is that he did not play on the Pound team. But any lingering sympathies disappear in *A Homemade World*, in which he proposes his version of the objectivist/symbolist binary structuring American poetry: Williams vs. a very disgraced Stevens. That he does so in a somewhat lapidary prose owing a good deal to the example of Stevens (and/or Marianne Moore) is an unquenchable irony. Here Kenner is concerned to define the particular “genius” of Americanness in poetry, a nationalist use of “genius loci” motifs. “The ideology of genius is very much a part of this Romantic drive to naturalize art and language in terms of their authentic national provenance and destiny,” remarks Christopher Norris at the end of an elegant article on Paul de Man’s “deconstructing” of “genius” (163).

One might say, counterpoised, that Pound did not join the Stevens team either. Yet it would be possible to see a Stevensian Pound; in their early work (Perloff’s article emphasizes the later work of both), suggestive resemblances between their poetic projects could be established, as I suggested above with the brief discussion of seriality. And Stevens is neither ahistorical nor asocial in his poetry. If one looked at their social ideas as imbedded inside the poetry—representations of gender or of race or elites—one might even see great similarities between Pound and Stevens. Nonetheless, “team thinking” is startlingly important in this criticism. For Kenner models the binary (between Pound and others) that Perloff picks up, and, of course, he models the importance to the reception of modern poetry, of an effective understanding of the Pound team—something that Perloff emphatically pursues. Indeed, setting up a binary of effective vs. ineffective practitioners is a central way Perloff has structured her critical thinking about poetry throughout the bulk of her career.

Yet binaries can also be helpful. Since the university is an institution in which we mainly practice the dissemination of poetry, Perloff's binary has become canonical in the classroom for locating central tendencies in modern American poetry. But the pedagogic use of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" depends mightily on keeping poets somewhat immobile and unambiguous in their style (and critics very mobile). The real question is—do you play on the poets' or the critics' team? For critics, critics should have the advantage—mobility, manipulation, judgment. Poets (and poet-critics) might differ from this. Because to ask "whose" is to forget to ask "which." That is: Which Pound? Which Stevens? One might take each of the named poets as self-different at different times and junctures in his work. Instead of posing them against each other, one might ask which of three or four Pounds? Which of three or four Stevenses? and, At what era of their work?

*The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, that hegemonic informant, has at least two Stevenses and two Pounds. One Stevens is symbolist ("The Worms at Heaven's Gate"; "The Idea of Order at Key West"). One is more imagist ("The Snow Man"). But of course it is far more interesting to say that Stevens, especially early Stevens, plays in the fecund space between these positions, in such works as "Anecdote of the Jar" or "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." In *The Norton Anthology*, a reader can discern one Pound as an imagist ("In a Station of the Metro"); the other is deeply symbolist, not only in the early work ("The Return"), but also in the *Cantos*, as an illustration of already established axes and principles that precede the poem. The symbolist Stevens is notably "indeterminate," to use a Perloff word of note, for the orotund Miltonic syntax leads to a shimmer of ever-changing meditations, while the broken asyntactic phrases of objectivist Pound lead to Knowledge affirmed and positivist. Their apparent binary modulates at least to a chiasmic X.

In Kenner's *The Pound Era*, the mentions of H.D. are, it is true, more numerous than those of Stevens: ten pages of which, again, a few phrases on three pages do the damage effectively. The damage to a female practitioner is differently structured than remarks about Stevens, remarks that allude, however lightly or sourly, to the nature of his projects and *poesis*. For one thing, the remarks on H.D. are neither ambiguous nor sympathetic; they involve personalized claims disparaging her life, and they set her poetry as a side category of biographical events. "Her grown life was a series of self-destructions, her poetic discipline one of these." Here he is talking about the imagist work and ignoring any later contributions (e.g., H.D.'s long poems *Trilogy* and *Helen in Egypt*). "Ahead lay marriage, childbirth, desertion, bisexual miseries, and Freud's couch" (175–76). That last offers a very neat composite slander of psychoanalysis, Freud, sexual preference, and this woman for whom psychoanalysis encouraged intellectual and spiritual explorations as well as self-analytic ones. His seeing H.D.'s translations as "statements of her own impassioned sterility" sug-

gests that a woman cannot do anything that does not offer a secret mirror of her sex life (probably inaccurately summarized by Kenner) (523). Further, such a comment shows Kenner's curious, unconscious indebtedness to the reductionisms of popular Freudianism on women—a Freud debased and deployed as a weapon against female ambition and achievement. A corollary of his version of genius theory seems to be that rival male poets (Stevens), while overly subtle, are not nearly as bad as female poets (H.D.) with pretensions to literary achievement belied by their biographical goofs and feminine failures. Kenner's book is riddled with unexamined literary, cultural, biographical, and intellectual assumptions and a tone ironically playing with writers as if they were hand puppets or paper dolls. One assumption has to do with gender, linked to genius in lurid ways. Minor men (the underlying term might be ideologically effeminate men who want to play with language Too Much) and women (so lacking, so self-deceived) cannot, in Kenner's thinking, be an Era even if they want to be.

Perhaps a useful view of Kenner would be to analyze how he demonizes, disparages, discounts a variety of other practitioners (male and female) in order to build a case for Pound's greatness and centrality. Genius theory, again. Yet in spite of itself, the shadowy alternative appears—his book is awash in such bright, almost journalistic details about others that his ironic cocking a wink at the vicissitudes and amusing passions of so many artists and cultural figures almost suggests that a bolus of practitioners, an affiliative network, is the literary history of this modern era. The more Kenner gossips, citing what the writers thought of each other, the more one sees *The Pound Era* like the *Cantos*—a book organized to champion specific main ideas, but giving rise to a multiplicity of possible combinations outrunning that monotheism and almost destroying it. Context is the not-so-hidden secret player in this book. *The Modern Bolus, My Pound Lens* might almost have been as good a title. It is much closer, this occluded title, to the project of Perloff's work throughout a good deal of her career.

The world has a lot of human potential for genius (for cleverness, for high insight). But there are only some official "geniuses," and to have said Stevens vs. Pound pits one genius against the other—a bullish struggle naturalized within literary reception. This opposition is part of an analytic framework that depends on assuming literary achievement is best analyzed through agons in which one of the Big Bulls wins and chews the other to bits—if bulls chewed. I think I am mixing my metaphors. The struggle Perloff proposes differs somewhat, but not essentially from Harold Bloom's analysis of the agons motivating poetic practice. The Pound/Stevens struggle is unconscious, not deliberate. It concerns members of the same generation, not single epigone and singular master. Their agon occurs between figures viewed as binary opposites, not similars. The critics are using their poets' possession of "Eras" and literary critical apparatuses as stand-ins for direct confrontation. But despite these differences,

nonetheless Perloff's essay did draw on that Bloomean binarist agon and got much nourishment from it. In contrast, David Antin's "what it means to be avant-garde" (a 1981 performance talk-poem) skewers Bloom's patriarchal power struggle (his "seedy / freudianism" of strong poets) which is "abraham[ic]" in the sense of one line, one genealogy, one son fighting one father for a kind of copyright over "patented inventions" (117, 118–119). This genius theory is blockage "in which the brilliant achievement of / one artist closes an avenue to the next" (119). Against this explicitly named patriarchal genius agon, Antin poses the vision of the artist as situational practitioner in time and place: "i did the best i could under / the circumstances" (115).

Stevens vs. Pound. To continue binarist thinking, this could be Eliot vs. Williams, let us say (Williams thought so), or certain other combinations—Stevens vs. Williams, as Kenner proposed in *A Homemade World* (1975), maybe even H.D. vs. Hughes. It might be Yeats vs. Stein, and so on. But just putting new names into the proper opposing slots does not change this literary institution and ideology. The critique must be more thoroughgoing. Hence substituting other "genius" names inside the model of "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?"—adding new dramatis personae—is still an essentializing great-man (extended to great-woman) theory about writing. This is why the either/or formulation may be appreciated, but it must now be resisted. Rejected. Which is, interestingly, what Perloff begins to accomplish in her second essay.

In her revision of her generative essay, she notes that Eliot, Stein, Williams, and in other explorations of modernism, Marcel Duchamp were missing in her active invention of the Pound/Stevens binary. This is precisely right. Other lacunae—Olson, Beats, Oppen, etc. To erode genius theory will allow people to notice that poems are made in affiliative networks of dialogue and response, challenge and return, that include active people of both genders and multiple ethnicities. Further, because of the magnetic revulsion of applying the word genius to a woman, women have been rather more unread, unseen, unstudied in the regime of genius, that is, in the realm of literary criticism as it has been shaped in the past hundred years. Thus it has been useful at least to add H.D., Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, Laura Riding, and Lorine Niedecker to modernist reading lists. Not only useful—but rather hard work, accomplished by a generation of passionate, mainly feminist critics. Yet simply adding female geniuses, or African-American and Hispanic geniuses and gay geniuses and so on, while enormously helpful to our sense of culture and achievement, and a necessary—a crucial—scholarly move, does not adequately address the assumptions about art's production and reception that genius theory proposes. Genius as an ideology about art making and subjectivity denies the material conditions undergirding social and artistic production.

Thus "genius" indicates a system of value that denies context, resists understanding of differential conditions for work, and weighs value in

singular, not pluralist, situational or pragmatic ways. Hence it is not a question of plugging gaps with further genius-names, but of restructuring our critical sense of artists' interactions in a dialectical fashion: with their own cohorts, with their production of subjectivity and work, in their fights and dialogues with others, and by identifying our need and positioning as readers. We need to analyze their strategic agency and remove their "genius." What would other analytic systems look like? How does one avoid "genius" models? In recent critical years, as I noted above, there has developed a theoretically nuanced literary history—one attuned to the creation of a rollicking community with many players, interactions, staged performances, interventions, envies, emulations, and differentiations.

The material conditions allowing the "work" of what has been called "genius" begin to emerge more clearly and usefully at this critical juncture. What is hidden in "genius" as an intellectual category and probe of literary effects is precisely matter in all its social, institutional, and historical manifestations. Who supports, who disseminates, how are affiliations made and unmade? How do career options, publishing struggles, commercial conditions, cohorts and competitors get formed and maintained? What institutions uphold the norms of correct, proper, or rewardable poetry, and proceed to offer those rewards? How do we interpret gender institutions entering and inflecting the cultural realm? And who/where is the reader? For the constructed reception of "genius" depends on the reader—the socialization of the reader, her practices, analyses of the needs, demands, or social situation of the reader, and how he has been trained to receive any given work and authorship itself. The reader's subject position, too, is inside material conditions. From that complex of positions, any reader may both help to legitimate and help to examine the deep ideological, formal, and reception structures of cultural products. Ron Silliman summarizes: "Thus one cannot define value without specifying the reader at stake: valuable for whom? to what end?" ("Canons" 153). Silliman said this in the context of a specific critique of *The Cantos* and, in a general call, a polemical resistance to erasure of practitioners in literary history.

Thus, there is no zero degree "genius." Genius, even as we have been accustomed to use the term in literary discussions, is, in truth, an end product, a product of agreed upon, ideological assumptions, a telos, and not the raw material one starts with. "Genius" so-called is the result of a material and social process, both in the ongoing formation of a writer and in the consumption and structuring of a writer in reception by readers. Perloff's own reconsideration of her genius-laden essay suggests that, as such an end point, "genius" blocks, rather than enhances understanding of the cultural field of poetry.

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# Poets/Readers: Whose Era?

VINCENT N. LOLORDO

## I

IN AN EARLY ESSAY, "Examples of Wallace Stevens," R. P. Blackmur attempted to distinguish among modernist poets (Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens) on the grounds of the particular variety of obscurity experienced by their reader.<sup>1</sup> In his account, Poundian difficulty takes the form of problems with factual reference, Eliotic the form of problems of reference to beliefs or systems of feelings (on which, for example, the effectiveness of the repeated "Shantih" that closes "The Waste Land" depends). These are both recognizably problems of what George Steiner has called contingent difficulty, the difficulty of " 'a word, a phrase or reference which [one] will have to look up' " (27); such a poetry points the reader—via whatever means—outward, toward the world of discourse of which the poem is a interdependent part. Stevens, by contrast, poses difficulties that are specifically those of language: a dictionary, rather than other sources of information, is vital to any reader of his work. To Blackmur, the difficulties of his verse prove not susceptible to "specific sorts of external knowledge and belief" (the dictionary, for Blackmur, is internal to the language) but rather "clarify themselves to the intelligence alone" (89, 91).

Blackmur's particular strand of proto-New Criticism might have taken as its motto Eliot's injunction that the only method is to be very intelligent. Nevertheless, a theory may be elicited from his distinction by reframing it in Bakhtinian terms: Pound's difficulty is that of novelization, Stevens' is that specific to the lyric. Indeed, the very source of each brand of difficulty is its position at the extreme end of the spectrum: Pound's poetry is excessively novelized, Stevens' is excessively lyrical. The high valuation that Blackmur was prepared to give to Stevens at this early date corresponded to his own concern for poetic language: the abstruse quality of Stevensian diction separates his poetry from the hurly-burly of daily language. But it is Pound's poetry that has been aligned with the practice of experimental writing for the past twenty years; and this bears witness to a shift in definition, from the high modernist idea of poetry as a particular language to the more recent account of modernism

as a discursive practice that seeks to erase boundaries among different kinds of writing.

Marjorie Perloff's "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" was surely a major source of this shift; Perloff argued that the choice between these two poets was defining of modernism—and of its legacy, of "the meaning of poetry itself in current literary history and theory" (2).<sup>2</sup> Twenty years ago, the debate over the meaning and inheritance of modernism looked very different than it does today, as Perloff noted in her talk at the 2000 Modern Studies Association conference. These days, we can have our indeterminacy and our meditative lyricism, too. No new polarity has emerged; indeed, the very idea of an era of literary scholarship defined by poetry—the imaginative legacy left by the New Criticism in the 1950s and 1960s—now seems increasingly distant, separated as we are from that era by the moment of theory.

Perloff restated her old opposition in October 2000, posing Gertrude Stein and Eliot as the two American poets most representative of the radical pre-WWI European modernism to which, she suggests, we are only now returning. Interestingly, she invoked this particular historical moment without overtly reopening the question of the *avant-garde*—the question that, I will argue, is now most vital to the polarizing debates that still define the contemporary poetry world. To present Stein/Eliot as an either/or is in one important sense deceptive: both writers existed and still exist as "major poets," figures of modernist autonomy rather than *avant-garde* praxis.<sup>3</sup> Debate in (North) American poetry today is not focused on the question of rival poetics or particular figures who might represent these values. Rather, it concerns itself with publishing venues and their status as value-laden contexts, asking whether poetics can meaningfully be separated from such material concerns.

Here I consciously switch my attention from the school canon—the canon of academic study, within which two writers can coexist comfortably as objects for ideological critique and exegetical subtleties—to the poet's canon (following Alan Golding's distinction). I do so because I take Perloff's project over the past years as an extended, and greatly successful, effort to drive the "poet's canon," as a critical wedge, into the school canon that existed circa 1980. If the Pound/Stevens polarity pitted synchronic modernism against diachronic literary history, such a gesture, at least in retrospect, seems equally clearly to pose the poet's canon against the continuity-driven canon of the literary academy. But given the growing predominance of practicing poets over a shrinking area of academic poetry studies, it seems of little use to reenact this particular battle. The poet's canon has won even as the academic prestige of poetry has diminished with the recent ascendancy of cultural studies and identity politics, discourses hardly friendly to the "difficulty" of much contemporary poetry. (If Stevens' traditionalism helped him become the favored poet of deconstruction—that is to say, the poet of the moment of "theory"—no

one would say that age was the age of Stevens.) And the post-theory literary academy's investment in identity politics renders the selection of a single "representative" impossible.

Consequently, to restage Perloff's debate with any two figures—posing, say, the collage scholarship of Susan Howe against the unfurling syntactical displays of Jorie Graham—is finally unsatisfactory. No single binary can encompass the diversity of investments in contemporary poetry. Graham is not the poet of the academy, but the poet long affiliated with a specific institutional site, Iowa; Howe's affiliation with the SUNY-Buffalo poetics program might be read similarly. To pose Graham's "mainstream" against Howe's "margins" considers only a particular institutional reward structure; Howe's poetry is as academically central as Graham's, responding as well to the concerns of poststructuralist historicism as does Graham's to sophisticated formal readings.<sup>4</sup>

Then what if we drop the names? A particularly good example of the kind of contemporary debate that takes this line is the discussion earlier this year on Steve Evans' (privately circulated) "Notes to Poetry."<sup>5</sup> For Evans, the avant-garde is the locus of poetic value, definable both historically and in its present incarnation by "its anti-capitalism and its insistence on autonomous intellectual/poetic production." His admonitory polemic for the new millennium argues that the contemporary avant-garde, directionless since the institutionalization of "language poetry" in the mid-1990s, is vulnerable to the omnivorous appetite of liberal pluralism, the dominant ideology of market society—and of the poetry world. Evans chooses *Fence* as his central target, arguing that the magazine incarnates pluralism by decontextualizing avant-garde strategies and presenting them, apart from the political commitments they should entail, as so many merely formal commodities among others.

My intention here is not to translate "Pound/Stevens" as "avant-garde/mainstream." To do so renders the names "Stevens" and "Pound" almost entirely metaphorical, perhaps designating, say, the National Book Award and St. Elizabeth's, insider and exile, as locations competing for the privilege of telling the truth about American culture—and ignores the fact that *each* writer was both associated with the avant-garde and ultimately canonized as a high modernist. The concept of language-centered writing has come to be understood by criticism as the signified of "the avant-garde" in a way similar to the relation of deconstruction and "theory" within literary-critical debates of the 1980s and later. Yet the relation of Pound to language poetry is as tenuous and mediated as the relation of Stevens to the current practice of "mainstream" literary journals. Charles Bernstein's strongly articulated insistence that Pound's innovative poetics cannot simply be abstracted away from his fascism for liberatory use (see his "Pounding Fascism" in *A Poetics* 120–27) has not, to my knowledge, been countered within experimental poetics. (Such a tacit consensus might be taken as itself indicating a shift in "eras." In her 1982 piece, Perloff used Pound

tactically, as an avant-garde precursor: his fascism goes unmentioned in the essay.)

My concerns, ultimately, are not with the specifics of Evans' judgments, but with his focus on the magazine as the central topic of literary-political debate. Such a perspective treats literary history as inherently hostile to avant-garde values, which wither when torn from the ethically rich context from which they spring: the eventual canonization of any once "avant-garde" writer will inevitably obscure the material specifics of his or her original publication context. It does not, however, itself solve the question of the *relation* between formal strategies and their origin in avant-garde sociality.

A skeptical, sociological account might assert that the "mainstream" and the "marginal" in American poetry function as a system of differences without positive values. But movement between these two positions can occur only in a single direction. The work of a poet who emerges in the mainstream may become increasingly experimental, but such shifts are not typically associated with a similar shift in publishing venues and may thus always be dismissed as "merely" formal. By contrast, an experimental writer who chooses to appear in a more mainstream magazine may lose prestige in certain quarters even if his or her work shows no signs of increased conventionality. Nevertheless, the material conditions of publishing are not self-evidently value-laden. Too often critics fall back into a relatively empty notion of oppositionality. The difficulty of maintaining a sociological objectivity is illustrated by Christopher Beach's generally excellent *Poetic Culture*, which contains a chapter pitting Stephen Dobyns against Lyn Hejinian, treating the former as typical of "mainstream" or "workshop" poetry and the latter as representative of "experimental" or "Language" poetry. Beach asserts that Hejinian "wins no prizes and continues to publish in small presses" because her "oppositional" poetry "attacks bourgeois notions of the subject and [its] relation to discursive formations" (78). Although Hejinian indeed attacks such notions, the opposition Beach locates is merely that of a structural relation between two terms: Hejinian's negative relation to prizes and major presses *defines* her as an "avant-garde" poet as surely as Dobyns' positive relation defines him as a mainstream one.

