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Poetics, Politics, and "Totalitarianism":
Ezra Pound, Charles Olson, and the "Language" Poets

by

John R. Woznicki

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
In
English

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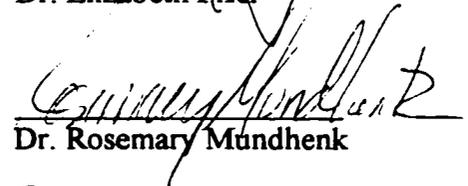
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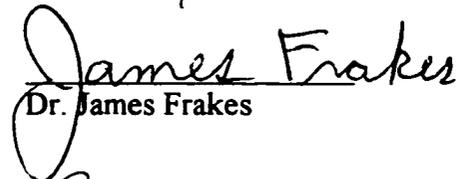

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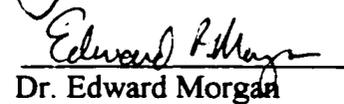

Dr. Edward Morgan

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Chapter 1: Writing a Wrong: Ignoring Ideology.....	3
Chapter 2: The “Whole” of <i>The Cantos</i>: Ezra Pound’s Totalitarianism....	28
Chapter 3: Olson’s (Uni)verse.....	96
Chapter 4: The Political “World “ of the Language Poets.....	165
Chapter 5: Preservation of the Poetic “I”.....	230
Notes	239
Works Cited	245
Vita.....	255

Abstract

In response to Jerome McGann's suggestion that we have relied on a "Romantic" ideology to read poetry, this dissertation examines "totalitarianism" in American verse, opposing the common notion that poetry represents cultural values of democracy, diversity, freedom, and openness. Exploring this totalitarianism in both senses of the word—the intentional rhetorical stance of the poet who forces personal ideas on the reader and the artist's creation of a total form to proffer this ideology—we may see how modernist poets such as Ezra Pound and Charles Olson have manipulated epic, history, narrative, and objective poetics to conceal the appearance of rhetoric while actually strengthening their rhetorical expressions, creating a total poetic form that conceals yet conveys a revolutionary personal ideology. Reading the work and ideas of these poets closely while employing the theories of Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, Mikhail Bakhtin, Michel Foucault, Theodor Adorno, and Fredric Jameson to track poetic movement through the twentieth-century, we find that Pound illuminates the contradictory nature of the relationship between poetry and society. He negotiates the space between freedom and control by establishing an intellectually difficult, diverse art that addresses the paradox of authority in a free society with politically active revisionist strategies, all while protecting the subjective artist under the auspice of objectivity. Pound's work establishes a poetic tradition that influencing Olson and, later, contemporary "language" poets such as Charles Bernstein, Ron Silliman, and Barrett Watten to create similar forms of political writing that assert language's non-referentiality in a postmodern age and claim to separate the artist and his/her political

convictions. In spite of the postmodern tendency to consider this poetry as formless, fragmented, and apolitical, these forms, however, reinvest poets with authority, allowing them to pass on their inherited ideology of political revolution through art, reinforcing and reiterating an ideological goal of these American poets—the utopian restoration, through words, of our value in a capitalist age.

Chapter 1

Writing a Wrong: Ignoring Ideology

Almost fifteen years ago in *The Romantic Ideology* Jerome McGann appealed for a more consistent socio-historical perspective to encounter ideological content in poems. Yet McGann has only sporadic influence on literary critics. Although neo-Marxist critics like Fredric Jameson have examined how genres such as film and novels are involved in their own historicity, poems are still thought to be less “historical” than other genres and less ideological. The poem too frequently continues to be treated as a disengaged, mostly obscure reflection of the artist’s philosophy or experience. Today academicians still read poetry as though Cleanth Brooks’ idea of the “well-wrought urn” applies: the poem as a carefully crafted, personal icon.

From Whitman on, American poetry has been liberating, democratic, and ideological. American poets have created poems to provide the individual (thought of as a “romantic” in a cultural tradition that glorifies the pioneer) with a strategic document to assist in the negotiation between individual “freedom” in a new democracy and responsibility as a member of a community. Criticism of American poetry has focused on its pioneering spirit, hope and enthusiasm, on how our poetic project is a creative and celebratory venture employing a “free” poetic form that, despite civil and world wars and industrialization, contains the possibility of spiritual satisfaction.¹ Even poems as dour as T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* contain hope; the chant of “Shantih, Shantih, Shantih” at the poem’s end supports this notion (Eliot 46). Whitman, Crane, Williams,

Ginsberg, and the Beats, and the present-day oracular “performance” poets and multicultural poets, write personal portraits of how they have come to fit (or not to fit) within America. American poetry, in general, has been classified “open,” “neo-Romantic” and “utopian” in nature by critics who accept it as a distinctly American poetry that contrasts verse from poets such as Ezra Pound governed by European intellectualism and tainted by fascist tendencies and anti-semitism.² Yet we attribute this “American” quality in our poetry to the poetic “I” who painstakingly shapes the poem and ignores the historical factors that contribute to the formation of personal ideology within this “open” poetic.

McGann convinces us that both “poetry and literary criticism are products at the ideological level, where a culture’s ideas and self-representations are maintained” (*Romantic Ideology* 3). American poetry and criticism perpetuate a notion of freedom while promoting the idea of the Nietzschean “self-made man” who “seeks a picture of the world in that philosophy in which we feel freest (*sic*), i.e., in which our most powerful drive feels free to function” (Nietzsche 224-25). Poet and critic see American poetry through the prism of American ideology, bridging the gap between the individual artist and society, providing a way to make sense of a genre thought obscure. Yet McGann seems to criticize reading American poetry through a lens based on the ideology of “freedom” external to the work. Instead, critics should be reading the ideological material within the work. American poetry may represent our culture’s democratic ideals of freedom, but another politically motivated ideology struggles with and often contradicts what lies on the surface. A historical reading of the poem.

considering the historical moment of its creation, reveals the paradox. It is therefore important to read poetry through history. McGann tells us that:

the works of any historical moment transcend their particular socio-historical position only because they are completely incorporated to that position, only because they have localized themselves. In this fact we observe that paradox fundamental to all works of art which is best revealed through an historical method of criticism: that such works transcend their age and speak to alien cultures because they are so completely true to themselves, because they are time and place specific, because they are—from our point of view—*different*” (*Romantic Ideology 2*).

