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CREDIBLE PRACTICES:

WHITMAN'S CANDOUR, POUND'S SINCERITY, OLSON'S LITERALISM

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ABBREVIATIONS

WHITMAN

<i>CP&CP</i>	<i>Complete Poetry and Collected Prose</i>
<i>DA</i>	<i>Democracy in America</i>
<i>LG</i>	<i>Leaves of Grass</i>
<i>NUPM</i>	<i>Notebooks and Unpublished Prose Manuscripts</i>
<i>SCW</i>	<i>The Structure of Complex Words</i>
<i>WWC</i>	<i>With Walt Whitman in Camden</i>

POUND

<i>ABCR</i>	<i>ABC of Reading</i>
<i>C</i>	<i>The Cantos</i>
<i>CWC</i>	<i>The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry</i>
<i>CEP</i>	<i>Collected Early Poems</i>
<i>Con</i>	<i>Confucius: The Unwobbling Pivot; The Great Digest; The Analects</i>
<i>GB</i>	<i>Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir</i>
<i>MA</i>	<i>Machine Art & Other Writings</i>
<i>LE</i>	<i>Literary Essays of Ezra Pound</i>
<i>SA</i>	<i>Sincerity and Authenticity</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound</i>
<i>SP</i>	<i>Ezra Pound: Selected Prose, 1909-1965</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>The Spirit of Romance</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems</i>
<i>YCAL</i>	The Ezra Pound Papers, MSS 43. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

OLSON

<i>O&C</i>	<i>Charles Olson and Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence</i>
<i>CORC</i>	Charles Olson Research Collection. Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut, Storrs.
<i>CPO</i>	<i>The Collected Poems of Charles Olson</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Prose</i>
<i>MI</i>	<i>The Maximus Poems</i> (1960)
<i>MII</i>	<i>Maximus Poems IV, V, VI</i> (1968)
<i>MIII</i>	<i>The Maximus Poems: Volume Three</i> (1975)
<i>P&R</i>	<i>Process and Reality</i>
<i>SVH</i>	<i>The Special View of History</i>

ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and Charles Olson. It examines some individual but related theories of expression in their writings *about* poetics as well as their strategies of realising such ideals in their major poems. Chapter one explores the role of candour in “Song of Myself”, first by tracing a brief history of its use, and then by showing that latent in its definition is a denotational contradiction germane to Whitman’s own practice. On the one hand, poetic candour means forthright and frank expression well-suited to Whitman’s formal experimentation, while on the other, it requires a suspension of judgment (a *neutrality*) adequate to the radical democratic structures he seems to everywhere promote. Chapter two explores the meaning and function of sincerity in some of Pound’s early theory and verse; it argues that sincerity at first meant a kind of expertise or skill in rhythmic composition but later came to denote a rhetorical insistence on precise definition. I track some manifestations of this phenomenon in *Rock-Drill*. In chapter three I explore literalism as a sustained refusal of certain forms of generalisation. Following a clarification of what is meant by literalism as it applies to Olson’s verse, I examine some smaller (i.e., minimal) poems from *The Maximus Poems* and argue that in seeking to avoid the abstractions of both conventional metrics as well as rational discourse, Olson risks constructing a subject at the centre of his poem that might successfully disable the lyric ego at the expense of installing more controlling kinds of authority.

INTRODUCTION

No! I want to talk. I mean, you want to listen to a poet? I mean, you know, like, a poet, when he's alive, whether he talks or reads you his poems, it's the same thing. Dig that! [APPLAUSE] And when he is—when he is made of three parts, his life, his mouth and his poem, then by God the earth belongs to us! And what I think has happened is that that's—well gee, one doesn't want to claim things.

—Charles Olson (*Reading at Berkeley* 14)

This thesis argues that “candour”, “sincerity” and “literalism” are poetics. It analyses aspects of three poets’ attempts to write poems adequate to their convictions. The poets, and their poems, are: Walt Whitman and “Song of Myself”; Ezra Pound and *The Cantos*; and Charles Olson and *The Maximus Poems*. Though no subsequent comparison to Sir Philip Sidney’s 1581 *Defence of Poesie* is offered, I understand Whitman, Pound and Olson to be working towards individual refutations of Sidney’s claim about poetic artifice, that the poet “nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth” (29).

Neither Whitman, Pound nor Olson would have been able to recognise Sidney’s claim as a viable description of their own aims. They would also have found unfamiliar Sidney’s subsequent declaration that a poet “never tries to conjure you to believe for true, what he writeth” (29). In fact, these poets thought the opposite: they believed that despite the artifice of their medium, poets *can* affirm things in their poems, and it is their particular burden to do so. It is the purpose of this thesis to offer some commentary about how Whitman, then Pound and finally Olson take up this challenge, and how we, as readers, might agree to believe that what they say is true.

True of *what*? It is a good question to ask. A preliminary reply must stipulate that as poetics, candour, sincerity and literalism are never going to address themselves to the big metaphysical questions, or only obliquely. Truth, in this context, cannot correspond to abstract notions. It remains a question of practice. Of course, such terms as those I have chosen to describe these poets' various poetics do connote a certain moral force behind or essential to expression, but my considerations are primarily aesthetic, and in particular, prosodic (pertaining to the theory and the practice of versification). This thesis discusses the structures and strategies (which are sometimes very un- or non-structured let alone very strategic) involved in finding a form or forms that will convey, in a real way, the sense that what is said is what (and how) the poet thinks.

Attempts to devise a form of utterance in which something like "truth" can reside are nothing new to poetry. In a recent discussion of "hypermetricality", Simon Jarvis has argued that in the conclusion to Wordsworth's "Ode to Duty" the poet succumbs to powerful feelings, a submission which leads to a momentary loss of metrical control over language. Such a loss of control is of paramount significance since "it is precisely the poet's art to master" it (*Wordsworth's Philosophic Song* 8); in doing so he should turn language into an instrument. When the pressure of the emotive moment breaks down that instrumentalism, language overflows its measure. When Wordsworth utters the long line "And the most ancient Heavens through Thee are fresh and strong", the material breaks in upon the ideal, and the poet blurts out a sort of truth (*Song* 8) as the metrical rules subside. What gets blurted out when the "normal defences are down" (*Song* 8) is a "wish believed at the moment of utterance, that poetry will speak truth: not in the sense of describing or explaining the truth, but in the sense that this utterance be the living event of truth" (*Song* 21).

Such losses of control—and the truths which may or may not happen during them—remain matters of technique. Jarvis makes it plain in his discussion that truth is

itself a matter of technique. As such, truth is not merely a matter of semantics or reference, but of (specifically poetic) presentation. Citing Marcel Detienne's study of classical verse, Jarvis points out that for ancient poets truth was fundamentally "characterized by performative efficacy" (*Song* 20). Truth was not opposed to falsehood: "the only meaningful opposition involved *Aletheia* and *Lethe*" (qtd. in Jarvis 20). Jarvis's cogent analysis of Wordsworth speaks to the work of the poets in this study only insofar as it cannot account for them. How are we to know if poets working in the free verse tradition are enunciating truth in verse if, unlike Wordsworth, their poems are not marked by a preponderance of metrical control interrupted by especially truthful and salient losses thereof? In other words, how, if at all, can any one of these poets, working outside what might crudely be understood as predetermined formal restrictions, express a truth beyond its mere assertion?

Unsympathetic critics might point to any of these writers and say they are "all blurt and no truth". Do they then lack recourse to truth just because there is no pentameter to break? What is certain is that neither Whitman, Pound nor Olson "broke the pentameter" for the sake of it. Their departures from metrical regularity were not abnegations of poetic duty but reaffirmations of it. But this begs the question: what is Whitman's prosody? What is Pound's? What is Olson's? For as Charles O. Hartman has succinctly put it, getting rid of metre is not the same as getting rid of prosody (26). Still, outside of the obtuse equation that would automatically understand a freedom from metrical restriction as naturally leading to truthful poetic statement, where do we begin? First, by placing a pretty solid restriction upon what is meant by "truth" here. I believe that it must consist in the conveyed sense that the poet means what he writes.¹ In other

¹ A brief note is necessary on what will certainly strike (if it has not already) the reader as a patently phallogocentric discourse. When I am explaining what I see as Whitman's, Pound's or Olson's theories I will adopt their masculine vocabulary as a matter of accurate rendition. When they talk about poets, they mean male poets, generally. It is

words, the invention of new stanzaic structures, the use of idiosyncratic typography, parataxis, recuperated found material or any other major feature of the verse must be seen—and tested—as innovations in form but also as kinds of honesty in writing. This is a peculiar situation because if it is always in *how* not *what* the poet says that the poet's truthfulness is conveyed, then the criteria by which he can be judged "truthful" are also the most artificial.

That said, these poets really did want their poems to be true, if not empirically then certainly true in the sense of *meant*, and part of their trustworthiness can be gleaned from their pressing ahead despite the apparent contradictions of the just-mentioned paradox. All of which might already have shifted the discussion from a question of truth to the mere communication of intention. Is that what they are committed to? Is Whitman committed to "you, whoever you are", or to his art? Is Pound committed to rectitude, or to his verse? Is Olson committed to the polis, or to his poem? The failure—*intentional*, on their part, I think—to make distinctions between these objects of commitment is what makes their practices' truth claims at once more believable *and* implausible. As Stanley Cavell has argued, in morality "tracing an intention limits a man's responsibility; in art, it dilates it completely" (*Must We Mean What We Say?* 236). "The artist", he continues, "is responsible for everything in his work, and not just in the sense that it is done, but in the sense that it is meant" (*Must We Mean What We Say?* 237). The following is an inquiry into the ways in which Whitman, Pound and Olson approached this responsibility.

not the purpose of this or any of these chapters to analyse gender's impact upon poetics, though clearly these issues are important to the work of each of the poets herein discussed. For a recent analysis of gender-poetics see Michael Davidson's *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (2004). Naomi Schor offers a broader theoretical discussion of gender and aesthetics in *Reading in Detail* (1987), in which she critiques a philosophical tendency to see "detail" as gendered feminine, and "generality" or "abstraction" as gendered masculine. For a broader discussion of male self-awareness and subjectivity, see Peter Middleton's *The Inward Gaze* (1992).

OUTLINE OF THE THESIS

Chapter one, “Whitman’s candour”, construes candour as a principle of Whitman’s poetic discourse. The chapter begins by noticing that Whitman uses the term “candour” in several different ways. Following a brief historical note about the long history of the word, designed to give the reader some sense of the ways in which Whitman himself could variously mean it, I argue that neutrality was for Whitman amongst the most essential features of candid impartiality, and suggest how this impinges upon both the content and the structure of “Song of Myself”, with particular emphasis on the “catalogues”. I argue that part of Whitman’s complex understanding of candour is informed by the notion of personal legibility, and point to some historical precedents, namely Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* and Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. Pursuing the notion of poetic openness to one of its many logical extents, the discussion reaches a stage where neutrality becomes something like a lost capacity for adjudication (picking up on one of Whitman’s metaphors about poetic activity and judgment).

At this point, I argue, candour in Whitman’s poem can also be reimagined as a kind of *parrhêsia*, that is, fearless speech. The key principle of *parrhêsia* is the speaker’s identification between his *logos* and his *bios* (Foucault 106). This identification comes at a cost; in Whitman’s case, courageousness is construed as a kind of impairment of wit. Following a discussion about the nature and manner of the problem of self-referentiality, the chapter concludes by weighing in on a question concerning Whitman’s “democratic” credentials. Against the more typical reading of Whitman being somehow exemplary of paradigmatic inclusivity, I suggest that it is only with, through and in candour—as neutrality *and* as courageousness—that he can conceivably be thought of as a democratic poet at all.

Chapter two, “Pound’s sincerity”, begins by suggesting that for Pound sincerity initially meant something like a skill or expertise in composition. Because it is part of Pound’s usual polemical use of the term to refuse to define it outright, the first two sections of the chapter retrace some of its early uses and interrogate the contexts of its deployment in order to get a clearer idea of what Pound actually means, especially by the declaration that “I believe in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity” (*LE* 9). After offering some extended speculations about what the term does mean, the chapter attempts to think through those speculations by looking at some of the poems he was writing at the time of his early polemical uses of the term. Coming to a provisional notion that for Pound sincerity pertains equally to questions of a poet’s handling of rhythm as well as of image, I read “The Return”, “Alba” and “An Object” as tests.

Having established a sense of what Pound means by sincerity, and how that can be discerned in the poems he was then composing, I track the history of Pound’s move *away* from “sincerity as expertise” towards sincerity as “precise definition of the word”. In brief, beginning especially in 1920 after the publication of *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* in *Instigations*, Pound’s notion of sincerity shifts from a competency of rhythmical composition to a greater insistence on denotational reference. The shift is not immediate and, as a term essential to many of the changes in Pound’s thinking—poetical as well as political—it is not always stable in its meaning. But by the time Pound comes to translate *The Great Digest* between 1945 and 1947, it has for him a meaning quite opposite to what he first meant by it. I argue that instead of being the end product of long poetical skill and practice, sincerity becomes a rationale for, as well as a central term in, his increasingly “authoritarian” verse practices. Implicit in this shift is a transfer of labour: the poet no longer works to become sincere, but is so implicitly; it is up to the reader to train herself sufficiently to understand how. I explore the consequences of this shift in the prosody of *Rock-Drill* (1955).

The third chapter, “Olson’s literalism”, is a critical reading of some of the central tenets proposed by Olson in the 1950 essay “Projective Verse”. Here I argue that Olson’s formal innovations were very much contingent upon the poet’s undue emphasis upon content—facts and figures and other non-metaphorical “realities”. At the same time, I notice that many of Olson’s poems explicitly comment upon the process of making verse, and then proceed through a series of close readings to find that many poems *not* ostensibly about poetry are, in fact, centrally concerned with poetics as well. That is, Olson’s innovations in formal presentation are largely constructs of his penchant for writing *about* form.

This chapter tries to say something about one particular kind of poem in *The Maximus Poems*: the tiny, obstinate and very often impenetrable short poems of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968). I suggest they demonstrate a kind of rhetorical theatricality that Michael Fried thought active in the so-called minimalists of the 1960s and 1970s. I draw upon unpublished archival essays to show that there *are* grounds for comparing Olson’s poetry to the visual arts (though this comparison remains entirely conceptual). In the comparison with “literalist art”, as Fried calls the minimalists, I show there to be a certain privacy about Olson’s work inconsistent with his more publicly announced concerns for the polis. This has consequences for the kind of poems he writes: interested in presenting his words “logographically”, Olson very often deletes even their most tangential syntactic and thematic connections so that the reader is obliged merely to behold rather than interpret them; or she is asked to root around in Olson’s sources for lost connections. In either instance, the poet is asserting what strikes me as a powerful control over the reader. I suggest towards the end that the latent justification of privacy in Olson’s theories of “Projective Verse” is anti-social.

CHAPTER ONE—WHITMAN'S CANDOUR

There are three artistic tones—*candor*, chasteness, 'clear',
 which is diffused beauty; humour, which is diffused wit;
 and pathos which is diffused... [incomplete].

—G. M. Hopkins (*Journals and Papers* 290)

A PRINCIPLE OF DISCOURSE, 1855

This chapter, as its title indicates, deals with the first of what Hopkins called the “artistic tones”, candour, as it applies to the poetry of Walt Whitman in general and to “Song of Myself” in particular. Candour, as I hope to show, features as essentially in Whitman’s poem as it does in his thinking about his poetry. Problematically, he uses the term in a number of different ways. “Candor”, for instance, appears five times in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855), and in each instance a new significance is proposed, so that by the end of that paratext the term contains a diversity of meanings apposite to the poems it helps to introduce. Whitman first uses it as part of a description of “common people”, whom the preface—like the twelve poems that follow it—is eager to redeem as new models for poetic composition: “[t]heir manners speech dress friendships—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of their carriage . . . their deathless attachment to freedom [...] these too are unrhymed poetry” (*LG* [1855] iii).² Here candour is figured as a physical attribute closely

² Whitman’s idiosyncratic punctuation will be preserved throughout. Emphases and curious typographical decisions are original unless otherwise indicated (the same goes for Pound and for Olson in later chapters). I will mark my own elisions with square parentheses around three-dot ellipses, which should be distinguished from Whitman’s use of between two and seven points in the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* as substitutes for a variety of more conventional punctuation marks like dashes, colons, commas and

related to “freshness”, and means something like “wholesomeness”, or something similarly conducive to and suggestive of both moral and physical health. The long paragraph from which this quote is taken substantiates this description: the “common people” are adverse “to anything indecorous”, but fierce when injustice arouses their resentments; curious and “welcoming of novelty”; in possession of “wonderful sympathy”, though “susceptible to a slight”; fluent of speech; delighting in music; manly, tender and native in their elegance; of “good temper and openhandedness” (*LG* [1855] iii).

But the common people, and the “unrhymed” poetry that Whitman supposes its collected individuals actually *are*, still “awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it” (*LG* [1855] iii). The means by which he will treat each person are described when Whitman promises, some pages later, that:

[m]en and women and the earth and all upon it are simply to be taken as they are, and the investigation of their past and present and future shall be unintermitted and shall be done with perfect candor. Upon this basis philosophy speculates ever looking towards the poet (*LG* [1855] vii).

Here, rather than defining attributes of the people to be depicted in the poems, Whitman uses “candor” to describe the method of their depiction. The candid facial expressions of the common people deserve candid literary ones from the poets who celebrate them. In this usage, candour means an honesty capacious enough to treat everyone and everything, at all times, without intermission. The wholesomeness of the

periods. The date in square parentheses in my citations from *Leaves of Grass* indicates the edition year. Because of the varied and complicated publication history of *Leaves of Grass* (there are six to seven editions, depending on the definition of “edition” followed), my citations refer to the original editions, all of which are available online at *The Walt Whitman Archive* (www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/index.html).

common physical aspect is reimagined as the wholeness of the poetic act. Furthermore, candour in this sense undertakes to guarantee a freedom from distortion: “all [...] are simply to be taken as they are” (*LG* [1855] vii). Whitman is also stating that candour, as a method of investigation, is able enough in its truth claims to catch the eye of philosophy (having, presumably, outdone it).

In a passage of the 1855 preface following a brief mention of the “mechanic or farmer” having a “candid and generous heart” in contradistinction to the “cruel inferiority” of those squatting in the upper echelons of political and social establishments (*LG* [1855] viii), three subsequent uses of candour occur together in a tight cluster. Towards the end of the preface, Whitman writes:

[t]he great poets are also to be known by the absence in them of tricks and by the justification of perfect personal candor. Then folks echo a new cheap joy and a divine voice leaping from their brains: How beautiful is candor! All faults may be forgiven of him who has perfect candor. Henceforth let no man of us lie, for we have seen that openness wins the inner and outer world and there is no single exception (*LG* [1855] ix).

“Candor”, having been first used as an adjective to describe the appearance of common people, then, subsequently, as a *method* used in describing them, is now held up as an aesthetic *ideal* of communicative honesty of both the poetic artefact and the poet himself. Such an ideal implies a certain formal eccentricity that retains this important complication, which is a critical relation internal to Whitman’s competing ideas of what candour is: a “*personal* candor” is justified by its absence of “tricks”, whereas of “perfect candor” “all faults may be forgiven”. One “candour” removes the tricks, probably of prosodic ornamentation, while the other imports new faults, i.e., the infelicities of style

and content for which Whitman is well known. Faults—from the Latin *fallere*, to deceive—shall prove, Whitman asserts, his absence of tricks. As an attribute of his subject matter, as a method of writing and as a quality of the subject who writes, candour already embodies the sorts of contradictions Whitman would famously admit to at the end of “Song of Myself”.

It is the claim of this chapter that candour, despite its various meanings (actually, in a sense, because of its various meanings, as I will explain), is a key if unstable principle of Whitman’s discourse, and that, as such, candour is a poetics. For Whitman, candour carried with it certain formal as well as ethical obligations and ideals. The basic circumstance of candour’s intelligibility as a poetics may be clarified by a brief discussion of the history of the term.

HISTORICAL NOTE ON “CANDOUR”

The word “candour” comes in to English, via French, from the Latin *candere*: “to be of a glowing white”. Noah Webster’s *American Dictionary of the English Language* defined the first meaning of *candid* as simply “white”; and though it remarks that that meaning is “rarely used” (119), as an amateur lexicographer, the etymology is likely one Whitman would have known.³ It points to a couplet by Dryden from “Of the Pythagorean Philosophy”, a translation of “Book XV” of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

The box receives all black; but pour’d from thence
The stones came candid forth, the hue of innocence (318).

The larger narrative describes the conundrum of Myscelos of Argos, who one night is instructed in a dream by Hercules to leave his homeland lest the demigod return and kill him. Unfortunately, law prohibits anyone leaving Argos. After substantial deliberation, encouraged by further, increasingly menacing visitations from the Herculean spectre, Myscelos decides to heed those threats and scorn the laws of men, and so prepares to depart. Meanwhile, rumours circulate about his imminent exit—“Thus while he linger’d, his design was heard” (Dryden “Pythagorean” 318)—and he is condemned through a process of judicial suffrage, where elder citizens cast pebbles, white or black, into an urn

³ As Ed Folsom has recently shown, Whitman was an avid reader of dictionaries (Folsom *Native Representations* 15); his interest might have been initially aroused by the so-called “war of the dictionaries” begun in 1830 with the publication of Worcester’s *Comprehensive, Pronouncing, and Explanatory Dictionary of the English Language*, largely seen as a rival of Webster’s monumental 1828 first edition of the *American Dictionary of the English Language* (13). Whitman owned both but preferred the latter, and annotated it (Folsom “Dictionaries” 183-4). For a polemical treatise on the power of language and definitions, though unpublished during his life, see Whitman’s “Words” (a.k.a. “An American Primer”) in *NUPM*, Vol. 5, 1621-1711. For a discussion of Whitman’s own ideas about a new dictionary, see Michael R. Dressman’s “Walt Whitman’s Plans for the Perfect Dictionary” in *Studies in the American Renaissance* (457-73).

in which “[t]he first absolve, but fate is in the last” (Dryden “Pythagorean” 318). As a negative verdict is being rendered, Myscelos appeals to Hercules to intervene. Hercules does so by changing black stones into white ones, thus converting what would have been an unanimous conviction into an unanimous exculpation.

As Mary Randolph has observed in her excellent survey of “candour” in English satire, in the late seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century “candour” and “candid” were “used quite conventionally [...] by many writers to mean only an exaggerated kindness or an innocent leniency of judgement”; in this context, a petition for “candour” was little more than “a polite social bow to a literate public” (46). John Dryden, for instance, concludes the preface to his *Annus Mirabilis* (1666) by saying to his reader, here specifically the “Honourable Sir Robert Howard”: “[y]our candour in pardoning my errors may make you more remiss in correcting them if you will not withal consider that they come into the world with your approbation, and through your hands” (*Poetical Works* 40). It is as cunning an implication of the reader in the fortune of the text as Whitman would ever make.

Though there are earlier recorded usages of the term as “whiteness” (1398), or “stainlessness of character” (1610), the *OED* shows Izaak Walton was the first to use the term “candour” to mean “sweetness of temper, kindness” in 1653: “[i]f he [the reader] bring not candour to the reading of this Discourse, he shall [...] injure me [...] by too many Criticisms” (*OED Online*). Thomas Blunt’s *Glossographia: or a Dictionary Interpreting the Hard Words* (1670); Nathaniel Bailey’s *Universal Etymological Dictionary* (1728); and Dr. Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) all list similar meanings (Randolph 45-6), so that in the eighteenth century, candour means predominantly “courtesy”, “plain-dealing”, and a gracious “impartiality”, as opposed to a “*frank* judicuality of mind” or outspokenness. On the surface, Randolph continues, “all of this seems innocent enough although one may perhaps wonder a little at these

Augustan authors' unbounded confidence in their readers' perpetual mellowness of mind"; as an "artificial kindness" and a "candy deal of courtesy" candour seems to have "advanced high up in the roll-call of eighteenth-century 'virtues', admired and bespoken everywhere" (Randolph 46-7). Candour became not merely a virtue of the readership; Lewis Theobald thought it a quality of composition; Alexander Pope believed it tantamount to truth; Corbyn Morris esteemed it a virtue of political leaders; Richard Glover held it as a sought-after thing in a friend (Randolph 47).

As Randolph's survey shows, with the advent of satire came certain shifts in the meanings of the term. Jonathan Swift uses "candour" and "candid" half a dozen times in *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), not as cordial appeals to fellows but as defensive salvos designed to subdue hostile critics:

Not that he [the author] would have governed his judgements by the ill-placed cavils of the sour [...] but he desires to be answerable no farther than he is guilty, and that his faults may not be multiplied by the ignorant, the unnatural, and the uncharitable applications of those who have neither candour to suppose good meanings, nor palate to distinguish true ones (21).

But the most striking feature of the eighteenth century's total enthusiasm for this term is the degree to which it was itself being used disingenuously, appealing to both the critic and the general reading public for a leniency informed by good manners and intelligence before proceeding to use irony, humour, exaggeration and ridicule to expose that same audience's stupidities. Calling a reader candid became tantamount to calling her obtuse. From these usages, it developed its more modern meaning: frank speaking about

uncomfortable truths. By the end of the eighteenth century, candour was to be espied with derision and contempt. From Canning's *The New Morality* (1798):

‘Much may be said on both sides’.—Hark! I hear
 A well-known voice that murmurs in my ear,—
 The voice of *CANDOUR*.—Hail, most solemn sage,
 Thou drivelling virtue of this moral age,
CANDOUR, which softens party's headlong rage,
CANDOUR,—which spares its foe;—nor e'er descends
 With bigot zeal to combat for its friends.
CANDOUR,—which loves in see-saw strain to tell
 Of *acting foolishly*, but *meaning well*;
 Too nice to praise by wholesale, or to blame,
 Convinced that *all* men's motives are the same;—
 And finds, with keen discriminating sight,
BLACK'S not *so* black;—nor *WHITE* so *very* white [...]
 Give me th'avow'd, th'erect, the manly foe,
 Bold I can meet—perhaps may turn his blow;
 But of all plagues, good heaven, thy wrath can send,
 Save, save, oh! save me from the *Candid Friend*! (qtd. in Randolph 59-60)

The career of candour was perverted by its double usage, and succumbed to this abuse because of the original instabilities of its meaning (Randolph 62). As a term it had come, Randolph remarks understatedly, “a very long way from its original meaning of ‘dazzling whiteness’” (61). Randolph is keen to show a deep connection between the fate of satire and the fate of one of its favourite terms, so that the decline of the word is

connected to the decay of a genre; but other critics have proposed alternative explanations.

William Empson offers a brief but incisive analysis of the history and usage of candour in *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951). His discussion bears directly upon a problem addressed only by implication in Randolph's study, namely, the word's *various* meanings. Mentioning only in passing its original uses in English to mean a variety of metaphorical praise like "white" or "innocent", "splendid" or "fortunate", Empson is more interested in its other, more recent meanings. He cites the final three entries from the *New English Dictionary*—

- 3 free from bias; fair, impartial just (1635)
- 4 free from malice; 'not desirous to find fault', 'gentle, courteous';
favourably disposed, favourable, kindly (1633)
- 5 frank, open, ingenuous, straight-forward; sincere in what one says
(1675) (*SCW* 308)

—and comments: "one must admire the great work in '4' for making the definition grow slowly from the idea of the just judge to that of the judge prejudiced in your own favour" (*SCW* 308). But Empson thinks '5' confuses "ideas which are more seriously opposed": "telling the truth against yourself" versus "exposing other people to their faces" (309). Such inherent contradictoriness makes candour a *complex* word.

Empson's discussion shows the extent to which candour presents a "rather confusing bundle when it is called in to handle a practical situation" (310). He believes the word does seem to offer an ideal of the "innocent simpleton who picks out the good points in a person's character and ignores the bad ones, without affectation or

design”, so that candid judgments are both favourable and unbiased (309). Voltaire’s *Candide* is the model instance of this.⁴ A simple equation of this notion is as follows: “the kind umpire is truthful”, i.e., since nothing is suppressed out of malice, such a judge is a “trustworthy source of information” (309). But in its full use, candour leads only to a “peculiar kind of truthfulness”: “the truthful umpire is kind”. Though this second formulation does not look seriously different from the first, and in fact the two might be read together as “the ideal umpire is both kind and truthful”, a “perfectly accurate judgment is not in view” since the candid person’s “method is so likely to deceive him” (309-10).

Empson thinks the demise of candour, tipped by Sheridan in *The School for Scandal* (1777)—a play featuring “Mrs. Candour” who is described in the *dramatis personae* as “a malicious and affected woman” (Sheridan 22)—can be traced to a “Victorian fear of outspokenness”, the “strongest enemy of the grace of the word” (*SCW* 307). He speculates that the “Augustan settlement had become artificial” since the word presumed (as Randolph shows in detail) “a code of manners which had become vulgarised”; “the attack on it is a sort of minor parallel to the attack on Poetic Diction” (307). But in “An Episode in the History of Candour”, Donald Davie takes issue with Empson’s claims, suggesting that

Victorians, as we know, were a great deal more outspoken on some things than we can afford to be [...] And as for ‘the Augustan

⁴ “If Pangloss closes everything inside a system, *Candide* (Latin, *candidus*, ‘white’, ‘pure’, ‘beautiful’, and, by extension, ‘honest’, etc.) is he who is open to all experience. The term was used frequently in the contemporary French translation of Locke’s *Essay on Human Understanding* to suggest the self as an innocent sheet of white paper on which experience will write its story. Voltaire often employs the word for its echoes of Horace, for whom *candidus* means unimpeachably ‘sincere’; but elsewhere he also uses *candide* in an emergent modern sense, with the pejorative sense of gullibility” (Cuffe “A Note on Names” *Candide, or Optimism* xxxvi).

settlement', it had been split in two a full thirty years before, when Goldsmith and Johnson took arms against Thomas Gray and his imitators ("Episode" 184).

Davie's alternative explanation looks not to literary precedents, but to religious and historical ones. "When we are examining the disintegration of a moral principle so firm and so central as candour was for a man as good as Dr. Johnson", we are "doing a great deal more than filling in a missing chapter of semantic history; we are dealing with the collapse of a civilization" ("Episode" 186).

Davie tracks the ruin of candour to 1772 and an obscure episode in English religious history, "when an appeal was made to Parliament for the repeal of the Toleration Act of 1688" (during which time the Unitarians claimed, falsely, to be speaking for the Trinitarian majority as a whole, when in fact they merely represented their own interests); as a consequence the Establishment saw the Dissenting Interest was disunited. The "crucial point is that 'candour' was indeed the slogan inscribed on the banner under which the Unitarians deviously fought in 1772" ("Episode" 187).

Davie cites the stinging criticisms of the candour of the "Evangelical Movement" made by David Bogue and James Bennett in *History of Dissenters from the Revolution in 1688, to the Year 1808*, published in 1810, as a signature moment in the history of the decline of candour. As Trinitarians themselves, they wanted to discredit Unitarianism because of its espousal of the anti-Trinitarian heresies of Arianism and Socinianism. By calling "Presbyterian" what was actually "Unitarian", the ancestors "brought 'candour' and 'candid' into disrepute" ("Episode" 188). This very precise explanation (and I give only the briefest outline here) is legible as an allegory of "not calling things by their right names" ("Episode" 188), and Davie is quick to see contemporary parallels, such as a corollary between the fate of candour and the "muddles and duplicities" of political

liberalism, the “ho-hum-much-to-be-said-on-both-sides attitude” (190) that “leads us to condone the denial of political liberties to ninety-nine citizens out of every hundred” (189). Pound’s own concerns about “right names” and the shortcomings of overly-liberal governments are already legible in the background here.

The demise of candour was not exclusive to England or France. While they might lack the same sense of their own historical specificity—though *Webster’s* does, after all, point to Dryden—there is evidence from American writers that in the United States “candor” suffered a similar disgrace. Emily Dickinson wrote circa 1883:

CANDOR, my tepid Friend,
Come not to play with me!
The Myrrhs and Mochas of the Mind
Are its Iniquity (“CIX” *Collected Poems* 302).⁵

Dickinson sent this poem to Susan Gilbert Dickinson and prefaced it with the following remarks: “How inspiriting to the clandestine Mind those words of Scripture, We thank thee that thou hast hid these things” (*Letters* 790). In doing so, she moots the idea that candour is opposed to some special, even spiritual privacy. Writing a few years earlier to Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Dickinson makes it sound like a necessary kind of deception: “Candor – my Preceptor – is the only wile. Did you not teach me that yourself, in the ‘Prelude’ to ‘Malbone?’” (548). Dickinson does not specify the passage in question, but it is probably this one:

One learns, in growing older, that no fiction can be so strange nor
appear so improbable as would the simple truth; and that doubtless even

⁵ This poem was brought to my attention by Peter Nicholls.

Shakespeare did but timidly transcribe a few of the deeds and passions he had personally known. For no man of middle age can dare trust himself to portray life in its full intensity, as he has studied or shared it; he must resolutely set aside as indescribable the things more worth describing, and must expect to be charged with exaggeration, even when he tells the rest (Higginson 2).

While the word “candor” was never in vogue in America the way it was in England, subsequent editions of Webster’s *American Dictionary* do record some of the term’s especially fraught history. The 1830 edition defines “candid” as “free from undue bias; disposed to think and judge according to truth and justice, or without partiality or prejudice” (119); the 1871 *Dr. Webster’s Complete Dictionary of the English Language* disambiguates related terms further: “CANDID, FAIR, OPEN FRANK, INGENUOUS. A man is *fair* when he puts things on just or equitable footing; he is *candid* when he looks impartially on both sides of a subject, doing justice especially to the motives and conduct of an opponent; he is *open* and *frank* when he declares his sentiments without reserve; he is *ingenuous* when he does so out of a noble regard for truth. *Fair* dealing, *candid* investigation; an *open* temper, a *frank* disposition; an *ingenuous* answer or declaration” (190). That said, it must be noted that not everyone in America thought the term had lost its use value. Even the most “European” of writers, such as Edgar Allen Poe, for instance, wrote to J. E. Snodgrass on 1 April 1841:

I am temperate even to rigor. From the house in which I first saw this basest of calumniators to the hour which I retired from his office in uncontrollable disgust at his chicanery, arrogance, ignorance and brutality, nothing stronger than water ever passed my lips. It is, however,

due to candor that I inform you upon what foundation he has erected
his slanders (qtd. in Quinn 303).

That said, it is clear from Whitman's uses of "candour" above that he was aware of its history; it is therefore likely that his uses of a term discredited in the Old World were part of a concerted attempt to recuperate maligned and damaged idioms. When he describes the "freshness and candor" of the common people's physical aspect he means it, at least metaphorically, as "pure" and "innocent"; when he describes his method of writing—to simply take things as they are—he implies a beneficence that comes from truthfulness; when he says that great poets will be known by the absence of tricks he means it as honesty; when he associates it with beauty he means again something like purity; and when he says all faults will be forgiven of him who "has perfect candor", he appeals to his readers' benignity in a way that would have been familiar to eighteenth-century English satirists.

The rest of this chapter is an attempt to describe a number of ways in which Whitman's "Song of Myself" is a candid poem at the level of statement (what it says) and the level of utterance (how it is said).

NEUTRALITY

Insofar as the question of *judgment* is central to any historical understanding of candour, so it was for Whitman. Importantly, the candid poet will be forgiven for any faults arising from his candid utterances; at the same time he will, candidly, issue impartial judgments of his own. In the 1855 preface he states:

The great poet is the equable man [...] High up out of reach he stands, turning a concentrated light [...] His brain is the ultimate brain. He is no arguer . . . he is judgment. He judges not as the judge judges but as the sun falling around a helpless thing (*LG* [1855] v).

This passage has recently received attention from a number of commentators. Martha Nussbaum, in her article “Poets as Judges: Judicial Rhetoric and the Literary Imagination”, thinks it recommends a demeanour sensitive to the complexities of concrete particularity, but also that Whitman is describing a commitment to fairness that does not yield to bias or favour: his “confrontation with the particular, while intimate, is unswerving” (1480).

But is this image really authorising a “rich historical concreteness” at the expense of “quasi-scientific abstractness” (1480)? It reads almost like the opposite. Whitman probably wants it both ways. Nussbaum’s thesis might not be taking Whitman literally enough, insofar as she wants real judges (with certain obvious restrictions like statute and precedent) to judge more like Whitman does (1482), while Whitman is clearly advocating a continued, perhaps even more distinct, difference between them: “the poet judges *not* as the judge judges”. For one thing, the very fact that judges are constrained by precedent seems counterintuitive to Whitman’s aims, since he largely

wished to defy inherited rules. In the above-quoted excerpt from the preface he proposes to *replace evaluation with perception* which could, at one extreme, be read as an attempt to make phenomenological the process of judgment itself, so that by standing apart—being abstract—he can suspend having to say anything definite at all, at the same time as preserving a certain sense of marvel:

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,
 Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,
 Looks down, is erect, bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,
 Looks with its sidecurved head curious what will come next,
 Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it (LG
 [1855] 15).

Against Nussbaum's decidedly particularist readings, Wai Chee Dimock in *Residues of Justice: Law, Literature and Philosophy* thinks Whitman is not particular *enough*. As "both author and subject of his song", he makes a poem as much about the accumulation of detail as about the divestment of it; he "spins out an endless catalog of the self's many attachments only to distinguish the self from all those attachments" (114). She reads Whitman's assertion about poetic judgment as both a "democratic manifesto" and as a platform of "noncontingent poetics", and objects to Whitman's unconditional elimination of difference, or his "cosmic tenderness, without exception", so open it conflates the impartial with the impersonal (115) and makes all "equally indifferent" (123). Dimock objects to Whitman's penchant for representing other people in his poems as at once substitutable and interchangeable, thereby making "an ethics of preference" impossible. As such, he cannot access "that chaotic world of special loves and hates" (124). Whitman's "democratic poetics" (123) do invite some

serious questions about how an “open” poetic form can be used to structure experience in an ethical manner without itself actually codifying *an* ethics—that is, is an “open” poetic compromised by its own inability to chose *between* the people, places and things it selects for presentation, or is this inability in fact the intended outcome, and at what cost? How such generalisation necessarily translates into indifference is harder to assess. Granted, the reiteration of parallel syntax—

In vain the speeding or shyness,
 In vain the plutonic rocks send their old heat against my approach,
 In vain the mastodon retreats beneath its own powder'd bones,
 In vain objects stand leagues off and assume manifold shapes,
 In vain the ocean settling in hollows and the great monsters lying low,
 In vain the buzzard houses herself with the sky,
 In vain the snake slides through the creepers and logs,
 In vain the elk takes to the inner passes of the woods,
 In vain the razor-bill'd auk sails far north to Labrador (*LG* [1892] 54)

—does foreground a formal steadiness that at times seems more interested in securing the grammatical equivalences of its own structure than in the actual detail of those particulars. But the intensity of the enthusiasm for such syntactic accretions, however, undermines any criticism that wants to interpret it as signifying indifference only. It is precisely in the longer catalogues, where the details if not of experience then of composition are at their most insistent, that the possibility of even a structural indifference is most under interrogation. Put plainly, why iterate neatly such diversity out of indifference alone?

Most recently, in “The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman”, Jane Bennett reads Whitman’s “strangely open-armed, projective, impersonal, elemental judging” as characteristic of Whitman’s sensitivity for a “political ecology of things”. She is responsive to Whitman’s eschewal of the “morally-responsible agent and the priority it gives to the activity of rank-ordering”, especially when it creates an order with itself at the centre or top (n.p.). Though Whitman is commonly wary of anthropocentrism—as in his ideal of speaking “in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance [sic] of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees” (*LG* [1855] vi-vii)—this weariness is a (rhetorical?) way of arrogating the additional authority of Nature to himself, just as Whitman’s barbaric yawp, belched in response to being upbraided for his “gab and loitering” by a spotted hawk—itsself the lawless foil of Poe’s raven—speaks “with the authority of nature” (Davenport *Every Force* 152). Bennett is right to believe Whitman’s image *implies* a counter-cultural critique in which “truly good judgment can be at odds with the conventional criteria of goodness”, but I wonder if being merely *wary* of anthropocentrism is the same as actually avoiding it. Not to overstate the point, but it seems to me that when Whitman says that a poet “judges not as the judge judges, but as the sun falling”, he describes only tangentially a model for a new theory of law, or a philosophy or a political ecology; he is first and foremost describing a poetics that proposes to offer a special variety of judgment.

Whitman’s ideas about candid impartiality—concerning the benevolence, the innocence and the good-will inherent therein—were connected to his understanding of neutrality (*ne-uter*, neither-nor). His refusal to take sides in the Civil War is well-documented by biographers and points to a resilient and compassionate morality that was effectively blind to political contingencies beyond the immediate facts of individual suffering. A principled attempt to see all sides the same so as to see each person in the isolation their individuality requires results, at the very least, in a refusal to prioritise

difference without, to my mind, entirely abandoning what Dimock calls an “ethics of preference”. In an early draft version of “Song of Myself”, preserved in a notebook now housed at the Library of Congress, Whitman wrote:

I am the poet of the body
 And I am the poet of the soul
~~The~~ I go with the slaves of the earth ~~are mine and~~
~~The~~ equally with the masters ~~are equally [illegible]~~
 And I will stand between
 the masters and the slaves,
~~And I~~ Entering into both, ~~and~~
 so that both shall understand
 me alike.⁶

In the published version of the poem, preserved through all editions, Whitman reduces this passage to the more politically correct but certainly no less profound claim that “I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul” (*LG* [1892] 45).⁷ What is preserved from this draft version, even if Whitman finally declined to promote the

⁶ The notebook in question is known as “LC Notebook #80”. An electronic image of the passage in question can be viewed via the Library of Congress website: <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=whitman&fileName=wwhit080.data&recNum=69>. Here I follow Ed Folsom’s transcription: <http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/whitman/specres04.html>.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated in the parenthetical citation or in my introduction of a particular passage from Whitman’s poetic text, every time I quote from *Leaves of Grass* I am quoting from “Song of Myself”. While there are some significant differences between versions of this poem, I quote from the latest edition where subsequent changes to the original version of the text are either nonexistent, minimal or deemed by me not relevant to concerns local to the argument. When I quote from earlier versions I will give my reasons for doing so. All quotations from the 1855 *Leaves of Grass* giving Roman numerical page citations are from the preface.

particular dialectic of master and slave as one he was successfully able to mediate, is one of *the* defining characteristics of “Song of Myself”, namely, the insistent reference to and relation of oppositions:

I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,
 And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,
 And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men (*LG* [1892] 46).

Elsewhere, some lines earlier:

I am of old and young, of the foolish as much as the wise,
 Regardless of others, ever regardful of others,
 Maternal as well as paternal, a child as well as a man,
 Stuff'd with the stuff that is coarse and stuff'd with the stuff that is fine,
 One of the Nation of many nations (*LG* [1892] 42).

Familiar dichotomies—body-soul; master-slave; man-woman; old-young; foolish-wise—are all repeatedly presented together. And then some lines later, having made the following conspicuous, though common, claim for something like total representation, “I am not the poet of goodness only, I do not decline to be poet of wickedness also” (*LG* [1892] 47), he dismisses a tension between good and evil:

What blurt is this about virtue and vice?
 Evil propels me and reform of evil propels me, I stand indifferent,
 My gait is no fault-finder's or rejecter's gait,
 I moisten the roots of all that has grown (*LG* [1892] 47).

Adversarial structures of all kinds, be they emotional, social or metaphysical, are subsumed; this is a condition of Whitman's more capacious expression that requires attention from a number of difference angles. There are, firstly, some relevant precedents from intellectual history that shed some light on Whitman's particular attempt to candidly adjust what he claims is his wide "sympathy" into an expression of disinterestedness sufficiently open so as to be able to allow the kind of universal receptiveness to and understanding of *his* meanings. The assertion Whitman makes in the above-selected quotations is not that the conflicting parts of traditional oppositions will be reconciled by the poet, but that they are understood by *him* (though this may in itself be an important condition of their eventual reconciliation). One of those precedents is Hobbes's *Leviathan*; the other is Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.

As Samantha Frost succinctly puts it in her recent article "Faking it: Hobbes's Thinking-Bodies and the Ethics of Dissimulation", in *Leviathan* Hobbes sought to lay out "the conditions for the possibility of our mutual intelligibility" in the "pursuit of peace rather than truth" (32). Such cessation of all conflict, according to Hobbes, "should form the basis of our ethical and political thinking" (Frost 32). Frost is right to point out that, for Hobbes, participation in practices of reading, and being read in return, is a condition of political subjectivity. Hobbes writes of the artifice that is man:

there is a saying much usurped of late, that wisdom is acquired, not by reading of *Books*, but of *Men*. Consequently whereunto, those persons, that for the most part can give no other proof of being wise, take great delight to shew [sic] what they think they have read in men, by uncharitable censures of one another behind their backs. But there is another saying not of late understood, by which they might learn truly to

read one another, if they would take the pains; and that is, *Nosce teipsum*, *Read thyself*: which was not meant, as it is now used, to countenance either the barbarous state of men in power, towards their inferiors; or to encourage men of low degree, to a sawcie [sic] behaviour towards their betters; but to teach us, that for the similitude of the thoughts, and Passions of one man, to the thoughts, and Passions of another, whosoever looketh into himself, and considereth what he doth, when he does *think, opine, reason, hope, fear, &c.*, and upon what grounds; he shall thereby read and know, what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon the like occasions [...] [Y]et to do it without comparing them with our own, and distinguishing all circumstances, by which the case may come to be altered, is to decypher [sic] without a key, and be for the most part deceived, by too much trust, or by too much diffidence; as he that reads is himself a good or evil man (*Leviathan* 2).

Whitman's "Song of Myself" models a related but nuanced version of this. Whitman combines the two modes of reading—of others, and of oneself—by encouraging his readers to read one another *through* him—as, say, master and slave in the draft of "Song of Myself" are asked to. This is the basic structure of his address: Whitman speaks to everyone by speaking to each one in particular, so that the poet is the site of both intimate relationship and political community. In "So Long!", a poem placed at the end of the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass* and used as an envoi in every subsequent edition, Whitman writes the most famous of his apostrophes to the reader. The long lines that extend outward towards the margins are not only mimetic of the poet's own *longing*, but literally enlarge the circumstances of his legibility:

My songs cease—I abandon them,
 From behind the screen where I hid, I advance personally, solely to you.

Camerado! This is no book,
 Who touches this, touches a man,
 (Is it night? Are we here alone?)
 It is I you hold, and who holds you,
 I spring from the pages into your arms—decease calls me (*LG* [1867] 35).

Whitman's acts of making himself both available and legible are always going to be imaginative ones—that is, mediated by the medium of his expression. This was a constant and early concern for Whitman. An untitled 1855 poem, which eventually would come to be called “A Song For Occupations”, opens as follows (note the exaggerated caesura marked by the extended ellipsis):

Come closer to me,
 Push closer my lovers and take the best I possess,
 Yield closer and closer and give me the best you possess.

This is unfinished business with me . . . how is it with you?
 I was chilled with the cold types and cylinder and wet paper between us
 (*LG* [1855] 57).

Though in 1860 Whitman's estrangement from his audience seems to have been turned from longing into a more palpable pessimism and despair, the trope of poet-*as*-his-text had become established; in the poem that would later be called “Whoever you are

holding me now in hand” we find the expression of the idea that in reading *Leaves of Grass* what is really being read is Whitman himself: “And in libraries I lie as one dumb, a gawk, or unborn, dead” (*LG* [1892] 98).

Hobbes’s idea that a viable political community be predicated upon the conditions of the legibility of the men and women who comprise it, rather than upon literacy per se (that is, the reading of *books*), is also quite clearly a concern shared by Whitman and expressed in “Song of Myself”. An unambiguous statement of such is given as early as its second section:

Have you reckon’d a thousand acres much? have you reckon’d the earth
much?

Have you practis’d so long to learn to read?

Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?

Stop this day and night with me and you shall possess the origins of all
poems (*LG* [1892] 30).

Here Whitman is presenting “Song of Myself” as an exemplary instance of the very legibility it simultaneously recommends. What is being subtly mooted here is that the poem at hand models a personal legibility, i.e., Hobbes’s “key” to mutual understanding: it will be nothing but itself, and legibly so; it contains no ambiguities or sophisticated meanings that require long practice or special enterprise. It asks the reader of the poem, as Whitman asks the reader of the preface, to

re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book,
dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a

great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body The poet shall not spend his time in unneeded work (*LG* [1855] vi).

Frost thinks that for Hobbes a theory of ethics cannot address itself to “the question of whether there is a coincidence between one’s inner world and one’s behaviour and activities” considering the diversities of both (49). “The presentation of the self as disposed to peace—even if faked—is ethical if it contributes to the project of constituting an environment in which peace appears to be possible” so that the “ethical affectation of a peaceable disposition is a condition of political subjectivity” (Frost 49). Along similar lines Whitman writes in the 1855 preface: “of all mankind the great poet is the equable man”; “[h]e is the arbiter of the diverse and he is the key. He is the equalizer of his age and land” (*LG* [1855] iv).

The extent to which Alexis de Tocqueville seemed to predict Whitman’s “great poet” has been acknowledged by a number of critics.⁸ In terms of the impartiality latent in a candour like Whitman’s, Tocqueville’s comments on equality are of central importance. In a chapter called “Americans’ Aptitude for General Ideas”, we read:

⁸ Edward Dowden was among the first to note the striking correspondence between what Tocqueville says a democratic poet will be like and what Whitman says of himself. See Reino Virtanen’s “Tocqueville on a Democratic Literature”. *The French Review* 23.3 (January 1950): 214-22. F. O. Matthiessen touches briefly on Tocqueville’s predictions also. In *The American Renaissance*, he reads Tocqueville’s comments positively, saying “the democratic imagination bridged the void between single and universal by making specifics richly symbolic of the whole” (535). Though other critics have contended Tocqueville’s *Democracy* might not have been so prescient. Mary Austin, in *American Rhythm*, argues dismissively that “[a]nybody could have predicted the rise of new verse forms in America” (9). That much might be true; what is astonishing is the extent to which Tocqueville anticipated some particular innovations and attitudes like the almost aggressive dismissal of inherited forms (*DA* 546); a tendency to borrow heavily from a variety of other languages (*DA* 555); and bombast (*DA* 565).

The man dwelling in democracy [...] is aware of beings about him who are virtually similar; he cannot, therefore, think of any part of the human species without his thought expanding and widening to embrace the whole. Any truth which applies to him seems to apply equally and similarly to all his fellow citizens and those like him (*DA* 505).

The structural and thematic equalities of Whitman's poetry as a whole, and of "Song of Myself" in particular, are amongst its most salient characteristics. It is a function of many of the passages in "Song of Myself" to assert an equality as radical as the one Tocqueville identifies (in which the "I" *is* everyone). "I am", says Whitman:

One of the Nation of many nations, the smallest the same, and the
largest the same,
A Southerner as soon as a Northerner, a planter nonchalant and
hospitable down by the Oconee I live,
A Yankee bound my own way ready for trade, my joints the limberest
joints on earth and the sternest joints on earth,
A Kentuckian walking the vale of the Elkhorn in my deer-skin leggings,
a Louisianan or Georgian,
A boatman over lakes or bays or along coasts, a Hoosier, Badger,
Buckeye;
At home on Kanadian snow-shoes or up in the bush, or with fishermen
off Newfoundland,
At home in the fleet of ice-boats, sailing with the rest and tacking,
At home on the hills of Vermont or in the woods of Maine, or the
Texan ranch,

Comrade of Californians, comrade of free North-Westerners, (loving
their big proportions,)

Comrade of raftsmen and coalmen, comrade of all who shake hands and
welcome to drink and meat,

A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,

A novice beginning yet experient [sic] of myriads of seasons,

Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,

A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,

Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity (*LG* [1892] 42).⁹

The equality of Whitman's poetry, I mean to suggest, is a function of his neutrality. One cannot *be* equal by oneself; to foster the communication of equality requires a neutrality of disposition, especially since that neutrality is something that must perforce become expressive, which is to say that the oxymoronic *neutral commitment* to equality is a pretty self-contradictory practice in itself: for Whitman, "neither/nor" becomes "both/and",

⁹ Cf. Frank O'Hara's "In Memory of my Feelings": "Grace | to be born and live as variously as possible. The conception | of the masque barely suggests the sordid identifications. | I am a Hittite in love with a horse. I don't know what blood's | in me I feel like an African prince I am a girl walking downstairs | in a red pleated dress with heels I am a champion taking a fall | I am a jockey with a sprained ass-hole I am the light mist | in which a face appears | and it is another face of blonde I am a baboon eating a banana | I am a dictator looking at his wife I am a doctor eating a child | and the child's mother smiling I am a Chinaman climbing a mountain | I am a child smelling his father's underwear I am an Indian | sleeping on a scalp | and my pony is stamping in the birches, | and I've just caught site of the *Nina*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa Maria*. | What is this land so free?" (*Collected Poems* 256). O'Hara's lines speak directly not only to this passage of Whitman's, but equally to the second half of the thirty-third section of "Song of Myself", which contains lines like: "I am a free companion"; "My voice is the wife's voice"; "I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there" (*LG* [1892] 59); "I am the hounded slave"; "I am the mash'd fireman"; "I am an old artillerist"; and "I take part, I see and hear the whole" (*LG* [1892] 60).

and maybe even “either/or” just as the “diversity” he claims to be helpless to resist is in fact a condition of “sameness”. In another early draft, Whitman tries out the famous beginning of “Song of Myself” like this:

I am your voice—It was tied in you—In me it begins to talk.
 I celebrate myself to celebrate every man and woman alive;
 I loosen the tongue that was tied in them,
 It begins to talk out of my mouth (*Notes and Fragments* 36).

But as something expressive, neutrality already describes a contradictory condition. Normally understood, it connotes a certain inactivity or passivity. How then to account for not only the act of speaking neutrally, but for the poetic hyperactivity extant in such features as the repeated presentation of opposites; or the lengthy catalogues; or the continual apostrophes to the reader?¹⁰ Tocqueville, in part, provides an answer that has to do with a democrat’s unprecedented *enthusiasm* for equality:

Democratic nations are at all times fond of equality but during certain ages their *passion for it verges on excess* [...] Men pounce on equality as their spoils of war and cling on to it like a priceless possession which somebody is threatening to snatch away [...] Do not bother to show them that freedom is slipping through their fingers while their gaze is elsewhere; they are blind, or rather they can see only one advantage

¹⁰ For example, the phrase “whoever you are” occurs five times in 1855 *Leaves of Grass*, seventeen times in the 1856 edition and twenty-seven times in the 1860 edition. Not that statistics like this afford a very detailed account of the particular concerns of the poetry itself, but it is interesting to note that such appeals seem to increase directly in relation to the country’s slide towards civil war, indicating a progressively more frantic appeal to the camaraderie Whitman seemed to believe such apostrophes could create.

worth pursuing [...] [Democratic nations] have a *burning, insatiable, constant and invincible passion for equality*; they want equality in freedom and, if they cannot have it, they want it in slavery. They will endure poverty, subjection, barbarism but they will not endure aristocracy (*DA* 586-7; emphases added).

Roland Barthes has defined the neutral as “that which outplays [*déjoue*] the paradigm” (*Neutral* 6). For Barthes, and I think for Whitman, the neutral “remains structural”, by which he means that “the Neutral doesn’t refer to ‘impressions’ of greyness, of ‘neutrality’, of indifference. The Neutral—my Neutral—can refer to intense, strong, unprecedented states”; to “outplay the paradigm” he continues, “is an ardent, burning activity” (7). The neutral, furthermore, is “a manner—a free manner—to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time” (8); it operates according to a “principle of non-exhaustivity” (10); the neutral “is not about more intellectual sophistication” but is a “guide to life” (11); it sheds all planning and thematic grouping (11); the neutral is a suspension of conflict in a manner of speaking (13). Barthes is clear in his lectures—*The Neutral* consists of notes from his penultimate course delivered to the Collège de France between February and June 1978—that the “neutral” is not a word to be defined but a thing to be named, by which he means a way of thinking and of doing (6). Whitman frequently *claims* neutrality in view to establishing a text that embodies the equality he desires. For example, in section six of “Song of Myself”, having been asked by “a child” the question “*What is the grass*”—whose rhizomatic structure matches the anti-hierarchical discourse of neutrality Barthes is trying to describe—the speaker responds:

How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than
he.

I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of hopeful green stuff
woven.

Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,
A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,
Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may see and
remark, and say *Whose?*

Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.

Or I guess is it a uniform hieroglyphic,
And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,
Growing among black folks as among white,
Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same, I receive
the same.

And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves (*LG* [1892] 33).

In fact, even the poem's opening three lines claim some degree of general commonality if not actual identity or sameness, a reciprocity that has at least something to do with "creeds and schools in abeyance" (*LG* [1892] 29) so that "I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard". Those lines read:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
 And what I assume you shall assume,
 For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you (*LG* [1892] 29).

This opening stanza is itself quite a complex bundle of its own, and by no means transparently or unproblematically suggests a structural or even metaphysical balance between the “I” and the “you”.

Commenting in the introduction to the 1959 reissue of the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Malcolm Cowley argues that when the poem finally became, in 1881, titled “Song of Myself”, it was an act that seriously undermined the poem’s—and poet’s—original intentions. Cowley suggests that in 1881 “Myself” is “my [Whitman’s] personality”, though Whitman had originally been writing about a “not-myself”, a representative figure who, “by achieving union with his transpersonal soul, had realized the possibilities latent in every man and woman” (xxxii). He continues, lamenting the addition (also in 1881) of the three words “and sing myself” to the poem’s first line, by saying that what at first seems little more than Whitman’s attempt to balance the line in obedience to his “age-old habit of not saying in three words what might be said in six” (xxxiii) is in fact much worse: to “celebrate”, Cowley thinks, means to speak unconsciously, compulsively; whereas to “sing” in “Whitman’s jargon means ‘write songs about’” himself (xxxiii-xxiv). My own sense is that Cowley is right to notice the shift but not entirely right to argue that the “not-myself” was the *only* entity being mooted in the first edition. To read “Song of Myself” as compulsively “unconscious” outpouring is to misread it, as I argue in a discussion of *parrhêsia*, below.

For the moment, it is in passages from “Song of Myself” where Whitman is *not* explicitly saying anything to do with equality that his neutrality (and its prosodic

ramifications) might most beneficially be tested. The best places for doing this are the poem's two longer catalogues—sections fifteen and thirty-three.

THE CATALOGUES—1 (SECTION FIFTEEN)

I want to make it quite clear that Whitman's neutrality, as manifest in his poetry, is *candid* insofar as it not only habitually reserves judgment, but does so in view to being *favourable*.¹¹ This auspiciousness really is something exclusive to the poems. Without going so far as to propose some kind of absolute difference between Whitman's poetry and his prose, he is consistently loath to make criticisms of anybody in his poems.

Section nineteen from "Song of Myself" begins:

This is the meal equally set, this is the meat for natural hunger,
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous, I make appointments
with all,
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,
The kept-woman, sponger, thief, are hereby invited,
The heavy-lipp'd slave is invited, the venerealee is invited;
There shall be no difference between them and the rest (LG [1892] 43).

This persistent compulsion to express little but unconditional optimism elucidates one of Whitman's more interesting contradictions which will be addressed in various ways throughout the remainder of this chapter; namely, that as Whitman approaches a neutrality of disposition, the more his expressive ranges are constrained. In other words, as Whitman's candour increases, so too does the regulation of verse. All this happens in

¹¹ Such impartiality *plus* favourableness, as Empson saw to be significant of candour, is discernible even where Whitman goes out of his way to be fair. In the above-quoted passage, "I am the poet of the woman the same as the man" (LG [1892] 46), readers might have noticed that Whitman concludes by saying "there is nothing greater than the mother of men". I.e., men and woman are "the same", with the proviso that mothers are the best. That passage is certainly trying to favourably judge "mothers".

counter-distinction to Whitman's journalism. For example, in an 1856 prose pamphlet called *The Eighteenth Presidency!* written in despair at the various failures of Franklin Pierce (1853-1857), Whitman condemns swarms of "dough-faces", "kept-editors", "clerks", "attachés of officers", "blusterers", "braggarts" and other impudent and nuisance persons for threatening America with their cowardice, and then goes for the jugular with a polemical vehemence that anticipates Pound's so-called "Hell" cantos.¹²

"Every trustee of the people is a traitor"

looking only into his own gain, and to boost his party. The berths, the Presidency included, are bought, sold, electioneered for, prostituted, and filled with prostitutes [...] The perfect equality of slavery with freedom is flauntingly preached [...] The President eats dirt and excrement for his daily meals, likes it, and tries to force it on The States. The cushions of the Presidency are nothing but filth and blood. The pavements of Congress are also bloody (*CP* 1309-10).