The question of the avant-garde, then, demands the examination not only of social arguments about the formal, but also of poetry's own internal creation (or figuration) and analysis of the social. To provide evidence of the latter, I will now introduce John Ashbery and his 1991 book-length poem, *Flow Chart*. Ashbery's poem circles obsessively around the notions of centrality and marginality, while constantly converting formal and textual strategies into figures for the social—and vice versa. Ashbery's particular awareness may be ascribed to his peculiar position: my suggestion that no two current poets stood as useful successors to Perloff's Pound

and Stevens can now be modified. The current debate most relevant as a successor to Perloff's formulation concerns two versions of this single poet.<sup>6</sup>

## II

When Evans (and others) argue that liberal pluralism is "by tendency eclectic and apolitical, allergic to commitment and against principles on principle," their words might equally well describe the lack of "program" Ashbery famously attributed to Frank O'Hara (and by implication to his own work). (Ashbery went on to claim that the "'message'" of O'Hara's poems, "'unlike the message of committed poetry . . . incites one to all the programs of commitment as well as to every other form of self-realisation'" [qtd. in Smith 26 n 4].) While Hank Lazer refers to "the domestication and acceptance of John Ashbery's experimental poetry as a kind of strategic tokenism" (14), other commentators shift the responsibility to the poet himself. Charles Bernstein calls Ashbery's unwillingness to produce an oppositional poetics "a great disappointment for our letters" (157), consciously alluding to William Carlos Williams' famous judgment of "The Waste Land" as "the great catastrophe to our letters. . . . Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics" (146). The comparison evaluates Ashbery in no uncertain literary-historical terms. Evans' words might then equally describe the "career path" that moves from the title of Yale Younger Poet to the collage work of *The Tennis-Court Oath* to the Stevensian meditative verse of *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, accumulating academic exegesis at a steadily increasing rate.

One aspect of Ashbery's project has been to transcribe the protean moods of the atomic self; and this tendency has been taken to correspond with the socioeconomic fact of Ashbery's post-1976 ascendancy to major or even "greatest American poet" status. Of course, the two Ashberys are not solely their own creation. By the early 1990s, Ashbery could be blurbed (on the back of *Flow Chart*) both as "unfailingly avant-garde" and as the canonical inheritor of the high modern mantle, purifier of "the dialect of the tribe." The two positions coexist easily within what we might think of as the capacious pluralism of Ashbery's work, a poetry as thoroughly novelized as Pound's yet as meditatively lyrical as that of Stevens, one which has eschewed (since *The Tennis-Court Oath*) collage strategies and lyric monoglossia alike. Such a pluralism lends itself to appropriation: in "The Story of Fence," her first-person account of travels through the wilds of the contemporary poetry world, the editor Rebecca Wolff describes her magazine's title as presenting itself with the inevitability of "the best clichés." Indeed, few clichés remain unembraced by John Ashbery. But his most frequently-cited stance, "a kind of fence-sitting / Raised to the level of an aesthetic ideal" (*Selected* 88), does not preclude a continuing poetic examination of the relation between the discourse of lyric poetry and the social.<sup>7</sup>

*Flow Chart* begins by self-consciously charting itself, summoning up an iambic pentameter to locate the speaking subject at some point late in a career: "Still in the published city but not yet / overtaken by a new form of despair, I ask / the diagram" (1). The poem opens on an edge, neither out of the frying pan nor in the fire, acknowledging both the dangers of literary history and an imperative to innovate that might itself be only more poetic history, a temporally paradoxical predicament: the new pursues, seeking to overtake from the past.<sup>8</sup> Throughout, Ashbery addresses the subject of the Major Poet and this figure's relation to the demands of the social world:

What right have you to consider yourself anything but an  
enormously eccentric though  
not too egocentric character, whose sins of omission haven't  
omitted much,  
whose personal-pronoun lapses may indeed have contrib-  
uted to augmenting the hardship  
silently resented among the working classes? If I thought that  
for a minute I'd . . . (150; Ashbery's ellipsis)

By referring to "personal-pronoun lapses," the voice of accusation gestures both at self-critique and at criticism. Noting such an errant use of pronouns, particularly of the lyric "I," a kind of errancy that could not exactly be called "egocentric," has long been a prominent feature of Ashbery criticism. Noting political "sins of omission"—as in Charles Bernstein's stricture—has been another such feature. Thus forcibly pinned into the very person he would rather "lapse" away from—the first—"Ashbery"'s reply sputters out into ellipses. But the metaphors of centrality that trail through the accuser's language are a still more serious matter. The two terms (eccentric and egocentric) are potentially opposites, and the opposition is revealing; the eccentric "character" of *Flow Chart* is not centered within the "I" or ego but stands outside it, is etymologically speaking *ek kentros*, outside the center. This is not to argue that Ashbery is claiming (accusing himself of) a marginal identity; his question is different: what would it mean for poetry—and for the act of writing poetry—to have or want a central position?

So many were hung out to dry, or more accurately, to rot.  
And these marginalia—what other word is there for them?—  
are the substance of the text,  
by not being allowed to fit in. One can proceed like a ghost  
along corridors and find that doors are closed to one, and  
then  
what good is being invisible? (37)

"So many" of us, Ashbery tells us, are marginalized, a group of ghostly outsiders to whom doors remain closed, occupying a corridor (a related, more socially specified space appears earlier on the same page: "the narrow, closetlike conundrum / of their own slender existences"). But this social meaning coexists with the textual reference the same passage enacts. The text gestures at the particular quality of "So many" of its own lines, the consequence of their "not being allowed to fit in." If we take seriously for a moment the possibility that marginalia form "the substance of the text," the formal consequences are radical. Such a work would stand as a response to another, absent form that could never be known through these secondary notations, deriving its own notion of form from the discourse it is parasitic upon.

We might think of this discourse as literary history, a narrative that, for a poet who operates—as he announces in the poem's opening line—inside the "published city" (3) of textuality, has something of the weight that history proper bears for Pound or Stevens:

*It seems I was reading something;*  
I have forgotten the sense of it or what the small  
role of the central poem made me want to feel. No matter.  
The words, distant now, and mitred, glint. Yet not one  
ever escapes the forest of agony and pleasure that keeps them  
in a solution that has become permanent through inertia. The  
force  
of meaning never extrudes. And the insects,  
of course, don't mind. (3–4)

Once established as canonical—positioned as a "central poem"—a text can harden into an alien, senseless literary monument: a fairy-tale location in the timeless "forest of agony and pleasure," where nothing ever changes. The writing that makes up *Flow Chart* seeks to avoid this reification into a "central" poem of stasis. The poem figures reading otherwise, as a process that must be continual, to escape the linguistic inertia that seals up meaning like an insect in amber. Here I equate the "insects" with the glinting "words." The speculative nature, the contingency of this reading is its very point; it suggests a practice in which the writer looks very like a reader of his own text, rereading his own writing as it drifts toward the metaphorical—as it always will—then taking up the implied metaphor (words are insects) to start a new stream of language. It is this ongoing slippage, a quest that slides, placing reader and writer together, on edge, rather than locating or penetrating to some "center," that characterizes the poem's production of meaning.

The forgotten "*something*" being read may be characterized more specifically, given that the "central poem" alludes to a characteristic Stevensian image. In "A Primitive Like an Orb," the complexity and distance of such

a hypothesized “central poem,” in a logic like that of some medieval proof of God’s existence, merely confirms Stevens’ faith in its certainty: “The central poem is the poem of the whole, / The poem of the composition of the whole” (CP 442). Ultimately this “central poem” is transformed into a personage, “A giant on the horizon . . . / At the centre on the horizon, concentrum, grave / And prodigious person, patron of origins,” and in the lyric’s final stanza, Stevens affirms the part/whole relations of traditional representational poetics: “Each one, his fated eccentricity, / As a part, but part, but tenacious particle, / Of . . . the total / Of letters” (CP 443). These individual moments of “eccentricity” somehow all add up to a “concentrum”: the resort to such a coinage—forging a substantive from an entirely relative adjective, “concentric,” which denotes the state of sharing a center—marks the difficulty of such politico-poetic alchemy. By contrast, Ashbery’s sense of a shared marginality renders it impossible to find a solid or central position, a fixed ground for judgment. His “I” lacks this perspective; it is part of a “we” who are “other” to the idea of a dominant discourse. Centrality itself, as Charles Bernstein puts it, is “the power of the dominant margin” (188); acknowledging this, the truly marginal poem may *contain* multitudes but declines to *represent* a whole or a central figure that could stand for this whole.

For Ashbery, the marginality of poetry in the order of contemporary discourses is never confused with his own poetic career. The latter periodically emerges with a revealing awkwardness, often undermining those moments in the poem where a certain lyric pathos might otherwise occupy center stage:

But though reams of work do get done,  
not much listens. I have the feeling my voice is just for me,  
that no one else has ever heard it, yet I keep mumbling the  
litany  
of all that has ever happened to me. . . . (81)

“Litany,” of course, was first mumbled—published—as the long centerpiece poem of Ashbery’s *As We Know*. The section of this work Ashbery chose to excerpt in his *Selected Poems* begins as follows: “Some certified nut / Will try to tell you it’s poetry” (253). The “certified” nut—playing on the word—is, of course, no one other than the “major poet.”

The poetic career is figured throughout *Flow Chart*, often in terms that both invoke and parody the most traditional of imagery:

Any day now you must start to dwell in it,  
the poetry, and for this, grave preparations must be made, the  
walks of sand  
raked, the rubble wall picked clean of dead vine stems, but  
what

if poetry were something else entirely, not this purple  
weather  
with the eye of a god attached, that sees  
inward and outward? What if it were only a small, other way  
of living,  
like being in the wind? (145)

The description of poetry as a final dwelling place figures the poetic career in the most somber of terms, as if the practice itself was finally a writing toward death, a process of monumentalization; Ashbery's mordantly comical pun equates "the poetry" with a grave and thus tips the delicate tonal balance, undermining, as it were, the monument. But this is not to suggest that the alternative poetics of the quotidian ("a small, other way of living") is a consistent consolation in the poem. The temptation of the monument constantly returns, as in, for instance, the ambition to "build the palace of reason . . . to be able to construct the small song, our prayer / at the center of whatever void we may be living in: a romantic, nocturnal place / that must sooner or later go away" (76). The image reformulates "the small / role of the central poem" (3); no longer a distant, monumental text, it is now a necessary yet ineffectual prayer, spoken from a position in which centrality seems a tenuous claim indeed.

### III

The question of the place of poetry is endemic to *Flow Chart*; at moments it is treated quite literally, with a comic sociological objectivity—as in a remark that "poets are retreating into—or is it out of?—academia, beset by the / usual pit-bulls and well-meaning little old ladies in tennis shoes. And discovering / and assimilating new bastions of indifference and comprehension" (133). The passage hardly needs interpretation; I will simply note that Ashbery's pairs of images unwind with a looseness that serves to emphasize the idea of a system governed by signifying opposition (by difference), rather than the particular values of either side.

Such a reading of textual figurations of the literary is not, of course, itself meant to dismiss the possibility of a more strictly sociological argument (at which I have already gestured). Here I want to briefly introduce the work of Pierre Bourdieu. In Bourdieu's literary sociology, the literary field is the dominated or marginalized part of the field of power. Within the literary, the sector of restricted or autonomous production defines itself through inverting the values of that of large-scale production. The space of literary activity as a whole, then, is marked by struggle between market-driven and market-opposed principles of hierarchy.<sup>9</sup> The latter principle, of course, is that of the avant-garde. Such movements are cemented by opposition; but given the terms of the dominant model of literary history, recognition falls upon the individual and hence acts as a kind of entropy: exhibit, the fate of "language poetry," or the career of John Ashbery.

A sociological account of this kind is not concerned with the motivations that might cause an individual poet associated with an avant-garde to send work to a relatively mainstream publication, but with noticing that for such a poet to do so, whatever the motive, is complicit with the existing logic of literary history. Within these terms, such an action is double, counting both as a bet that the game of individual reputation—the game of “eras”—will continue to be the dominant game and an investment in a particular magazine that in its overt denial of group affiliation clearly supports this game. (None of which necessarily prevents a particular author from placing some side bets as well.) But the choice of a particular publication venue is also an attempt to be read in the present: the synchronic game of cultural intervention—the game played most aggressively by the avant-garde—goes on concurrently with the weird diachronic game of reputation (the two games I attempt to show Ashbery’s engagement with herein).<sup>10</sup>

It remains possible for literary history to choose its game: to elevate individual authors and forget the avant-garde, collective venues in which they originally appeared. To understand the author-function, as Michel Foucault reminded us, is not to disable it. It is difficult to see what editorial practices might prevent this; certainly, they will need the assistance of a literary history that is able to conceive of a unit of study other than that deadly dichotomy of the “major author” and the amorphous subject of cultural studies. But such a history cannot ensure the possibility that particular texts or ways of reading might function as a kind of liberatory practice outside the limits of their originary community.

At this point I will step aside: my conclusions are anticipated by Ashbery’s *Flow Chart*. I have argued that the poem frees the reader into an active marginality, one maker of meanings among many, while at the same time positioning writing (including its own) as a marginal practice. Its concluding line directs the reader back out into the world by pointing to a space that the poem does not seek to contain: “It’s open: the bridge, that way” (216). Such an account accords with the contemporary consensus in experimental poetry, which tells us that an avant-garde or postmodern poem will question and problematize, disrupting certainties and emphasizing differences—will precisely not seek, as did the modern work, to “compel conviction”—all this as part of its project of connecting formal techniques to the social struggles that give them their ultimate purpose and value. I quote Lyn Hejinian from “The Rejection of Closure”: “The ‘open text,’ by definition, is open to the world and particularly to the reader. It invites participation, rejects the authority of the writer over the reader and thus, by analogy, the authority implicit in other . . . hierarchies” (43). One wants to agree—but the question remains: how will such open invitations further a reimagining of social relations?

I want to suggest that for all its revisionary gestures toward modernist ambition, *Flow Chart* finally remains ambivalent about the values of avant-

garde poetics. The poem often thematizes claims that are recognizably versions of contemporary ones such as Hejirian's and concludes, I think, that poetic intervention can only affect the ground for discursive exchange—as by allowing the possibility of a relationship that exists outside the discourse of linguistic mastery to continually reemerge:

What we are to each other is both less urgent and more  
perturbing, having no discernible root, no *raison d'être*, or  
else flowing  
backward into an origin like the primordial soup it's so easy  
to pin  
anything on, like a carnation to one's lapel. So it seems we  
must  
stay in an uneasy relationship, not quite fitting  
together, not precisely friends or lovers though certainly not  
enemies, if  
the buoyancy of the spongy terrain on which we exist is to be  
experienced  
as an ichor, not a commentary on all that is missing from the  
reflection  
in the mirror. *Did I say that? Can this be me?* (10)

The slide of language here from metaphorical to literal, and the consequent undermining of the idiom ("to pin / anything on") mimics the sponginess of the linguistic terrain we inhabit: our shared linguistic conventions. No argument from a concept of origins (reversing the flow) will ease this tension. Instead, we have an "uneasy" present-tense pragmatics; and it is this "not quite fitting"/"together" (our collective marginality, to read the line break strongly) that will preserve us. Rather than a field to be tended by the poet, language is the very ground on which all our relations are conducted, a ground we experience as an "ichor": as a foreign substance that is yet within us, preserving the surprise, the otherness of language and the non-identity of our words and selves: "*Did I say that? Can this be me?*" Another lament on our internal division, another evocation of lyric pathos—"a commentary on all that is missing"—might yet be avoided. Yet this freedom is both solution and problem in Ashbery's poem: the reader of the "open" text is not always properly grateful: "And if I told you / this was your life, not some short story for a contest, how would you react? / Chances are you'd tell me to buzz off and continue writing" (81). If we, the readers, have been writing all along, then belated writerly attempts to free us from the marketplace—presented here in the familiar terms of the literary contest (what Evans calls the "rigged lotteries" of the prize system that establishes and reinforces hierarchies)—may not be entirely welcome. The passage as a whole is still more ambivalent:

And though one can hear the traffic's swish  
 as it cuts from one side of the island to the other, one is  
 transfixed,  
 facing an army of necessary revisions. "How would it be if I  
 said it this way,  
 or would so-and-so's way be better, easy on the adjectives?"  
 And if I told you  
 this was your life, not some short story for a contest, how  
 would you react?  
 Chances are you'd tell me to buzz off and continue writing,  
 except  
 it's so difficult; we barely begin and paralysis takes over,  
 forcing us out  
 for a breath of fresh air. . . . (81)

The earnest self-styled contestant, weighing the do's and don'ts proffered by the minor Hemingways of the workshop or manual ("easy on the adjectives'"), is easy to mock—except that Ashbery, mixing pronouns with his typical promiscuity, refuses to separate this figure entirely from the writer *qua* writer. Writers here are both spoken for and addressed: "one" is writing, "you" are writing, "we" are writing. The contestant confuses writing—for Ashbery, the project of a life—with the pursuit of literary status; but neither belief will reduce the difficulty of writing and revision itself.<sup>11</sup> As elsewhere in the poem, writing here is figured as a state of would-be fluidity constantly threatened by the force of inertia. The writer is "transfixed" not only by the process of revision but by the "difficult" process of writing itself, unable to move with the easy flow of the traffic outside: "paralysis takes over" and forces us back into the daily world of banal health.

Ultimately, Ashbery presents the notion of freeing the reader into writing as desirable and impossible, at best as a process that must be repeated over and over again.<sup>12</sup> Readers are or can be writers and vice versa: but the two traditional roles remain, however ridiculous:

not that you don't  
 already love him enough, more than any writer deserves. He  
 won't thank you for it.  
 But you won't mind that either, since his literature will have  
 performed its duty  
 by setting you down gently in a new place and then speeding  
 off before  
 you have a chance to thank it. We've got to find a new name  
 for him. "Writer" seems  
 totally inadequate; yet it is writing, you read it before you  
 knew it. And besides,

if it weren't, it wouldn't have done the unexpected and by  
doing so proved that it was quite  
the thing to do, and if it happened all right for you, but  
wasn't the way you  
thought it was going to be, why still  
that is called fulfilling part of the bargain. And by doing so  
he has erased your eternal debt to him. You are free. You can  
go now. (185–86)

The passage is a gleeful send-up, both of those two legendary figures, Author and Reader, and of the by now received revisionary notions about their relationship. The parodic element begins with the clunky false note of Ashbery's sly reference to "his literature." In the midst of these ambitious claims, a secondary meaning sneakily deflates the writer, leaving just another zealot, the type who might aggressively try to interest you in some "literature."<sup>13</sup> The writer "fulfill[s]" the bargain, it should be noted, and so erases our debt to him. In providing this surprising yet pleasurable textual experience, this yet-to-be renamed figure replaces the old notion of the "Writer," that figure on whom we always relied for meaning: the process described and parodied here is that which Roland Barthes so grandly prophesied in "The Death of the Author," the effort toward "suppressing the author in the interests of writing (which is, as will be seen, to restore the place of the reader)" (168). But in Ashbery's scenario, our freedom quickly becomes the tactfully ambiguous freedom to "go."

Have we—returning to Barthes' language—been born as readers, freed from the oppressive mythic regime of the Author to make meaning on our own; or have we simply been dismissed from text? In the end, the perhaps negative freedom with which the passage concludes resonates with the idea of a passive freedom of consumption, the illusory freedom of choice provided by the liberal state, just as strongly as with the conception of positive freedom that stands at the end of the avant-garde project. A stalemate between readerly and writerly poetics—which equally remain circumscribed by the boundary lines of the major poet (and the corresponding mode of publication)—is thus eloquently figured in Ashbery's work. Given my own feelings, already amply stated, I could hardly conclude this piece by any optimistic, and in any case belated, invocation of the Ashbery Era. Nevertheless, to express, whether analytically or as symptom, the dilemmas of the particular historical moment is an achievement that cannot be dismissed. It prompts me to suggest that John Ashbery is surely our most ambivalent living poet.

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<sup>1</sup>Blackmur's essay, first published in 1932 in *Hound & Horn*, is an early example of the argument that sought to justify readerly difficulty, a line that would become crucial to the New Critical reception of modernist poetry—and, indeed, to the reception of modernism in the arts. I examine the discourse around modernism and difficulty in my dissertation. See also Diepeveen.