The poem attempts, then, as a work created by an individual, to somehow separate itself from its milieu (as McGann says) to “localize” itself. One example that I will be returning to later is the situation of modernist poetry’s seeking escape from a degenerating world, yet all the while connected to and informed by its specific surroundings, infiltrated by hidden, ideological material, different from poetry of another historical moment. We must preserve this difference not only because it makes the poem more interesting to study but to inform our own age:

Works of the past are relevant in the present . . . precisely because of this difference. We do not contribute to the improvement of social conditions or even to the advancement of learning . . . by seeking to erase this difference, but rather by seeking to clarify and promote it. When critics perpetuate and maintain older ideas and attitudes in continuities and processive traditions they typically serve only the most reactionary purposes of their societies . . . (*Romantic Ideology 2*).

The freedom of the poetic “I” is the “older idea” the historical mode destroys. As McGann attempted to “arrest that process of reification the academic criticism of Romanticism, whose ideology continues to be translated and promoted, and whose works continue to be taught and valued for that ideology” (*Romantic Ideology 2*), this

dissertation, by employing a historical method, will also attempt to question our conventional reading of the trope of “freedom” in American poetry by examining the ideological differences manifested in form and structure.

Poetry, Politics, and Postmodernism

McGann recognizes that if his “book [were] concerned with contemporary literary products...its procedures would be quite different, necessarily” (*Romantic Ideology 2*). In dealing with both the contemporary and the past in dialectic fashion, I wish to reveal another the critical standard of reading the political content of poetry that has been ignored up until now. As with the novel, the poem may also be considered a Jamesonian “socially symbolic act” that seeks to do just that—to act (*Political Unconscious*). The poetic “I,” by virtue of the visionary, objective forms it uses, becomes the poetic “eye” that works at “totalizing” all it sees. Our poets have created ideological documents, complete within themselves, painting a portrait of our broken-down society while compelling the reader to adopt new actions, behaviors, and manners of living to practice within a new, total image of society offered to us. These totalities created by, in, and through the act of writing a poem, obvious in some modernist poetry such as Pound’s, continue to be created in an era marked by an end to totalities. American poets, both modern and postmodern, engage in “totalitarianism” through their specific use of language, forcing us through rhetorical strategies to accept their new-fashioned utopian society. They perpetuate what we may consider *political* master discourses, passed on by their predecessors before they have been effectively killed in a patriarchal Bloomian act of passing on poetic power. Even as these totalitarian poets

ignore the academy in their pursuit to create alternative utopias not validated by those in power, their master discourses continue to be validated by academic critics. They perpetuate what they attempt to overturn—the status quo within modern ideologies of power, including the marginalization of groups and the denial of political agency to the “other”—while claiming a revolutionary stance. This anti-academic, anti-rational poetry adopts an elitist attitude. In spite of its revolutionary stance in the name of humanism, it insists on a method of observation and instruction incompatible with our notions of democracy and freedom.

By working backward from the present this introduction starts *in medias res* with postmodernism, an era defined by its sense of the end of history. Whether a conception of humanity constituted by the intersection of different epistemic positivities or discursive formations, sociological, archaeological, or genealogical, or a subjective concept of “the disappearance of a sense of history,” the loss of a sense of temporal passage and continuity that condemns us to a “perpetual present” (*Postmodernism* 11), postmodernity is largely ahistorical. Postmodern poetry reflects this ahistoricity through a poststructural understanding of language. It is relatively formless or employs non-organic form, generally non-linear, refusing to adopt or express narrative, contains no obvious or forced meaning, has no modernist codes to break in order to reach “truth.” Disjunctive not only in form but in content, it responds to a fragmented universe that fragments the subject and author of the poem, and it deconstructs the modernist ideal of the centered self. Postmodern poetry rejects totalizing systems of art—there are no more epics, no more “long” poems written—extolling non-totalitarian, non-tractarian works

that empower the reader. Contemporary poets privilege what they call “open” texts that allow for differentiation and discontinuity, allowing readers to fill in texts as active participants. No more than the critic can the writer claim mastery over the subject: both are complicit in textual production.

New Era, New Message: No Form?

This kind of postmodern strategy is given primacy in the texts of many “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E” poets. In discussing this poetry and its strategies, Steve McCaffery writes:

Language writing resists reduction to a monologic message offering instead an organized surface of signifiers, whose signifieds are undetermined; there is primacy lent to readership as productive semantic engagement with a text in order to generate local pockets of meaning as semantic eruptions or events that do not accumulate into aggregate masses. The texts, whilst written, demand writers to produce *from* them, for what the texts lack are authors: the traditional semiotic fiction of a central detached but recoverable source of origin (*From Productive to Libidinal Economy* 294).