In tone and intention this invective is markedly different from anything discoverable in the poems. Written in the same year (1856) as *The Eighteenth Presidency!* and, judging from the subject matter, concerned with many of the same issues, "Poem of Many in One" could hardly be more different:

O I see now that this America is only you and me,

¹² In Canto 14 Pound writes: "politicians [...], their wrists bound to | their ankles, | Standing bare bum, | Faces smeared on their rumps, | wide eye on flat buttock, | Bush hanging for beard, | Addressing the crowd through their arse-holes, | Addressing the multitude in the ooze, [...] Profiteers drinking blood sweetened with sh-t, | And behind them f and the financiers | lashing them with steel wires. | | And the betrayers of language" (C 14|61).

Its power, weapons, testimony, are you and me,
 Its roughs, beards, haughtiness, ruggedness, are you and me,
 Its ample geography, the sierras, the prairies, Mississippi, Huron,
 Colorado, Boston, Toronto, Raleigh, Nashville, Havana, are you
 and me,
 Its settlements, wars, the organic compact, peace, Washington, the
 Federal Constitution, are you and me,
 Its young men's manners, speech, dress, friendships, are you and me,
 Its crimes, lies, thefts, defections, slavery are you and me,
 Its Congress is you and me, the officers, capitols, armies, ships, are you
 and me,
 Its endless gestations of new States are you and me,
 Its inventions, science, schools, are you and me,
 Its deserts, forests, clearings, log-houses, hunters, are you and me,
 The perpetual arrivals of immigrants are you and me,
 Natural and artificial are you and me,
 Freedom, language, poems, employments, are you and me,
 Failures, successes, births, deaths, are you and me,
 Past, present, future, are only you and me (*LG* [1856] 198-9).

There are two things to notice about this passage of immediate concern. The first is that Whitman deleted from subsequent editions the line "[t]he perpetual arrivals of immigrants are you and me", a decision which was probably motivated by his growing contempt for "millions of ignorant foreigners" (*Prose Works* II 762), a contempt documented by David Reynolds in *Whitman's America: A Cultural Biography*. In an illuminating discussion of Whitman's journalism in the late 1840s, Reynolds traces in

some detail Whitman's "intense Americanism" that led him, in his journalism, to make a number of public and vitriolic attacks on immigrants using "racist, paranoid imagery" (Reynolds 99). Bemoaning a "coarse, unshaven and filthy Irish rabble" he asked: "shall the dregs of foreign filth—refuse of convents—scullions from Austrian monasteries—be permitted to dictate what Tammany must do?" (*Whitman of the New York Aurora* 67).¹³ Unable—for what seems as much like aesthetic as moral reasons—to criticise such newcomers in verse, he simply removes the line.¹⁴ But such criticism is not existent solely in the journalism. Even in the 1855 preface, a paratext that announces twelve poems of calculated beneficence, Whitman derides "all those of these states who"

could easier realize the true American character but do not yet—when
the swarms of cringers, suckers, doughfaces, lice of politics, planners of
sly involutions for their own preferment to city offices or state
legislatures or the judiciary or congress or the presidency, obtain a
response of love and natural deference from the people whether they get

¹³ In *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass*, Carroll C. Hollis asks "does journalistic prose become poetry by cutting it up into lines?" and then answers: yes and no. "The value of line arrangement is to remind us of other values in words beyond straight communication of ideas, which is the function of conventional prose" (231). It is a fair point; but it misses, as critics so far have in general, the way in which the poetry differs from the journalism in the nature, as well as the handling, of its content. It is a curious result of Whitman's prosaic innovations (such as they are) that they so often distract critics from the real differences between his poetry and his prose. It has seemed safe to assume, for instance, that since the poems are "prose-like", they will resemble the prose in other, more substantial ways as well. Often they do not.

¹⁴ The extent to which Whitman became worried about the actual social diversity he everywhere applauds in the poems is evident in a number of small but telling changes he made to the text of "Song of Myself". For instance, in 1881 he adds the following lines to the first section: "My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,
| Born here of parents born here from parents the same" (LG [1881] 29). And the famous passage that began, once the poem was divided into fifty-two sections, section 24—"Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (LG [1855] 29)—was changed in 1872 to "Walt Whitman am I, a kosmos, of mighty Manhattan the son" (LG [1872] 54), as though being "an American" really had become the brand of global identity he predicted, and somehow was therefore not native enough because of it.

the offices or no . . . when it is better to be a bound booby and rogue in office at a high salary than the poorest free mechanic or farmer with his hat unmoved from his head and firm eyes and a *candid* and generous heart [...] then only shall the instinct of liberty be discharged from that part of the earth (LG [1855] viii-ix; emphasis added).

The second thing to notice is the extent to which this “open” and all-encompassing poem is here characterised by a very strict—and strictly sustained—rhetorical figure, the epiphora “are you and me”. Its rigidity checks the diversity the poem is trying to describe, bringing each new vista or community or attribute of America into categorical and to some extent linguistic sameness, the exuberance of which is met and tamed by the inherent passivity of the verb “are”. The control, though passive, is ardent also; epiphora is amongst the most emphatic of figures since it occupies a privileged position in the line: an epiphora is literally the last the word(s) on the subject. In “Song of Myself”, the poem’s most conspicuous use of epiphora occurs in the twenty-fourth section, which Whitman begins by announcing the name of “myself” as “Walt Whitman, a kosmos, of Manhattan the son [...] No more modest than immodest” (LG [1892] 48), and then, some lines later, proceeds to speak “democratically”, distributively, in a very controlled and controlling way:

Translucent mould of me, it shall be you!
 Shaded ledges and rests it shall be you!
 Firm masculine colter [sic] it shall be you!
 Whatever goes to the tilth of me it shall be you!
 You my rich blood! your milky stream pale strippings of my life!
 Breast that presses against other breasts it shall be you!

My brain it shall be your occult convolutions!
 Root of wash'd sweet-flag! timorous pond-snipe! nest of guarded
 duplicate eggs! it shall be you!
 Mix'd tussled hay of head, beard, brawn, it shall be you!
 Trickling sap of maple, fibre of manly wheat, it shall be you!
 Sun so generous it shall be you!
 Vapors lighting and shading my face, it shall be you!
 You sweaty brooks and dews it shall be you!
 Winds whose soft-tickling genitals rub against me it shall be you!
 Broad muscular fields, branches of live-oak, loving lounge in my
 winding paths, it shall be you!
 Hands I have taken, face I have kiss'd, mortal I have ever touch'd, it
 shall be you (*LG* [1892] 49).

The distinct lack of any predication in this stanza other than the modal verb “shall” in the epistrophic phrase of “it shall be you” is exemplary of one of Whitman’s finest “tricks”. Its mantra-like repetition not only imbues the whole with a sense of inevitable futurity, but “shall” on its own expresses, at best, a strong assertion or intention; at worst, it sounds like it expresses an instruction or command.

The same strong determination that underwrites this passage from section twenty-four also underwrites the poem’s first long catalogue, even though the verb structure of the latter is remarkably different. In the latter, the verb tense is predominantly the simple present. Such a tense contributes to the overall neutrality of the catalogue—neutrality here, as in Barthes’s formulation, is being thought of as “intense, strong, unprecedented states” (7). The simple present tense, used with real consistency, admits neither prospect nor paradigm. From section fifteen:

The pure contralto sings in the organ loft,
 The carpenter dresses his plank, the tongue of his foreplane whistles its
 wild ascending lisp,
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their Thanksgiving
 dinner,
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,
 The mate stands braced in the whale-boat, lance and harpoon are ready,
 The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,
 The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd hands at the altar,
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the turn of the big wheel,
 The farmer stops by the bars as he walks on a First-day loafe and looks
 at the oats and rye,
 The lunatic is carried at last to the asylum a confirm'd case,
 (He will never sleep anymore as he did in the cot in his mother's bed-
 room;)
 The jour printer with gray head and gaunt jaws works at his case,
 He turns his quid of tobacco while his eyes blurr with the manuscript;
 The malform'd limbs are tied to the surgeon's table,
 What is removed drops horribly in a pail (*LG* [1892] 39).

Exceptions to the present simple tense include the use of the passive voice to describe the ordaining of deacons, the sectioning of insane persons and the tying of malformed limbs; it could be that something like a very subtle thesis is being part-proposed, given Whitman's antipathy for organised religion: that in their shared deviation from the predominant verb tense, deacons are like lunatics and malformed limbs and should be

taken away. It could, conversely, be a demonstration of close attention to the language, so that the actions of the “deacons”, from the Greek *diakonos*, meaning servant or waiting man, and the implied patient—literally he who endures or bears pain—are each described using a verb tense fitted to their conditions.¹⁵

In the emphatic state of the present tense, the figures enumerated in the catalogues are mutually suspended in their particular activities. Is this not, in some sense, the “suspension of conflict in a manner of speaking” that Barthes says is actualised in a neutral discourse?

If so, such neutrality is not without its consequences. David Simpson has argued (along similar lines to those Dimock does, as adumbrated above) that if Whitman is ambitiously seeking some high degree of inclusiveness, he is perforce led to ignore—or is unable to recognise—individual differences (“Destiny Made Manifest” 177). The further risk is that in not acknowledging distinctions, one cannot actually understand the people being described. The people who populate the poem, most concentrated in but not exclusive to the catalogues, Simpson argues, cannot interact: “the poetry presents them as a chain of successive signifiers next to each other but never interfering with each other” (“Destiny” 182). Simpson’s point is that Whitman’s language instrumentalises the people he depicts; Whitman cannot ultimately evade the charge that

¹⁵ These are, admittedly, not the only instances of passive voice in this catalogue. Such a tidiness of means would be antithetical to the poet attempting to get beyond such straightforwardness. In addition to the instances already mentioned, Whitman uses the passive voice to describe: a “Quadroon girl” sold at auction; a “Squaw” selling moccasins; a sign painter; a wife giving birth; a regatta spread on the bay (*LG* [1892] 40); a gathered crowd; and, perhaps most importantly, the President holding a cabinet meeting (*LG* [1892] 41). To use the passive tense so infrequently in the larger context of a sixty-eight-line catalogue, some of whose lines contain more than one verbal clause, still constitutes a fact about the verb-structure of the catalogue worth noticing. Furthermore, without derogation to those others being described, it is not exactly the auspicious company amongst whom a reader might expect her enthusiastic American bard to place the President.

he does this. To some extent the people mentioned in the catalogues *are* reduced to their functions. Also from section fifteen:

Seasons pursuing each other, the plougher ploughs, the mower mows,
and the winter-grain falls in the ground;

Off on the lakes the pike-fisher watches and waits by the hole in the
frozen surface,

The stumps stand thick round the clearing, the squatter strikes deep with
his axe,

Flatboatmen make fast towards dusk near the cotton-wood or pecan-
trees,

Coon-seekers go through the regions of the Red river (*LG* [1892] 41).

The question remains: is Whitman, in the catalogues of “Song of Myself”, actually attempting an inclusivity that must perforce disappoint those readers, like Dimock, with a hope for greater particularity, or like Simpson, with a hope for something more dramatic (assuming this is what he means when he laments a lack of interaction between the people of the poem). Inclusivity strikes me as a certified effect of the catalogues, so that in reading them I get the sense of a writer working according to some definite ideas about—to borrow a term Paul Ricoeur uses in *On Translation*—“linguistic hospitality” (23), a condition whose “predicament is that of a correspondence without complete adhesion” (Kearney xvi).¹⁶ But it remains possible to mistake the bold

¹⁶ Admittedly Ricoeur’s phrase pertains to translation, and he uses it as part of larger description of translation as a problem of hermeneutics. That said, Whitman is quite concerned with the question of “translation”, even if in his usage it denotes a problem do to with the more general task of simply getting his meaning across. From “Song of Myself”: “I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women” (*LG* [1892] 33); “The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me, |

desire for inclusivity as the total or final disposition of the verse. As Kerry C. Larson argues, the effect of the catalogue is one that is “at once radically open (the list is, conceivably, infinite) and radically closed (each line, imagistically speaking, is sufficient unto itself)” (*Drama of Consensus* 127). Larson continues to suggest that despite the notoriety of the catalogues for their innovation, “they carry with them an essentially conservative appeal in the sense of restraining the pressure of human demand” (129).

As it happens, there is not a single line in “Song of Myself” that is *not* end-stopped. With the run-on line available popularly since at least Milton, there must be a reason for this—which is to say Whitman was choosing the end-stopped line as a feature of his verse on purpose rather than through some blind adherence to a conventional norm. Addressing the question of inclusivity—which is now something of a commonplace if not a cliché in Whitman criticism—Quentin Anderson says that “it is mere grammatically pedantry to think of his catalogues as inclusive: at their brilliant best, they are successful efforts to meld things together, to make the sum of things ring with one note” (*Imperial Self* 95). Anderson is right about the first point. The catalogues, insofar as they present quite diverse and discrete descriptions of events and actions, suspended without the interaction Simpson rightly sees as missing, do little more than model what the sought-after inclusivity might be like.

Such modelling, though, remains in itself only one part of the function of the catalogue. As a manner of speaking (baldly, a form, a style, et cetera), Whitman’s catalogue presents “the struggles of its time” (*The Neutral* 8) without, as it were, having to spell out what those struggles are. Perhaps the best instance of this occurs about half-

The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate into a new tongue” (*LG* [1892] 45); “I swear I will never again mention love or death inside a house, | And swear I will never translate myself at all, only to him or her who privately stays with me in the open air” (*LG* [1892] 75). From the poem first published in 1855 and eventually called “Song of the Answerer”: “He resolves all tongues into his own and bestows it upon men, and any man translates, and any man translates himself also, | One part does not counteract another part, he is the joiner, he sees how they join” (*LG* [1892] 136).

way through section fifteen. In patently *not* melding things together, Whitman uses juxtaposition—which is an obviously common possibility given the structure of the verse in this section—to present a difference that is jarring. Amid some vignettes that seem rather randomly compiled, Whitman reports:

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on her tipsy and
pimpled neck,
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer and wink to each
other,
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths nor jeer you;)
The President holding a cabinet council is surrounded by the great
Secretaries (*LG* [1892] 41).

A number of critics have seized upon this particularly striking moment. Betsy Erkkila reads this passage as “undoing traditional hierarchies” (88). Stephen Cushman thinks the auditory likeness of “prostitute” and “President” elevates the former in order to condemn the latter, citing as he does so the above-quoted passage from *The Eighteenth Presidency!* as proof of that readjustment (38). Candour is the operative principle here: it permits the poet to treat different subjects independently while at the same time using that very independence to, with the seeming innocence of mere form, suggest an argument nonetheless.

In the two main catalogues of “Song of Myself”, both of which are (technically) complete sentences, the semi-colon is used to draw sharper distinctions between clauses than the more commonly-used comma, so that the difference between prostitute and President is underscored. And yet, even as the poet takes each as individually as the poem’s form permits, the comparison persists (it is actually facilitated by the

THE CATALOGUES—2 (SECTION THIRTY-THREE)

In the second of the great catalogues of “Song of Myself” the reëmergence of rhetorical figures indicates, *prima facie*, that the poet is trying hard to convince the reader of something. The section begins: “Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I guess’d at” (LG [1892] 55), and then, after a little more introductory boasting, the anaphoric recurrence of gerunds and prepositions sets to work creating prosodic momentum. There is a sense that grows directly out of the very relentlessness of this catalogue’s forward-thrusting gerundives (which I have italicised in the excerpt that follows for emphasis) and from Whitman’s grammatical suspension of eighty-one lines without resolution (each one itself a dependent clause) that he is again trying to outplay the paradigm, perhaps even that of his own neutrality:

By the city's quadrangular houses—in log huts, *camping* with lumbermen,
Along the ruts of the turnpike, along the dry gulch and rivulet bed,
Weeding my onion-patch or *hoeing* rows of carrots and parsnips, *crossing*
savannas, *trailing* in forests,
Prospecting, gold-*digging*, *girdling* the trees of a new purchase,
Scorch'd ankle-deep by the hot sand, *hauling* my boat down the shallow
river,
Where the panther walks to and fro on a limb overhead, where the buck
turns furiously at the hunter,
Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock, where the otter is
feeding on fish,
Where the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou,
Where the black bear is *searching* for roots or honey, where the beaver

pats the mud with his paddle-shaped tail;
 Over the *growing* sugar, over the yellow flower'd cotton plant, over the
 rice in its low moist field,
 Over the sharp-peak'd farm house, with its scallop'd scum and slender
 shoots from the gutters,
 Over the western persimmon, over the long leav'd corn, over the
 delicate blue-flower flax,
 Over the white and brown buckwheat, a hummer and buzzer there with
 the rest,
 Over the dusky green of the rye as it ripples and shades in the breeze;
Scaling mountains, *pulling* myself cautiously up, *holding* on by low
 scragged limbs,
Walking the path worn in the grass and beat through the leaves of the
 brush,
 Where the quail is *whistling* betwixt the woods and the wheat-lot,
 Where the bat flies in the Seventh-month eve, where the great gold-bug
 drops through the dark,
 Where the brook puts out of the roots of the old tree and flows to the
 meadow,
 Where cattle stand and shake away flies with tremulous *shuddering* of
 their hides,
 Where the cheese-cloth hangs in the kitchen, where andirons straddle
 the hearth-slab, where cobwebs fall from festoons in the rafters,
 Where the trip-hammers crash, where the press is *whirling* its cylinders,
 Where the human heart beats with the terrible throes under its ribs,
 Where the pear-shaped balloon is *floating* aloft, (*floating* in it myself and

looking composedly down) (LG [1892] 55-6).

The parenthetical aside in the final line of this excerpt restates the special status of the poet who looks down upon the scene (restating the metaphor of judging as the sun falls) in order to retell phenomenal wonders. Importantly, Whitman brackets out his person so as to indicate that these events have hitherto been observed somehow anonymously. His “look”, furthermore, is “composed” in an obvious pun that associates mere visual perception with writing (more on which promptly).

Up to this point in the catalogue no “I” corresponding to the “myself” has been offered (it does not occur until the final line of the catalogue). This itself is a deferral consistent with the procedure of suspending dependent grammatical clauses throughout, in which every line is, as it were, underwritten by the authority of the next. The intended general effect is one both of even-tempered perception *and* ecstatic vision. Justifying the latter, the prevalence of present participles suggest movement, while the absence of a definitive experiencing subject means that it has no stable vantage from which to gaze (ecstasy = *ex-* meaning “out” or “from” + *histanai*, “to place”). The “myself” does, admittedly, look down from the “pear-shaped balloon”, but seeing as this revelation is given in a parenthetical aside, the message is such that that detail seems inessential to the action overall which is governed almost entirely by the anaphoric repetition of prepositions—“By”; “Along”; “Where”; “Over”; “Under”; “Upon”; “At”; “Through”; “Far”; “Nigh”: a singular coherence is diminished by the accumulation of multiple perspectives. Towards the end of the catalogue, Whitman gives a final push, placing present participles at the head of lines where anaphoric prepositions had mostly been used. It ends:

Walking the old hills of Judea with the beautiful gentle God by my side,

Speeding through space, *speeding* through heaven and the stars,
Speeding amid seven satellites and the broad ring, and the diameter of
 eighty thousand miles,
Speeding with tail'd meteors, *throwing* fire-balls like the rest,
Carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother in its belly,
Storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning,
Backing and *filling, appearing* and *disappearing,*
 I tread day and night such roads (LG [1892] 58).¹⁷

The insistent manner of presentation—manifest as continual adjacency—coupled with diminished subjectivity of the speaker/poet, begins to naturalise the experience. What I mean is, as readers, we begin to become used to the format, and get carried along by it.

The catalogues are instances of an extreme form of Whitman's conviction that neutrality

¹⁷ In the latter part of this thirty-third section, technically not part of the catalogue, Whitman changes tactics, using a series of (relatively) short declarative sentences seemingly able to state clearly certain "facts". In the beginning the total abstraction of what he is saying works in stark contrast to the *way* he says it. As in: "I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul" (LG [1892] 58); or: "I help myself to material and immaterial" (LG [1892] 58). They soon settle into the more intelligible, though no less audacious, claims of transpersonal identity, some of which are cited in a previous footnote. Several critics have commented on the shifts in verb structures in Whitman's poems. Writing about the narrative retelling of the murder of "four hundred and twelve young men" in the following, thirty-fourth section (LG [1892] 61-2), Stephen Cushman remarks that "by manipulating syntax, Whitman manufactures the illusion of factual consciousness presenting a journalistic account" (*Fictions of Form* 20). For another important account of Whitman's journalistic style in verse, see Carroll C. Hollis's *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* (211-32); though I would stress that neither addresses the unique difference between the journalism proper, and a journalistic style (the latter being neutral). For an important study of Whitman's handling of verbs in general, see James Perrin Warren's "The 'Real Grammar': Deverbal Style in 'Song of Myself'", as well as Warren's *Walt Whitman's Language Experiment*. Jake Adam York offers an interesting account of how Whitman's oratorical-minded manipulation of verb tenses effects combinations of different temporal frames, saying this is "clearly [Whitman's] most obvious tactic borrowed from [Daniel] Webster's and [Edward] Everett's conjugational tricks. [In "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry"] Whitman shifts the future tense back into the present, and the present into the past" (*Architecture of Address* 51). For a facsimile of the full catalogue of section thirty-three, see Appendix one—figure 1.

is both a worthwhile position to hold *and* is an applicable compositional principle. If we are at any point convinced of anything in these catalogues, it is not of his zooming through stratospheres or of his really having seen or done any of the things he says at all, but *of* his persistent conviction *per se*. No single vignette could possibly matter in and of itself. Instead, it is their movement and accumulation that is crucial.

If his catalogues are candid, as I am claiming, they are so in precisely this way: in them, Whitman shows *himself* only in the perpetual abandonment of a judgmental subject position. D. H. Lawrence says something similar when he writes that Whitman communicates “through one continual ecstasy: the ecstasy of *giving himself*” (“Whitman” 47). This is an important point because it brings into focus two things. First, that Whitman’s neutrality is active (again underlining the conspicuous attribution of the passive voice almost completely to subservient persons). Notions of receptiveness or inclusivity inhere in “Song of Myself” because the poem makes us think these things about it. Second, the condition of no special vantage leads not only to new problems of form, but to a poetry that also perforce puts the condition of its own formation at the centre of its concerns, and ours. Lawrence Buell concludes, in his study of Whitman’s catalogue techniques, that, in the end, they are little more than “outpouring” (339). I cannot agree with this for reasons I give in the section entitled “Kinds of self-reference”, below. But his other conclusion, that reading the catalogues with a proper sense of abandonment adequate to them “does not mean the complete denial of the critical faculty, but only its suspension, for as long as it takes to get caught up, or at least to give the piece fair trial” (339), seems right on the mark. Whitman’s catalogues may not be particularly inclusive or receptive, but they do demand of their readers a degree of reciprocated candour.

Many if not most critics who attempt to say anything about Whitman normally have something to say about his catalogues. It is part of their curious and fascinating

condition that they remain at once taxing physical structures—that is, displays not only of authorial nerve but also, I think, tests of any reader’s capacity to stay attentive and, if she is reading them aloud, as she should, of her breath—as well as interesting conceptual propositions (having to do with democracy or sociality or whatever).

Edward Dowden, one of Whitman’s earliest and most enthusiastic critics, was first to argue that the catalogues were expressive of democratic ideals. He wrote in 1871: “each unit is as interesting as every other unit, and possesses equal claims to recognition” (“The Poetry of Democracy” 43). In “Whitman’s Catalogue Rhetoric” Mattie Swayne connects the grammatical style of the catalogues to other common instances in Whitman’s poetry (162-78). Though in one sense the catalogues are amongst his most obvious “patterns or ‘devices’”, by 1954 Stanley K. Coffman, Jr. could still claim that Whitman’s use of them was understudied. Working with the notion that Whitman is a much more formal poet than he initially seems, Coffman finds the catalogues of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” to be composed with all the careful organisation adequate to highly formal creation: they define, he argues, the real and objective status of the external world, “doing so within the framework of transcendental idealism” (“A Note on the Catalogue Technique” 232).

Other studies, such as Detlev W. Schumann’s “Enumerative Style and its Significance in Whitman, Rilke, Werfel” (1942) and Harry R. Warfel’s “Whitman’s Structural Principles in ‘Spontaneous Me’” also connect the catalogues to transcendentalism (1957). Roger Asselineau’s *The Evolution of Walt Whitman* (1962) argues that the catalogues are “spiritual exercises that he practiced in order to reach a state of grace” (102). In 1970, Gay Wilson Allen criticised the term “catalogue” insofar as it implies a gross kind of accumulation and not the sharper detail he observes in section fifteen of “Song of Myself”, where each “enumeration” (his term) is expressed as a single sentence—though joined to others by a comma or semi-colon (*Reader’s Guide*

177). John B. Mason wrote in 1973 that the catalogues “control the reader’s movement from the singular to the cosmic” (34), mixing transcendental platitudes with reader-response criticism. I broadly agree with Mason that Whitman’s catalogues are a lot more active than has been generally understood, though I find it hard to understand what is meant by his conclusion that the catalogues are “metaphors for processes which occur outside of time and space” (49). More recently (1992), Tenney Nathanson has written that “even Whitman’s catalogues have a performative dimension, and their sometimes unfortunate prolixity is thus a defect risked in the name of the linguistic values to which *Leaves of Grass* is committed: like ceremonial utterance, Whitman’s distended, iterative sentences may be intent on accumulating power over myriad creatures and objects they name rather than rendering any particular thing in precise detail” (*Whitman’s Presence* 17).

In the next section I want to isolate for discussion one particular iterative strategy in the catalogues that is at once conspicuous as part of the poem’s formal as well as conceptual organisations.

PARALLELISM REVISITED

As Tocqueville noted, democracies tend to prioritise equality over all else, and will tolerate even a loss of freedom in view to preserving structural balances. The question then is: in giving up himself for the sake of attempting a hitherto unprecedented expression of comprehensive identity—what Whitman calls in the 1855 preface the perfectly candid and “unintermitted” investigation of all men, women and things upon the earth—what freedom does Whitman forfeit in consequence? Whitman was, of course, adamant that he worked in what he called “new free forms” where the “cleanest expression is that which finds no sphere worthy of itself and makes one” (*LG* [1855] vii). Despite such declarations of autonomy from older or inherited forms, Whitman obviously failed to get clear of all of their various constraints; consequently, criticism has spent a lot of time inventing ways of describing, sorting and conceptualising his energetic eschewals (the present study included).

In *Walt Whitman* (1906), Bliss Perry argued Whitman wrote “prose-poems” using a sort of “ruined blank verse” (82), and that “the essential model [...] was the rhythmical pattern of the English Bible [in which Whitman] found a charter for the book he wished to write” (qtd. in *American Prosody* 221); John Erskine in “A Note on Whitman’s Prosody” (1923) suggests that Whitman’s apparently natural forms were in fact *only* apparent, and that his prosody merely *seems* wild because we have lost the sense of the line—the argument here being that Whitman, seeking to accommodate the modern reader’s laxity, merely lineates the poems as “we” would otherwise read more traditional verse: “Whitman’s originality is more of the eye than the ear” (336); in “The Fundamental Metrical Principle in Whitman’s Poetry” (1938), Sculley Bradley argues that Whitman’s most predominant form of rhythmical organisation is a sort of stanzaic

stress-pyramid, where the number of stresses per line gradually increases from the beginning until somewhere roughly mid-way through a given strophe before atrophying.

The analytic innovativeness of Bradley's study aside, it nevertheless attempts to show that a *balance of rhythmic patterning* is common to Whitman's verse; Bradley reminds his readers that the "reiterative parallelism of Whitman's logic" was first noticed in 1914 by de Selincourt (446); Walter Sutton, in "The Analysis of Free Verse Form" (1959), sees Whitman's versification as a concerted challenge to the efficacy of current critical tools and suggests that though "the form of a work can never be exactly defined", a "useful approximation may be achieved by critics if form is conceived in terms of interrelated levels of organisation for which the poem's verbal structure acts as an objective control" (254); taking a similarly more lenient, if sceptical line, Roger Mitchell in "A Prosody for Whitman?" (1969) thought that parallelism did not itself constitute a systematic prosody, and suggests a more conceptual rationale: that the fundamental goal is "the principle of unity in variety" (1610). For a while, in the 1950s and 1960s, those who cared to discuss Whitman seemed more readily able to take the poet's professed openness at face value.

Lately, critics have gone back to more technical analyses: Rosemary Gates suggested in "The Identity of American Free Verse" (1985) that delays in accurate descriptions of Whitman's prosody were caused by attempts to "impose on his poetry methods not applicable to his form" (248); elsewhere she offers a highly-specialised analysis of Whitman's phrasal prosody that deploys recent advances in linguistics, in view to arguing that "Whitman's sound structures were rooted in the language system itself, not the literary tradition" ("T. S. Eliot's Prosody and the Free Verse Tradition" 547); Annie Finch in *The Ghost of Meter* (1993) argues that Whitman tends to fall back upon the authority of the pentameter as a reassurance of the ego's power and autonomy (31-2); and finally, though by no means exhaustively, Stephen Cushman in *Fictions of*

Form in American Poetry (1993) suggests that Whitman's exhortations to subsequent fellow American poets to avoid formalism is merely one example of a fictionalised freedom from stock poetical touches (41).

Despite all the vast and very often excellent criticism of Whitman's poetry, the most important technical observation about Whitman's form was amongst the first to be made. Taking a cue from the early Whitman critic Bliss Perry, in 1935 Gay Wilson Allen made a concerted effort to outline a kind of "rhetorical rhythm" he called Whitman's "parallelism", a "main rhythmical principle in Biblical poetry" and "other primitive verse" (*American Prosody* xxxv). What he called "parallelism" was primarily a technical form. Asking what was new about Whitman's prosody, "we find only that it lacks conventional rhyme and meter" (217). Part of the misunderstanding of Whitman's free verse was caused by the poet himself: "it is always hard to figure when his critical words on the poetic art refer to prosody and when to the thought in his poems" because "he does not anywhere show a clear distinction between the thought and the manner of expressing it" (217).

The first thing to notice about Whitman's parallelism is that "the line is the rhythmical unit, each line balances its predecessor, completing and supplementing its meaning" (222).¹⁸ In other words, Allen recommends to his readers the notion that Whitman's parallelism is somehow closely related to his thinking. At the same time, he notes some earlier commentators, such as Jean Catel in his *Walt Whitman: la naissance du poète* (1929), who ascribe Whitman's rhythms to his early interests in oratory. Reiterative devices such as epanaphora (repetition of a word at the beginning of a line) and

¹⁸ Allen goes on to confirm Autrey Nell Wiley's 1929 study of *Leaves of Grass*, which finds that of 10,500 lines of verse, only twenty run on ("Reiterative Devices" 161 note 2). Lois Ware, in her equally forensic study, also made in 1929, finds that of the 10,376 lines in *Leaves of Grass*, only thirty-seven run on ("Poetic Conventions" 56). Of course results vary according to definition and edition used; suffice it to say that on the whole, run-on lines are rare in *Leaves of Grass*, and non-existent in "Song of Myself".

epanalepsis (medial or final reiteration) are commonplace not only in Whitman's poetry, but were themselves commonplace.¹⁹ There is no doubt that the use of these devices is prevalent in "Song of Myself". Such repetitions—and the restrictions on expression they apply—make organisational sense consistent with Whitman's neutrality. In candidly treating everyone and everything the same, he is obliged, through a dedication to "sameness", to treat various different things "the same". In other words, I offer this small adjustment: Whitman's parallelism might well be mimetic of political ideals in accordance with, say, what Betsy Erkkila calls Whitman's "grammatical utopianism" (*Political* 322); but it is also an expression of his candour. In treating his subjects candidly, he could not have addressed them otherwise.

As I want to argue in the next section, candour imposes restraints not only upon what the poet can say about his subject matter and how, but imposes some important restrictions upon what he can say about himself (and how): the responsibilities of candid expression include a denial of lyric interiority.

¹⁹ Numerous scholars, Allen included, have undertaken to set out the extent of Whitman's debt to rhetorical and oratorical techniques. Despite the broad agreement between critics *that* Whitman borrowed from such models, there is yet to be (and there is not likely to be) firm consensus as to what end or why. F. O. Matthiessen thinks that "though Whitman's lines are based on the parallelism familiar to orators and almost entirely avoid the run-on, they cease to be mechanical and take on an animation of 'interior gesture'. Such interior gestures may be the bridge by which Whitman passes from declamation to lyricism" (*American Renaissance* 557). Carroll C. Hollis in *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass* sees Whitman's oratorical and rhetorical techniques as trying to make the appeal to the reader more literal, i.e., not lyric at all, especially if lyric is taken to mean private speech that is overheard, as in J. S. Mill's famous definition (Mill 71): "the prophet poet's direct appeal to 'you' is the organising principle of 'Song of Myself'" (Hollis 63). For a detailed discussion of the specific cultural influence of oratory in mid nineteenth-century America, see David Reynolds's *Walt Whitman's America* (154-93).

KINDS OF SELF-REFERENCE

In eschewing an agency able to make judgments, Whitman surrenders the capacity to adjudicate in either an explicit or complex moral way.²⁰ He also avoids having to rehearse the roles of oppositional sociality implied in more sophisticated kinds of organised expression. This has moral as well as formal implications. As Allen Grossman has usefully noted, having done away with the abstract forms or metrical sets that previous poets used to assert the presence of a single individual resisting them, Whitman loses the singular individual altogether (“Poetics of Union” 189): the Whitman of “Song of Myself” is his own double. In an emphatic appropriation of what was by the time of writing an increasingly outmoded idea, namely that poets are divinely inspired, the 1855 preface offers a striking metaphor in which Whitman describes a “you” and a “me” standing together as they look into a mirror:

The greatest poet has less a marked style and is more the channel of thoughts and things without increase or diminution and is the free channel of himself. *He swears to his art, I will not be meddlesome*, I will not have in my writing any elegance or effect of originality to hang in the way between me and the rest like curtains. I will have nothing hang in

²⁰ To paraphrase a useful redefinition made by a colleague of mine: the crux of this is whether poetry is an arena for adjudication whatsoever, notwithstanding Whitman’s talk of ‘judgment’, ‘judges’ and the like. Can the expressive, performative and rhetorical freedoms of poetry (freedom in this case being freedom from consequence and from making things happen) open up space for the imaginative inhabiting of possible ethical worlds without being bound by the demands of legal justice, or politics for that matter? That is, an absolute difference between poetic and ethical and legal and political discourse must be maintained, despite some of Whitman’s declarations to what seems like the contrary, because if not, an equivalency of poetry, ethical instruction, legal norms and political action lead to the consequence of the rules and conventions of those other discursive practices, itself leading to a description of a ‘right’ way to write poetry, as in, say, Socialist Realism (Woods n.p.).

the way, not the richest curtains. What I tell I tell for precisely what it is. Let who may exalt or startle or fascinate or soothe. I will have purposes as health or heat or snow has and be as regardless of observation. What I experience or portray shall go from my composition without a shred of my composition. *You shall stand by my side and look in the mirror with me* (LG [1855] vii; emphases added).

Dennis Donoghue has identified in Whitman a tendency to equate being with value, itself an equation supporting the notion that literature thereafter need not seek anything supplementary to the putatively natural movements of speech²¹ (*Connoisseurs* 35). Such an equation is being mooted here, as in this passage Whitman promises “no agent or medium and offer[s] no representation of value—but offer[s] the value itself” (LG [1855] 59). This makes the poet, as Roy Harvey Pearce has claimed, himself “the sole means of testing his authority” (*Continuity* 172). Such a condition is not a purely authoritarian act; Whitman takes this self-reflexivity rather literally. It is, for instance, the source of what he himself identified as his innate contradictoriness.

In this one important passage, Whitman provides a connection between the two modes of candour Empson himself found so contradictory: one the one hand, Whitman promises to proceed without the intrusion of judgment. He will allow nothing to interfere with his expressions, so that without intermediation there will be no difference;

²¹ “The quality of BEING, in the object’s self, according to its own central idea and purpose, and of growing therefrom and thereto—not criticism by other standards, and adjustments thereto—is the lesson of Nature. True, the full man wisely gathers, culls, absorbs; but if, engaged disproportionately in that, he slights or overlays the precious idiocracy [sic] and special nativity and intention that he is, the man’s self, the main thing, is a failure, however wide his general cultivation. Thus, in our times, refinement and delicatessen are not only attended to sufficiently, but threaten to eat us up, like a cancer [...] Negative qualities, even deficiencies, would be a relief” (Whitman “Democratic Vistas” *Complete Prose Works* 230).

he will have, in other words, an impartial if not favourable disposition (impartiality is inherently favourable because it finds *everything* good, or at least *not* bad). And at the same time, the newly proposed poetry will be “frank, open, ingenuous, straight-forward; sincere in what one says” (*SCW* 308). The promise Whitman makes is literally of an apocalyptic (from *apo-* “un-“ + *kaluptein* “to cover”) expression, a revelatory utterance that removes rather than erects obstructions, be they the elegances either of veils or of rime schemes. Despite the considerable amount of scholarship on Whitman’s relation to the Bible, no critic has yet surmised that this passage from the 1855 preface is quite obviously an updating of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians:

Seeing then that we have such hope, we use great plainness of speech:
And not as Moses, *which* put a veil over his face, that the children of
Israel could not steadfastly look to the end of that which is abolished;
But their minds were blinded: for until this day remaineth the same veil
untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which *veil* is done away
in Christ. But even unto this day, when Moses is read, the veil is upon
their heart. Nevertheless, when it shall turn to the Lord, the veil is taken
away. Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*,
there *is* liberty. But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass, the
glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory,
even as by the Spirit of the Lord (2nd Corinthians 3:12-18 *The Holy Bible*;
original emphases 893-4).²²

There is much in “Song of Myself” to suggest Whitman saw his role (or, the role of the speaker of that poem) as a prophetic one. The word “celebrate”, as in “I celebrate

²² Thanks are due to Ben Dawson for bringing this passage to my attention.

myself', denotes a rite or religious ceremony as much as the marking of some happy event. As Michael Sowder notes, the main sense of the Hebrew word translated into English as "prophet" means one whose mind bubbles up and pours forth as a fountain, from inner, divine spontaneities, revealing God (*Whitman's Ecstatic Union* 5). Whitman asserts his own authority as an inspired poet by describing himself as a conduit (the egalitarian streak importantly remains intact):

Through me the afflatus surging and surging, through me the current
and index.

I speak the pass-word primeval, I give the sign of democracy,
By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of
on the same terms.

Through me the many long dumb voices,
Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
Voices of the disease'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs,
Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
And of the threads that connect the stars, and of wombs and of the
father-stuff,
And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
Of the deform'd, trivial, flat, foolish, despised,
Fog in the air, beetles rolling balls of dung.

Through me the forbidden voices,
Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil,

Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd.

I do not press my fingers across my mouth,

I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart,

Copulation is no more rank to me than death is (*LG* [1892] 48).

That the “you” and the “me” who stand in the mirror refer to the reader and Whitman respectively is, to my mind, far from settled (actually I think in this specific instance it is unlikely). Notice, for instance, that it is to his *art*, and not to his audience, that Whitman swears an oath of non-interference. It is entirely feasible that the “you” being addressed is in fact his poetry. Similarly, the “you” in “And what I assume you shall assume” might not in fact be *you*, dear reader, but, again, the poem. The passage quoted above from Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians—and Whitman’s reworking of it—substantiates this claim.

The phrase “great plainness of speech” is a translation of the Greek word *parrhêsia*. The term not only has a considerable importance for Christian thought, but as Judith Butler shows in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, is also importantly related to *autopoiesis*, or what she calls “self-making operations”. In this book she argues that to engage in autopoietic “self-stylization” is to “engage in an aesthetics of the self that maintains a critical relation to existing norms” (17). Butler mentions it in relation to Foucault’s 1983 Berkeley seminar series “Discourse and Truth”, later published as *Fearless Speech*, in which he discusses some characteristics of philosophical *parrhêsia*. The term *parrhêsia* means literally “to say everything”, from *pan-* (everything) + *-rhema* (to say), and is usually referred to in English as “free” speech. The *OED* defines *parrhêsia* as “candour, frankness; outspokenness or boldness of speech. Also: the act or practice of asking forgiveness in advance for speaking in this way” (*OED Online*). A *parrhesiastes* is someone

who does not hide anything, but “opens completely his inner thoughts and feelings to others through discourse” (Foucault 12):

in *parrhêsia*, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that an audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The word *parrhêsia*, then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says (Foucault 12).

There is one objection to be immediately countenanced: that *parrhêsia* is not something which verse—as artifice by definition—can easily (or, perhaps ever) accommodate. That is, *parrhêsia* as it is defined here sounds something like mere *outpouring* rather than the craft proper to the composition of verse. By way of response, I would point out that Foucault makes an early distinction between two types of *parrhêsia*. There is on the one hand the “pejorative sense of the word not very far from ‘chattering’, which consists of saying any- or everything one has in mind *without qualification*” (13). This sense has the characterisation of a bad democratic constitution where “everyone has the right to address his fellow citizens and to tell them anything”, including stupid or dangerous things (Foucault 13). In avoidance of this, Whitman makes a distinction in the 1855 preface, claiming a sort of privilege for himself as the “greatest poet”, one who speaks *of* and *for* the common people, but not *as* they do:

The greatest poet hardly knows pettiness or triviality. If he breathes into any thing that was before thought small it dilates with the grandeur and life of the universe. He is a seer . . . he is individual . . . he is complete in himself . . . the others are as good as he, only he sees it and they do not. He is not one of the chorus (*LG* [1855] v).

true; he is sincere in his opinion because his opinion is also the truth; “he says what he knows is true” (14). As in the conclusion to the fifth section of “Song of Myself”:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge that pass
all the argument of the earth,
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,
And that the all the men ever born are also my brothers, and the women
my sisters and lovers,
And that the kelson [sic] of the creation is love,
And limitless are the leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs on the worm fence, heap’d stones, elder, mullein and
poke-weed (LG [1892] 32-3).

These are some pretty extraordinary things to know. Rather than debate them, I want to address the nature (i.e., the function and structure) of the claim as such. The main point to take away from the comparison with *parrhêsia* is a kind of boldness of speech; the proof of the sincerity of the *parrhesiastes* (the user of *parrhêsia*) is in his courage; and that as a practice, *parrhêsia* entails the foregrounding of the relation between the speaker, on the one hand, and what he says, on the other. A practice such as the latter is what Foucault would describe as a form of self-knowledge: “[t]he circle implied in knowing the truth about oneself in order to know the truth is characteristic of *parrhesiastic* practices since the Fourth Century” (Foucault 107).

In the same way, Whitman’s incessant self-commentary is neither a concept nor a theme but a practice, a “technique of persuasive discourse”, in which his own “moral

subjectivity” is rooted; more precisely, for Whitman as for Foucault after him, “the decisive criterion” of *parrhêsia* is not to be found in birth, or citizenship, or intellectual competence, but in discovering the relationship between a speaker’s *logos* and his *bios* (Foucault 106). I can think of three distinct ways in which it is Whitman’s clear intention to foreground the coincidence of his *logos* and his *bios*. The first is in the relation between the prefaces and the poems; the second consists in moments where the poems auto-referentially discuss the conditions and meanings of their own statements. These are discussed in the rest of this section. The third coincidence of *logos* and *bios* is a coincidence that occurs prosodically, and is discussed in the following section.

It is amongst Whitman’s most persistent *critical* manoeuvres to suggest an identity between his poems and his person. The postscript to the “death-bed” edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1892), a paratext called “A Backward Glance O’er Travel’d Roads”, begins with Whitman describing himself and *Leaves of Grass*—“I and my book”—“gossiping in the early candle-light” of their mutual old age (LG [1892] 425). Speaking of his poems, he says he is “curious to review them in light of their own [...] intentions”, thereby affording them a kind of autonomous agency. Towards the end of the piece he writes that *Leaves of Grass*, through all its permutations, had never been anything but “an attempt, from first to last, to put *a Person*, a human being (myself, in the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, in America,) freely, fully and truly on record” (LG [1892] 438). But with a proleptic salvo not untypical of any candid self-defence, Whitman then insists: “no one will get at my verses who insists upon viewing them as a literary performance, or attempt at such performance, or as aiming mainly toward art or aestheticism” (LG [1892] 438). His poems (Whitman claims) are no more performative than his real life is. Poet and poems stand together, mutually reflected.

As it happens, it was something of a ritual for Whitman to write about his poems on his birthday. In “Preface, 1876”—itself issued with an edition in celebration

of the centenary of America's birth (even the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* was published on the *fourth* of July, 1855)—Whitman confesses: “As I write these lines, May 31, 1875, it is again early summer—again my birthday” (*CP&CP* 1007). Similarly, in “Preface, 1872” Whitman “concludes this preface [...] pencil'd in the open air, on my fifty-third birth-day” (*CP&CP* 1005). Though the greatly expanded 1856 edition of *Leaves of Grass* contains no preface, it does contain a long postscript called “Letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson” (*LG* [1856] 346-58), so keeping the trend of writing paratext alive. This edition, furthermore, contains the poem called “Poem of Many In One” (later, in 1892, renamed “By Blue Ontario's Shore”), in which Whitman simply relined large sections of the 1855 preface. A more literal coincidence between poetry and what the prefatorial prose predicted the poetry would say could not be imagined:

Responding their manners, speech, dress, friendships—the gait they
 have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the
 presence of superiors,
 The freshness and candor of their physiognomy, the copiousness and
 decision of their phrenology,
 The picturesque looseness of their carriage, their deathless attachment to
 freedom, their fierceness when wronged,
 The fluency of their speech (*LG* [1856] 186).

Here the distinction between the poet as historical personage and the poet as persona or speaker of his poem is merged in the most emphatic way. Though neither time nor space permits a fuller presentation of examples, Whitman's prefaces are filled with explanations of what he was trying to achieve, and how and why. This is the usual purpose of a preface. Gérard Genette writes of what he calls the “original preface” (one

written by the same person who also authors the text he introduces): “its chief function is to *ensure that the text is read properly*” (*Paratexts* 197; original emphasis). It is the purpose of Whitman’s prefaces to create a sympathetic (read: candid) audience, as well. In these pieces he speaks of the vicious reviews of his writings (*CP&CP* 657)²³ even as he says he merely attempts to write poetry worthy of the “grand and eclectic nationality” that is its subject (*CP&CP* 1003). The preacherly affectation of tone in these prefaces is not without important precedents of its own. Just as Whitman ends the 1872 preface by “wafting to you, dear reader, whoever you are [...] my true good-will and love” (*CP&CP* 1005), i.e., by encouraging a friendly response from the reader, so too had Cambridge Platonist Benjamin Whichcote, in the late seventeenth century, recommended God’s readers hospitably receive *His* scripture:

God expects that the reader of scripture should be of an ingenuous spirit; and use candor, and not lie at the catch: for the scripture is to be read as a man would read a letter from a friend; in which he doth only look after what was his friend’s mind and meaning; not what he can put upon the words (*Works* 245).

The second way Whitman foregrounds the relation between his poem and his person is by explicitly saying something about his poetics *in* the text of the poem itself. This reflexivity consists in a *parrhesiastic* self-exposure by telling the reader about the details of the poem’s formal construction. This inclusion of poetic theory inside the

²³ Rufus W. Griswold’s review *Leaves of Grass* in the 10 November 1855 number of *The Criterion* is as hilarious as it is hostile: “we have only to remark, that [LG] strongly fortifies the doctrines of the Metempsychosists, for it is impossible to imagine how any man’s fancy could have conceived such a mass of stupid filth, unless he were possessed of the soul of a sentimental donkey that had died of disappointed love. This *poet* (?) without wit, but with a certain vagrant wildness, just serves to show the energy which natural imbecility is occasionally capable of under strong excitement” (24).

poem is a kind of self-proving. One of the ways this is handled in “Song of Myself” is in openly telling the reader about shortcomings of the poem *in the poem*. Curiously, this is the only common form of chastisement in Whitman’s poetry. Far from a polite petitioning of the reader’s favourable judgment so that she will excuse in advance whatever styles she finds infelicitous or content she finds transgressive, in the twenty-fifth section of “Song of Myself” Whitman writes:

Dazzling and tremendous how quick the sun-rise would kill me,
If I could not now and always send sun-rise out of me.

We also ascend dazzling and tremendous as the sun,
We found our own O my soul in the calm and cool of the daybreak.

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach,
With the twirl of my tongue I encompass worlds and volumes of worlds.

Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,
It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,
Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?

Come now I will not be tantalized, you conceive too much of
articulation,
Do you not know O speech how the buds beneath you are folded?
Waiting in gloom, protected by frost,
The dirt receding before my prophetic screams,
I underlying causes to balance them at last,

My knowledge my live parts, it keeping tally with the meaning of all
 things,
 Happiness, (which whoever hears me let him or her set out in search of
 this day.)

My final merit I refuse you, I refuse putting from me what I really
 am,
 Encompass worlds, but never try to encompass me,
 I crowd your sleekest and best by simply looking toward you.

Writing and talk do not prove me,
 I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,
 With the hush of my lips I wholly confound the skeptic (*LG* [1892] 50).

Mark Bauerlein reads such lines as exemplifying a sort of proto-deconstructionist anxiety over language expressed by a poet alert to the dangers, but ultimately unable to escape the finger-trap, of untenable self-referentiality. There are, for instance, other passages in other poems that would seem to support such a reading. An 1856 poem called “Poem of the Sayers of the Words of the Earth” provides one example:

When I undertake to tell the best I find I cannot,
 My tongue is ineffectual on its pivots,
 My breath will not be obedient to its organs,
 I become a dumb man (*LG* [1856] 330).

Bauerlein notes that if one reads Whitman's poems as instances of unmediated emotion, this "leaves the critic with little else to say" as though purity of affect leads to a paucity of response. In this model, Whitman's "candid emotion requires no interpretation; it just is. Beyond signification, it does not mean: it does" (18).

I myself more readily side with Jeffrey Walker's assessment of Bauerlein's study, especially when Walker wonders, contrary to Bauerlein's thesis, if Whitman was in fact *not* trying to overcome language with language, but instead used Orphic self-representation as "a pose, a rhetorical tactic in service of the ethical, social and political ideals he wanted to promote" (300). Whitman himself, however, occasionally did say things that support Bauerlein's reading. He told Horace Traubel:

language *as* language, I have discounted—would have rejected altogether but that it serves the purpose of *vehicle*, is a necessity—our mode of communication. But my aim has been, to subordinate that, no one could know it existed—as in a fine plate glass one sees the objects beyond and does not realise the glass between (*WWC* v.6 386).

But such a passage is as legible as a continuation of the campaign of candid self-criticism as it is a fact simply to be taken as true. What Bauerlein reads as the "unmediated emotion" of self-reprisal—even though the blame is slyly shifted away from his own skill and made a problem inherent to the medium—is its opposite. The self-criticism is not unmediated expression but *mediated expression*: there is a disparity between what Whitman says and what he does (the gap opens the conceptual space interposed between *logos* and *bios* so that its connection can be all the more forcefully claimed). What Whitman *says* confesses an inadequate linguistic power; what Whitman *does* is use candid self-criticism to very strong effect. No critic, after all, would contradict

Whitman and suggest he is lying, that he actually knows “what [he] really [is]”. The pivotal moment in section twenty-five comes towards the end when Whitman writes that “with the hush of my lips I wholly confound the critic”. Surely the opposite is in fact the case and cannot be taken literally.

It is amazing, though, the extent to which critics have abided by Whitman’s candid appeals (explicit or otherwise). For a long time they have seemed to shy away from distinguishing between what Whitman says he is doing and what he does. While the reasons for their failing to do so vary, a candid critical leniency persists across every epoch of criticism, a leniency that starts to look a lot like some critical determination to “take Whitman’s word for it”. Charles Eliot Norton, intrigued by Whitman’s crassness, and by no means convinced of his poetic excellence, reviewed the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* by saying, after offering some preliminary objections, “but it is only fair to let him state his theory for himself” (321), at which point the review becomes little more than a series of uninterrupted extracts from *Leaves of Grass*. R. W. B. Lewis in *The American Adam* transplanted Whitman’s descriptive vocabulary into his own critical one. “If we want a profile of him”, Lewis writes, “we could start with the adjectives Whitman supplies” (47). Randall Jarrell goes further to borrow entire arguments *about* the verse directly *from* it. In his article “Some Lines from Whitman”, he states that “to show Whitman for what he is one does not need to praise or explain or argue, one needs simply to quote” (103). Roy Harvey Pearce in *The Continuity of American Poetry* suggests that Whitman’s “power of naming, describing and collocating is such that a reader cannot help but be overwhelmingly, even *uncritically*, aware of the single ego” (167; emphasis added). Jorge Luis Borges came closest to outlining this circumstance of criticism when he complained, “almost everything that has been written about Whitman is falsified by two persistent errors. One is the summary identification of Whitman, the man of letters, with Whitman, the semi-divine hero of *Leaves of Grass* [...] The other is

the senseless adoption of style and vocabulary of his poems by those who write about him, that is to say, the adoption of the same surprising phenomena one wishes to explain” (“Note” 144). And yet even Borges’s reading concludes by imagining Whitman’s desire to identify himself with his future readers to be an adequate sign of that achievement: “And it was thus that he became the eternal Whitman” (147). Mark Bauerlein is rightly alert to the dangers inherent in taking such a position—one whose naivety might rival the one Whitman ostensibly adopts—and yet fails, if somewhat paradoxically, to heed his own warnings. So, the question remains, why is Whitman so categorically believed?

COURAGE IN VERSE

Candour is the technique of anti- or no-technique: candour is a technique of histrionic expression in which the speaker makes an avowal of failure in order to pre-empt critical objection and so force a kind of unity between what he says and what he means. For a critic to say that, for example, section twenty-five is unbelievable in terms of its content would result in a rather meek attack on obvious hyperbole *and* force her to admit that Whitman is in fact more effectual than he makes out. Candour, the *parrhesiastic* mode of literary expression I am trying to describe it as here, remains “a ‘figure’ among rhetorical figures, but with this characteristic: that it is without any figure since it is completely natural” (*Fearless Speech* 21). This is Whitman’s candour manifest not as the “cheap American optimism” it so often seems but as an outlandishness that is an “outrageous wager of faith” (Sheppard 197). Our belief happens *in spite of*, rather than *because of*, grounds for verifying anything that he says. Such brinkmanship aims to replace demonstrable knowledge with assertions of belief.

In these first two relations of Whitman’s writing and his life—paratext-poetry; and self-criticism in the poems—the coincidence cannot escape the theoretical conditions of its assertion, by which I mean simply that their relations are hypothetical, or, merely the assertions of an identity between Whitman’s saying what he does and some kind of demonstration of that. In this section I want to try to define a particular kind of poetic “courage” of “Song of Myself”. Its principal function is to push the refusal of judgment that is inherent in candour beyond its mere assertion. That is, it consists in more than a statement in verse blatantly about refusing to make distinctions between classes of things or hating social hierarchy or treating everyone “the same”. That is, it is not any kind of announcement, or pledge, or allegiance; or evidence; and especially not testimony; it is a kind of activity of proof.

discreet implication is that Whitman has enjoyed some kind of sexual union with God. Worse, upon waking, Whitman finds God has departed (maybe to get an early start at work), but has also put out some fresh towels for the poet's morning routine. In the version of the poem in the following edition in 1856, Whitman wrote instead: "As the hugging and loving Bed-fellow sleeps at my side through the night, and withdraws at the peep of day" (*LG* [1856] 9); though Whitman clearly retains an oblique reference to the divine nature of the partner in the capitalisation of "Bed-fellow", it seems the more overt reference to God was something better left implied than stated directly.

Later on the same page of the 1855 edition, Whitman addresses his soul with the couplet: "I believe in you my soul the other I am must not abase itself to you, | and you must not be abased to the other". And then wrote:

Loafe with me on the grass loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhyme I want not custom or lecture, not
even the best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and turned gently upon me,
And parted the shirt from my breast-bone, and plunged your tongue to
my barestript heart,
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet (*LG*
[1855] 15).

While it is by no means certain, given the deictic shifts in "I" and "you" throughout the poem, it nevertheless might be reasonably supposed that a) another sex act is being

described here; and b) that it is between the soul and the “other I am” which “must not abase” itself to the soul, i.e., the body. If this is a viable implication of the passage, as I think it surely is, then something really interesting can be said to happen here: either Whitman is making a crass observation about the separation of body and soul—where the very crassness of its affront to decorum is used to demonstrate the crassness of the distinction it offends; or he does not mean “I” and “you” to refer to body and soul at all and so, by not carefully enough discriminating the references, says something that can be read as just plain silly.²⁴

It is an important element of Whitman’s courage that his poetry risks bathetic statement. Such passages approach candour in its modern sense, of speaking frankly, openly and ingenuously as a means of “telling the truth against yourself” *and* a way of “exposing people to their faces” (*SCW* 309) by saying things that either expose their prejudices or openly accuse them of sin (as in “Sun-Down Poem”). Such are the risks of keeping as “delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart” (*LG* [1892] 48). These passages are courageous as much for *what* they say as for the fact *that* they are said. I admit this is a distinction whose very fineness risks meaning little at all; but what I mean is they are (potentially) crass or silly or both; saying them, the act of saying them, takes courage, and is a function of candour. Such candour pushes towards a “loopiness and a daftness that cuts off any retreat back towards intelligence” (Nicholls

²⁴ Other poems risk bathos too. Perhaps foremost amongst them is “Song of the Broad-Axe”, which begins: “Weapon shapely, naked, wan, | Head from the mother’s bowels drawn, | Wooded flesh and metal bone, limb only one and lip only one” (*LG* [1892] 148). The shapely weapon drawing out from the mother’s bowels covers pederasty and incest in three lines. It is a crudity which jars badly against the sophisticated prosody of the lines, where the short but heavily syncopated four-beat and riming opening two lines clash harshly with the longer, rhythmically dissipated third line. Elsewhere, in the first version of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”, in 1856 called “Sun-Down Poem”, Whitman implicates the reader in his sins—Allen Ginsberg has described such moves as attempts to “universalize his claims in order to get what he wants” (n.p.)—saying that he used to be like “you”: a “solitary committer” (*LG* [1856] 217). For an interesting recent discussion of Whitman, masturbation and capitalism, see Andrew Lawson’s *Walt Whitman and the Class Struggle* (17-20).

“Conversation” n.p.). Whitman’s anti-gentility is connected to his trying to get free from the proscriptive burdens of conventional poetic techniques: “I sound my barbaric yawp” (*LG* [1892] 78) being a mere commentary on that situation. Whitman is obliged to risk this naivety of statement, so that to defy the codes of decorum is also somehow to transgress the conventions of poetic composition they enforce. In sum, to become something like an idiot (as in, *Candide*): “I talk wildly, I have lost my wits” (*LG* [1892] 52) is the hallmark of the great poet so described. As such:

[t]he art of art, the glory of expression and the sunshine of the light of letters is simplicity. Nothing is better than simplicity . . . nothing can make up for excess or for the lack of definiteness. To carry on the heave of impulse and pierce intellectual depths and give all subjects their articulations are powers neither common nor very uncommon. But to speak in literature with the perfect rectitude and insouciance [sic] of the movements of animals and the unimpeachableness of the sentiment of trees in the woods and grass by the roadside is the flawless triumph of art (*LG* [1855] vi-vii).