<sup>2</sup>Although, as Marjorie Perloff has observed, the New Critics wrote “respectfully— if also quite critically” (1) about both men, here I would choose rather to emphasize that each was somewhat marginal to their canon. In its early stages the New Criticism took Pound to have already declined from the height of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” and, without the late achievements before them, considered Stevens a mere aesthete. (The best account of Stevens' reception is John Newcomb's *Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons*.) The two poets only became potentially polar opposites—“major” poets whose work attracted sustained attention—in a postwar environment where Pound was increasingly acknowledged by poets as the crucial precursor of the New American Poetry, Stevens by critics as the foremost living exemplar of the main line of lyric poetry in the English language. This is the background against which Perloff's “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” was written.

<sup>3</sup>Here I do not mean to deny that the pair otherwise—whether autobiographically or in the literary-historical symbolic—form a perfect opposition. Their well-known encounter is easily allegorized. On November 15, 1924, the patron of the *Criterion*, Lady Rothermere, brought Eliot to pay an unexpected call at 27 Rue de Fleurus. *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* tells the story: “Eliot said that if he printed anything of Gertrude Stein's in the *Criterion* it would have to be her very latest thing.” Stein promptly sat down at her desk. “[S]he . . . began to write a portrait of T. S. Eliot and called it the fifteenth of November, that being this day and so there could be no doubt but that it was her latest thing” (*Selected Writings* 166). The piece was sent to the *Criterion* and appeared in that magazine's January 1926 issue; a year later, writing in the *Nation and Athenaeum*, Eliot associated Stein's writing with jazz and 1920s' mass culture: “her work is not improving, it is not amusing, it is not interesting, it is not good for one's mind” (qtd. in Schuchard 137 n 39). The particular terms of this evaluation place Stein outside the literary/artistic domain, the sphere in which value judgments are governed by the faculty of *taste*. Eliot's recognition—or decision—that Stein could not be assimilated to the disciplinary role of the developing modernist literary canon anticipates much of her later reception history.

<sup>4</sup>A search of the MLA International Bibliography on-line turns up 47 articles or book chapters whose “subject” is Howe, 26 whose is Graham. (Much of this scholarship is very recent. More than half of the work on each writer has appeared since 1995: over this span, the count is Howe 26, Graham 17—to contextualize, over the same period the count for Adrienne Rich is 82, for John Ashbery 71. Interestingly, Rich and Ashbery were the two candidates for most significant contemporary poet that Charles Altieri proposed in his 1984 study *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry*; some eighteen years later, they remain the living poets most acknowledged by criticism.)

<sup>5</sup>I focus on this piece as exemplary of definitional debates around the *emerging* avant-garde. The (relative) obscurity of *Fence* is precisely the point: to wait for a magazine to become “established” is to wait for it to have belonged to a previous moment. In any case, I am not the first to mention this debate in other forums; it is alluded to with a certain condescension by Robert Hass in his introduction to *The Best American Poetry, 2001*, as representing the intemperance of youth. For better (if also at times for worse) such intemperance has long defined the avant-garde.

I will refer only to Evans' piece, "Third Factory: Notes to Poetry IV.1," which was posted at <<http://www.umit.maine.edu/~steven.evans/3F-1>>; some thirty responses have been archived at <[www.umit.maine.edu/~steven.evans/3F-index.htm](http://www.umit.maine.edu/~steven.evans/3F-index.htm)>.

<sup>6</sup>I make this argument in considerably more detail in an article entitled "Charting the Flow: John Ashbery and Literary History," which is the source of much of the second section of this piece.

<sup>7</sup>The line is from "Soonest Mended," a poem easily read as addressing the social situation of contemporary poetry. It opens with a weary summary that teeters at the edge of parody: "Barely tolerated, living on the margin / In our technological society" (*Selected Poems* 87).

<sup>8</sup>This has long been Ashbery's position. The opening of *Flow Chart* repeatedly echoes his earlier "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror"—the poem whose reception quickly elevated Ashbery to critical centrality, making a writing life into a "career"—a poem that could still suggest that since "today is uncharted" (*Selected Poems* 192), "Today has no margins, the event arrives / Flush with its edges, is of the same substance, / Indistinguishable" (200). (Among other images later taken up in *Flow Chart*, "Self-Portrait" refers (203) to the inaccessible "diagram still sketched on the wind.") *Flow Chart* maps the space of "today" (left uncharted by the more focused discursive lyric development of the earlier poem). A third related formulation may be noted: near the end of the prose poem "The System," Ashbery speaks of "the razor's edge present which is really a no-time, straying over the border into the positive past and the negative future whose movements alone define it" (*Selected* 158).

<sup>9</sup>My account derives primarily from Bourdieu's *The Rules of Art*. Interestingly, *Fence* has proved capable of absorbing this literary sociology and using its aura of value-neutrality to legitimize itself; a recent issue contains a short article by David Kellogg entitled "The Self in the Poetic Field," which takes Bourdieu's cultural sociology as a way of suggesting possibilities for contemporary American poetry. Kellogg argues that the dominant trend among new independent little magazines is a playful eclecticism and that this should be understood not as an attempt to return to a simple, pre-ideological notion of universal literary merit (as a critic like Evans might suggest) but as acknowledging that we exist in an unstable, transitional period. Pluralism, according to this account, has permeated even the avant-garde.

Such an argument works perfectly as part of the journal's position: its pluralism dons the value-neutrality of literary sociology as a disguise and thus eludes the pursuing logic of criticism. In Bourdieu's terms, the willingness of a new player to speak the language of the market reads as a calculated defiance: lacking symbolic capital specific to the field, the new player has less at stake in the field's autonomy and is more likely to appeal to the logic of the dominant. We see a liberal pluralist logic of inclusion under attack by its inverse. To publish a diverse variety of poetry (as does *Fence*) may be a principled stand; but providing such a convenience for the reader is entirely in accordance with hard marketing logic, as if *Fence* were to say: "New all-purpose *Fence*: why buy anything else?"

<sup>10</sup>Political or activist concerns necessarily stand in an unpredictable relation to long-term canonicity; perhaps the best example of this phenomenon among American literary careers is that of Harriet Beecher Stowe.

<sup>11</sup>Here again the particulars of Ashbery's (perceived) career and more general statements about the activity of writing blur together: while the copiousness of Ashbery's work hardly leads one to think of him as experiencing difficulty writing, the phrase "it's so difficult" more easily adheres to his work, which is resistant both to the local, readerly imposition of coherence and to the literary-historical narratives that seek to position Ashbery, whether as another "major poet" in the tradition or as a marker of some postmodern break. (Nonetheless, "first thought, best thought" is no part of the

Ashbery aesthetic. Elsewhere in the poem he cautions, "Something else will break fruitfully / the allotted chain of associations, and it will serve as well—only don't try to pass it off as / an impulse, sincerity" (145). The warning advocates a poetry of association without the (Beat) rhetorical imperative behind it; without the investment in the unified, self-authorizing subject; and without the characteristically Beat refusal of revision.

<sup>12</sup>To extend the avant-garde logic of "production for producers" is to see its utopian possibilities to change the social conditions under which some people write and others consume their writing, to make *everybody* a producer: to imagine a polis with a publisher in every neighborhood, people reading each other's work and talking about it, across the space where once stood the backyard fences. And the title of Poet or Writer would disappear. (Here I borrow a fantasy from Marx's *The German Ideology*. John Guillory discusses this particular "thought experiment" in his *Cultural Capital*.) This is not to claim that aesthetic distinctions and the arguments we have over them would vanish; rather, that such judgments would no longer be legitimized in terms of a particular stance vis-à-vis the laws of the market, and consequently the distinction between avant-garde and mainstream literary production would no longer be tenable.

<sup>13</sup>"All the rest," one might say, "is literature": the distinction between literature and writing—visible in the figure of the short-story contestant—lies behind this passage. Ashbery, of course, is deeply familiar with the unrelenting attack on *literary* values that distinguished French modernism; in moments such as these his descent from this particular line is most apparent.

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# The Pound/Stevens Era

CHARLES ALTIERI

## I

ONE OF THE PLEASURES of returning to the question of “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” is getting to read once again the superb essay by Marjorie Perloff that initially formulated the questions with her characteristically lucid and challenging directness. For me an even greater pleasure, because a more perverse one, has been rereading how completely and precisely she captures the critical climate of the 1970s and early 1980s, in the process utterly skewering romantic critics of Stevens like Harold Bloom. Yet I find myself wondering if precision about the critics is the best way to establish the cultural roles played and playable by the work of Wallace Stevens and Ezra Pound. Or, to put the issue another way, fear of sounding like those critics ought to be sufficient motive to lead us to attempt reconfiguring Perloff’s basic oppositions, if only because they have dominated discussion for almost twenty years.<sup>1</sup>

Perloff represented Stevens as a fundamentally romantic poet devoted to lyric and concerned with poetry as elevated thought based on the symbolic transformation of the perceived world. Her Pound, on the other hand, stressed making over thinking and so pushed poetry beyond the conventions of romantic lyricism that haunt Stevens’ efforts to be modern. Pound the maker had no need to transform the real: his obsession was in restoring to it its objectivity and hence its historicity. Because he could subordinate the symbol-forming imagination, Pound could dramatize the mind’s potential harmonies with the processes of a world extending far beyond the confines of self. Pound then could become the exemplar for contemporary efforts to develop experimental modes of poetry that are not bound to romantic ideals and expectations.

This is obviously a powerful picture. But is it one we want to have dominate the next twenty years? Those devoted to Stevens are not likely to think so. There is a lot of the romantic in Stevens, but Stevens was so ambivalently aware of his fealties that he also elaborated his own sharp critique of romantic values in poetry. On the most fundamental level Stevens was leery of the desire for symbolic statements. For various reasons throughout his career, he was much less interested in offering inter-

pretations of the world than in reflecting on what happens as the mind turns in various ways within and upon that world. Poetry explored the kinds of identification and habitation that certain modes of eloquence might allow: "A poem is a particular of life thought of for so long that one's thought has become an inseparable part of it" (NA 65). The poet's craft, the poet's making becomes the ultimate test of whether words of the world can in fact carry the life of the world.<sup>2</sup> And cadence affords the poem's basic means of linking words to world in ways that allow the will a place to anchor itself.

Pound comes off much better in Perloff's account. But I think he too suffers from the oppositions she develops and from the framework necessary to link him directly with Language writing. The following passage summarizes most of Perloff's major points:

The *how*, for Poundians, thus becomes more interesting than the *what*: if poetry teaches us how to talk to ourselves, it is not because it provides us with a vision of Reality but because its processes imitate the processes of the external world as we have come to know it. (506)

Ernest Fenollosa provides the naturalizing principles allowing a sophisticated return to a process-based version of mimesis not unlike one proposed by the early James Joyce. Yet in my view even the richest notion of mimesis binds Pound's sense of history and visionary possibility to natural processes and so underplays his concern for directly psychological energies and their socio-political situations. Perloff cites Pound on the "'constatation of fact'" (493), but her emphasis is more on the fact than on the constatation, where one would have to attend more thoroughly to how voices establish facts and wills adjust themselves to such establishings. It may even be the case that Pound's interest in constatation helps explain, as Perloff's objectivist reading does not, why *The Cantos* elicit so much complaint that the underlying connections are rarely clear and usually idiosyncratic. Given Pound's idealization of freedom, it may have seemed to him necessary to admit a strong degree of contingency into the ways he organizes his world. That sense of contingency establishes a substantial counterpoint to the poem's quest for underlying patterns of energy while setting off by contrast how the objective qualities extend beyond the conditions informing their being chosen in the first place. Whatever the explanation we give for this contingency, our reading of Pound has to acknowledge that dealing with egos is as important for him as dealing with facts, perhaps because the ego is another kind of fact that requires attending not to what we see but to how we constate our worlds.

Both poets then have something to gain if we attempt an alternative way of understanding how they might be related to one another. In pursuing that, we also may be able to develop fresh ways of appreciating

what it meant for later poets to have the example of both men on which to draw. The question of how we assign priorities within the study of modernist American poetry leads me to suggest that we propose two quite different eras, each constructed by different poetic cultures. For the immediate heirs of the modernists, that period clearly had to be considered the Eliot era because he set the basic cultural agenda for the work of younger poets and critics. But by the 1960s that situation had changed. Tired of what seemed both a restrictive formalism and a conservative ideology bound to the sense of poetry as inherently ironic, poets turned to the more secular options afforded by Pound and by Stevens. Although there were many poets who chose one over the other, there were many others who sought various kinds of inspiration and guidance from some combination of the two modes of writing. So there might be good reasons for speaking of a single Pound/Stevens era based in part on deep agreements between the poets and in part on how later poets in fact developed a sense of heritage. After all, concerns for fleshing out romantic lyricism led poets like Charles Wright to model their rhythms on Pound's sharp-edged concision rather than Stevensian "voluble delugings" (*CP* 24). It was Stevens' almost minimalist, quite unromantic abstraction that made him a vital presence for poets like Robert Creeley, even though their major loyalties were to the Pound tradition. For ambitious younger poets today like Chris Stroffolino, Jennifer Moxley, Haryette Mullen, and Joshua Clover, it proves even more important to have a single Pound/Stevens era to which to turn because they face the formidable task of continuing experimental traditions while seeking a recasting of romantic excess not compatible with the priorities of Language writing.

If we construct our literary past in terms of how our own poetic culture can idealize certain aspects of modernist American poetry and hence still feel challenged by that work, it seems to me severely limiting to focus on irreconcilable conflicts between Pound and Stevens. There are obviously important differences between them. But I want to use the question of idealization in order to concentrate on what the two poets share as they ask what powers poetry can be said to exemplify and how poetry can clarify the dangers and rewards that accompany the relevant dispositions of mind and affect. This will require first sketching three fundamental features of their work that I think bind them to a common project, in ways that prove more central for contemporary poetics than the work of other modernist pairs we might invoke like Crane/Williams or Loy/Moore. Then I will look at specific moments in which their poetry provides exemplary strategies for handling what continue to be crises about how idealization can have claims on a culture that is fundamentally alienated from poetry's traditional ways of seeking authority for itself.

First, Pound and Stevens feel the pressure of history in a distinctive way. They share with Eliot and other modernists the revolutionary sense that art now had to address urban realities—the pastoralism of the previ-

ous generation of poets seemed little more than escapist nostalgia. Pound and Stevens differ substantially from these other modernists, though, in the degree to which they internalized the quest for getting free from both inherited expectations and the modes of expression that sustained those expectations. Where T. S. Eliot and Hart Crane intensified the romantics' anxiety of influence, Stevens and Pound generalized that set of fears so that they encompassed every aspect of mediation. They saw historically conditioned factors as threatening to provide easy, popular formulations for even the most intimate aspects of psychic life. And they were terrified of assuming conventional roles or linguistic patterns that might undermine their efforts to develop new imaginative identities. Being modern required relentless scrutiny about every aspect of language that the dominant culture took as fundamental to the lyric imagination. As poets such as John Ashbery would continue to emphasize, history is not just something that happens outside us but it is something that qualifies and conditions all our efforts to represent that outsideness for ourselves. The very commitments to expression that enable writers to appreciate what it means to make the imagination a vital force within the real also doom them to a continual sense of their own pathos. For an example, one might contrast Pound's painful self-scrutiny about available languages in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* to Eliot's more public ironies enabling a constant use of the past he wants to transform. And Stevens is even more precise in his sense of dispossession:

Is it a philosopher's honeymoon, one finds  
 On the dump? Is it to sit among mattresses of the dead,  
 Bottles, pots, shoes and grass and murmur *aptest eve*:  
 Is it to hear the blatter of grackles and say  
*Invisible priest*; is it to eject, to pull  
 The day to pieces and cry *stanza my stone*?  
 Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the.  
 (CP 203)<sup>3</sup>

How can poetry develop imaginative stances for engaging this sense of historicity? This question brings us to the second important similarity between the poets—to me the basic one. It could no longer suffice to imagine the poet's task as the direct rendering of experience. Poetry had to make experience articulate, but it also had to find ways of dramatizing what was involved in taking self-conscious responsibility for the renderings of one's historicity that emerged in these efforts at articulation. We find in Pound and Stevens the same sense of a second-order lyricism that we find pronounced in Ashbery and in Creeley (as well as in the relatively young contemporaries I have mentioned, although their basic concern is with hearing how their imaginations are continually invaded by popular media). Poetry becomes a matter of making sensual and sensible one's ability

to hear and to engage the specific stances enabling one to bring aspects of the world under the sway of language. In Stevens' *Harmonium*, these second-order concerns generated a delightful combination of skeptical ironies and dense sound patterns—the fullness of the latter serving as compensation for the frustrations inherent in the search for some kind of abiding truth. But by the mid-1930s Stevens found himself unable or unwilling to let irony defend himself from commitment. He wanted some direct way of addressing his society. Yet the more direct he became, quintessentially in “Owl’s Clover,” the more his ironic consciousness haunted him because the directness seemed mired in standard rhetorics so that there was no distinctive personal or poetic stamp he could put on his discourse. Stevens had to be abstract because when he heard himself attempting to be concrete and practical he found no trace of the poet he knew he could be. He made his need for abstraction his theme, thereby freeing himself from irony into a range of other second-order hearings of his own direct impulses.

Consider Stevens’ treatment of the idea of a hero. In “Owl’s Clover” Stevens proposed interpretations of the social order. After that he turned increasingly to interpreting his desires for certain kinds of interpretations. He saw that any particular rendering of specific images of heroism, any concrete projections he might offer, were pervaded by ideology and distorted by the very needs that called them forth. But if one could capture the structure producing the need, and if one could find positive energies in one’s resistance to those concrete images, one might construct an idea of the hero around which various social groups might rally. They might see what they share precisely because of the intensity with which they pursue their differences.

Pound’s second-order concerns differ substantially from Stevens’ in their focus, yet they lead to a similar sense of empowerment through the intensity of one’s focus on how craft might lead beyond itself.<sup>4</sup> Where Stevens develops ways of making poetry out of reflection on his own desires for speech, the Pound of *A Draft of XXX Cantos* concentrated on disciplines allowing poetry to reflect on how it might best make articulate what can be heard in the voices it encounters. How could both poet and reader attune themselves to aspects of voice that are not reducible to the propositions asserted? How could they simultaneously interpret the originating context through the voice and use the voice as a measure of how well the agent was responding to the social forces shaping that context? These cantos become insistently self-reflexive without thematizing self-reflection as an end in itself. Their goal is to define energies that can arise from hearing themselves hearing these voices. Poetry resists ideology and reductive historicism by foregrounding dispositions toward these voices capable of honoring their singularity while incorporating that singularity within a capacious sense of culture as dialogue.

The third similarity is a simple extension of the previous claim, but it is crucial to recognizing how both writers open similar new directions for adapting modernism to contemporary writing. If poetry is to engage in constant second-order reflection and to adapt lyrical passions in relation to those reflections, it cannot present itself as relying on business as usual. Poetry cannot simply offer itself to readerly expectations shaped by literate culture at large; nor can it trust that these conventions suffice to convey the impact on society that the poets hope to have. On the simplest level, Pound and Stevens treat poetry as if training readers in certain habits of attention and reflection were more important than any investment in a particular assertion—either of emotion or of belief. All the modernists shared some version of this emphasis. With Eliot it is hard to tell whether he confused this possibility of literary conversion with the possibility of religious conversion, or whether he might have been right that only something like religious conversion will give meaning and purpose to the transformations of reading that modernism proposed.

Pound and Stevens were much more insistent that the conversion had to be secular and therefore that poetry had to emphasize possibilities of affecting the reader's ways of engaging experience. They differed from Williams, Moore, and Crane because they wanted not only to construct ideal readers but to make reading a constant reflection on one's relation to possible ideal practices. Heroism in their work became less something one could find in their contemporary society than something one had to construct as a possible state of responsiveness to what texts embody.<sup>5</sup> Poetry made certain modes of consciousness possible and testable, so that it promised to offer a social force for its idealizations that seemed much less subject to endless irony than the effort to render "interpretations" of experience or projections driven by particular ideological agendas.

If I am right, the stakes are large in getting clear how Pound and Stevens offer similar ways of dealing with how they would like us to engage what is obviously different in their particular worldviews. Ironically, the best way to appreciate these similarities may be to look critically at typical value assertions made when those identifying with one of the two poets make negative judgments of the other. For it seems that "Poundian" judgments about Stevens and "Stevensian" judgments about Pound tend to seek out what is most problematic in construed first-order claims by the respective poets while ignoring the second-order reflections contextualizing and adapting those claims. By attending to the limitations in such perspectives we can dramatize by contrast the poets' efforts to avoid the righteousness that comes so easily to their critics. We create the possibility of arguing that it is precisely in these reflexive relations to their own desires that their poetry becomes most radically modern and most evocative for contemporary culture.