By decentering the poet, postmodern “language” poetry attempts to empower the reader to make meaning from the poem without accepting a predetermined method. Language poets believe that contemporary poetry continues the tradition of privileging the writer, a tradition that reflects the status quo condition of the loss of individual power in capitalist society. The writer represents the owner of production that controls our labor and its products. Bob Perelman, a contemporary language poet, holds that, just as Virgil’s *The Aeneid* justifies empire, much of contemporary poetry exists for “a sort of Monday-morning Emperor” (Hoover 498), the bourgeois reader, who can feel “in the exquisitely disposed syllables, the pain of repression that comes with the territory of

world dominion” (Hoover 498). Perelman calls for a “defamiliarization” of poetry, removing it from the comforting ægis of the oral: “Unlike the oral poet, who is reinforcing what the community already knows, the didactic *writer* will always have something new, and possibly, unacceptable to get across” (Hoover 498). Perelman wishes to break away from a traditional *view* of poetry. The “acceptable” is what the community already knows, such as our communal, nationalistic belief in democracy—poetry rooted in an oral tradition such as the epic that reinforces our desires for freedom and reenacts the American Dream, a distinctly utopian impulse. Language poets see their project as being new in its anti-conventional strategies to disrupt what has been considered acceptable. But this revolutionary stance nor revolutionary strategies are not new—American poets of this century have embraced this idea of “difference” since Ezra Pound’s summons to “make it new.” In his essay on Zukofsky in *The New Sentence*, Ron Silliman reinforces this:

There is of course a critical element of oppositionality in the work of William Carlos Williams, as indeed there is in Stein, Zukofsky, Olson or Creeley. In each instance it lies in the identification of method with content. Opposition to the horrors of daily life in the twentieth century, whether or not these are equated with any given social and economic system, is expressed through opposition to the normative or inherited practices of that literature which embodies the status quo” (132).

In the attempt to combine form and content to disrupt the conventional and make poetry “new” throughout this century, poets have maintained a didactic element, teaching the readership to deny the status quo, whether in the structure of a society that latently oppresses our daily lives or in the form and content of a poetry that communicates and perhaps mimics this oppression. Can this didactic element convey a revolutionary

message without creating a utopia, a “totality” to impinge on the reader’s making of meaning from art, without direction from the artist? Although it has been customary to recognize poetry such as Pound’s as totalitarian, representing “fundamentally utopian project[s]” (*New Sentence* 132), postmodern poets from Charles Olson also desire change and, so, in the name of change for improvement, pass on the inevitable ideological contamination of American poetry. Within their revolution they create a normative poetry replicating traditional language use they wish to oppose.

Narrative as Poetic Form

Postmodern poets, in their anti-utopian posturing, propose to break down the interactive circle between poet, reader, and world by eliminating form from their work so as not to influence the reader about *how to* read a poem. New Criticism required the reader to regard formulaic particulars, such as narrative or character, to explicate poetry. Narrative is one of these familiar “forms” that postmodern poets deny, yet according to Walter Benjamin, this denial of form has its beginnings in not the postmodern but the modern era. In his essay “The Storyteller,” he associates the advent of modernism with the loss of both the possibility and the utility of narrative as organizing structure. The critical element for Benjamin that allows circulation between speaker, audience, and life is the concept of “experience,” which is disappearing, increasingly replaced by a new category, that of “information,” which may be regarded as experience reified, and in which the claim to authority has been replaced by verifiability. Narrative is to be replaced by a structure that matches the chaotic, information-based, fragmentary nature of the modern condition. A new “code” based on verifiable information, models the

era's positivistic attitude, one that requires *vision* to substantiate the truth. The reader, like the poet, must sort through the multitude of discursive images, of diffuse information. It would not be difficult, taking Benjamin's theory one step further, to connect the decline of narrative with the triumph of the lyric in the Imagist aesthetic of modernism, rejecting the long, continuous poem conceived as anything other than a series of short poems gesturing towards their own fragmentary status and centripetal preciseness. Modernism, in its substitution of privileged moments of insight or emotion for the continuous development of a story, can be read, in Benjamin's terms, as the replacement of the grasp of experience by the shock of information.

If Benjamin's analysis allows for a reading of the transition to modernism in terms of the decay of narrative's potential, then the uncertain space and aesthetic terrain of postmodernism further diminishes the authority of narrative. As the embodiment of collective consciousness and communal experience, narrative may fade with the beginnings of modernism, but the sense of the strength and integrity of the subject is, as though in response, reinforced—as the subject becomes the modernist, heroic individual. But this subject, an individual striking out on his own or a representative of an equally heroic "people," may itself be seen as dependent upon certain stories or grand narratives which, Jean-Francois Lyotard suggests, have served to structure our sense of progress since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The two dominant stories that Lyotard identifies—first of *Bildung* and the progress of the speculative spirit, and second of liberation, equality, and the triumph of the people—can be read as the necessary foundations of a heroic modernist subject. These subjects become the

heroes of their authors' epic narratives, whether an individual such as Pound's Dante-like persona harrows history in order to carry on his version of tradition to the people in epic form, or Olson's Maximus, an "elected" representative of the collective proposes to awaken the citizens to a sense of their autonomy and agency.

Although no longer structured as an *uninterrupted* "narratives," conventional stories that move plot smoothly from beginning to end in Aristotelian fashion, modernist poets persisted in writing long poems that maintain some semblance of narrative form. They and their literary critics thought of these poems as *epics*, where insight is divined from those in possession, now not of experience, but of information. It is now sometimes thought that the new, objective forms brought in by modernists such as Pound replaced narrative in poetry, the loss marking an "evolution toward a writing shaped as much by the present realities of the world *as form* as by any inherited sense of traditional modes" (*New Sentence* 129). Yet poetry in the twentieth century maintains its narrative structure and its hero-protagonist by acting as a record of a historical continuum. The work, no longer a story within itself, is now thought of as an entire segment of the larger plot line of history. This connection between poetry and history and the modification of the narrative form warrants examination. We may come to see that this poetry meets the criteria of Lukács' theory of the modern novel, setting in motion a tradition that he traces back to ancient poetic forms. Fictional narrative strategies have contributed to the development of the twentieth-century poem, and Lukács' theory of the novel explains all twentieth-century art forms—form seeks to recreate reality and recover its completeness. Although the advent of postmodernist

thought contained in Lyotard's view signals a further dislocation of heroic authority when the legitimizing grand narratives on which these poets base their works are called into question, we may find a reversal of this dislocation as the artist creates alternative totalities or utopias within modified poetic forms. segments of history that fit into the larger whole of time. The artist forages in history and his world for fragments of reality he can build upon to create and control his history of the moment.