It is important to understand clearly what Whitman is and is not claiming as the primary ideals of his innovative poetic expression. He is not claiming that what is best and most interesting is a capacity to “carry on the heave of impulse”; he is not saying that to “pierce intellectual depths” is what is foremost; nor is he mostly interested in giving “all subjects their articulations”. So much for Whitman being in basic agreement with critics who argue his poems are spontaneously impulsive; philosophical; or democratic. It is important to notice that these are *not* his principal claims since they are the very things Whitman’s verse seems like it is doing. Instead he is claiming

simplicity—that which is easily understood and presents no difficulty to the understanding. Simplicity is, if not a balance, some kind of mid-way point between “excess” and its opposite, “a lack of definiteness”. To reimagine simplicity as “perfect rectitude” and insouciance, and then to claim that these conditions are as unimpeachable as trees and grass, is a subtle but literal apology for *Leaves of Grass*, itself an object made from paper and comprised of pages (leaves). Furthermore, its language is here figured as sunshine²⁵—the odd image of light being emitted from actual letters is perhaps not as strange as it sounds given Whitman’s training as a typesetter and printer. In figuring language as literally incandescent, Whitman returns to the original meaning of candour: white, shining. But the essential question remains: what, in such purification, is getting left out? As Empson writes in his brief survey of candour, “the root idea of whiteness is never lost, and the splendour of its purity comes partly from knowing what to ignore” (*SCW* 309).

This problem brings me to the crux of what I want to suggest: candour, as a poetics, entails a practiced mindlessness of the poet, where his “lost wits” provide the basis for “wild talk”. As Scott Altman succinctly put it in a piece of jurisprudential polemic, “Beyond Candor” (1990), judging candidly means “never being *consciously* duplicitous”; this sort of judicial honesty, he argues, often requires a “*non-introspective judge*”: a judge who does *not* critically examine his mental states as a precautionary measure designed to avoid error (297; emphasis added).²⁶ This is a description of

²⁵ In what seems like a feasible suggestion, Keston Sutherland recently wondered if Whitman had in mind Thomas Gray’s lines from “Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College”: “Gay hope is theirs by fancy fed, | Less pleasing when possess; | The tear forgot as soon as shed, | The sunshine of the breast: | Theirs buxom health, of rosy hue, | Wild wit, invention ever new | And lively cheer, of vigour born; | The thoughtless day, the easy night; | The spirits pure, the slumbers light, | That fly th’approach of morn” (Gray 5).

²⁶ Altman makes these comments in a critique of some prominent American legal philosophers, Ronald Dworkin foremost amongst them, as well as of scholars

judgment very close to the kind of judgment Whitman wants for the poet of “Song of Myself”. As a piece of art in the candid mode, what is eschewed in “Song of Myself” is concerned less with deleting “duplicity”—in the sense of poetic expression “never being consciously duplicitous”—than with getting rid of “consciously”, where “consciously” means really something more like “knowingly”. In this way, the ideal condition of the speaker of “Song of Myself” is to be an *ignoramus*. *Ignoramus* was first used in English as a legal term referring to an endorsement made by a grand jury when it considered the evidence insufficient (*Chambers Etymological Dictionary* 507). In Latin, *ignoramus* is the first person plural present indicative, and means “we do not know”. “Song of Myself” is filled with confessions of ignorance. Early in the poem Whitman writes:

A child said, *What is the grass?* fetching it to me with full hands;
 How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any
 more than he (*LG* [1892] 33).

Such confessions or predictions of “not knowing” persist until the end of the poem. In the penultimate strophe Whitman writes: “You will hardly know who I am or what I mean” (*LG* [1892] 79). But in either case, the statement of ignorance remains rhetorical. In the first instance, the confession of ignorance provides an occasion for numerous

comprising the Critical Legal Studies movement. Altman’s essay intervenes in a complex and lengthy debate over the practice and benefits of judicial candour in American legal theory in the 1980s and early 1990s. In his article he proposes some interesting analogies to describe various “techniques” of judging: there is “Houdini”, a judge who seeks to surreptitiously rule in alignment with a pre-established (usually right-wing) political agenda and who manipulates legal arguments to find in their favour; there is “Hapless”, a formalist in thrall to some notion of the letter of the law; and “Hercules”, who, like “Houdini”, seeks to use precedent to support a judgment determined in advance, but with the difference being that Hercules wants to issue a ruling in accordance with what he or she perceives to be the spirit of the law, and not in furtherance of an acknowledged partisan position.

parallel speculations (in this way I would suggest “ignorance” underwrites the catalogues themselves), providing an early platform to demonstrate multiple possibilities of a kind the poem elsewhere promotes. In the latter instance, “hardly” means “scarcely”, i.e., only just, so that a line that sounds like it denies the reader’s knowing in fact only limits it to a glimmer.

As a manner of formal organisation, such ignorance forces two issues to the front. On the one hand, ignorance is conceivably the factor or condition of verse which determines the speed with which the poem treats its subjects. It does not know more than the simple facts of the case, that mowers mow and that ploughers plough, or that, generally, everything is as it is. This limited treatment is as much an expression of respect for the integrity of the entities encountered as of their instrumentalisation. Ultimately, the poet must view the world ignorantly in order to take it at face value. In taking things as they appear, the poet does little more than acknowledge a thing as existing and then moving on. “Meaning”, whatever that is, remains essentially interior, and so better left either unsaid or un-surmised. The clearly discernible human body in general, and the human face in particular, were for Whitman the all-important preconditions for any viable sociality (recall how the “candor” Whitman first applauded in the 1855 preface was of “physiognomy”). In “Sun-Down Poem”, Whitman writes:

Curious what is more subtle than this which ties me to the woman or
man that looks in my face,

Which fuses me into you now, and pours my meaning into you.

We understand, then, do we not?

What I promised without mentioning it, have you not accepted?

What the study could not teach—what the preaching could not
accomplish is accomplished, is it not?

What the push of reading could not start is started by me personally, is it
not? (*LG* [1856] 219)

But *do* we understand? It is hard to say what Whitman means because, as Larson astutely notes, more often than not Whitman tells you that a meaning has been conveyed instead of conveying a meaning (*Consensus* 11).

The second issue forced to the front leads on from the first. There is, as in this quote from “Sun-Down Poem”, just as there is in the very first line of “Song of Myself”, a severing of the author from his meaning: he cannot say it. It is, from the very first, “ours”, so that having a “we” is a necessary condition of understanding. This doubleness is proposed often in “Song of Myself”; it is the same one proposed in the 1855 preface, in which poet and poem stand together and look at one another’s reflection. Whatever can be seen, or expressed, remains superficial (not meant pejoratively). What this means is that, in the end, the structure of meaning in “Song of Myself” must always remain analogical, so that the poem is “like” the poet, and the poet “like” the poem, but the two remain distinct. This itself is a kind of duplicity, in both its modern sense, as a deceit, and in its archaic sense, as in doubleness. The deceit is that the poet *cannot* convey his meanings, that the poem fails and that language is insufficient for his purposes (where clearly it *is* sufficient: it meets his expressive needs if only in conveying a sense that it remains insufficient). The doubleness arises from the fact that what Whitman means and what he says are not the same. This is, I believe, the primary contradiction of “Song of Myself”.

ON CONTRADICTION

In his 1909 lecture, “Pragmatism and Religion”, William James wonders, after quoting extensively from Whitman’s poem “To You” (*LG* [1892] 186-8), what the word “possible” might really mean. He asks, “when you say that a thing is possible, what difference does it make?” James then contends:

It makes at least this difference[.] that if anyone calls it impossible you can contradict him, if anyone calls it actual you can contradict *him*, and if anyone calls it necessary you can contradict him too.

But these privileges of contradiction don’t amount to much. When you say a thing is possible, does not that make some farther difference in terms of actual fact?

It makes at least this negative difference[,] that if the statement be true, it follows *that there is nothing extant capable of preventing* the possible thing. The absence of real grounds of interference may thus be said to make things *not impossible*, possible therefore in the *bare* or *abstract* sense (*Pragmatism* 127; original emphases).

The problem I would suggest is that for Whitman meaning remains merely possible. Surely Whitman *wants* to convey his meaning; as such, says James, in the mere act of wanting it, bare abstract possibilities become “*live* possibilities”, a condition in which “our ideals” might become “actual things” (realities). These live possibilities are maintained by “our act” or “our turning-places”, the places where “we seem to ourselves to make ourselves grow” (129). Of these special places, James continues:

Why should we not take them at face-value? Why may they not be the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world—why not the workshop of being [...] The only *real* reason I can think of why anything should ever come is that *some one wishes it to be here*. It is *demanded* [...] This is living reason (129).²⁷

By way of conclusion, I want to suggest that in “Song of Myself” Whitman is acting out the possibility that he means what he says, and that this event happens at the very place where he “turns” and “grows” (his ability to *act* it out is also a function of the artifice of his medium). Though James does not in his lecture have poetry particularly in mind when he uses these terms, their relevance to prosody is clear: “verse” comes from the Old English “fers”, itself from Latin *versus* and means “a turn of the plough, a furrow, a line of writing”, from *vertere* “to turn”. A verse is a growing place.

Whitman’s acting out of this possibility takes place in the organisation of its statements (obviously). Aside from its religious connotations, “I celebrate myself” also means “I” *perform* “myself”. In the 1876 preface, Whitman writes: “[m]y form has grown strictly from my purports and facts and is the analogy of them” (*CP&CP* 1013). As a noun, “purport” means “the meaning or substance of something”, typically a document or speech; “facts” means, in this instance, experiences, so that even this rather straightforward sounding declaration of organicism is complicated by the insertion of a distinction between what he has meant and what he has done. In other words, the

²⁷ Cf. Wallace Stevens’s take on the “possible” in “Notes Towards a Supreme Fiction”: “But to impose is not | To discover. To discover an order as of | A season, to discover summer and know it, | To discover winter and know it well, to find, | Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all, | Out of nothing to have come on major weather, | It is possible, possible, possible. It must | be possible. It must be that in time | The real will from its crude compoundings come” (*Collected Poetry and Prose* 349).

poetry is always already conceptually an analogy.²⁸ It is to the second half of section thirty-three, some of which is touched on above, that one may turn to find some idea of what the “live possibility” of this might look like. Following the long eighty-plus line catalogue, a new arrangement of utterances takes effect. Much of the latter part of the section adopts a form Allen might have had in mind when he described “synthetic” or “cumulative” parallelism, where the second line supplements the first. The first instances of this kind of parallelism begins:

I visit the orchards of spheres and look at the product,
And look at quintillions ripen'd and look at quintillions green.

I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,
My course runs below the soundings of plummets.

I help myself to material and immaterial,
No guard can shut me off, no law prevent me.

I anchor my ship for a little while only,
My messengers continually cruise away or bring their returns to me (*LG*
[1892] 58).

²⁸ Cf. Prynne's 1963 letter to Olson: “So that analogy is the means by which we finally do come to know; the cognate, parallel utterance; the resemblance which can be carried across (transferred) just because it is less than complete identity. Always assuming that the whole pattern is allowed its substantive integrity, and not merely employed as a rhetorical ornament. That is, the mind must venture some real weight on the proposed image and commit a portion of trust to its stability. Thus, the prose rhythm may offer itself as an image of what will support its own fact, which is the identity of its hold on a footed point of view; the writing itself will contain & display that to which it may more publicly appear to refer. The proffered reference, in fact, as a realised inherence: the analogy of a man speaking with his own voice” (Prynne *CORC* Series II, box 206).

The composition here begins simply: one line makes a declarative statement (though as noted above, the simplicity of the grammar is at times at odds with the clarity of its meaning); the second line supplements the first by providing added detail. But the detail is time and time again curiously disposed. In the first couplet, the “*And*” in “And look at the quintillions [...]” appends a second look to the first, since in either line “I” looks at apples (“spherical product” seems to me like a needlessly arcane circumlocution for “apples”). The result is a supplementation of detail and a restatement of fact. The speaker verifies his own observations. “Quintillions”, furthermore, is an entirely speculative number; as Prynne describes the analogical structure of meaning in general, and I am here recounting it in particular, Whitman’s supplementary²⁹ line commits a portion of trust to the stability of the initial image. The levels of such commitment vary, but the commitment, abstractly conceived, remains. One of the more famous passages from “Song of Myself” occurs in this section, and illustrates the point clearly:

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of dogs,

Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marks-

²⁹ A relevant theoretical discussion of the logic of the supplement is given by Jacques Derrida, who writes in *Of Grammatology*: “the substitute makes one forget the vicariousness of its own function and makes itself pass for the plenitude of speech whose deficiency it nevertheless supplements. For the concept of the supplement—which here determines that of the representative image—harbours within itself two significations whose cohabitation is as strange as it is necessary. The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of presence. It culminates and accumulates presence. It is thus that art, *téchne*, image, representation, convention, etc., come as supplements to nature and are rich with this entire cumulating function” (144-5). I think the notion of supplementary “cohabitation” fits Whitman’s use of cumulative parallelism nicely; it is interesting to note, as well, that Derrida’s thoughts on supplementation should arise in direct response to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, another candid “teller of truths” against himself. Where Derrida is interested in identifying “a supplement at the source” (*Of Grammatology* 304) as part of a critique of the idea of “source”, Whitman takes this condition—“stand in the mirror *with* me”—as the original condition of writing itself.

men,
 I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the
 ooze of my skin,
 I fall on the weeds and stones,
 The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
 Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with
 whip-stocks (*LG* [1892] 60).

Beyond “I am the hounded slave”, everything that intervenes between this line and the next major claim—“I am the mash’d fireman with breast-bone broken”—supplements the facts of the claim. Should one be looking for skilled metrical handling, one can readily enough find it, since pockets of scanable metrics inhere throughout, as in:

x / x x / x x /
 I wince at the bite of the dogs,
 / x x / x x / x / x x / / x /
 Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marks-
 /
 men.

The iamb “I wince” nicely shifts the stress from the experiencing subject to the action he or she is forced to perform as a direct result of that diminished subjectivity (slavery); in the same way the authority or power of the marksmen is heightened by its duple stress (as a typesetter by trade, Whitman would likely have been sensitive to such matters as this one here, where the fact of the word being broken against its margin alters its rhythmical signature from trochee to spondee). But is this really the kind of reading that the poem requires? I doubt it. The more apparent prosody is that of the interlinear arrangement of its end-stopped lines, whose accumulative weight is designed

to create and stabilize an image in the reader's imagination. There is, because of Whitman's end-stopped lines, no momentum germane to the drama of the event related. The vignette of the hounded slave does not begin, for example:

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of
Dogs, Hell and despair are upon me...

There is no momentum in this passage; there is no discernible metre to break across the line (in this sense it could be argued that Whitman uses end-stopped lines because he lacks metrical designs worth breaking), or to indicate diminished subjectivities of slaves or the authority of slave drivers. In other words, despite the basic structure of the poem being the complete sentence (there are exceptions, as in the catalogues as discussed above), the poem inhabits neither a condition of complex narrative nor of sophisticated prosodic inventiveness. The "phrasal movement" of the prosody, to borrow a term from Derek Attridge, is one of predominant "statement" and "extension" (*Poetic Rhythm* 183). Each new line is a present-tense utterance designed to give the sense that the whole scene transpires in a single moment. Its supplements are coincident with (simultaneous to) the original event.

This fact has some important relevance for Whitman's thinking concerning line breaks. He tends to break the line at points where one utterance requires some kind of re-statement, be it a temporal shift, a change of perspective or speaker, or any other way of saying something else about the same thing, so that the turn of the verse is where the poem grows back into itself. Such growth, as in the catalogues, though it has structure, is not a progression. One thing leads to another, but only as a consequence of their suspended-ness. Whitman's best use of the verb sometimes comes where he does not use one at all. In this fascinating passage from the second section of "Song of Myself",

Whitman turns every verb into a quality of the things he describes:

The smoke of my own breath,
 Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine,
 My respiration and inspiration, the beating of my heart, the passing of
 blood and air through my lungs,
 The sniff of green leaves and dry leaves, and of the shore and dark-
 color'd sea rocks, and of hay in the barn,
 The sound of the belch'd words of my voice loos'd to the eddies of the
 wind,
 A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms,
 The play of shine and shade on the trees as the supple boughs wag,
 The delight alone or in the rush of the streets, or along the fields and
 hill-sides,
 The feeling of health, the full-moon trill, the song of me rising from bed
 and meeting the sun (*LG* [1892] 30).

The passage comes to no single point (except the literal full-stop). It remains suspended in the mutuality of its expressive variety. Its “voice”—being entirely “Whitman’s” own—is also one characterised by diminished subjectivity.

Whitman’s candour was a means of turning an ethical-looking openness into a structure of address that blocks critical inspection. Pre-emptively, he displaces inspection of what I earlier called “lyric interiority”. His gaze conveys no really intimate knowledge. The speaker will go not much farther than addressing what he has himself already said, or done, or seen or written. Perhaps the clearest instance of this can be found in the most famous lines from “Song of Myself”:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes) (*LG* [1892] 78).

Whitman the poet and Whitman the speaker of “Song of Myself” are certainly in some kind of tension. Assessing Whitman’s work on the whole, Martha Nussbaum, concludes *Upheavals of Thought* by suggesting the “all-encompassing presence of the poet figure”, the “forced bravado” and the “aggressive phallic muscularity” are “entirely at odds with the poetry’s deeper purposes” (672). Betsy Erkkila also finds an overall contradiction, and remarks that Whitman’s words were not “historically innocent”; she argues that his “joining of Puritan visions of America as city-on-a-hill” with a “revolutionary idea of America as beacon of republican liberty” perpetuates “the potent but baneful intermingling of idealism and imperialism” (*Political* 57).

But critics as alert to the serious contradictions in the text—as Nussbaum and Erkkila are—risk mistaking those contradictions as lamentable flaws of Whitman’s execution rather than as conditions integral to his poetic. As Pablo Neruda remarked of Whitman’s frankness:

he had no fear of moralizing, or immoralizing, nor did he seek to separate the fields of pure and impure poetry. He was *the first totalitarian poet*: his intention was not just to sing, but to impose on others his own total and wide-ranging vision of the relationships of men and nations (140; emphasis added).

It is a useful observation. Speaking of the symbolic character of power in a democracy, and in particular about the methods of its legitimation, Claude Lefort writes that:

power is based on the people; but the image of popular sovereignty is linked to an empty place, impossible to occupy, such that those who exercise public authority can never claim to appropriate it. Democracy combines two apparently contradictory principles: on the one hand power emanates from the people; on the other it is the power of nobody. And democracy thrives on this contradiction. Whenever the latter risks being resolved or is resolved, democracy is either close to destruction or already destroyed (279).

If Whitman, finally, can be said to be a democratic poet, as so many critics think he is,³⁰ then his being so is inextricable from his candour. That is, he can be deemed democratic not because of what he says about social inclusivity or for some detected hospitable disposition towards others, but because in speaking, in the poems, with both the contingent meaninglessness of trying to speak for everyone (and therefore saying nothing) as though *neutral*, and with all the non-contingent meaningfulness of speaking for yourself (and therefore saying nothing much) as though *courageous*, he can make a claim to authority only at the instant he cannot but fail to exercise it.

³⁰ See George Kateb's "Whitman and the Culture of Democracy"; Larzer Ziff's *Literary Democracy*; Jason Frank's "Aesthetic Democracy"; and Charles Altieri's "Spectacular Antispectacle". See also Harry Frankfurt's *On Bullshit* for a useful discussion about the democratic predicament of being at once as alienated from "the facts" as from "oneself" (64-9).

CHAPTER TWO—POUND'S SINCERITY

Sincerity from of old until now,
holding together
Not shallow in verbal usage
nor in dissociations (*C* 99|728)

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF EXISTING “SINCERITY” SCHOLARSHIP

Lionel Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1971) remains the most important text on the history of "sincerity". Trilling's historical account of the term is written, at least in spirit, as a correction of Pound's temperamental antipathy for detailed philological studies. No doubt Pound would have felt Trilling's careful investigation into what the term *had* meant during the career of its use in English was an example of a professional philologist using his vocation to keep men's minds "off life in general, and off public life in particular" (*LE* 20). It is amongst Trilling's first priorities, conversely, to dismiss the "merely fanciful etymology" of *sine cera*, "without wax" (*SA* 12), which Pound sometimes promoted, as in the 1930 essay "How to write" (*MA* 88).

There have been, before and since Trilling's book, many studies of the term. I. A. Richard offers a useful discussion of the problems sincerity presents to both readers and poets. Richards, like Pound later would, looks to the *Chung Yung*—what Pound translated in 1951 as *The Unwobbling Pivot*—for some clarification on “sincerity” in chapter seven of *Practical Criticism*, “Doctrine in Poetry” (255-74). In 1953, Henri Peyre suggested, somewhat ingenuously, that “sincerity” is a French virtue (1), an observation Trilling actually part-endorses (*SA* 57-8). For an in-depth study that rebuffs this claim

implicitly by tracking the uses of “sincerity” in eighteenth-century English verse, Leon Guilhamet’s *The Sincere Ideal* (1974) is a useful resource.

In *Theory of Literature* (1956), René Wellek and Austin Warren dismiss “sincerity” outright, saying: “the term seems almost meaningless [...] the poem is a sincere expression of the poem” (208). Being too sophisticated (by her own admission) to actually look for the historical poet in the poem, Patricia Meyer Spacks writes that “the term’s special value may lie in the fact that it does suggest both a quality of the poem and a quality of its effects upon the reader” (“In Search of Sincerity” 591). Spacks helpfully dissociates “sincerity [...] generated by technique” from “the poet’s actual integrity of feeling” (602).

Donald Davie’s “On Sincerity: From Wordsworth to Ginsberg” (1968) tracks an important reversal of the doctrine concerning the poetic “I” in describing a move in postmodern poetry away from the modernist dissociation of the poet and the speaker of the poem back to a condition where the “I” unequivocally stands for the author (61-6).

What these studies all have in common is a general understanding that “sincerity”, whatever it might mean, is mostly a philosophical or hermeneutic problem. It is important to note that though sincerity has been and continues to be viewed by many critics as a feature of “Romanticism”—as evidenced by the 2010 publication of *Romanticism, Sincerity and Authenticity* (Milnes and Sinanan, eds.)—Romantic poets rarely used that term to describe their own aims or ideals, as Patricia M. Ball shows in “Sincerity: The Rise and Fall of a Critical Term” (1964). Pound, by contrast, *did* use the term, a lot. It finds its way into most of the important critical texts he wrote.

It first appears in a series of short, combative articles written for *The New Age* between December 1911 and February 1912, which were later grouped together under the title “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris”; it appears in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1915); and can be found again, most famously, in the “Credo” section of the 1918 composite

essay “A Retrospect”: “I believe in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity” (LE 9). It appears in Pound’s edition of Ernest Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919); in “How to Write” (1930); *ABC of Reading* (1934) and in *Guide to Kulchur* (1938). Following *Kulchur*, Pound’s last major prose work, the term occupies a central place in his translations of Confucius: *The Great Digest* (1947) and *The Unwobbling Pivot* (1951). The term even gets shifted directly into *The Cantos*, where the English words “sincerity” and “sincere” appear eight times; “sinceritas” is also used in a Latin phrase at the beginning of *The Pisan Cantos* (1948) and in *Thrones* (1959); and there are numerous uses of it in the various ideograms Pound takes to stand for it.

But what Pound means when he writes the term “sincerity” is often unclear or ambiguous. How he *uses* it, however, is rather more definite: when Pound writes of “sincerity” he does so polemically (even the uses of the term in *The Cantos* are polemical). In this way, the opacity and ambiguity reinforce his idiosyncratic arguments and ideas. In what follows I track the uses and enquire into the meanings of this important critical term. In this respect, my study differs from those outlined above. What is clear in looking at *how* he uses the term is that sincerity is for Pound (and therefore his readers) primarily a question of poetics, and is only secondarily a philosophical or hermeneutical problem.

This chapter is organised to give a roughly chronological account of Pound’s meanings and uses of sincerity. The most important questions asked throughout are also the most basic: what does sincerity mean for Pound, in terms of poetic practice, each time he uses it? How can we know that, or, what are the means for finding out? What are the consequences and implications of this difficulty?

EXPERTISE

In the 1911-1912 essay “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris”, Pound says: “technique is the only gauge and test of a man’s lasting sincerity” (*SP* 34). It is a claim he rearticulates in the 1918 essay “A Retrospect”, when he says: “I believe in technique as the test of a man’s sincerity” (*LE* 9). Though both claims are clearly addressing a similar concern, there are important differences in them as well, as will be explained. Much of the “Osiris” essay is really an attempt by Pound to say something about the “masterly use of words”. In what is an almost breathlessly-compact description of the kind of poetics he wants to articulate, Pound begins by drawing what he somewhat ironically admits is the “cumbersome simile” of words as “great hollow cones of steel of different dullness and acuteness” which are “not easy to move”; the competent technician of verse arranges them so that they radiate energy “at a very high potentiality” and that their “vertices” juxtapose so as to augment rather than neutralise one another. This “control” is that “which nothing short of genius understands” (*SP* 34). All this is an incredibly vague bundle of abstract concepts to try to make sense of, especially since Pound offers no concrete example of what he means. The primary difficulty of this passage comes from the fact that Pound, aside from not offering a concrete example, also never *stops* to explain himself, as though pausing to do so would be as contemptible an act as the verse he indirectly criticises. But certainly sincerity is central to this early essay on poetics since it is so closely associated with the master-term under advisement, namely “technique”. The technique Pound addresses is not, say, that of a backhand volley in tennis, but very precisely the composition of poems.

Though one might go so far as to say that Pound preserves the difficulty of sincerity by using it in such an abstract context, its association with technique does give it a designation specific enough to suggest that Pound means something *like* “expertise”

or even “skill”. It is upon those grounds that I want to try to hold Pound to account.

There is good evidence for doing so. As he says earlier in the “Osiris” essay, “every man who does his own job really well has a latent respect for every other man who does *his* own job really well; this is our lasting bond” (*SP* 33).³¹ Sincerity here seems, if only indirectly, to be something worthy of respect. Pound has more to say about that:

the man who really does the thing well, if he be pleased afterwards to talk about it, gets always his auditors’ attention; he gets his audience the moment he says something so intimate that it proves him the expert. He does not, as a rule, sling generalities. He gives the particular case for what it is worth. The truth is the individual (*SP* 33).

There are some enormous claims here, but one clearly being mooted is the idea that the expert’s “good job” is performative and not something an audience must intuit. If you want to be seen as an expert you have to show that you are one. It is, in this sense, connected to what Pound elsewhere calls *virtù*,³² a term which, no matter which of its

³¹ For an exceptional and enlightening essay on this very notion, and one that also gives Sidney’s claims outlined in my introduction closer attention, see Geoffrey Hill’s “Our Word is Our Bond” in *Collected Critical Writings* (146-75).

³² It is appropriate that what Pound might mean by sincerity here is definable in relation to another notoriously hard-to-define word. As Robert Harrison has noted of the translation of this term in the W. W. Norton critical edition of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, for example, the word “virtù”—which is used 59 times in that work—is inconsistently translated as “strength”; “virtue”; “valour”; “character”; “ability”; “capability”; “talent”; “vigour”; “ingenuity”; “shrewdness”; “competence”; “effort”; “skill”; “courage”; “power”; “prowess”; “energy”; “bravery”; and so forth. (“Machiavelli” n.p.). In a manner instructive to the current argument, Harrison contends Machiavelli knew full-well he was taking a very traditional Christian word and evacuating it of all its religious and moral connotations, in order to, in effect, return the word to its pre-Christian, Roman meaning. Harrison himself suggests that virtù might usefully be translated as “efficacy”, citing in contradistinction more traditional definitions like “the human will in action” and “the union of force and ability”.

many meanings one chooses, has its etymological root in “man” (from Latin *vir*), and therefore retains the constant idea of a behaviour: that which *shows* its quality.

Which brings up the very important assertion that “the truth is the individual”. I think the intended meaning here is that truths are singularities, or particulars, and therefore local to someone esteemed an “expert”. This is a very explicit rejection of metaphysical notions of truth. Truth is something confined not to the poet’s ideational self but is the demonstrable result of a man’s long training and application. Truth is, or requires lots of, work. Again, the phrasing of the statement that “technique is the only gauge and test of a man’s lasting sincerity” is curious, but to calculated effect: a “gauge” is an instrument or tool of *measure*, so implicating poetry by definition. But what can “only” be doing here other than declaring the absolute priority of technique, as though nothing else can determine sincerity; “only” tacitly supports the assertion that “truth is the individual”.³³

But there is another complication that also increases individual responsibility: the technique that is to gauge sincerity is not a technique of critical but of creative writing. In other words, Pound says that a poet’s technique is the gauge of his own sincerity; he is careful not to say that technique is a way of determining other people’s sincerity (already establishing the ground for his subsequent and vituperative polemical attacks on “the critic” in the 1920s, discussed below). So when Pound says that truth is the individual, he means a few interconnected things. He means, for instance, to articulate a theory of poetic labour in which value—a poem’s truth—corresponds to the

³³ The notion of “truth as work” resonates with James’s and Peirce’s notion of truth in pragmatism, in which truth is something that must be tested and put to use; that it is something tied to and tried by experience, experimented with and worked at; and that it remains truth until it ceases to function as such. Though to be sure, these early pragmatists would argue that truth is *social*. Truth is truth because it works *for* everybody, rather than being merely the product of an individual’s work. For a more detailed study of the particular meanings and uses of the word “individual” amongst poets and artists circa 1912 see Robert von Hallberg’s 1995 essay “Libertarian Imagism”.

intrinsic skill of its maker rather than to what it *says* exactly. There is in this idea an early mooted of a reactionary or protectionist economic mindset appropriate to the establishment of guilds (see the excerpt from Canto 91 below). That said, what else is “Imagism” if not a guild? “In the spring and summer of 1912, ‘H.D.’, Richard Aldington and myself decided that we were agreed upon the three principles following”:

1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing’ whether subjective or objective
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation
3. As regarding rhythm, to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome.

[...] Agreeing upon these three positions we thought we had as much right to a group name, at least as much right, as a number of French ‘schools’ (*LE* 1).

The second thing Pound means by “truth is the individual”, as this excerpt demonstrates, is the idea that a community is defined by its aesthetics before anything else—to revise Adam Smith’s dictum, so far as Pound was concerned, poets of shared, specialist sensibilities cannot meet without conspiring a poetics against the general public. As he wrote in a December 1912 letter to Harriet Monroe: “[w]e are in such a beautiful position to save the public’s soul by punching its face that it seems a crime not to do so” (*SL* 13). The ligatures of this connection in Pound’s mind between expertise and the truth (of verse at least) are essential. In a 22 October 1912 letter to the same recipient, Pound earlier wrote that he thought Monroe’s financial backers “would rather hear a specialist’s opinion, even if it’s wrong, than hear a rumour” (*SL* 12). The mastery over words Pound talks about in “Osiris” is a precision not of fact but of form. Anyone

can say a rumour (that is what a rumour is), but Pound's expert abhors such availability. *If* just anyone can say something, then, by virtue of that condition of unverified account, it becomes suspect of untruth. A rumour is doubted or unbelievable in relation to the breadth of its circulation. The more people know it and say it, the less its likelihood of truth. For Pound, a sincere poem is the opposite of rumour.

But how can this be ascertained other than by mere assertion? What Pound says about his theories of poetry sounds good, but trying to think about his ideas in practical situations is harder to do, which in part comes from the fact that to remain viable, they must perforce remain (trade) secrets. I will come back to "imagism" below, but what, for example, does this mean: "an 'image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (*LE* 4)? This is an often-quoted definition; critics less commonly quote what Pound says next, where he says he uses "the term 'complex' in the technical sense employed by the newer psychologists, such as Hart, though we might not agree absolutely in our application" (*LE* 4). In other words, Pound asks his readers to recognise that he is speaking in specialist's technical jargon; but he also asks them to realise that he might even be out-doing the inventors of the discourses he appropriates: Hart might fail to understand the idiosyncratic precision with which Pound is applying his (Hart's) term "complex". Attempting to redefine "complex", Pound suggests it is like the feeling one gets when one stands in the presence of "the greatest works of art" (*LE* 4). Whatever a "complex" is as Pound means it, it takes serious talent to make one.

Unspecific definition is common in Pound's discussions of poetics, and, like his explanation of sincerity in particular, is usually done *negatively*. This sounds somewhat counterintuitive given the fact that he spends a good deal of his early expository prose very publicly doling out advice on prosody to hopeful neophytes. In "A Retrospect", for instance, Pound includes the most famous of these pieces of guidance in the section "A

Few Don'ts", originally published in the March 1913 number of *Poetry*. The negative contraction "don'ts" is the operative term here. Pound's interest in exploring the interconnections between truths and expression addresses the means by which we know when an expression is sufficiently accurate: it is not the content of the proposition that is evaluated, but the craft behind it.³⁴ Rather than ideas or meaning, however vaguely construed, Pound posits a different kind of interiority, one that is plainly technical. The site most open to such skilful demonstrations is rhythm. And yet here, too, Pound wants to assert echelons of expertise:

[y]et it is quite certain that some people can hear and scan "by quantity", and more can do so "by stress", and fewer still feel rhythm by what I would call the "inner form of the line". It is this inner form, I think, which must be preserved in music; it is only by mastery of this inner form that the great masters of rhythm—Milton, Yeats, whoever you like—are masters of it (*SP* 38).

Put differently: some people can count; others can count *and* identify accent; and then there are those who are sensitive to something more intimate, more innate and certainly much harder to quantify. Not only that, but *what* it is such people can detect remains unnamed and even a private matter. This quality is made to seem almost like a preference: "whoever you like" is at once an offhand remark designed to give the impression of a writer so secure in his knowledge about who the masters are that he

³⁴ Not to overplay the "pragmatist" card, since I earlier stated Pound's sincerity is a question of poetics not philosophy, but Peirce's attack on definition is relevant, not least because *definition* will become something Pound promotes later. Peirce writes in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear": "[n]othing new can ever be learned by analyzing definitions. Nevertheless, our existing beliefs can be set in order by this process, and order is an essential element of intellectual economy, as of every other" (81).

cannot really be bothered to list them, but it also implicitly suggests that the masters should be preferred, as in “liked”. But what does “it is only by mastery of this inner form that the great masters of rhythm [...] are masters of it” mean? As ever, it remains hard to pin Pound down. What is of course emphatically clear is that rhythm, of the kind Pound promotes, has an “inner form”, with the operative word being *inner*. As it happens I think a thesis *is* being put forward here and in similar comments, however obliquely; before saying how that works prosodically, a brief but further examination of a couple more related comments on rhythm is required.

Pound opens his “Treatise on Metre” (published at the back of *ABC of Reading* in 1934) by recounting how an anonymous but famous Ibsen actress—by virtue of which her request was “not simple dilettantism” (*ABCR* 197)—made a “sincere wish” for a competent summary of more than the “slightest value” (*ABCR* 197). Again, the principal error to be rectified through the forthcoming explication of metrics is a “confusion in the public mind” which has a “very simple cause: the desire to get something for nothing or to learn an art without labour” (*ABCR* 197). These opening remarks set the tone for a short (less than ten pages) “treatise” which is nothing of the sort. If anything, “Treatise on Metre” is a polemical anti-treatise whose targets seem to be the various enemies of “inner form”. There are a few enormously vague—and, again, highly quotable and often quoted—pronouncements like “rhythm is a form cut into TIME” (*ABCR* 198) at the opening of the treatise which need not detain us here. In a passing note on “articulate sounds”, Pound writes that syllables have weights and durations that can be either “original” or affected and so altered by other “syllable groups around them” (*ABCR* 199). The good poet recognises this and composes so as to handle or otherwise delimit these in an “interesting manner” (*ABCR* 199); the “writer of bad verse”, by contrast, “expects his faculty to descend from heaven. He expects to train and control that faculty without the labour that even a mediocre musician

expends” (199). This is the crucial point of the “Treatise on Metre”; everything else Pound says therein is a variation of praise for the former and condemnation of the latter. The poet sensitive to the variations and subtleties within either himself or his poem is opposed to the poet who works mechanically, with forms imposed from without. So when Pound demands his readers “LISTEN to the sound it makes” (*ABCR* 200), this is at once a piece of important technical advice and a discrimination between those who can or will listen and those who cannot or will not. When he writes that “great obfuscation spread from the failure to dissociate heavy accent and duration”, he means to deride those who write and read by putting a “swat on syllables two, four, six, eight and ten” (*ABCR* 203). Speaking of “classic hexameter”, he writes that “professors” regularly fail to take into account local conditions like caesurae and other “shadings”. As such, Pound hopes, it ought to be clear that verse is “vastly more compendious” and can “accommodate a vastly greater amount of real speech than will a set of variants starting from a single type of line” whether “measured by duration or by the alternating heaviness of syllables”. Specifically:

ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum (*ABCR* 203).

Rather than every departure being an exception to a rule, Pound comes close to wanting exception to *be* the rule—or what he calls later “variation within limits” (*ABCR* 205). Nomenclatures such as those which might name the specimen of metrical pattern noted above were, Pound continues, invented by those “who never LISTENED to verse” (*ABCR* 204). As in the case of “Professor Webb or whatever his name was”, the “ignorant set out to make laws” and “the gullible obey them” (*ABCR* 205). In sum, then, for Pound prosody must be learned by practice, not by index of nomenclature. In the same way, there is no recipe for a Botticelli (*ABCR* 205).

What do Pound's comments on metrical composition have to do with sincerity?

Well, a lot, actually. In the third section of the "Treatise", Pound makes an explicit reference to literature for which "sincerity" might be seen as an epithet by those wishing to ridicule it: he snidely alludes to the popular love for the man—Philip Sidney, as it happens—who said "look into thine owne hearte and write" (*ABCR* 205). *That* is not (well, not yet) what Pound means by sincerity. Sincerity is primarily formal, a feature of rhythmic expertise. "Rhythm *MUST* have meaning", he writes to Harriet Monroe in January 1915 (note the early use of the prototypical mechanic line *tumty tum*):

It can't be merely a careless dash off, with no grip and no real hold to the word and the sense, a tumty tum tumty tum tum ta. There must be no clichés, set phrases, stereotyped journalese. The only escape from such is by precision, a result of concentrated attention to what is writing [sic]. The test of a writer is his ability for such concentration, AND for his power to stay concentrated till he gets to the end of his poem, whether it is two lines or two hundred (*SL* 49).

The notion that a rhythm must have meaning is for me amongst Pound's most intriguing but enigmatic statements on prosody. Clearly Pound cannot be suggesting that rhythm has meaning in the way that a word has meaning; he probably means that rhythm must communicate something that is not directly expressed. I think by saying a "rhythm must have meaning" Pound is arguing that rhythm must be seen to be *meant*, which is to say, it must be discernibly (to the person qualified to inspect it) both intentional and *not* mechanically in accordance with some pre-given form (since composing in regular heroic couplets would also in itself constitute a design of intention, perhaps one even stronger than that of the man composing in looser

rhythms).³⁵ In other words, for the poet as Pound construes him, rhythmic meaning and sincerity are part of a demonstration of an “intellectual knowledge of his own creative state” (Ball 3) that cannot submit its authority to a design not invented by its own labour. This is to say that for Pound a meaningful rhythm is one that shows the poet is someone who knows, and is in control of, what he is doing.

Such a condition is in significant opposition to “sincerity” as the Victorians commonly understood it in general, and as Thomas Carlyle conceived it particularly. In *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* (1841) Carlyle says:

[b]ut of a Great Man especially, of him I will venture to assert that it is incredible he should have been other than true. It seems to me the primary foundation of him, and of all that can lie in him, this. No Mirabeau, Napoleon, Burns, Cromwell, no man adequate to do anything, but is first of all in right earnest about it; what I call a sincere man (40-1).

This much I think Pound would have in the 1910s readily agreed with (though perhaps he would have disputed the choice of phrase “Great Man”). But Carlyle goes on to say something that is the opposite of what Pound is at this time arguing:

I should say *sincerity*, a deep, great, genuine sincerity, is the first characteristic of all men in any way heroic [...] The Great Man’s sincerity is of the kind he cannot speak of, is not conscious of [...] No, the Great

³⁵ Writing in metrical cliché is also, of course, not the only possibility of *not* meaning something. It has, also, an historical possibility, as in the emergence around this time of automatic writing or other forms of Surrealist automatism. For Pound, a rhythm that is sincere is one composed because the composer is conscious of what is going on: writing is not accident—historical or personal—it is not parapraxis. Intention, consciousness, concentration, meaning, knowing are Pound’s watchwords.

Man does not boast himself sincere, far from that; perhaps does not ask himself if he is so: I would say rather, his sincerity does not depend upon himself: he cannot help being sincere! (41)

Unlike Carlyle's idea that "sincere" is something a "Great Man" is only accidentally, for Pound, the sincere poet works to become, and then remain, conscious of the greatness of his acquired abilities (for a note on Pound's (non)relation to Carlyle see Appendix two—figure 1). The sincerity of a poet lies not in *what* he says since the truth of that utterance would have to hold some universal validity, and would therefore be, to borrow the phrase from "Osiris", to "sling generalities" (SP 33). The truth of the poet as Pound has so far described it, is an accomplishment of hard work. It is, furthermore, *his* hard work. Truth is individual and deliberately acquired.

Ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum is, by contrast, in Pound's estimation, not hard work at all. Such a rhythm constitutes a "faculty descended from heaven", as stipulated in "Treatise on Metre". As a musical shell, or an evacuated metrical cliché, it is a caricature of what Pound calls in "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris" the "technique of manner, a thing reducible almost to rules" (SP 34). Writers using such a vacuous metricality must be, according to Pound's scheme, insincere: if Pound believes in "technique as a test of a man's sincerity", a writer using either the *ti tum ti tum ti tum* rhythm of "Treatise on Metre" or the slightly more sophisticated "tumty tum tumty tum tum ta", as in his letter to Monroe, is going to fail that test categorically. A poem written according to those rules cannot be believed to have some real or sophisticated relationship to the content it is supposed to grip and to hold.

Just how a rhythm is obliged to grip and hold its language is never made explicit. Pound does, however, refer in the "Osiris" essay to what he calls a "technique of content", which "nothing short of genius understands" (SP 34); and though here again

Pound refuses to offer even a modicum of evidence supporting that assertion, it does sound like such a technique is ranged against the “careless dash off” with “no real hold” of the sense and the meaning. Pushing further into the abstraction of Pound’s description, we might suppose that a form without a “grip” on its language will make a poem that does not know what it is saying. Its language use would be unthinking, uncomprehending. The opposition being proposed, then, is between the metrical caricature and the *concentrated* rhythm, a term—“concentrated”—which Pound uses three times in the paragraph berating metrical cliché. Despite the mention in that same paragraph of “stereotyped journalese”, which seems to refer to diction, the emphasis upon *precision* seems applicable to rhythm too: the refusal of cliché and set phrases sounds like it could as easily pertain to metrical sets as to stock expressions. The poet has got to *think for himself* about what he is doing formally. Hence the reiterations of “concentration”, a word that pertains to both thought and to form, argue for both condensation—the second tenet of imagism—and thinking hard about something (mental exertion). What was the gauge of “lasting sincerity” earlier in the “Osiris” essay now becomes the test of a writer. Lasting—i.e., durational and enduring—sincerity is little more than the ability to “*stay concentrated*”.

The well-known statements in Pound’s “Credo” section of “A Retrospect” are in this sense connected. In the point before Pound writes that he believes in “technique as a test of a man’s sincerity”, he says:

I believe in an ‘absolute rhythm’, a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed. A man’s rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable (*LE* 9).

This enigmatic statement requires some unpacking before I can finally turn to a poem and see if any of this makes sense in an applied situation. First of all: what does “absolute” in “absolute” rhythm mean? Readers familiar with the eventual trajectory of Pound’s career can easily see in this phrase a forecast of subsequent authoritarian sympathies, as in an absolute ruler or absolute monarch. These projections are not far off the mark, as I will suggest below in reference to Pound’s use of the term sincerity in his translations of Confucius and in *Section: Rock-Drill*.

But suspending for the moment our benefit of hindsight, it would be possible to take “absolute” to mean something like “not qualified” or “undiminished”, and therefore total. This might have been partly what was meant, since Pound seems intent on advertising an exacting correspondence between emotion and rhythm or, even more bizarrely, between rhythm and “shade of emotion” (this notion of “shade” might anticipate what Pound means by a caesura as a “shading” of rhythm in “Treatise on Metre” 203). By this Pound must be asserting a kind of heretofore-unprecedented rhythmic sensitivity: not only can nebulous and often indistinct things like *emotions* get exactly registered, but so can their shadows.³⁶ The rage for exactitude seems a pretty tall order. Only a few individuals are likely to be able to live up to it. But again, the

³⁶ In this sense something like a scientific fantasy is being mooted, as though the poet were somehow an ultra-sensitive instrument like a seismograph, both developing and responding to almost undetectable alternations in pitch and duration. Richard Sieburth writes that Abbé Rousselot’s recording device, into which Pound spoke in Paris in 1912, “produced what look like intricate seismographs of vowels, consonants, pitch, and tempo” and “could provide scientific proof that free verse was, in its own way, just as ‘regular’ or ‘formal’ (in terms of the patternings of accents or quantities) as, say, the traditional alexandrine” (“The Sound of Pound: A Listener’s Guide” n.p.). Aside from Sieburth’s informative online essay which discusses Rousselot’s experiments with Pound and others, see Noel Stock, *Poet in Exile* (90-1); for a more in-depth discussion of Rousselot’s project, though without mention of Pound, see Katherine Bergeron’s recent article “A Bugle, a Bell, a Stroke of the Tongue” (see Appendix two—figure 2 for an example of the graphic registrations of voice Rousselot’s machine could make). For an excellent discussion of some theoretical and ideological implications of Pound’s concept of “rhythm”, with an especial emphasis on the idea of the “primitive”, see Michael Golston’s *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* (59-145).

important idea here is “individual”. With this in mind, it seems to make sense that by “absolute” Pound means to describe rhythm as an instrument that is not subject to restrictions, i.e., metrical restrictions, and therefore not common or easily shared or even transmitted. Such a rhythm, in sum, is identifiable as independent of other rhythms. Being not other than entirely itself, its truth is individual; and, furthermore, so is the skilled expression of emotion. There remains, however, an implied sense of power, as in the unrestricted power of the absolute monarch. The power, though, belongs to the language. From here it is a short and direct step to his pronouncement at the beginning chapter four of *ABC of Reading* that “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost degree” (*ABCR* 34). It is important in this regard to recognise that in this statement Pound offers his description of free verse. Free verse is not, for Pound, undisciplined; it disciplines. T. S. Eliot must have had this kind of argument in mind when he said in 1942 that “no verse is free to a man who wants to do a good job” (31).

So much for “absolute rhythm”. How and why must a man’s rhythm be “interpretative”, and interpretative of what? The *OED* defines “interpretative” first as “having the character, quality, or function of interpreting; serving to set forth the meaning (*of* something); explanatory, expository”; and second as “deduced or deducible by interpretation or inference; inferential, constructive, implicit, virtual” (*OED Online*). It remains possible Pound means both: that a rhythm is analytic, and therefore active; and that a rhythm is legible or, passively, is able to be read. In other words, this rhythm shapes the language, and readers should be able to see it doing so (this is how it “holds” and “grips”). Rhythmically, Pound proposes to compose in rhythms that leave him in control of the language, and which also show him to be exercising that control. Such a rhythm, Pound predicts, will be “in the end, his own”. The implication here being that, again, this condition of rhythmical skill and ability is not won overnight. “In the end”

indicates a potentially very long duration; it only intimates, more generally, that Pound's interest in rhythm pertains to something more fleeting than a single line. In *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound writes that the "single line is, it is true, an insufficient test of a man's art, but it is a perfect test of his natural vigor" (SR 110), meaning that a single line will give an immediate insight into what *kind* of thing the poet is up to. But if it "reads" *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum* it does not bear further analysis.

Finally, what is at stake in saying that a rhythm is "uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable"? Clearly Pound is attacking ersatz rhythms through the obvious analogy of money. It anticipates his later denigrations of paper money, which *is* counterfeitable, versus the greater trustworthiness of gold, which unlike paper money, has to be assayed before it has value. But "counterfeit" has, at least etymologically, some very direct things to say about composing poems. From the Latin *contra*- "in opposition" + *facere* "to make" (cf. *poiesis*), Pound quite unambiguously asserts that rhythms must be made not borrowed. The technique that can test a writer's sincerity lies in the extent to which he is not opposed to making his own rhythms.

So, with all this preliminarily in mind, it behooves us to look at a poem and ask, is it sincere? In choosing a poem to inspect, I want to give Pound the benefit of the doubt by not selecting a poem from any of the collections published before *Ripostes* in 1912, so as not to hold him to account for a poem heavily indebted to, say, Swinburne. In 1965 Pound dismissed many of these early metrical exercises as "stale cream-puffs" and as mere practice in the building of a repertoire (regular meters would also sometimes be used polemically, as in "Mauberley"). That is, I want to select a poem that seems to me most likely to fit the criteria above, not so as to prove Pound a man of his word *per se*, but in recognition of the fact that his criteria are so daunting it seems unlikely anyone—Pound included—could enact them. That said, "The Return" is to my mind amongst Pound's best early poems. But is it sincere?

THE RETURN

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!

See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened;
As if the snow should hesitate
And murmur in the wind,

 and half turn back;
These were the “Wing’d-with-Awe,”

 Inviolable.

Gods of the wingèd shoe!

With them the silver hounds,

sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!

These were the swift to harry;
These were the keen-scented;
These were the souls of blood.
Slow on the leash,
pallid the leash-men! (*CEP* 198)

Hugh Kenner notes in *The Pound Era* that in this poem every line has a “strongly marked expressive rhythm”, five of which use the same “emphatic rhythmic figure”—“/ x x / x /”, as in the line “Gods of the wingèd shoe!”—but “no two lines are *quite* alike” (190). As such, “it is actually the rhythm that defines the meaning” (189). This last statement of Kenner’s sounds like he’s merely saying what Pound has said. Of course “no two lines are alike”, as in *rhythmically* alike, since that would only be possible if their words were repeated verbatim, and even then their identity would be highly contentious (in the same way, we must admit that no two lines of iambic pentameter are alike either). But suspending that kind of objection for the moment, what does this emphatic rhythmic figure do? Pound has intentionally and, provided one agrees to acknowledge the repeated rhythm Kenner identifies, conspicuously used it throughout an otherwise quite irregularly syncopated poem. Such irregularity is as intentional as the fixed signatures of the repeated rhythmic figures it is designed to accommodate. “The Return” shows that Pound has concertedly departed from pre-set metrical form, but that he retained a definite interest in rhythmic composition. That he can so handle a rhythmical phrase of such relative complexity at the same time as avoiding regular metre means that Pound, whatever else he is also doing—Kenner, for instance, thinks that in an otherwise fragmented poem the rhythm holds verb tenses in place (191)—is demonstrating his skill. In other words, a starting premise is that “The Return” is a performance of technical, rhythmical accomplishment.

In *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*, Donald Davie argues that in “The Return” the organisation of its stanzas is as important as the organisation of its lines (33). “The Sapphic stanza has a sort of phantasmal presence in or behind the first four lines, but only as a sort of musical theme”; this theme is “at once thereafter developed and elaborated not quite beyond recognition but certainly beyond analysis” (34). So what

does this “phantasmal presence” mean? Davie wonders about “the decay of classical studies” or the “etiolation of Hellenism” (34).³⁷ I wonder if Davie is right about this vague relation; or rather, I wonder if he is right in supposing that it is something Pound sought intentionally? If he did, it could be an example of a “shade of expression”, a tacit, formal admission that any form, however sincerely original, is haunted. The idea that the Sapphic stanza is *behind* the first stanza of “The Return” is curious, and, if true, something perhaps Pound would have thought neither beyond recognition nor beyond analysis (34). He might have intentionally ghosted it into his poem only to emphasise its uselessness as an analytic tool. In other words, Pound has written a poem whose form, which the reader knows something about in advance of reading the poem, cannot be used as a key to understanding it.

Both Kenner and Davie are clear about the subject of their analyses: under primary consideration is rhythm; whoever “they” are remains important but of secondary concern. The rhythmic originality leads us, as readers, to inspect it, though we do this for historical as well as purely aesthetic or prosodic reasons (this poem would be curious for different reasons if published in 1812 or 2012). Michael Golston in *Rhythm and Race in Modernist Poetry and Science* modifies Kenner’s claim that, in “The Return”, “they” are the Gods who “return in unstable metres”, suggesting that “they” are the emphatic rhythms themselves (96). Either way, the thing under inspection is the rhythm of the poem. Golston also picks up on Davie’s claim that this poem says something about the “etiolation of Hellenism” by suggesting that the inaudible rhythms of the poem indicate a language in the “trajectory of decay” (96). Golston is keen to make a

³⁷ In “How to Write” (1930), Pound says that “I think the Sapphic rhythm is biological and organic” (*MA* 94); and to hopeful neophyte (but soon expert translator) Mary Barnard, Pound wrote in response to an initial query in late 1933: “how hard and for how long are you willing to work at it [Sapphic form]” (*SL* 248)? In early 1934, he continues: “write yr. own ticket. *Invent* some form of exercise that don’t depend on the state of yr liver [...] If you really learn to write proper quantitative Sapphics in the Amurikan langwidge I shall love you and adore you” (*SL* 252; original emphasis).

theoretical claim about this poem and its relation to Rousselot's phonoscope, going so far as to suggest that the poem is designed to register an interest in the machine that monitors its rhythms (though it is a problem of Golston's conceptual argument that he ignores the fact Pound wrote this poem before he had even heard of Rousselot). That perplexity aside, I think Golston is right to point out the number of times (three in total) Pound admonishes his readers to "see", as though asking us not just to hear the rhythms but to appreciate their presence. Rhythms, in this sense, so far as we can identify them and then care to inquire further, solicit critical attention.

Looking at them, obediently, what does one find? First, the reader is offered the opportunity to evaluate the authenticity of the poem's construction. Doing so, we can notice the irregularity of the strophic structure. Phantoms of Sappho notwithstanding, this poem is empathically not employing, at the level of either line or strophe, ciphers of evacuated musicality like *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum*.

Second, does the rhythm "grip" and "hold" the words and the sense? Kenner argues enticingly that the rhythm is meant to supplement the fractured syntax. It is an interesting idea but he fails to fully make the case, saying only that the rhythms firmly hold the poem's elements in relation to one another (*The Pound Era* 189), which is little more than a rearticulation of Pound's own argument (again). He says later: "we have, in the rhythmic definition, every necessary element, held in place in the poem's continuum, so exactly that alterations of tense will specify everything" (*The Pound Era* 191). Kenner's point is that from "Gods of the wingèd shoe!" every verb is in the past tense, indicating—not merely reinforcing—a semantic connection between the "emphatic rhythmic phrase" and the returning Gods (borne by that phrase).

This evaluation is fair enough, but proceeds along lines Pound has already determined a critic should follow. In the case of "The Return", the reiterated rhythmic phrase actually intervenes in the morphology of the words Pound uses. In the line

“These were the ‘Wing’d-with-Awe”, the word *winged* is shortened to avoid rhythmic ambiguity. In this line, “Wing’d” is definitely a single strong stress. In being so-devised, the rhythm—again: “/ x x / x /”—is preserved. By the same logic, in the line “Gods of the wingèd shoe!”, *winged*, as an isolated metrical unit, is elongated into a trochee, again, in view to preserving the integrity of the rhythm. In other words, Pound budes rhythmic “meaning” towards meaning something like formal “intention”. The rhythmical figure grips and bends: it contracts the word “winged” in one instance while it elongates it in another. These minor contortions might actually constitute something of a failure according to another of Pound’s many criteria. When he writes in this same letter to Monroe that “poetry must be as well written as prose”, he means, amongst other things, that a poem’s rhythm should not distort the normal pronunciation of words to suit a rhythmic pattern. Here, in “The Return”, the intention to use a certain signature rhythmic phrase affects (by gripping) the integrity of “winged”, for in neither case does Pound ask us to pronounce it as we normally would, that is, as the ambiguously rhythmic (one syllable or two?) word it is.

In this (extremely important) letter to Monroe, Pound also states his ideals: “objectivity and again objectivity, and expression”; he wants in his ideal poem no “hindside-beforeness, no straddled adjectives”,

no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing—nothing that you couldn’t, in some circumstance, in the stress of some emotion, actually say. Every literaryism, every book word, fritters away a scrap of the reader’s patience, a scrap of his sense of your sincerity. When one really feels and thinks, one stammers with simple speech; it is only in the flurry, the shallow frothy excitement of writing, or the inebriety of a metre, that one falls into the easy—oh, how easy!—speech of books and poems (SL 49).

The first thing to wonder about this is the extent to which Pound means this honestly and without obfuscation or innuendo. Take, for instance, the word “stress” in “the stress of some emotion”. This could be a surreptitious assertion about the connection between rhythm (as in the positions and patterns of *stress*) and emotion—in this case stress is posited as *belonging to* emotion. Second, the injunction against book words—with no examples given—must surely also refer to words like “hath” and “twas” (*CEP* 187), which are prevalent in his verse around the time he wrote this letter. Third: “when one really feels and thinks, one stammers with simple speech”? Surely to stammer—to repeat *involuntarily* (that is, against the better discretions of one’s conscious aims) letters and words in a poem is something sincere poets are not wont to do in general and Pound is on guard against doing in particular. This is a stammer: *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum*. Still, it is interesting that he takes *speech* as a basis for his poetics here, as usually Pound’s work is “philological”, i.e., characterised by the “laborious appropriation of classical literature” (Sutherland 4). Frank O’Hara, for example, makes speech a model for poems in a way Pound does not.³⁸

While it might be the case that a lot of poets set about contravening their own principles over time, it seems odd that Pound would deride such aspects of poetry as obviously facile that he himself employed hitherto and would continue to in the future. Something else must be going on. One important aspect of this dismissal is how brusque it is. This, again, is tantamount to an implied assertion that the poet knows what he is doing and cannot really be bothered to pause and explain.³⁹ This is an attitude

³⁸ That said, a counterargument could be made about the seriousness of Pound’s interest in poems made from speech based on the preponderance of vocatives in many of his so-called “Imagiste” poems.

³⁹ I am reminded in this instance, especially since Pound might be accused of contravening some of his own principles, that James Joyce has Stephen Dedalus say in

that will terribly and, according to many commentators, irreparably damage the language and clarity of *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*. In any case, the reader must ask herself: does she understand what Pound means, notwithstanding the apparent self-contradictions? And, furthermore, how could she accept what Pound is arguing for when clearly he does not adhere to his own principles?

And yet, despite all the abstract negativity of this statement, there are two useful handholds that can more profitably be made use of. The first is that sincerity is something almost like stock: it rises and falls according to the reader's patience, which itself rises and falls in accordance with a reader's tolerance for literaryisms, which is to say, inherited forms (be they metrically or figuratively derivative). This means, again, that sincerity is something connected to skill and now, more prominently, to originality. The second point worthy of attention is the single concrete example Pound gives: Lord Alfred Tennyson.

It is interesting to compare Pound's attitude to Tennyson with those of his favoured troubadours. In a 1922 letter to Felix E. Schelling, for example:

About Provence. The Wm. Morris tapestry treatment of the Middle Ages is unsatisfactory. The originals were more vital, more realist. De Born writes songs to provoke real war, and they were effective. This is very different from the Romantic or Macaulay-Tennyson praise of past battles (*SL* 178-9).

De Born's songs actually do something. Maybe Auden's contention that "poetry makes nothing happen" (197) is true *now*, but not in, say, 1192. The comparison between De

the ninth book of *Ulysses*: "a man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are portals of discovery" (182). It is a remarkably unimpeachable prolepsis.

Born and all Romantics or a Morris-Macaulay-Tennyson complex means that Pound is identifying an historical problem as much as he is saying something merely related to matters of individual poets (though Pound does think De Born is a better poet than any Romantic or Victorian poet). Pound is making an argument actually quite close to the Platonic idea that would disqualify poets from the republic for lacking first-hand knowledge of their subject matter. Unlike Tennyson, Bertrams de Born fought in the battles he sang about. In a similar sort of way, if Pound obeys the injunction implicit in his attack on Tennyson and writes about what he himself has first hand knowledge of, then “The Return” probably is about prosody as well.