## II

The Poundian claims against Stevens seem to me easier to deal with, if only because it feels as if I have spent half my life grappling with them.<sup>6</sup> The standard claim (uttered first by Pound himself)<sup>7</sup> has been that Stevens' abstraction evades historical reality and turns inward in solipsistic reverie. In reaction to such claims, Alan Filreis has done a superb job of showing how in fact Stevens does not ignore the real but seeks ways of entering conversation with radical poets on issues of vital importance for his immediate cultural situations.

But if Filreis' value judgments are the most appropriate, Stevens' greatest poetry would occur during the period in the 1930s when he sought such accommodations.<sup>8</sup> Therefore I prefer a very different tack. Rather than accepting the priority of any claims about social reality, I want to concentrate on Stevens' increasing refusal to be bullied by discourse about the real (or by claims that the poet best serves society by offering dialogical relations with it). Then I can emphasize how Stevens models processes of thinking and of reading that refuse being locked into positions of assent or disagreement before fully elaborating how both assent and disagreement can be formulated. These processes explore how the poet's powers as maker of linguistic structures might shape alternative ways readers could pursue intellectual investments. These explorations hold out the possibility of reconfiguring how we understand what most convincingly binds modern agents to social commitments.

Stevens' "Examination of the Hero in a Time of War" seems to me the best example for my case, in large part because it offers a somewhat strange conclusion to *Parts of a World*. On the one hand, the poet seems to repudiate many of the volume's gestures toward directly addressing contemporary social conditions. Here we see Stevens turning from poetry directly engaging history to poetry convinced that one best engages history by reflecting on the desires sponsoring that engagement. On the other hand, the poem is not quite at ease with its new gestures. Instead there is considerable straining to get the poem's affective investments in harmony with its idealization of self-reflection. As the volume concludes, it also indicates how there will have to be continued efforts to draw tight connections between shared common experience and the idea of the hero.

The poem's sixteen stanzas divide structurally into groups of four. The first group begins with the abstract voice of a hero born of war and articulating its fealty to something like sheer necessity. Then the next three stanzas uneasily try out human voices seeking some way to internalize that severity, or at least enter into its proximity without sentimentalizing it into yet more "Chopiniana" (CP 275). The second group of stanzas takes the opposite tack. Beginning with the effort to link the hero to the common man, this group works its way to realizing the need to separate the hero as idea from the various images that cultures impose on that idea.

Poetry becomes a process of attempting to tease out an underlying structure of desire from the first-order manifestations giving a target for the desire.

The next turn of the poem in section IX is crucial for my general argument because here Stevens shifts to positive terms. We had seen the negative case, why the hero cannot be an image. Now the next two stanzas each begin with conditional clauses, as if the poem had to build on possibilities created by the processes convincing the speaker that the hero cannot be an image or actual person. These stanzas in effect connect the hero to the mind's powers of self-reflexive magnification by reflecting on their own constructive activity, now "Leafed out in adjectives" (*CP* 277). As with Pound, dealing with idealization proves inseparable from exploring how an audience might feel itself manifesting powers of thinking and of feeling that seem central to identifications they might want to make yet are not sufficiently fostered by their culture.

All this self-reflexive intensity generates the increasing skepticism of stanza XI, where in effect the historical actuality manifests its resistance. But that very negation calls forth the central statement that is the final stanza of the third part of the poem:

It is not an image. It is a feeling.  
There is no image of the hero.  
There is a feeling as definition.  
How could there be an image, an outline,  
A design, a marble soiled by pigeons?  
The hero is a feeling, a man seen  
As if the eye was an emotion,  
As if in seeing we saw our feeling  
In the object seen and saved that mystic  
Against the sight, the penetrating,  
Pure eye. Instead of allegory,  
We have and are the man, capable  
Of his brave quickenings, the human  
Accelerations that seem inhuman. (*CP* 278–79)

In my own previous writing about Stevens, I emphasized the use of these "as" constructions to make the action of the poem also the evidence for its claims.<sup>9</sup> "As" constructions establish equivalences in time and in manner: as the poem acts, one is invited to see one's own mind acting and to treat one's feeling for those actions as evidence for the values that the poem proclaims. Here a second-order consciousness of what the text is doing becomes also a first-order consciousness about how there can be an alternative to allegory. Thinking about the hero in this poem embodies what becomes possible through such thinking—namely this sense of the self responding to its own quickenings. These equivalences in turn make

a strong claim to link author and reader within that very process, since reading is simply letting oneself participate in those activities and trying to understand who one becomes in the process. The poem composes a visibility that replaces sight, so that it offers a modern mode of objectivity based not on the object but on how subjects manage to confirm one another's reactions.

Now, however, I am less interested in the conceptual work done by the "as" constructions than I am in how Stevens' rendering of affective experience can be said to intensify the substance to which these claims lead us. Fully appreciating this self-reflexive path for understanding the hero depends on our clearly recognizing how our own affective participation in seeing the object establishes the degree to which we actually share in what the poem makes visible. The affects quickening within the poem afford the subject matter for a second-order engagement in which those affects become the events in the poem through which we trace the possibility of our being able to extend ourselves to participate in the continuing construction of heroes without images of heroes. Then, because we see why feelings matter, we also have to recognize the importance of the art that brings them immediately into these reflexive processes. Making is inseparable from thinking because the making provides the intensity that in turn allows us to appreciate how our feeling helps literally to constitute the object seen. The poet's eloquence is also the poet's means of exploring what affects can enter and help compose the self-reflexive processes that simply are what the poem means as it goes about trying to give resonance to its own quickenings. Approaching the hero is not just a matter of thinking certain thoughts. The thinking must sustain a way of speaking. The way of speaking then defines for self-reflection a means of investing in the feelings elicited by and in that way of speaking. To be the man we have to enter voluble speech, which is the only domain where what remains ideal can also be said to exist. That is what it means to feel capable.

These possibilities for a new locus of meaning, however, also create for Stevens a new set of problems. For there is a large undeveloped distinction between 1) glimpsing the hero through our intense participation in a way of thinking and 2) believing in any long term presence of the hero helping us shape actions to accord with what we only glimpse. Just how much of a man can momentary quickenings produce? Stevens' last four stanzas address these issues, but I think in ways that strain somewhat awkwardly to establish the appropriate or necessary long-term affective states. Stanza XIV, for example, turns quickenings into "hymns" as it tries to give the hero an enduring place in experience. But Stevens soon has to pull back from his own excess. Rather than treat the hero as a permanent possibility of certain ways of thinking, he falls back on his comfortable myth of seasonal aspects of our imaginings. The hero becomes only a figure of summer, of those states of imagined plenitude providing the appropriate rhetorics. However, then there must be a continual other to the hero,

reminding us and him of autumnal and wintry imaginative sites. Correspondingly, the hero takes on an isolated solitary existence—not the extension of quotidian self-reflection but the nagging other tormenting familiar man with his mediocrity.

Yet Stevens would not yield entirely to this structure of oppositions. Instead, his subsequent poetry took on a challenge that I think recurs at the core of writers as different as Ashbery and Adrienne Rich and Lyn Hejinian. How can the poet base any claims about provoking enduring changes in our values when his or her writing offers only fleeting quickenings and the promise of momentary identifications? How can writing produce the kinds of quickenings that will provide relatively stable links to the hero without basing the stability in precisely those outmoded images and monuments that must be resisted if we are to have even provisional glimpses of values capable of persisting through the inevitable dismantling of those images and monuments? Stevens' subsequent work would explore two possible responses to these challenges, both based on foregrounding second-order reflections on the difficulty of making those stable assertions. First, one can shift what one means by permanence, or at least by enduring substance. Rather than locating what endures in specific objects, one can dramatize an endurance deriving from the fact that certain paths of thinking prove themselves worthy of repeated journeys. Here the *telos* is not the place at which we arrive but the sense of arrival within the various turnings of the path. Poetry need not seek explicit resolutions so long as it constructs ways of speaking and of reading that allow us to play possible ways of answering against one another. For then it relies on how certain modes of thinking best correlate reflection with feeling. Second, Stevens had to link the processes allowing for idealization more closely to purely quotidian experience. For then there might be much less of a gap between the solitary hero and the familiar man. He developed imaginative paths that projected as the measure of heroism not simply the poet's eloquence but the poet's sense of the necessities that eloquence had to confront. There would be no need for allegory because the readers would find themselves inseparable from the very processes calling them into being as self-reflexive agents. Whatever heroism was, it would have to begin in and return to what we all had in common—not just as readers but as agents with typical needs that readers could see their reading managing to address.

### III

When we turn to criticisms of Pound, we enter a considerably more dense and more problematic world. His poetry has elicited two basic lines of criticism. One dwells on his adamantly idiosyncratic structuring of details. Although these critics grant there are many beautiful passages in *The Cantos*, they also insist that the poems are incoherent unless one is willing to spend a lifetime familiarizing oneself with the background of Poundian

allusion and attuning oneself to Pound's associative linkings of details. Pound's pursuit of freedom to be himself ultimately won out over his desires to be a prophet. The second line of criticism focuses almost entirely on those of Pound's overall values that seem to come through his text all too clearly. Enormous labors are devoted to tracking his anti-Semitism and reading his fascist imaginings back through his entire career. Ironically this insistence on taking Pound to task for his values seems to me precisely the mode of criticism he should have wanted because it does not treat his poetry as the dalliyings of an aesthete but takes very seriously his self-representation as a quasi-prophet attempting to save a society bent on self-destruction.

However, Pound also would have wanted his critics to take the trouble to read his poetry and try to understand why his work risks the idiosyncratic and the hermetic. Here I will argue that at least his *Draft of XXX Cantos* provides an example of self-criticism that goes a long way toward addressing the now standard complaints. I do not want to deprive Pound of his excesses, but I think I can suggest ways of reading the volume as a whole that keep Pound a vital figure for us because they track his second-order engagement with the entire issue of how poetry can blend cultural criticism with the counterpressure of plausible idealization. Pound was not content to turn out gorgeous or clever passages loosely strung together by appeals to readerly associations. Although the *Cantos* do not have clear organizing patterns, they do have a consistent and clear organizing demand—that first the poem and then the reader attune to those energies within history that have some possibility of modifying how one imaginatively approaches a contemporary world. This attuning must have its idiosyncratic dimension because the individual must create its associations or be enslaved by prevailing public models, as arbitrary as they are entrenched. But it may be possible, as in Stevens, to see the cultivating of idiosyncrasy as itself a way of taking up a demand felt by an entire culture. In fact *A Draft of XXX Cantos* seems to me based on an insistence that we recognize this common need for individuality and that we then labor to give concrete expressions to our own most intensely held commitments. Poundian ideogrammic method offers a spiritual discipline for registering aspects of individual lives that are simply lost when those individuals seek abstraction as a means of shoring up their claims to matter.

It is difficult to make a convincing case about the values governing *The Cantos* without developing a book-length argument. Here I will have to be content with a much slighter project. I will first try to show why we cannot simply identify Pound the composer of *A Draft of XXX Cantos* with the more extreme passages that critics use to link these texts to his contemptible public stances on Jews and on fascist values. Then I will sketch his development of second-order values through two kinds of passages. Pound's Malatesta cantos offer a stunningly fresh and vital understanding of how we might idealize a character without turning heroism into an



The critic of Pound might reply that although I help rescue Pound's intelligence, I do nothing to reinterpret the fact that Pound still needs this hell and finds it composed of those with whom he disagrees. Fascism is at core a tendency to treat differences as if they justified ultimate binaries, with only one side having a plausible claim to be right. This, however, ignores the way Pound a few cantos before this one offers a similarly hysterical voice, this time in the person of someone he deeply hates. The poetry seems to want us not just to identify with certain views but to appreciate different qualities of voicing depending on the perspectives agents assume. I cite one of the many delightfully overblown condemnations of Sigismundo Malatesta uttered by his archenemy Pope Pius II and cited in Canto X:

*"Lussurioso incestuoso, perfide, sozzure ac crapulone,  
assassino, ingordo, avaro, superbo, infidele  
fattore di monete false, sodomitico, uxoricido."* (Cantos 45)

We learn a good deal about the Pope from how he speaks. We see his lascivious sensuality evoked simply by the sonority of his Latin. We see how here that investment in sensual pleasure is inseparable from his blindness and his perversity. The abstract labels substitute self-righteousness for any contoured attention to the qualities of intelligence and free-spiritedness that characterize Malatesta and make him a problematic political force.

Now we have the beginnings of a second-order drama. How can Poundian modes of engagement with history provide means of criticizing those who find their discourse trapping them in abstract, self-confirming substitutes for the real? More important, how can one use that criticism as a means of actually fighting one's way back to the specific forms of energies within that history that might make one's present a more dynamic and focused domain? One answer lies in everything the poem manages to make us see about Malatesta to which the Pope was blind and indeed to which centuries of historical writing had been blind because they took their cue from papal interpretations of Renaissance politics. For there to be a modern epic, Pound would have to train readers brought up in a decidedly anti-epic culture. His first task was to guide readers to grasp the limitations producing the Pope's self-defensive misreadings. It is crucial then that they recognize how odd and how resonant it is that the Pope created not one but two effigies of Malatesta to have burnt ("the first one wasn't a good enough likeness" [Cantos 45]). For this uneasy doubling reflects a problem fundamental to the fantasy that one can provide generalizations that also adequately characterize an individual's moral being. No single image can suffice for the person, and no single image can adequately reflect the modes of desire that shape the process of representation. Such representational ambitions lead only to repeated renderings of

static oversimplified images that will stand still for epithets like those that the Pope imposed on Malatesta. But these images will not bring us very close to the dynamic forces that the individual brings to his environment in ways that ultimately affect how others experienced their own existences.

Far be it from me to suggest that Pound's most vociferous critics may have a good deal in common with old Pius. I want to concentrate on the ways that Pound's text counters this effigy and all it entails. So I will dwell on how Pound stages the reader as the hero of the Malatesta cantos because of the modes of attention required to be able to distinguish between response to the concrete person and response to an emblematic political figure. Pound's efforts to separate the person from the effigy then turn out to have rich parallels with Stevens' struggle against various kinds of monuments to heroes, since the monument too locates idealization in some presumed content rather than in some demonstrable practice of recuperating vital modes of engagement with particular movements of desire. But for Pound, the relevant readerly processes are not entirely self-reflexive. Rather readers must submit to being reeducated precisely so that they learn to weave self-reflection closely into the modifying powers made possible by carefully focused attention to luminous particulars caught in process.

Developing an adequate readerly relationship to Malatesta requires correlating three basic concerns. First, there has to be a process of historically situating the overall context against which Malatesta must stand out if he embodies significant distinctive forces. Pound's specific contextualizing begins with Canto V because there the poem makes two important shifts. Its basic field of action modulates from Greek and Provençal matters to the murky world of high Renaissance political intrigue. Its narrative focus shifts from the ideogrammic method of the visionary poet to the painstaking efforts to figure things out that one finds in the Renaissance historian Benedetto Varchi. Faced with the task of understanding why Lorenzo de' Medici killed his cousin and friend Alessandro de' Medici, Varchi is torn between systems of interpretation, within which float memories of a comparable murder of Giovanni Borgia, found floating in the Tiber ("dark with the cloak, wet cat gleaming in patches" [Cantos 18]). If one views the murder politically, it may have been the noble (*pia*) thing to do. But if one views it with any strong sense of family loyalty or the claims of friendship, the murder was utterly ignoble (*empia*). So the best Pound can do in reconstructing Varchi's position is to conclude with a series of Eliotic fragments, none of which enable any resolution:

Splash wakes that chap on the wood-barge.  
Tiber catching the nap, the moonlit velvet,  
A wet cat gleaming in patches.  
"Se pia," Varchi,  
"O empia, ma risoluto

"E terribile deliberazione."  
Both sayings run in the wind,  
*Ma se morisse!* (*Cantos* 20)

Through Canto VII this modernity occupies the scene. Within modernity, Poundian visionary fragments seem incapable of bringing much resolution or satisfaction. Major modern artists like Flaubert and Henry James enter as mere "husk of talk" (*Cantos* 26) reduced to serving as passive witnesses unable to do more than Varchi to come to terms with a pervasive darkness. The poem turns to Malatesta because it seems necessary to take up a different writerly strategy and to engage a transitional moment between the heroic individualism of the early Renaissance and the cloaked intrigues of the institutional structures that come to be the major manipulators of power. There the poem might be able to find filiations with a mode of personal agency that is not trapped in what Arnold's "Preface to Poems 1853" called the condition of modern consciousness in endless dialogue with itself. There the world may be close enough to modernity to help the reader develop powers necessary for appreciating this mode of concrete agency while still recognizing that any form of focused energy will have substantial limitations built into the very strengths that particularize it.

When Pound finally arrives at Malatesta, he has to develop the other two basic concerns necessary if readers are to read against effigies. Having shown why we need an alternative to Varchi's world, he must spell out how we engage persons without miring ourselves in endless, self-canceling interpretations. We need access to the energies actually manifesting what we can take to be the person's character. We need a perspective on his relation to his environment that tests and secures the responsiveness we develop to that particularity. Clearly, Pound cannot simply offer counter-assertions to the Pope's imperious judgments.

We do not need more judgmental claims; we need alternatives to the endless chain of abstract assertion and counter-assertion that keeps people like Pius in power. For his alternative, Pound tries to avoid assuming the point of view of one offering judgments based on purportedly objective description. Instead he links understanding Malatesta to a particular readerly discipline. An author can attempt to make the character actually present by judicious selection of his various ways of speaking. That approach gives interested parties more intimate access to the man than they would receive from descriptions. There emerges a sharp contrast between person and effigy because voice has an immediacy difficult to transform into single pictures. Yet Pound also realized that only presenting voices runs the risk of seeming to select only those aspects of the person that fit the author's prejudices or that subordinate judgment entirely to the character's energies and point of view. Therefore he supplements the self-presentation by dramatizing the effects Malatesta has on a range of those

with whom he comes into contact. We get voices affected by their relationship to his voices. That enables us to appreciate the person's energies in terms of the effect they have in eliciting certain modes of address and dispositions of energies from those surrounding him. There is, for example, an immense difference between people who put others on the defensive and those who draw others out or entice them to play various self-expanding roles.

Malatesta superbly fits Pound's purposes because he seems to have been such a man of action that he did not offer the kinds of self-interpretations we now see as basic to understanding people. Pound's Malatesta has no interest in interpreting himself or justifying himself. The imaginary level of identification seems not to have tempted him. All that mattered was living as fully as possible in the various present tenses afforded by his multifaceted interests. To know him is to engage him as he acts. To know him through archives is to know him in terms of how he speaks. Moreover, to respond to the modes of presence that Malatesta affords is to engage one historical possibility created by the cultural forces producing the Renaissance, which at the time seems to have gone largely unrealized. For Malatesta's version of individualism simply could not survive the economic factors manipulated so successfully by the Medici. Pound's choice of character then presents the reader with the challenge of having to appreciate someone whose orientations do not quite fit the modes of self-understanding that came to prevail in Western culture. Readers have to be wary of imposing on Malatesta the kind of psychology that he implicitly rejects.

Because there is very little theater about self-expression and self-justification, these cantos offer very little space for the dialectic of excess and lack that shapes romantic and post-romantic versions of agency. Yet those very refusals intensify the sense that here the ultimate hero is not any historical agent but the possibilities of engaging the world modeled by the poetry. This poetry promises to show the culture of self-expression how to read against itself, and in order to do that it has to make visible what the rewards might be of such experiments.