The "Concrete" Manipulation of History

The modernist notion of dealing with the immediate particulars of the world may seem "at first glance... to shut out an engagement with history as the motive force of the poem... a deliberate renunciation of historical matter within the poem" (Finklestein 30). Yet this "objective" interchange with the environment intended to make a new poetry different from that of predecessors who failed to change conditions in their deteriorating world. For the poets themselves, it "signifie[d] a break with the Romantic notion of the sublime," a rejection of the attainment of a transcendental utopia (30). The modernist movement to the objective interior, looking *within* a tangible reality for content rather than *toward* a subjective abstraction, easily allowed new forms to be married to new content. What Norman Finklestein claims for the later Objectivist poets, such as Zukofsky and Oppen, also applies to their direct predecessor Pound: these poets produced "a body of work, in that privileged moment [that] seems to be derived not from a ritual but an exterior object or event that carries aesthetic worth prior to the poet's work of creation, or indeed, of perception itself" (29). Forms such as Imagism, based on a vision of what the artist sees, did not prevent the artist from once again

looking for material outside the present. Here the modern artists take objectivity into a visionary Romantic realm. By manipulating history as objective material, modern poets reclaim “Romantic inferiority, a mode of discourse which permitted the poets a means of gathering history into the symbolic contours of their verse; thus sustaining their auratic power” (Finklestein 30-1). Benjamin’s idea of the *aura* of a work to which Finklestein refers suggests that the work’s own artistic production is based on ritual or interior impulse. This aura, or connection between artist and work, denied by the modernist poet’s claim of objectivity, is reinstated when history becomes an “objective” subject of the poetry. Taking into account the aesthetic ideologies of the artist, the portrayal of history is still subjectively manipulated to conform to ideology. Poems such as *The Cantos* “have merged so thoroughly with historical matter that a version of History (engineered through ideology, of course) appears to be speaking itself” (Finklestein 30). In a totalizing effort to increase opportunities to change the world, the artist attempts to create his version of history with a poetic unit.

One way poetry manipulates history is through its conversion into something tangible, a domain to be viewed and visited. The establishment of geography or “home” lends the twentieth century American poem “epic proportion” and reshapes it into a controllable narrative structure central to long poems such as Williams’ *Paterson*, Pound’s *Cantos*, and Olson’s *Maximus*. Within this establishment of geography, of “home,” the vision of the Objective poets becomes inherently political; their art reconstitutes history and ideological order for the collective. Critics have not necessarily ignored the historical nature of the American “epic” poets, but have neglected *how* this

element goes on to express control in a discourse that seeks to establish itself beyond criticism, creating a singular, authoritarian vision for the “new nation” in the name of revolution. From the lessons and structures of the old, these poets attempt to create the new. Charles Olson brashly refers to his new world as a *polis*, a reversion back to the Ancient Greek city-state.

As they move from the Romantic abstraction to the modernist real, revolutionary objectivists poets never turn away from the possibility of cultural revolution, culminating in a neo-Romantic “sublime” state. They revolt from the conditions spawned by the practices of late capitalism: the commodification of human labor and the reification of the self into fragmentary parts. Olson speaks at great length in his poetry about how we are “advertised out,” asking if the imagination can transform social structures by providing alternatives to the dominant structure of enlightened thought. He seems to claim that desire provides the basis for revolution. Imagination comes into play; art is not to be created and enjoyed in leisure time or a means of extolling a “Socialist” cause, but a way to earn freedom from bourgeois Puritanism, from enlightened thinking, through a new relationship made with one’s world. These poets call for a new social order— supplanting the old with their own programs for living. They review and revise the laws of historical development so that bourgeois individualism and its new “art” (of advertising, of usury, etc.) can be replaced.

The authoritarian nature of their objective poetry emerges here, for the poets themselves are commodified by a literary academy and attempt revolution using the reified language and forms of the modern period. Their work exemplifies the artist’s

privileged status in the leftist movement, at least with regard to the modernist philosophy of art. Each artist claims to be the only one who can *see* into the past and present so as to see into the future, as does Lenin's vanguard, becoming both vanguard *and* proletariat leader, fashioning a better world, one based on artistic ideals, a "golden age in which the arts would flourish as symptoms of a general well-being" (Stead 278). Like Lenin's vanguard, a common worker that has the foresight to become a leader of the proletariat, taking the foremost position to lead, the poet is seer, prophet, rising above the masses. Artistic privilege authorizes authoritarian discourse, allows poetry to make evident the ideological organization of what Adorno and Horkheimer deem "administered societies," and sanctions action such as Pound's work for Mussolini. The twentieth century poetic revolution is done in the name of a collective ultimately imposed on the reader.

Story to Glory: Maintaining the Utopian Tradition

The result of this revolution makes poetry into a "historical moment" that can be captured and compared to one's present. Charles Olson's cry that "history is NOW!" shows the artist's wish to collapse the space and time continuum to control it, to understand the present and subsequently affect the outcome of cultural action by rewriting history in poetic terms. Pound wished upon his society first a new economics, then a new system of government, all to be translated through a new poetics and a new way of reading history. Yet he attempted to do what past poets (before the advent of postmodernism) tried to do, to communicate their own version of *truth*. To do this, they have relied on myth, raking new forms out of the traditions, out of old content:

Myth, for Dante, for Shakespeare, for Milton, was the poet-lore handed

down in the tradition from poet to poet. It was the very matter of Poetry, the nature of the divine world as poets had testified to it; the poetic piety of each poet, his acknowledgment of what he had found true Poetry, worked to conserve that matter. And, for each, there was in the form of their work—the literary vision, the play of actors upon the stage, and the didactic epic—a kind of magic, for back of these forms we surmise distant origins in the rituals toward ecstasy of earliest Man. (Finklestein 65)