As it happens, when one looks to other statements Pound made about troubadours’ verse forms, one can discern an inferred thesis pertaining to a man’s individual truth and its correspondence to prosodic originality and the “various devices by which the total sound is articulated” (“Definitions of Poetic Terms” YCAL 96 | 4040).⁴⁰ As he wrote to Dorothy Shakespear in a 1912 letter:

The value the Provençals attached to form may be judged from the fact that in those days it was considered as much a plagiarism to use another man’s form as well as the content (*Pound and Dorothy Shakespear* 185).⁴¹

Pound in fact makes a claim about rhythmic originality as early as 1910 in his lectures on medieval poetry, later collected as *The Spirit of Romance*, writing that “rhythm is the hardest quality of a man’s style to counterfeit” (SR 103). Forms and especially rhythms must be self-made if they are to be technically valid and function as tests of a man’s

⁴⁰ Numeric references following “YCAL” citations refer to box and folder—so here box 96, folder 4040—of the Ezra Pound Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

⁴¹ Pound reiterates this claim in *ABCR* (69).

sincerity. The insincere verse uses metre as a decoration, as something inessential to the making of verse (i.e., something not *made* in the process of writing). Rhythms that are not so made, the argument goes, cannot be interpretative because they do not participate, intellectually, in the process of their own development.

If, for Pound, rhythms are interpretative and the technique of their application a test—and, implicitly, a proof—of skill, then even his free verse must be rhythmically legible as an expression of sincerity. I think it could be possible to go further and say that for Pound a sincere poem will have to tell you something, in the organisation of its rhythms, about how it was made or why. It is in this way that a good rhythm is interpretative and also not counterfeit. It does not lie about itself because it shows its truths *as* individual. This definition is of course nowhere near airtight, but I think it gets us closer to what Pound means; that said, we must be prepared to have to accept (or reject) the fact that a poem's individual truth might consist in nothing other than an original form. At any rate, given Pound's continuing tendency to define only what he does mean negatively—"no hindside-beforeness"; "no straddled adjectives"; "no Tennysonianness"; "*nothing* you couldn't say" (SL 49)—another example is useful here, one that contrasts with one written by the object of Pound's contempt.

The first exhibit is a translation of an anonymous Troubadour poem, which Pound originally published in 1918 in *The Little Review*, at the head of the "Homage a la Langue d'Or [sic]" sequence, republished as "Langue d'Oc" in *Quia Pauper Amavi* in 1919. The fact that his poem is a translation is, to my mind, not insignificant insofar as Pound is, as I will show, making a point in it about the primacy of rhythmic invention over semantic content. Indeed, Pound has been, throughout his career, accused of making spurious translations of poems from languages he had not competently understood let alone mastered. This is because he is interested in doing something other

than rendering a “semantic map” (*The Pound Era* 83) of the original. His translations are occasions for inventing rhythm and cadence. He took the following poem:

Quan lo rossinhols escria
 Ab sa par la nuev e-l dia,
 Yeu suy ab ma bell' amia
 Jos la flor,
 Tro la gaita de la tor
 Escria: drutz, al levar!
 Qu'ieu vey l'alba e-l jorn clar (qtd. in Ruthven 161)

and made it into this:

When the nightingale to his mate
 Sings day-long and night late
 My love and I keep state
 In bower,
 In flower,
 'Till the watchman on the tower
 Cry:
 “Up! Thou rascal, Rise,
 I see the white
 Light
 And the night
 Flies” (“Alba” 19).

Pound's version, though it looks like a piece of free verse, behaves according to a very strict set of rules (related to his translation's rimes): the rimes dictate, as it were, where the poet breaks the line—this feature is most salient at the end, where, in Pound's version, the lineation opens out tremendously, almost as though consciously “expressing” its “internal” structures. Breaking lines where rimes occur is different from scheduling them in advance at the end of lines. Here, rimes are the cause rather than consequence of the versification. In other words, Pound's rimes are not organised by, but actually organise, the poem.

Importantly, implicit in this prosodic arrangement of rimes is a methodical disorganisation of metre.⁴² Because of the rimes' arrangement of the poem into its intricate, tapered shape, the internal tensions of “Alba” are drastically manipulated. The relatively long lines announcing the lovers are mimetically long; the opening two lines are quite rhythmically irregular—the first is dominated by so many weak stresses one needs a more sophisticated scanning technique than merely *strong-weak*; by contrast, the second is dominated by strong stresses. These, which describe the relations of the lovers (one mostly weak versus one mostly strong itself being legible as stereotypically gendered), are broken against the much shorter amphibrachic lines of the upper middle section of the poem, which illustrate the interrupted loci of the lovers' amours (in bower, in flower). But since their nocturnal trysts are about as regular as the sunrise that ends them, in the line “My love and I keep state” we are offered a glimpse of something more nearly iambic. The riming lines “in bower” and “in flower” are key; Pound uses them to break immediately that suggested metrical pattern. As medially-stressed units of rhythm, amphibrachs tacitly recommend the idea of inner (emotive?) pressures *and* they disrupt the nascent organisational tendencies of emergent iambs, all the while

⁴² This observation takes its cue from Simon Jarvis's précis of an essay by Clive Scott. See Jarvis's “Why Rhyme Pleases” (33-4) and Scott's “Aragon, Les Yeux d'Elsa” (271).

maintaining a strong, rhythmic impulse. With “bower” and “flower” each set on its own line, the verse’s movement is slowed down considerably; and with a long way to go before the next rime—“tower”—we are then heaved towards the opposite extreme, and are made to rush across “’Till the watchman on the *TOWER*”, trampling down what could be otherwise understood as a possible emergence of trochaic metre so that, when really read aloud, the line has, I think, only two strong stresses: “’Till the *watch*man on the *tower*”. “Alba” could be sincere in the sense that it demonstrates Pound’s conscious *avoidance* of metre.

I admit this might not in itself constitute a very satisfactory reading. It could be that Pound had entirely different intentions. That said, I cannot help but notice how Pound at least *seems* to be setting one common prosodic device, namely rime, *against* another, namely metre. Did Pound *mean* this? Simon Jarvis has recently argued that “either a poet intended an effect or the reader is making it up. But because prosodic thinking operates right at the threshold of intentionality, the difficulty of deciding whether its effects are nugatory or real is in fact constitutive of the field of prosodic thinking” (“Rhyme” 18). I would add to that by suggesting the Poundian “sincerity” of “Alba” is in part corroborated by what I think is its calculated *polemic*. Prosodically, the poem is argumentative, combative, internally conflicted. What is more, its central triple rime, the conspicuous “bower—flower—tower” is, I believe, an instance of undeniable intertextuality. In “The Lady of Shalott”, Tennyson writes:

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
 Little breezes dusk and shiver
 Through the wave that runs for ever,
 By the island in the river
 Flowing down to Camelot.

Four grey walls, and four grey *towers*,
 Overlook a space of *flowers*,
 And the silent isle *imbowers*

The Lady of Shalott (72-3; emphases added).

This cannot be a coincidence. “Alba” is a passing rebuke of Tennyson’s prosody, which I have no doubt Pound would have dismissively scanned as *tumty tumty tumty tumty*, et cetera. Choosing the same exact words from the target language for his translation, and then *reversing* their order, is a further conscious decision designed to solicit a comparison with Tennyson’s poem most overtly.⁴³

The intertextual allusion is involved as a kind of proof of Pound’s metre-breaking rhythmic inventiveness; the difference Pound suggests by directing us to the comparison is one between an analytic rhythm and a decorative one. Pound has in his poem, for example, out-rimed Tennyson’s stanza (twelve rimes in forty-two words versus ten rimes in forty-seven). I want to state for the record that although I do not necessarily believe Tennyson’s poem is the vacuous musical shell Pound most probably did, the seemingly incontrovertible trochaic tetrameter of the stanza’s first two lines *does*, I feel, compel me into placing “a swat” over the word “in” of the fourth line; similarly, the potential molossus “Four grey walls” in the sixth line is, again, to my hearing, contorted by rhythmic precedent, so that the whole line is legibly trochaic. One might argue that the highly regular and syncopated verse of Tennyson’s poem is mimetic of the Lady’s imprisonment, especially, as in this last example, if the quote unquote “natural” vigour of a word’s rhythmical signature is forced against its will into

⁴³ While the rimes “flower” and “tower” are suggested by the original poem’s “flor” and “tor”, “bower” is Pound’s own contribution. An earlier translation he gives in *The Spirit of Romance* does not contain this word (40-1); I think Pound only thought to use it during his concertedly polemical, post-*Spirit of Romance* imagist phase.

subservient positions by the metre. But I think Pound would likely find even this a decorative superaddition, that is, almost as accidental as the metrical promotion of the word “in” of the stanza’s fourth line. Imposed in advance, these metrical features are superficial whether or not they are “appropriate” to the occasion of the poem’s content. This is prosody as decorum. You would no more write “The Lady of Shalott” in anapaests or some other jaunty metre than you would wear a bikini to a funeral. Pound wanted to eschew more than the imposition of certain rhythmic conformities; he sought to overhaul prosodic expectation as such.

IMAGISM

If rhythm is interpretative, then so might an “image” be. Both are calibrated towards the analytic investigation of the truth of the individual, so far as Pound is concerned. As such, imagism is not distinct from the performative ideals of sincerity. The connection can be made more clearly by noticing that the theories of expression gathered first under the rubric of “Imagism” and then of “Vorticism” have some significant things to say regarding rhythm.⁴⁴

In Pound’s 1915 prose work *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, he dissociates lyric and imagism, preferring to think of them as separate modes, rather than imagining the latter as a species of the former. There is lyric, Pound explains, and there is another sort of poetry “as old as lyric and as honourable, but, until recently, no one had named it” (*GB* 83). Ibycus and Liu Ch’e presented images, Pound argues; so did Dante. They are thus claimed to be proto-imagist poets. Milton did not present images and that, Pound says tersely, is why “Milton is a wind-bag” (*GB* 83). Of course none of these claims are substantiated by anything other than bullshyness. But given the fact that such bluster is Pound’s normal critical tone and his habitual disinclination to give examples the general tendency of his polemical style, when he does say something testable it is important to pay attention. I gather a few of those instances here.

The distinction between imagism and lyric is important because in making it Pound argues that rhythm is somehow opposed to “tone”: Pound reiterates his belief in “absolute rhythm”, which he describes as the belief that “every emotion and every phase of emotion has some toneless phrase, some rhythm-phrase to express it” (*GB* 84).

⁴⁴ Pound is entertaining two principles in the phrase “truth is the individual”: an ideal of truth as specific and particular; and also the idea that truth is not something widely shared, understood or otherwise communal or social. Hence the negative definitions of sincerity: implied in the manner of its use is a kind of discrimination.

“This belief”, Pound continues, “leads to *vers libre* and to experiments in quantitative verse” (GB 84). Also, it leads to the definition of rhythm as something more closely aligned to physical forms and movements than to the syncopations of sound. It seems almost as though Pound wants to say that metrics belong to lyric but that rhythms belong to imagism. It is an audacious conscription if this claim *is* implied. While the discrimination is left ultimately incomplete, it is also one he would not easily give up. In an unpublished note called “Definitions of Poetic Terms” (circa 1953), Pound wrote: “LYRIC: poetry intended to be sung | | word derived from name of | musical instrument the LIAR” (YCAL 96 | 4040). But the showy antipathy towards anything so disingenuous and false as lyric is already prevalent in *Gaudier-Brzeska*. Aligning the “wing-bag” Milton with rhetoric, Pound says the “image” is “at the furthest possible remove. Rhetoric is the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience” (GB 83). Pound continues: “even Aristotle distinguishes between rhetoric, ‘which is persuasion’, and the analytic examination of truth” (GB 83). The syntax of this distinction means that for Pound imagism equals the “analytical examination of truth” (83).

This must be another way of describing the “interpretative rhythms” of the sincere poet; which is to say, it describes the rhythms of the poet who does not “dress up”. Instead, he obeys the other two tenets of “Imagiste faith”: “Direct treatment of the ‘thing’, whether subjective or objective” and “to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” (GB 83). In an interesting recent discussion of these well-known rules, Peter Nicholls draws attention to the fact that in the first, Pound has put scare quotes around the word “thing” so that “an otherwise straightforward piece of technical advice is complicated by yet another claim for the exteriority of the poem’s origin” (“Poetics of Modernism” 57). Nicholls’s larger argument suggests that in “modernist poetics” there is a conception of “poetic fact” as something that exists outside the poet. “Far from being an object”, Nicholls continues, this “thing” is what

Pound elsewhere defines as image, “an emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time” (*LE* 4). Nicholls is surely right to draw attention to the remarkable significance these two discreet quotation marks make. This “thing” is hardly an object in any normal sense of the meaning. It is not, for example, the silk or the dust drifts or the wet leaf or any other object mentioned in the poem “Liu Ch’e”, published in *Lustra*, the same year as Pound published *Gaudier-Brzeska*:

The rustling of the silk is discontinued,
Dust drifts over the court-yard,
There is no sound of foot-fall, and the leaves
Scurry into heaps and lie still,
And she the rejoicer of the heart is beneath them:

A wet leaf that clings to the threshold (*P* 110-1).

In seeking to define this newly complicated “thing”, Nicholls says that it is “actually the complex itself which constitutes the image, a verbal and affective assemblage whose syntax incorporates literal spacing” (57); or again, “these ‘things’ are not single objects, but arrangements in social and psychic space which the poem delicately conjoins” (57). Judging from his other criticism, Nicholls is clearly a sympathetic but sceptical reader of Pound. In being careful to convey the “deliberately unspecific designation” of Pound’s “thing”, Nicholls cannot himself be clear about what Pound describes.

I agree with Nicholls that the scare quotes around the word thing in Pound’s most famous instruction is a “warning so far ignored by commentators” (57); but I wonder about his explanation, for two reasons. First, in his reading of it as something necessarily set off or distinct from the poet, Nicholls construes the “thing” as

something externally imposed and therefore not true *individually*. And second, I think Nicholls ignores what strikes me as a simpler possibility: that when Pound puts the scare quotes around the word “thing” he means to denote *utterance*. Just as rhythm (and therefore, indirectly, the poem) was, in a sense, the subject of “The Return”, so too does “thing” mean “In a Station of the Metro” or *The Cantos*, or any poem so treated. A very direct support for this literal interpretation can be found in looking further into Pound’s explanations of an “image” in *Gaudier-Brzeska*:

All poetic language is the language of exploration. Since the beginning of bad writing, writers have used images as ornaments. The point of Imagisme is that it does not use images *as ornaments*. *The image is itself the speech*. The image is the word beyond formulated language (GB 88).

“Exploration” not only makes a claim about the intrepid practice of verse, but from the Latin from *ex-* “out” + *plorare* “to utter a cry”, it also pertains to something done with the “voice”. And if that seems too fortuitous a coincidence, Pound reiterates, saying: “an image is itself the speech”. It is a startling and very explicit claim, which commentators have also largely failed to discuss adequately.

Pound’s emphasis here on the image as speech undermines a lot of criticism that has ignored the “warning” identified by Nicholls. Frank Kermode’s description is typical of an incomplete understanding of the arguments Pound ventures through his imagist prescriptions. In *Romantic Image*, Kermode writes:

Pound, like Hulme, like Mallarmé and many others, wanted a theory of poetry based on the non-discursive *conchetto*. In varying degrees they obscurely wish that poetry could be written with something other than

words, but since it can't, that words may be made to have some sort of physical presence "as a piece of string" (161).⁴⁵

This is a notion common even amongst some of Pound's most sensitive and devoted commentators. Richard Sieburth writes, for example: "Imagism attempts to institute a poetics free from mediation, free from metaphor, free from temporality and, ideally, free from language altogether ("In Pound We Trust" 150). Such a commentary performs an inverted diagnosis, reading Pound's attempts to define a non-lyric mode of poetry as something desirous to be therefore non-poetic; but Pound is always describing imagism as *making*, as *conceiving*, as *active*, as *intensive*. When Pound writes that an image is speech, that "the image is the word beyond formulated language", the key here is "formulated" not "language". A desire for an image to be something "beyond language" would constitute a desire to abandon language as such; but an image as something "beyond *formulated* language" delineates a specifically non-systematic, non-predetermined method of composing poems. This question of "formulated language" bears directly upon Pound's criticism of Tennyson's vacuous metricality, and, in the current context, upon bad writers who use images as ornaments.

Of course, at this point historically, the argument against ornament is pretty hackneyed. One can recall instances of it in Whitman. In his 1909 essay "What I Feel About Walt Whitman", Pound writes that "mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has

⁴⁵ Kermode, writing this in the mid 1950s, would have been probably familiar with Pound's work up until *The Pisan Cantos*. His comments bear a lot more truthfully on *Rock-Drill*, actually, which he would likely *not* have seen (it was published in 1955 in Milan, 1956 in New York and 1957 in London) before he wrote *Romantic Image* (1957). At any rate, his discussion focuses on Pound's reading of *CWC*. Kermode also comments, ahead of the quote given in the body of the text above, that Pound wanted things "without intellectual content whatever" (161). It is hard to fathom what that might mean, but I am suggesting the opposite: that Pound's "things" are his poems, and that, as such, not only is intellectual content required, but it is, amongst whatever else it is, related to a knowledge of form, rhythm, structure, et cetera. I do not think Kermode would want to argue that rhythm is without intellectual content.

learned to wear a collar and dress shirt” (*SP* 145), which is a tacit admission that even Pound has had to “dress up”. Nevertheless, the negative definition of sincerity continues its build-up (the poet, still refusing to explain). Interestingly, Pound takes special care to retain the “speech” element of the image:

In the “search for oneself,” in the search for “sincere self-expression,”
one gropes, one finds some seeming verity. One says “I am” this, that, or
the other, and with the words scarcely uttered one ceases to be that thing
(*GB* 85).

Aside from the conspicuous use of the word “thing”, I note also the implied mutability of truth: “ceases to be” means that Pound had been genuinely what he said he was, if only for a moment. In a pretty ironic statement, given Pound’s later developments, he writes that an “author must use his image because he sees it and feels it, not because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economics” (*GB* 86). This is, again, the re-emergence of the idea that “truth is the individual”.

It is exactly along these lines that Pound attacks symbolism. A symbol is, like an ethical or economic system, too general to either grasp or apply to the truth as Pound means it (individually). “An image”, Pound says, “is real because we know it directly” (*GB* 86). By contrast, a “symbol” stands in “the deathless light”, but this “is *not our* affair”. Instead, “it is our affair to render the image as we have perceived or conceived it” (*GB* 86). The “or” between “perceived” and “conceived” bears a pretty enormous burden of relation, equating as it does two quite substantial—and perhaps substantially different—kinds of mental process. But the point is that the “rendering” of the image, in Pound’s explication, is itself more important than the processes by which it was initiated (perception or conception). And yet an image—like sincerity itself—can only

be defined negatively insofar as “the precise statement of such a matter must be based on one’s own experience”. To explain, in other words, he “can do so only autobiographically” (GB 85). Pound then offers a prose narrative, from inception to completion, of his imagist masterpiece, “In a Station of the Metro”.

Since so much emphasis is placed upon the form, the structure and the design of the poem, the words themselves are demoted in significance. This, I find, must be the root of Pound’s antipathy for “symbolism”.

To hold a like belief in a sort of permanent metaphor is, as I understand it, “symbolism” in its profounder sense [...] Imagisme is not symbolism [...] The symbolist’s *symbols* have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic, like 1, 2, and 7. The imagiste’s images have a variable significance, like the signs *a*, *b*, and *x* in algebra (GB 84).

There is a connection here between the individual mutability of an image and the tirade against the rigidity of *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum*. An imagist poem is sensitive to the particulars of the case before it—its sensitivity consists in the flexibility of its verbal instruments. So when Pound says in the “Credo” section of “A Retrospect” that he believes the “perfect symbol is the natural object”, he does not mean, as Kermode thinks he does, “a piece of string”. Nor is Pound defining what Eliot would call the “objective correlative”. He is here only talking about language. The natural thing is that which comes naturally from the moment of concentrated writing. The symbol “obtrudes”; he does not say why, but it seems clear enough why: a symbol comes from elsewhere and imposes itself on the current situation (a symbol is an ornament in a way pernicious to Pound’s “individual” since it demotes intentionality). The symbol can say one thing but mean something else without apparent cause; as such, to those for whom

“a hawk is [just] a hawk”, meaning disappears. Instead, Pound claims for imagism a kind of more focused expressiveness responsive to individual conditions of “vivid consciousness” (GB 88). “Vivid” is an unusual but telling epithet, since it implies that what is presented is in fact the *strength* and intensity of the poet’s living consciousness (from the Latin *vivere*, to live).

The emphasis on the image-as-speech, therefore, means that imagism has a much closer connection with his early experiments in personae and masks than has been hitherto acknowledged. Normally, the former is seen as a break with the latter, and the fact that Pound largely abandoned one for the other supports this view. But upon closer inspection, many poems in the imagist mode are as interesting for their handling of speech and for the interest they build around the speaker as for their direct treatment of “things”. In fact, such a distinction should really no longer be allowed unopposed.

Pound himself was not so quick to make a distinction between his experiments in voice, and his experiments in image. The “search for the real” is in fact the same as the “search for oneself” and the search for “sincere self-expression” (GB 85). “I began this search”, Pound tells us, “in a book called *Personae*, casting off, as it were, complete masks of the self in each poem. I *continued* in a long series of translations, which were but more elaborate masks” (GB 85; emphasis added). These translations are, of course, those delicate and poised Chinese poems from *Lustra* and *Cathay*, but also include bolder attempts like “The Seafarer”, published in *Ripostes* in 1912. But one intriguing poem from that same collection brings many of these matters to a head:

AN OBJECT

This thing, that hath a code and not a core,
Hath set acquaintance where might be affection,

And nothing now

Disburbeth his reflections (*P* 60).

This poem begins by deleting the relevant specificities of an object actually encountered in the world (as in, so much for that theory of the “natural object” being a stone or a flower). The indefinite article “An” means we are dealing at once with a class of things, as well as one example in particular. The title furthermore ramps up the ambiguity as to whether the object being treated is a material thing, and therefore external to the mind of the speaker or to the mind of the agent “his” whose reflections are undisturbed; or whether the object refers to a person, as in an object of someone’s affections. The title also carries with it the latent suggestion of an *objection*. It even has the potential to refer to itself—i.e., the object of “An Object” is the poem that follows (if so this would be an early articulation of so-called Objectivism).

The first clause of the first line, “This thing”, contains an implicit contradiction between the deictic specificities of “This” and the translation of “object” into “thing”—an object that one need not, cannot or does not wish to name (so that this poem already bears the hallmarks of Pound’s polemical sincerity), at the same time as preserving the possibility that we are still nevertheless dealing with an inanimate material object while also expanding the possible references of “thing” to mean an event, situation, thought or utterance. A “code” is a system of words, letters, figures or other symbols, which are substituted for other words or symbols, especially for purposes of secrecy. The secrecy posits an interior even as it moots the idea of a code of conduct, as something like a manner of behaviour adopted for purposes of mere show or etiquette. This “thing” is without a core—from the Latin *cor*, meaning “heart”—also mooted an interior. So, “this thing” has a certain kind of quite specific centre, one associated with knowledge, since it has “set acquaintance”—from Old French, *acointier*, “to make known”—where

might be affection (the business of the heart). The term “acquaintance” connotes a condition of being and of knowing a lot less distracting than affection (both a feeling of fondness and a state of mental affliction), which is itself a decorously muted substitute for “love”.

Given Pound’s interests in troubadours and courtly love—that is, with a poetry and a time replete with codes and cores and affections—one may speculate that, despite this poem’s obliquity, it takes some kind of interpersonal relation as its subject matter. J. H. Prynne has pointed out a possible relation between this poem and James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (“Pound Lectures” n.p.)—*Ripostes*, incidentally, also contains the poem “Portrait D’une Femme” (17-19). In James’s novel Osmond says:

If you’re ever bored take my advice and get married. Your wife may indeed bore you, in that case; but you’ll never bore yourself. You’ll always have something to say to yourself—always have a subject of reflection (v.2; 177).

This goes some way in summarising what might in fact be “happening” at the level of subject or theme or argument. But there are important structural features in operation as well. As Prynne also noted, in Pound’s 1962 *Paris Review* interview he “acknowledged the importance of structural involution in the Jamesian style” (“Pound Lectures” n.p.). In that interview, Pound says:

I’ll tell you a thing that I think is an American form, and that is the Jamesian parenthesis. You realize that the person you are talking to hasn’t got the different steps, and you go back over them. In fact the Jamesian parenthesis has immensely increased now [...] The struggle

that one has when one meets another man who has had a lot of experience to find the point where the two experiences touch, so that he really knows what you are talking about (“The Art of Poetry” n.p.).

It could be important that the poem “An Object” is lifted from James, since that revealed fact changes its complexion in this significant way: it returns “thing” to a position of rhetorical ambivalence, because “thing” is at once “marriage” and, at the same time, the transposition, even the translation, of James’s words into Pound’s, so that “thing” is again literalised as “code” and made to refer to the poem as much as to anything else. It begins to come clearer that this poem “treats”, as in the “direct treatment of the thing” (a kind of “handling”), *manner*. That Pound does not acknowledge the borrowing from James constitutes its secrecy as a fundamental suppression of information. The questions then are, how much does the speaker’s refusal to make his references explicit contribute to the poem’s becoming something like a thing; conversely, how much does the poem’s status as a thing necessarily force the speaker’s speech itself to become the “object” of its utterance; and furthermore, is this poem “imagist”? It certainly presents no word that could be taken as a *symbol*, and in that there is a certain imaginative reciprocity: the concentration involved in making this poem is evidence in the near total exclusion of things from “outside”, even if the Jamesian reference lurks in the background. Something else lurks there as well:

x / x / x / x / x /
 x / x / x / x / x / x
 x / x /
 x / x / x / x

I do not mean to suggest this is a scansion of “An Object” Pound would have recognised as valid; it probably is not. But the first, decasyllabic line must be intentional (Pound would not, I have to believe, write this sort of line in such a short a poem *accidentally*). In fact, it could be argued by a reader keen to impose metrical rigidities from without, that the whole “thing” is crudely iambic, disturbed only by the amphibrachs of “affections” and “reflections”;⁴⁶ and that the third and fourth lines, if read contiguously, are also roughly pentameter (with aforementioned amphibrachic disturbance). Read this way, the poem seems to suggest that where such a code is, there can be no affection. But to answer the first of my own rhetorical questions: as it turns out, the poet is not refusing to make explicit what is being “treated”. It is the poem itself that is under consideration. This is what is meant by “direct *treatment* of the ‘thing’”. The “treatment” is self-analysing. In other words, the interpretation just offered is impossible without considering rhythm as something *other* than decoration.

Second, does the status of the poem-as-thing push the poet’s own speech to the fore? Absolutely: the code is offered so as to be tampered with, especially *by* speech. Speaking the poem aloud dispels the ghost of iambic pentameter categorically. Not to impose one code over another, but it strikes me as more reasonable to suggest that, read out loud, the first line has only three strong stresses, on “thing”; “code”; and “core”. The string of intervening weak stresses makes traditional strong-weak scansion both difficult and probably irrelevant. Put otherwise, it is important that “An Object” offers the prospect of iambic pentameter only in order to, at the same time, thoroughly subvert it, reiterating the point that there is no meaningful variety in *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum*. Because what comprises this poem (and every poem!) is words themselves, and because words are things that must be taken individually *and* in relation to their

⁴⁶ As in “Alba”, as medially-stressed units of rhythm, amphibrachs tacitly moot the idea of inner (emotive?) pressures *as they disturb emergent iambs*. Also, as in “The Return”, Pound mobilises this rhythmic interiority in order to disrupt the metrical set.

surrounding context, there will always be different ways to pronounce their rhythms. Iambics—imposed from without and rigid in structure—in this sense are the formal equivalents of symbols. Both are ciphers and morally objectionable because they are (hypnotic or otherwise) unthinking. If “An Object” is not written in iambics, then other possibilities open up. The fact of being confronted with such choices is part of what makes this poem meaningful. *That* a choice exists, between rigidly scanning the opening line as iambic pentameter, on the one hand, and *not* doing so, on the other, is a choice that itself unlocks some of the poem’s significance. I would go so far as to suggest that in “An Object” Pound proffers a potentially metrical scheme only to use speech—i.e., the voice of anyone actually reading it aloud—to destroy it. One could *scan*, in silence, the first line as iambic pentameter, but one cannot *speak* it that way.

And finally, *is* this an imagist poem? The answer must be, I think, categorically *yes*. It is as though an imagist poem cannot be properly understood until its rhythms as spoken or uttered have been inspected. I am even tempted to suggest that it is because of, not despite, the variable and enigmatic significance of what the poem *means* that it becomes an “image”, and consequently a “thing”. Is it sincere? One might be tempted to say, with all the buried references to James and ghosting metres, not to mention the mystery surrounding that which is being described, that it constitutes the opposite of a sincere poem, until, of course, one recalls that for Pound, sincerity is predominantly a question of poetic form and structure whose truths rise in direct correspondence to the skill of the poet in what it is he makes.

IDEOGRAMS

The “partial self-effacement” of the “personae” poems (Nicholls “Poetics” 56) is essential to the imagist process of foregrounding technique as a test of sincerity, for two related reasons. First, it permits the poet to concentrate on formal ingenuity. Working with a translation or another kind of source text was a way of making content secondary to the primary activity of craft. Pound does not say, for instance, *the profundity of the message* is the test of man’s sincerity. Second, it opens up grounds for making a distinction between the poet and the speaker so that the poet can work on—directly treat—the “thing”, the image as speech. “An Object” is certainly amongst those poems that seem to move most easily between the imagist and personae poems. The “Hath” in this poem imply an archaic or affected speaker, one other than Pound; the possessive pronoun “his” is left without a referent intentionally. It has become almost a tenet of the faith of Anglo-American literary modernism that there is a separation between the man that suffers and the mind that creates. This was true for Pound in the 1910s. Pound claimed, retrospectively, in 1922 that: “I’m no more Mauberley than Eliot is Prufrock (*SL* 180). And yet, in the later 1910s and early 1920s, Pound begins to develop a new model of sincerity, one different from that which has been so far interrogated and described. The move away from sincerity as tested by technique continues through the 1930s and 1940s. It has its historical roots in Pound’s interest in Chinese.

By late 1919, Pound had edited, and finally seen through to publication, Ernest Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. What appealed in particular to Pound’s sense of sincerity (as a technique or otherwise) is not the idea that Chinese ideograms are somehow pictures of *things* (this did *not* appeal because this is *not* what Pound means by “image”, nor is it actually what Fenollosa says), but that

a great number of these ideographic roots carry in them *the verbal idea of action*. It might be thought that a picture is naturally the picture of a *thing*, and that therefore the root ideas of Chinese are what grammar calls nouns. But examination shows that a large number of the primitive Chinese characters, even the so-called radicals, are shorthand pictures of actions or processes (*CWC* 9; original emphases).

In the preface, Pound calls Fenollosa's work "not a bare philological discussion but a study of the fundamentals of all aesthetics" (3). This study does have some important things to say about aesthetics, the most important of which for Pound was the idea that a language might "bear its metaphors on its face" (25); Fenollosa describes in this work a writing system whose characters and scripts reveal the metaphorical structures of thought in action. In Chinese, Fenollosa argues, words are not "filed down" to their "narrowest edges of meaning" (24). Pound might have understood this to mean that Chinese characters do not participate in the rigid referential logic of a "symbolist's symbols" (*GB* 84).

That said, it is possible to imagine *The Chinese Written Character* played a role in shifting Pound's interests away from purer techniques of rhythmical discipline and towards some more focused attention on individual words. At the end of *The Chinese Written Character* Pound offers a series of notes on the text and provides some refracted comments on some ideograms Fenollosa used as exhibits. Pound refers to Confucius's statement that "a man's character is apparent in every brushstroke", and then remarks: "the high value set by the Chinese on calligraphy is appreciable when you think that if the writer does not do his ideogram well, the suggestion of the picture will not carry" (*CWC* 37). Though the implication here is that the way a writer structures his words is literally fundamental to the efficacy of conveying the meaning those words transmit,

there is now also the added fact that a word itself can substantially reflect a man's meaning. Some pages later, Pound glosses the ideogram *hsin* as



Man and word, standing beside his word, man of his word, truth, sincere, unwavering.

The word sign is radical supposedly from combination of tongue and above : 言 [sic] mouth with tongue coming out of it (*CWC* 40-1).

This is a crucial point in the history of Pound's understanding of the term "sincerity". It maintains man and word as separate entities—as had been the case in his "personae" and imagist poems; but now, with sincerity as a kind of ideal to be attained and not a skill to be tested, the discrepancy between man and word starts to become a liability. The increased focus on ideograms has two important effects. First, it introduces a growing desire for fixed correspondence—"unwavering"—even though Pound was told that the ideograms represent actions not things. Second, in seeming opposition to the first, there is in Pound's reading of Chinese a speculative element. The ideogrammatic method is speculative in the sense that Pound is often literally unsure of how to read actual ideograms. Where Pound was once in control, and technique's test of sincerity a demonstration of that fact, now Pound hazards guesses: "tongue and above : 言 mouth with tongue coming out of it". Zhaoming Qian says that the feature Pound speculates about (Pound is referring to the perpendicular stroke at the top right hand of the ideogram) is merely a flourish of one kind of calligraphic style ("Re: Calligraphic Styles" n.p.). As a writing system he could not pronounce, his growing interest in Chinese ideograms meant that Pound was changing focus. The importance of rhythm (a

component of how words sound) was duly replaced by a new emphasis on denotation (that is, what they *say*).

In “How to Read” (1927), Pound asserts that “literature has a function in the state [...] [T]his function is *not* the coercing or emotional persuading, or bullying or suppressing people into the acceptance of any one set or any sets of opinions”, a move which marks a decidedly “social” turn in his thinking about poetics. Instead, it “has to do with the clarity and vigor of ‘any and every’ thought and opinion. It has to do with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself” (*LE* 21). Governors—traditionally the most insincere of all people, since they deal in generality absolutely—cannot think, nor can legislators act, without words whose solidity and validity have been established by writers (*LE* 21):

When their work goes rotten—by that I do not mean when they express indecorous thoughts—but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e., becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot (*LE* 21).

The question foremost in Pound’s mind now is one of definition: “[i]t is not only a question of rhetoric, of loose expression, but also of the loose use of individual words. What the renaissance gained in direct examination of natural phenomena, it in part lost in losing the feel and desire for exact descriptive terms” (*LE* 21). This change of tone and direction signals not just a shift, but a kind of U-turn in what it means to be sincere. Technique becomes less important than securing precise referential orders. Pound has very clearly moved away from Fenollosa’s belief that words are not filed down to narrowest meanings: Pound wants exactly that.

Significantly, it is in this period of his writing that Pound starts pushing the definitions-cum-critical concepts *melopœia*, *phanopœia*, and *logopœia*. In *phanopœia* “we find the greatest drive towards the utter precision of the word; this art exists almost exclusively by it” (“How to Read” *LE* 26). In the late 1920s and early 1930s Pound fully becomes the bullying critic he had shown signs of in earlier polemics and manifestoes. In a paranoid sounding section of “How to Read” called “Vaccine”, Pound writes:

I suggest that we throw out all critics who use vague general terms. Not merely those who use terms because they are too ignorant to have a meaning; but the critics who use vague terms to *conceal* their meaning [...] The first credential we should demand of a critic is *his* ideograph of the good; of what he considers valid writing, and indeed of all his general terms. Then we know where he is (*LE* 37).

This passage underlines the transitions from technique to precise applications of terminology (which is I suppose a kind of technique in itself). Pound had usually kept these disciplines separate. In *The Spirit of Romance* (1910), he writes: “the best poetry of this time appeals by its truth, by its subtlety, by its refined exactness” (116), which is clearly not, or not mainly, a comment on the precise use of words as exact denotations of referential specificities. And though Pound concedes, describing now the interpretive process and not the creative one, that “our whole appreciation of the time depends on whether we understand what is meant by peculiar terms”, that is a problem for *us* not for the pre-renaissance Tuscan poets. It is an historical/philological problem precisely caused by slack use of words over time, and not a problem of the poetic applications of those terms at the time they were written. The comment from *Spirit of Romance* that a Tuscan poem “aims to be what it is, and never pretends to be something which it is

not” (116) now has a particular sort of relevance. In the 1920s, Pound becomes increasingly concerned with dissimulation.

These sorts of comments are characteristic of Pound’s critical discussions at this time. In the 1930 essay “Cavalcanti”, for example, he elevates precise terminology to an *imperative* condition (that in itself is an important shift, displacing rhythm):

Unless a term is left meaning one particular thing, and unless all attempt to unify different things, however small the difference, is clearly abandoned, all metaphysical thought degenerates into a soup. A soft terminology is merely an endless series of indefinite middles (*LE* 185).

Connected to Pound’s rage for precise terminology is the dismissal of criticism as a valid practice, as in: “what we need now is not so much a commentator as a lexicon. It is the precise sense of certain terms *as understood at that particular epoch* that one would like to have set before one” (*LE* 162). Paradoxically, defamations of critical practices were coterminous with Pound’s own increasing interest in writing social as well as literary criticism in the 1930s. The most salient feature of this new interest is the way in which Pound speaks of poetry and of criticism in exactly the same way. Precise terminology is needed for good *writing* of any kind, full stop. This conflation finds its fullest expression in the 1940s and beyond, where Pound’s criticism *is* his poetry, and *visa versa*. Tellingly, in the last decades of its composition, *The Cantos* was for the most part the only thing Pound wrote (some important translations notwithstanding).

We have already seen how in “How to Read” Pound actually advocates practices of reading criticism very similar to the “ideogrammic method” of writing poetry. And in an offhand but quite telling moment in *Guide to Kulchur* he finally proclaims: “the *work* is more criticism than any talk around and about a work” (286; original emphasis). This is,

in sum, why Pound's post-Pisan cantos look like a (very impatient) scholar's notebooks. It is at the moment important to recognise that in this period of critical activity—"How to Read" (1927); "How to Write" (1930); *ABC of Economics* (1933); *ABC of Reading* (1934); *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935); *Guide to Kulchur* (1938)—that Pound, as a critic, attacks criticism, and how much of that is in fact ranged against "fakery" in view to establishing the various merits of authority, either his own or of other men of equally robust volition. In "How to Write", for example, Pound diagnoses "a certain number of main literary diseases" (*MA* 88). Preposterously, he backs up this opinion by saying that such fake practices are insincere, since "sincere means without wax, sine cera, [...] Roman antique dealers and makers of fake expensive marble used wax for their frauds" (88). And later in that same essay:

I have also offered the patient reader an acid⁴⁷ which will free him from entanglements of a hundred and a thousand fake-thinkers. It is not merely in semi-serious criticism that these people abound. The whole of alleged philosophical and critical writing is riddled with malpractice [...] the same old shoddy (*MA* 104).

Against such critical diseases, Pound offers a précis of Fenollosa's essay on the Chinese written character and suggests that "occidentals" think abstractly while "orientals" think in concrete terms. Press an occidental on a matter like "what is red" and he will, invariably, recoil from specificity until plunged wholly "into incognita"; pose the same question to an oriental and he will say "cherry, rose, iron-rust, flamingo" (*MA* 105). Armed with this spurious but exotic argument, he then continues:

⁴⁷ I.e., sincerity. In other words, sincerity is construed almost as an acid (tongue?) that can, through invective, dissolve and expose "cover-ups", aesthetic, intellectual or moral.

We are stifled with those ersatz pseudo-critical essays in which one can insert a negative every ten lines without in any way indicating to a reader who doesn't know the subject beforehand whether the author is telling truth or falsehood (*MA* 105).⁴⁸

In a sense, it is still incumbent upon the sincerity that is being called for here to show itself, only now what sincerity means is receiving positive—rather than negative—definitions, literally *as* precise definition. This essay is important because Pound here first and fully discriminates between technique and vocabulary: “there is the vocabulary, there is the idiom, and there is the technique and the art of writing”. With sincerity being clearly aligned with verbal definition, Pound has wholly dissociated it from technique. From here, it is a straight line to the “Terminology” section at the beginning of his 1947 translations of *The Great Digest* of Confucius, in which Pound defines several important ideograms central to Confucian thought and to Confucian ethics. Pound, most relevantly, defines *Ch'eng* as



“Sincerity.” The precise definition of the word,
pictorially the sun's lance coming to rest on the precise

⁴⁸ As Zhaoming Qian points out in “Towards an ‘Ideogrammic Method’ of *The Cantos*”, in discussing “Pound’s development of the ‘ideogrammic method’”, critics tend to pay more attention to the source that provided its name and aesthetic framework than to the factors that contributed to the substance. The fact is that Pound was in search of a theory promoting the kind of poetry he was constructing, and Fenollosa’s essay appeared to serve the purpose ideally” (277). Qian acknowledges that Fenollosa’s essay is “absurd and misleading”, but defers to Ron Bush’s argument in *The Genesis of Ezra Pound’s Cantos* that Pound was more interested in “the spirit of Fenollosa’s remarks about oriental logic” than in any particular theoretical argument about the language (10). Bush cites Pound as saying in some notes made during the preparation of the manuscript for publication that “it is not so much their letter as the underlying feeling of objectification and activity that matters” (qtd. in Bush 179). In other words, Pound felt that *The Chinese Written Character* was more literature than philology.

spot verbally. The right-hand half of this compound means: to perfect, to bring into focus (*Con* 20).

“Language must serve thought: where there is no thought; where there is no strong thought, there is no need of novelty of expression. Fake thought thus betrays itself”, Pound wrote in 1930 (*MA* 111-2). This is a pretty long way from his other assertion in *Gaudier-Brzeska* that “an image is not an idea” (*GB* 92). *This* kind of sincerity very clearly is an idea, and Pound now thinks it should control language rather than be tested by it. The language—the speech as image of 1915—is no longer a vortex into which ideas rush: thought now organises images, not visa versa.

This is, in short, the ideogrammatic method.

The method has its roots in the 1913 essay “The Serious Artist”. That it was composed the same year Pound first received the Fenollosa manuscripts may be more than coincidence. In this essay, Pound, however obliquely, defines “seriousness” in art as a refusal to falsify the report: “[b]ad art is inaccurate art” (*LE* 43). The arts, runs Pound’s main contention, “give us our best data for determining what sort of creature man is [...] The arts provide the data for ethics” (*LE* 46).

What qualifies the artist to provide these data for ethics is his irrefutability, or, his seriousness and accuracy (i.e., his concentration and precision): “I mean beauty, not slither, not sentimentalizing about beauty, not telling people that beauty is the proper and respectable thing, I mean beauty. You don’t argue about an April wind, you feel bucked up when you meet it” (*LE* 45). Such immaculate certitude is the result of “a reasonable number of observations of any given phenomena” (*LE* 46), though Pound habitually presents his findings not as *data* but as *certitude* about the data (in this sense the truth remains at least performative, if not now performative of rhythms). Loath to explain himself, he presents his findings without example. This is the application of

“scientific” method as rhetorical device, not science proper, though Pound contends otherwise: the serious artist “is scientific in that he presents the image of his desire, of his hate, of his indifference as precisely that, as the precise image of his own desire, hate or indifference” (*LE* 46). The inductive method of knowing precision when it is encountered sounds a lot like a rationale for a coterie of *illuminati*. Pound has not abandoned the notion of the specialist, either:

The touchstone of art is its precision. This precision is of a various and complicated sort and only the specialist can determine whether certain works of art possess certain sorts of precision [...] It is no more possible to give in a few pages full instructions for knowing a masterpiece than it would be to give full instructions for all medical diagnoses (*LE* 48).

Pound admits to some of the changes in attitude and perspective in his critical thinking which I am trying to describe. In a 1936 note to his various treatises on composition and style, aptly entitled “Honesty of the Word Does Not Permit Dishonesty of the Matter”, he writes that in his earlier criticism he shows “just contempt” for the “falsity of a writer who would not face technical problems” (*MA* 121). Such an indifference to technique, to skill and to training, is also an indifference to “*ethos*” and to “values of any kind”. And then Pound revises the vocabulary of that most famous of earlier statements: “An artist’s technique is a test of his personal *validity*. Honesty of the word is the writer’s first aim, for without it he can communicate nothing efficiently” (*MA* 121). The statement on “rhythm”, which had been the first tenet of his “Credo” in “A Retrospect”, now is replaced by a new primary consideration, the “honesty of the word”: “without *le mot juste*, without exact expression, the fitting of right word to the thing, no truth can exist, a man can neither communicate with another, nor

can he present the truth to himself, or to get his ideas into any sort of order”; “respect for honest writers, and contempt for the defilers” (*MA* 121). The replacement of “sincerity” with “validity” is telling, not least because in contravention of his own warnings about precise definitions, I think Pound insufficiently discriminates between them. “Validity” comes from the Latin *valere*, “to be strong”. Where “technique as a test of man’s sincerity” had meant, as I understand it, rhythmical innovation as a means of determining a man’s expertise (in rhythmical innovation!), Pound now means that the “technique” of using words correctly determines a man’s power. It strikes me that “validity” also has scientific and logical connotations that Pound might be keen to invoke. It legitimises (validates) his own claims, his own project. Because of course one can be sincere (in the everyday sense) at the same time as making unsound or invalid claims. But what can *correctly* mean in this circumstance? The difficulty, or impossibility, of knowing a word to mean “one particular thing” was in fact the very occasion of technique as a test of man’s sincerity in the 1910s. Words that mean “one particular” thing were, in *Gaudier-Brzeska*, derided as symbols. It was in opposition to them that sincerity took on importance.

This shift in emphasis on what is meant by sincerity has clear implications for the kind of poems that Pound would write. In 1940, Pound publishes *Cantos LII-LXXI*, a sequence that contains poems he had been working on since the late 1920s (though other sequences of cantos were published in the intervening years: *Eleven New Cantos* was published in 1934 and *Fifth Decad of Cantos* was published in 1937). While this sequence, *Cantos LII-LXXI*, is by no means the first to import foreign material into the poetry proper, it is unique in the *extent* to which it quotes the reported speech of historical characters.⁴⁹ Rebecca Beasley describes this method of literary production in

⁴⁹ Critics largely refer to this habit or tendency of importing foreign material directly into the text of *The Cantos* as Pound’s “collage” technique. Marjorie Perloff is amongst the

the “Malatesta Cantos” (cantos 8-11) as the transfer of “historical documents into the poem in extended quotations, without revising them into poetic form” (*Visual Culture of Modernism* 204). While she rightly contests the appropriateness of the appellation “collage”, since there is no record of Pound ever being enthusiastic about its particular techniques, her more important point is that the “Malatesta Cantos” imported “extra-poetic material” in a “gesture of supreme self-confidence in the individual’s constructive powers”, so that while the poem is indeed an “intervention in art in general”, it also “argues for the primacy of the individual artist” (204).

For only the second time in the poem does Pound, in *Cantos LII-LXXI*, allow extensive and sustained secondary material in the poem. The “Malatesta Cantos” used extensive quotation from letters found in Sigismundo Malatesta’s postbag; in *Cantos LII-LXXI*, Pound seems determined to outdo that feat: the vast majority of everything in the first ten cantos is composed from matter taken directly from the *Li Ki*, or *Book of Rites*, and from de Mailla’s eighteenth-century *Histoire Générale de la Chine*. The latter ten cantos—which critics generally refer to as the “Adams cantos”—are taken, again almost entirely verbatim, from *The Works of John Adams*. Everything therein, especially in the Adams cantos, is set down—albeit, in fragments—as they were spoken and written by the person who spoke or wrote them.

These cantos have received relatively little commentary compared with earlier

most enthusiastic critics to speak on behalf of this convention. Her analogy between Pound’s fragmented textual surface and those of Cubist and Dadaist art can be found in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (181). The tendency is considered also by Charles Altieri in “Picasso’s Collages and the Force of Cubism” (8-33); James Laughlin in *Pound as Wuz* (107); and Jacob Korg in “The Dialogic Nature of Collage in Pound’s *Cantos*”. In *The Tale of the Tribe*, Michael Andre Bernstein sees Canto 8 as a “decisive turning point in modern poetics” (40). Mike W. Malm has offered an alternative description of Pound’s technique; referring particularly to the *Fifth Decad of Cantos*, he describes this section as using what Möbius called “quotational montage”, a condition where “whole passages consist chiefly or exclusively of passages from other [...] works” (*American Poetry* 73). For a rather different attempt to define the “texture” of the poem, see Joseph Conte’s “The Smooth and the Striated: The Compositional Texture of the Modern Long Poem”.

sections of the poem, especially compared to the later *Pisan Cantos*, for a very common reason: they lack interesting technique! Clark Emery objects

not to the quality of the lines, but to the method by which the Adams cantos are developed. They are altogether too crowded with fragments [...] They lack continuity, do not flow; and there is too little variety and relief from focus upon Adams. Pound seems to have overrun his limits here (*Ideas Into Action* 177).

Kenner argues in *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* that the Adams cantos are an “intended analogy of the Confucian *Analects*, of which Pound, remarking ‘Points define a periphery’, has noted that they ‘should be considered rather as definitions of words’, as the Adams’ quotation defines one aspect of ‘elegance’” (219). George Dekker, in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, refutes Kenner’s claim, finding the Adams cantos “inevitably very different in character: they are, unmistakably, extracts from a fuller context, and therefore less sufficient than the *Analects*” (184). Donald Davie in *Poet as Sculptor* thinks Pound’s “cuts and compressions and juxtapositions make a ‘nonsensical hurly-burly’ of Adams’s life” (163). It is a common objection. Daniel Pearlman too, for example, finds the Adams cantos filled with “excessive detail” (231). By way of example, here is an excerpt from the source text Pound was consulting, followed by what he made of it:

In this possible case, a minister here from Congress would be useful. In case the armed neutrality take it up, a minister authorized to represent the United States to all the neutral courts, might be of use [...] You will receive herewith enclosed a commission as minister plenipotentiary to the United Provinces of the low countries, with instructions for your

government on that important mission, as also a plan of a treaty with those States, and likewise a resolve of Congress relative to the declaration of the Empress of Russia, respecting the protection of neutral ships (Adams *John Adams Speaking* 400).

And from Canto 69:

In case a minister here from Congress wd/ be useful

...if the neutrality, a minister to all neutral courts

might be useful

Dec. 31 Amsterdam 1780

1st Jan. Philadelphia

yr/ commission plenipotentiary sent herewith (*C* 69|403).

In a recent investigation of what has been more loosely called Pound's "documentary method" (Cookson 75), David Ten Eyck argues that in the "direct presentation of texts" in the Adams cantos Pound has taken literally the notion that "history is a schoolbook for princes" and that "history can only be objectively and accurately 'included' in poetry through the direct presentation of texts" ("History and Anonymity" 284).⁵⁰ The source, he goes on to contend, has "itself become the subject of these cantos; and what is now essential is not so much where events occurred in history, but how they are recorded in *The Works of John Adams*" (284). This is an

⁵⁰ In putting scare quotes around "included", Ten Eyck is, I think, referring to a definition of epic Pound often offered. On 14 September 1933 Pound writes to Harriet Monroe: "Dear Aarriet [sic]: I know you hate like hell to print me, and that an *epic* includes history and history ain't all slush and babies' pink toes. I admit that economics are *in themselves* uninteresting, but heroism *is* poetic, I mean it is [a] fit subject for poesy" (*SL* 247; original emphases).

important innovation in the techniques of sincerity, since in poems like “The Return” and “An Object”, the poem—and its poet’s skills—had been the central contention. In the Adams cantos, Pound offers a sort of greatest hits of the great man’s musings, correspondences, et cetera. In using language like “direct presentation of texts”, Ten Eyck comes close to making an oblique connection between the Adams cantos and imagism. I want to make that connection now.

The Adams cantos can be conceived as developments of imagism if one heeds what Nicholls’s thought were the warnings of the scare-quotes around the word “thing” in Pound’s early imagist tenets. One needs to prefer, as well, the less-quoted description of “the image is itself the speech” from *Gaudier-Brzeska* to the more common interpretation of the “direct treatment of the ‘thing’”. Burton Hatlen, for example, gives a succinct but ultimately still problematic run-down, saying that Pound, in “A Retrospect”, “clearly assumes there *are* things, and that the words of the poet can give us access to these things” (“Pound and/or Benjamin” 74). Hatlen here still assumes that “thing” means simply “physical object” rather than the utterance being presented as a poem (as though either a physical object *or* a poem could be simple).

The truth of the Adams cantos inheres almost exclusively in Pound’s transposing what was said or written. The clipped “hurly-burly”, as Davie describes it, is an effect consequential of Pound’s intention to delete everything *except* what Adams said or wrote, thereby in perfect obeisance to the second tenet of imagism: “To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” (*LE* 3). If the Adams cantos do proceed according to this rule, they also accord with the first tenet of imagism, to directly treat the “thing”. With a few exceptions (outlined below), Pound does not, for the most part, intervene by *adding* anything.

The method exacts a considerable cost for intelligibility, but it is its purpose to do so. In this sense, the Adams cantos retain a thread of relation to the sincerity of

Pound's earlier imagist poems insofar as precision of presentation is still considered important. Yet even the most sympathetic critics of the Adams cantos, like Kenner or Ten Eyck, think the sequence has flaws: "there are some serious questions to be asked about the ethics and the limitation of this type of approach. Yet I would suggest that in spite of their many faults [...]" (Ten Eyck 288). The point, though, surely, of cantos 62-71 is to *have* flaws, to be *sine cera*, without wax? Their purpose is to present directly and with a minimum of contextualising information, the gists and piths of what was said and written by the subject—in this sense, the Adams cantos veer away from imagism to stress the importance of "man standing beside word". In fact, the very action of assembling a text in such a highly recalcitrant manner means that sincerity is no longer an expertise to be tested and so confirmed, but a method to be followed.

The proof of this is in the relative demotion of the third tenet of imagism. Using another man's words, with albeit hitherto unseen faithfulness to them, means that the injunction to, "as regarding rhythm, compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome" (*LE* 3) becomes somewhat irrelevant. Rhythmic presentation is less important than sticking to "what was said", so that sincerity is less a skill than an adamancy or constancy, or even, actually, a sort of faithfulness. While Pound's almost total reliance upon the words of John Adams keeps intact both assertions and to a large extent the rhythms of *that* man's utterances, these assertions and rhythms no longer *test* sincerity, but *constitute* it. In transposing Adams's words, Pound diminishes the opportunity for his own inventiveness. This is not, for instance, mere translation. Content, and now quite a lot of the *form*, is being re-exhibited, albeit in a seriously diminished state. Far from a "collage" or "montage" technique used to test Adams's sincerity, it is Pound's sincerity that can be seen to assert itself in the dissolved context (again, a kind of acid test) of the damaged text. The fragmentary presentation of the source is expressive of Pound's peculiar brand of sincerity. These cantos are awfully

hard (or boring) to read because the poet's emergent emphasis on "individual words" is ranged against the connective ligatures of contiguous syntax.

Which explains why so many critics have themselves stayed away from such cantos. The sequence is commonly seen as an over-long and eccentric record of one man's reading of another man's writing. Which is of course correct: over the course of the sequence Pound trawls through *The Works of John Adams*. This fact raises the question of structure, or its lack thereof. Pound moves methodically through his source, lifting random phrases from it and placing them into their new context without using any particular kind of design other than personal whimsy. While the Adams cantos do tend to "foreground the authority of legal texts and call repeatedly for the clear definition of words" (Ten Eyck 288), their apparent structural randomness is legible as a backhanded reaffirmation of Pound's own undiminished authority. In other words, the Adams cantos are important transitional texts for Pound. They show the poet forfeiting some control over a strictly personal organisation of the text in order to appeal to some other, already established authority. Using Adams's words as he himself set them down is by no means *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum*, but it is an important relinquishment of strict control over formal invention.

One has to wonder why Pound writes like this. I want to suggest that the relative demotion of formal considerations is connected to the notion of sincerity as precise definition and as "man standing beside word". Speaking of just such tactics, Trilling writes (of modernists in general) that "for all their intention of impersonality, they figure in our minds exactly as persons, as personalities, of a large and exemplary kind" (*SA* 7). He means this—specifically in relation to Joyce and Eliot—as a damning criticism, a failure of their ruse. But I think Pound had this in mind and wanted this. For as critics such as Maud Ellmann in *The Poetics of Impersonality* and Jean Michel Rabaté in *Language, Sexuality and Ideology in The Cantos* have contended, "the purpose of the mask

is to restore the essential link between the speaker and his words” (Ellmann 140).

Rabaté observes that Pound, after Yeats, “played on the etymology per-sona, a mask *through which* a voice can be mimicked; but masks possess still another aperture, the two holes for the eyes” (26). *The Works of John Adams* is, in a sense, a step towards the perfection of the mask since it seems like no mask at all—there is nothing in *The Works of John Adams*, for instance, to translate, and so to make his own through technical demonstration, in the way Pound made the poems of *Cathay* his own; nor is there any question as to the historical specificity of Adams’s “voice”. It is useful to recall that Pound says he *began* the search for truth, for “oneself” and for “the real” using personae, and then later used the purportedly more “objective” imagist poems (GB 85).

That search continued in the Adams cantos, where “direct treatment of the ‘thing’” took on a new meaning, especially since the “thing” being directly treated was no longer the poet’s own utterance but his part-organisation of another man’s words. In particular, “treatment” seems to be something like “subjection to the action of a chemical agent” in view to dissolving some material and preserving other material. This action looks very much like the poet is pursuing a theory of essences. So far as sincerity is concerned, what was once a pretty radical idea about its relation to technique and to skill now risks being restored to its older notion of purity.

ORIGINATE, PROMOTE

As a consequence of Pound's translations of Confucian texts, "sincerity" took up a new principal position in his lexicon. Pound made two translations of the *Ta Hio*, and in both instances he construes sincerity as a quality of intention. In 1928, Pound first translated the *Ta Hio* as *The Great Learning*—it appeared first as a University of Washington Bookstore pamphlet, and then (in 1939) as a New Directions pamphlet. Pound worked from Guillaume Pauthier's French edition *without* a Chinese text version to hand. Beginning again whilst incarcerated in the Army Detention and Training Center at Pisa, and finally publishing in 1947, Pound made another translation based on James Legge's translation. A central passage of Pound's version reads:

The men of old wanting to clarify and diffuse throughout the empire that light which comes from looking straight into the heart and then acting, first set up good government in their own states; wanting good government in their states, they first established order in their own families; wanting order in their own families, they first disciplined themselves; desiring self-discipline, they rectified their own hearts; and wanting to rectify their hearts, they sought precise verbal definitions of their inarticulate thoughts (the tones given off by the heart); wishing to attain precise verbal definitions they set out to extend their knowledge to the utmost. This completion of knowledge is rooted in sorting things into organic categories (*Con* 30-1).

The phrase "precise verbal definition" is not something Pound cribbed from Legge.

Legge's translation reads: "wishing to rectify their hearts they first sought to be sincere

in their thoughts. Wishing to be sincere in their thoughts [...]” (*Chinese Classics* 222).

Looking into Pound’s 1928 version, one reads: “those who desired this rectitude of spirit, tried first to make their intentions pure and sincere; those who desired to render their intentions pure and sincere, attempted first to perfect their moral intelligence” (*Ta Hio* 6). In the years intervening between 1928 and 1947, “pure” and “sincere” have come to mean “precise verbal definition of inarticulate thoughts”. It is an extremely confusing idea: how can one be precise about one’s thoughts if they are *inarticulate*?

What does that mean? Catching a glimmer in “inarticulate thoughts” of the notion of the precise registration of the exact “emotion” or “shade of emotion” from the “credo” section of “A Retrospect”, we can notice that Pound has quite literally replaced poetry’s rhythm (which corresponds to these emotions and shades thereof) with “precise verbal definition”. But “inarticulate” does more than just that: insofar as it denotes something like “unfluid” or “not joined up”, it very accurately describes the fragmented poetics of *Cantos LXII-LXXI*, and even more so, those of *Rock-Drill*.

The next section of the Confucian text, having established the fact that organic knowledge (what both Pound and Fenollosa believed was scientific about “oriental” nature) is the nadir of an arc, bends all the way back out again, so that:

When things had been classified in organic categories, knowledge moved toward fulfilment; given the extreme knowable points, the inarticulate thoughts were defined with precision (the sun’s lance coming to rest on the precise spot verbally). Having attained this precise verbal definition (*aliter*, this sincerity), they then stabilized their hearts, they disciplined themselves; having disciplined themselves [...] (*Con* 32-3).