At first Pound invites us to hear Malatesta as an overbearing egotist writing to Giovanni de' Medici. This is not a conventional hero. Yet the egotism is not simply an imaginary construction. Malatesta has to try to present himself as an equal to Giovanni, and he has to do so while begging for his service money. The egotism is not just an act, but it is theatrically required. This Malatesta who seems so full of himself may well be one who can play the parts he has to play without any moral qualms. After all, he has many other voices to live for. Pound quickly shifts to the voice to which he seems most attached, the voice of Malatesta as deeply concerned patron of the arts. But even when he is involved in aesthetic issues, Malatesta never loses sight of the economic side—now as something he can control. He gives advice about not wasting labor, in part be-

cause he hates waste and in part because his underlying concern for freedom makes all slavish tasks seem unbearable. Then we see that for Malatesta there remains a strong Provençal sense that concerns for freedom are inseparable from the worship of erotic love. Love demands cutting through conventions, and it demands that we honor in each other the possibility of creating the self in accord with those energies that generate our richest satisfactions. For Malatesta, as for Pound, this means that one cannot just think about love; one must sing it. Only then does Pound return to Malatesta the warrior, now involved in a labor of organizing details about a martial campaign with the same directness, attentiveness, and gusto that he brought to his love song.

By the second Malatesta canto, Pound feels the voices are well enough established that he can begin to speculate on their significance. He shifts to the perspective of those on whom Malatesta has made a strong impression. For a general observer, perhaps one of his troops, the main effect of Malatesta is to require a radically conjunctive and paratactic style rather than one that elaborates complex internal relations. Then Pound shifts the focus to more intimate frameworks by offering us the contents of Malatesta's post bag that was captured and made open to public view. The post bag consists of several letters reflecting how other people interact with Malatesta. From these letters we measure the effect he has on others, and we see the range of voices that his voices allow others to assume. Knowing Malatesta involves also recognizing how others seem to dispose themselves in anticipation of his presence. Knowing Malatesta this way involves also recognizing how we as readers might learn to use archival materials. We are invited to appreciate how history comes alive so long as we manage to maintain attitudes focused on how various forces come together to shape particular fields of energy transfer.

The particular letters in the post bag are carefully chosen to match the voices we encountered in the previous canto. His architect and overseer show that they can rely entirely on his knowledge of the relevant details so that there need be no postures or evasions that artists often use in dealing with patrons. His mistress, on the other hand, can revel in self-conscious role-playing. Madame Isotta delicately has someone else send him the news that she is aware of his other affairs, knowing he will understand and appreciate her gesture. His six-year-old son, on the other hand, manages to muster an almost-adult voice in order to thank him for the gift of a horse and to promise to "learn all there is to know about riding" (*Cantos* 39). That sentence and the tone of wary but genuine respect are enough to make us confident that Malatesta has successfully passed on to his son his own conjunction of dignity with endless curiosity and zest for experience. Finally, we see Malatesta's architect for his Tempio responding with great care to Malatesta's care for his ultimate monument, a monument ironically less expressive of his virtues than the energies he put into producing it (not unlike *The Cantos* themselves).

Yet with all this idealization, Pound refuses to treat Malatesta as if his character could give these early cantos a moral center. Malatesta is someone we are always catching up with, not someone we imagine reasoning with or even trusting to honor any commitment not sustained by immediate passions. Although we cannot make him a model, we also cannot treat him in terms of the public judgments uttered by Pius. Consequently, we have to explore the possibility of simply taking this man as a natural force, one whose moral flaws are as visible as his strengths yet play almost no role in affecting how he is judged by those with whom he comes into contact. However, moral judgment is not the only mode of judgment involved in dealing with characters. At the least we have to face the judgments made necessary because of how history unfolds. There is much to praise in that Malatesta has the energies of an ideal modern character. He would never suffer from Varchi's or Eliot's paralysis over fragmentation and contradiction. But he also proves incapable of the patience and self-restraint necessary to survive the dense play of political forces taking hold on the Italian peninsula.

Therefore, the most we can say about Malatesta as hero is that he fully embodies the problematic status of values Pound deeply admired but saw as insufficient to what the age demanded. But we can say a lot more about the importance of coming to make these realizations about Malatesta. Although there is almost no appeal that we attempt to enlarge ourselves by imitating Malatesta's example, there is a strong appeal that we recognize how our own powers can expand by virtue of what it takes to respond intensely to the engaging specificity of that example. We are asked to appreciate in a concrete context the degree to which understanding a person involves also recognizing how strength is inseparable from limitation. We are invited to realize that without such understanding history becomes either the dump that Stevens projects or the continuation of the social authority sustaining powers and fantasies of power like the Pope's.

#### IV

In the plot of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, Malatesta cannot prevent the descent into hell. He does provide an alternative to the various paralyzed modern minds introduced with Varchi. But the model of reading that Pound elaborates in these cantos proves incapable of giving the text a new direction. The text tries to apply the same attitude adapted for Malatesta to the voices of practical American businessmen who in turn seem to call up for balance the presence of Confucius, the poem's embodiment of something like an ideal reader aware of the need to treat each according to his nature. However, it seems that it is the presence of this ideal character that pushes the poem into the hell of seeing how far the actuality is from such possibilities. Hell may be the site to which we are condemned when we are tempted to believe there can be order and intelligence shaping public life,

so that then we stop accepting limitations and begin believing in our abstract judgments.

Getting out of hell requires a few substantial adjustments in the poem's idealization of reading.<sup>10</sup> During the Malatesta cantos, the poem was seeking heroes. After the hell cantos, the poem is trying to align itself to the endless purgatorial task of coming to terms with a history where too much idealism is as destructive as cynicism. Reading historical moments requires acknowledging limitations and seeking within those limitations moments of grace and adaptive responsiveness. The poem comes back around to its fascination with ideals of reading, now with a more tempered sense of how to adapt to other voices and let them form complex fields of possibility and restraint. At the least, we then find it difficult to mount the abstraction necessary for righteousness. Experiencing that difficulty may then help us locate sufficient focused energy not to despair over what remains a very bleak historical time.

For my example of how this modified purgatorial reading operates, I have chosen an intriguingly anticlimactic passage from near the end of Canto XXII. The final two-thirds of this canto follows Pound to a Gibraltar whose mysterious multicultural society elicits memories of the atmosphere in Eliot's "Sweeney Among the Nightingales." Various indistinct characters with shady backgrounds occupy the scene until one, Yusuf, is given a distinct stage on which to make a moderately elaborate speech. He claims that since when he travels he is tricked out of money, he does the same thing to visitors to Gibraltar. There follows an extended account of attending a synagogue ritual where the Pound-figure seems a clueless anthropologist somewhat fascinated by events that he can describe even though he cannot appreciate how the religion makes them all connect. After a brief apparent digression to a case for blackmail, we get the following passage:

An' the nigger in the red fez, Mustafa, on the boat later  
An' I said to him: Yusuf, Yusuf's a damn good feller.  
And he says:  
    "Yais, he ees a goot fello,  
    "But after all a chew  
                    ees a chew." (*Cantos* 105)

The canto then concludes with a narrative of a girl redefining terms so as to escape a judge's imperatives until the exasperated judge announces, "Signori, *you* go and enforce it" (*Cantos* 106).

It would be too large a leap to treat this passage as closely paralleling Stevens' concern for bringing the ideal of heroism within quotidian life. But there are interesting links between the two because Pound here adapts his concern for nuanced reading and the adjustment of expectations to very elemental social interactions. His ultimate aim here seems to be show-

ing the reader how the same virtues cultivated in approaching a Malatesta apply to such casual contexts, where they can make a substantial difference in our capacity to endure our limiting circumstances. In my case, close attention to this passage proved necessary because I wanted to counter the pleasure most of my graduate students were taking in finding evidence of Pound's various vices—papal rhetorics have a long half-life. But not even their villainous Pound would have introduced this passage just to show he could offend Jews and Africans. Then what was he after in having his “nigger” use the concept that a “chew / ees a chew” as somehow illuminating despite its tautological form? Why offer a person from one racial identity facing enormous prejudice using another generalized racial term in order to make what seems to him an important qualification about character? Clearly Mustafa must need such terms: without them an incredibly murky cultural environment would be even more confusing. The canto has already dramatized how difficult it was to apply any identifying characteristics to the fluid world of Gibraltar during the war, where virtually everyone was a stranger and no cultural traditions seemed secure. Even oversimplified racial terms then promise some kind of identity for oneself and some kind of workable categorization for one's world, even if ironically “nigger” will soon follow “chew.”

Pound's treatment of reading here takes just the opposite tack, celebrating the strangeness that emerges when one knows all that one cannot know about cultural differences. The Pound-figure does not respond to Mustafa. Instead, he trusts that his own contextualizing will let his silence prove his most effective available speech. In these circumstances the poet's role is not to describe or to judge but to compose a frame that makes it clear why silence is appropriate. For that task the synagogue passage proves crucial. Because the speaker cannot grasp what holds the details together, he presents them as a paratactic listing of details that attract his attention but fit no pattern and have no “meaning.” Here this lack of pattern does not generate defensive judgments enabling the self to maintain his own sense of interpretive authority. The speaker simply lets himself dwell in a fascination of not knowing what Jewish ritual is. Recognizing that he can connect nothing to nothing, he also realizes that he has to make do with what he can see, or, better, with the powers of a perspective that has to stay in the position of distanced observer able to focus on physical details. He simply does not know enough to connect these details. From that position, he learns two things about the law that prove crucial to the canto as a whole. It is possible to enter actively into a scene even when one does not appreciate how the law might work, both literally and figuratively. Understanding is not necessary for fascination, and fascination can sometimes work better than flawed understanding as a basis for establishing social relations. Second, this mode of reading allows the self its own position outside the law. Yet that position need not be that of rebel or criminal. It suffices simply to recognize how the urge for secure predication through

the law can eventually constrain one's own range of voices and responsiveness to voices.

Because of these realizations, the poet can let the entire canto turn on a momentary identification with both the judge and the lady in the court case from the Renaissance that oddly comes to conclude this canto. The lady takes the poet's role, endlessly spinning out possibilities that refuse fealty to the law's demand for clear definitions. The judge then becomes her ideal reader. For rather than becoming defensive and hiding behind the law, he honors the sense of freedom and play realized in her performance. He turns to the audience at large in a frustration that is also a call for complicit understanding: "Signori, *you* go and enforce it." In situations like this, one has to rely not on codes provided by social institutions but on powers of reading that can accommodate silence and appreciate the contours at once sharpening and limiting performative energies. Mustafa's label of "chew" provides in negative form essentially the same social role as the construction of monuments providing images for the hero. The Pound/Stevens era is that moment in American poetry when the writing seemed to offer a direct alternative to such forms of social identity. Identity itself came to seem a projection based first on recognizing how one might best distribute one's readerly energies to resist imposed monumentality, then on the realization that in reflecting on the powers composed by those energies, readers were entering at least one society where there could be mutual recognition less haunted by category-driven forms of belief. If only critics could learn from such sites.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is also characteristic of Perloff that she has produced a vigorous challenge to her own arguments in her essay in this volume, proposing Eliot as having had the greatest impact on the development of twentieth-century American poetry.

<sup>2</sup> "In short, these two arts, poetry and painting, have in common a laborious element, which, when it is exercised, is not only a labor but a consummation as well" (NA 165). I should add here an observation I am not competent to elaborate. When Stevens speaks of this laborious element, he is probably referring at least in part to the poet's work in shaping rhythmic patterns. This is a topic on which it seems to me Perloff is uncharacteristically casual, since she seems almost to see Stevens' emphasis on statement as entailing a refusal of technical innovation. See for example 497 and 505 of her essay "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" I cannot here concretely demonstrate Stevens' skill, but I can point to how hard his best poems seem to work to accomplish a controlling sense of cadence. See Natalie Gerber on the rhythmic innovations in Stevens and in Williams.

<sup>3</sup> Eliot established one way of constantly acknowledging this historicity. He articulated a widespread sense of the increasing gulf between the resources on which the imagination relied (religion, fantasy, projection, eloquence, passion) and the modes of understanding that were at the time producing changes in the fabric of practical life that seemed attractive to most people. But his concept of tradition embraced the dump

as tradition, eliminated much of its odor, and repudiated all hope in a distinctive “the” capable of providing an alternative to historical knowledge. Both Stevens and Pound, in contrast, shared a sense that the dump had somehow to become “*aptest eve*” by framing the need for some kind of immediacy. It is true that Stevens then sought a purely phenomenological “the” inseparable from the mind’s self-scrutiny while Pound’s “the” pointed outward to exemplary states within what history provided. Yet there remain very important parallels between the two poets. They both shared Eliot’s overall sense of Weberian disenchantment. Yet both intensely resisted equating resignation with despair because they thought art could produce alternative dispositions of spirit tested by how they could reframe readers’ relations to history.

<sup>4</sup>In Pound’s formative years, his basic second-order struggle was to explore the consequences of basing lyric language on Provençal cadence rather than on the iambic discipline of the sonnet tradition. He also of course distrusted all forms of what he called rhetoric, but the iambic structure was for him the point at which the spirit of rhetoric took control over the poet’s lyric ambitions.

<sup>5</sup>Given such ambitions, it should be clear why that is probably a mistake. As any public drinker knows, bars are great dialogical sites, but only because they make no demands whatsoever that one change one’s life. Correspondingly, if poetry is to make such demands, and Pound and Stevens shared the sense that without such demands there was only the dump without the *the*, poetry simply had to be more ambitious and more lonely than dialogical ideals permit. Poetry had to have a substantial stake in being difficult because it had to get readers to become suspicious of the expectations about lyricism that they had taken on in their specific interpellation of cultural values. Poetry had to hold out the possibility of satisfactions that went well beyond those expectations about lyricism. Satisfaction had to be based not simply on specific states of thinking and feeling created by individual poems, but instead had itself to be an aspect of second-order identifications. One had to care not just about what the poet presented but about how the presenting produced its own possibilities for identification and for exploration.

<sup>6</sup>Let me cite three of my attempts, if only as a pressure that I not completely repeat myself. My chapter on Stevens in *Painterly Abstraction* emphasizes the dangers that follow from bringing to bear on Stevens a moral position such as the value of dialogism, since his work emphasizes qualities of self-orientation that simply involve concerns not stateable in relation to dialogical functions. “Stevens’s Ideas of Feeling” makes an analogous argument that Stevens bases affect on feelings rather than on emotions because he resists the self-congratulatory and plot-driven features of large-scale emotions. Stressing feelings enables the poet to foster a constant second-order presence testing the degree to which various inclinations of sensibility can or should receive investments. “Why Stevens Must Be Abstract” is the closest to my argument here because it emphasizes his efforts to find alternatives to the direct assertions about the real which he thought were usually reducible to ideology and interest.

<sup>7</sup>Typical Pound reactions to Stevens are given in Alan Filreis; see 147.

<sup>8</sup>In *Painterly Abstraction*, I argue that Stevens did not collect *Owl’s Clover* when he brought his work together because he realized that when he dealt directly with political questions he tended to be as vapid and empty abstract as his interlocutors. Therefore, he realized later, if he were to save himself from the glib abstractness of ideas that tempted him when he thought politically, he would have to be much more abstract on the level of his expressive register. Then, rather than represent specific political agendas and patriotic concerns, he might have fresh terms for idealization based on states and powers that poetry could be said to make possible. If I am right, it might be productive to hear the social references Filreis brilliantly unearths in a somewhat different register. While some of the time Stevens might be seeking affiliation with other

writers, at other times he may well be marking his own difference from them by subtly projecting how distinctively he approaches the issues. This emphasis on different registers became more pronounced as Stevens became increasingly disillusioned with his own capacity to make poetry directly engage politics.

<sup>9</sup>See especially *Painterly Abstraction*, but all the essays mentioned in the previous note address this topic.

<sup>10</sup>The basic transition from the Hell cantos occurs in Canto XVI, where the composer turns to the fact that other writers have made the same visit and not succumbed. Then he bathes with acid to free himself from hell's ticks and accepts the earth and quiet air because that gives him a place from which he can project into a range of heroes confronting war in order to see experience in terms of a purgatorial mountain. After making those identifications, the text can return to the task of attempting to hear what is distinctive about individuals in their speech without imposing abstract demands upon them. Canto XVII then begins the 1927 volume with the exploration of new beginnings, now as something one has to experience over and over again. So the rest of the volume can examine various combinations of voices for what they can and cannot make of their historical situations.

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## Pound vs. Stevens: Old Wine in New Bottles or New Bottles for Old Wine

LEON SURETTE

WHEN MARJORIE PERLOFF jumped over the ropes to help Hugh Kenner get Harold Bloom on the mat, she managed to depersonalize the dispute (as far as the living participants were concerned) and elevated the discussion from a question of the relative status of Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens to one of the true *Weltanschauung* of the early twentieth century. For Perloff the issue resolves into a choice between a backward-looking, romantic Stevens, and a forward-looking, modernist Pound. Romantic, she tells us, means a concern with *content* to the denigration of *form*. That content is characterized indirectly in her commentary on the critical criteria of Harold Bloom and Helen Vendler: "in adopting such an Arnoldian, which is to say an essentially Romantic, view of poetry, they are, after all, merely giving tacit assent to Stevens's own definition of poetry as 'an unofficial view of being'" (491).

Perloff characterizes modernism in a non-parallel manner. She programmatically abstracts away from any content and focuses on attitude: "*Modernism* . . . means rupture—not, of course, with the distant past which must be reassimilated, but with all that has become established and conventional in the art of one's own time" (498). Perloff's contention that modernism is a recovery of the distant past would render it equivalent to Jeffrey Perl's Renaissance—which was self-advertised as a rejection of the immediate (Medieval) past and a recovery of the distant (Classical) past.<sup>1</sup> Of course, here Perloff is adopting Pound's principle of making it new—that is, *renovation*. But a breach cannot surely be just a matter of style. At the end of her essay, Perloff returns to the question: "What do we mean when we talk of Modernism in poetry?" (504). Her answer is still that it is a rejection of what preceded it:

the Pound Era is the era when the norms of the Romantic crisis poem as of the Symbolist lyric were exploded, when poetry found that it could once again incorporate the seemingly alien discourses of prose without losing its identity. (505)

Her choice of military epithets reminds one of the rhetoric of Futurism and Vorticism, as does her conception of what it is to be modern. But I find it difficult to accept that modernism—or even Pound’s own aesthetic—can be usefully identified with either of those brief, and fundamentally polemical, movements.

In setting up such a sharp dichotomy between romanticism and modernism, and in placing Stevens and Pound on opposite sides of the divide, Perloff leaves herself open to a variety of destructive responses. I will cite only one, John Newcomb’s in *Wallace Stevens and Literary Canons*:

Perloff’s own values are heavily weighted towards one of the two poetic camps she purports to analyze; therefore the distinctions she employs turn into a series of dichotomies—fact vs. invention, form vs. content, outwardness vs. inwardness, the political vs. the personal, the historical epic vs. the lyric, Pound vs. Stevens—primarily designed to attack Stevens and his critical tradition to the benefit of Pound and his. Not only does Perloff unproblematically present these loosely sketched binaries as the only two possible courses for critics of modernism, but she apparently sees one set as being always politically correct, the other as always politically evasive or reprehensible. (10)

Newcomb’s strictures are not entirely unfair, but they are delivered in a polemical spirit that has characterized the debate from the outset and that I would like to avoid. “Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?” is overly schematic and undeniably polemical. Those weaknesses are also its virtues—as its long shelf life bears witness.

The following discussion will argue that Pound is just as concerned with content as is Stevens—if not more so—and that Pound is also much more bumptiously certain of the truth of his beliefs than is Stevens. The latter, I will argue, is grounds to categorize Pound as more of an Enlightenment (or, alternatively, a New Age) figure than a modernist. On the other hand, Stevens’ undeniable skepticism must be allowed to mark him a modernist. In pressing this case, I will make some detours in an effort to establish what such terms as “modernism,” “romanticism,” and “Enlightenment” might be taken to mean. I beg the reader’s indulgence in what might seem a rather pedantic exercise, but I see no reasonable alternative.

There is no shortage of Stevensian comments to support the view that he was a poet more concerned with content than form. So I have no quarrel with that claim. However, it is less clear that Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, or Keats would accept such a characterization of their poetic mode or modes—presumably unquestionably romantic ones. Wordsworth’s preface to the 1800 *Lyrical Ballads* seems preoccupied with the question of diction, which surely is a formal issue. Nor is it clear that

Yeats, Joyce, Woolf, Forster, Ford, Eliot, or Lawrence were indifferent to content. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a literary artist other than Pound who suggested such a thing. William Carlos Williams might seem a candidate, but it was ideas, not content, that he opposed. The slogan, “no ideas but in things,” does not exclude content. Even the Futurists, Vorticists, and Surrealists had clear interests in the content of their art. Perhaps Dada would meet Perloff’s criterion for modernism, but I do not believe that Pound does, and I will argue in the following pages that he does not.