“Magic” in the modern world’s replaced by a more “scientific” approach in poetry, but we may still find the same didactic drive to create truth in art, despite this modification. The modern manipulation of history through the conversion of the form that carried history, the replacement of narrative with other poetic forms, transports the tradition so that the modern reader can understand the poet’s individual truth within a historical context. This goal to communicate truth validates artistic endeavor which always seeks to convert the traditional: conversion is “a source of primal empowerment: it can provide the individual poet with a transpersonal, communal authority that will allow him to articulate his own contribution to the ongoing matter of the historical work” (Finklestein 65). Transformation of traditional forms creating new totalities did not stop with Pound. Contemporary objectivists and language poets attempt to “find contemporary correlatives to the historically appropriate forms of a Dante, a Shakespeare, a Milton. They seek to respond to the demands of the moment, knowing full well that in doing so, they intuitively respond to the movement of history as one moment opens on to the next...”(Finklestein 65). Being poets of their time automatically invests their work with ideological content, yet the presence of personal ideology contradicts what they actually attempt to do—to circumvent personal ideology to articulate an almost archetypal vision of truth. In *both* eras of our century, the first

when the attainment of truth was futilely sought, and the second, when it was ultimately rejected, "poetry, if it is to be of historical moment, must address itself to ideas that are central to its time; that poetry despite all ideological vicissitudes, can have as its object a kind of truth which, emerging intrinsically from the text, stand forth as the totalizing result of the human struggle for knowledge" (Finklestein 36). In examining the ideological shifts throughout each era's poetics, we will find the poet's struggle to find and communicate truth is never over: the poet never gives up the attempt to create the right form for the age, an individual version of perfection.

Tracking Poetry's Movement: Dialectical Contradictions

The search for truth in a truthless age, the maintenance of the narrative impulse following its "death," the struggle between intellectual and anti-intellectual poetry, the creation of totalities in a fragmented world, are all contradictions a dialectical analysis may explain. One of the important lessons learned from the work of Marx is this notion of the dialectic, attaining truth by revealing contradictions and overcoming them. This dissertation is itself in a dialectical process, reading American poetry's inevitable "totalitarianism" in relation to its proposed ideology of freedom and (later) formlessness, as the poetry is involved in a dialectical relationship with its own contradictory components. Hegel discusses the synthesis of two antithetical ideas into a higher form of truth. Many critics would see American poetry, especially the poetry of the modernist period ripe with European influence (Pound, Eliot, the "Fugitives," etc.), immersed in a Hegelian dialectic that describes a process of change, through art, where a thesis, or ideational entity, is transformed into its opposite, an antithesis, allowing the

original thesis to exist while a resolution is worked out. The modernist conversion of the Romantic sublime, from nature to city, from narrative to lyric, from subjective to objective, also works in this dialectical fashion. The Hegelian dialectic, however, does not explain the remaining internal contradictions found within the works. The higher truth to which these works aspire never clearly materializes and cannot be wholly accepted by its readership and our future artists who look to our past for new ways to resolve the contradictions.

Another way of considering the contradictions left over in twentieth century transformations of myth, narrative, and their “magic,” as outlined above by Finklestein, would be to apply the work of Adorno and Horkheimer’s dialectical explanation of Enlightenment. The purpose of Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis is to show how myth is already enlightened thought, and how enlightened thought, in its wish to do away with the “abstractions” of mythology, inevitably reverts back to mythology in order to master what is feared—nature. These Frankfurt school critics explore the dynamics of modern power, concluding that the “Enlightenment is totalitarian” (Adorno 6). We may examine this territory of the dialectic since Enlightenment thought is part of the American cultural heritage that poets possess and also strive to overcome, although, during the Enlightenment, literature suffered a demythologization and despiritualization, it continued to be written. Much in the same way that Plato dismissed the poets from his Republic, the enlightened attitude that “knowledge is power” allowed for the mind to “overcome superstition” American poets saw literature perpetuating so it might wholly use and dominate, in patriarchal fashion, nature and other humans

(Adorno 4). Yet in protecting the narrative element within the poem and including the formal logic that “provided the Enlightenment thinkers with the schema of the calculability of the world” (Adorno 7), “totalitarian” poets imbued their work with the “discipline and power that Bacon celebrated as the ‘right mark’” (Adorno 8). Adorno and Horkheimer remind us that:

even the best intentioned reformer who uses an impoverished and debased language to recommend renewal, by his adoption of the insidious mode of categorization and the bad philosophy it conceals, strengthens the very power of the established order he is trying to break (Adorno xiv).

The poet succumbs to the enlightened notion that the self, awakened to the knowledge that power is the principle of all relations, holds dominion over what it sees.

The use of myth by our poets, their continuation of the elements of traditional narratives through use of other forms, ritualizes the activity of writing poetry as a way to instruct readers. As Adorno points out, “[m]yth intended report, naming, the narration of the Beginning; but also presentation, confirmation, explanation...Narrative became didactic at an early stage” (Adorno 8). The great narratives of the ancients had the expectation of control without a locus of power in the objective world. All-powerful gods were of the nether world, with an indissoluble bond to the elements of the earthly world. The myths of the gods included magical properties to explain what could not be explained. Magic, inside these stories and outside, was a way of addressing the elements of earth with which the gods were unified: “[t]he shaman’s rites were directed to the wind, the rain, the serpent without, or the demon in the sick man, but not to materials or specimens” (Adorno 9). Shamans were empowered because of their communication

skills; they were entrusted with the continuity of didactic myth, responsible for making that myth ritual to perpetuate lessons. Ancient narratives, therefore, may be considered to have distinct purpose and our poets' use of these myths make their own work "purposeful." but the manner of achieving these purposes differs within the dialectic of myth and enlightenment, demonstrating Enlightenment's involvement with sovereign power, linking our poets to enlightened thought. But it would be wrong to claim that any purposeful action with specific goals (including the creation of an artistic work based on narrative) is always a totalitarian act, because questions of subject, intent or motivation, and the theoretical or ideological basis of the action must also be considered.