“*Aliter*”, as in “(*aliter*, this sincerity)”, is a piece of legal jargon meaning “otherwise”; and as a piece of (albeit obsolescent) mathematical jargon, it denotes either an alternative method or a proof of a result, inserting therefore the double hint that sincerity is at once something analogous to “precise verbal definition” *and* proved by “precise verbal definition” (i.e., sincerity is validity). In Pound’s translations of Confucius, sincerity and verbal precision are actually synonymous terms.

The conflation of these notions is not exactly foreign to Confucian ethics, writes Feng Lan. They are often combined into a theory that holds that “language is not an *a priori* given predating human existence but rather a nominative act, the primal performance of the creative intelligence by which human beings prescribe actual things, determine existential conditions, and demarcate the distinctions in socio-political relations” (Lan 46). But what is interesting about Pound’s translations is the consistency of their conflation. And even when Pound does follow Legge’s translations of sincerity, Lan continues, “Pound’s ‘sincerity’ cannot be relegated to the same Christian ethics as inscribed in Legge’s version; rather, the term unequivocally signifies [...] ‘activity which defines words with precision’” (71).

In *Chung Yung: The Unwobbling Pivot*, Pound writes/translates that sincerity is the “precision of terms”, which is “heaven’s process. What comes from the process is human ethics. In sincerity man finds the axis without forcing himself to do so” (*Con* 168-9). *Without forcing himself to do so?* Long gone is the man who would find it right to write: “I think the artist should master all known forms and systems of metric, and I have with some persistence set about doing this” (*LE* 9). Instead:

intelligence [which] comes from sincerity is called nature or inborn talent; sincerity produced by reason is called education, but sincerity (this

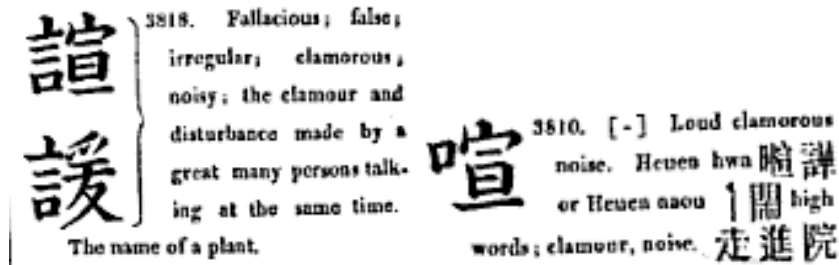
activity which defines words with precision) will create intelligence as if carved with a knife-blade (*Con* 171-3).

This is sincerity as language filed to its “narrowest edge of meaning”. Furthermore, the sincerity Pound seems ready to promote is one not far from that which Carlyle described in *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. The most salient feature of that sincerity for the present discussion is that it is not the result of work.

Of course, such adamant demands for precise definitions are, when it comes to Pound’s understanding of Chinese, considerably ironic. Ming Xie has shown that Pound’s etymological explanations of some Chinese characters were at best “far-fetched and merely fanciful” and have “no basis in Chinese etymology” (*Appropriation* 237); what Pound saw as new and exciting metaphors were in fact “conventionally ‘metonymic’ images” that, in Pound’s handling of them, “risk being sentimentalized as exoticism” (*Appropriation* 69).⁵¹ In an interesting letter dated 9 October 1945 to Dorothy from the DTC, Pound asks his wife to look up two ideograms, “3818” and “3810”, in *Morrison*. Using his amateur powers of etymological perception (quite remarkably a “sincerity” that emerges *not* from training or work but from a sense of natural or innate talent), he speculates, positively, the former “seems to be | word & constant”; and the latter

⁵¹ Pound’s interests in—and problematical relationship with—the Chinese language in general and with Confucian texts in particular is the subject of a number of highly qualified and enlightening studies already. Chief amongst the more recent of them is Feng Lan’s *Ezra Pound and Confucianism* (2005). Lan offers an extensive analysis of Pound’s various translations. A particularly compelling observation concerns Pound’s “Aristotelian” organisation of *The Unwobbling Pivot*, an intervention which forces the whole work, Lan argues, into a westernised “thematic structure” (43). Ming Xie’s important study, *Ezra Pound and the Appropriation of Chinese Poetry* (1999), offers insight into the early poems as well as into Pound’s later handlings and mishandlings. The other important recent publication is Zhaoming Qian’s (editor) *Ezra Pound and China* (2003). For a brief but incisive account of some of Pound’s influential misappropriations of the Chinese poetic canon, see J. H. Prynne’s “China Figures” (1983).

“mouth & constant | also the idea of wind circulating in a closed space??” (*Letters in Captivity* 125). Here is what *Morrison* says they mean:



(264).

So, Pound was obviously off the mark. This kind of idiosyncratic adaptation of what seemed like an authoritative discourse was his common practice. As Lan shows, Pound aligned the *zheng ming* (rectify names) and *cheng yi* (to attain precise verbal definitions) with his own aesthetic considerations; they are made into poetic rather than strictly civil, administrative or political virtues, in an attempt to re-establish the political value of the poet and the social value of poetry at large (Lan 67).

This tendency—to claim the authority of other, ancient texts whilst abusing not just their subtleties but often even their main or actual meanings—is a practice critics have recently begun to collate. Peter Makin begins “Ideogram, ‘Right Naming’ and the Authoritarian Streak” by sympathetically aligning himself with Pound’s call for clear language in public discourse, but quickly moves on to diagnose a tendency towards prejudice in Pound’s practice, in which the poet’s own personal feelings obscure an understanding of technical terms. He offers an incisive reading of Pound’s use of Bishop Grosseteste’s word “diaphana” and finds that Pound’s temperamental dismissal of philological practices in view to developing a “method of haste” leads him to misunderstand the term completely (123). For Pound, diaphana are things into which light penetrates and diffuses, revealing their form and structure; Grosseteste uses the

term in a passage about refraction, as in a prism. Diffusion is not refraction.⁵² The question then is, as J. H. Prynne puts it succinctly in a 1963 letter to Olson,

why in hell didn't he [Pound] look for the facts? There is indeed a poignant mythos attached to our thinking about the operative pressures that move our lives, and the role that this has played in the development of our modern cosmology; but it would take more than a certain precision of reference to disentangle this, and without such modest care all speculation is reduced to the merest complaint (CORC Series II 206).

The important thing to understand is that even in getting it wrong Pound is being, according to the definition he gleaned from Confucian texts, sincere. The truth might no longer be the individual; but the individual can still make claims on truth.

Prynne likely asks the question rhetorically, having in mind a pretty good idea as to why Pound failed to seek the facts about his materials. It was in his interest, as *poet* and not *historian* or *philologist*, *not* to look for them. Pound had had in mind for a long time what Prynne has elsewhere called the “Jeffersonian ideal” of the “informed and cultivated individual, well-read in history, and with an active mind” (qtd. in Dorn “Charles Olson Memorial Lectures” n.p.). Using such attributes as means of claiming influence for the purpose of learning, however, is a misapplied idea: “the poet going for influence in such an excluded circuit [as poetry]” makes the claim “to power a most

⁵² As Makin alerts readers, the Grosseteste text in question is *Die Philosophischen Werke* ed. Ludwig Baur (Münster: Aschendorffsche, 1912. p. 73). He also usefully provides as reference A. C. Crombie’s *Robert Grosseteste and the Origins of Experimental Science, 1100-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961; pp. 117-10). Makin concludes that nothing in Grosseteste’s text could have lead to the metaphysics Pound associates with the phrase *per plura diaphana*. “The phrase itself, misunderstood, simply acted as a trigger for clusters of ideas Pound brought to it” (139 note 11).

peculiar joke” (Prynne qtd. in Dorn “Charles Olson Memorial Lectures” n.p.). Not that one necessarily must play what Pound derisively called the literary-critical game of “FIND THE AUTHOR” (*ABCR* 147), but in trying to answer why Pound did not or chose not to look for the facts—or rather, in suggesting some ideas about what he was doing *instead* of giving them or looking for them—one cannot help but notice some important clues in his turn towards authoritarianism up to and during the Second World War.

Pound’s comparison of Jefferson to Mussolini in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* is perhaps his most famous defence of authoritarianism. It is, also, interestingly a tract where evidence itself is minimised but rhetoric is maximised; but more importantly, Pound at one stage even acknowledges how this condition impinges on form:

I am not putting these sentences in monolinear 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 facts and putting them all together (*Jefferson and/or Mussolini* 28; original emphasis).

The post-Enlightenment validity of empirical investigation notwithstanding, surely in 1915 Pound would have wanted to suggest that the *way* he says something *does* somehow impart something to the reader interested in *knowing*? And what “old form of trickery” is that? Is it logical discourse or “monolinear syllogistic arrangement” of argument? In “old form”, a lingering antipathy for the *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum* is legible; but so is his now-abandoned skill in prosodic arrangement.

Operative here as well is a perverse sort of reasoning, namely, that the appeal to authorities must not be one readily or easily acceptable to the general reader. Everyone

knows what iambic pentameter or trochaic tetrameter is. As such, for someone like Pound interested in asserting his own authority, he cannot appeal to those more familiar, therefore common, therefore general sources. Instead, his own authority consists in his making it difficult for his readers to understand what he is talking about, and why (i.e., to what authorities and to what end). It is as though skill in technique has been supplanted by a doctrine of rank obscurantism.

Pound's enthusiasm for Mussolini remained throughout the war, despite his (Pound's) opposition to the war itself. His pacifist inclinations aside, Pound began recording bi-weekly radio speeches for Radio Rome in January 1941 often characterised by fascist invective. He wrote about 300 speeches in all, desisting only after the Italian government fell in July 1943. Importantly for both Pound's own sense of intellectual freedom and in view of his subsequent indictment for treason, he spoke in these speeches always as a US citizen. From 29 January 1942, the following draft statement preceded his broadcasts:

Rome Radio, acting in accordance with the fascist policy of intellectual freedom and free expression of opinion for those who are qualified to hold it, has offered Dr. Ezra Pound the use of the microphone twice a week. It is understood that he will not be asked to say anything whatsoever against his conscience, or anything incompatible with his duties as citizen of the United States of America (qtd. in Doob xiii).

The preamble nicely encapsulates what Pound now means by sincerity—his speaking always as a man desirous to propagandise of his *own* accord, free from official or external coercion—even as it underlines his life-long commitment to expertise, which, aside from being quite highly qualified to discuss matters of poetry, was also largely a

sort of accelerated snobbery: “free expression of opinion for those who are qualified to hold it”; Dr. Ezra Pound received an *honorary* doctorate from Hamilton College in 1939. There is something appropriate in that, given that “honorary” means “without the usual requirements”. Partly because of such oddball patriotism, and partly because of frequent *non-sequiturs* in the oftentimes hysterical-sounding diatribes of his radio speeches, Italian officials of the Federal Communication Commission suspected him of speaking in some form of Allied code. The fact bears some relevance to the “disturbed reflections” of “An Object”, that which “hath a code and not a core”. Archibald MacLeish wrote to Pound at St. Elizabeths in a 5 July 1956 letter: “your information may be horse crackers but your heart is sound” (YCAL 32 | 1329).

Of course, for such outspoken opposition to US involvement in the war, upon cessation of the hostilities Pound was detained by US military forces, held first at the DTC near Pisa, and then, following his extradition to America in 1946 to answer charges of treason, subsequently incarcerated at St. Elizabeths hospital in Washington D.C. after being found mentally unfit to stand trial. Again, without wanting to play “find the author”, these events might have had some serious implications for Pound’s notion of sincerity. By way of conclusion to *Sincerity and Authenticity*, Trilling writes that society might be thought of

not as civilization’s agent exacting for the boon of human development a price that was high yet not finally beyond what the means of the race might afford, but as the destroyer of the very humanity it pretended to foster. What was not inevitable was that this line of thought should issue in the view that insanity is a state of human existence which is to be esteemed for its commanding authenticity (*SA* 168).

Certainly Pound was always wont to position himself antagonistically towards everybody else, structurally as well as semantically. The above-cited defence of the honesty of his non-coherent arguments in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (which, as it happens, he is right to describe as not *monolinear*) is a case in point. It is important to remember that for all Pound's insistence upon exact definitions and precise terminologies, his most basic claims to authority always lay in formal ingenuities. In the beginning, Pound claimed to believe in technique as a test of a man's sincerity, by which he meant that expertise was proved by the demonstration of skill. By the late 1930s and into the war years, sincerity is increasingly asserted in advance as some authentic condition that is proved not by skill but by an idiosyncrasy of definition and of design. In *Guide to Kulchur*, for instance, Pound says that an "imperfect broken statement"

if uttered in sincerity often tells more to the auditor than the most meticulous caution of utterance could [...] The sincere reader or auditor can find in those words a very profound intuition of verity. It is a personal aesthetic. The bare "wrong" phrase carries a far heavier charge of meaning than any timorous qualification (129).

The point, then, is a peculiar kind of de-arrangement of sense, in order to show not skill but confidence—even though here, too, readers might detect a restatement of Pound's earlier assertion that "when one really feels and thinks, one stammers with simple speech" (*SL* 49). I consider it highly improbable Pound was really insane, but Trilling's comments nevertheless offer some interesting points to consider. Trilling says that the idea that insanity is in fact esteemed for its authenticity is grounded on two assumptions. First, "that insanity is a direct and appropriate response to the coercive inauthenticity of society [...]. It is at least an act of criticism that exposes the true nature

of society [...] it is also an act, expressing the intention of the insane person to meet and overcome the coercive situation” (SA 168).

Secondly, Trilling suggests that “insanity is a negation of limiting conditions in general, a form of personal existence in which power is assured by self-sufficiency [...] The position may be characterised as [...] an intellectual mode to which analytical argument is not appropriate” (SA 169). This is traceable as a poetic development in *The Cantos*. What I mean is that in the late *Cantos* especially, as a result of the one hundred and eighty degree turnabout in the poet’s estimation and understanding of sincerity, Pound’s prosody can be thought of as both invested in the thwarting of external analyses *and* as uninterested in demonstrating complex analyses of its own (so that his poems are at once exempt from criticism and things which are inherently and highly judgmental). In order to say something about how this happens, I want to turn now to the cantos of *Section: Rock-Drill*.

SECTION: ROCK-DRILL

The opening pages of *Section: Rock Drill de los Cantares*, cantos 85-95, are designed to immediately induce readerly disorientations. The first word of Canto 85 is not only in Chinese but is also amongst the largest ideograms in the whole poem—



(C 85 | 663)⁵³

—which Pound translates as “great sensibility”; the effect is to impress upon the reader a renewed didactic severity now that the author has sufficient access to secondary materials following his rather source-material-light stay at the DTC at Pisa. Canto 85, for one thing, contains more ideograms than any other. It is remarkable for its taking the program of *dichten* = *condensare* to extremes, as in this section, which is quite typical of Canto 85:

⁵³ The sequence in which a reader encounters ideograms in *The Cantos* as a whole will vary slightly depending on the edition she is consulting. Historically, Pound *first* uses an ideogram in *The Cantos*—the *cheng ming* or ‘right name’ ideogram—on the title page of *The Fifth Decad of Cantos* (1937), and again at the very end of the section, by way of conclusion to Canto 51. From 1975, complete editions of *The Cantos* place the *hsin* or “man standing beside word” ideogram (*Con* 22) at the end of Canto 34 (171). But Canto 34, as it originally appeared in *Eleven New Cantos, XXXI-XLI* (1934), does not contain it. Ron Bush has shown that *The Pisan Cantos* would have in fact included many *more* ideograms than they currently do if publishing conditions of the Pisan sequence had been better—if Pound wasn’t incarcerated in an Army detention centre and if New Directions had had the money to pay for their inclusion (“The Pisan Cantos” n.p.). It is a function of the retrospective imposition of sincerity as Pound eventually came to understand it that the first two ideograms readers now encounter in newer complete editions are those the poet took to mean “man standing beside word” and “right name”.

丕

p'i

The arrow has not two points

貳

pou éul cheu

pu erh⁴

“O nombreux officiers

Imperator ait.

邑

Iterum dico

太

T'AI MEOU 1637

1562

戊

武

OU TING 1324

1265

丁

cognovit aerumnas

TSOU KIA reigned 33 years

惟

wei (C 85 | 576).

Here Pound is clearly back working with esoteric sources and handling them with an inflexible recalcitrance. Davie goes so far as to suggest that *Rock-Drill* announces itself as “unreadable” (*Poet as Sculptor* 205); Canto 85, he argues, is a logical conclusion to ways of writing that “were adopted sporadically and inconsistently” in earlier sections, for here, Davie says, Pound has realised “how far a poem made up of marginalia upon a source can stand independent of that source”. Presumably it cannot stand at any distance whatsoever: “Canto 85 *has* to be read along with its source” (*Poet as Sculptor* 206); that source is Jesuit sinologist Séraphin Couvreur’s *Cheu King*, or *The History Classic*, first published in a trilingual (Chinese, French, Latin) edition in 1896.

Rock-Drill opens with two cantos that deal mostly with Chinese history. The next few cantos, 87-89, jostle various techniques of ideogrammatic compilation of nineteenth-century American historical texts, with a particular emphasis in Canto 88 on Thomas Hart Benton’s *Thirty Years’ View*. Cantos 90 to 93, and to slightly lesser extents 94 and 95, move radically away from the fraught historical and material conditions of 85-89 and toward a paradisaal poise and suavity indebted as much to Pound’s earliest imagist poems as to the more moving emotional passages of *The Pisan Cantos*: the rebarbative illegibility of cantos 85-89 works in stark contrast to the more contemplative cantos 90-95, as though the sequence as a whole enacts the distinction Pound makes in Canto 76 between two areas of human activity: “in historiography or in making anthologies” (C 76 | 476). Compare these samples from either half. From Canto 86:

CHÊN

震

Iou Wang, 770

幽
王

King Jou

killed by barbarians

義

†

和

Houo

in augustiis me defendisti (C 86 | 586-7).

And from Canto 92:

The four altars at the four coigns of that place,

But in the great love, bewildered

farfalla in tempesta

under rain in the dark:

many wings fragile

Nymphalidae, basilarch, and lycaena,
 Ausonides, euchloe, and errynis (C 92 | 639).

The first lobe of cantos models sincerity as self-sufficient, precise terminology not defined but only presented (their precision is rhetorical), so that readers are faced with a language very much purified of meaning (unless they speak Chinese, but even then the ideograms are not syntactically arranged). This is what Davie means when he calls these cantos illegible. The Confucian mandate toward precise definition is linked, prosodically, with an over-reliance on textual authority (as in the heavily Chinese character-laden excerpt quoted above), and more particularly, with a strong emphasis on single words. The second lobe is much more “readable”, indicative of a poet very much in control of his *own* mythological discourse. On the whole, *Rock-Drill* brings two central matters into urgent conflict: the foregrounding of versification designed for “condensation to maximum attainable” (SL 322) versus the poet’s own authorial commitment to give a more personal account of his private conceptions of paradise.

Risking naivety, Pound seems to have abandoned what might be broadly understood as the primary association of linguistic reference, that of word to thing, and presents in its place specimens of writing that are denuded of their referentiality (precisely, their *meaning*), therefore becoming difficult rhetorically (here is where Kermode’s “piece of string” gains relevance). We are, in these early cantos of *Rock-Drill*, clearly being *told* what is right, without much information about what such rightness might consist in. As Pound puts it at the beginning of Canto 89:

To know the histories



to know good from evil

經

And know whom to trust.

Ching Hao (C 89|610).

In all this, the “specialist” is also the “authority”. These cantos are written by, but also probably for, the expert. As such, “expertise” returns to take on a new thematic significance from the start of *Rock-Drill*: Queen Elizabeth, mentioned on the first page of Canto 85, is cited not solely in her capacity as an historical monarch, but more importantly, as a scholar: “Queen Bess translated Ovid” (89|563); in the same vein Cleopatra, well-known as a powerful sovereign, is presented as an explicator of economics: “Cleopatra wrote of the currency” (89|563). The whole section actually begins with a list of authorities. Canto 85:

LING⁴

靈

Our dynasty came in because of a great sensibility.

All there by the time of I Yin

All roots by the time of I Yin.

Galileo index'd 1616,

Wellington's peace after Vaterloo

伊尹

止

chih³

a gnomon,

Our science is from the watching of shadows;
 That Queen Bess translated Ovid,
 Cleopatra wrote of the currency,
 Versus who scatter old records
 ignoring the hsien² form



(C 85 | 563).

With such attention-grabbing names and Chinese characters paraded here, it might seem strange perhaps to inspect the most unpretentious of words in the foregoing passage, but just what sort of work is “our” doing in this passage? Substantial work, I think. The first usage of “our” refers only tangentially to the implied compiler of the *Chen King* from which the ideogram “LING” is taken. The pronoun “our” refers to an exclusive grouping that consists of all those named and elevated into the upper echelons of the poem’s commendation. It is after all in *Rock-Drill* that Pound does begin his attempts “to build light” (C 94 | 662), i.e., establish a personalised pantheon of the good. It is a pretty surreptitious disenfranchisement of the reader (unless she passively accepts these exemplary figures and unimpeachable luminaries too), one that stuns her as it solicits her submissive attention. The “our”, furthermore, legitimates as “appropriate” the circumstances of utterance—in this case a poet sufficiently expert so as to be qualified to make such discernments of virtue and seal them with ideogrammic signs. In “our” Pound is clearly including himself.

The question of expertise is being re-addressed in another way as well. It remains a vital fact about *The Cantos* that understanding the poem is possible only having first discovered what it is the poet thinks he is talking about. This can be said to

some extent about all poems, but Pound forces the issue, especially in *Rock-Drill*. In a letter written to Vanni Scheiwiller—the first publisher of *Rock-Drill*—Pound insists that “[n]obody can understand what the final cantos are ABOUT until they have read the earlier ones AND I doubt if anyone will have the necessary technique until they have been through the earlier parts the POEM, POEM, NOT POEMS (qtd. in Bacigalupo 231-2). It is as though the real substance, let alone argument, of *Rock-Drill* is in fact located elsewhere. In other words, Pound has shifted the responsibility of technique from himself to his readers: by *Rock-Drill*, it is *they* who need to train themselves over a quite long duration and have established themselves as experts.⁵⁴ Massimo Bacigalupo thinks the reader is being asked in what he calls Pound’s “desperately peremptory” manner of cantos 85 and 86 to agree to acquiesce to a text “impermeable to all objections” (240). Pound cannot “admit hesitation, doubt, self-irony, for then the whole shaky poetic-ideological edifice would collapse” (240). Would it? There are safeguards in place. For one thing, the text is so obscure that tracking down the sources, in Couvreur’s *Chen King*, say, is really hard work and ultimately sheds little light upon the rest of the text.

For another thing, cantos 85-89 are *serious*. Canto 85 is filled with moralising neither to be scoffed at nor is it easy to tell if its moralistic pronouncements refer to the text under particular consideration, or just “generally”: “Our science is from the watching of shadows” (C 85 | 563); “no mere epitome without organization” (C 85 | 564); “Their writings wither because they have no curiosity” (C 85 | 565); “Nor by vain disputations” (C 85 | 566); “no sitting down on a job” (C 85 | 567); “The pusillanimous | wanting all men cut down to worm-size” (C 85 | 568); “No classics, | no American

⁵⁴ Cf. Whitman’s “Song of Myself”: “Have you practis’d so long to learn to read? | Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?” (LG [1892] 30). What Pound *now* demands is something Whitman wanted to avoid from the beginning. In *ABCR* Pound asks laconically “how much of Walt Whitman is well written” (ABCR 79). “The man who really knows can tell all that is transmissible in a very few words” (ABCR 83). The two might have agreed on this point. Whitman claims ignorance and writes rather long-windedly; in *Rock-Drill*, Pound’s “knowledge” leads him to say very little indeed.

history, | no centre, no general root” (C 85 | 569); “study with the mind of a grandson” (C 85 | 570); “Les mœurs furent réformées | la vertu fleurit [morals reformed, virtue flourishes]” (C 85 | 571); et cetera. What is special about this canto is not *that* Pound moralises, but the extent to which the ambient material has been so radically diminished that any reader not willing to dig around in *Couvreur* will understand almost nothing but moral pronouncements (and even then very little); these pronouncements, furthermore, are presented almost like translations, even though they are often actually *interpretations*.

Such seriousness, as J. L. Austin remarks, “must not be joking”, as in, not like “writing a poem” (*How to do things with Words* 9). It is an important effect of Pound’s seriousness that Canto 85 is not “like” a poem, either. The Chinese characters are forcibly distinct from the rest of the canto’s grammar, so that they dominate the attention. As Bacigalupo notes, in these early *Rock-Drill* cantos “diction becomes compact and supple”, “shrinking into small bits of mosaic very unlike Pisa’s discourse-in-process”, which means that the whole thing nearly disintegrates into “units of expression” no longer than the “line phrases” that are its “irreducible atomic facts” (*Forméd Trace* 233). This is indeed true to some extent, but is mostly a function of the fracturing effects of the ideograms and only pertains to cantos 85-89, the first two in particular. It is important to note that the prosodic organisation of the lines is arranged around the “illegible” ideograms in a strange kind of textual phyllotaxis.

Hugh Kenner, noticing that Pound “tended to fix upon the constellated words in ancient texts, not on their syntactic connections” (*Pound Era* 68), suggests that because Pound was never a lazy man he must have preserved his (grammatical) ignorance of Greek and Chinese languages on purpose (*Pound Era* 69). In a 1935 letter to W. H. D. Rouse, Pound excoriates translations that preserve the source text’s unnecessary words, the “blank words for timing” that “make his work sound like

natural speech”. It is a remarkable demonstration of the damage this doctrine of condensation can inflict when taken to such extremes as in *Rock-Drill*. Pound then says: “When I suggested your doing a translation with *all* the meaning, I didn’t mean merely to put back *words*, or translations for words” (*SL* 269). In 1937, to H. L. Menken, he reiterates the point: “The job of the serious writer is to dissociate the *meaning* of one word from another” (*SL* 286). In *Rock-Drill*, the dissociation is so total that syntax can consist in little more than the arrangement of ideograms down the page. Expression itself has by this time wholly been reduced to mere inconsequence (it is a condition that ultimately emerges from Pound’s work in translation): “T’aint wot a man sez but wot he means that a traducer has got to get across” (*SL* 271). *Rock-Drill* often condescends to get across neither (for a better idea of what I mean, see Appendix two—figure 3).

Eva Hesse has remarked that in *Rock-Drill* “syntax yields to parataxis” and gives each word “full echo area” (48). Such parataxis is a function of sincerity. In *The Unwobbling Pivot* Pound provides a note to the reader in which he remarks that the book concerns “Confucian metaphysics”, and is divided into three parts: “the axis; the process; and sincerity, the perfect word, or the precise word” (95). “Perfect” is equivalent in meaning to “precise”; that tells us a lot about the method here deployed: perfect can be traced back to “facere”, to make; while precise can be traced to “praecis”, to cut short. Sincerity: to make short cuts.

What had been, for Pound, the measure of a poet—namely, his “irreproachable skill” (*LE* 283)—now looks more like the skill of seeming irreproachable. As Bacigalupo succinctly remarks, what captivates the reader about *Rock-Drill* is its unequivocal status as a textual object (232). Left mostly untranslated, the ideograms subdue the reader. This new authority is confident to the point of over-reduction; and yet, it can still sometimes be used to *underline*. Where ideograms are not left to run riot, they often serve to emphasise whatever point is being made. As in:

All, that has been, is as it should have been,

but what will they trust in

信 now?

“Alla non della”, in the Verona statement

οὐ ταῦτα . . . χαχοῖσι

Section Rock Drill (86 | 584).

The ideogram once translated as “man standing beside word” is now given as “trust”.

“All, that has been, is as it should have been” sounds like a pseudo philosophical rationalisation of Pound’s new interest in *not* labouring for new rhythms. Here “Alla non della” is an often-repeated quip from Mussolini, referring to a clarification of meaning Pound believed significant. Drawing up his Program of Verona for the Republic of Salò, Mussolini said: “It is a right *to* property not a right *of* property” (Terrell 485 note 63). The Greek text—“not all . . . ills”—is a busted phrase from Sophocles’s *Electra*, which Pound translated as “need we add cowardice to all the rest of these ills” (*Trachis* 50 note 1). This, like “SPLENDOR, | IT ALL COHERES” from his translation of *The Women of Trachis* (1957), is for Pound a key phrase. In *Trachis*, Hercules utters this phrase, removes his mask, faces the audience and says: “but you must help me | and don’t make me lose my temper, | don’t dither, and don’t ask me why. | This is the great rule: Filial Obedience” (*Trachis* 50). By now, if we have come this far in *The Cantos*, we trust Grampa Ez, right? If so, we must “study with the mind of a grandson” (C 85 | 570).

The mind of a grandson cannot fathom the authority of the grandfather as anything but absolute, presumably. “Authority” is a difficult term to get a hold of, so I want to try to think of it in a narrower way, that is, as a state of being *author*-like. This

construction indicates a certain doubling which is peculiarly active in *Rock-Drill*, where Pound becomes, finally, the person the poem has been hoping to portray: the organising force of the poem itself, its revealed intelligence: i.e., the poet as *both* composer and explicator of text. Taking up the tactics from his early experiments in personae, Pound enters the poem *as* Pound, in the role of expert in the writing of his own poem. As an entity he is required to explain some of the underlying principles of method that will help the reader understand. Right from the start of *Rock-Drill* Pound deploys a rhetoric of instruction. On the second page of the sequence:

Versus who scatter old records

ignoring the hsien² form

賢

and jump to the winning side

(turbae)

II. 9. have scopes and beginnings

tchoung

仁

智

chèn

jen²

chih⁴

i-li

are called chung¹⁻⁴

衷

仁 好

(1508, *Mathews*) (C 85 | 564).

These ideograms are lifted directly from Couvreur's translation of the *Chen King*. "II. 9." refers to "Livre II", "Chant 9" of the "Troisième Partie": "Sous l'empereur *Li wáng*, un ministre d'État engage l'un de ses collègues à combattre les flatteurs, qui oppriment le peuple et mettent le trouble dans la capitale" (*Chen King* 368).⁵⁵ Here, of course, flatterers (*les flatteurs*) are those who offer insincere praise. They are connected by virtue of ideogrammatic force to those who scatter records, or to those who, as it were, do not consolidate. "*Hsien*", which *Mathews* defines as "virtuous, worthy, good", is, importantly, described as a "form", thus tacitly shoring up the case for expedited prosody, so that Pound compiles content that corroborates his method of presentation. In his favoured idiom of electricity, the circuit is opened and closed simultaneously. That things have their proper names is a complete but not very detailed aesthetic ideology:

As against its hug as well as its blow,
I speak of Sir William Pulteney.

Name for name, king for king

𠄎 wang

𠄎 wang

Foreigners own 7 million

usury at 46 in violation,

if beneficial, why not several? (C 89 | 611)

⁵⁵ Pound writes a "note" at the end of Canto 85: "Kung said he added nothing. Canto 85 is a somewhat detailed confirmation of Kung's view that the basic principles of government are found in the Shu, the History Classic. The numerical references are to Couvreur's Chou King [sic]. Meaning of the ideograms is usually given in the English text; transliterations as in Couvreur and Mathews" (C 85 | 579). As it happens, most of the meanings of the ideograms in *Rock-Drill* are *not* given in English.

There is in *Rock-Drill*, as Pound writes a few lines later, “no mere epitome without organization” (C 85 | 564)—this itself is an important definition of the section’s poetics, since epitome means both “perfection” and “summary”. If these early cantos in *Rock-Drill* are sincere, they are so in defining their poetics by simply *saying what they are*. But, importantly, Pound fails to distinguish these statements on poetics from what he seems to say his source text is saying. Does “no mere epitome without organisation” refer to the teachings of the *Cheu King*? It certainly *sounds* like something Pound might have at least wilfully gleaned from his study of it (though, for the record, I have looked in the relevant passage from Couvreur’s *Cheu King*, Part III, Book II, and could not find it). It must be taken as probably referring to both, with the added complication that its provenance remains obscure. But the interface between epitome and organisation is clearly under consideration in the way the source text is being re-presented. Such ambiguity is a signature fact of this section:

But if you will follow this process

德

not a lot of signs, but the one sign

etcetera

plus always Τεχνη [*téchne*]

and from Τεχνη back to σεαυτον [*oneself*] (C 85 | 566).

Here the ideogram (*tê*) means virtue. In the “Terminology” section of *The Great Digest* Pound defines it as (with particular relevance to the question of sincerity): “[w]hat results, i.e., the action resultant from the straight gaze into the heart. The ‘know thyself’

carried into action” (*Con* 21). “Not a lot of signs, but the one sign” is a reiteration of “*dichten = condensare*” taken now to its material extreme, the absolute of linguistic sincerity, so that to write one thing is to mean one thing. From *téchne* back to oneself means that the latter follows on from the former. Pound the busy compositor rebukes the reader who might find this all a little overly compact with “Etcetera”, a throwaway line he cannot even be bothered to spell properly.

And so the profound abuts the casual as though the underlying point is that what is written accrues value *because* of its haphazardness, itself paradoxically an overt expression of authorial control: Pound can be casual about these truths because to be like that is to adopt a posture of knowing those truths by heart. Furthermore, to indicate, however minutely and fleetingly, that the process is somehow tedious, if not a downright cliché, is to propose a familiarity with what is being said so thorough that its elaboration would be superfluous.

This is important because I think it speaks directly against those commentators (Kenner, Davenport, Bacigalupo, Brooke-Rose, McGann) who have become strong proponents of Pound’s instructiveness and sought with often astonishing intelligence, sensitivity and learning to perform exegeses. Kenner surely goes too far in suggesting that here Pound’s structures are “to be validated” not “by his opinions, but by the unarguable existence of what exists”, or that *The Cantos* “proves by simply existing” (325). What Kenner lauds here is a rhetoric of irrefutability.

MAN STANDING BESIDE WORD

The Cantos in general, and *Rock-Drill* in particular, could not have been written if Pound had not largely abandoned many of the strictures he laid down in the 1910s and 1920s. How else might poets develop if not by changing their minds, let alone contravening their own most sacred beliefs?⁵⁶ *Rock-Drill* contravenes the strictures of sincerity by stating it directly. Sincerity as the precise definition of the word is stated, albeit in Latin, as far back as Canto 74:

in principio verbum

paraclete or the verbum perfectum: sinceritas

from the death cells in sight of Mt. Taishan @ Pisa (74 | 446-7).

It is a manner of expression he learned, literally, from ideograms, which, as Fenollosa wrote, bore their metaphors on their face. So when Pound says so explicitly in Canto 86, after an ideogram meaning *reverence*, that “you can know the sincere”, it creates a problem for its meaning as Pound had defined it in *Gaudier-Brzeska* in 1915. According to the argument of that essay, the moment one says one is something one ceases to be that thing. *Rock-Drill*, by the standards of 1915, is not a sincere sequence of poems. Sincerity is not its method so much as its ideal.

The point I want to make here again concerns Pound’s tendency in *Rock-Drill* to name its procedures through the explicit expression of ideas or themes or pertinent translations, as though merely saying something *in the poem* about the poem makes it

⁵⁶ As it happens, at the same time as Pound is writing these most rebarbative cantos, he was also making highly metrically regular translations from the *Classic Anthology as Defined by Confucius*. The mechanical rigidity of some of those poems is truly extraordinary. For an example of one, see the next chapter.

true. This is quite different from the auto-referential prosodies of “The Return” or “An Object”, though it might not be so foreign to the idea of *personae* that “implies not only masks but a man donning them” (Kenner “Broken” 3). “In *The Cantos*”, Kenner continues, “Pound’s personality makes strategic entrances and withdrawals, though the operations of his mind afford the dramatic continuity of the poem” (3). This coming and going of personality is similar to what Michael Davidson calls “Pound[‘s] intrud[ing] directly into his sources, quoting them verbatim and showing himself to be thinking about them” (Davidson *Ghostlier Demarcations* 105). For one thing, in *Rock-Drill*, parenthetical self-commentary functions as a guide, one that is at times if not critical or suspicious, at least keen enough to purport to also want veridical accuracy, which seems almost at odds with the rather offhand presentation. Parentheses, I want to note, are themselves literal instantiations of the model of sincerity Pound is applying here: the adjacency of “man standing beside word” is fitted, grammatically and rhetorically, to parentheses (from *parentithenai*, “to put in beside”). Though Pound’s parenthetical digressions are not essential to the *meaning* of the poem, they are necessarily “sincere” as structures of address. From Canto 86:

But some Habsburg or other
 ploughed his Imperial furrow,
 And old Theresa’s road is still there in Belgium.
 Tree-shadowed
 and her thalers
 were current in Africa,
 standard in our time,
 “characters by their coinage”;
 Cleopatra wrote of her coinage.

(Joseph two, verify? ploughed his furrow) (C 86 | 585).

It might be useful in this regard to recall what Pound said in 1962 about parenthesis:

“the struggle that one has when one meets another man who has had a lot of experience to find the point where the two experiences touch, so that he really knows what you are talking about” (“The Art of Poetry” n.p.). What clarification is afforded the reader here other than the poet’s own—perhaps staged—uncertainty about his own referents?

The passage itself offers an implicit guide to the mechanics of *Rock-Drill* itself:

“characters by their coinage” sounds a lot like “you can know a man by his word”.

Sieburth notes that *kharakter* in Greek refers to the upper die used by the coin maker or to the upper impression or mark on the coin, and that sovereignty is a signature of authority tantamount to the inscription of value or meaning into a material substance (“In Pound We Trust” 162-3). The value of money, as the precise meaning of words, “depends on what is there to meet it”.⁵⁷ The parenthesis, as a feature of such verse, is quite a long way from the maximum efficiency of expression we have come to associate with Pound in general and with these later, highly impacted cantos in particular. In doubling up his utterances (the ploughed furrow is mentioned twice; and “some Habsburg or other” is “Joseph two”), Pound provides a statement immediately followed by its restatement (or, the character and its impression). Repetitions of this kind abound in *Rock-Drill*; many repeated phrases recur throughout the sequence, intimating a prosody that is as *insistent* as it is resonant. In such ideogrammatic clusters, corroboration becomes a principal end of composition. This is, in brief, a kind of self-justification. It is also, actually, remarkably *inefficient*. Pound has made, in canto 85-86

⁵⁷ Pound makes it clear that he thinks money is a note for existing credit and not a licence to manufacture more credit *ex nihilo*. Hence, incidentally, the close connection between coinage and agriculture, in this passage, *et seq.* In 1940: “Who issues the money? The answer is *cultivate* the land” (SL 342; original emphasis). Also: “If a penny of land be perch | that is grammar | nummulary moving toward prosody” (C 97 | 691).

厥^{25.} A personal pronoun—he,
1680 she, it, its, his, hers, theirs,
etc.

(*Mathews* 238).

Here the parenthetical aside serves to set up a distinction between his own reading of the ideogram and what it “really” means—if sincerity is the precise definition of the word, but the precise definition of the word entails something other than philological explication, then sincerity seems something no longer testable, but rather, merely attestable (and idiosyncratic). Pound is attempting to drive home the similarity between the autodidactic self, who learns in his own way and sees things accordingly, and the good sovereign (“wei heou”), who also proceeds to implement his authority not by deliberate use of skill but “naturally”, as though the honed skills of misreading possess some measure of relation to the naturalness of an inborn-sovereign’s power. It sounds like a tautological arrangement because it is:

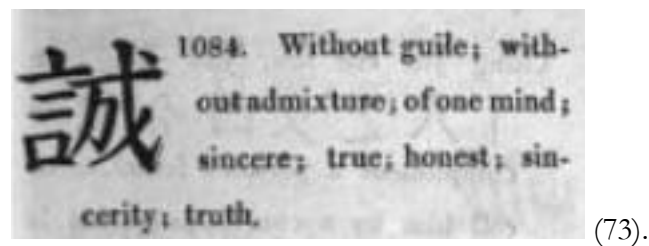
成 成
bringest to focus
ch’eng *ch’eng*

Zagreus

Zagreus (*C* 77 | 495).

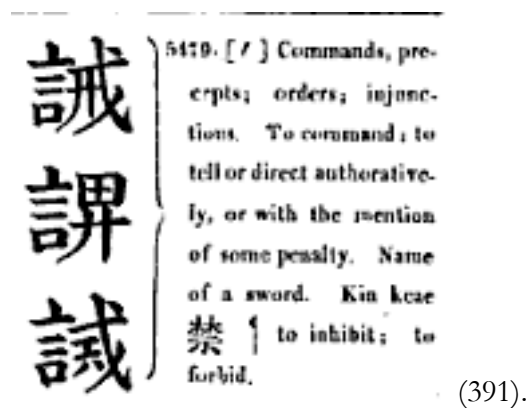
This passage is, admittedly, from *The Pisan Cantos*, but Pound’s handling of ideograms therein nicely anticipates his later use of them in *Rock-Drill*. Here the ideograms mean “to perfect”, and the reader might recognise them as the right-hand components of what Pound defines as sincerity, the precise definition of the word.

As it happens, Pound would likely have found textual evidence in the ideogram for sincerity for the kinds of tautological arguments he made. Look at the ideogram for “sincerity” which Pound used in the “Terminology” section of *The Great Digest*, given here as entries in Robert Morrison’s *Dictionary of the Chinese Language*, the multi-volume set Pound was using via correspondence with Dorothy from DTC:



(73).


It could hardly have escaped Pound’s attention, during all the years he worked with the Chinese language, the remarkable visual similarity the “sincerity” ideogram bears to the first of the following characters, defined by “commands, precepts; orders; injunctions. To command, to tell or direct authoritatively, or with mention of some penalty”:



(391).


This definition from Morrison also goes on to give the definition: “Name of a sword”, as in “‘Sincerity’. The precise definition of the word, pictorially the sun’s *lance* coming to rest on the precise spot verbally” (*Con* 20; emphasis added). Anyway, the remarkable

affinity between ideograms for “sincerity” and for “command” is not merely a stylistic one unique to *Morrison*. Pound also sometimes used the *Mathews’ Chinese-English Dictionary*. It gives the following entries. For “sincerity”:

² Sincere, true, honest. To
 make sincere. Certainly;
 381 honestly.

(381)

and for “a precept” or “command”:

⁴ A precept, a command-
 ment. To warn. To pro-
 628 hibit. Distinguish 戒 No.
 381.

(628).

The affinity of form between “628” and “381” is so close that *Mathews* requests the reader take note of the distinction. Pound either ignored or failed to heed that warning.

In Canto 86, just as in Canto 85, even as Pound more regularly cites part, book and chant numbers from *Couvreur* in the margins, he refuses the distinction between the source and the referent of the evidence he everywhere brings for presentation, so that lines about and from other texts also begin to appear to be about and from *The Cantos* (this is a restatement of what I said above about Pound’s tendency to conflate expressions of the poem’s ideas with statements describing its procedures). Such utterances float ambiguously between paraphrase, stipulation and assertion of fact.

Now my turn for thin ice and tigers.

Live up to your line

and the constitution

憲
呂

etiam habitus inspiciendus

貌^{mao⁴}
亦
尙
一
人

It may depend on one man (C 86 | 582-3).

Terrell says the line about ice and tigers refers to King Mu, who said at the beginning of his rule: “the trembling anxiety of my mind makes me feel as if I were treading on a tiger’s tail, or walking upon spring ice” (483 note 41). It seems fairly certain Pound *is* referring to this. But it cannot but also refer to the opening of *The Great Digest*: “holding a clear concept one can be at peace, being thus calm one can keep one’s head in moments of danger; he who can keep his head in the presence of a tiger is qualified to come to his deed in due hour” (*Con* 29). Turning King Mu’s words into his own at St. Elizabeths, the idea of “keeping one’s head” takes on particular poignancy. “Live up to your line” also has to refer to *both* the lineage of kings and the sovereign act of composition. In either case, the question of “qualification” is foregrounded. It is a ubiquitous phenomenon. Canto 85 for instance, gives a pretty accurate summary of how *The Cantos* has come to be written. “[T]aó tsi” means both “truth” and “store up”:

taó tsi

$\frac{1}{2}$ research and $\frac{1}{2}$ *Τεχνη*

$\frac{1}{2}$ observation, $\frac{1}{2}$ *Τεχνη*

$\frac{1}{2}$ training $\frac{1}{2}$ *Τεχνη*

Tch'eng T'ang for guide (C 85 | 570).

There is a subtle if unmistakable acknowledgement of the doubleness of reference a few lines later on, in Canto 86. Pound writes: “It can’t all be in one language” (C 86 | 583).⁵⁸ The line clearly applies, if not refers, to *The Cantos*, and yet is literally a *half*-quotation, lacking an opening quotation mark. As Dennis Donoghue has rhetorically asked, are not “all the quotations, all the allusions to other cultures”, an “acknowledgement of history, his [Pound’s] acknowledgement that there have been other times and other places”, and do not all these finally add up to “Pound’s assertion that we have not invented meaning” (qtd. in *Dance of the Intellect* 19)? These are, as Perloff is right to show, questions bound up intimately in questions about Pound’s “respect for the given” (*Dance of the Intellect* 19). But I think we can go further. Certainly Pound shows great respect for some givens. The larger question is: to what extent is this so-called *respect for the given* really two things at once: first, actually a demonstration of acquiescence to authority; and second, a profound arrogation *of the very authority* he presumes to hold up intact, so that when Pound speaks, he speaks literally *with* the authorities he esteems, as Olson believed:

Ez’s epic solves [the] problem by his ego: his single emotion breaks all down to his equals or inferiors (so far as I can see only two, possibly, are admitted, by him, to be his betters—Confucius, & Dante. Which

⁵⁸ In Canto 105 Pound speaks directly to the reader, cussing her: “I shall have to learn a little Greek to keep up with this | but so will you, drratt [sic] you” (C 105 | 770).

assumption, that there are intelligent men whom he can outtalk, is beautiful because it destroys historical time (*Mayan Letters* 26).

In Cantos 87, 88 and 89, Pound takes citation to some sort of limit. As Jean-Michel Rabaté has written, endorsing Olson's observation that Pound is the "Tragic Double of our day", the rift between revolutionary poetics and reactionary politics is a division it seems "idle now to minimise"; indeed, their dissociation itself becomes a "creative fissiparity" the writing of which "tends to disrupt the monologist features of our dominant metaphysical discourse while attempting to regain the lost paradise of an utterance that would be able to tell the full truth" (28).

What I am trying to suggest is that there is all the time a tacit acknowledgment, despite indications to the contrary, that signifiers cannot simply be left to themselves (this is neither wanted nor believed in as an ideal). Precise terminology cannot attain precision without some additional guarantee, the occasion of its right and proper use, which is usually not distinct from pressures of context and the (moral) force of the speaker. But "man standing beside word" is not merely a moral proposition. It is the condition of prosodic meaning itself: "live up to your line".

Pound's later prosody moves away from discursiveness in an attempt to stand even more adamantly beside words. In his late style he is obsessed with shutting down almost every coherence and favours intuitive abbreviation. The knife-edge of his sincerity sets about hacking away material with breathless abandon so that in *Rock-Drill* Pound's authorial asides—which typically imply parentheses whether or not he actually bothers to enclose them in proper punctuation—occur with regularity and are hilariously unhelpful. From Canto 89 alone: "“That is to say:” (89 | 610); “Catron (I think it was) has shown horse-sense” (89 | 612); “vide infra” (89 | 613); “dratt ’em” (89 | 614); “This quotation is not from Mr Webster” (89 | 616); “which might end this

canto, and rhyme with | Sigismundo” (89 | 616); “(I think that is in Benton)” (89 | 617); “This section is labelled: Rock Drill” (89 | 621); “(that was Randolph)” (89 | 622); “This is perhaps prose, | you can find it in Benton” (89 | 623). These indicate a kind of anxiety about the whether or not “the point” has been conveyed without actually condescending to get it across. Their intended effect is mainly rhetorical, designed to show that Pound knows what he is on about, even if “we” do not.

Richard Godden observes that the indexical and iconic bias in Pound’s early theory of language in effect eliminates man from the activity of signification and comfortingly installs nature in the place of any specifically historical conditions of linguistic production of exchange (qtd. in Sieburth “Trust” 156). Surely this view, if it ever was true, has been thoroughly abandoned by *Rock-Drill* given the amount of authorial fiddling (something that does *not* happen at all regularly in *Cantos LI-LXXI*, the Chinese history and Adams cantos). Furthermore, the upshot is that *Rock-Drill* is absolutely overrun by symbols, by signs already always culturally—and not individually—constructed! By the time of *Rock-Drill*, nature (whatever that is) is at best an insufficient guarantee of linguistic stability; for this reason the poem imports its theories into its practice in a most literal way, by just saying what its theories are. The poem now takes seriously the idea that the poet’s uttering the words is a means of proving their veracity—where “their” means both word and person.

That said, in *Rock-Drill*, language is still construed as a living rather than merely historical event. Canto 87 puts that into action. The perfection of what is outside of oneself is actually accomplished in the apparently unmediated presentation of what others have said, thereby avoiding the lulling of oneself with egocentric claims. Here technique is concerned with little more than citation. In this part of the poem, citation is the *modus operandi*. That said, notwithstanding the historical personages being specifically named, the speaker is quite definitely Ezra Pound:

“But”, said Antoninus,

“Law rules the sea”.

“And that the state shd/ have benefit

from private misfortune,

not in my time, not under me.”

Until Salmasius, wanting precision:

Want, *χρεία*,

“Common practice!” sd/ Ari re business;

“Cogitatio, meditatio, comtemplatio.”

Wrote Richardus, and Dante read him.

Centrum circuli.

Remove the mythologies before they establish clean values.

“Europe” said Picabia

“exhausted by the conquest of Alsace-Lorraine.”

Vlamnick: “. . . is local. “Art is.” (C 87 | 590)

D. S. Carne-Ross contends that a “cardinal principle of the poem” is that the “materials it presents must be exactly as they are or were. A man’s actual words, and as far as possible even the sound of his words, must be reported, the date, location, and so on, must be given. As Pound sees it, this is part of the evidence” (196). As Perloff rightly says, commenting on Carne-Ross’s argument, this is what Pound would have meant as a “constatation of fact” (*Dance of the Intellect* 9).⁵⁹ The definition of “constatation” is instructive in regard to finding out just what Pound is really up to here.

⁵⁹ Pound uses this phrase in “An Approach to Paris”. *The New Age* 13.23 (2 October 1913): 662-4. 662.

It means both to “assert” *and* to “verify”. The *OED* gives the tripartite meaning of *constate* as “to establish, ascertain, or state” (*OED Online*) and traces its roots to the pluperfect of *constare*, which is itself a “casual derivative of *constere*”, “to be established”.

In that one succinct (and prescient) summary of method, Pound triply binds assertion to verification and both to certain casualness. For all intents and purposes this casualness is practiced; it is both affectation *and* really how Pound at this time writes and thinks.

Pound’s nonchalance has built into it an added risk most salient in his rebarbateness and intransigence: his studied carelessness is quite literally an intolerant carelessness for study. As Pound will remark hazarding sentimentality in “Notes for Canto CXVII et seq.”: “I lost my center | fighting the world” (*The Cantos* 117 | 822). All of which is to say that D. S. Carne-Ross’s contentions about Pound’s reverence for exact replication of utterance is an effect, not a fact, of the verse. For what we are reading in the above passages from Canto 87 is not an exact representation of speech as it was uttered but a precise rendition of Pound’s ventriloquism. Did Antoninus really speak in such a way so that when translated “sea” rimes with “me” (or, in English)? Or, why splice Vlamnick’s motto like that, other than to demonstrate formal derangement, a parallel authority setting it all down? Pound is concertedly casual, not careful with the facts (it remains a peculiar feat to make one seem like the other). This is not a new development. From *The Pisan Cantos*:

and you might find a bit of enamel

a bit of true blue enamel

on a metal pyx or whatever

omnia, quae sunt, lumina sunt, or whatever

so they dug up his bones in the time of De Montfort

(Simon)

Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel
and Uncle William dawdling around Notre Dame
in search of whatever

paused to admire the symbol (C 83 | 548).

Austin's discrimination between constative and performative utterance, in Pound's (mis)handling of it, does not, all of a sudden, seem so unimpeachable. When Austin writes that "to issue a constative utterance (i.e., to utter it with historical reference) is to make a statement" but that to "issue a performative utterance is, for example, to make a bet" (*How to do things with Words* 6 note 2), he dismisses poetry in general at his peril; and he ignores in particular Pound's attempts to push together divergent facts that, on the one hand, testify that something was said, and that, as such, are, on the other hand, true (as speech-acts, not as "facts"). In other words Pound is adapting an attitude *about* historical utterance into a means of *making* a poem whose veracity depends as much upon *what* was said as *that* it was said, with particular emphasis on *who* said it. The precision with which it is rendered is less important than *that* it is rendered; the reference to the speech act becomes a fact in itself.

The question of restatement is thus pushed to the fore. Pound's method of presenting others' utterances in casual, clipped or otherwise attenuated ways risks obscuring the meaning such methods were meant all the more forcefully to convey. The dominant experience of reading the late cantos (85-89 particularly) is of Pound's obfuscation of and interference in meaning and sense; Pound literally gets in the way. Such prosodic compaction is the opposite of analytic. In other words, his explicitness is everywhere complicated by difficulties of surface that I think are directly attributable to

intentionally confusing separations of what it is he says and how: in *Rock-Drill* what matters is less what the *language* means than how *Pound* condescends to arrange it (this results as much in the conveyance of meaning as its prevention). Such intransigent presentations of the “thing” make one wonder if the “thing” directly presented is now not the poem but, instead, the poet’s personal temperament.

DRAFTS

In the paradisaical cantos of *Rock-Drill*, cantos 90-95, Pound comes as close as he is likely to get to that other, much derided definition of sincerity: “look in thy heart, and write”. In the “terminology” section of *The Great Digest*, Pound actually defines another important ideogram closely related to sincerity as “[w]hat results, i.e., the action resultant from the straight gaze into the heart. The ‘know thyself’ carried into action” (*Con* 21). Indeed, this seems to have some currency with the action of *learning* by heart, or, perhaps, even *knowing* by heart. Without meaning this sentimentally, the implication here is that without a solid word, or set of words to hitch to or stand behind, Pound’s system of thinking risks dissolution. Repetitions in the paradisaical cantos are unlike those in cantos 85-89. They are not reiterations designed to impart insistence; they are, appropriately enough, more like prayer. But insofar as Pound wants one word to mean one particular thing without variance, words—but really, ideograms—are more like symbols as derided in *Gaudier-Brzeska*: permanent metaphors.

It could then be rather easy to decide, therefore, that Pound’s audacity is ultimately one of style rather than of thought, that his intransigent difficulty is really just an oppositional defence *of* individuality rather than a realised if idiosyncratic expression of it, managed through the bizarre and intentionally opaque (de-)arrangement of language. The function of rectitude in Pound’s poem is ultimately as much a question of prosody as it is a question of morals (in this sense, as we shall see, Olson is right to condemn Pound’s *ti tum ti tum ti tum ti tum* of the translations of the *Classic Anthology* as both a moral and prosodic failure). Still, the implied straightness of the gaze into the heart so as to write is realised in persistence, where persistence is really the only way to offer anyone sufficient proof of anything, beyond judgment:

and of endurance with the dissolving of a view, as Henry James noted. I.e., over a longer duration, some things dissolve, others do not:

Chiefs' names on a monument,
Seepage,
the élan, the block,
dissolution.

止

Or as Henry again: “we have, in a manner of speaking,
arrived.

Got to, I think he says “got to, all got to.”

The ubicity, ascertaining (C 87 | 596).

Those things that do not dissolve, which remain ubiquitous, ascertain and make certain. Ultimately, I want to suggest, *Rock-Drill* is an exercise in certainty of this kind, albeit an anxious one. Pound's repeated interventions in his text (which is a weird way of saying *how* he writes it), be they parenthetical asides or other instructions or directions for reading, are only one means of accomplishing certainty, or its effects. Others include, most conspicuously, the interjections in the text that point to other texts for rhetorical effect. When Pound writes “[t]hat is the great chapter, Mencius III, I, III, 6” (C 87 | 594), we read a very common affectation of scholarly practice that is neither particularly scholarly, nor is it really a direction to that source text. It is, if anything, a short-cut masquerading as precision. Indeed, at times, the first five cantos in *Rock-Drill* read very much like transcriptions from a notebook designed for personal use rather than public display, so utterly incomprehensible is their shorthand.

And yet, Pound's affectations of haste and auto-didactic scholarly pursuit are techniques long in coming to fruition. As Marian Louisa Ardizzone writes, from the 1930s onwards, Pound was seeking "the significance and value of writing in cognitive terms" (6) and the only way to manage that was to replace "theoretical knowledge" with a knowing "coincident with making" (7). In other words, he was looking for a way to write not only *what* but *as* he thought. I want to suggest here, by way of conclusion, that this happens most prominently in the paradisaical cantos of *Rock-Drill*. Those familiar with *The Cantos* as a whole will know these cantos to offer the merest respite before Pound plunges back into the even *more* rebarbative discourse of *Thrones*. At any rate, even these cantos are not immune to idiomatic damage caused by a model of sincerity that now approaches "just saying what you think" without recourse to studied and careful formal consideration. The technique reaches its apotheosis in Canto 91, a canto packed with assertions of visionary clarity. Then, towards the middle:

Over harm

Over hate

 overflowing, light over light

And yilden he gon rere

 (Athelstan before a.D. [sic] 940)

the light flowing, whelming the stars.

 In the barge of Ra-Set

On river of crystal

So hath Sibile a boken isette.

Democracies electing their savage

till there is no clear thought about holiness

a dung flow from 1913

and, in this, their kikery functioned, Marx, Freud
and the american beaneries
Filth under filth,
Maritain, Hutchins,
or as Benda remarked: "La trahison" (C 91 | 633-4).⁶⁰

Looking through the notebooks for *Rock-Drill* is very often a confusing activity. In those that contain material for cantos 85-89, Pound was clearly reading multiple source texts simultaneously. The effect—one of haste, flashing associations, dates, notes to himself, et cetera—is often similar to what eventually ends up in *Rock-Drill* itself. Though the material in these notebooks received substantial amounts of revision and rearrangement, the overall effect is roughly the same. Then, that historical work done, something remarkable happens. In the notebook where Pound begins to write his paradisal cantos, in a gesture that is at once authoritarian and sincere, the first drafts of the paradisal cantos, 90-93, are written out straight, with almost no revisions and very little difference between first draft and published verse. Cancellations are limited mostly

⁶⁰ This vicious passage has been mostly condemned by critics, for obvious reasons. Bacigalupo offers his condemnation of the lines as indicative of “mean hate” and then says: “At this point the decision of how to respond to the old man’s obsessions must be left to the individual reader”. He does point out, however, that “a small gain can be made” if we know that of these infamous lines Pound marked in the margins of the typescript: “carattere un poco più piccolo [a somewhat smaller type]” (296); Bob Perelman calls them “probably the most notorious in the poem” but attempts to “remind readers of the vast effort he [Pound] made to energize poetic language” and “live in epic conditions”, all of which are part of an effort to understand the “violent dynamics of Pound’s writing” (*The Trouble with Genius* 36, 39); Randall Jarrell calls this passage “a moral and intellectual disaster” (“Extraordinary Misuse” 440); Philip Kuberski thinks it is symptomatic of what he calls “sign anxiety”, the “slippage or instability at this juncture between vocal or written form and conceptual or physical reference” (*A Calculus of Ezra Pound* x); Wendy Flory has found that the outburst “kikery” is actually the only example of explicit anti-Semitism in these late sections (“Pound and Antisemitism” 294); astonishingly, James Wilhelm quotes only the first three italicised lines in an argument about the generally high level of cultural interest amongst autocratic leaders (*The Tragic Years* 72).

to miswritten words, and sometimes to a line that threatens to give the reader too much context to work with. But overall, what is published in *Rock-Drill* as cantos 90-93 is more or less a simple transcription from the notebooks.