The form/content dichotomy, then, is a dubious criterion for sorting artists into romantic and modern. It is a survival of a modernist polemic designed to distinguish itself from high Victorianism—which did privilege content over form. But Matthew Arnold, the guru of high Victorianism, regarded the romantic mode as empty-headed, that is, as devoid of content—or at least of high seriousness:

the burst of creative activity in our literature, through the first quarter of this century, had about it, in fact, something premature; . . . And this prematureness comes from its having proceeded without having its proper data, without sufficient materials to work with. . . . English poetry . . . did not know enough. (384)

Stevens’ interest in content, then, would mark him as a Victorian, rather than a romantic. Certainly his poetry and prose would meet the requirement of high seriousness.

Stevens shares Arnold’s belief that for there to be success in literature, the epoch must be right. As Arnold put it, the creative imagination

must have the atmosphere, it must find itself amidst the order of ideas, in order to work freely; and these it is not so easy to command. This is why great creative epochs in literature are so rare. . . . [To have a great epoch] two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment, and the man is not enough without the moment. . . . (383)

Stevens’ poetry can readily be seen as a search for Arnold’s “order of ideas” (as propaedeutic to the “idea of order”). Stevens certainly shares Arnold’s perception that the old “order of ideas”—essentially Christianity for both of them—was no longer adequate. In short, he was aware of a rupture, though where the Futurists and Vorticists celebrate the rupture, he bemoans it.

I suspect that it is his nostalgia for a lost order of ideas that marks Stevens as a romantic for Perloff. For like the romantics, Stevens assigns the task of creating or discovering a new order to the poet. But the romantics saw the artist as a vates or prophet, while for Stevens she is a mere inventor of

fables or fictions. I would argue that this diminishment of the artist is the hallmark of his modernism, for it is of a piece with the skepticism that is the hallmark of the modern. If we ignore Stevens' skepticism, his "search for order" could be seen as more Victorian than romantic. Perloff seems to have been confused by these imperfect correspondences between romantic, Victorian, and modern positions, for in the passage cited above she characterizes Bloom's and Vendler's "view of poetry" as "Arnoldian, which is to say an essentially Romantic" one.

In preparation for his Princeton lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," Stevens told Henry Church (March 25, 1941) that he had—as Arnold would have done—sought out the best that had been thought and said, though in his own somewhat desultory manner:

The truth is that, if you want to work your way through your library, the simplest way to go about it is to have a definite subject and then to look for something pertinent to it. I find something pertinent everywhere; I must have two or three dozen books on my table that I had never looked at before. After reading a good many of them, I have concluded to say my say on my own account, with the least possible reference to others. One must stand by one's own ideas, or not at all. (L 388)

Notice that Stevens searches his library with a well-defined object in mind—and decides to represent the results as his own cogitation. Stevens, then, has reversed Arnold's splitting asunder of the role of critic and poet. In this respect he is like the romantics, but also like all of the modernists from Yeats through Pound and Eliot to Auden.

The romantic project can be seen as the *recovery* of a lost order; Stevens', by contrast, is to *discover* a new order. Such a project seems to me to be thoroughly modern—especially when we remember that Stevens insists that the order he finds must always be a fiction—that is, a created order. Stevens obviously does not share the positivist faith that there is a permanent order and that it is one's destiny to discover it. Of course, the whole of Stevens' *oeuvre* reaches toward a fiction so complete, so intricate, so persuasive that we will think we have found it, but he always insists that it is a fiction.

Indeed, he sounds rather more like an existentialist than either a romantic or Victorian in "Noble Rider," where he asserts that "reality is not that external scene but the life that is lived in it. Reality is things as they are. The general sense of the word proliferates its special senses. It is a jungle in itself" (NA 25–26). Such remarks are perfectly consonant with the modern, post-Kantian, epistemology that we organize the phenomenal chaos in which we are embedded and do so in accordance with the properties of our bodies (our senses) and minds (our cognitive capacities) and only in some contingent accordance with the noumenal reality be-

hind the phenomena. Since the understanding that the world we know is a construct—in Stevens' terms, a "fiction"—is very much at home in the twentieth and even the twenty-first century, I do not see how Stevens' obsession with that *aperçu* can mark him as a romantic. We may prefer Pound's more solid commitment to simple truths, but we can hardly count such a preference as evidence of his modernism—any more than we can count Stevens' preoccupation with the reflexive (that is, contingent) nature of our knowledge as evidence of his romanticism. Insofar as Stevens can be aligned with those twentieth-century figures, he cannot so easily be assigned to the dust bin of romanticism, unless the whole century be dumped with him.

What, then, is the touchstone for romanticism? What is it that Perloff would have us believe modernism rejects? Since she gives that question scant attention, we must speculate. Perhaps she has in mind "spirituality," an interest in Kant's "noumenal"—that which stands behind phenomenal appearance and which we cannot know by the senses or by reason. In the post-Kantian world, all talk of the noumenal is either mere fiction or mysticism.<sup>2</sup> Stevens accepts the situation and devotes a lifetime attempting to talk about the noumenal without mysticism.

If we take *belief* to be definitional for romanticism and also see romanticism and modernism as contraries, then *skepticism* would be definitional for modernism. On such a dichotomy the lines of demarcation shift away from the form/content pair toward skepticism/faith or belief.

But perhaps this is not the right pair either. Hans-Georg Gadamer sees the hallmark of romanticism as the insistence on the ineffability of the individual, rather than metaphysical credulity:

the linguisticity of the event of agreement in understanding . . . , which is in play between people, signifies nothing less than *an insurmountable barrier*, the metaphysical significance of which was also evaluated positively for the first time by German romanticism. It is formulated in the sentence: *Individuum est ineffabile*. . . . [F]or the romantic consciousness it meant that language never touches upon the last, insurmountable secret of the individual person. (21–22; my italics)

Gadamer's view that the centrality and ineffability of the individual is a hallmark of romanticism is pertinent here because it is also Pound's view:

I offer for Mr Eliot's reflection the thesis that our time has overshadowed the mysteries by an overemphasis on the individual. . . . Eleusis did not distort truth by exaggerating the individual, neither could it have violated the individual spirit. Only in the high air and the great clarity can there be a just estimation of values. Romantic poetry, on the other hand, al-

most requires the concept of reincarnation as part of its mechanism. No apter metaphor having been found for certain emotional colours. I assert that the Gods exist. (*Guide to Kulchur* 299)

Pound's fellow Imagist T. E. Hulme expressed a similar view of the matter in "Romanticism and Classicism" at the dawn of literary modernism: "Here is the root of all romanticism: that man, the individual, is an infinite reservoir of possibilities." In contrast, the classical view is that "[m]an is an extraordinarily fixed and limited animal whose nature is absolutely constant" (116). Since the classical view is that all humans are fundamentally alike, there is no mystery about the individual. Indeed the "classical" temperament was perceived by Hulme and Eliot as hostile to all mystery. They saw modernism as a return to such a classical temperament, a return that rejected the Enlightenment belief in the perfectibility of man.

If skepticism is the hallmark of modernism, Pound does not qualify as a modernist. His assertion "that the Gods exist" as instantiation of "certain emotional colours" sounds very much like a romantic *belief*, and it can be contrasted with Stevens' more modern skepticism. Insofar as Pound insists on the certainty of belief, he is a romantic, but insofar as he insists on the universality—that is, impersonality—of his beliefs, he is a classicist. With Stevens, we have a similar asymmetry: insofar as he dwells on the individual's idiosyncratic perception of the world, he is a romantic, but insofar as he is skeptical, he is a modern. Perloff's neglect of the classical/romantic dichotomy eclipses a well-known aspect of the story of modernism<sup>3</sup>—though she does align Pound tangentially with classicism by noting that classically trained scholars are attracted to him (505). Pound, then, is no less concerned with content than is Stevens, though Pound regards his content as true and Stevens regards his as fiction.

When Stevens speaks of gods, he is far more skeptical than Pound, though he is also more emotional (romantic?):

if we say that the idea of God is merely a poetic idea, even if the supreme poetic idea, and that our notions of heaven and hell are merely poetry not so called, even if poetry that involves us vitally, the feeling of deliverance, of a release, of a perfection touched, of a vocation so that all men may know the truth and that the truth may set them free—if we say these things and if we are able to see the poet who achieved God and placed Him in His seat in heaven in all His glory, the poet himself, still in the ecstasy of the poem that completely accomplished his purpose, would have seemed . . . a man who needed what he had created, uttering the hymns of joy that followed his creation. (*NA* 51)

Such a prodigious skepticism is not quite atheism, but it is far less an assertion of belief than Pound's declaration that the gods exist.

It is because of statements such as the foregoing—and, of course, his poetic practice—that Stevens is often labeled a symbolist, that is to say, a latter-day romantic. Since the young Pound and the young Eliot both cut their poetic teeth within the ambience of symbolism, some take Stevens' affinity for it as definitive evidence that he was not modern. But if we look at Arthur Symons' introduction to *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*, we find that he thought it represented a revolt, very like the rupture Perloff assigns to modernism. Symbolism is, he says, a

revolt against exteriority, against rhetoric, against a materialistic tradition; in this endeavour to disengage the ultimate essence, the soul of whatever exists and can be realised by the consciousness; in this dutiful waiting upon every symbol by which the soul of things can be made visible; literature, bowed down by so many burdens, may at last attain liberty, and its authentic speech. In attaining this liberty, it accepts a heavier burden; for in speaking to us so intimately, so solemnly, as only religion had hitherto spoken to us, it becomes itself a kind of religion, with all the duties and responsibilities of the sacred ritual. (5)

Symons sets up the same dichotomy as Perloff does—between exteriority, rhetoric, and materialism, on the one hand, and essence, authenticity, and the sacred on the other. He identifies the first set with the Victorian age and the latter with the symbolist revolt against that oppressive past. Though Symons regards essence and authenticity as good, and exteriority and materialism as bad—the reverse of Perloff's axiology—both critics sort the field in the same way. Indeed, we might note that to organize history as a series of revolts or *Aufhebungen* is *echt* romantic.

Stevens' early views of the nature of poetry, religion, and belief—and of nineteenth-century materialism—are very like Symons'. Take his journal entry for August 1899 (coincidentally the year of publication of *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*):

I would sacrifice a great deal to be a Saint Augustine but modernity is so Chicagoan, so plain, so unmeditative. I thoroughly believe that at this very moment I get none of my chief pleasures except from what is unsullied. The love of beauty excludes evil. A moral life is simply a pure conscience: a physical, mental and ethical source of pleasure. . . . I believe, as unhesitatingly as I believe anything, in the efficacy and necessity of fact meeting fact—with a background of the ideal. [ . . . ]

I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force. Don't, therefore, look at facts, but through them.  
(L 32)

His "romantic" distaste for a Chicagoan "modernity" is surely an expression of his antipathy for a contemporary world that he saw as dominated by materialistic concerns to the exclusion of aesthetic interests and not for cultural or philosophical modernism. Even Ezra Pound is susceptible to a distaste for the commercial present:

"Beer-bottle on the statue's pediment!  
"That, Fritz, is the era, to-day against the past,  
"Contemporary." (*Cantos* VII 25)<sup>4</sup>

If Stevens is nostalgic for the past, it is because he supposes that belief was easier then. Pound, on the other hand, regards the past as a midden heap from which the astute observer—the genius poet—can extract what is valuable and leave the rest. Such a view of the past cannot be characterized as modern—whether modern means a rupture, as Perloff would have it, or skepticism and relativism, as I would have it. It seems rather Augustan to me. Alexander Pope saw the poet's task as the re-expression of universal truths: "What oft was *Thought*, but ne'er so well *Expressed*" (153). It is even more like Arnold's search for "touchstones," which encapsulated the wisdom of the past. Pound's entire career was devoted to a recovery of the past—to "making it new"—so as to revitalize a moribund Western civilization. What could be more romantic than that? He told Donald Hall in a 1962 interview:

I am writing to resist the view that Europe and civilization are going to Hell. If I am being "crucified for an idea"—that is, the coherent idea around which my muddles accumulated—it is probably the idea that European culture ought to survive, that the best qualities of it ought to survive along with whatever other cultures, in whatever universality. (242)

Notice that Pound's romantic ambition to recover the past is untainted by the other romantic fixation with the individual. He is not saving *his own* world, but *everyone's* world.

Pound's project to recover the past for use in the present is not easily reconciled with Perloff's understanding of modernism as a "rupture" with the past. Certainly Futurism, Vorticism, and Surrealism all represent themselves as instantiating such a rupture. But the first two movements were brief and fundamentally abortive. Although surrealism has proven to be more durable, it can hardly claim to be definitional for modernism. Indeed, as already noted, the notion of rupture smacks of the Hegelian

*Aufhebung*, or Marxist revolution. The first two of these movements can be seen as adopting the rhetoric of their principal opponent, Marxism, or dialectical materialism, which itself has a strong claim to be modern. Though she does not mention Marxism, Perloff's qualification that the rupture is not "with the distant past which must be reassimilated, but with all that has become established and conventional in the art of one's own time" seems designed to discriminate her modernism from Marxism. But if the "rupture" is only a break with "all that has become established and conventional in the art of one's own time," then modernism is reduced to "l'épatement des bourgeois." (Of course, on the ideological front, modernism can be seen as a rejection of democracy and nineteenth-century materialist science, but that is not where a defender of modernism would wish to go.)

However, if we stress the reassimilation of the *distant* past, then something more substantive is introduced, perhaps something like that egregious "content" that so mars the romantic mode. But what is this distant past that the modernist Pound assimilates and the romantic Stevens does not? One must presume it is Confucius, Ovid, the Troubadours, Cavalcanti, and Dante, since they are the representatives of the distant past Pound most frequently invokes. Leaving Confucius aside, Ovid is the earliest of them.

If we look to Pound's comments on Ovid et al. to discover what makes them appropriate models for the modernist *Aufhebung*, we find—unfortunately for Perloff's dichotomy—something rather like "an unofficial view of being." For example, in *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound specifically links Ovid to mediumistic motifs: "Ovid, before Browning, raises the dead and dissects their mental process; he walks with the people of myth" (16). I have argued elsewhere that Pound's motivation for assimilating such a past was of a piece with that of the nineteenth-century mythographic and religious studies that inspired Wagner and the early Nietzsche. If, as I believe, Pound's interest in the distant past is not strictly formal, it is difficult to see how it is particularly modern on Perloff's definition of modern.

Pound scholarship has always acknowledged his early interest in "unofficial view[s] of being," but the standard New Critical line has been that he abandoned such juvenile interests for a mature and modern "formalism." Unfortunately the history of modernist formalism—in the field, as it were—does not support the New Critical story of aesthetic autonomy, to which Perloff tacitly appeals.<sup>5</sup> She quotes from *Opus Posthumous*: "Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed"<sup>6</sup> and says that "for Pound, form *is* that reality." She sees this "principle" as underpinning a necessity for formal innovation, citing Pound's "A Retrospect": "no good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old" (497).<sup>7</sup> In these comments she seems to be conflating the New Critical and formalist principle of textual autonomy with the avant-garde notion of rhetorical or stylistic "rupture" invoked earlier. What she might mean by the phrase, "for Pound, form *is* that reality" requires some investigation.

For Bernard Harrison, "The thesis of [New Critical] Formalism is that the objects of literary-critical study are purely intra-textual; that there is no opening from text to world; that the text is an hermetic system of meanings produced wholly internally to it" (33). If we accept Harrison's characterization it must be the text that is "reality" and not the "world." In such a case, there cannot be a contrast between form and content, container and contained, so Perloff's understanding of formalism cannot be the same as Harrison's.

Abstract expressionism found a way out of the impasse represented by a formalism that rejects both Yeatsian esotericism and Harrison's deconstructive hermeticism. One foundational text of abstract expressionism is Wassily Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Although Wyndham Lewis printed excerpts from that work in *Blast* in 1914, Pound in a 1916 letter to John Quinn seems not to have warmed to Kandinsky's avowedly Theosophical arguments:

No, I don't think Kandinsky the last word. He starts out with some few sane propositions, but when it comes to saying "blue = God," "pink = devil", etc. etc. we do *not* follow. Gaudier's own "Mysticisme nuit à la vrai sensation d'art" [Mysticism spoils the true experience of art] is, I think, nearer the mark. Though perhaps it is not more than 3/4 of a truth. It is certainly very apt to bitch the matter. Certainly it (mysticism) succeeds in doing so if it is treated as of a different value from any other impulse or emotion. (Materer 63)

Though we cannot be certain what Kandinsky's "sane propositions" are, the following seem plausible candidates:

Form alone, even though totally abstract and geometrical, has a power of inner suggestion. A triangle . . . has a spiritual value of its own. . . .

Purely abstract forms are beyond the reach of the artist at present; they are too indefinite for him. (Kandinsky 28, 30)

Pound held views rather similar to Kandinsky's Blavatsky-inspired theories, though Pound's inspiration was Emanuel Swedenborg, not Madame Blavatsky. In 1907, at the tender age of 21, he wrote to Viola Baxter Jordan:

I am interested in art and ecstasy, ecstasy which I would define as the sensation of the soul in ascent, art as the expression and sole means of transmuting, of passing on that ecstasy to others.

Religion I have defined as "Another of those numerous failures resulting from an attempt to popularize art." By which I mean that it is only now and then that religion rises to the dignity of art; or from another angle, that art includes only so much of religion as is factive, potent, exalting.

Swedenborg has called a certain thing "the angelic language." . . . This "angelic language" I choose to interpret into "artistic utterance." (Gallup 109)<sup>8</sup>

The young Pound's claim that art contains whatever is true and valuable in religion is compatible with the sentiment Stevens confided to his diary at about the same age: "I'm completely satisfied that behind every physical fact there is a divine force. Don't, therefore, look at facts, but through them." It is also compatible with the mature Stevens' search for a supreme fiction, which also looks "through" facts, though with only the imagination, not a divinity, behind them.

Pound's respect for Swedenborg indicates a side of Pound's aesthetic that is overlooked in Perloff's characterization of him as a formalist poet of rupture. In opposition to that view, I offer one that places Pound in a tradition he shares with Stevens, one that issues in the American painterly movement of abstract expressionism and whose roots go back to Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, rather than to Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

Although Stevens did not associate himself with abstract expressionism, Glen MacLeod has shown that Barnett Newman, a leading American representative of the school, regarded Stevens as a kindred spirit (48–50). Two of the founders of abstraction, Mondrian and Kandinsky, derive their aesthetic from the Theosophical speculations of Mme. Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner. MacLeod relegates the fact that Mondrian became a member of Blavatsky's Theosophical Society in 1909 to a footnote, and he pays almost no attention to Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Had he done so, he would have found a striking similarity between Stevens' criticism of surrealism (which he cites [129]) and Kandinsky's criticism of cubism. Though cubism and surrealism are wholly distinct movements, the poet and the artist criticize them from a similar perspective.

Here is Stevens on surrealism:

The essential fault of surrealism is that it invents without discovering. To make a clam play an accordion is to invent not to discover. The observation of the unconscious, so far as it can be observed, should reveal things of which we have previously been unconscious, not the familiar things of which we have been conscious plus imagination. (Bates, *OP* 203)

And here is Kandinsky on cubism:

There has arisen out of the composition in flat triangles a composition with plastic three-dimensional triangles, that is to say with pyramids; and that is Cubism. . . . [It leads] to an impoverishment of possibility . . . [as] the unavoidable result of the external application of an inner principle. . . . The search for constructive form has produced Cubism, in which natural form is often forcibly subjected to geometrical construction, a process which tends to hamper the abstract by the concrete and spoil the concrete by the abstract. (Kandinsky 44, 52)

MacLeod is struck by the affinity between surrealism and Stevens' aesthetic, even though Stevens is critical of its practice (129). The affinity with Kandinsky's expressionist theory is, I think, even more striking.<sup>9</sup> The Theosophical framework in which Kandinsky and Mondrian developed their aesthetic theories is very like Swedenborgianism in that both believe that particular forms and colours—abstract symbols—convey information to mere mortals from a transcendent realm. Barnett Newman came to call these abstract symbols "ideographs" (MacLeod 154). That Newman should have chosen a mode so like the Chinese ideogram to illustrate the abstract symbol is a fortuitous coincidence, for Pound, too, keys on the Chinese ideogram as illustrative of his own aesthetic theory.