Representing Form, Representing Content

The question of signification plays a major role in the question of the creation of totalities, a subject I will pursue with regards to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets later in this study. For now, it is important to note that there is an intentional separation between subject and object within our rational, scientific way of thinking that empowers the subject to take dominion over what he sees. As "myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity... Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men... He [the subject] knows them [objects] in so far as he can manipulate them" (Adorno 9). In the dialectic between myth and enlightenment, there is a distinct modification concerning representation. Although "[l]ike science, magic pursues aims," there is a difference in how they pursue them. The ancients sought "to achieve them by mimesis—not by progressively distancing itself from the object" (Adorno 11). Using

magic to describe the machinations of the gods and their effects on their objective world, the ancients dealt in “specific representation... What happens to the enemy’s spear, hair or name, also happens to the individual: the sacrificial animal is massacred instead of the god” (Adorno 10). With magic, objects stand for what they are and actions, ideas, explanations reflect their direct relationship with the object. The subject or perceiver of the object (or thinker of the thought) has little *power* or *sovereignty* with regards to thought; the obvious answers contained within the narrative were not questioned—they remained outside of the human domain. There is no separation between subject and object. Therefore, “[o]n the magical plane, dream and image were not mere signs for the thing in question, but were bound up with it by similarity or names. The relation is not one of intention but of relatedness” (Adorno 11). As these narratives, and the methods of considering the world and expressing it (including the use of language), were appropriated by the Enlightenment, “magic,” that is the method of describing the world mimetically, was replaced by science and the hierarchies of social power:

In place of the local spirits and demons there appeared heaven and its hierarchy; in place of the invocations of the magician and the tribe the distinct gradation of sacrifice and the labor of the unfree mediated through the word of command. The Olympic deities are no longer directly identical with elements, but signify them (Adorno 8).

This turn toward signification marks a step toward our century and its linguistic study of signs, signifiers, and signifieds.

Pound, Williams, and Olson attempt to reaffirm and reestablish the relationship between subject and object but cannot do so because of the neo-positivistic forms they

chose to use, forms that reflect their involvement in modern enlightened rationality. This condition marks both the modern and postmodern eras of our century, eras defined by a lack of a central, organizing myth. Adorno tells us that “[i]n science there is no specific representation: and if there are no sacrificial animals there is no god. Representation is exchanged for the fungible—universal interchangeability” (Adorno 10). The human quest to gain sovereignty over the world by reducing it to what is scientifically knowable results in the use of a conceptual unity that both fixes distinctions and denies specific representation. This contradiction governs modern thought and “expresses the hierarchical constitution of life determined by those who are free” (Adorno 14). Poets attempting to master this contradiction eventually find themselves in a dilemma concerning poetic method. The dialectic of enlightenment returns to myth by way of new narrative forms, noting not the return to the unity of mythic nature but the use of the mythic element to uphold the enlightened mastery of nature, where “the submission of everything natural to the autocratic subject finally culminates in the mastery of the blindly objective and natural” (Adorno xvi).

The Artist’s Dilemma: Freedom Versus Control

Whereas the epic artistic impulse was to form new images personalized by the author to valorize and perpetuate the past in the future, a “broadening of the world of the absolute past, an enriching of it with new images (at the expense of contemporaneity)” (Bakhtin 19), the enlightened desire is to empower the individual through knowledge influenced poetry to contend with the present, to create images based on a direct representation of reality. In an attempt to achieve a direct relation to

one's world, poets—from Wordsworth to Williams—attempted to break away from the stylized language and epic form, found in what Mikhail Bakhtin called “high genres of all authority and privilege” that sustained a “lofty significance and grandeur...[an] orientation toward completeness” (Bakhtin 20). Wordsworth's call to use the speech of the common man, Pound's “make it new” and Williams' “no ideas but in things” demanded an end to classical elements that enforced distance between work and reader, this distance emphasizing the loss of Benjamin's idea of *aura*. These poets wished to gain the perspective of contemporary reality in order to become more involved with it, to immerse themselves in it to deal with it more effectively.

Then what role does the artist have in re-creating that reality? To what extent is there of choice or manipulation of objects ultimately placed on the canvas or blank page? How much is reality filtered through the individual author? To what extent is it modified? How do the details, the objects, speak for themselves? We may begin to see the possibility of contradiction in the realistic, objective strategy taken by the artists of the turn of the century, one that wavers between *freedom* for the individual to investigate and *control* of what is seen as reality. In an artistic time where “contemporary reality provides the point of view” (Bakhtin 22-3), we must begin, as Bakhtin suggests, to consider the efforts of realistic authors and modernist poets as informed by the same concerns as early postmodernists—the art produced is incapable of being whole, unable to speak “truth”:

Through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness... meanwhile our present has been moving into an inconclusive future. And in this inconclusive context all the semantic stability of the object is lost...this leads to radical changes in the

structuring of the artistic image” (Bakhtin 30).

If the goal is to represent, through objects, the contemporary world, then we must admit that “[t]he temporal model of the world changes radically; it becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not been spoken” (Bakhtin 30). Yet Bakhtin follows this statement with the idea that, “for the first time in artistic-ideological consciousness, time and word become *historical*” (Bakhtin 30, emphasis added), an idea antithetical to the ahistorical position of postmodernists who deny history for text without specific representation. Although the objects in their ever-changing flux cannot achieve finality in their representation, the image created by the author from these objects does acquire a concrete and, therefore, malleable presence of its own:

The image acquires a specific actual existence. It acquires a relationship—in one form or another, to one degree or another—to the ongoing event of current life in which we, the author and readers, are intimately participating. This creates the radically new zone for structuring images in the novel, a zone of maximally close contact between the represented object and contemporary reality in all of its inconclusiveness—and consequently a similarly close contact between the object and the future” (Bakhtin 30-1).