On a piece of foolscap found amongst George Oppen's daybooks and drafts, he wrote: "Pound's copiousness, for Pound knew what he thought [...] The fact ruined much" (UCSD 16, 24, 14).⁶¹ This quip is part of a larger—albeit mostly unpublished—critique Oppen made of Pound. The former thought the latter never had occasion to mistrust the phenomenal world because he never looked hard enough. For Oppen, writing was literally auto-didactic: "the poet learns almost everything from his own [...] prosody" (Oppen *Selected Prose Daybooks and Papers* 48). Conversely, Pound's late prosody, it seemed to Oppen, was symptomatic of a poet less interested in making discoveries than in showing what (and that) he knows. The notebooks for the paradisaical cantos seem to confirm this observation. The lineation of these cantos is nearly the same as in the notebooks; their rather shortened lines reflect a speed of both mind and of pen, as well as the small format of the original 60-page stenographer's pads into which they are inscribed. These cantos look and read like notes because they *are* notes, at once provisional and final, the first and last word collapsed into one. It is fitting that as Pound moves from questions of historical fact to questions of belief (always a tentative distinction anyway) he should, as a matter of sincerity, write down what he already knew he had to say. I want to end this chapter by quoting the original version of Canto 92 in its entirety. That Pound changed so little before publication is a compelling demonstration of "man standing beside word":

⁶¹ University of California San Diego, Mandeville Library Special Collections, George Oppen Papers. The numbers refer to series, box and folder, respectively.

from 9.7 M^{to} were blown
seed -

Not every plant has seed.

so all the weasel eat
one -

No swallows up
climbing -

as engraver on gold -

but not usually of brass
or red copper

No triangle

No water in
line found.

No Tetrad ~~of~~ silver

with smoke of mischief
to franklin sense.

~~✓ That I be again grown
in gold~~

gold off mercury silver

✓ Vande ju with gold

✓ from his sea-change

✓ Nam Here to
question
of honour

as Fitzgerald it was.

when he freed a man

I have been @
 Port of
 (Oreland 1916
 ?17).

7 Signor
 10 facevo ~~la~~ sentinella

o non facevo
~~la~~ sentinella"

accused of not taking
 cover
 along bombardment.
 —
 gran affetto

'a chi st'ivan
 guardando
 l'orecchio assai.
 - to foul from the silver
 candle -
 's calm - as the soft -
 -
 Po-Sol & her large
 now
 over deep sapphire -
 bit to child
 played under wave -
 & fine diamond
 in me
 to Pinella

"He love," sd Humbert

"like a cage with
bars -

That breaks my heart

seeking to reach the stars"

→ to her a rain bell,
~~for~~

as of silver —

Ja Luna Regina —

~~not~~ ^{gold} ~~Sun's~~ gold
gold as Zabala ^{placid}
Anubis guard the portal -

as the cellula -

on his Segur — 22

Sandus -

Sully

Had no blood ~~fell on his~~
after -

Ta' zK TWV UGATWV

YEVORERA

Said Theophilus.

et aquis mala.

in questo lumera
afreiso me santilla

(Folco i^o
nel 3^o
esodo.)

I If I see her not

no sight is worth the
beauty of my thought

~~to the the came
a few
over the ages~~

Ben built with a
sphere of crystal.

Pat's she shd. touch with
her hands.

Coast Region.

4 altars @ the 4 corners
of Pat place.

4. bit of gl. - low
bouldered -
postella & Vinfesta.

under rain ~~the~~ the dark:

~~many~~ many wings fragile

Don. 8
12.22

from far & tender
all marine

chh chh

~~so~~ no pebbles turn with
the name-

~~st~~ chh

~~st chh~~
ch'u

"fui chinab"
qui refulgo"

Le Paredos will pass out front
but is gassed
for a flake
for an hour.

Then going.

Then an hour

Then going.

Hilary ^{stumbles} ~~stumbles~~ but
to Drain Mine

is abundant
unceasing
is improvement.

on uniforms — until .

✓ The 11th was turned²
from the manifest-
overlooked to detail —

✓ The 11th now observes
more dynamic

The 11th Pontifex ceased to be
holy
The 11th was a Caesar's time —
he was big game —

✓ The 11th ceased to be holy

✓ The 11th was being seen
worshipped
to Emperor

Margarethe von Taubert
& Uncle Carlo

both tried a clean up.

hence, in a way, it

Rimini has reliefs.

✓ Semel's personality
shows about.

even you were
help last Wednesday.

"Do foto" sd Del Corno

"la città" for

2 foreign houses among
Ten thousand Italians.

11
Ag

2 ~~evil~~ by law :

usury \$ to banks
not

f Ref \$ ~~les~~ soc.
anonymous.

=
grabbed his phone

f called in minister.

Bella also phoned Torino,

instantly,

to dig out Vivaldi.

f minister went to a
fighting line.

as did old Marinetti.

Hans Sachs [†]

~~sd Schutz~~

war ein Schu

sd "Schutz" ^{Bracht}

macher und Poet
der u.

Having ^{yet} seen no armada,
Vorn lack-

12⁵
10.10
PM

Das ud. scarcely - -
from sea caves -
300 years

Mein,
aber 5 Wolken

14/10

I gained as using
 ✓ no degradation of
 saccharine-

for 40 years I have seen
 this

now flood
 as a Yang Be. =

also ~~desensit.~~ desensitization.

25 hundred years
 desensitization

2 thousand years desensitization
 after ~~phosphorus~~
 desensitization

for a little light from the
Gardens -

Erigena.

Artemisia. Richardson.

Hilary looked at an oak leaf -

or hilly. or ^{now an} ~~now an~~.

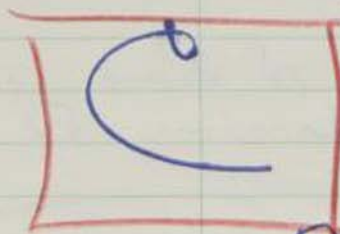
against the brown oil
of coffee sweat -

I can now to take
the chinks. of sun -

the Portuguese spreading
spice trees.

"a common" of Ari

"cuthons & Trade"



93

Ar $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{1}{2}$ — $\frac{1}{2}$ $\frac{1}{2}$

A man's paradise is his
good nature.

sd: Nat:

"parus angelicum" ~~Antef~~

2 $\frac{1}{2}$ of a Seal.

having his own mind
to stand by
himself.

CHAPTER THREE—OLSON’S LITERALISM

that’s too much: yr style seems to be too personal: ha
 that’s too much: yr style seems to be too personal: ha
 that’s too much: yr style seems to be too personal: ha
 that’s too much: yr style seems to be too personal: ha
 that’s too much: yr style seems to be too personal: ha

—Robert Creeley (*O&C* v.1 101)

Commentators rarely discuss Olson’s actual prosody. His theories of poetic composition receive substantial attention, but few poems are read in any sort of detail with an eye to saying something about their construction. This is a strange situation because his prosody—whilst perhaps not a *system* of versification—is surely amongst the most salient features of his poetry, and especially of *The Maximus Poems*. With this in mind, this chapter reviews “Projective Verse” in order to offer an explanation as to why this has been the case; it also tries to make a start upon reversing that tendency. It is central to my argument that the reasons for such a curious omission in the existing scholarship directly result from the kind of poetry—backed up by the poet’s prose explanations thereof—Olson wrote, rather than from some widespread critical myopia. It is my further contention that the curious critical inclination to forego detailed analyses of particular poems is even stranger since many of them—even those which do not ostensibly seem to be addressing the conditions of their own poetics—once inspected, can be read as commentaries on prosody.

“Literalism” is not a term Olson used very often. I take this fact to be amongst the term’s assets because Olson’s pronouncements about his own theories and ideas of verse composition have done much to distract, frustrate or otherwise interfere with

criticism wishing to interrogate the verse on terms not already established by the poet. This interference is one I find, despite all of Whitman's paratextual stage-setting and Pound's relentless sloganeering, both more apparent and acute in Olson than in his predecessors discussed above. Trying to say something about Olson's prosody using a term not common to the poet's own critical vocabulary is, admittedly, something of a departure from the previous two chapters. I do so as a precautionary measure designed to avoid what Robert Casillo has called a critical tendency to read certain poets through the prism of their own mystified vocabulary (961) and as a means of getting more immediately to what Olson's verse tells us about itself. But in brief: I take literalism to denote a suspicion of abstraction and therefore an attempt, in verse, to pay more attention to whatever might be its opposite.

“SYSTEMATIC DISORGANIZATION”

For a poet whose principal motto was *'istorin*—“finding out for oneself” (*SVH* 20)—Olson offered a lot of advice to his contemporary writers, to his students and to his audience of readers about how to write their own poems or about how to properly understand his. The extent to which this guidance was either valid or useful, not to mention applicable to Olson’s poems in a more than casual way, has largely been left unexamined. This is, in part, a direct consequence of the kind of poetry Olson always argued he was writing. His first letter to Robert Creeley, for instance, gets immediately to the point. Hearing from his friend and fellow poet Vincent Ferrini that Creeley responded to a poem of Olson’s he had seen by saying Olson was “just lookin’ for a lang”, Olson wrote to Creeley on 21 April 1950:

a man god damn well has to come up with his own lang., syntax and song both, but also each poem under hand has its own language, which is variant of same ((THIS IS THE BATTLE: i wish very much, creeley, i had now to send you [...] *PROjective Verse vs. the NON-projective*: the argument pitches here (*O&C* v.1 19)).

The essay Olson says he wishes he had to send is of course one of the most famous essays in post-war American poetics, “Projective Verse”, published in *Poetry New York* in October later that year. It is with some historical irony that Olson should have been prompted to write to Creeley to defend himself against the latter’s accusations by citing an essay which would become best known for a principle Olson in fact took from

letters Creeley wrote to *him* in the months intervening between this initial correspondence and the publication of “Projective Verse”:⁶²

the *principle*, the law which presides conspicuously over such composition, and, when obeyed, is the reason why a projective poem can come into being. It is this: FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT. (Or so it got phrased by one, R. Creeley, and it makes absolute sense to me, with this possible corollary, that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand) (“Projective Verse” *CP* 240).

What sounds, arguably, like a rather obvious repackaging of Romantic conceptions of organicism⁶³—this fact in itself constitutes another, and very acute historical irony, if in

⁶² The letters in question from Creeley to Olson are dated a month apart. The first, sent on 5 May 1950, reads: “The ‘formal’ has killed what the head: might get into: in that it has put into menial/ enclosed/ work: what it sd have been determining, ONLY, as an extension of its center: in any given work. Which is to say: as now, in many, the insistence on an attention (FIRST) to possible castings for a content: has belied the content: or no more that the Dr.’s [William Carlos Williams] implication re the suitability of the sonnet/ for our time, etc” (*O&C* v.1 63; odd syntax and punctuation are original). The second, sent 5 June 1950 reads: “form has now become so useless a term/ that I blush to use it [...] the possible casts or methods for a way into/ a ‘subject’: to make it clear: that form is never more than an *extension* of content. An enacted or possible ‘stasis’ for thought. Means to” (*O&C* v.1 79; original emphasis). For an instructive (if bad-tempered) discussion of theoretical borrowings Olson made from Pound and Williams, see Perloff’s “Charles Olson and the ‘Inferior Predecessors’: ‘Projective Verse’ Revisited”. *ELH* 40.2 (Summer 1973): 285-306. For a point-by-point breakdown of the main arguments of Olson’s “Projective Verse” (1950) and related utterances by his “sources” in the critical prose of Pound and Williams, see pages 288-290 of Perloff’s essay in particular.

⁶³ As in Coleridge’s remarks on organic form in his lecture on Shakespeare: “[t]he form is mechanic, when on any given material we impress a pre-determined form, not necessarily arising out of the properties of the material; —as when to a mass of wet clay we give whatever shape we wish it to retain when hardened. The organic form, on the other hand, is innate; it shapes, as it develops, itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the

his primary manifesto, the poet who reputedly inaugurates a post-modern poetics is also the poet who goes beyond modernism's programmatically post-Romantic aesthetic by returning to Romantic ideas as such—is an important moment not only in Olson's critical writings, but for subsequent critical writings about his work. Hidden in the apparently innocuous “never more than” is a demotion of form itself, which is a curious step for a poet determined not only “[t]o break the pentameter”, as Pound memorably put it in *The Pisan Cantos* (C 81 | 538), but to break as many other inherited rules for verse composition as he could as well.

One of the key ways in which Olson demotes the importance of prosody—and thereby keeps critical attention off it—is by turning *poiesis* into the specific content of the poetry itself. Just as Olson had a tendency to talk about his own poems in his critical writings and lectures, so too did he write poems about poems. In 1954 Olson wrote “I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master. . .” in reaction to Pound's *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*, which was published earlier that year. Olson's poem is a key and early example of one expression of his literalism. In it he attacks the interconnected abstractions of commerce *and* inherited form. The poem begins:

the dross of verse. Rhyme!
 when iron (steel)
 has expelled Confucius
 from China. Pittsburgh!
 beware: the Master
 bewrays his vertu.
 To clank like you do

life is, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms; —each exterior is the physiognomy of the being within—its true image reflected and thrown out from the concave mirror” (55).

he brings coolie verse
 to teach you equity,
 who layed down such rails! (*CPO* 318).

Here Olson berates his “master” for what he perceives to be Pound’s use of the outdated prosodic archaisms of rime and of metre; these features are detestable to Olson because they are complicit in commercial enterprise; their abstract structures are believed to actually facilitate consumerism, here presented as a commodified “Orientalism”, a mere decorative art appropriate for “old ladies”:

. . . Whistler, be with America
 at this hour

open galleries. And sell
 Chinese prints, at the opening,
 even let the old ladies in—

let decoration thrive, when
 clank is let back
 into your song (*CPO* 318).

The theme of frivolous consumption is as salient as the sense of betrayal. In the poem’s opening, the “iron (steel)” of the second line refers to rails wrought in the smithies of “Pittsburgh”, and by extension to the train tracks that criss-cross the country bringing products to its every corner. The clank of their forgery (their being hammered out straight—“hammer” being a favourite euphemism for “versify” in Olson’s prosodic

lexicon) is a “Noise! that Confucius [Pound] himself | should try to alter” (*CPO* 319), as Olson says later in the poem. Rails, or train-tracks, are an explicit analogy for what Olson thinks are the structures of the imposed regulation of metrical sets. Conventional and ordered beats lead to straight lines that move either poem or train along a predetermined path so that direction is determined in advance of motion. The necessity of their parallel structure itself epitomises Euclid’s fifth postulate, the so-called “parallel postulate”, that Olson was learning to abhor through his burgeoning, Black Mountain-influenced interest in non-Euclidean mathematics induced by an amateur’s reading of H. S. M. Coexeter’s *Non-Euclidean Geometry* and the related works of Riemann, Cayley and Lobchevsky (Clark *Allegory* 114). In an ironic apostrophe, Olson hails Pound with an intended pun, “O Ruler!” (“I, Mencius” *CPO* 319), i.e., he who governs and that with which straight lines are drawn. Going further, Olson appeals directly to Whitman after a further dig at Pound’s now-ruined “ear”:

that the great ’ear
can no longer ’hear!

o Whitman,
let us keep our trade with you when
the Distributor
who couldn’t go beyond wood,
apparently,
has gone out of business (*CPO* 319).⁶⁴

⁶⁴ The reference here is to Pound’s own apostrophe to Whitman in “A Pact” (1915), which itself makes explicit reference to commercial activity: “I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman— | I have detested you long enough. | I come to you as a grown child | Who has had a pig-headed father; | I am old enough now to make friends. | It was you

Then, in the third section of “I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master . . .”, the *dis*-tribute to Pound “the Distributor” ends with an announcement about the power of the eye as against the clank-ruined ear. The reference to “feet” not marching in military obeisance to a beat is a hardly-concealed declaration of fidelity if not to that old hat *vers libre*, then at least to Williams’s notion that the “intrinsic movement” of a poem must “verify its [own] authenticity” (*Collected Poems* v.2 54). Olson writes:

It is too late
to try to teach us
we are the process
and our feet
We do not march
We still look
And see
what we see
We do not see
ballads
other than our own (*CPO* 320).

Olson beats Pound with a stick whose lineation, though assuredly more crooked-looking than the straight rails of the poem’s foregoing stanzas, is cast in the gradational

that broke the new wood, | Now is a time for carving. | We have one sap and one root— | Let there be commerce between us” (*P* 90). “I, Mencius” is legible as a repetition of that gesture, albeit with an intention not towards reconciliation but severance of ties. Pound, of course, never wrote remotely “like” Whitman, so his apostrophe is more diplomatic than personal.

indentations common to Williams (and to a lesser extent Pound himself). The reference to a Williams-esque layout must have been in Olson's mind; he is hedging his bets a little in aligning himself with Williams's more indigenous prosody against Pound's newly recursive traditionalism.⁶⁵ The earnest rejection of anything but "our own" pledges at least a modicum of allegiance to Williams as though that, too, were not somehow a contravention of the mandate to compose exactly according to the conditions dictated by *one's* own mental and physical reality—what Creeley called Olson's "firmer grips on content: which wd come to your own demands" (*O&C* v.1 59).

That Olson issues a criticism of metrical composition in Pound's *Classic Anthology* by writing in stepped lines must be some kind of joke. But the coterie declaration "*We* do not see | ballads | other than *our* own" might be an irony too far for Olson to have intended, seeming as it does to claim independence from "inherited forms" (*O&C* v.1 19) by borrowing a form regularly used by Williams.

"Letter 15" of *The Maximus Poems* (1960), composed the year before, anticipates this attack and gives something like a fuller description of the various alternatives under consideration (see Appendix three—figure 1 for the full text of the poem). The poem opens with a kind of enormous epigraph: three prose paragraphs longer than the entire remainder of the poem. In this prose epigraph Olson proceeds to correct mistakes made in a previous *Maximus* poem, "Letter 2"—"It just goes to show you. It was not the 'Eppie Sawyer'. It was the ship 'Putnam'. It wasn't Christmas morning, it was Christmas night" (*MI* 71). With the theme of correction and error duly if heavy-handedly introduced, the first section opens with a description of method:

⁶⁵ This alignment moves both ways: Williams quotes a large section from the opening of "Projective Verse" in his *Autobiography* (329-331). His admiration for this essay might of course have something to do with, as Perloff rightly suggests, its quite explicit reiterations of Williams's own 1948 talk, "The Poem as a Field of Action", in which he proposes "a revolution in the conception of the poetic foot [...] We are through with the iambic pentameter as presently conceived" (*Selected Essays* 281). With Pound saying as much in *The Pisan Cantos*, 1948 was by all accounts a bad year for pentameters.

He sd, “You go all around the subject.” And I sd, “I didn’t know it was a subject.” He sd, “You twist” and I sd, “I do.” He said other things. And I didn’t say anything (*MI* 72).⁶⁶

The reference here is to a correspondence between Olson and Paul Blackburn, the latter being the “he” in “these lines” (Butterick 101). The act of contortion, of “going all around the subject”, is here offered as a principle of writing and expression designed to get beyond the straight rails of abstract uniformity. Though this poem, “Letter 15”, is explicit in its agenda, *The Maximus Poems* do in general take this approach as well.

Such twisting was, albeit implicitly, announced from the beginning of the poem: “Maximus of Gloucester” in the title of the first poem, “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to you”, is a periphrastic genitive, and Olson wrote much of what followed accordingly: circumlocution is *the* means of his syntactic movement. What Olson seems after is a kind of “systematic disorganization” of prosody (*O&C* v.1 51). The point is made clearly, again picking up the image of “rails”. In the lines immediately following those just cited—“He sd, ‘You go all around the subject’ [...]” (*MI* 72)—Olson wrote:

⁶⁶ Throughout I refer exclusively to the “complete edition” of *The Maximus Poems*, first published in 1983, edited by George F. Butterick. This edition gathers together *The Maximus Poems* (1960); *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968); and *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975). When I use the generic title *The Maximus Poems* I refer to the work as a whole. When I refer to a specific volume, I will give the exact original title *and* the date in parenthesis. In-text citations of poems will include notification of the specific volume from which the exhibit is taken, according to the convention established in George Butterick’s *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson*. *MI* refers to *The Maximus Poems* (1960); *MII* to *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968); *MIII* to *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975). This is to give the reader a sense of which volume the poem I quote from appears in since I will not always give that information explicitly. The page numbers I give, however, refer to the new consecutive pagination of the “complete edition”, and not to the pagination of individually published volumes. This is important because, for instance, *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968) is unpaginated, and because the 1983 “complete edition” contains newly discovered and newly authenticated poems not included in the original *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975).

Nor do I know
 that this is a rail
 on which all (or any)
 will ride (as, by Pullman

that sense the ads are right abt, that you are
 taken care of, you do
 not sleep, you are
 jolted

And if you take a compartment
 the whole damned family . . .

I sd, “Rhapsodia . . . (MI 72; original ellipses).

So concludes the first part of “Letter 15”. The tracks of rails figure here as the symbolic structure of bad conveyance. Olson insists upon a movement neither straight nor comfortable (Pullman cars are *sleeper* cars). The verse needs twisting, bending, and some kind of curving or other distortion. Interrupting the description of an advertisement for trains, Olson returns to his original point: “Rhapsodia”, from the Greek *rhaptein* “to sew or stitch together” + *aidein* “to sing” (*Webster’s Seventh* 737). So far as *The Maximus Poems* does have an overall structural logic, this would seem to be it.

It is also, in a sense, the structural rationale behind individual poems, many of which in *The Maximus Poems* (1960) are internally divided by numbers and/or numerals. In its second section, “Letter 15” proceeds to realise the patched-up style of rhapsody.

It moves abruptly to handle a very different sort of content: it quotes in full Captain John Smith's epigraphic poem which introduces his "ADVERTISEMENTS | for the unexperienced [sic] planters | of New-England, | | or anywhere" (*MI* 73), a book he published in 1631 after some pilgrims declined to take him with them. In quoting it, Olson is bringing the question of poetics and advertising into another explicit relation. Olson said that Smith's poem "argues a condition of poetics at the date it was written" (qtd. in Butterick 103). The speaking subject of Smith's poem is a ship wrecked upon a sea shelf, so that Smith means "advertisement" in what is now for us its older sense, i.e., as a warning: "If in or outward you be bound, | do not forget to sound; | Neglect of that was cause of this | to steere amisse" (*MI* 74). In a later *Maximus* poem Olson will call Smith "the stater of | quantity and precision" ("*Some Good News*" *MI* 126). The lesson is: float not carelessly along (know what ground you traverse).

In a 1953 review, written around the same time as this poem, of *Captain John Smith: His Life & Legend*, Olson applauds Smith's capacity to, in prose, relate the "sudden land of the place" like "Juan de la Cosa put it in his map" ("Captain John Smith" *CP* 319). Olson does not substantiate these claims in the review or elsewhere. Nevertheless, Smith's writing, Olson contends, like Cosa's first-hand mapping of the North American east coast, takes, in theory, a special sort of syntax absolutely unlike commercial "advertisements, all the shit now pours out, the American road, the filthiness, of graphic words" (*CP* 319). He continues:

god, to get the distinction, across! so that even Ezra Pound stops
praising ads, for some silk stocking, in the error of his anger, at the bland
[...] that even his own act is now ad-writing (*CP* 319-20).

In the third section of “Letter 15”, Olson suggests the current clanging of Pound’s poems is proof of an ear so degraded that he believes the “true troubadours | are CBS”; and that “Melopoeia [sic] | | is for Coke by Cokes out of | pause” (*MI* 75). Which is to say that Olson thinks Pound is writing jingles. He might have had something like this poem in mind when he thought so (from the *Classic Anthology*):

Pluck, pluck pluck, the thick plantain;
pluck, pick, pluck, then pluck again.

Oh pick, pluck the thick plantain,
Here be seeds for sturdy men.

Pluck the leaf and fill the flap,
Skirts were made to hide the lap (5).

Putting aside the obvious need to criticise a predecessor out from whose shadow it was proving difficult to stand, there is in “Letter 15” a more comprehensive rejection of regulated metrical musicality as an aesthetic principle as such. Following Smith’s poem, Olson begins the third section with the rhetorical question: “And for the water-shed, the economics and poetics thereafter?” (*MI* 74). There, “three men coincide”: Elbert Hubbard, purveyor of “moral imperialism” (Butterick 106); Pound, arrogant distributor of ditties (Olson calls him “Brer Fox, Rapallo”); and Raymond, who places brash newspaper ads for his department store in Boston. This, Olson wonders, is “The American epos, 19- | 02 (or when did Barton Barton Barton Barton and Barton?” (*MI* 75)—here “Barton” is Bruce Barton, an advertising executive. The modern sense of “epos”, Olson is asserting, is a long way off from its original sense. In a 1957 letter to

Philip Whalen, Olson says that “[a]t Homer’s date *epos* (about equal to *logos* and *muthos*, with what shadings now lost) was WORDS THEMSELVES” (qtd. in Butterick 106). So by the recovery of Homeric *epos* Olson wants a word “to mean not a single thing the least more than | what it does mean (not at all to sell any one anything” (*MI* 15). Calling for a language of “words themselves”, I would suggest, is a demand for a language ranged against the rhetorical production of desire—i.e., language *without* the super-addition of abstract metre or rime. Prosodically, once such schemes are imposed, the language also will be made to *want* them (a rime *scheme* creates the desire for rimes). The getting rid of abstract impositions of formal obligation requires a language already self-sufficient. The enigmatic ending to the unofficial fourth letter of *The Maximus Poems* (1960), a.k.a., “The Songs of Maximus”, “you sing, you | who also | wants”, is often read as an approbatory not condemnatory finale. Shachar Bram finds it, for example, to be an appeal to readers to let themselves grow as Olson/Maximus will (68). But here *want leads* to song. The latter, song, is an effect of an afflicted and dangerous condition. “You sing, you | who also | wants” is no recommendation. It is an observation part of the larger diagnosis Olson/Maximus gives upon his arrival in Gloucester.

This kind of self-sufficiency is by no means asserted solely in isolated attacks upon other poets (although such attacks are common, as in the notorious “Letter 5”, an attack on Ferrini). As it happens, explanations of the structure of *The Maximus Poems* are common features of the verse throughout. Perhaps amongst the most memorable of such instances is this short, untitled poem from *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968):

All night long
I was a Eumolpidae
as I slept
putting things together

which had not previously
fit (*MII* 327).

This poem was anticipated by one of the shortest pieces in *The Maximus Poems*:

tesserae

commissure

Jan 19th 1962 (*MII* 269).

Either instance is an example of the poem's self-mythologizing of its own rhapsodic structure. This structure has, in Olson's mind, everything to do with the epic he thought he was writing. As Olson says in his *Last Lectures*, "Pound's 3 categories | melopœia | phanopœia | logopœia | only define the problem of lyric poetry | & don't relate to epic. | He made the mistake of leaving out a 4th category: mythopoeia" (16). By "myth", Olson means literally "mouth", the poem's habit of talking (about itself). Olson's idiosyncratic notion of what "myth" is—i.e., as meaning "mouth", and "mouth" being indistinguishable from "word"—comes from J. A. K. Thompson's *The Art of the Logos*: "*Logos* did not originally mean 'word' or 'reason' or anything but merely 'what is said'" (17); "a *Logos* was a *Muthos*, a *Muthos* was a *Logos*. They were two names for the same thing" (*The Art of the Logos* 19).

Though there is no question that *The Maximus Poems* is rhapsody—in over six hundred pages of poetry, the formal features of no two poems coincide⁶⁷—I want to suspend further questions of rhapsody as a model for overall form, the stitched-together fabric of the epic entirety, and offer a more local inspection of syntax. Not that a reader needs to get to “The Twist” to realise Olson has by that point in *The Maximus Poems* (1960)—it is its eighteenth “letter”—pretty well dismissed normative syntax as a thing fit for use, but it provides a useful example of how, when Olson is writing a poem not taken from other sources, his syntax goes. Appropriately enough, this poem, too, features things that move by rail. It begins:

Trolley-cars
are my inland waters

(Tatnuck Sq, and the walk

from the end of the line

to Paxton, for May-flowers

⁶⁷ The possible exception to this rule being three poems written in what Olson calls, in *Causal Mythology*, “fivers”: “*Some Good News*”; “*Stiffening, in the Master Founders’ Wills*”; and “*Capt Christopher Levett (of York)*” (MI 124-40). Several critics have attempted to make rough estimations about the overall shape of *The Maximus Poems*. J. H. Prynne thought the poem, up to *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), was “not secondary assemblage but primary writing; with this difference, that man’s current position of knowing what he does brings in the great unifying sentimentalities of dream as surely as it offsets merely naïve forward narrative” (“Review” 66). At Simon Fraser, speaking before the publication of *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975), Prynne says that “[t]hey tell me there is a great mass of further material. But I know for myself the primary structure of this poem is already complete, and complete in two major movements: the going out [...] and the coming back” (“On Maximus” 10). Paul Christensen argues that each of the six books of *The Maximus Poems* are “thematically organized” (*Call Him Ishmael* 119), but that the progression of the structure of the whole “tends towards less ordering of parts” (120). Sherman Paul does not explicitly identify a structure, but he reads the poem chronologically even though “there is no narrative line” (*Olson’s Push* 129). Don Byrd in *Olson’s Maximus* reads the poem’s tripartite structure as exemplary of “space, fact, stance”, so that each book corresponds to a certain theme (54).

or by the old road to Holden,
after English walnuts (*MI* 86).

Taking the term “twist” for a title to a poem which means to describe his own poetics is a calculated instance of self-knowing.⁶⁸ Aware of the main assumptions governing its own prosody, the poem suggests two ways of moving through the physical environment. These ways of moving are also the poem’s “theme”, which supplants the actual formal arrangement of the poem as a thing of primary consideration. The poem is as much a poetic tract as a poetic object. Anyway, the two ways of moving are by trolley car, and on foot. The fourth and fifth stanzas of the epigraphic section,⁶⁹ also, characteristically enough, contain another section on poetics:

Or he and I distinguish
between chanting,
and letting the song lie
in the thing itself.
I plant flowers

⁶⁸ The entry for “twist” in *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* notes that the sense of “to branch” or “to divide” is obsolete in English, but the sense of “to combine” or “to unite” is found as early as 1471; the figurative meaning of “to entangle” or “to confuse” (as in *twist up someone’s story*) is recorded by 1863. The sense of “to rotate” or “to revolve” is first recorded in 1789, developing out of the earlier sense of “to combine”. In “*Tyrian Businesses*” (*MI* 39-44) Olson writes: “(peltate | is my nose-twist [i.e., nasturtium], my beloved, my trophy | tropical American diffuse and climbing pungent” (*MI* 40; emphases added). *Troping* is clearly under advisement here. In this poem as in others, when Olson is talking about flowers he is also usually talking about poetics.

⁶⁹ By “epigraphic section” I mean to describe a common occurrence in early *Maximus* poems, namely, a portion of text that precedes numerical divisions within a poem. Half the poems that comprise the first two segments of what would eventually become *The Maximus Poems* (1960)—i.e., letters 1 through 22—namely, “Letter 1”, “Letter 2”, “Letter 5”, “Letter 7”, “Letter 10”, “Letter 14”, “Letter 16”, “On First Looking out through Juan de La Cosa’s Eyes [Letter 17]”, “The Twist [Letter 18]”, “*Maximus, at Boston and Tyre* [Letter 21]” and “Letter 22”, contain some form of epigraph.

(xenia) for him,
 in the wet soil, indoors,
 in his house

As I had it in my first poem,
 the Annisquam
 fills itself, as its tides, as she did
 the French dress, cut
 on the bias (*MI* 86).

The spelling of zinnia flowers as “xenia” is an intertextual allusion to Pound, who himself composed three different poems called “Xenia” (*CEP* 82, 278, 279). At issue here are forms of expression (again), especially if we take xenia to mean a genus of coral (a referent sponsored by the phrase “*wet* soil” and the implied coming and going of tides in the next stanza) which is known to pulse, whereas nose-*twists* or *nasturtiums*, which Olson’s poem’s title partly alludes to (Butterick 125), ostensibly do not. Syntactically, the conjunction “as” does much of the work in adjusting the poem’s structure to its content: “*As* I had in my first poem” depicts Olson asserting the priority of his own beginnings. The poem he describes, according to Butterick, is “Marry the Marrow” (circa 1945-6), which contains the following relevant lines:

Structure! least steel, most liquid:
 The Annisquam and the Atlantic
 At high tide fulfilled the land,
 Brimmed and eased it.
 Stretched the fabric across the hips of the earth,

French cut,

Discovering the global curve beneath (*CPO* 41).

The poem concludes, rhetorically: “Shall we string and tense the marrow more?” (*CPO* 42). The conjunction “as” in the penultimate stanza of the epigraphic section of “The Twist”—“As I had it in my first poem”—is made to posit a quick but not metaphorical movement in a way Olson will often require: the soil of the planting box is wet *as* was the soil of the land filled by the sea *as* its tides were filled *as* she filled (fully) the French dress. The slick passage from one thing to another minimises comparison though it maximises fast relations between things described. The extent to which “as” is here being used to keep the poem moving is primary; only secondarily does it ascribe affinity, as is made plain if a reader substitutes for “as” the word “like”. Olson is not saying these things are “alike”. It is a knowing move, crowned with a final “as” slipped into the section in the word “bias”.

There is an explicit justification for this kind of laterally connective procedure in “Projective Verse” as well. As it happens, the rationale for writing like this is given in the form of another of the manifesto’s more memorable pronouncements. Regarding the “process of the thing, how the principle can be made so to shape the energies that the form is accomplished”, it can be boiled down as follows:

(first hammered into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION
MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION
[...] get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed,
the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business,
keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen (*CP* 240).

As to questions of movement as handled in the poem:

Between Newton and Tatnuck Square the tracks
go up hill, the cars
sway, as they go around the bend
before they take, before they go down to
the outer-land

(where it is Sunday,
I am small, people go off
what strikes me as questionable
directions. They are large,
going away from my father and me,
as cows on that landscape

he and I seeming
the only ones who know
what we are doing, where
we are going

Now I find out it is the Severn
goes from Worcester to Gloucester to
: Bristow, Smith called it,
what sticks in me as the promised land
those couples did go to, at right angles
from us, what does show
between Gloucester and Boston, the landscape

I go up-dilly, elevated, tenement
down (*MI* 87).

This excerpt constitutes the entire first section of “The Twist”. The two ways of *going* are met by two time frames: Olson as a boy (in the first two stanzas here presented) and Olson as a man. To some minimal extent the syntax obeys the dictum to place one perception immediately after another, though there is little urgency about it; and after all, what poem does not contain one thing coming after another thing, in some kind of sequence? With his trademark opened but not closed parenthetical aside, Olson shows both a concurrence and a contiguity of content: one memory embedded inside another, interrupted by a live thought. The memory, though, is not admitted innocently into the text, by which I mean it performs a calculated function, indicating a design operative as well as or in spite of the semi-automatic prescription of “Projective Verse” to “keep it moving”. For the passage stakes a claim to an understanding better or more finely attuned than most people, presumably, possess. Those passengers who alight from the streetcars proceed at equally determinate “right angles”, directions that strike the young Olson as “questionable”. Only he, and his father, know what “we are doing”, a fact corroborated by their non-geometrically determined movements.⁷⁰ It is an important claim because implicit in it is an arrogation of responsiveness and awareness to the immediate geography, not to mention an implicit connection between doing and knowing (other passengers, by contrast, do *not* know what they are doing).

⁷⁰ I detect a latent prolepsis in this which is also a claim for the validity of a prosody that twists, namely, that by contrast, Olson’s way of going is *not* questionable. At any rate, for an earlier, semi-famous statement on poetics that uses the same pedestrian / train analogy, see T. E. Hulme’s *Speculations* (1924), in particular: “verse [i.e., concretion] is a pedestrian taking you over the ground, prose [i.e., abstraction]—a train which delivers you at a destination” (qtd. in Davie *Articulate Energy* 193).

In contradistinction to this—other passengers’—way of going, Olson moves between Gloucester and Boston by going “up-dilly, elevated, tenement | down”. In a dream he recorded in 1953, Olson travelled the same route he often had, but this time not by “I A or B & M train, but a sort of fairy-tale landscape, up & down [...] other experiences on this train (with a shift to elevated, at the end) But had gone when I was awake” (qtd. in Butterick 128). Subsequent poems would reimagine the traversal of this route as well, as in the brief poem “128 a mole | to get at Tyre” (*MII* 250), where the mole is the A. Piatt Andrew bridge, a causeway connecting Boston to Gloucester via US Highway 128, itself another pre-established route straight enough to follow without either thought or choice. The tracks others go by are not, the implied argument contends, either as spontaneous or authentic as Olson’s own, as he never ceases to remind us; the swaying movement on the trolley, back and forth, means passengers move under a kind of control rhythmically not their own. The description of that fact, however, seeks ways around succumbing to a similar fate. Though only briefly mooted, the line “Before they take, before they go”, for example, doubles back on itself, so that the syntax seems almost to self-revise, dramatising a care for accurate description. The two utterances move as though contingently entangled by one another (conflating as they do their *going* with their *taking*, an important condition of consumerist abstraction, as discussed below). Once Olson’s proclivity for twisting his syntax like this is discerned, it is easy to find such constructions in other, earlier *Maximus* poems. Towards the end of “Letter 7”, for instance (with particular emphasis on “as”):

Hartley’s fingers gave this sense of soaking, the ends as stubbed
as Jake’s, and each finger so thick and independent of the other, his own
hands were like gloves.

But not cloth. They stayed such salt rock as Jake’s

were—or as marshmallow is, if the trope will stand, as Hartley’s hands
 did stand, they were so much (each finger) their own lives’ acts

as Jake’s did
 from baiting hooks for sixty years,
 as Hartley’s,
 refusing woman’s flesh (*MI* 38).

Or as in “Letter 5”, where “as” again does most of the connective work:

It is enough Gloucester,
 to say where it is,
 had you also the will to be as fine as

as fine as fins are

as firm as

as firm as a mackerel is
 (fresh out of water)

as sure

as sure as no owner is
 (or he’d be to sea)

as vulnerable

(as vulnerable as I am
brought home to Main St
in such negligible company) (*MI* 24).

Towards the end of the second section of “The Twist”, we read:

The harbour the same,
the night of the St Valentine
storm : the air
sea ground the same, tossed
ice wind snow (Pytheus) one

cakes falling

as quiet as I was
out of the sky as quiet
as the blizzard was (*MI* 88).

The arrangement of the clauses, in particular the refusal to specifically demarcate their edges, might be mimetic of the syntax of a storm, but here the confusion of sense is more than an imitation of weather. The idiosyncratic phrasing signals an individual going, as it were, his own way. In 1965 Olson agreed with Ed Dorn’s assessment that it was in “The Twist” where “the voice really starts” (*Muthologos* v.1 159). Part of the reason for finding this true is that Dorn said so, and Olson agreed; but another reason is the syntactic oddity of the passage. The repetition of “as” in this final stanza of the

second part of “The Twist” conveys a sense that something is happening *other* than comparison. Of course the reader familiar with *The Maximus Poems* will read this section and think ahead to “Letter # 41 [broken off]”, where Olson writes again about the same storm: “With a leap (she said it was an arabesque | I made, off the porch, the night of the | St Valentine Day’s storm, into the snow” (*MII* 171). Here the conjunction “as” almost works to obscure, rather than establish clarity of, relations through comparison. Even though we intimate the sense of what is being proposed—that Olson’s fall through the air was somehow like cake falling which in turn was like snow falling in a storm—the stability of the representation is undermined by both the oddity of the related event *and* the syntax that carries its description.

Olson continues in the third section of “The Twist” to provide even more talk of locomotives (“the Third Avenue El”), “I run my trains | on a monorail, I am seized | —not so many nights ago— | by the sight of the river | exactly there at the Bridge | | where it goes out & in” (*MI* 89). The singleness of Olson’s transversal movements—via “monorail”—should by now be recognised as something proposed so often it no longer seems worth glossing. As it happens, the singularity of the poem is forwarded as an implicit justification of the specificity of the placement of the poet as he writes. Judging from the lines “by the sight of the river | exactly there at the Bridge | | where it goes out & in”, it is written from Fort Point Park, looking across the harbour toward US Highway 127 and the Western Avenue Bridge right at the place where the Annisquam River empties into the Atlantic. And then the poem concludes:

I recognize
the country not discovera, [sic]
the marsh behind, the ditch that Blynman made, the dog-rocks
the tide roars over

some curves off,
 when it's the river's turn, shoots
 calyx and corolla by the dog
 (August,
 the flowers break off

but the anther,
 the filament of now, the mass
 drives on,

the whole of it
 coming,
 to this pin-point
 to turn

in this day's sun,

in this veracity
 there, the waters of several of them the roads
 here, a blackberry blossom (*MI* 89-90).

At the figurative centre of these final lines are “the flowers”, culminating in the admittedly fanciful “filament of now”, which I suppose is the anther of the blackberry blossom. Typically, though, Olson attempts a precision of reference, referring to both

the calyx—the sepals of the flower forming a whorl that encloses the petals and forms a cup-like protective layer around the bud—and the corolla—the petals of the flower, themselves forming another whorl within the sepals and enclosing the stamen (all the while the threads, the lines, that twist are kept just peripheral to the literal statement). “Some curves off” cannot be wrenched into easy grammatical sense as the foregoing four lines can: the tide might “roar over” “some curves”, that is, rocks or contours of the river; but surely it cannot roar over “some curves *off*”. The stanza that the line “some curves off” opens in fact lacks a proper subject, though the line following it, “the flowers break off” matches “curves off”. But there is no doubt that something is happening to flowers in water (the river’s turn shoots calyx and corolla, et cetera).⁷¹ Olson offers multiple renditions of what he means: “anther” = “filament of now” = “mass”; or again “this day’s sun” = “this veracity”. The preponderance of definite articles and deictic adjectives in the concluding passage contributes to whatever sense of particularity this passage might afford its readers. But the exclusiveness with which specific references are used verges on special pleading:

“the country”; “the marsh”; “the ditch”; “the dog-rocks”; “the tide”;
 “the river’s”; “the dog”; “the anther”; “the filament”; “the mass”; “the
 whole”; “this pin-point”; “this day’s”; “this veracity”; “the waters”; “the
 roads” (*MI* 89-90).

⁷¹ Here the allusion to *xenia* (whose corals quite literally look like an underwater-bouquet) is again tacitly summoned, though the mooted image of a flower in water probably, if at all, refers to an annual ceremony held in Gloucester to remember fishermen lost at sea in which mourners gather to throw “bouquets of flowers on the outgoing tide” (qtd. in Butterick 223). Olson writes about this in “*Maximus, to Gloucester, Sunday, July 19*” (*MI* 157-9): “this afternoon: there are eyes | in this water | | the flowers | from the shore, | | awakened | the sea” (*MI* 159). This poem, like Pound’s most famous “*Xenia*” poem—published in the November 1913 number of *Poetry* (58-60)—is perhaps best characterised as one of acute social observation.

This definiteness, such as it seems, also arises from the subtle but absolutely discernible syntactical control. Implicit in the repetition of the definite article and other specific adjectives is an insistence that uses its own inwardly curling recalibrations of statement as a means of making what is indeed very abstract knowledge read like something more specific. The twist is, then, a turning of abstract statement—*what* veracity, for instance? oh, *this* veracity; or imagine the difference to both tone and meaning if Olson had written “the anther | *a* filament of now”—into a specificity through syntactic contortions and manipulation. This section of “The Twist” is not a well-formed sentence. It is *de*-formed *by* the specificities of the presentation of nouns.

WHAT IS MEANT BY “OLSON’S LITERALISM”

The foregoing pages offered a brief discussion of a text not usually discussed as an auto-referential poem about poetics. “The Twist” is, of course, also about a lot of other things as well; the same could be said, though to a radically lesser extent, about “I, Mencius, Pupil of the Master” and “Letter 15”. These latter remain, in my opinion, lesser poems because of it. The point to take away, however, is that Olson’s poems ask to be read as largely self-referring. Olson’s literalism, therefore, consists very much in a special kind of autopoiesis.

Michael Fried, in a seminal critique of minimalist art—a movement he, appropriately enough, preferred to call “Literalist”—says that the “literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters the work” (“Art and Objecthood” 153). I am not suggesting that an interesting test of *The Maximus Poems* is going to necessarily involve a comparison between what it feels like to read it in Gloucester versus what it feels like to read it in the British Library.⁷² But Olson remains very interested in controlling the circumstances in which readers encounter his work. This is the case for any poet of course, but for Olson such control is central to his poems’ effect. In this desire, Olson shares an affinity with minimalist artists as Fried portrays them. In making this connection I am interested in discriminating between what might be described as two kinds of literalism. There is, I believe, some critical distance and difference between

⁷² Interestingly enough, this *is* an assertion Prynne wanted to make in his lecture on *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968) at Simon Fraser. He begins that talk by saying: “[m]y sense of the completion of that poem varies very strongly according to where I am, and this is new place to be, so I have what seems a new poem with me” (4). Whitman, of course, earnestly recommended his readers take *Leaves of Grass* outside; he was reportedly delighted with the second, 1856 edition, because it would easily fit into any pocket. The *New York Tribune* advertised the one-dollar edition as “handy for pocket, table or shelf” (Stern 121).

literalism as meta-writing typified by a kind of inward-looking, hyper self-consciousness characteristic of—Olson would have thought—Wallace Stevens’s verse (i.e., a poetry with minimal concern for “facts” or “the world out there” and instead concerned with interrogating its own internal functions); and literalism as a “stance *toward* reality *outside a poem* as well as a new stance toward the reality of a poem itself” (CP 246; emphasis added) as exemplified by Fried’s notion of theatricality:

[i]t is a function not just of the obstructiveness and, often, even aggressiveness of literalist work, but of the special complicity that that work extorts from the beholder. Something is said to have presence when it demands that the beholder take it into account, that he take it seriously—and when the fulfilment of that demand consists simply in being aware of the work and so to speak, in acting accordingly (155).

In what feels to me like a direct correlate to this allegation, early Olson critic Egbert Faas wrote that the most famous claim of “Projective Verse” is that the poem can, thanks to the inherent accuracies of the typewriter, render the poetic page as a score for speech so that the “reader will be able to voice the poet’s work, and be drawn into the poem rather than analyse or judge it” (122). Olson wrote in “Projective Verse” that

[i]t is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of speech, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and

by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work (*CP* 245).

Any benefit of accurate registration of individual vicissitudes the machine affords the composing poet is secondary to its affording him the capacity to accurately instruct his reader. While letters to editors and the manuscript and typescript drafts show that Olson was absolutely concerned with matters of typography and the placement of the text upon the page, I think the rigidities of spacing were more useful as indicators of authorial intentions (tantamount to instructions to the reader) than as registers of attention or perception (see Appendix three—figure 2). It has been little noticed by critics the extent to which Olson's use of typographic spacing is integral to his pedagogical conception of poetics, where prosody becomes an implement of *instruction*. Indeed, as the manuscripts at the Charles Olson Research Center at the University of Connecticut show, Olson almost never wrote first drafts on the typewriter (the exactitudes it affords are therefore mainly useful to the secondary act of dissemination). Most poems, especially those of *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975), which he never had time to assemble for publication, are scrawled on the backs of letters, chequebooks, placemats, et cetera. Taken literally, Olson's comments about the typewriter laud not so much its heightened capacity for registering accuracies of perception but its function in schematising authorial voice into directions for performance. With this new capacity comes a greater degree of control over readerly behaviour.

Does Olson's prosody extort its readers, as Fried thinks minimalist artworks extorts their beholders? And can the poems of *The Maximus Poems* be said to demand certain critical or interpretive reactions which function in obeisance to prescriptions already established by what Olson says about his verse? I think the answer to both such questions is plainly *yes*. Faas wrote his remarks largely before any substantial body of

criticism of Olson's work existed. His observations, however, have proved to be quite prescient, as two of the more recent critical works on Olson show. Stephen Fredman's hermeneutical method in *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition* (1993) focuses upon the prose written by various American poets as the "bulwark" for the poetry. His larger thesis, that American poets lack a tradition and so seek to establish one for themselves by writing justificatory theoretical statements, seems as much a plausible idea about American verse as it does an accession to the idea that criticism should ventriloquize the arguments made in those theoretical statements in the first place, so that the very act of grounding oneself in a self-made tradition is as coercive as it is original. He writes: "[i]n the absence of an embracing cultural tradition, the prose statements perform an important duty in authorizing the poetry. An awareness of this crucial quality of the prose is absolutely essential" (3). What Fredman means by a "crucial quality" of the prose is pertinent to what I am trying to describe as Olson's literalism. By all accounts Fredman is right. *And*, at the same time, he adopts a critical position afforded to him and constructed by the very poets he wants to analyse. In other words, Fredman takes the theoretical pronouncements of his subjects as the tradition against which their poems are to be measured. This is not to say that Olson should best be placed in a context totally foreign to him, for example by what the poets in Ghana are doing these days (though why not?); still, in Fredman's model the space for what once might have been called critical distance risks collapse.

One of the most salient outcomes, exemplified time and again in critical writings about Olson, is this: commentators lose the capacity to discriminate between their explanatory description of what the poet thought he was doing and what, on the other hand, they themselves think of the poetry. This is because, I suggest, we are being asked implicitly to study the poetry only secondarily. The irony of my having to say all this in view to saying something about Olson's prosody is palpable and itself not an unrelated

consequence of “literalism” as I am describing it. Instead, the reader or critic—*does* Olson have readers who are not also critics or scholars, I wonder—studies primarily the poet’s own theoretical explanations. Olson’s desire to obscure the line between, on the one hand, a new prosody, and on the other, a new stance towards reality (these are the two headings of “Projective Verse”), is accomplished insofar as the poetry so often seems to enact what Olson says it does. How, for example, does a poem like “*Letter, May 2, 1959*” (quoted below) *not* constitute a new prosody and a new stance toward reality? Don Byrd, usually one of Olson’s more sensitive commentators, seems at times too comfortable in letting statements about poetics in Olson’s poems—nevermind what is said in the theoretical prose—stand as unproblematically accurate. In the “The Possibility of Measure in Olson’s *Maximus*”, he writes: “Olson’s poetic achievement is to discover a poetic which is so completely spatial that he can simply say ‘metric is mapping’” (52), as though that were the end of the matter. The statement is a paraphrase from Olson’s *Maximus* poem “NOTE ON THE ABOVE”, an in-poem commentary on another *Maximus* poem called “John Burke”, where Olson writes: “metric then is mapping, and so, to speak modern cant, a congruent means of making a statement” (MI 149). Surely the idea that metric is mapping is made explicit in this poem—“*Letter, May 2, 1959*”—but only as a sort of conceptual pun:

125 paces Grove Street
 fr E end of Oak Grove cemetery
 to major turn NW of
 road

this line goes finally straight
 fr Wallis property direct

to White (as of 1707/8)

(2) 125 of curve

(3) 200 paces to Centennial

(4)

47 90 90

st

230 paces

c 300 paces

Whittemore to the marsh

Kent's property/Pearce

w to marsh

70 (hill falls off

paces o

hill falls o

S to o 140

marsh o

o

Meeting house

old stonewall

Babson

Green

—between Bruen & Eveleth?

house

(Perkins)

Ellery

fence marking

Millet (*MI* 150).

In mapping out “paces” Olson is taking literally the idea that poems are made of and by “feet”. Admittedly, the poem makes a convincing case for a new prosody and a new stance towards reality, since the poem does in a way *measure* space—Creeley calls it a “literal mapping” (*Quick Graph* 172). One might say: poems are measures of space, or that poems measure space. Just look at this poem. It is a measure of space, is it not? The sense in which the poems seem to so obviously *do* what Olson elsewhere says they do, accounts, a least in part, for the habitual failure of critical discourse to recognise and then discuss a distinction between Olson’s poetry and his theories about poems. Since the identity between them looks so straightforward it becomes easy to say “For Olson [...]”, and then make a comment without really specifying if by “Olson” one means to treat the “theorist/theory” or the “poet/poem”.

When it comes to reading the poems, critics regularly attempt summaries or explanations of the former; that, or, the poetry is used as a sort of prop. In the most recent critical work on Olson, Carla Billitteri explains:

Olson’s truth is always singular in manifestation; its transmission has to be conveyed univocally, in consequence of the fact that its content and form are one. Projective verse is not so much read, then, as absorbed, is not so much interpreted as internalized. Composed so as to preserve the life force of the poem in its wholeness and entirety [...], projective verse would discourage any analytical approach (134).

Her analysis of some of the prohibitive strategies is apt and I entirely agree with her assessment; but when it comes to looking at the poetry she in fact puts into action the

very prohibitions she elsewhere identified, mistaking Olson's seeming organicism not for the linguistic ideology it is, but as an accomplishment of an absolute identity between form and content as such. The verse itself, replete with all manner of involved particularity, deflects her attentions back towards the paraphrasable theory of a pre-determined understanding of what the verse is. In her chapter on Olson she only quotes three times from his poetry; the verse that is quoted is not so much analysed as presented as a recapitulation of Olson's theories. For example, she quotes:

I measure my song,
measure the sources of my song,
measure me, measure
my forces

(And I buzz,
as the bee does,
who's missed
the plum tree,
and gone and got himself caught
in my window

And the whirring of whose wings
blots out the rattle of
my machine) (*MI* 48).

She then comments: "[m]easuring his song and its sources and measuring himself and his forces, the poet becomes imprisoned by the demands of his craft much as the bee

becomes trapped in the poet's domestic space" (132), which seems a fair but not very incisive analysis. More importantly, *has* the poet become imprisoned? What is striking about such commentary is how it fails to recognise the poem as a poem. In accepting Olson has collapsed the distinction between form and content, Billitteri can simply discount his prosody. Seeing this excerpt as exemplary of projective verse and quoting it as part of an explanation-cum-defence of the tenets of that programme, Billitteri ignores the pretty obvious sonic decoration that a poem written under the sign of "Projective Verse" is either pledged to avoid or to use to some concerted and obvious effect. Rimes like: sources/forces, buzz/does, me/bee—and alliteration—"window | And the whirring of whose wings" receive no comment. I agree with Billitteri's that this poem is "about" the conflict between so-called "natural" versus more mechanical modes of poetic production (though that, too, is a distinction Olson makes in "Projective Verse"); while noticing such sonic decorations is perhaps not going to have profound effects upon her larger argument, it seems unlikely that a discussion about Olson's conception of the material immanence of language could responsibly avoid them.

Billitteri is not alone in her tendency to talk about Olson's poetics without discussing the poems, though her recent book does provide a particularly graphic example of the extent to which that dissociation has continued to carry.⁷³ Even Robert von Hallberg, in what is to my mind still the best and most important single study of Olson's work, begins his book by saying that "Olson is an unusually interesting theorist" and that "a study of his poetics should logically precede an examination of his poetry" (1). What makes Olson's ideas about poetry so much more interesting than his actual

⁷³ A survey of the schedules of one recent and one forthcoming (at the time of writing) Olson centenary conference shows the extent to which his prosody remains weirdly ignored. Panels for the Charles Olson Centenary Conference in June 2010 at Simon Fraser University included such topics as Olson and feminism; Olson and visual art; Olson and dance; Olson in Canada; Olson and space; Olson and pedagogy. A conference at the University of Kent has panels on Olson and myth; Olson and space; Olson in translation; Olson and his contemporaries; Olson and women; et cetera.

poems? Are the causes of this deflection somehow attributable to the power of the prose-theory, so that readers are habitually drawn away from (i.e., abstracted by) the poems by the gravity of intellectualised justification given for them in the prose essays?⁷⁴ One reason for this might be that the poems themselves encourage such deflections. The word *deflect* is, as it turns out, well suited to and deeply complicit in what Olson often tried to do. Robin Blaser recounts how, upon reading *The Maximus Poems*, he also became interested in the history of Gloucester and New England. He says that when Olson found out about this he (Olson) chastised him (Blaser) for that affront and vigorously recommended he (Blaser) find his own place (Ferrini n.p.). But such admonitions are inextricable from instruction. From the “Fort Point section”:

Directly in front of my own house
 (by the choke-cherry tree) at
 Stage Fort Avenue. A depression,
 in the ground, up hill from the tree
 is still there. Or was, the last time
 (recently, 1964)

 I took my son and daughter
 so that they might know
 if they wanted to
 where to dig (*MII* 369).

⁷⁴ This is undoubtedly the case for some critics. William V. Spanos, for instance, clearly finds Olson a more interesting philosophical phenomenologist than a poet. See, for example, his quite cerebral “Charles Olson and Negative Capability: A Phenomenological Interpretation” (1980). In all fairness to Spanos *et alia*, American poetry of the twentieth century—but really since Whitman—has been concerned with “facts”, and pushes against the sequestering of poetic discourse into the polite confines of fine art and letters (and into, say, philosophy).

It is hard not to read this as a statement of poetics and only secondarily as a poem whose measures must be studied and whose figurative language is richly suggestive. But surely the form is an extension of the content only insofar as the content here seems able to deflect attention away from form entirely (i.e., what form?). And all the while the poem says “come over to my part of town” and “I’ll show you where to look”. Olson’s telling us “where to dig” is more a *map* than “*Letter, May 2, 1959*” could ever be.

Even Ed Dorn, in perhaps the most perceptive and interesting, if not influential pieces on *The Maximus Poems*—“What I See in *The Maximus Poems*”—does not ever offer to “read” any part of text. The third section in that essay, deceptively titled “A Look at the Poems: A Non-Technical Note”, begins:

I am not going to look at the poems because I already have, many times. There is no point in talking about the way they are put together, in a sub-total sense, because, in the first place, I never had a taste for analysis, and in so far as technique goes, there is Olson’s projective verse essay, and besides, any man ought to do that work for himself (42).

Granted, there is a certain degree of casualness arrogated to this particular critic who earlier in the essay expresses a sufficiently developed boredom with “understanding and reason” to “abandon them altogether” (36), but Dorn is also being in this respect a good student of Olson’s, one who has learned not to subject the teacher’s work to the scrutiny of a discourse not already its own. To Olson, a metrical set is as abstract as reason itself: neither should be sought. Dorn’s comments on, for example, Olson’s prosody (which, as a “system” of versification, is something patently anathema to the counter-rational impulse of the writing) are respectfully limited. For instance:

I don't particularly care the way it is arranged. I like the way it is, on the page, and find a great sense in the way it is, and relevantly, in the way Olson says it ought to be. But I don't depend on it. In one sense, I am completely anticritical. But maybe I mean not critical at all (43).

Other recent studies have found different reasons for not reading the poems. Libbie Rifkin's sociological study, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan and the American Avant-Garde* (2000), discusses what she calls Olson's pedagogical "strategies of marginality", by which she means the "decentring practices as the insider rhetoric of anecdote and conversation, the Rimbaudian drunken ramble"; she considers Olson's "composition by field" to be a theory of poetic production "deployed by agents who often already enjoy a degree of institutional authority, and they tend to want to retain it" (27). Similarly, Anne Day Dewey's *Beyond Maximus: The Construction of Public Voice in Black Mountain Poetry* (2007) seeks a sociological explanation for the "development of field poetics in the careers" of Black Mountain poets (212). Her account is sensitive to "claims for the authority of poetic voice" Olson so often assumes, but locates the main interest of the invention and transformation of field poetics in the dynamic relations between the institutions of poetry and the cultural scene at large. If "Black Mountain Poetry" is a term that has any meaning whatsoever, it does so, it seems, only as a sociological and historical category. What, for example, do the poems of Ed Dorn, Charles Olson, Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley and John Wieners have in common *prosodically*? If we say they are joined by a shared commitment to something so vaguely defined as "composition by field"—something each poet would describe and express differently—what is really being claimed? It is amongst Olson's principal achievements to make idiosyncrasy seem like a method.

MINIMA

It is one of Fried's intentions in his essay to define and then defend a distinction between experience, on the one hand, and meaning, on the other. Broadly, this "crucial distinction" comes down, for him, to a distinction between theatrical and non-theatrical art. Meaningful, non-theatrical art—art that has, for instance, quality and value, and, importantly, an interior that is legibly complex—is opposed by the "theatricality of objecthood" (*AC&O* 160), a literalism whose "quality of having an inside" is "almost blatantly anthropomorphic", as though the work in question had a secret inner life. Olson's "minimalist" poems approach a similarly "secret" anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism itself is never something *The Maximus Poems* shies away from. It is a central aspect of Olson's self-consciously primitive imagination:

The View – July 29, 1961

the arms
of Half Moon Beach,
the legs
of the Cut (*MII* 225).