Pound was introduced to the ideogram by Ernest Fenollosa's notes, which he edited to produce *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. Fenollosa believes that the Chinese ideogram—like the forms and colors of Kandinsky's non-figural painting—manifests universal truths:

The prehistoric poets who created language discovered the whole harmonious framework of nature, they sang out her processes in their hymns. . . . Thus in all poetry a word is like a sun, with its corona and chromosphere; words crowd upon words, and enwrap each other in their luminous envelopes until sentences become clear, continuous light-bands. (32)

If Barnett Newman had come across Fenollosa's essay, he surely would have been attracted by it. Certainly Stevens would have had no problem with such sentiments. The famous lines from "Peter Quince at the Clavier" seem entirely compatible with Fenollosa, Blavatsky, or Swedenborg in their positing of a correspondence between the "spiritual" quality of beauty and the flesh:

Beauty is momentary in the mind—  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.

The body dies; the body's beauty lives. (CP 91–92)

Whereas Stevens felt the state of modern disbelief as a crisis, Pound saw it as an opportunity for himself as an avatar of a new belief, the precise nature of which is still unclear, but which certainly contained a spiritual as well as a political and economic component. Pound was comfortable, even strident in his "belief." Stevens remained throughout his life a searcher for belief, unless we give credence to his deathbed conversion to Catholicism. Pound was just as convinced that he, and other poets, "knew" the gods:

The long flank, the firm breast  
and to know beauty and death and despair  
and to think that what has been shall be,  
flowing, ever unstill.

Then a partridge-shaped cloud over dust storm.  
The hells move in cycles,  
No man can see his own end.  
The Gods have not returned. "They have never left us."  
They have not returned.  
Cloud's processional and the air moves with their  
living. (*Cantos* CXIII 807)

Stevens had no such confidence, but he had the same interest in something beyond the individual and beyond the merely physical—and what poet does not? Stevens had a much more subtle intellect and a much more cautious temperament than Pound; and it must be admitted, in support of Perloff's assessment of him as a romantic, a much more personal take on the world. Where Pound asserts that the gods exist, Stevens asserts: "God is in me or else is not at all (does not exist)" (Bates, *OP* 198). But Stevens' doubt and uncertainty are surely more characteristic of a "modern" sensibility than is Pound's bumptious certainty. The neglect—if that is the right word—of content that Perloff sees as the hallmark of Pound's modernity, I see as the hallmark of his Enlightenment confidence that truths are self-evident and need not be asserted or argued. Such a confidence marks him, perhaps, as more authentically American than Stevens, but not, I think, as more modern.

Let me give Stevens the last word:

It is as if in a study of modern man we predicated the greatness of poetry as the final measure of his stature, as if his willingness to believe beyond belief was what had made him modern and was always certain to keep him so. (Bates, *OP* 280)

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<sup>1</sup>Though it in no way trumps Perloff's argument, it is worth noting that Jeffrey Perl takes a diametrically opposed view of modernism in *The Tradition of Return* (1984) and in the later *Skepticism and Modern Enmity* (1989). In the latter work he argues that modernism was essentially humanistic, defining humanism as the desire for continuity, and that the renaissance was its contrary, that is, a valuation of the interruption of continuity. "For its partisans," he says, "modernism is the restitution of tradition; for detractors, an interruption of it" (15). He adds the observation that humanists (such as the romantics and the moderns) were often self-deceived, believing themselves to be iconoclasts and revolutionaries: "those who most recoil from humanism, axiology, the classical tradition, are most dependent on them" (15).

<sup>2</sup>The so-called "epistemological revolution" is the triumph of the perception that all "knowledge" must be reduced to the status of belief or opinion, even the tenets of empirical science. Stevens is closer to that postmodern view than is Pound, but does not, I think, quite attain it—though that is another story.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Gelpi presents a view of modernism that discriminates it from Hulme's and Gadamer's romanticism and aligns it instead with Hulme's classicism. In addition, he sees reflexivity and skepticism as the hallmarks of modernism. In stark contrast to Perloff, he puts Stevens and William Carlos Williams together as the prototypical modernists: "Stevens' and Williams' remarks on the imagination form a concise summary of Modernism as a literary term. For them both, the poet was not the individual locus of vision, the inspired medium who saw into the life of things and tried to find adequate language for this mystical experience, as the Romantics maintained; instead the poet was an individual through whose personality the "constructive faculty" of the imagination strove to compose the fragments of impression and response into an autotelic art object. *Anti-idealist and antimystical, the poet did not reveal the divinity of Nature but invented an apposite, aesthetic coherence, necessarily less than absolute in extrinsic terms but, ideally, self-sustained in its own medium*" (78; my italics).

<sup>4</sup>To be fair, when a critic complained of Pound's romantic nostalgia for the past, he responded:

The poem is not a dualism of past against present. Monism is pretty bad, but dualism (Miltonic puritanism, etc.) is just plain lousy.

The poem should establish an hierarchy of values, not simply: past is good, present is bad, which I certainly do not believe and have never believed.

If the reader wants three categories he can find them rather better in: permanent, recurrent and merely haphazard or casual. (Baechler 46)

<sup>5</sup>John Crowe Ransom's *New Criticism* is the *locus classicus* for the New Critical formalism. The following paragraph contains not only an articulation of formalism, but also invokes Perloff's notion of rupture or revolution:

It is my feeling that we have in poetry a revolutionary departure from the convention of logical discourse, and that we should provide it with a bold and proportionate designation. I believe it has proved easy to work out its structural differentiation from prose. . . . The structure proper is the prose of the poem, being a logical discourse of almost any kind, and dealing with almost any content suited to a logical discourse. The texture, likewise, seems to be of any real content that may be come upon, provided it is so free, unrestricted, and large that it cannot properly get into the structure. *One guesses that it is an order of content, rather than a kind of content, that distinguishes texture from structure, and poetry from prose. . . . I*

suggest that the differentia of poetry as discourse is an ontological one. It treats an order of existence, a grade of objectivity, which cannot be treated in scientific discourse. (280–81; my italics)

<sup>6</sup>This quotation is from the essay "On Poetic Truth," by H. D. Lewis, mistakenly attributed to Stevens in Samuel French Morse's 1957 edition of *Opus Posthumous*.

<sup>7</sup>The sentiment of Stevens' remark in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is pretty much identical to Pound's:

To say good-by to the past and to live and to be  
In the present state of things as, say, to paint  
In the present state of painting and not the state  
Of thirty years ago. (*CP* 478)

<sup>8</sup>Compare Swedenborg:

From this it follows that the speech of spirits is a universal speech, and from it are sprung, and, as it were, born all the languages; for it is spiritual ideas which constitute their speech. When these inflow into man's memory they excite words corresponding to the ideas and the like, which man has in his memory; moreover, they excite ideas which are mixed, or which are many for the same word, as is usually the case, as also such as have been blended with each other from various circumstances, and many which adhere, as it were, round about. All this occurs according to the nature and disposition of spirits, for spirits excite ideas, hence words which suit their nature, thus this occurs according to all that variety and diversity which belongs to spirits and to their states. (*The Spiritual Diary*, para. 2138)

<sup>9</sup>Michael Faherty has shown in "Kandinsky at the Klavier" that Stevens was familiar with Kandinsky's aesthetic, perhaps from early on. Among other evidence he cites James Johnson Sweeney (as quoted in Brazeau): "Yes, he was interested in the musical theory of Kandinsky's painting. It stimulated a good many people in those early days, 1912 and right after. I think that's what appealed to him" (152). In addition he argues persuasively that "Peter Quince at the Clavier" reflects the influence of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, especially the following:

Generally speaking, colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul.

*It is evident therefore that colour harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration in the human soul; and this is one of the guiding principles of the inner need.* (Kandinsky 25–26)

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## Poems

### Along the Narrow Rast

Along the narrow rast  
between Egypt and China  
the spiral threads the needle's eye  
with hands trembling  
under knitted eyebrows.

A silk cord leads light  
out of the infernal din of voices  
and ancestral guilt—not to look back,  
cut the serpent's tail, walk  
backwards and sweep the trodden road  
clean of their footprints.  
*Ushabtis* will provide for the dead  
Pharaoh and the Emperor  
has his army of common clay men.

May the dream child sing softly in her tower  
to the whirr of a nurse's spinning wheel;  
though mediocrity is the load in her basket,  
a few crystal moments remain on the scales  
played on the Nile before Pythagoras came.

Mary de Rachewiltz  
Tirolo di Merano, Italy

## Invective Against Swan Songs

*King Otto, Ludwig II of Bavaria's  
Brother/Successor, from the Insane Asylum*

The soul, good people, flies beyond the parks  
And far beyond the domes of the winter palace.

Waking in a strange, phosphorescent light,  
It rises, deliberate, and goes without saying

Like a sleepwalker summoned by the moon  
To carry out a nobler office. Snow

Falls silently, and the owl's downy wings  
Make no sound as it swings through the cold night.

Behold, already on the long parades  
The carrion birds descend to line the streets.

And the soul, good people, having lately risen  
Escapes the walls of speech as another prison.

Nick Norwood  
Abilene, Tex.

### Psalm of the Absent Man

In this house of cold rooms, winter light  
Plays on the floors and carpet, casts  
A subdued brightness on the empty walls.

The people who lived here now are gone—  
Death is absolute and the trees outside lean  
Into a harsh breeze. What remains is dirt.

A few leaves huddle in corner pockets.  
Even new grass succumbs to January's early  
Frost—this sheet of delicate icicles. A man

Walks his dog down the gravel path.  
His loneliness follows him like a shadow.  
Every day he walks by and ponders who

Lives here in this two-story house.  
What and who remains when memory  
Falters? He remembers to walk on.

Virgil Suárez  
Tallahassee, Fla.

## Eyeing the Storm

The sky fills with the wind's  
gray warriors chanting what  
they know of the coming season.

Autumn's smile spills again  
between the atoms of what  
the universe does to stay alive.

The spirits of all the creatures  
prepare for the coming snows.  
It is the Moon of Ducks Flying,

elk making the long climb down  
the hills, small salmon slipping  
downstream toward the salt sea.

Inside the smallest of stones,  
music slender as jonquils  
lifts itself to the waiting sun.

The Old Ones say this is the song  
for which the great grizzlies listen  
before they head for their caves.

I watch the storm roll around  
in the great circle of time, wonder  
if its warriors will call me.

Fredrick Zydek  
Omaha, Nebr.

## On a Theme by William Stafford

If I could be like Wallace Stevens,  
I'd fold my clothes into the bureau  
drawer instead of living  
from a suitcase. I'd hang up my long  
coat in the closet and really move  
in.

I'd cook food in my room on a hot  
plate, then open up the window for  
the neighbors. With my tongue  
pursed like a stick, I'd push my ice  
cream all the way down to the end,  
so that even the last bite contained  
both cone and cream.

Millicent C. Borges  
Venice, Calif.

## The Ice Fisherman

One must have a butt of stone  
To sit atop a dry-wall pail  
Upended with its mouth against the snow;

And wear layers of winter clothes,  
The same number as the layers  
Of ice, beneath which, miserable glitter

Of minnow, shiner, chub or sucker  
Hangs on a hook to lure  
Pike or walleye; and see the same distant leaves

Which stir above the same shoreline,  
Flickering ghosts against the dark trees,  
Whose shadows point toward the place

For the watcher to perch, silent on the ice,  
And wait for his short rod's tip to bend  
Down toward the fish that's there or the one that isn't.

George Feger  
Williamstown, Mass.

## An Optative Mood

*for Laura*

It wouldn't take long to tell you what  
I want to tell you: it wouldn't be eloquent,  
though it wouldn't be easy—it would involve

tropical airs confused by slant sea-squalls  
and grasses rooted deep in the prairies; it would  
involve scored seeds drifting through spring,

the leaves' swerving return down to the ground  
in fall and the sinewy whispers in the wind  
rising out of those dead leaves; it would

involve doorways, apartments, and blank streets  
at 3 a.m. littered with broken wine bottles  
and the derelict trucks of the city; the highways

and overpasses leading back out of the city  
into the empty spaces and the dusty signs that point  
in directions outside ourselves; the gestures

of our ancestors in us; hesitations, doubts,  
boredom and gratitude; stammerings like  
"Where, where on earth am I?" and "What the hell?"

It would involve some calm in the mind and an inkling  
of things. A sharp intake of breath. It would involve  
wanting, you and me, and something mortally tender.

It would involve the universe coming to know itself  
through our unplanned questionings, a voluptuous sense  
of not being what we are and being what we will.

Thomas Pfau  
Fort Worth, Tex.

**“There is a life apart from politics . . .”**

*There is a life apart from politics . . .*  
So Stevens says

At times the times provide  
One if  
Only for a time to think  
Thoughts apart from  
This body politic

While the rest  
Of us  
Wait out the times and  
On the rare occasion

Pry back and  
Wedge the lid  
And for a moment  
Glimpse

Mark Bauer  
Barrington, R.I.

## Invoking a Line by Wallace Stevens

*. . . the seeming of a summer day . . .*  
—Wallace Stevens, “Description without Place”

Just before dusk, the parched men and women  
begin drinking gin and tonics as they sit on porches  
with white wicker chairs and ornamental planters  
still filled with wiry stalks of withered annuals.  
Every evening, under the constant hum of insects  
and buzz or crackle of a bug lamp, their conversations  
chronicle another summer drought. They speak  
about scenes that seem evidence of timelessness,  
indifference, or, rather more distressing, loss:  
how for weeks even a screen of storm clouds  
could not cool the hot contours of those two lanes  
curving through the blistered countryside; how  
for many mornings smoke drifting from brush  
fires blotted the distant sky; how otherwise each noon  
horizon would disappear in glare like a bleached  
absence dotting the view on an overexposed photograph;  
how by late afternoon a mirage of heat ripples  
would waver over bare asphalt at the drive-in diner;  
or simply how the air was often empty of chirping  
birds that now stayed quiet all day as they perched  
in patches of crosshatch darkness under shade trees.

Edward Byrne  
Valparaiso, Ind.

## The Lever

When the virile, savage splendor in you  
Dies, it is time for the lever, the sea  
Touched as if it were a purse full of pearls.  
It is time as well to stroke the mountain,  
Bathing the finger in its waterfalls,  
Choosing its highest peak as a fulcrum  
As if the late sky wanted jacking up.  
It need not be so big a scale as this:  
A needle nestles warm in the haystack,  
A pencil pursues its dreams of paper,  
The hand on the lip of the lover can  
Loose a startlement of amorous phrases,  
Lovers lying low almost everywhere—  
The letter opener remembers the seal,  
And the crowbar is avid for boulders.  
Just the slightest movement and you are saved:  
The pencil moves on into language,  
A rapt lover will never stop talking  
Until a kiss invades the rich source of sound  
And two nudes at last lie like prime movers.  
Therefore, do not cry too much over spilt milk:  
It was a slip of the wrist that wanted  
A splayed galaxy, or so we must tell  
Ourselves, prodding and prodded, here and there—  
Chopsticks lust for the rice, and earth listens,  
Indulging lovers as its princely pair.

Charles Edward Eaton  
Chapel Hill, N.C.

## Reviews

### Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing.

By Bart Eeckhout. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002.

Reading and writing. Reeling and writhing, Lewis Carroll called them. He might have been thinking of Wallace Stevens (or his critics). Take this line: "The poem lashes more fiercely than the wind." Now do this. Identify the "poem" with the imagination. Say it "lashes" (fastens down) what reality's "wind" disperses. Recall the "Blessed rage for order." Meanwhile, note that "rage" and "lashes" indict the imagining mind for ordering pious restraints and punitive routines. Then tack (since a tethered sail can drive as well as thrash): say the poem's a lashing out against constraint, dispersing (or dis-bursing) windier schemes. Observe that a fiercely lashing poem surpasses words, or sutures them—or wholly lacks a language. Go on like that.

My example is glib, of course, and taken out of context. Still, it hints at the irreducible (but not unlimited) multiplicity of meanings Bart Eeckhout says is typical of Stevens' work—the radical polysemy he credits (and sometimes blames) for the nonconsensual commentary Stevens' verse notoriously engenders. Eeckhout's book is must reading (as the addled tabloids like to say). It combines sharp analysis of Stevens scholarship with interpretations of Stevens' poems that are at once "close" (but not "closed"), multiply contextual, and crisply keyed to the poet's abashed and exalted trysts with muse and *mal*, limitlessness and limits.

Eeckhout rightly locates Stevens at a philosophical crossroads where standard, theocratic Western attitudes toward human limitation meet (or collide with) an errant counter-tradition. In the "deviant" view (initiated by Kant, developed by Nietzsche and Rudolf Boehm, and traceable in phenomenology, pragmatism, and certain strands of poststructuralism), human limitation—our "embodied, sensuous, vulnerable, mortal" circumstance—is not (as in the theocratic view) an essentially negative, unnatural and "fallen" state defined by constriction and privation. It is, instead, our necessary and productive (if also frightful and absurd) condition. Those contrasting versions intersect in Stevens, who (dressing up and disguising private needs and feelings) sees limits as both "enabling and constraining" and appears "aesthetically and intellectually obsessed with . . . the satisfactions and disappointments afforded by the intrinsic finitude" of being human. Liminal scenes and subjects drench his work.

But despite Stevens' "topical" compatibility with philosophy, and despite the excellence (however contradictory and partial) of phenomenological, pragmatist, and deconstructionist accounts of his writing, Stevens is not a philosopher. He is a poet intrigued by philosophical ideas. His thinking is more playful, disruptive, and sensuous than systematic, and the polysemy generated by his poems seems best described not by philosophical prescriptions but a cosmological paradox, that is, as finite but unbounded. Furthermore,

the question of how we are conditioned by limits, so fruitful when asked in “the epistemological and ethical realms of philosophy and religion,” is less fruitful when asked in “the more performative and aesthetic world of poetry,” where continuity is apt to trump conclusions. Given all of that, Eeckhout seeks to study Stevens in terms put forward by the poetry itself. He considers approaches through embodiment, mortality, and desire but finally decides “to recast the threadbare, but still crucial, Stevensian reality-imagination debate . . . as a topicalization of the limits of perception, thought, and language.” Those categories stress Stevens’ concern with the limits of writing. As it turns out, to study those limits requires a preliminary test of the limits of reading. Eeckhout explores these constraints without foreclosing the “signifying potential” of Stevens’ poems, a delightful process that takes up half his book.

Stevens became canonical belatedly but is now “an almost exclusively academic poet.” We read him today through the lenses of a critical industry whose most salient feature is the “extreme disparity” of its approaches to his work, which remains a testing ground for competing critical ideas and ideologies. Eeckhout lists reasons why this is so: Stevens’ marked tendency to write poetry about poetry, his work’s role as “symbolic capital” among competing “interpretive communities,” and the way the intentional polysemy of his verse appeals to contemporary preferences for contingency and hybridity. Most important, he argues, Stevens’ metapoetry compels metareading, an intense self-consciousness about interpretation in tune with recent literary theory. Three chapters trace the aesthetic qualities effecting that compulsion: first, dizzying qualifications, “absence of closure,” “discontinuity in thought and feeling,” and “short circuits of logic and expectation” in Stevens’ poems preclude arrival at rational and determinate conclusions; second, mixed and indeterminate tones and voices question the unity of the speaking subject and multiply interpretive potential; and third, vague but insistent self-inscriptions in literary and philosophical traditions make the poems extremely porous to ramifying intertextual connections from within and without the Stevens canon. An extended reading of “The Snow Man” locates these general characteristics in a particular poem—and amid a manifold of competing interpretations and textual relations—while a meditation on the irritations and pleasures of undecidability (a near definition of “the literary”) leads to Eeckhout’s second concern: the limits of writing.