Again we must remember the connection between the novel and the poem: the poem is involved in maintaining narrative form in order to continue work in the reestablishment of the whole, while existing in an era already struggling with what we consider postmodern questions of flux and uncertainty. Bakhtin’s call for “close contact between the object and the future” reminds us of the historical enterprise of art—where the objects presented in the artistic image are connected with the future where the artist can reassert control and recreate a utopian totality just beyond our grasp. After

contemporary reality provides the point of view. “[e]ven where the past or myth serves as the subject of representation” (Bakhtin 22-3), where enlightenment returns to myth, we return to the bias of the author. In his wish to correct his reality, the poet reverts back to antiquity, to the idea of absolutism. Ideas of apocalypse and renewal that formed the basis of mythical (epic) literature continue through twentieth century poetry:

The temporally valorized categories of absolute beginning and absolute end are extremely significant in our sense of time and in the ideologies of past times. The beginning is idealized, the end is darkened (catastrophe, the ‘twilight of the gods’). This sense of time and the hierarchy of times described by us here permeate all the high genres of antiquity...so deeply into the foundations of these genres that they continue to live in them in subsequent eras—up to the nineteenth century, *and even further*” (Bakhtin 20, emphasis added).

The projects of twentieth century poets are totalitarian projects, continuing the tradition of authorial dominance in present and future worlds by the representation of art. The hierarchy between author and reader is maintained as the author attempts to make us see reality despite the “freedom” objective allow for individual perspective and the “fact” that we may not represent “truth” in a language that poets (and all speakers) use. These totalizing projects, ranging from Pound’s Imagism through Olson’s Projectivism to the poetry of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, all preserve the privilege of the author to manipulate and coerce, to create and destroy beliefs. Modern and contemporary poets have found new ways to manipulate realities to authorize new versions, including those past realities we would normally think of as historically distant. Both Pound and Olson suture objective perspectives of their reality to their pasts, breaking down and reforming histories to propagate personal utopian epistles.

History, in a sense, is intentionally destroyed by these actions, paving the way

for the disconnected self not only to make its own meaning, but to deny any meaning made with historical connections. As a consequence, the overt political aspect of early modernist poetry too harshly laden with dismal social commentary for most critics — not only Pound’s anti-usury diatribes, but also Williams’ *Paterson IV*—provokes a reaction. With the advent of postmodern thought, the self disengaged from its society has triumphed in some sectors of the academy and notions of politics have all but vanished from consideration in criticism. The postmodern artist is unable to “transform the recalcitrant material of history into imaginative art” (Teres 153) and is therefore believed to be non-ideological. Yet, despite this failure, postmodern “language” poets maintain an authoritarian discourse in their poetry, recognizing the contradictory dilemma of art created to rise above ideology and art that upholds the “historical,” enlightened ideology it wishes to transcend, all the while creating its own ideology based on contemporary models. Politics has never left poetry: Pound’s tradition of the powerful all-seeing “I,” though modified in specific ways, is still with us.

Chapter 2

The “Whole” of *The Cantos*: Ezra Pound’s Totalitarianism

“What drives, or what can drive a man interested almost exclusively in the arts, into social theory or into a study of the ‘gross material aspects’ videlicet economic theories of the present? What causes the ferocity and bad manners. . .?” (Ezra Pound in “Murder by Capital,” 485)

Pound’s Age

To begin the investigation of the advancement of a modern totalitarian ideology within this century’s poetry, we must start with the “prime mover” of modernist poetry, Ezra Pound. (Bradbury 257) Pound brought to American poetry all of the European modernism he could digest: French *vers libre* and symbolism through Jules Laforgue and Remy De Gourmont, English “classicism” and “vorticism” via T.E. Hulme and Wyndham Lewis. His assimilation and adaptation of these sub-movements have influenced poets of his own time, such as T.S. Eliot and William Carlos Williams, who used Pound’s aesthetics in the development of their own theories.

Yet other aspects of Pound’s heritage have been overlooked. Pound was also heir to ideological and aesthetic influences from outside his immediate artistic surroundings—an almost universal disfavor with industrial culture and the rise of the novel as an art form. Alfred Kazin reminds us that “our modern literature came out of those great critical years of the late nineteenth century which saw the emergence of modern America, and was molded in its struggles” (Kazin ix). Although Kazin speaks specifically of American fiction in his book *On Native Grounds*, we can extrapolate his thoughts on poetry as well as fiction. Whether conceived in Europe or America, poetry

and fiction are “rooted in the drift of the new world of factories and cities, with their dissolution of old standards and faiths” (Kazin viii).

The ideological content of Pound’s poetry largely has been oversimplified. He often has been considered “simply a traitor, an anti-Semite, a obscurantist, a money crank...” (Creeley 25). The bulk of criticism on Pound deals with revolutionary poetics and forms. The connection of this new poetics to the changing modern environment, the “drift of the new world” bringing revolutionary political change to Russia, Germany, and Italy, was de-emphasized both during an era of New Critical thought that dealt solely with the text and a postmodern one that denies the text’s historicity. In 1942, Kazin’s commentary led the way toward the creation of an alternate method of considering poetry as a social product, leading toward Jerome McGann’s later admonition of this prior ignorance of the social connection of art to its environment: “Artistic products, whatever they may be formally, are materially and existentially social...Consequently, the study of such products must be carried out through a socio-historical framework...(*Romantic Ideology* ix). This lets us put Pound’s ideology within a study of his art, always noticing how the pressures of his chaotic modern world led him to continue tradition even while destroying convention.

Pound’s struggle was two-fold. A Romantic who inherited the tradition of transcendentalism he would never relinquish, he did renounce his Romanticism for an objective, practical communion with the world. He could not accept the non-pragmatic aspect of Romanticism for it could not solve the world’s problems, including the devaluation of human life. He came to see symbolism as sloppy, “all vagueness and

music” (Stead 237). Abstraction in art was impractical and, therefore, unacceptable. This abstraction was the aspect of William Butler Yeats’ poetry that Pound tried to help him modify. Pound wanted poetry to be recognizable so that it would prompt a reader to action, to change. An early poem, “Revolt Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry,” gives us some indication of Pound’s despair over the turn of the century’s tendency toward abstractness and his revolutionary hunger for change:

I would shake off the lethargy of this our time,
and give,
For shadows—shapes of power—
For dreams—men.