This is an anthropomorphism to be sure, but is it a secret? It could be argued that its sheer brevity is a signature of secretiveness. The fact that Olson has deleted so much context so that the text merely *is what it is* seems itself suspiciously like a demonstration of a motto Olson liked to quote: "that which exists through itself is called meaning" (*Causal Mythology* 11). What is this poem *other* than a wholly minimal view of landscape, so obviously and entirely anthropomorphised? Its blatancy lacks something normally

additional to merely “what it is”: like meaning? Such brevity is a commonplace in *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), a volume heavily populated with patently minimalist pieces whose condensation is so extreme they are legible as rhetorical propositions about the presentation of decontextualised utterances whose significance remains intrinsic. Since the poems give their readers so little to go on we understandably revert to wondering not about their structures but what in writing them Olson might *think* he is doing. Take, for instance, the poem “Homo Anthropos”:

Homo Anthropos
 – and Our Lady: Potnia,
 and Poseidon (Potidan

[Theroun]

Thursday January 10th 1963 (*MII* 316).

This poem presents the Jungian archetype (the expression of secret inner life *par excellence*)⁷⁵ even as it operates as archetypal: its reticence is distinctive of so many of the small poems of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968). But more to the point, it reads as would a poet’s note to himself, as though a map or plan for other poems. Indeed, the poems either side of this one, “THE FRONTLET” (*MII* 315) and “to enter into their

⁷⁵ There are numerous other “Jungian” references throughout Olson’s text. See, for instance, an earlier *Maximus* poem: “brang that thing out, | the Monogene || the original unit | survives in the salt” (*MII* 242). In *Psychology and Alchemy*, Jung wrote: “[t]he limbs of the Anthropos born of the Autogenes (=Monogenes) correspond to the four gates of the city” (reprinted in *Dreams* 185), which might work as an explanation of the poem “the arms | of Half Moon Beach | the legs | of the Cut” insofar as the beach and the Cut are access points to Gloucester. For an extended discussion of Olson’s debt to Jung see Charles Stein’s *The Secret of the Black Chrysanthemum* (1987).

bodies” (*MII* 317) respectively, explicitly mention the Lady of Good Voyage and Poseidon. “Theroun”—from Greek, meaning “wild beast”—is part of a piece of marginalia Olson made in his source text, Harrison’s *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Butterick 435). It is an annotation that does not clarify but rather contributes to the mystery of what this is supposed to mean. In other words, this poem cannot be read on its own. One must look to “THE FRONTLET” to find out that “Theroun” is a bull; or to “to enter their bodies” to know that for Olson “Our Lady” (“Potnia”) and Poseidon (“Potidan”) have some significant relation beyond the morphemic similarities of the epithets. The point I want to make is that the difficulty of “Homo Anthropos” is entirely connected to a sort of displaced referentiality. Like so many other poems of *The Maximus Poems*, it deflects analysis or directs it elsewhere. As such, it presents a difficulty that can be resolved to some extent. It is nearly impossible, however, to say anything about its prosody. Literalism of this kind both emphasises the enigmatic, secretive character of the poetry as it minimises prosody as something available for consideration.⁷⁶ Which, again, is weird because the form is so conspicuous—that said, beyond noticing it *as* evident, there seems relatively little other work to be done.

Olson can be understood to be handling the individual terms of this piece so as to create what minimalist artist Tony Smith describes as “pneumatic structures”: “in these, all the material is in tension” (qtd. in Fried 156). In a December 1966 interview with *Artforum*, Smith continues to suggest that “biomorphic forms have a dream-like quality” (qtd. in Fried 156). Such “pneumatic structures”, Fried says, “can best be

⁷⁶ Olson tells us his secretiveness is a function of his kicking against syntax: “Because breath allows *all* the speech force of language back in (speech is the “solid” of verse, is the secret of a poem’s energy), because, now, a poem has, by speech, solidity, everything in it can now be treated as solids, objects, things [...] a poem can be allowed to have the play of their separate energies and can be allowed, once the poem is well composed, to keep, as those other objects do, their proper confusions. Which brings us up, immediately, bang, against tenses, in fact against syntax, in fact against grammar generally, that is, as we have inherited it (“Projective Verse” *CP* 244).

described as hollow with a vengeance” (156); consequently literalists claim “biomorphic” forms, a fact which betrays their “latent or hidden naturalism” (Fried 157). Isn’t *pneumatic* structure exactly what Olson claims he wants?

If I hammer, if I recall in, and keep calling in, the breath, the breathing as distinguished from the hearing, it is for cause, it is to insist upon a part that breath plays in verse which has not (due, I think, to the smothering of the power of the line by too set a concept of foot) has not been sufficiently observed or practiced, but which has to be if verse is to advance to its proper force and place in the day, now, and ahead. I take it that PROJECTIVE VERSE teaches, is, this lesson, that that verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath (*CP* 241).

It seems to me more than merely coincidental that immediately following this opening gambit about the new importance of the breath (it is the first time Olson proposes it in the essay) he then writes this:

Let’s start from the smallest particle of all, the syllable. It is the king and pin of versification, what rules and holds together the lines, the larger forms, of a poem. I would suggest that verse here and in England has dropped this secret from the late Elizabethans to Ezra Pound, lost it, in the sweetness of meter and rime [...]

It is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty, by these particles of sound as clearly as by the sense of the words which they

compose [...] The fineness, and the practice, lie here, at the minimum and source of speech (*CP* 241).

From whence does all this talk of the “minims of language” (*CP* 241) come, and of language that is at once “least careless” and “least logical” (*CP* 241)? Accompanying such descriptions of the new prosody are adjectives like “fineness”, “scrupulous” and “exacting” (*CP* 241), as though any poet would hail the advent of a newly vague and muddled verse practice. And amid a lot of speculation about the “ear” and its connection to the syllable, Olson then posits that its “twin” is the “line”:

the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing, shall come to, termination (*CP* 242).

The pairing between syllable and line—later put: “the HEAD, by way of the EAR to the SYLLABLE | the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE” (*CP* 242)—so commonly glossed by commentators, has some interesting implications for the *kinds* of poems that Olson writes. For a poet who so ostentatiously announced a long poem of really estimable power and attention and control in the very title *Maximus*, he wrote an unusually large number of very small poems. In the second part of “Projective Verse”, which announces a new “stance toward reality”, Olson writes that “in the beginning and the end is the breath, voice in its largest sense”. Attending to this “voice” means a change in the “dimension of the line” (*CP* 247). It is not at all clear that by “dimension” Olson means big or long or whatever. I think Olson is quite (perhaps intentionally)

confusing on the subject; but I also think that the new “dimension” heralded by projective verse pertains as much to a novel aspect or feature of the coming poetry as it does to its physical extent. As such, a change in dimension also means a “change in his [the poet’s] conceiving” (*CP* 247). By the change in “scale in which he imagines the matter’s use” (*CP* 247), Olson means not only to suggest a breakthrough in relative proportions, but changes in the very range of value formation. The projective act which “leads to dimensions larger than the man” is wholly designed to disqualify the validity of the egocentric, even anthropocentric subject position—Olson calls this disqualification “objectism” (*CP* 247). The new dimensions and scales, according to Olson, will point to something “bigger” than the poet in the conceptual sense.

One way to face this dilemma is to recover a “due and profound respect | for the materials” (*CPO* 100), as Olson put it in the non-*Maximus* poem “The Praises”. Such a respect will also recover the “secret of secrecy” and “the value” (*CPO* 100). But it is to the *Maximus* poems at the smaller end of that dimensional/scalar spectrum (which finds fullest expression in the blank pages of *MII* 284-5), those composed with a purported attention to the “minims” of language, which are themselves so minimal they seem *a priori* to exude and command not only a respect for their materials but for the inherent value of secrecy, that I want now to turn.

LEAST SONG

In “Projective Verse” Olson calls for the “the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego” (CP 247). What does this actually mean? I take it to define a poetics whose “acts of composition” work towards a radical containment of occasion wherein a liable speaker *could* lyrically interfere. In saying this, I think Olson is surely making a distinction best described by Ed Dorn: “the exhortation to be beyond your poetry, to write *Poetry*, not your *own* poetry; nobody could ever care about that [the latter]” (“Charles Olson Memorial Lectures” n.p.). Among the possible outcomes of this compositional strategy are the little poems of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968).

These poems are realisations of projective verse, however counterintuitive it sounds to the reader predisposed to thinking of “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” (CP 239) as something participating in the fundamental condition of American “SPACE” as Olson defines it in “Call me Ishmael”: “large, and without mercy” (CP 17). For one thing, the near-total minimisation of time in such small poems allows that other conceptual counterpart, space, to make itself more readily felt; for another, these brief poems, “hooks and eyes” as Olson calls them, are not “snippets” (qtd. in Butterick 368), but resistant intensities whose forms necessarily discourage any attention to internal regularities (no ego has *time* to assert itself therein like that).

Olson’s promotion of a new attention—writerly as well as readerly—to the syllable and the line is connected to a condemnation of what he calls prosodic laziness: “contemporary workers go lazy RIGHT WHERE THE LINE IS BORN” (CP 242). When the “heart” has gone lazy “slow things” such as similes and adjectives are admitted into verse. These are, Olson contends, boring, and must be deleted:

there is a whole flock of rhetorical devices which have now to be brought under a new bead, now that we sight with the line. Simile is only one bird who comes down, too easily. The descriptive functions generally have to be watched, every second, in projective verse, because of their easiness, and thus their drain on the energy which composition by field allows into a poem (*CP* 243).

Against all this easiness Olson wants difficulty. By this I mean something very specific: a refusal to please, to write pleasing verse, verse that has, for example, interesting and compelling similes in it. Robert von Hallberg has written of Olson's desire for "drying out" the verse using prosaic rhythms and of using a "tonal restraint so severe that the attitude of the poet seems neither ambiguous nor subtle" (*Scholar's Art* 191). Hallberg continues to suggest that Olson eschews such niceties because, for example, fine gradations of tonal intricacy might advertently make the verse personal (191). In saying this, Hallberg is ninety percent right; but to my mind he mistakes the "getting rid of the lyric interference of the individual as ego" as an eschewal of personality *per se*. If that is so, how can the poet's attitude come through? Olson is interested in deleting the *lyric* interference, the musicality and everything else associated with lyric (rime, meter, et cetera) of the individual as ego, not the ego itself. I mean, are we to believe that *The Maximus Poems* somehow *delete* the poet's personal ego?

Given that such a great deal of "Projective Verse" is largely a lot of tough-guy posing (*its* syntax, for instance, conveys an urgency that presents some rather conventional content as something radically new), we must pay attention when Olson *does* make a specific claim, since that is something that can be subjected to analysis. In this instance he is prescribing a principle of poetic composition that is the "targeting" of simile. This apparently off-hand remark is part of a larger argument about "OBJECTS":

“what they are, what they are inside a poem, how they got there, and, once there, how they are to be used” (*CP* 243). I want to think about this proposition—the targeting of simile—as it impinges upon acts of composition that are concerned not only with avoiding metaphorical devices, but also with the practice of comparison more generally.⁷⁷ It is useful to do this by, in fact, *comparing* a short poem from *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968) with Pound’s imagist poem par excellence. Olson wrote:

23 School and 16 Columbia :
 myrtle and violets. and wood.
 _____ (*MII* 220).

If this delicate-seeming little poem, set against the vast white space of the oversized page of the second volume *looks* like imagism, that is because it is, I think, a rather cunning revision of Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” (1913):

The apparition of these faces in the crowd :
 Petals on a wet, black bough . (*P* 251)

Like Pound’s most famous short poem, Olson’s consists of a mere two lines, though Olson has, in his poem, exchanged a title for a thick underline *after* the piece, as though to outdo the already emphatic certitude of Pound’s original juxtaposition. In both poems, the first lines are separated from their respective second lines by a colon set a small space away from the end word. Olson’s poem, moreover, is a near-perfect syllabic

⁷⁷ Elsewhere in “Projective Verse” Olson quotes from Fenollosa’s *CWC*: “‘Is’ comes from the Aryan root, *as*, to breathe” (*CP* 242). As we already have seen, Olson uses “as”—perhaps the most important of his little words—very often to indicate prosodic movement at the expense of clearly demarcated comparisons so that the physical act of placing things in proximity occasions relation, *not* pre-existing criteria.

replica of Pound's "In a Station of the Metro": though the first line of Pound's poem contains twelve syllables, whereas Olson's contains only eleven, if "violets" in Olson's poem is sounded as the diphthong it is in actual speech, that is as the two-syllable "*vi-o-lets*" rather than three syllable "*vi-o-lets*", each poem's second line consists of seven syllables. In regard to their respective second lines, there is a definite convergence of content: Pound's "petals" correspond to Olson's "myrtle and violets"; and Pound's "bough" corresponds with Olson's "wood".

Despite such interconnections, these are significantly different kinds of poems, a fact not least emphasised by comparing their opening lines (the difference is made starker by what they share). Whereas for Pound, the circumstance underlying the occasion of his poem is a swiftness of perception—as he "got out of a Paris 'metro' train at La Concorde, and saw *suddenly* a beautiful face, and then another and another" (*GB* 86; emphasis added)—Olson's poem gets its "image" from a gradually accreted attention to local conditions. In "Human Universe" he writes that "[w]hat happens at the skin is more like than different from what happens within. The process of the image [...] cannot be understood by separation from the stuff it works on" (*CP* 162). Olson's poem refuses separation whilst Pound's relies on it.

As it happens, "23 School" and "16 Columbia" are addresses near his home at 28 Fort Square, in Gloucester, so he would have passed them often enough during his perambulations through the city; that is, he would have "known" them directly. 23 School Street was, in 1967, the time of this poem's composition, covered with ivy, myrtle and violet; 16 Columbia Street, some 90 yards away, was made entirely of wood (Butterick 323-4). Not that such details are significant in themselves. Indeed, I think Olson's poem precisely (intentionally) lacks thematic occasion, just as it lacks swift moment of perceptual understanding, in the sense that Pound's possesses both. But it does help to explain the odd full stop and space of Olson's second line, as this minor

syntactic disruption is used to indicate a split in the references of the second line:

“myrtle and violets” pertains to the house at 23 School Street; “and wood” pertains to the house at 16 Columbia Street. Pound, too, uses intra-linear spacing as a kind of graphic syntax to map corresponding relations between the two lines to express the poem’s “equation” (GB 87). In Pound’s poem the clausal subject of the first line, “apparition”, corresponds to the subject of the second line, “petals”; the prepositional phrase “of these faces” meets the prepositional phrase of the second line, “on a wet, black”; the loci “crowd” becomes “bough”, so that each is a place and condition of the emergence of faces and petals, respectively.

Olson’s poem, too, uses a kind of point-by-point interlinear correspondence. But “23 School and 16 Columbia” is not an imagist poem, for two reasons.⁷⁸ First, it does not proceed, nor is it governed by, the logic of comparison. There is no occasion for simile. In this sense Olson has fulfilled the promise he made in “Projective Verse”. As Prynne has remarked of the already-discussed poem “The Twist”, even though it shows all “gracious behaviour of the lyric occasion” (5), it is, nevertheless, “in the condition of something that is not lyric” (4). Prynne contends:

it is the absolute particular, because there is no other thing like it, there is nothing other related to it. It is particular [...] So if you have a condition of that order, then there is no lyric, because the lyric relies on the gracious condition of metaphor, and metaphor transfers the small into the large, and the one thing into the other (“Simon Fraser” 6).

⁷⁸ Olson recounts in a *Paris Review* interview, given shortly before his death, that he was once asked by a presenter on Canadian television: “Mr. Olson, what do you think of imagism?” And I said ‘what?’” (“The Art of Poetry, No. 12” n.p.). Referring to this incident enigmatically, he says elsewhere that this poem “has to do with that [imagism]” (qtd. in Butterick 324).

Olson's poem "23 School" lacks metaphor in a way Pound's "Metro" does not (even though Pound himself also insisted imagism was not lyric). Pound's colon facilitates the swiftness of the perception of relations common to metaphor, but no one is fooled that the colon in "Metro" means anything other than "is like". Olson's punctuation, by contrast, does not facilitate comparison between the lines of the poem. The houses on School Street and Columbia Street are not "like" flowers and wood, respectively. Nor, actually, *are* they these things, either, which would be a more surreptitious, but nevertheless still metaphorical relation. The flowers on 23 School and the wood of 15 Columbia are only the actual conditions of their appearance, and their relation is none other than real. Nothing further is meant by it other than to observe that they are there.⁷⁹ In *The Special View of History*, notes for a series of lectures delivered at Black Mountain in the mid-1950s, Olson writes of the term "actual": "the word is in good usage, and has an exact meaning: 'involving acts or action' and 'opposed to potential, virtual, theoretical, hypothetical, etc'" (*SVH* 33). This poem seems a fairly clear instance of a methodology becoming the object of its attention (*SVH* 41).

The second reason why this poem of Olson's is not lyric is because the poet is interested in a veracity other than one that relates to psychic fact. Pound writes about his experience in creating "In a Station of the Metro" that "[i]n a poem of this sort, one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective" (*GB* 89). As Hallberg has pointed out, "when Olson read Whitehead, his attention was captured by the description of actual entities, or actual occasions—Whitehead's term for the *res vera*, the smallest units of being—as reliably determinate" (*Scholar's Art* 86). For Whitehead, an actuality is

⁷⁹ This aspect of Olson's poetics comes close to George Oppen's "objectivism". Oppen writes in the poem "Route" (1968): ". . . One man could not understand me because I was saying | simple things; it seemed to him that nothing was being | said. I was saying: there is a mountain, there is a lake" (*New Collected Poems* 197). It is also a very unambiguous instance of "as" modulating towards "is". See footnote 77 above.

devoid of a shadow of ambiguity: it is exactly what it is, by reason of its objective definition at the hand of other entities [...] Definition is the soul of actuality: the attainment of a peculiar definiteness is the final cause which animates a particular process (*PeR* 223).

Olson's poem is not ambiguous as Pound's is, if ambiguity is taken to mean a kind of double movement: forward, over and down across the colon; and backward, up, over and across. In other words, Pound's poem cuts out the copula and suspends both incomplete clauses, each against the other, so that the apparition of faces is like petals but petals are also, conversely, like the apparition of faces (this is a definite gain made by the colon over the words "is like": the punctuation is, in this case, a more versatile pivot). That versatility is the poem's source of energy: each line is a term that informs and illustrates the other. Olson's poem, on the other hand, though it also sets up two references, does not make them complimentary through verbal ambiguity. His poem is, instead, and despite its specificity, still obscure, but only if we like our reality to have structures as abstract as the grammar we normally use to describe it. Olson cuts out the occasion of comparison, but not to expedite a disparate likeness. He goes further than Pound, cutting out prepositional phrases as well: "on" or "has on it" or "is covered by" (interestingly, conditions similar to a Gloucester ruined by ownership), in the case of 23 School Street; and "made of" or "made from" (conditions of distance familiar to readers of *The Maximus Poems* by this point). These *abstractions* are literally removed. Each house is referred to using an absolute minimum of information through the compression of syntactic and semantic units. The evacuation or suppression of even basic grammatical ligatures is a signature of Olson's literalist tendencies. Getting rid of the individual as ego means getting rid of the instruments of emotive expression.

One last comparison with Fried's description of minimal art's "literalism" is appropriate. In sculpture, he says, the question of colour becomes an increasingly important problem for the literalist, for this very particular reason: it is "identical with its surface; and inasmuch as all objects have surface, awareness of the sculpture's surface implies objecthood" (Fried 162). In an important *Maximus* poem, Olson goes so far as to say as much, explicitly. "*Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27* [withheld]" concludes:

An American

is a complex of occasions,
themselves a geometry
of spatial nature.

I have this sense,
that I am one
with my skin

Plus this—plus this:
that forever the geography
which leans in
on me I compell [sic]
backwards I compell Gloucester
to yield, to
change

Polis
is this (*MII* 185).

What is at stake here is a kind of physiology of resistance and also of force. By “Polis | is this” what does Olson mean? That complex and occasional, spatially geometrical man, one with his skin and confidently aggrandizing—“plus this—plus this”—compels all to bend to his patently imperialist compulsions? Catherine R. Stimpson quotes this passage as part of what she calls the “benign authoritarianism of [Olson’s] morally charged political vision” (“Preliminary Images” 164). A video recording of Olson reading this poem shows the poet casting his arms out at “compell [sic]”, and then forming fists as he says “to yield” (“Letter 27 [withheld]” n.p.). The connection to Fried’s critique of literalist art is not merely fortuitous. Olson not only draws analogies between the different artistic media, as the title of an unpublished 1952 essay “The Attack, Now, in Painting & Writing” indicates, but explicitly states therein that “it is painters who tend to throw most light on myself, as it shows in the work” (CORC 29 | 1493). Like a sculptor working with stone, Olson suggests, men who write need to “take up from—and keep in—the *resistance* implicit in language itself because it came out of his mouth, that diverse thing” (CORC 29 | 1493). In other words, a certain obduracy is what is now wanted: “technicals [sic] are no longer the front quite as previously they were for Pound & Picasso” (CORC 29 | 1493). In an added note to this essay, coming back to what seems to have been for Olson his key argument, he writes:

this analogy of the medium of language (man as a man the “stone,” and himself as self the tool, chisel, or whatever, brush, if he be silk), I don’t know but what I should want to identify something else as a resistance even under these more detachable upper parts—silence, as the thing from which—and against which—all speech plays, that thing if a man talked steadily his whole life long he’d only chip at, it is so buried, so much as the earth out of which any stone comes, to be carved. And so

much the fact of rhythm, that, in speech it is silence which is the interstice, the space, the variants of stress, the thing that we mean to say [...] the taking of breath [...] that factor which the word silence is altogether inadequate to characterize (CORC 29 | 1493).

The resistance being proposed here—breathing *in* as a momentary stop in *expression*—can be understood as an obdurate particularity of speech. It is here that Olson’s adoption of Fenollosa’s connection between “is” and “as” (CP 242) becomes vital: “as” indicates breaks in the ligatures of communicative acts. Fried might call this condition a “specificity of materials” (165). Quoting Don Judd in saying that in the literalist enterprise a “work needs only be interesting”, Fried offers the following clarification: “all that matters [to a literalist] is whether or not a given work is able to elicit and sustain (his) *interest*” (165). While “literalist work is often condemned” for “being boring”, “a tougher charge would be that it is merely interesting” (165).⁸⁰

The extent to which “particularity” itself becomes a principle of composition as well as its aim can be determined from a comment Olson makes on 29 July 1963, when he joined Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan and Philip Whalen for a panel discussion before an audience attending the University of British Columbia Poetry Conference. A member of the audience asked about Olson’s favourite term *’istorin*. Olson responds saying the “minutest particulars” are “now *the only thing that’s interesting*, and that if you don’t get that registered—and we’re all in the process of finding out how

⁸⁰ Clement Greenberg’s formative “Recentness in Sculpture” (1967), itself perhaps *the* other canonical critique of minimalist art, accuses the makers of its objects of being too devoted to “ideation”: the “modular simplicity may announce and signify the artistically furthest-out, but the fact that the signals are understood for what they want to mean betrays them artistically. There is hardly any aesthetic surprise in Minimal Art, only a phenomenal one” (183-4). He continues: “[t]hat presence as achieved through size was aesthetically extraneous, I already knew. That presence as achieved through the look of non-art was likewise aesthetically extraneous, I did not know” (185).

the hell you can make language and/or act register that” (*Muthologos* v.1 13; emphasis added). Though Olson never gets around to articulating what would happen should his ultimatum be ignored and “you don’t get that registered”, in his literalist poetic expressions—defined here as an eschewal of metaphorical relations—such emphasis on the *interest* of particularity is paramount.

Olson lacks an operative notion of metonymic fragmentation. Each poem, no matter how small, is a construct and requires a knowing of what the image is before the syntactic pattern can be accounted for. Starting with *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), Olson begins to place very small, very compact poems amongst the larger ones. They are, I think, uneven in their quality and success. There are dozens of really striking examples of poems whose quite radical compaction renders obscurity almost if not entirely performative (if not also rhetorical). Take, for instance, this short, obstinate poem from the early pages of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968):

Dogtown the dog town
of the mother city the C-
city : METRO-
POLIS (*MII* 188).

The area of Cape Ann known as “Dogtown” features regularly in *The Maximus Poems*, most conspicuously in the four important poems from *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), called “Maximus, from Dogtown”, numbers one through four. Here, Dogtown is figured as part of Gloucester, the metropolis. It seems, however, unclear as to what Olson is doing except messing around with an etymology, where metropolis means “mother city”, from the Greek words *metr*, “mother” and *polis*, “city”. There can be little doubt, given Olson’s proclivity for vulgar misogyny, that the “C-“ in “C- | city” stands

for “cunt”. It is a piece of slang he uses elsewhere in *The Maximus Poems* (MII 129). Having made this extremely minor clarification, what then? The poem seems so fixed in its particularities that little else can be said about it. This is, I want to contend, an intended effect of the poem. It is an end in itself. Its purpose is to address the reader, and not to present itself for inspection. Looking, desperately and with some embarrassment, into the history of the word “cunt”—only part deleted here, perhaps as a “hook”—there is not much to notice except that it originally comes from Swedish, *kunte*, which might have some relevance given Olson’s father was a Swedish immigrant (so that in this way, obliquely, tentatively and not a little offensively, the poem is about Olson’s parents). Looking into the drafts, the poem was originally presented with additional material, which itself increases the mother-father theme (in Olson’s personal gender-mythology the ocean is male and the land/city female):

Okeanos’
stream
sustaining
clasping
interlacing
fastening

the Gloucester sea-serpent
first seen coiled
on the rocks of Cape Ann

Dogtown the dog town
of the mother city the C-

city : METRO-
POLIS (CORC 2 | 58).

What I want to suggest, though, is that the poem's obstructiveness is *personal* (yet not lyric). In seeking to write poems without inherited forms, as well as without the ideas that may or may not come with those forms, Olson has to regress into a kind of private obscurity manifest as displaced meaning.

In a 1959 essay amongst the poet's paper's at Storrs called "The Principle of Measure in Composition by Field: Projective Verse II" (CORC Prose 159), Olson describes what he calls the "method of least action". He begins by saying that "the poem's job is to elicit massive attention to the variety of systematic order in creation", but that "all creation is obstructive" ("Principle" n.p.). The poet, in order to make such a poem, must "abide in method as in desire" to the "principle of measure in field composition". This principle "is the method of 'least action' – viz. least 'song'" and is "least" "in order to insure [sic] that the condition variety in the truth of occurrence shall re-occur on the lucid as it does on the obstructive plane". Quoting Riemann (another post-"Projective Verse" discovery), Olson defines *occurrence* as the "domain of the infinitely small". He continues, transposing mathematical jargon into poetics:

technically, "least" works out this way: a poem is a "line" between any two points in creation (the poem's beginning, and its end). In its passage it includes—in the meaning here, it passes through—the material of itself. Such a material is the "field", and in verse has the function of an integral which shall be called "impetus". The problem of a poem, therefore, is that the impetus of the material (the differential element of) and the systematic length (the poem from beginning to end, the

differential element of “line”) shall constitute a successful composition
 (“Principle” n.p.).

All of which may be greeted by the reader hoping for some clarification of the still rather enigmatic assertions in the first “Projective Verse” essay with dismay or even disbelief. Two things are somewhat certain. First, that Olson has here looked towards more scientific explanations of his verse practices. The success of his understanding (I can only assume) is less important than the appeal to authorities and ideas outside the likely expertise of those who might want to understand or even use such insights. Second, outside of the long theoretical explication, Olson is trying (at least in part) to account for the effect of his short pieces: both line and field must

stay weighted with the individual peculiarities of the poem’s relevant environment—its idiosyncratic quality of being itself, of being “obstructive” at the same time that it is lucid, and of immediate worth [...] It is the poem’s peculiar province of non-Euclidean discourse
 (“Principle” n.p.).

What is being developed here is a poetics that becomes conspicuous in the shorter pieces of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968) and is continued well into *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975), a poetics that is at once obstructive and lucid. Such a configuration is the basis of Olson’s literalism. When he states continually that the attention to the syllable is a method of organising verse according to its smallest particles, he is using an argument (largely left unexplained) about a rationale for the construction of poems according to the formal particularities of “his own lang” (O&C v.1 19). In *Causal Mythology* (1965), Olson explains:

I believe there is simply ourselves, and we are here as a particularity which we'd better use because that's about all we got. Otherwise we're running around looking for somebody else's stuff. But that particularity is as great as numbers are in arithmetic. The literal is the same as the numeral to me. I mean the literal is an invention of language and power the same as numbers. And so there is no other culture. There is simply the literal essence and exactitude of your own. I mean, the streets you live on, or the clothes you wear, or the colour of your hair is no different from the ability of, say, Giovanni di Paolo to cut the legs off Santa Clara or something. Truth lives in what you do with it. And that means *you*. I don't think there is any such thing as a creature of culture [...] I don't believe a there is a single person in this room that doesn't have the opportunity—the absolute place and thing that's theirs. I mean places and things that are theirs. That's again why I say I think the literal is the same as the numeral. I don't believe that every one of us isn't absolutely *specific*. And *has* his specificity [...] The *reductive* is what I'm proposing (CM 36; original emphases).

A poem's specificity implies, in my reading of Olson's theory of idiosyncratic prosody, a linguistic reduction. Specificity *is* reductive. Accuracy is not a question of reference, but an implication of presentation. What gets foregrounded is the impact of a reductive specificity upon the reader's attention. The poem's intensity comes not so much from the poet's directed attention but from the reader being confronted by high levels of specificity, much of which cannot readily be accounted for or explained. These poems often have no other grounds than those they so barely establish.

Olson's concern for "actual" circumstances lead to the composition of poems that are to be beheld more than interpreted. This is in direct counterdistinction to Whitman's ideal of legibility. Whitman wanted to be read, to be understood, immediately, notwithstanding his "indirection", a function of the discrepancy between what he said and what he meant. Olson's poems are entirely more self-justifying: "[j]ust because a man does something all in a rush, don't think that that's how he does do it. He does it the way you do your life. And he finds his form just here" ("Form, no more than means is caused" *CORC* 30|1565). As in this short poem:

B. Ellery

Cinvat Bridge

aer (*MII* 217).

This is a one-line poem composed if not out of an attention to syllables, then out of obedience to the atomisation such attention implies. Most interestingly, the poem largely resists critical analysis (other than gloss, which is hardly "analysis"): "B. Ellery" was an eighteenth-century Dogtown merchant; in Zoroastrianism, souls of the dead must cross Cinvat Bridge on the day of judgment; *aer*, according to Jane Ellen Harrison, Olson's source (*Themis* 392), is weather, as opposed to aether. But then what? How to read further into the recalcitrance? We could say that B. Ellery is being deified somehow, insofar the poem plots a trajectory, from history into heaven, but even that is paraphrase. Here Olson gives us these words in seeming consistency with what Whitehead called "presentational immediacy" (*Pe&R* 61),⁸¹ a mode of perception that tries to delete the symbolic reference to reality (Maclachlan 230). In Olson's handling of it, words are presented in the overwhelming, obdurate light of a dislocated and

⁸¹ This is an essential phrase for Whitehead; I count it being used 72 times in *Process and Reality*. In its most "basic" (which is not to say comprehensible) definition, it is a mode of perception in which "the contemporary world is consciously prehended as a continuum of extensive relations" (61).

dislocating syntax; they shine out with all due stress against the white space of the page; being displayed in such a limited clarity, they are also at their most dramatic, indeed, their most rhetorical, when they are most conspicuous in their particularity. Elsewhere

The Account Book of B Ellery

vessels

goods

voyages

persons

salaries

conveyances (*MII* 204)

is juxtaposed with “A Maximus Song”:

thronged

to the seashore

to see Phryne

walk into

the water

March 6, 1961 (*MII* 205).

In the juxtaposition of these small works a thesis on form emerges. “The Account Book of B Ellery” advances towards something like a de-stylised record of facts (not to overburden the reader with too many more etymologies, but “fact” comes from the Latin, *facere*, meaning “to do”, and contains within it a rationale for the conflation between truth or reality and activity or doing). This poem, effectively Ellery’s literal “account”, is exemplary of an active agent who *was there*. “A Maximus Song”, by contrast, recounts the well-known story of Phryne, the beautiful fourth-century Athenian courtesan. This poem narrates the effect of beautiful form (people—here, men—throng to see her). As though to underline the determination of *The Maximus Poems* to remain so far into the condition of non-traditional poetics that it approaches a condition *not* “poetic” at all (i.e., not suffering dissonance from the interference of that pesky lyric ego), Olson places the following poem next in the sequence:

LATER TYRIAN BUSINESS

from

the diadem —————>

hangs

the 7 Angels of the 3rd Angel’s

“morning”

Sleep – the 7

after

Words

God the Dog,

as His Tongue

of the 1st

Hangs, dropping

Angel – who

Eternal Events

Adores. Only after

the Salivarating [sic]

was there a “Soul”

Dog

of the World – nafs

the Anima
 Mundi, Bred of a Dog's
 Admirer. Than which
 We Are

March 12. 1961 (*MII* 206).

It would be hard to take this poem seriously except for the fact that it so strongly solicits the attention (this is by no means the most attention-grabbing of examples in *The Maximus Poems*; see, for instance, Appendix three—figure 3). The primary interest of this poem seems to be, despite its radical appearance, how boring it is. It remains a curious but extraordinary feat that a poem like this can be at once so visually original and yet be so prosodically tedious. Greenberg's cogent remarks on minimalism have a certain appropriateness here: like minimal art, this kind of literalism has phenomenological but not aesthetic surprise.

RETICULE

In the spring of 1963, Olson began writing the poems that are now gathered under the rubric “Fort Point section” in what would eventually be published as *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968). I want to read in detail one of the poems in this section which strikes me as an appropriate item for a discussion about the peculiar interface between, on the one hand, particularity as a certain handling of detail that is interesting *as* particularity to no one but the poet,⁸² and on the other hand, particularity as a kind of resistance, which may or may not be discernible as different from theatrical gesture. Either way, what is presented is presented as *significant*. In these small poems, particularity takes on what Greenberg calls the “look of non art” (they don’t look like poems at all) as well as the appearance of striking material display (albeit not as striking as some of Olson’s more ostentatious formal experiments). The poetic materials are presented to the reader in a way that makes them seem like they matter.

The question of particularity is explicitly foregrounded by a very small poem at the precise moment in *The Maximus Poems* when Gloucester becomes no longer specific enough. Olson wrote to Joyce Benson, in reference to the cover of *The Maximus Poems* (1960): “I live actually on the dot exactly of the i in Point in Fort Point on the cover” (*Selected Letters* 371; see Appendix three—figure 4), the “absolute place and thing that is” his. In the Fort Point section, which was, at least at the time that Olson was writing it, supposed to be the final part of the poem—the penultimate poem in this sequence, and

⁸² Ed Dorn: “But when the Place is brought forward fully in form conceived entirely by the activation of a man who is under its spell it is a resurrection for us and the investigation even is not extractable. And it is then the only *real* thing. I am certain, without ever having been there, that I would be bored to sickness walking through Gloucester. Buildings as such are not important. The wash of the sea is not interesting in itself, that is luxuria, a degrading thing, people as they stand, must be created, it doesn’t matter that they have reflexes of their own, they are casual, they do more than you could hope to know, it is useful, it is part of industry” (“What I see in *The Maximus Poems*” 34).

in *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968) as a whole, is called “The River Map and we’re done” (MII 371-2)—Olson attempts to write a sequence that can handle adequately the very place where he lives and works, at least in a rather strict geographic sense.

The first poem in this unofficial section of *The Maximus Poems* appears, as so many of the ubiquitous small pieces in this second volume of *Maximus* poems, without a title. It registers an interest *in* particularity if not the interest *of* particularity. In full:

you drew the space in
reticule
now spread the iron net,
Enyalion (MII 354).

That Olson in fact introduces this poem as an epigraph when he reads it at the Vancouver conference (Butterick 478) should not deter a closer examination of it (its status as epigraph should not make it less important). For one thing, it seems not immediately clear what sorts of themes, connections or other associations (what we might call the normal work of an epigraph) Olson means to establish here.

Upon closer inspection, some of the peculiarities of this poem’s sense and meaning point to how it might actually have been written. That every poem will encode its own *poiesis* must to some extent be true, just as, say, DNA encodes its human. A close reading accomplishes, if only in outline, a minor and preliminary demonstration of the kind of reading that likely is required for many other of the poems in *The Maximus Poems* too, if we are unhappy with ascribing to the poem whatever tenet of “Projective Verse” seems most operative. In *The Maximus Poems*, interest in the particular *is* the interest of particulars: wanting to know enthusiastically and with hopeful advantage of benefit, if only for further knowing, is the value of their analysis. Any particular is

interesting provided it is afforded sufficient attention. I am thinking, in saying this, of Olson's advice to Ed Dorn in "A Bibliography on America", where Olson recommends, amongst much else, a lifetime of assiduity during which the best thing to do is

dig one's own place or man until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn't matter whether its Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it. And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years). And then you're in, forever (CP 306-7; original emphasis).

The poem cannot adequately be glossed without uncovering something about its structure: that is to say, since the poem is itself comprised of idiosyncratic references, reading it involves a tracing of not only what those references are, but of how Olson came to make them *relate* in the first place. What is secret about this poem is the extent to which the logic of its connections has been erased. Reading it, it becomes clear that it is conjectural, as Paul Christensen has argued many of Olson's poems are (Christensen 5). Of course, without wanting to discredit the theory, Christensen gets this notion about Olson's conjectural poetics from Olson's description of his own work. He wrote to Cid Corman that: "our *conjectures* abt what it is we have found to wonder about: that's what a poem is, a conjecture about an experience we are" (*Letters for Origin* 121). That said, a reading of the poem might risk a bit of conjecture itself, reconstructing what Olson did (or may have done) in writing it.

"Enyalion" is Enyalios, the Cretan god of war, whose name appears on the Linear B tablets found at Knossos. This is a seemingly surplus fact until Olson's source is consulted. Mentioning this in *From Mycenae to Homer: A Study in Early Greek Literature and Art*, Thomas Webster continues, after pondering the value of "using works of art as

Hephaestus who is to cast the net. In an early version of *Maximus III*, 38-40, also, Enyalion appears as a hobbled figure like Vulcan, so it is no mere lapse or confusion (479).

I suspect Butterick asked Olson what the connection was (though he would not have seen the second reference to Enyalion's Hephaestus-like hobble until after the poet's death) since it was his obligation in writing his *Guide to The Maximus Poems* to souse out every reference; I suspect, also, that by 1968, Olson might have forgotten *why* he had made this transfer. Webster's *From Mycenae to Homer*, which Olson *had* read—he owned and annotated a copy (CORC Olson Library 0467)—provides an answer. Webster shows that the Cretan warrior Meriones is described in books seven and seventeen of *The Iliad* as “the equal of the murderous Enyalios” (105). He appears in *The Iliad* thirty-four times in all. “Maximus, FROM DOGTOWN—1” (*MII* 172-6), the flagship poem of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), provides what is to my mind the occasion for the trans-identification of Enyalion and Vulcan. The poem features Olson's anti-hero, James Merry who in 1892, as Olson writes,

died in pieces tossed by the bull he raised himself to fight
in front of people, to show off his

Handsome Sailor ism (*MII* 172).

Quite simply, the phonic similarity (the pun, even) would have surely struck Olson's notice, so that *Meriones* rimes with *Merry*. The transposition then would have been easy enough to make between Meriones/Enyalion and Hephaestus, once Olson associates, retrospectively, Meriones with Merry. In “MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN—1”, which is already itself a poem deeply involved in the condition of myth, mixing Chinese,

Mexican, Greek and Egyptian lore together, having been killed by his own bull, Merry, like Hephaestus, goes *underneath the ground*:

Only the sun
in the morning
covered him
with flies

Then only
after the grubs
had done him
did the earth
let her robe
uncover and her part
take him in (*MII* 176).

As a matter of interest, the final “Dogtown” poem—“MAXIMUS, FROM DOGTOWN -- IV]” (*MII* 333-42), one of the longest of all *Maximus* poems, and certainly amongst those Olson felt to be his most important—is placed just a few pages before the “Fort Point section” of *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968), meaning that the themes and characters of all four “Dogtown” poems would have been in his mind when writing the “epigraph” under consideration. But it is important, I think very important, that Olson was unable to explain why he mixes Enyalion and Hephaestus. If it were, for example, some transposition really essential to his thinking, he would have recalled it and likely have mentioned it with the frequency he mentioned other things he held dear

and sacred. He does not. As it stands, this poem, combining as it does two distinct characters, is a surreptitious use of pun.

Hallberg notes that “rhyme will still serve an identifying function: it will identify the impulse behind the poem as mental, as analytic, rather than moral” (*Scholar’s Art* 188). This is an interesting comment, though his analysis is little more than a deft explanation of what Olson is saying about rime *theoretically* (Hallberg offers no verse by way of example). The idea that mental and analytical processes trump morality is here displayed. The rime-led Meriones-Merry typology is not invented; instead, the “language *leads* to [that] meaning” or identification (*Scholar’s Art* 188). While this is certainly a casual way of proceeding through the poem, it is also not *metaphorical*. This notion of being led by the language to meaning, rather than leading language *to* meaning, is crucial not just for the theory of Olson’s poetics, but in the practice as well.

This kind of writing procedure is what Olson means by “logography”, outlined in an eponymous 1962 essay published in *Proprioception* (CP 179-202). Olson defines logography as “word writing” and contrasts it with “‘idea-writing’ (ideogram etc)” (CP 184). Enyalion/Hephaestus is a typology or a conflation made possible by logography, specifically by pun. Its current state points to language “at the farthest point of the pun” (CORC Prose 130). When Olson conflates Enyalion with Hephaestus, he is at once very close to, and at the opposite end of, simile: two disparate references are shown to exist in some startling relation; but at the same time, the connection cannot easily be accounted for beyond its mere assertion. It points to a typology that can be traced back to a pun, which is to say, can be accounted for not through some pre-established historical reason, but through accidental discovery; a connection nevertheless already lay there in the language to be found. Here, Olson both creates and uncovers grounds for comparison that are established by the language rather than by ideas.

Something like a pun is also at work in the word “reticule” as well (though the seriousness with which Olson treats this subject must indicate that the humorous aspects of punning are superfluous). “Reticule” means a number of very diverse things. This condition is itself capitalised upon by the minimalisation of the context of its utterance. Firstly, “reticule” is the archaic spelling of “reticle”. A reticle is a “structure resembling a net; a grid; a network” (*OED Online*). Grammatically, this poem’s “you” probably refers to Enyalion; so the iron net he is admonished to spread is likely to be the unbreakable, invisible net Hephaestus crafted to catch Ares and Aphrodite. But it is also *not* that. The first two lines work to lessen rather than strengthen that reading. Why, for instance, has Olson not made further reference to Ares and Aphrodite, as he did in the draft version? In part, I think, because by disallowing the net to belong exclusively to Hephaestus, it can have more obvious affiliations with Gloucester, a fishing town. But if that is right, then the question to ask is: is this, as Robert Creeley asserts is the case everywhere in *The Maximus Poems*, an instance of Olson’s “particularizing vocabulary”, one that “forces thought to specific terms” in a deliberate assault on “generalized understanding” (*Quick Graph* 169)? Probably not.

Another interpretation comes into view, if one behaves in accordance with Olson’s own habits of rooting around in dictionaries (again, the activity of reading Olson’s poems cannot help but retrace *his* activities in writing them). Reticles are fine lines or filaments in sighting devices, such as telescopes, microscopes, and indeed, continuing the theme of war introduced by Enyalion-as-Ares, gun sights. Reticles facilitate position, aiming and measurement. Furthermore, to draw the space *in* reticule is, presumably, to reticulate: to divide up space using fine lines. The fine lines of reticule so drawn are legible now as both topographical contour lines *and* as lines of verse. For evidence of the former, see again the cover to *The Maximus Poems* (1960) where Gloucester harbour is depicted as reticulated space; for evidence of the latter, recall

Olson's rejection of "a whole flock of rhetorical devices" that need to be eschewed "now that we *sight* with the line" ("Projective Verse" 243; emphasis added). *Drawing* space in reticule, though, solicits the thus-far unmentioned meaning of that word, i.e., a little bag with a drawstring. Such an object, of course, recalls Hephaestus's net, which itself becomes, once closed around the captured lovers, a kind of sack. Essentially, the structure of this reticule is one whose mechanism of enclosure, the drawstring, is adaptable to its contents. The space of its frame is defined by the things (or, gods) inside it, in a way an iron grid cannot be. Implicit in two competing notions of the "action" of the iron net is the questions of *rails*, beginning us back to matters of verse construction.

In this short epigraph, then, Olson can suggest not only some of the principles of his "composition by field", but also sets that adaptable, non-Euclidean principle of physical measure against the rigidities of formal organisation that would seem to be suggested by the iron net. To reticulate space, rather than spread a stiff grid over it, is to construct a particularity instead of a scheme. As such, it has consequences for what Olson now means by "measure"—reticules are at once containers and measures. Just as Hephaestus becomes Enyalion through the accident of personal discovery—it is not in this sense an error but a reward for assiduousness—so too does Gloucester's history become, in the "Fort Point section" particularly, spatial (lineated); and that space, in turn, is then reordered through a process of radical reduction, into a phenomenological presentation of place: "places are 'gathered', not just amassed, but prehended, held" (Casey 25). For an indication of the extent to which "place" is really a condition of "prehension", recall the list of words Olson wrote on the draft version of the "metropolis" poem, above: "clasping, interlacing, fastening". There is everywhere mooted in Olson's verse practices of *The Maximus Poems* a positing of fixed and authentic correspondence between the shapes of the poems and their facticity. The argument in "Projective Verse" that form is an extension of content is belied by the extent to which

form, so essential in creating the “effect” of truth, is largely downplayed. To admit the inherent “truth effects” of idiosyncratic prosody would return the content, also, to a category of artifice Olson seems everywhere to want to avoid.

MEASURE

The “Fort Point section” consists of two kinds of poem. On the one hand, it contains poems that are generalised insofar as they are historical and in the public record. On the other hand, there are small poems like the ones I have already discussed. These contrast starkly with the historical poems, since a key function of their brevity is to delete the temporal condition as such. Their “push” is towards an ideal of particularity. This poem, also from the Fort Point section, typifies Olson’s modular simplicity:

I stand up on you, Fort Place (*MII* 361).

Christensen’s general and sympathetic comment seems applicable to a poem such as this. He writes: “Olson wanted the poet to be the measure of awareness, to be that lone human figure thrust into the uncertainty of the real” (212). Indeed, it seems to codify, in smallest outline, three obscure “measurements” Olson proposes most fully in the unpublished essay “There are Four Measurements” (*CORC* Prose 141): *typos*, *topos*, *tropos*. The fourth measurement Olson says is “one not to be spoken of if except as the ultimate one” (“There are Four Measurements” n.p.), reinforcing a sense of the patently secretive and ultimately private nature of these texts.

Typos is the typical, yet paradoxically “that which is least known” (*CORC* Prose 141). In this configuration Olson’s favourite line from Heraclitus is legible: “Man is estranged from that which is most familiar” (*SVH* 14). I think in this strange admission there is at least a conceptual acknowledgement of the sort of operation that led Olson to construct a Meriones-Merry typology. “*Typos*”, Olson further contends, is “substantive force”, but I am not sure it means something much different than *force*. Olson says its implementation is an attempt to redress the weakening limitations that

rational or logical discourse places upon the noun. In other words, why *can't* Enyalios have an iron net, and so *be* Hephaestus? In the context of the poem "I stand up on you, Fort Place", the substantive force is literally the "I" that stands up.

Topos is a "ratio-proportion measurement system". "Topos or place", says Olson, "ends forever the other error of the discourse system" created by "Socrates Plato Aristotle": a "species-genus error fundamental to metaphor and all of its brood", the "error of figure of speech" which "requires always a discontinuous jump and thus divides the continuous" (CORC Prose 141). Olson advocates a recognition of, or promotes the proposition that, "anything which stays the same no matter where it goes" is an "end to metaphor and metonymy (likeness & congruousness): analogy, which is at the center of this problem [...] The thing in itself is carrying meaning" (CORC Prose 141). This is an explanation, of sorts, of Olson's slogan (already cited): "that which exists through itself is called meaning" (*Causal Mythology* 11). According to this rationale, Fort Place, Gloucester is sufficient and meaningful in itself.

Tropism is *act*. Olson remarks that it consists in "the way one is bent, or, the way any action is bent by the act of its separation into itself or the isolation that act is, is what is tropos about it". The "tropical" is an ordering of words and of wills that "upsets all previous modes" precisely insofar as it presents itself as a fact "proposed by the mode of its own order" (CORC Prose 141).⁸³ Accordingly, then, each line must satisfy these three conditions, a trinity that Charles Altieri defines as tensions "held in balance by the vector" ("Olson's Poetics" 180). This single-line poem does this. It does this exactly—the *typos* is "I"; the *topos* is "Fort Place"; the *tropos* is "stand". Olson's poetics are seemingly always in operation. That said, his very complicated-sounding rationale

⁸³ Though Olson makes no mention of it in this essay, Lucretius's *De rerum natura* seems wholly applicable here, given Olson's explicit desire to state a connection between cosmology and poetics. The theory of the "clinamen" or "swerve" cannot but bear some relevance to Olson's discussions of tropes and troping (i.e., twisting).

seems not very far from describing a normal grammatical sentence in English: *subject* + *verb* + *object* in some arrangement (cf. Fenollosa's excitement about "*farmer pounds rice*"). It is in this regard fitting that the most succinct expression, in a poem, of Olson's poetics, is actually amongst the few complete simple sentences in *Maximus*.

In fact, how else can this poem be understood? If it is *not* an expression or schematisation of a poetics, what is it? Once this most basic of poems can be seen as an enigmatic statement of or proposition about poetics, it becomes harder not to read the entirety of "Fort Point section" as exemplary in this way as well. The point I want to make is that once projective verse can be discerned as operative in even the simplest declarative sentence, there is pretty much no stopping it. What is important to notice about this situation in particular, but I think also about *The Maximus Poems* in general, is that every poem, from the most prosaic to those which seems most like fragments of pure phenomenological interest (with all conceptual categories, not least the metrical set as a viable measure of verse, suspended so as *not* to be used), is in fact very much itself theoretical. For example, take this poem (quoted in its entirety):

	the dome
rotundum	of the city
	Fort
	defiance
	Hill (<i>MII</i> 362).

If it can be said to know something, it knows what it is like to be in a particular place, where "particular" means "certain", so that particularity is the *form* of certainty. And certainty, as a specificity that need not name itself, becomes a rationale for the "defiant"

obscurity of the later writing, begun in *Maximus Poems IV, V, VI* (1968). In the essay “Immediate, and Preliminary Statement, for whatever use” (1968), Olson writes:

I would prefer (as noticeable) an absence of statement, a restoration to states we would call obscure, in order that experience stay of its own peculiar self, at the same time that any elucidation or discovery— judgment, be then carried forward with it (*CORC* 31 | 1595).

AGAINST ABSTRACTION

As it happens, an antipathy for abstraction rests at the base of Olson's very compulsion to write. The word "of", in this case, is one that Olson uses with a particular care and force. In the "Grammar, a book" section of *Proprioception*, under the heading "IV Syntax ('ordering')", Olson quotes the following passage from Edward Sapir's *Language* (1921), a book Olson owned and marked-up heavily (CORC Olson Library 0422):

Thus, the *of* in an English phrase like "the law of the land" is now as colorless in content, as purely a relational indicator as the "genitive" suffix *-is* in the Latin *lex urbis* "the law of the city". We know, however, that it was originally an adverb of considerable concreteness of meaning, "away, moving from", and that the syntactic relation was originally expressed by the case form [ablative] of the second noun [...] All of the actual content of speech, its clusters of vocalic and consonantal sounds, is in origin limited to the concrete; relations were originally not expressed in outward form but were merely implied and articulated with the help of order and rhythm (Sapir 113-4).⁸⁴

It is clear from Olson's marginal endorsements of Sapir that he thought normative syntax was incapable of "concreteness of meaning" (the "I stand up on you, Fort Place" poem obviously excepted). In other words, grammatical conventions, as themselves concretions of habit, displace literal, specific, definite meaning:

⁸⁴ I have underlined here what Olson underlined in his copy. See Appendix three—figure 5 for the original.

one of the most insidious peculiarities of a linguistic drift is that where it cannot destroy what lies in its way it renders innocuous by washing the old significance out of it. It turns its very enemies to its own uses. This brings us to the second of the major drifts, the tendency to fixed position in the sentence, determined by the syntactic relation of the word (Sapir *Language* 166).

In the paragraph break following this passage Olson scribbled *Cliché!* The two main drifts are: *away* from original force of meaning; and, *towards* increasingly rigid conventions of expression. These two drifts were not, for Olson as for Sapir, unrelated.

The first word of the first *Maximus* poem, “*I, Maximus of Gloucester, to you*”, is “off”: “Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood [...]” (MI 5). The *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* says that until around 1200 AD there was no distinction between *of* and *off*. Clearly Olson means here “away from shore”, but any locution other than a spondee would considerably weaken the opening gambit. Certainly no tome called *The Maximus Poems* is going to begin with a weak stress, regardless how much its author derided metre. Implicit in Maximus/Olson being “off-shore” (MI 5) is the claim that he is also properly “of the shore”—“[t]he sea was not, finally, my trade” (“Maximus, to Himself” MI 56)—so that the poem begins in the very condition it must work to defeat: “estranged | from that which was most familiar” (MI 56). Insofar as *of* indicates the “thing, place or direction from which something goes, comes or is driven or moved”, it encodes the primary conflict of these opening *Maximus* poems. What is contested plainly in Letters 1-10 is ownership (and the panoply of social conventions that facilitate it). More specifically, the question of ownership is construed as a pernicious form of abstraction bearing directly upon poetics:

By ear, he sd.

But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last,
that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen
when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-
gunned? (*MI 6*)

The source of this assault on the attentions of the polis, and on the poet, is advertising, itself a program of abstraction that tries to arouse a person's desire to possess something they themselves have not made, and which seeks to wrest from them a control over the direction of their own senses, so that *poiesis* is exactly what is under threat. Any sort of antipoetic distraction likely costs more than it is worth:

Let those who use words cheap, who use us cheap
take themselves out of the way
Let them not talk of what is good for the city

Let them free the way for me, for the men of the Fort
who are not hired, who buy the white houses

Let them cease putting out words in the public print
so that any of us have to leave, so that my Portuguese leave,
leave the Lady they gave us, sell their schooners
with the greyhounds aft, the long Diesels
they put their money in, leave Gloucester
in the present shame of,
the wondership stolen by,

ownership (*MI* 13).

An argument being proposed here—backed up mimetically by the tapering lineation of this most explicit attack (though there are many others in the first ten letters of *The Maximus Poems*) and morphologically by what strikes me at least as a rather silly transposition of “own-” into “won-”—is one about good and bad trajectory: courses to take, routes to follow, lines to go by, tracks to cross. That is, how to move.

Simply put, those who abstract (*ab* from + *trahere* to draw away) are condemned, while those who, in this specific instance, immigrate (*in* into + *migrare* to move or shift) are exalted.⁸⁵ The point or place from which to measure these movements is of course Gloucester. Here Maximus, who himself, like the city’s migrants, comes to the city from elsewhere, recommends their shared trajectory with the preposition “in” (see below). As such they are in direct contrast to the absentee owners who, in the excerpt just quoted, “use cheap”, “take”, go “out”, “steal” and even force those who have come in to “leave”. Earlier, Maximus urges the people of Gloucester to

kill kill kill kill kill

those

who advertise you

out) (*MI* 8; emphasis added).

⁸⁵ I am not using such etymological explanations fortuitously, but tracking a method. Ed Dorn says Olson “raised the ante on Pound’s insistence on curiosity as the motive element in learning from an indispensable quality to a fundamental procedure [...] *Webster’s* unabridged dictionary Mr. Olson often pointed to as authority and instrument. He liked it so much, I think, not merely because it was American, but because it was both etymological and historical (whereas the *OED* is largely historical), and therefore quicker. There is a certain element of ‘speed is beauty’ in that” (“Charles Olson Memorial Lectures” n.p.).

The correct way is:

in! in! the bow-spirit, bird, the beak
 in, the bend is, in, goes in, the form
 that which you make, what holds, which is
 the law of the object (*MI* 8).

This condemnation of cultural and capitalistic abstraction, and the admonition towards a more substantive inherence as a viable stance against the attenuating distractions of a citizen's attention, is not so distinct from Olson's theories of composition. These opening, explicit attacks on the nebulous, abstracting forces of capitalist enterprise are a statement of poetic method. The "beak" here is assigned not only to the bird that comes in to Gloucester at the beginning of the poem to "nest", but to the larger problem of how an ego can go about solving the multiple problems of epic (cf. Olson's comments regarding the "beak" of Pound's ego in *Mayan Letters*). According to Olson, this driven ego-beak is only half the solution; Pound lacks an object, as Williams, in *Paterson*, does not (though Williams lacks the force, that is, the method).

The fourth letter of *The Maximus Poems*, "*The Songs of Maximus*", is amongst Olson's more obvious attempts in the early section of the poem to both demonstrate an argument against inherited musicality and to deploy an idiosyncratic form as part of that argument. How to read that approach is a difficult proposition, but I think it is necessary to interrogate the structure of the address of the message telling you your attention has been ruined by structures of address that obfuscate themselves in the process. Is its paratactic progression, for instance, indicative of a damage already done to the speaker's communicative abilities; or is it supposed to subvert the dominant *logos*? It is not always clear in which direction form extends from its content. Put another way,

is the form of the syntax here in collusion with or in opposition to its content? “Song 1”, the first of six sections of “*The Songs of Maximus*” reads:

colored pictures
of all things to eat: dirty
postcards
And words, words, words
all over everything
No eyes or ears left
to do their own doings (all
invaded, appropriated, outraged, all senses
including the mind, that worker on what is
And that other sense
made to give even the most wretched, or any of us, wretched,
that consolation (greased
lulled
even the street-cars
song (*MI* 17).

Since the matter of this poem is so clear-cut, most commentators read it as the straightforward attack (ignoring the idiosyncratic lineation) it is. Sherman Paul sees this poem as part of a larger and more urgent concern with the various troubled interconnections between public and private lives (*Olson's Push* 130). Paul Christensen

reads this poem as demonstrating a conflict between oral and verbal cultures and as establishing *locale* as a structural device (*Call Him Ishmael* 59). Frank Davey thinks “*The Songs of Maximus*” “spell[s] out Olson’s position in full”: that “advertising is the worst obscenity”; that by it “living men are made to lead a living death”; and that “commercial interests have placed a layer of excrement over the wonder of the universe” (“Six Readings of Olson’s *Maximus*” 309).

But the final four “lines”, the second and last consisting of nothing more than single words, are especially bizarre and warrant attention. “[G]reased”, inside a new parenthesis, speeds the line out: “greased” here presumably has to do with the food advertised on “coloured pictures”. But a draft of this poem reads:

dulled, greased (like hair), lulled (all
– even the street-cars –
song (CORC 1 | 11).

Which is to say that “greased” means *slick*, so that the further implication is that we are here talking about how words move, according to their sound: greased means, therefore, *fast* (food; or ad-men’s hair) and is said fast. “Lulled”, conversely, as with the cancelled “dulled” of the just-quoted draft, means (and is spoken) slow, so that what seems at first like the establishment of opposition is in fact legible as a commentary on language use. Both “greased” and “lulled” (which, given the nature of the poem as some kind of investigation into *song*, is importantly close to “lullaby”, itself a modification of *lull*) are sorts, if not classic examples, of onomatopoeia; as an ideophone, onomatopoeia is an *imitation*; as an imitation, it uses something else as a model of its *manner*. And with the next line’s mention of “street-cars”, Olson is addressing a question about methods of going by predetermined forms of procession along a given route.

The final word in the section, “song”, remains obscure. Is it the “street-cars” that “song”, as the “public conveyances | sing” in the second part of “*The Songs of Maximus*”? Or, instead, is an analogy being drawn, suggesting some form of equivalence between “street-cars” and “song”? At the level of historical reference, Olson is making mention of the fact that streetcars in Washington D.C., where he was living when he composed this poem in 1953, had “recorded music piped in to ease the travellers” (Butterick 14). But “song”, alone on the line like that, and echoing the generic titles of the poem’s six sections—“Song 1”; “Song 2”; et cetera—denotes also something of a condition, if not of lyric per se, then of ditty for sure.