Although Stevens’ work has been framed in divergent ways, his reputation continues to rest on the opportunities he offers “for pondering epistemological, language-philosophical, and literary-theoretical questions,” largely because of his evasive and unsystematic resistance to philosophers, poets, and others “committed to constructing comprehensive and coherent world-views.” Yet even as Stevens creatively refused to have a “developed philosophy,” Eeckhout shows that certain issues organize his poems: the workings of desire; the role of poetry in the wake of God’s reputed death; social and political contexts (two world wars, a severe economic depression, and a cold war); a compulsive need for originality; a delight in poetry’s ludic potential; and, most especially, a fascination with the limitations and inseparable interactions of perception, language, and thought in writing and in life. A discus-

sion of those interactions, and of Stevens' varying positions "between" the possible-impossible "limit situations" they involve, focuses several subsequent chapters on specific texts. "A Study of Two Pears" and its companions reflect multiple relations of matter and mind, for instance, while "The Plain Sense of Things" and other, similar poems probe alternative alignments between the concrete and abstract senses of "sense." "The Idea of Order at Key West" shifts along a continuum whose poles are marked by music and mimesis. And, with like-titled poems, "The Motive for Metaphor" explores the range of feasible postures between identity and difference, "metaphor and X." The readings are superb, alert to detail and system but finally open-ended. They imitate Stevens, defining boundaries they also traverse, as Eeckhout lets schema productively slip and interprets not only poems but also their intertexts and prior explications. A closing chapter spryly shuttles between the critic's competing tasks of specifying and summation; it turns around at terminal stations.

My own summations' sprinkled praise and cramped abridgements scant Bart Eeckhout's brilliant work, its intellectual force and range, its slippery-solid readings, human warmth, and savory diversions. For students and scholars launched on reading Stevens now, his book, in Ashbery's phrase, and after the poetry, prose, and letters, is the mooring of starting out. It sings "most spissantly," "right puissantly."

Guy Rotella  
Northeastern University

### **Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness.**

By Sara J. Ford. New York & London: Routledge, 2002.

The Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges dramatizes the performative nature of consciousness in his famous little parable, "Borges and I." The piece unfolds as a postmodern monologue that wraps up a speaker and an other aspect of self, "[t]he other one . . . the one things happen to," within a seamless, intricate web of shifting external relations and aperspectival consciousnesses. Here's a short excerpt: "I like hourglasses, maps, eighteenth-century typography, the taste of coffee and the prose of Stevenson; he shares these preferences, but in a vain way that turns them into the attributes of an actor." The Borges text, published as part of *Labyrinths* in 1964 just as modernism is folding into postmodernism, translates the self and its psychodrama into a rehearsed, staged, theatricalized, and ultimately performed experience, defined through its relations to external objects. Borges' parable points toward the postmodern self—narcissistic, nihilistic, enthralled by the spell of the image—at the same time that it remembers the psychological and philosophical origins of "consciousness" and "self," both constructions at modernism's core and the subject of Sara J. Ford's well-reasoned, elegantly written monograph, *Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens: The Performance of Modern Consciousness*.

The postmodern self, it turns out, is a chameleon, a simulacrum, embedded in language and blending into the creases and infinite contexts of its environments, its qualities and contours mimicking the techno-culture and its virtualities. By contrast, Ford's modernist version of interiority (via Stein and Stevens) seems fresh, undeconstructed, unencumbered; she has obviously absorbed, forgotten, and integrated postmodernist critique, as evidenced by her reference to Julia Kristeva's "writing subject" and the "David Lynch" moments in her discourse when the god-inhabited, myth-imbued world is exposed as a "Theatre / of Trope" (CP 397), a massive human defense against Nietzschean vacancy.

*The Performance of Consciousness* links an improbable couple, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens, through their mutual preoccupation with consciousness, their common praxes in modernist discourse, and a shared instructor at Harvard, the philosopher-psychologist William James, whose work challenged traditional and totalized notions of self. In addition, Ford overlays both writers' aptitude for employing "theater spaces," theatrical tropes, and the nomenclature of stage to rehearse theoretically the performative nature of consciousness and to dramatize the self's flux within a web of language, external objects, and relationships. Few critics have focused on the Stein/Stevens theatrical productions; yet under Ford's inspection, they reveal an important topological network within each poetic consciousness and illuminate the theater as a significant epistemological device.

Both Stein and Stevens, Ford contends, "[i]n their plays and in some of their most significant non-dramatic work . . . stage the modern self in order to explore its implications for literary expression" (16). This self-conscious, theatrically aware artifice that both writers employ allows the artist a mediated kind of agency, although both are mindful that consciousness cannot tame or apprehend what Ford calls the "unorderable flux of reality" (14). In the first chapter, "Consciousness Ungrounded," where she tracks the foundations of modernist conceptions of self, Ford explores the consciousness theories of William James, Henri Bergson, and Friedrich Nietzsche, and in particular their articulation of the experience of external reality and the self's ability or inability to access what Nietzsche called a "chaos of sensations" and Bergson termed "real duration" (13).

Ford's rehearsal of modernist thought is competent and clear, but she is most powerful when contextualizing and reading the plays and poems themselves. Chapters two and three take up Stein's enigmatic operas and plays. Ford does well to demonstrate Stein's theoretical and linguistic strategies, tactics that disrupt and obliterate the *dramatis generis* and displace theatrical narrative with what Stein calls the "landscape play." "Through the landscape play," Ford writes, "Stein could flatten traditional hierarchies of determining forces, opening up the self not to an existence beyond determining relationships but to a variety of simultaneous relationships" (21). Stein's landscapes stage, subvert, and immobilize language. Ford fixes on Stein's line ACARAFE, THAT IS A BLIND GLASS in the play *Tender Buttons* as the playwright's central trope for language, its transparency, opacity, and spectacularity. Deftly, Ford

negotiates her reader through the etymological and philosophical byways of this telling metaphor.

The last two chapters of *The Performance of Modern Consciousness* are devoted to Wallace Stevens' relation to the theater as playgoer, playwright, and poet. Ford fabricates an eclectic mélange of biography, modernist social contexts, and satisfyingly close readings to contextualize Stevens' vexed relations with actual theater and to elucidate his constructed theater spaces within the poetic canon. Ford rightly points out that Stevens, even in his love letters to Elsie Kachel, was experimenting already in his youth with the performative nature of writing and costume as the projection of metaphoric self. Ford's most original contribution is her reading of Stevens' Steinesque verse plays as proleptic markers of the poetry that was to come.

Indeed, from *Harmonium* through *The Auroras of Autumn*, Stevens exploits the metaphoricity of the theater and the fictions of the self it has engendered. His "theater spaces" fill and empty in combination with the poet's sense of "poverty"; sometimes the destitution of imaginative desire in the early poems, poverty in the late poems is knowledge, the certainty of absence or the perception of the reality that "There is no play. / Or, the persons act one merely by being here" (CP 416). The films *Being There* and *The Truman Show* are popular culture's equivalent visions of Stevens' sense of theater. For Stevens, the world's theaters (myths, religions, perceptions, interiorizations, his own poems) are fictional illusions, vain attempts to grasp the chaos and extra-human dimensions of existence. As Ford suggests: "In Stevens' modern world, all moments of consciousness are arrived at by way of illusion and costume" (110).

Stevens' theatricality, his use of costume to signify the desire to strip the self of external relations (fictions), reaches its apogee in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" in the section "It Must Change." Seeking to divest herself of the self's fictional entrapplings, Nanzia Nunzio, an anagrammatic mirroring of her spouse Ozymandias, performs a deconstructive striptease. Her wish to be clothed in the colorless cloak of nakedness, devoid of all fictive coverings, ultimately fails. As part of Stevens' world, Nanzia Nunzio's theater of perception is limited by the impossibility of the self's escape from a fictive/theatrical framework.

Stevens himself outstripped the modernists, even the postmodernists, when it came to rehearsing and performing the self. As Ford concludes, Stevens reminds us that Stevens' performance of consciousness discloses a reality in which "the illusion is revealed as illusion, the costumes are revealed as costumes, and the room itself, what we once thought a window to the world, is revealed as a stage" (97). Sara Ford makes a convincing case that Wallace Stevens and Gertrude Stein come to know themselves and ultimately their world through the fiction of the performed self that moves about in a landscape of words.

Mary Arensberg Valentis  
State University of New York at Albany

## Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens, and the Poetics of Privacy.

By Louis A. Renza. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002.

The argument of Louis A. Renza's book is that the writings of both Edgar Allan Poe and Wallace Stevens, especially in the poems of *Harmonium*, stage allegories of reading. Further, that these allegories, which are often difficult for even the most devoted reader to discern, are concerned with the theme of privacy. That privacy in turn requires qualification: it is not the cry of the Englishman, "My home is my castle," but rather has to do with the writer's desire to keep inviolate the core of his—for want of a better word—inspiration. In tension with that desire is the wish to publish writings, to go public. Thus "Stevens needs to write poems that simultaneously invite aesthetically compelling readings by others, but double as foils for yielding a private surplus to himself" (182–83). As background to his readings of the tales and poems, Renza provides a historical account of the evolution of the idea of privacy in the United States from the time of Poe to Stevens. His account is generally Foucauldian in its slant and makes use of the most recent scholarship of the era, but this is balanced by a tendency toward psychoanalytic criticism of the kind that will be familiar to most readers since the heyday of poststructuralism in the United States.

His first chapter is entitled "Poe's Secret Autobiography" and it sets the tone for most of what is to follow. Recent work on Poe has attempted to connect Poe with pro-slavery articles and so exclude him from the canon of U.S. literature. Renza, correctly in my view, does not spend long rebutting this argument, nor does he try to promulgate the opposite view, that Poe's work is somehow ideologically subversive. Instead we are led to the arena of Poe's psyche:

the verbal static emanating from Poe's tales may strike one as at once too contrived, too repetitive, and too subtle to construe as mere exhibitionism, or as an expression of ideological grievance, or as a sign of an unconscious, semiotic praxis. Quite the contrary, his rhetorical noise mostly calls attention to *his* making it without further point. That is, it refers the tale's imagined reader to the word-meditated traces of its author, the man in the text, and for no apparent reason other than to confront that reader with Poe's terminal, autobiographical presence—or his present absence. . . . This is a game, so to speak, out of narrative reach, its rules and motive withheld, and in that sense private. (32–33)

This is what Renza, a little awkwardly, calls throughout the book the "write to privacy." One of his examples of this is "The Philosophy of Furniture." Poe is in the process of describing how a room should be furnished with good taste ("*Glare* is a leading error in the philosophy of American household decoration," etc.), and then imagines the perfectly furnished room: "The proprietor lies asleep on a sofa—the weather is cool—the time is near midnight: we will make a sketch of the room during his slumber." Readers will recognize

this as a device to introduce the “perfect” room, but for Renza the matter does not end there. Although no further reference is made to this man, Renza glosses thus:

As Jack Larkin points out, domestic ideology purveyed norms such that a person’s “living alone” during the period “was customarily seen as a sign of eccentricity or even madness.” Who else is the article’s midnight-slumbering figure but Poe’s mad projection of himself, as if entirely oblivious to his narrator or public persona, to the latter’s interlocutors, and to us later readers as well? (79–80)

First, nowhere does Poe say that the proprietor lives alone. Second, readers of this book might fairly suppose that the “mad projection” is less Poe’s than Renza’s own, given that he provides no further evidence to back up the claim. As a reading of the essay, it is unpersuasive.

Time and time again, *Edgar Allan Poe, Wallace Stevens, and the Poetics of Privacy* makes an extravagant supposition concerning privacy, allegories of reading, etc., and then, rather than introducing evidence to support it or make it more plausible, merely states it in the indicative a few sentences on. What are we to make of his reading of “The Emperor of Ice-Cream”? Here are some highlights. To call in the “roller of big cigars” “means invoking the biologicistic force that results in erections”; “his whipping up ‘concupiscent curds’ in ‘kitchen cups’ evokes filling testicles with sperm”; “For ‘cream’ doubles as a vulgar idiomatic expression for gism, with ‘ice-’ its icily impersonal, biological discharge and nothing more”; “In missing its ‘three glass knobs,’ the cheap pine (‘deal’) dresser alludes to female genitalia from a vulgar male viewpoint: a woman’s private parts lacking the triune male genitalia, or what lower-class parlance would term the ‘family jewels,’ themselves here debased into mere ‘glass knobs’ ” (177–78). When the “roller” gives the order for the dead woman’s face to be covered, Renza remarks: “His directive also hints at a related vulgar joke, this one about putting a bag over a woman’s face to fuck her without regard to her physical appearance” (178). The intriguing thing is that throughout this reading of the poem, and indeed throughout the book when he is offering similarly farfetched interpretations, Renza’s critical conscience keeps interrupting. The reading above is prefaced by the comment: “Here I want to risk critical parody” (177). He seems unaware that to say this does not reduce the risk.

That Renza’s exegetical powers are negligible draws attention to the central problem of the book. The particular theme of privacy, which he believes is present in both Stevens and Poe, leaves the most delicate of textual traces. Who, given the reading above, would trust Renza to adduce them? Moreover, despite the historical background, both Poe’s work and Stevens’ poems are squeezed to provide the same moral of “inscribed readers” and the “write to privacy.” Should not literary criticism be responsible for describing why such writers are *different*? Renza might respond that since “the Poe-Stevens linkage must rely on tenuous objective evidence and scattered critical precedents” (103), to demonstrate a similarity between them is to provide an original take

on U.S. literary history. Indeed, but I suspect that Renza could “demonstrate” such a similarity between Edgar Allan Poe and any other writer one cares to name.

A final word on Renza’s prose. Often, when searching for a word, rather than find it, he makes up awkward new forms: to “contracept,” to “background,” to “end-run,” “immigrantist,” and “claviered”; he does not know the meaning of the verbal expression “to devolve on” (he appears to think it means something like “to be about,” “to consist in,” to “employ the image of”). (One might also note here that Robert Hass, the former poet laureate, has his name consistently misspelled.) As an example of his tautological and periphrastic expression, here is what he says about murder: it “entails a radically singular, self-other relation in a non-iterable moment of time” (55). The philosophical diction is employed to mask a poverty of thought: that a person can be murdered only once and that a murder victim has a murderer are neither new nor interesting ideas. Of course, some of this is the fault of the copy editor, but it is also symptomatic of the critical thinking of the entire book.

Justin Quinn  
Charles University  
Prague, Czech Republic

## News and Comments

\* \* \*

The Italian National Translation Prize for 2002 has been awarded to Massimo Bacigalupo. Bacigalupo is best known as the translator and editor of WS' poems and essays, William Wordsworth's *Prelude*, Emily Dickinson's poems, and most recently Seamus Heaney's *Beowulf*. The prize is administered by the Italian Ministry of Culture and is presented to the winner in Rome by the president of Italy. The ceremony is scheduled for December 2002.

\* \* \*

The Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens drew a capacity crowd to its annual WS Memorial Reading on June 22, 2002, at the Rose Festival in Elizabeth Park, Hartford. More than 150 people came to hear local poets Steve Foley and Courtney Davis along with student-poets Johanna Koltz and Anna Guarcco.

\* \* \*

The seventh annual WS Birthday Bash at the Hartford Public Library was held on Saturday, October 5, 2002, from 6:30 to 10:00 p.m. The guest speaker was Galway Kinnell. As usual, wine and hors d'oeuvres were served before the program, champagne and birthday cake afterward. The annual event is sponsored by the Hartford Friends and Enemies of Wallace Stevens and the Connecticut Center for the Book.

\* \* \*

The Academy of American Poets announced on November 7, 2001, that John Ashbery has been selected as the 2001 recipient of the \$150,000 Wallace Stevens Award. Frank Bidart was the previous year's winner.

\* \* \*

Seminal Stevens scholar Frank Doggett has died. Doggett is best remembered for his early study of Stevens' relationship to philosophy in *Stevens' Poetry of Thought* (1966). In addition to numerous articles, Doggett published *Wallace Stevens: The Making of the Poem* (1980), which explores the creative sources of Stevens' poetry, and he co-edited, with Robert Buttel, *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration* (1980). A high school principal for over thirty years in Jacksonville Beach, Fla., Doggett had a life-long passion for Stevens that began when, as an undergraduate in 1923, he purchased one of the first 100 copies of *Harmonium*. On September 4, 2002, the local newspaper, *Beaches Leader*, honored Doggett in an article entitled "Pioneer Stevens Scholar" by John Woodhouse that featured tributes from many Stevens scholars. Doggett's daughter, Jean Shepard, read it to him shortly before he died at age 96 on September 9, 2002. He will be greatly missed.

\* \* \*

Call for Papers: David Skeel, law professor at the University of Pennsylvania, will chair the 2003 Wallace Stevens Society Program at MLA (San Diego). The topic will be Stevens and the law. Send an abstract or ten-page paper to him by March 15, 2003, at UPenn or contact him at: dskeel@law.upenn.edu.

\* \* \*

C. K. Williams was the featured poet at the University of Connecticut's 39th annual Wallace Stevens Poetry Program. At Storrs on the evening of April 3, 2002, Williams read from his own poetry and presented awards to winners of the student poetry contest. At noon the following day, he gave a second reading at the Charter Oak Cultural Center in Hartford. Adrienne Rich will be the guest poet for the 40th annual Program in April 2003.

\* \* \*

The Lark Ascending presented *American Dream/American Nightmare* on November 11, 2001, at the German Evangelical-Lutheran Church of St. Paul in New York City. Featured on the program was a multimedia work titled *Black on Black/13*, which included a reading of "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" by off-Broadway director/actor Richard Edelman. This was followed by Nancy Bogen's slide choreography of an orchestral work by American composer Richard Brooks titled *Chorale Variations*, which, like Stevens' poem, was in thirteen sections.

\* \* \*

The Special Collections and Archives Division of the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University has acquired the modern poetry library of the late J. M. Edelstein. The library contains publications by some of the most notable writers in the United States, including Wallace Stevens, James Merrill, Robert Lowell, Robert Creeley, Allen Tate, Charles Olson, and Denise Levertov. The Edelstein Collection is most notable for its extensive number of works by Wallace Stevens. In addition to some 130 periodicals that include contributions by Stevens ranging from an 1899 Harvard University collection of student work to an issue of *Poetry* edited by Harriet Monroe, the library contains often multiple copies of Stevens' poetry collections, from presentation copies to first editions to signed volumes. For more information, contact Stephen Enniss, 404-727-4885 (e-mail: librse@emory.edu).

\* \* \*

On the rare book market, a copy of the 1948 Banyan Press's *A Primitive Like an Orb* was offered this summer by Lame Duck Books in Boston for \$350.

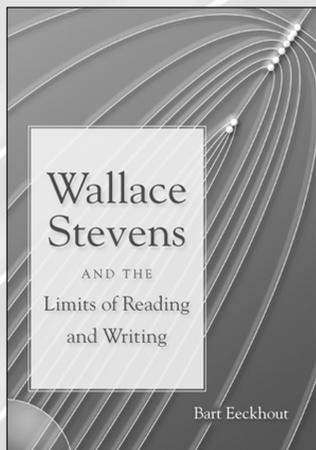
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Thanks once again to the Lannan Foundation for its generous patronage.

Sara S. Hodson  
The Huntington Library

# Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing

Bart Eeckhout



Often considered America's greatest twentieth-century poet, Wallace Stevens is without a doubt the Anglo-modernist poet whose work has been most scrutinized from a philosophical perspective. *Wallace Stevens and the Limits of Reading and Writing* both synthesizes and extends the critical understanding of Stevens's poetry in this respect. Arguing that a concern with the establishment and transgression of limits goes to the heart of Stevens's work, Bart Eeckhout traces both the limits of his poetry and the limits of writing as they are explored by that poetry.

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## Modern Language Association Convention

New York City

### Wallace Stevens in the Nineteenth Century

Saturday, 28 December 2002

3:30–4:45 p.m., Concourse E, Hilton

Program arranged by the Wallace Stevens Society.

Presiding Mervyn E. Nicholson, Univ. Coll. of the Cariboo

1. "Wallace Stevens and the American Cast Museum," Glen MacLeod, Univ. of Connecticut, Waterbury
2. "Anecdotes from Indian Territory: Wallace Stevens and the Trail of Tears," Andrew John Miller, Univ. of Montréal
3. "Razing the Romantic Tenement," Maureen Kravec, State Univ. of New York, Empire State Coll.