Though it should not come as a surprise that Olson is critical of measured verse—after all, he says as much in published essays and his verse is exemplary of that rejection as well—it has been little noticed how much his verse itself works to make that criticism both particular and sustained. Yet such attacks put into question the extent to which Olson suspends the habits of thought natural to poetic tradition. “Song 2”, the second section of “*The Songs of Maximus*”, makes a particularly awkward sort of point; in rhyming its second word, “wrong”, with the last word of the preceding section, “song”, Olson adopts the technique of what he wants to criticise:

lulled

even the street-cars

song

SONG 2

all
 wrong
 And I am asked—ask myself (I, too, covered
 with the gurry of it) where
 shall we go from here, what can we do
 when even the public conveyances
 sing?
 how can we go anywhere,
 even cross-town
 how get out of anywhere (the bodies
 all buried
 in shallow graves? (MI 17)

The difference being claimed is that Olson is *conscious* of his predicament: “I, too, covered | with the gurry of it”. It is an assertion also later reiterated in “The Twist” (in a passage discussed above), where Olson describes a scene in which he and his father emerge from a street-car to find that only they (Karl Joseph Olson and Charles) “know | what we are doing, where | we are going”: “people go off | in what strikes me as questionable directions” (MI 87).

In an unpublished essay called “Pun as True of Meaning as Well as of Rhyme” (1963), Olson suggests that “the word, no matter who uses it, if they actually use it at all properly” can “recall the other side of this curiously important thing, that rhyme may be essentially pun, and have power over us” (CORC Prose 130). In riming “song” with “wrong”, is Olson meaning to identify a power of control, or using that inherent power to make a point? Probably the latter, I suspect. What therefore is at stake or being contested, then, is not so much rime *per se*, but the conditions of its use. In another

unpublished prose work, “A New Short Ars Poetica” (1955), composed only a few years after “*The Songs of Maximus*”, Olson contends

that rhyme by now is a thing (because it is *wit* when you come right down to it, a division of wit—what witless ones couldn’t remember without it, and who could have when everything was so “measured”) which occurs—rhyme does, and wit does—all over the place [...] [W]it is, “activity of mind”. Rhyme is activity of sound. And it ought to occur at least as often as a man, if he has the wit, knows his mind is: the felicitous expression of associations not usually connected (CORC 33 | 1652).

In defining rime *as* wit, Olson shifts prosody—or, this aspect of prosodic composition—into the realm of cognition. The use of rime implies an agency, a demonstration of intellect working on, with or from the particular conditions of the language. What Olson is insisting upon, I think, is that a poem is a demonstration of what a poet knows during the immediate circumstances of composition. Olson leaves no room for accidental accomplishment.

The only essay that I know of which identifies this as the problem I am trying to describe is Stephen Thomson’s “Craft: Boats and Making in Olson’s *Maximus Poems*” (2004). Therein he addresses the trend in criticism that “constantly shifts between describing a way of *reading* [...] and a particular sort of *writing* that would (it seems) command such a reading” (9). In these conditions, a poem is allowed to explain itself; quotation is then “called upon to *enact* what has nevertheless first had to be explained”. The “perfectly routine indirect discourse of paraphrase and exposition facilitates such a drift from [...] constative to performative” (Thomson 9). I want, though, to

reconceptualise the problem, not in terms of the “constative” versus the “performative”, but in those proposed by Olson at the start of *The Maximus Poems*.⁸⁶ Tenancy and ownership (Thomson discusses expertly these issues also, but differently). Tenancy is for Olson a predominant concern. Sure enough it is alluded to or even explicitly referred to in a number of *The Maximus Poems*. One need only refer to “Song 3” in “*The Songs of Maximus*” for an example of such:

as the Seth Thomas
in the old kitchen
my father stood in his drawers to wind (always
he forgot the 30th day, as I don’t want to remember
the rent

a house these days
so much somebody else’s (*MI* 18).

The question of tenancy (from *tenere*, to hold), though, has a certain intimate connection with the formation of the verse itself. In Whitehead’s definition of “prehension”, Olson found an explanation of both the particularity of his content and the idiosyncrasy of its presentation: “[t]he analysis of an actual entity into ‘prehensions’ is that mode of analysis which exhibits the most concrete elements in the nature of actual entities” (*Pe&R* 19). “Tenancy” is more than a theme; prosodically, it is something to be overcome. The forms you use have got to be *yours*. What else are the repeated invectives

⁸⁶ In doing so I am of course aware that there is no escaping the enchantment of Olson’s conceptualism. In the end, even trying to notice and explain why critics have habitually not read the poems (virtually every poem in *The Maximus Poems: Volume Three* (1975), for instance, remains without proper commentary or analysis) commits the sort of error I am trying to diagnose.

against inherited forms in “Projective Verse” other than rejections of tenancy in favour of firmer holds on (even ownerships of) the materials at hand?

The objects which occur at any given moment of composition [...] are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem, must be handled as a series of objects in field in such a way that a series of tensions (which they also are) are made to *hold*, and to hold exactly inside the content and the context of the poem which has forced itself, through the poet and them, into being (*CP* 243-4).

Olson’s demand for ownership, even of only a prosodic kind, that is, of one’s own forms, and his contempt for traditional modes, comes close to championing a notion of prosody as private property, which he would otherwise presumably abhor. Is this, then, a re-expression of some kind of frontier American mentality?

Olson never owned his own home. But ownership of his poetry is something he wanted, to have “one’s own form, holding | every automorphism” (*MIII* 582). To realise, in writing, a self-made cosmos leads invariably to the collection of a massive amount of “stuff”. Theodor Adorno provides an interesting comment on that condition, with particular relevance to a poetics where one perception “must immediately and directly lead to a further perception” (*CP* 240):

The soundness of a conception can be judged by whether it causes one quotation to summon another. Where thought has opened up one cell of reality, it should, without violence by the subject, penetrate the next. It proves its relation to the object as soon as other objects crystallize

around it [...] In his text, the writer sets up house. Just as he trundles papers, books, pencils, documents untidily from room to room, he creates the same disorder in his thoughts. They become pieces of furniture that he sinks into, content or irritable. He strokes them affectionately, wears them out, mixes them up, re-arranges them, ruins them. For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live. In it he inevitably produces, as his family once did, refuse and lumber. But now he lacks a store-room, and it is hard in any case to part from left-overs. So he pushes them along in front of him, in danger finally of filling his pages with them. The demand that one harden oneself against self-pity implies the technical necessity to counter any slackening of intellectual tension with the utmost alertness, and to eliminate anything that has begun to encrust the work or to drift along idly, which may at an earlier stage have served, as gossip, to generate the warm atmosphere conducive to growth, but is now left behind, flat and stale. In the end, the writer is not even allowed to live in his writing (*Minima Moralia* 87).

What I want to suggest about Olson's poetics, and about his prosody as a viable subset of that, is that his "owning" of it comes at a price. To keep a *poetics* inhabitable, to live in it, you have to also keep making it. The obligation to make new forms means that innovation becomes the sole criteria—even purpose—of writing. It is the peculiar conundrum of Adorno's hypothesised writer that a condition of living in his own writing is that he has to make do with all the clutter that goes along with that. Adorno's remark that a writer cannot live there refers to the writer who "hardens [him]self against self-pity" and clears out the mess with technical abilities. Olson, unlike this writer,

justifies the keeping of everything by getting rid of public form instead. He gets outside the question of form itself by demoting it to be a mere extension of content. This process of making poems can be described as “not prosodic” at all, which is a remarkable contradiction. Since this system is inherently without rules, you cannot theorise it in advance. Unable to theorise about such poems, you just look at them, admire them for what they are, and accept them on their own terms—“The ownership, solely mine” (*MIII* 420). For Olson has indeed made it very hard to talk about his poems without more or less saying what they say. This is the interpretive corollary to the performance of the typewriter as a score for speech: the innovation in this technology is an advance in imitation. To say it “like I say it” is to let back in simile, only now the structure is imitative, authorial and ultimately anti-social.

We who read Olson’s poems need to think hard about what it is Olson is making us do. The syntax of the poems is, in this respect, *really* like the world’s: it does not immediately (or ever) strike you as contrived, or as socially or culturally conditioned, even though it is little more than a great palimpsest or accretion of historical human action that is often the result of very determined and specific sets of interests. As Dorn says in his essay on *The Maximus Poems*, you do not ask about these things, because they just seem to make sense as they are. In other words, the poems’ forms in *The Maximus Poems* again, like a great many of the forms of the society they are addressed to, are not commonly asked about since they cannot be thought of easily as making anything other than “sense”.⁸⁷ But the moment you do look, all sorts of important questions arise about the structures of the things under inspection, as well as about the assumptions

⁸⁷ I have in mind here, but only quite tangentially, something like Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, or what he calls in *The Logic of Practice* a “system of structured, structuring dispositions”, which are “constituted in practice” and “always oriented towards practical functions” (52). This idea of *habitus*, as described by Joseph Margolis, could have some particular relation to Olson’s literalist/minimalist proclivities, insofar as it is amongst the “microprocesses of social functioning” (67).

underwriting them (foremost amongst them is the extent to which, as a poetic critique of the arbitrary form of metrical settings, Olson in fact goes “farther into the diagram” of arbitrary form). What is of course particularly amazing is that Olson’s verse—so radically innovative and new in its forms—receives such little attention. This fact is a testament to its success in working against what Olson called the “universe of discourse”, his “term for the abstracting, generalizing system of reference, which puts the immediate always at a theoretic ‘distance,’ so that reflection and representation might then be the primary human acts rather than the very ‘actions’ themselves” (Creeley “Preface” xviii). Ownership, finally, is claimed over the verse since *your* having it too would be a kind of abstraction in itself. The specificity and rarity of so many *Maximus* poems is an expression of Olson’s literalist poetics. Attenuating metaphor reduces distortion even as it renders the poet’s persistent singularity deliberate to the point of wilful obscurity. A poem that can be easily shared is a song. Olson does not sing. Instead, he writes something like this:

the unit the smallest there is

Wed night (after 2 AM Thursday

July 16th –

’LXIX

Charles Olson (*MIII* 623).

CODA

What is most interesting to me about Olson's prosodies—and about the discrete sets of instructions that underlie each individual poem—is that they clearly make some bold assertions concerning the nature of the poet's relationship to the text he writes, and also about the nature of the relationship between the reader and the poet. It seems to me, in this respect, that Olson is broadly interested “not in developing new forms but in reflecting on the conditions of form itself” (Ashton “New Literalism” 382). This is, as Jennifer Ashton contends in her excellent polemical essay “Modernism's ‘New’ Literalism” (written against Perloff's *21st Century Modernism: The “New” Poetics*), a condition germane to many modernist as well as postmodernist texts. Ashton's title in fact refers to Perloff's first chapter of *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, in which she (Perloff) suggests poets like Lawrence, Zukofsky, Dorn, Rothenberg and Merwin might be grouped under a heading called “the new literalism”. By “literalism” Perloff means the opposite of what I am using the term to mean.

Perloff takes a line sympathetic to Pound's early understanding of symbolism—the rigid one-to-one equation of word/image to meaning—and calls literalism a “mode of undecidability” (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 44). In *21st Century Modernism*, Perloff admits to having opposed Eliot's “symbolist mode” to the “more ‘literalist’ indeterminacy of John Ashbery” (7-8). Ashton is surely right to think that Perloff is suggesting that literalism requires a stress on composition rather than representation, “the play of signifiers rather than the pointing relation of signifiers to signified” (*21st Century Modernism* 54). Olson is clearly interested in foregrounding the *compositional*, the *composed-ness* of his work, but *not* at the expense of “indeterminacy” or “undecidability”. Literalism, as I understand it and have tried to use it here, is a description of a verse practice that underwrites the activity of meaning what is said by presenting what is meant in a way that no else *has* said. For

Perloff, literalism is a strategically disingenuous artifice where the play of signifiers makes us, as readers, more aware of language as a material fact. Olson's poems do this too, but that kind of fashionable materiality is not the purpose of his verse.

"This new kind of reading", Ashton contends Perloff is proposing, "is not reading at all" because therein a "text turns out to be an object", it "turns out to be an object precisely because its readers take it as something that requires not their interpretation, but their 'vivid perception' [...] This involves mistaking experience for meaning" (382). But because Olson foregrounds the processual aspect of text-production while at the same time refusing the temptation to float randomly into the swirling miasma of language as a medium purified of human use, Perloff rejects him (she almost never discusses him, and only does so either in brief or while attacking him). The reason being this: his concept of working in the "open" is categorically not the same as, say, what most Language-centred poets think that means. As Lyn Hejinian, for example, contends in her 1983 essay "The Rejection of Closure", the point of foregrounding process is to invite participation in the construction of meaning by rejecting the authority of the writer over the reader (*The Language of Inquiry* 43). Commenting on this and the alphabet poem from *Writing is an Aid to Memory* (1977), Ashton remarks that Hejinian "doesn't imagine her readers as mere participants in the composition of the text, she imagines they are themselves composers" ("New Literalism" 384). Olson could never have accepted this.

CONCLUSION

My argument has been that Whitman's candour, Pound's sincerity and Olson's literalism are poetics. As such, they are recognisable as aesthetic theories as well as compositional practices: candour controls the structure and the content of the catalogues in Whitman's "Song of Myself"; sincerity guides Pound's early rhythmic ingenuity and is the key to his obstinacy later on; literalism provides the (non)conceptual means by which Olson can organise his poems into resistant bits of text.

Roy Harvey Pearce has argued with forceful generalisation that the history of American epic can be seen as an attempt to fuse the poetical and the moral, that is, an attempt to make fictitious and real designs become one (*Continuity* 61). This is an enormous claim that we can begin to make some sense of, if, by "epic", we agree to mean not so much a genre but an attitude. Though I said at the outset that this study is not an historical argument, one of the main connections between Whitman, Pound and Olson is the privileging of attitude over genre—that is, over convention, and ultimately over established form.

In conclusion to her *On the Modernist Long Poem*, Margaret Dickie has written that the history of American modernism is the history of the long public poem, and that central to each of them was a certain turning away from form (148). Dismissing what might be particularly American about this, the more essential and important claim involves the turn away from *form*. What is entailed in this turning away?

I think that at the heart of each of the three projects herein discussed lies a common paradox. First of all, moving away from form does not make sense, any more than, say, moving away from content makes sense. Of course, what Dickie means is the eschewal of inherited form. It entails a moving away from everybody's forms, from the forms they share or otherwise hold in common. If that is true, then the move away from

form, however ambiguous it remains, requires a certain idiosyncrasy that cannot perforce succeed as a moral example of anything except a “turning away”.

In other words, there is in the poetics of candour, of sincerity and of literalism, something deeply catastrophic, that is itself a *final* turning (from *kata*- “down” + *strophē* “turning”). The socialities these poets imagine in their long poems will always be undermined to some extent by the manner in which they are presented. Olson opens the final section of *The Maximus Poems*—a section left incomplete following his early death—with the lines “having descried the nation | to write a Republic | in gloom on Watch-House Point” (377), as the vast white spaces of the page surround the scant text like dire emptiness. Pound ends *The Cantos* with “To be men not destroyers” (*C Notes* of CXVII et seq. | 823) from this side of the Second World War, something he continued (ludicrously) to believe he could have stopped if given a five minutes’ audience with Roosevelt or Stalin. The clarity of that moral sentiment is blemished by a great deal of other writing that seems to push readers into an untenable position of obeisance. Writing a poetics of ecstatic union just a few years before the fratricidal disaster of the Civil War, Whitman pledged to his readers an “absolute and perfect candour” that culminated in the following oath: “what I tell I tell for precisely what it is” (*LG* [1855] vi). In this, and in Pound’s and Olson’s proposed poetics, is an appeal for credibility *and* an acknowledgement of that impossibility.

For me, one thing among many that connects these writers is the idea, or, perhaps more accurately, the hope, that in their inevitable failure to avert the disasters they felt so competent to diagnose is some provision for redemption, bestowed by the very culture they distanced themselves from and which, perhaps as a consequence, they proved powerless to save.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX ONE—WALT WHITMAN

APPENDIX ONE—FIGURE 1

SONG OF MYSELF.

55

Myself moving forward then and now and forever,
 Gathering and showing more always and with velocity,
 Infinite and omnigenous, and the like of these among them,
 Not too exclusive toward the reachers of my remembrancers,
 Picking out here one that I love, and now go with him on brotherly
 terms.

A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses,
 Head high in the forehead, wide between the ears,
 Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,
 Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears finely cut, flexibly moving.

His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him,
 His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and
 return.

I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion,
 Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?
 Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you.

33

Space and Time! now I see it is true, what I guess'd at,
 What I guess'd when I loaf'd on the grass,
 What I guess'd while I lay alone in my bed,
 And again as I walk'd the beach under the paling stars of the
 morning.

My ties and ballasts leave me, my elbows rest in sea-gaps,
 I skirt sierras, my palms cover continents,
 I am afoot with my vision.

By the city's quadrangular houses — in log huts, camping with
 lumbermen,
 Along the ruts of the turnpike, along the dry gulch and rivulet bed,
 Weeding my onion-patch or hoeing rows of carrots and parsnips,
 crossing savannas, trailing in forests,
 Prospecting, gold-digging, girdling the trees of a new purchase,
 Scorch'd ankle-deep by the hot sand, hauling my boat down the
 shallow river,
 Where the panther walks to and fro on a limb overhead, where
 the buck turns furiously at the hunter,
 Where the rattlesnake suns his flabby length on a rock, where the
 otter is feeding on fish,
 Where the alligator in his tough pimples sleeps by the bayou,

Where the black bear is searching for roots or honey, where the
 beaver pats the mud with his paddle-shaped tail ;
 Over the growing sugar, over the yellow-flower'd cotton plant, over
 the rice in its low moist field,
 Over the sharp-peak'd farm house, with its scallop'd scum and
 slender shoots from the gutters,
 Over the western persimmon, over the long-leav'd corn, over the
 delicate blue-flower flax,
 Over the white and brown buckwheat, a hummer and buzzer there
 with the rest,
 Over the dusky green of the rye as it ripples and shades in the
 breeze ;
 Scaling mountains, pulling myself cautiously up, holding on by low
 scragged limbs,
 Walking the path worn in the grass and beat through the leaves of
 the brush,
 Where the quail is whistling betwixt the woods and the wheat-lot,
 Where the bat flies in the Seventh-month eve, where the great gold-
 bug drops through the dark,
 Where the brook puts out of the roots of the old tree and flows to
 the meadow,
 Where cattle stand and shake away flies with the tremulous shud-
 dering of their hides,
 Where the cheese-cloth hangs in the kitchen, where andirons
 straddle the hearth-slab, where cobwebs fall in festoons
 from the rafters ;
 Where trip-hammers crash, where the press is whirling its cylinders,
 Wherever the human heart beats with terrible throes under its
 ribs,
 Where the pear-shaped balloon is floating aloft, (floating in it my-
 self and looking composedly down,)
 Where the life-car is drawn on the slip-noose, where the heat
 hatches pale-green eggs in the dented sand,
 Where the she-whale swims with her calf and never forsakes it,
 Where the steam-ship trails hind-ways its long pennant of smoke,
 Where the fin of the shark cuts like a black chip out of the water,
 Where the half-burn'd brig is riding on unknown currents,
 Where shells grow to her slimy deck, where the dead are corrupt-
 ing below ;
 Where the dense-starr'd flag is borne at the head of the regiments,
 Approaching Manhattan up by the long-stretching island,
 Under Niagara, the cataract falling like a veil over my countenance,
 Upon a door-step, upon the horse-block of hard wood outside,
 Upon the race-course, or enjoying picnics or jigs or a good game
 of base-ball,

At he-festivals, with blackguard gibes, ironical license, bull-dances,
 drinking, laughter,
 At the cider-mill tasting the sweets of the brown mash, sucking
 the juice through a straw,
 At apple-peelings wanting kisses for all the red fruit I find,
 At musters, beach-parties, friendly bees, huskings, house-raising ;
 Where the mocking-bird sounds his delicious gurgles, cackles,
 screams, weeps,
 Where the hay-rick stands in the barn-yard, where the dry-stalks
 are scatter'd, where the brood-cow waits in the hovel,
 Where the bull advances to do his masculine work, where the stud
 to the mare, where the cock is treading the hen,
 Where the heifers browse, where geese nip their food with short
 jerks,
 Where sun-down shadows lengthen over the limitless and lonesome
 prairie,
 Where herds of buffalo make a crawling spread of the square
 miles far and near,
 Where the humming-bird shimmers, where the neck of the long-
 lived swan is curving and winding,
 Where the laughing-gull scoots by the shore, where she laughs her
 near-human laugh,
 Where bee-hives range on a gray bench in the garden half hid by
 the high weeds,
 Where band-neck'd partridges roost in a ring on the ground with
 their heads out,
 Where burial coaches enter the arch'd gates of a cemetery,
 Where winter wolves bark amid wastes of snow and icicled trees,
 Where the yellow-crown'd heron comes to the edge of the marsh
 at night and feeds upon small crabs,
 Where the splash of swimmers and divers cools the warm noon,
 Where the katy-did works her chromatic reed on the walnut-tree
 over the well,
 Through patches of citrons and cucumbers with silver-wired leaves,
 Through the salt-lick or orange glade, or under conical firs,
 Through the gymnasium, through the curtain'd saloon, through the
 office or public hall ;
 Pleas'd with the native and pleas'd with the foreign, pleas'd with
 the new and old,
 Pleas'd with the homely woman as well as the handsome,
 Pleas'd with the quakeress as she puts off her bonnet and talks
 melodiously,
 Pleas'd with the tune of the choir of the whitewash'd church,
 Pleas'd with the earnest words of the sweating Methodist preach-
 er, impress'd seriously at the camp-meeting ;

Looking in at the shop-windows of Broadway the whole forenoon,
 flattening the flesh of my nose on the thick plate glass,
 Wandering the same afternoon with my face turn'd up to the
 clouds, or down a lane or along the beach,
 My right and left arms round the sides of two friends, and I in the
 middle ;
 Coming home with the silent and dark-cheek'd bush-boy, (behind
 me he rides at the drape of the day,)
 Far from the settlements studying the print of animals' feet, or
 the moccasin print,
 By the cot in the hospital reaching lemonade to a feverish patient,
 Nigh the coffin'd corpse when all is still, examining with a candle ;
 Voyaging to every port to dicker and adventure,
 Hurrying with the modern crowd as eager and fickle as any,
 Hot toward one I hate, ready in my madness to knife him,
 Solitary at midnight in my back yard, my thoughts gone from me
 a long while,
 Walking the old hills of Judaea with the beautiful gentle God by
 my side,
 Speeding through space, speeding through heaven and the stars,
 Speeding amid the seven satellites and the broad ring, and the
 diameter of eighty thousand miles,
 Speeding with tail'd meteors, throwing fire-balls like the rest,
 Carrying the crescent child that carries its own full mother in
 its belly,
 Storming, enjoying, planning, loving, cautioning,
 Backing and filling, appearing and disappearing,
 I tread day and night such roads.

I visit the orchards of spheres and look at the product,
 And look at quintillions ripen'd and look at quintillions green.

I fly those flights of a fluid and swallowing soul,
 My course runs below the soundings of plummets.

I help myself to material and immaterial,
 No guard can shut me off, no law prevent me.

I anchor my ship for a little while only,
 My messengers continually cruise away or bring their returns to me.

I go hunting polar furs and the seal, leaping chasms with a pike-
 pointed staff, clinging to topples of brittle and blue.

I ascend to the foretruck,

I take my place late at night in the crow's-nest,
 We sail the arctic sea, it is plenty light enough,
 Through the clear atmosphere I stretch around on the wonderful
 beauty,
 The enormous masses of ice pass me and I pass them, the scenery
 is plain in all directions,
 The white-topt mountains show in the distance, I fling out my
 fancies toward them,
 We are approaching some great battle-field in which we are soon
 to be engaged,
 We pass the colossal outposts of the encampment, we pass with
 still feet and caution,
 Or we are entering by the suburbs some vast and ruin'd city,
 The blocks and fallen architecture more than all the living cities
 of the globe.

I am a free companion, I bivouac by invading watchfires,
 I turn the bridegroom out of bed and stay with the bride myself,
 I tighten her all night to my thighs and lips.

My voice is the wife's voice, the screech by the rail of the stairs,
 They fetch my man's body up dripping and drown'd.

I understand the large hearts of heroes,
 The courage of present times and all times,
 How the skipper saw the crowded and rudderless wreck of the
 steam-ship, and Death chasing it up and down the storm,
 How he knuckled tight and gave not back an inch, and was faith-
 ful of days and faithful of nights,
 And chalk'd in large letters on a board, *Be of good cheer, we will*
 not desert you ;
 How he follow'd with them and tack'd with them three days and
 would not give it up,
 How he saved the drifting company at last,
 How the lank loose-gown'd women look'd when boated from the
 side of their prepared graves,
 How the silent old-faced infants and the lifted sick, and the sharp-
 lipp'd unshaved men ;
 All this I swallow, it tastes good, I like it well, it becomes mine,
 I am the man, I suffer'd, I was there.

The disdain and calmness of martyrs,
 The mother of old, condemn'd for a witch, burnt with dry wood,
 her children gazing on,
 The hounded slave that flags in the race, leans by the fence, blow-
 ing, cover'd with sweat,

The twinges that sting like needles his legs and neck, the murderous buckshot and the bullets,
All these I feel or am.

I am the hounded slave, I wince at the bite of the dogs,
Hell and despair are upon me, crack and again crack the marksmen,
I clutch the rails of the fence, my gore dribs, thinn'd with the ooze of my skin,
I fall on the weeds and stones,
The riders spur their unwilling horses, haul close,
Taunt my dizzy ears and beat me violently over the head with whip-stocks.

Agonies are one of my changes of garments,
I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person,
My hurts turn livid upon me as I lean on a cane and observe.

I am the mash'd fireman with breast-bone broken,
Tumbling walls buried me in their debris,
Heat and smoke I inspired, I heard the yelling shouts of my comrades,
I heard the distant click of their picks and shovels,
They have clear'd the beams away, they tenderly lift me forth.

I lie in the night air in my red shirt, the pervading hush is for my sake,
Painless after all I lie exhausted but not so unhappy,
White and beautiful are the faces around me, the heads are bared of their fire-caps,
The kneeling crowd fades with the light of the torches.

Distant and dead resuscitate,
They show as the dial or move as the hands of me, I am the clock myself.

I am an old artilleryman, I tell of my fort's bombardment,
I am there again.

Again the long roll of the drummers,
Again the attacking cannon, mortars,
Again to my listening ears the cannon responsive.

I take part, I see and hear the whole,

The cries, curses, roar, the plaudits for well-aim'd shots,
 The ambulanza slowly passing trailing its red drip,
 Workmen searching after damages, making indispensable repairs,
 The fall of grenades through the rent roof, the fan-shaped explosion,
 The whizz of limbs, heads, stone, wood, iron, high in the air.

Again gurgles the mouth of my dying general, he furiously waves
 with his hand,
 He gasps through the clot *Mind not me — mind — the entrenchments.*

34

Now I tell what I knew in Texas in my early youth,
 (I tell not the fall of Alamo,
 Not one escaped to tell the fall of Alamo,
 The hundred and fifty are dumb yet at Alamo,)
 'Tis the tale of the murder in cold blood of four hundred and
 twelve young men.

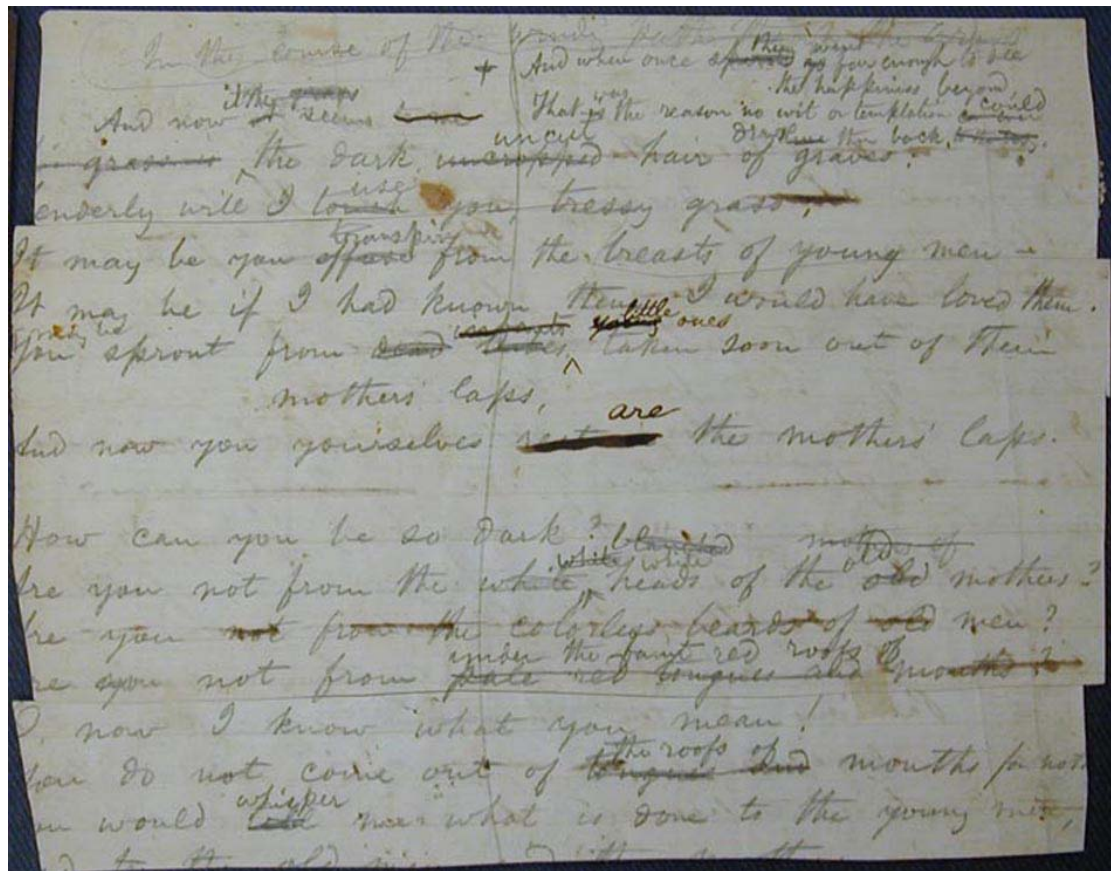
Retreating they had form'd in a hollow square with their baggage
 for breastworks,
 Nine hundred lives out of the surrounding enemy's, nine times
 their number, was the price they took in advance,
 Their colonel was wounded and their ammunition gone,
 They treated for an honorable capitulation, receiv'd writing and
 seal, gave up their arms and march'd back prisoners of war.

They were the glory of the race of rangers,
 Matchless with horse, rifle, song, supper, courtship,
 Large, turbulent, generous, handsome, proud, and affectionate,
 Bearded, sunburnt, drest in the free costume of hunters,
 Not a single one over thirty years of age.

The second First-day morning they were brought out in squads
 and massacred, it was beautiful early summer,
 The work commenced about five o'clock and was over by eight.

None obey'd the command to kneel,
 Some made a mad and helpless rush, some stood stark and
 straight,
 A few fell at once, shot in the temple or heart, the living and dead
 lay together,
 The maim'd and mangled dug in the dirt, the new-comers saw
 them there,

APPENDIX ONE—FIGURE 2



Draft of lines for the opening poem of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, eventually titled "Song of Myself".

Trent Collection of Whitmaniana. Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library. Duke University.

APPENDIX TWO—EZRA POUND

APPENDIX TWO—FIGURE 1

A RETROSPECTIVE NOTE ON CARLYLE

There has been very little comment on the relation between Pound and Carlyle, largely because Pound does not place Carlyle amongst his pantheon of relevant nineteenth-century predecessors. This is not to say they did not share ideas, as Mary Ellis Gibson has done most to show in her *Epic Reinvented*. Therein she suggests that Pound, like Carlyle (though mostly mediated through Carlyle's student Ruskin), "was persuaded" for example, "that art and society were inextricably linked: greatness in either depended on greatness in both" (x). The two men both advocated a hierarchical model of social responsibility (Gibson *Pound Encyclopedia* 101). Roger L. Tarr notes that Eliot read *Sartor Resartus* while at Harvard and lectured on it when he arrived in London. Though Tarr's assertion that "if its influence can be found in Eliot, then surely Ezra Pound is not far distant" seems more like a hedged bet than a scholarly argument, the fact that *Sartor* was required reading during the early twentieth century at many American universities means, indeed, it was at least *likely* that Pound knew of Carlyle's work (xxxiii).

Earlier, in my chapter on Pound, I suggested an important difference between Pound and Carlyle related to their very dissimilar ideas about sincerity; and then later on, I wondered if that difference might have begun, by *Rock-Drill*, to diminish. I suggested I had no hard evidence that Pound knew the passage on sincerity from *On Heroes*, but I want to speculate here that he *might* have done. His own attitudes towards the great men of history—Jefferson, Mussolini, Malatesta, Alexander, Confucius, Bertrams de Born, Dante—surely chime with Carlyle's own. Part of the reason for bringing this up again is a passage in Canto 85 curious for the extent to which it shares Carlyle's concerns explicitly.

Aside from a reverence for great men, Carlyle and Pound had a joint-interest in Norse mythology. Carlyle mentions several times in *On Heroes* “the Tree Igdrasil” [sic], the “[a]sh-tree of Existence” whose “boughs are the Histories of Nations” (18). It is, says Carlyle, “the past, the present, and the future; what was done, what is doing, what will be done; ‘the infinite conjugation of the verb *To do*’” (18). In his chapter “The Hero as Poet”, Carlyle discusses the interconnections between the world’s great poets, Dante and Shakespeare in particular. Suspecting it possible that the latter had never heard of the former, Carlyle rationalises what he calls their “fit”—their mutual project consisting in giving a voice to the world, Dante to its “central fire” and Shakespeare to its “upper light” (91)—by again appealing to the metaphor of Igdrasil, the means by which “everything does cooperate with all” (91). And later, in “The Hero as the Man of Letters”, Carlyle laments the gone era of the “Pagan Skalds”; their demise, and with it the “melodious, prophetic waving of its world-wide boughs”, has been brought on by the “clanking on a World-Machine” (153). Carlyle’s criticism of mechanisation also includes a criticism of the various instruments of democratic procedure. Each has important implications for sincerity. He declares

the world to be no machine! I say that it does *not* go by wheel-and-pinion ‘motives’, self-interests, checks, balances; that there is something far other in it than the clank of spinning-jennies, and parliamentary majorities; and, on the whole, that it is not a machine at all!—The old Norse Heathen had a truer notion of God’s world than these poor Machine-Sceptics: the old Heathen Norse were *sincere* men. But for the these poor Sceptics [democrats] there was no sincerity, no truth. Half-truth and hearsay was called truth. Truth, for most men, meant

plausibility; to be measured by the number of votes you could get. They had lost any notion that sincerity was possible (153).

I want to suggest that Pound, in writing the first canto of *Rock-Drill*, is addressing something similar about the nature of leadership and the form that governance should take if sincerity is an ideal worth venerating in the past as well as preserving for the future. Maybe he even had Carlyle in mind (their mutual association of the tree of existence with political discourse and behaviour is striking). About a third of the way into Canto 85 Pound writes:

THE FOUR TUAN¹

端

or foundations.

Hulled rice and silk at easter

(with the *bachi* held under their aprons

From T'ang's time until now)

That you lean 'gainst the tree of heaven,

and know Ygdrasail

poi

時

shih² [period of time]

忱

ch'ên² [sincere, trustworthy]

忠

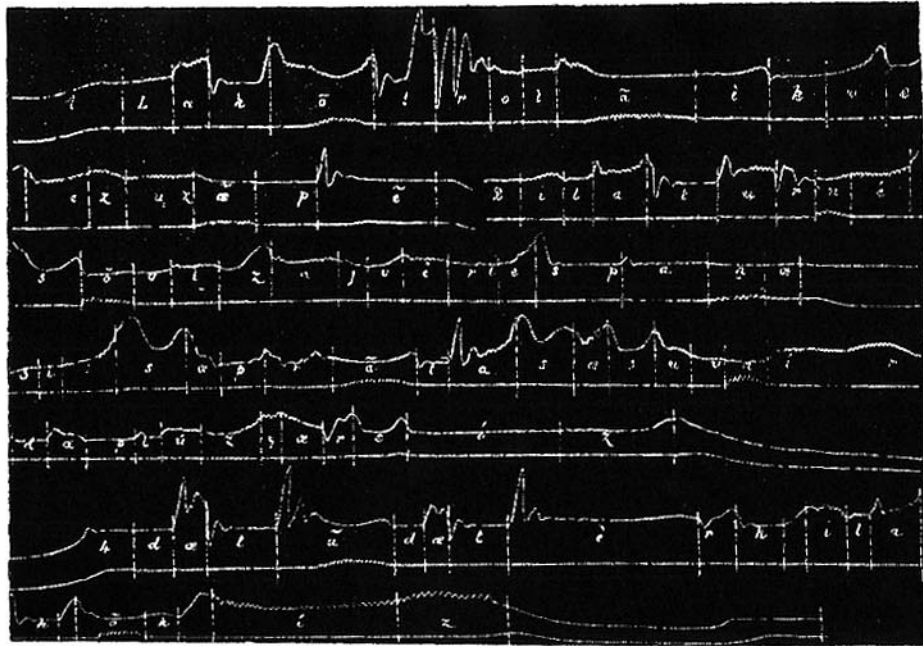
[to be sincere] (C 85 | 565)

Carlyle suggested that in the boughs of the tree of existence are the histories of nations; likewise, this passage appears amid a canto mostly consisting of Pound's cribs of the *Chen King*, a classic Chinese history text. Carlyle believed "Igdrasil" to be representative of the "infinite conjugation of the verb *To do*"; similarly, Pound writes after some further elaboration of the concerns of good, sincere government—i.e., not "this 'leader', gouged pumpkin | that they hoist on a pole" (C 85 | 565)—"put some elbow grease into it" (C 85 | 566). But most importantly, it seems likely that both writers were in part led to these various interests—in forms of anti-democratic leadership, in Norse mythology—out of a mutual concern for sincerity. Carlyle only mentions China once in *On Heroes*, but that single instance is interesting in light of Pound's discovery of Confucian hierarchy as the ideal expression of his own authoritarian preferences. In the lecture "The Hero as a Man of Letters", Carlyle writes:

By far the most interesting fact I hear about the Chinese is one which we cannot arrive at clearness, but which excites endless curiosity even in the dim state: this namely, that they do attempt to make their Men of Letters their Governors! (*On Heroes* 151)

Pound also thought that was an interesting fact.

APPENDIX TWO—FIGURE 2



A graphic recording of the speech act. From Abbé Pierre-Jean Rousselot's *Principles de phonétique expérimentale*, 1924 (qtd. in Bergeron 63).

APPENDIX TWO—FIGURE 3

Heaven and Earth begat the perceiver,
 "ch' e' ditta dentro"
 & Cheóu demittit aerumnas.
 Ling²

靈

was basis of rule.

Ts'oung

聰

tàn

宣

ming

tso

明

iuên

heóu

Cheóu demittit aerumnas:
 "Gentlemen from the West,
 Heaven's process is quite coherent
 and its main points perfectly clear.

顯

hsien.

Wu 武 leant on the yellow halbard

in his right, the white signal tail:

"e canta la gallina,

" he is ganged up with racketeers

" 6 steps or 7, reform.

" 4, 5, 7 strokes, reassemble

止

chèu

齊

t'sì

nài tchèu t'sì

and do not chase fugitives."

Cheóu's host was like a forest in Mu plain,

林

quasi silvam convenit

jo lin.

"Liking some, disliking others, doing injustice to no man."

極

血

偏

The 4th part: marginalia.

Liu dogs, serendipity? No.

恫

t'oung

瘰

kouan

9.6

T'oung kouan nài chenn

乃

not water, ôu iu chouèi

身

戾

min

監

kién

10.12

There be thy mirrour in men.

土

中

旦

Tán

日

iue

配

p'ei

皇

houâng

XIII, 9

k'i p'eng

其

朋

Odysseus "to no man"

火

tcho

敬

and you can know the sincere
That Tch'eng T'ang

戈

成

湯

Praestantissimos regere

overthrew Hia

甸

tien⁴

from Tch'eng T'ang to Ti I
nullus non splendida fecit,
nullus non se sociavit (tien⁴)
k'i tche, ut benefaceret.
Tcheou neither watching his
own insides, nor respecting the workings.
Our Dynasty came in because of great Ling²

靈

sensibility

555

(C 85; from 1975 New Directions edition of *The Cantos*)

APPENDIX THREE—CHARLES OLSON

APPENDIX THREE—FIGURE 1

“Maximus, to Gloucester | Letter 15”

Maximus, to Gloucester

LETTER 15

It goes to show you. It was not the “Eppie Sawyer”. It was the ship “Putnam”. It wasn’t Christmas morning, it was Christmas night, after dark. And the violent north-easter, with snow, which we were all raised to believe did show Bowditch such a navigator, was a gale sprung up from W, hit them outside the Bay, and had blown itself out by the 23rd.

On the 25th it was fog Bowditch had to contend with. The wind was NE allright, but there is no mention of snow. At 4 PM it cleared a little and he was able to see Eastern Point. And at 7 he came to anchor in Salem. In other words it was the beacon at Gloucester, not the light on Baker’s Island—there was no light on Eastern Point until 1831—which got him home.

The whole tale, as we have had it, from his son, goes by the board. The son seems to have got it thirty-five years after the event from a sailor who was with the father on that voyage (to Sumatra, and Ile de France, cargo: shoes). This sailor apparently (he was twenty years older than the captain) was the one who said, that night they did get in, “Our old man goes ahead as if it was noon-day”. He must have been 85 when he added the rest of the tale—how the

owners were very much alarmed at Bowditch's sudden appearance "on such a tempestuous night", and how, at first, they could hardly be persuaded he had not been wrecked.

1

He sd, "You go all around the subject." And I sd, "I didn't know it was a subject." He sd, "You twist" and I sd, "I do." He said other things. And I didn't say anything.

Nor do I know
that this is a rail
on which all (or any)
will ride (as, by Pullman,

that sense the ads are right abt, that you are
taken care of, you do
not sleep, you are
jolted

And if you take a compartment,
the whole damned family . . .

I sd, "Rhapsodia . . .

II

John Smith's latest book was,
 "ADVERTISEMENTS
 for the unexperienced Planters
 of New-England,

or anywhere" (dedicated
 to the Archbishops of Canterbury,
 and York, primates,
 it says,
 of England (1630)

The epigraph
 is a poem
 by sd Smith (refused
 as navigator by
 the Pilgrims, Standish
 chosen instead)

THE SEA MARKE

It reads (Smith died,
 that year):

"Aloofe, aloofe; and come no neare,
 the dangers doe appeare;
 Which if my ruine had not beene
 you had not secne:
 I onely lie upon this shelve
 to be a marke to all
 which on the same might fall,
 That none may perish but my selfe.

"If in or outward you be bound,
 do not forget to sound;
 Neglect of that was cause of this
 to steere amisse:
 The Seas were calme, the wind was faire,
 that made me so secure,
 that now I must indure
 All weathers be they foule or faire

"The Winters cold, the Summers heat
 alternatively beat
 Upon my bruised sides, that rue
 because too true
 That no releefe can ever come.
 But why should I despaire
 being promised so faire
 That there shall be a day of Dome"

III

And for the water-shed, the economics & poetics thereafter?
 Three men,
 coincide:

 you will find Villon
 in Fra Diavolo,
 Elberthubbarville,
 N.Y.

 And the prose
 is Raymond's, Boston, or

Brer Fox,
 Rapallo,
 Quattrocento-by-the-Beach, #
 429

The American epos, 19-
 02 (or when did Barton Barton Barton Barton and Barton?

To celebrate
 how it can be, it is
 padded or uncomforted, your lost, you
 found, your
 sneakers

(o Statue,
 o Republic, o
 Tell-A-Vision, the best
 is soap. The true troubadours
 are CBS. Melopoeia

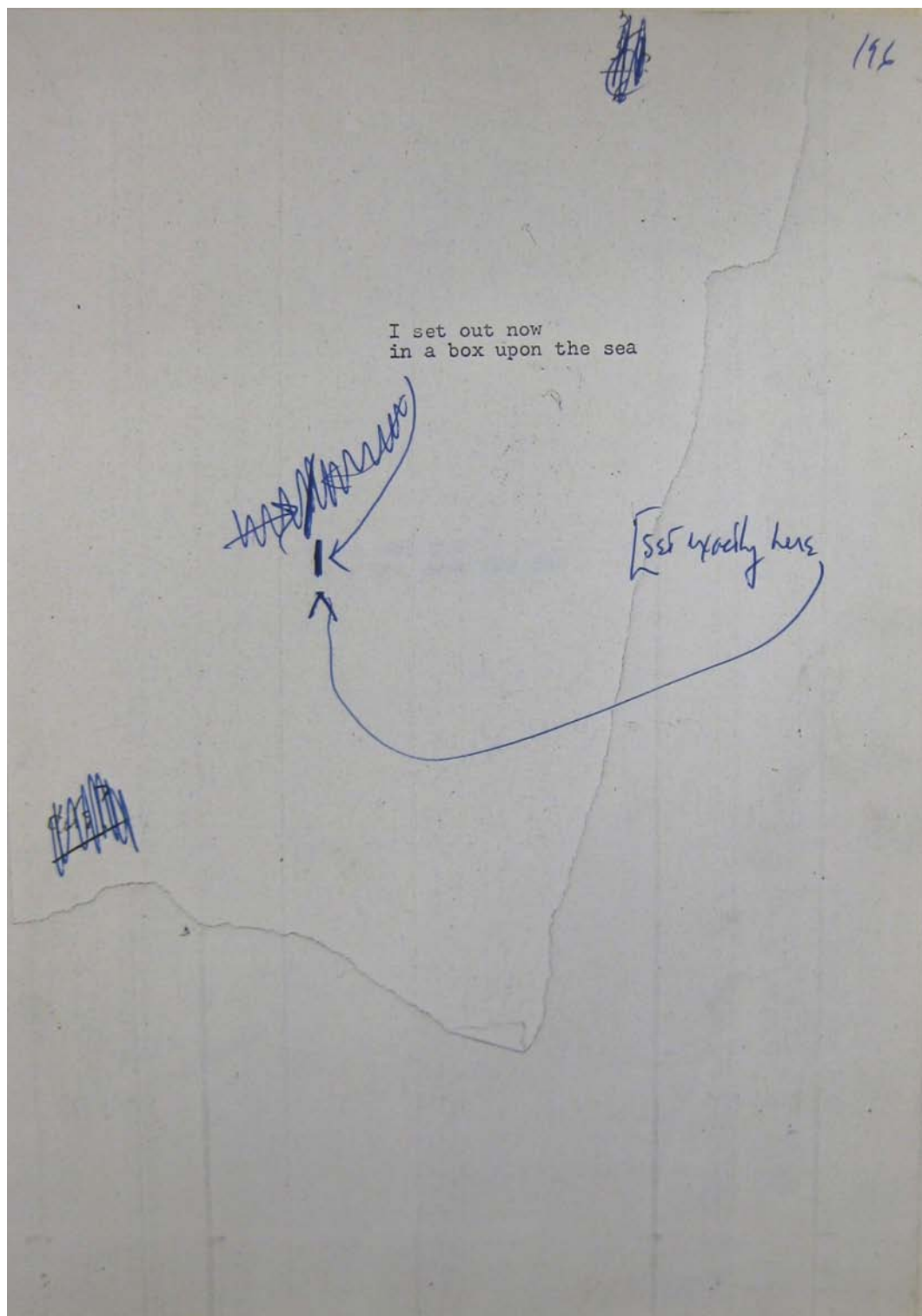
is for Cokes by Cokes out of
 Pause

IV

(o Po-ets, you
 should getta
 job

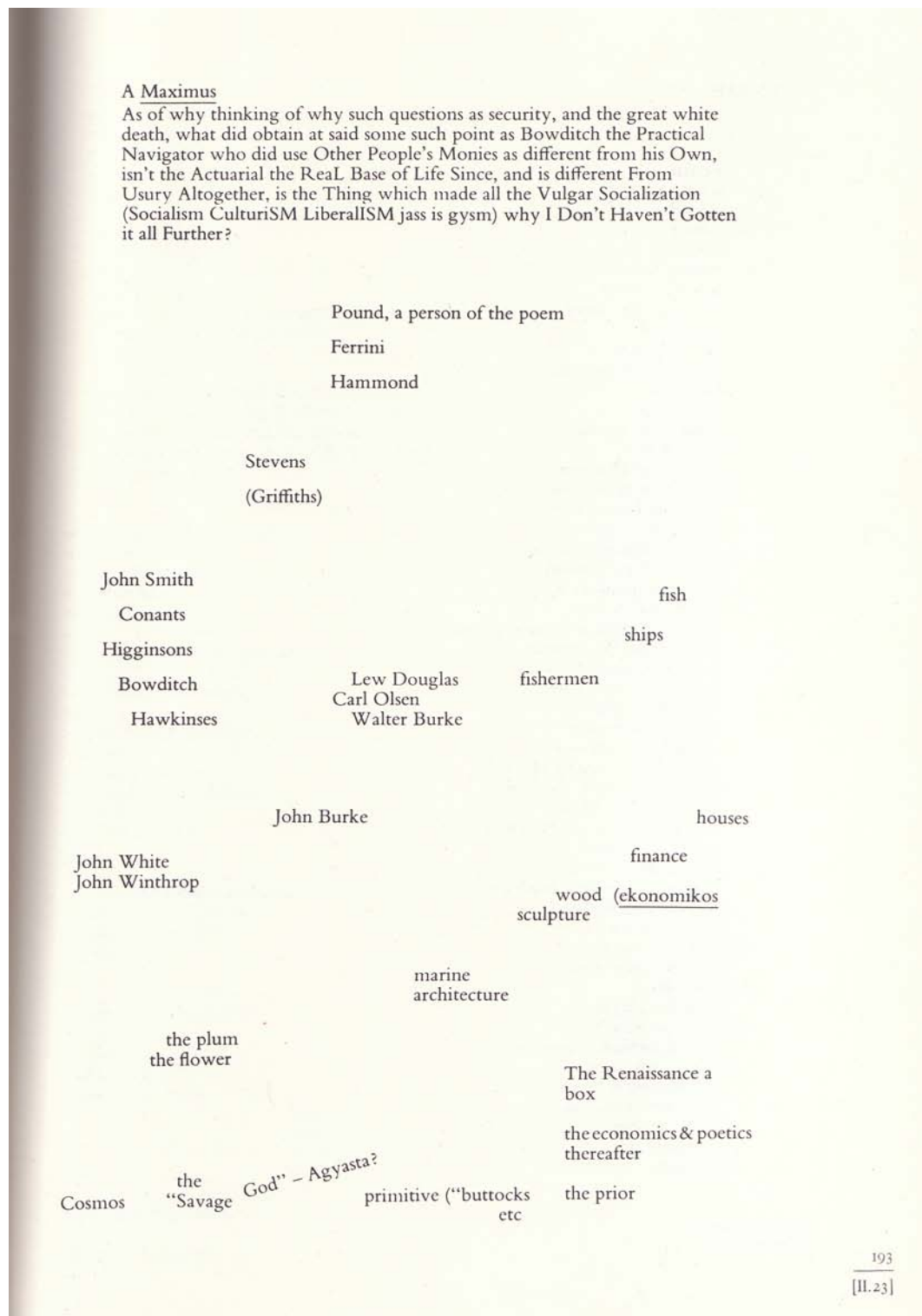
(MI 71-5)

APPENDIX THREE—FIGURE 2

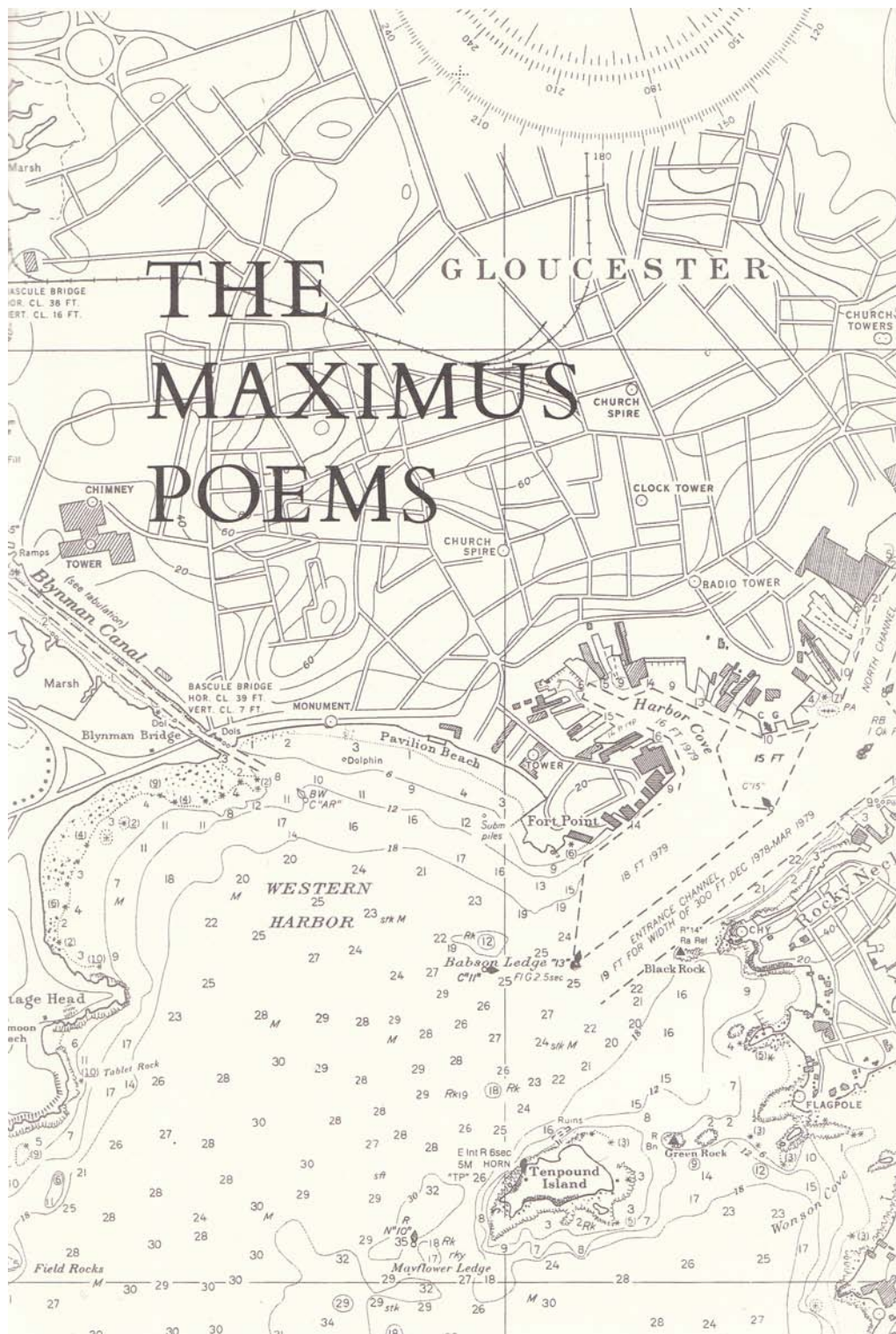


(“I set out now” CORC 4|187)

APPENDIX THREE—FIGURE 3

("A Maximus" *MII* 193)

APPENDIX THREE—FIGURE 4

(Cover of *The Maximus Poems* (1960))

APPENDIX THREE—FIGURE 5

Form: Grammatical Concepts

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word, hence "a seeing man" or "a seen (or visible) man," or is its predication, hence "the man sees" or "the man is seen," while a sequence like *see man*³⁰ might indicate that the accented word in some way limits the application of the first, say as direct object, hence "to see a man" or "(he) sees the man." Such alterations of relation, as symbolized by varying stresses, are important and frequent in a number of languages.³⁰

It is somewhat venturesome and yet not an altogether unreasonable speculation that sees in word order and stress the primary methods for the expression of all syntactic relations and looks upon the present relational value of specific words and elements as but a secondary condition due to a transfer of values. Thus, we may surmise that the Latin *-m* of words like *feminam*, *dominum*, and *civem* did not originally³¹ denote that "woman," "master," and "citizen" were objectively related to the verb of the proposition but indicated something far more concrete,³² that the objective relation was merely implied by the position or accent of the word (radical element) immediately preceding the *-m*, and that gradually, as its more concrete significance faded away, it took over a syntactic function that did not originally belong to it. This sort of evolution by transfer is traceable in many instances. Thus, the *of* in an English phrase like "the law of the land" is now as colorless in content, as purely a relational indicator as the "genitive" suffix *-is* in the Latin *lex urbis* "the law of the city." We know, however, that it was originally an adverb of considerable concreteness of meaning,³³ "away, moving from," and that the syntactic relation was originally expressed by

³⁰ In Chinese no less than in English.

³¹ By "originally" I mean, of course, some time antedating the earliest period of the Indo-European languages that we can get at by comparative evidence.

³² Perhaps it was a noun-classifying element of some sort.

³³ Compare its close historical parallel *off*.

like a infix

the case form³⁴ of the second noun. As the case form lost its vitality, the adverb took over its function. If we are actually justified in assuming that the expression of all syntactic relations is ultimately traceable to these two unavoidable, dynamic features of speech—sequence and stress³⁵—an interesting thesis results: —All of the actual content of speech, its clusters of vocalic and consonantal sounds, is in origin limited to the concrete; relations were originally not expressed in outward form but were merely implied and articulated with the help of order and rhythm. In other words, relations were intuitively felt and could only “leak out” with the help of dynamic factors that themselves move on an intuitional plane.

There is a special method for the expression of relations that has been so often evolved in the history of language that we must glance at it for a moment. This is the method of “concord” or of like signaling. It is based on the principle that words or labels for persons or objects that answer to the same countersign or that bear the same imprint are thereby stamped as somehow related. It makes little difference, once they are so stamped, where they are to be found or how they behave themselves. They are known to belong together. We are familiar with the principle of concord in Latin and Greek. Many of us have been struck by such relentless rhymes as *vidi illum bonum dominum* “I saw that good master” or *quarum dearum saevarum* “of which stern goddesses.” Not that sound-echo, whether in the form of rhyme or of alliteration³⁶ is necessary to concord, though in its most typical and original forms concord is nearly always accompanied by sound repetition. The essence of the principle is simply this, that words (elements) that

³⁴ “Ablative” at last analysis.

³⁵ Very likely pitch should be understood along with stress.

³⁶ As in Bantu or Chinook.

possessive *her*, is there any reason to doubt the vitality of such alternations as *I see the man* and *the man sees me*? Surely the distinction between subjective *I* and objective *me*, between subjective *he* and objective *him*, and correspondingly for other personal pronouns, belongs to the very core of the language. We can throw *whom* to the dogs, somehow make shift to do without an *its*, but to level *I* and *me* to a single case would that not be to un-English our language?

There is no need to ward such horrors as *Me see him* or *he see me*. True, the phonetic disparity between *I* and *me*, *he* and *him*, *we* and *us*, has been too great for any serious possibility of form leveling. It does not follow that the case distinction as such is still vital. One of the most insidious peculiarities of a linguistic drift is that where it cannot destroy what lies in its way it renders it innocuous by washing the old significance out of it. It turns its very enemies to its own uses. This brings us to the second of the major drifts, the tendency to fixed position in the sentence, determined by the syntactic relation of the word.

We need not go into the history of this all-important drift. It is enough to know that as the inflected forms of English became scantier, as the syntactic relations were more and more inadequately expressed by the forms of the words themselves, position in the sentence gradually took over functions originally foreign to it. *The man* in *the man sees the dog* is subjective; in *the dog sees the man*, objective. Strictly parallel to these sentences are *he sees the dog* and *the dog sees him*. Are the subjective value of *he* and the objective value of *him* entirely, or even mainly, dependent on the difference of form? I doubt it. We could hold to such a view if it were possible to say *the dog sees he* or *him sees the dog*. It was once possible to say such things, but we have lost the power. In other words, at least part of the case feeling in *he* and

(from Olson's copy of *Language*; CORC Olson's Library 0422)