I bid thee grapple chaos and beget
Some new titanic spawn to pile the hills and stir
This earth again. (Collected Early Poems 96-7)

The obscure “shadows” and “dreams” are to be replaced by the concrete—men and the “shapes of power” only they can concoct. Then Earth can only be reformed by someone to “beget” a poetry of immense strength, a “new titanic spawn,” that might find a place to stand ground in these slippery, contradictory times, in a world both marked by “lethargy” and “chaos” that together cause confusion. This new poetry would entail a form that in its images mimicked the hardness of the world in its chaos. Yet it would be understood as a whole, the inclusion of the fragmentary aspect of the world denoting not disintegration, but re-integration. As James McFarlane notes regarding modernist artists, “The very vocabulary of chaos—disintegration, fragmentation, dislocation—implies a breaking away or a breaking apart. But the defining thing in the Modernist mode is not so much that things fall *apart* but that they fall *together*... In Modernism the center is seen exerting not a centrifugal but a centripetal force; and the consequence is

not disintegration but...superintegration" (92).

For this superintegration Pound adapted the epic form, the "tale of the tribe," to tell tradition to a formless modern world. Pound has spoken about the affinity between mythmaking and writing poetry that discloses the need for mythic art in this senseless era:

The first myths arose when a man walked into "nonsense," that is to say, when some very vivid and undeniable adventure befell him, and he told someone else who called him a liar. Thereupon, after bitter experience, perceiving that no one could understand what he meant when he said that he "turned into a tree," he made a myth—a work of art, that is—an impersonal or objective story woven out of his own emotion, as the nearest equation that he was capable of putting into words. The story, perhaps, then gave rise to a weaker copy of his emotion in others, until there arose a cult, a company of people who could stand each other's nonsense about the gods (Tytell 27).

Pound was to marry mythic narrative tradition to his new method of "imagism," a visual poetic system where the hard facts of both past and present are seen and expressed.

Through story he attempted to create a community of understanding, to make sense of the "nonsense." For this he was to create a narrative poem from both the old and the new: "a poem including History" (Kenner 366).

Pound's initial action for *The Cantos*, his long poem seen in its first form as "Three Cantos" in 1917,³ engaged a traditional epic strategy to achieve a traditional goal—the universalization of the human condition. Although involved with an ancient form, Pound gave his epic a modern twist to compress time. Modern writers (re)created a timeless present through their art, an ultra-historical age where Joyce's longshot *Throwaway* both wins the Derby and floats silently, menacingly down the Liffey, and Eliot's Fisher King searches the fragments shored against ruin, waiting for a cleansing

rain. This is a design to compress all eras into one, described by Hugh Kenner as a distinctly modern sense of waste recycling involved the conversion of the used into the useable: "Whole histories are compressed as we compress junked cars" (Kenner 28). This modern compression of time allows history to be handled, seen, worked with, understood. History, solidified, can be made whole again, re-used. Space, the area occupied by the graspable solid for Pound and his fellow modernist authors, provided a medium to control time. The writer does this with artistic space because natural, cyclical rhythms of the passage of time no longer fit the modern age, or was it thought that art reflected a "true" nature. Impressionism and, later, cubism, were manifestations of the artist's inability, finally, to ever see the world again.

For Pound, Realism was also a failed artistic attempt to mimic the real because it had broken apart. Yet he saw the novelist's attempt to compact the space of reality to re-form or totalize the world, to remake the lost whole. The writer rushed to silence the chaos, removing man from the works of the world to allow him to see possibilities for change. Silencing of the world's chaos through form became Pound's aesthetic ideology, and making a transcendent myth from a fragmented reality to control that reality became a modernist action. In describing the ending of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Richard Ruland states that "two worlds of modern writing here intersect: the apocalyptic world of modern sterility and fragments and the transcendent world of the symbol where time can become myth" (Bradbury 249). Ruland's recognition of Fitzgerald's collision of transcendence with ultra-realism describes Pound's writing perfectly. Yet it is no accident that Ruland speaks of a novel when describing this

modern condition. It is within the novel's form that writers had the opportunity for this combination, and it was the novel that Pound was most fascinated with and influenced by, an art form that reflected the modern condition best.

Affinities with the Novel(ists)

Early modernist poetry began to lose its appeal to its audience because of its artificiality, too much exhibiting the abstractness Pound abhorred. Despite Art Nouveau's call to eliminate excess in embellishment its ornamentation and gaudiness, poetry at the turn of the century was much too Victorian. It continued filling in space with trivia, "whether the literary page or the living room, with knickknacks, objects, curlicues and cornices, gilded pictures and heavy furniture" (Tytell 85). C.K. Stead tells us that Ford Madox Ford, a great friend and early influence of Pound's, was "obsessed by the feeling of something needlessly artificial about the practice of poetry as distinct from the practice of prose" (Stead 28). This artificiality led early modernists to question the genre's effect on readers, to wonder whether poetry could contribute to the "lethargy" of the age that Pound spoke of in "Revolt Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry." Ford asked, "'Is there something about the mere framing of verse, the mere sound of it in the ear, that it must at once throw its practitioner or its devotee into an artificial frame of mind?'" (Stead 28). Ford's rhetorical question led the early modernists to either turn to the writing of novels or, as in the case of Pound, to incorporate prose and novelistic techniques into poetry.

Pound's relationship to the novelists of his day and the past can be described, at best, as paradoxical. He saw greatness in what authors like Flaubert and James were

accomplishing as they attempted to “set the arts in their rightful place as the acknowledged guide and lamp of civilization” (Tytell 114), a goal he later proclaimed for his Imagist group. Novelists “and not the poets seemed to Pound the great modern masters” (Stead 237). Yet Pound was a poet, not ready to give the title of master only to the novelist. In a revised opening to *The Cantos*, he asks whether he should “sulk and leave the word to the novelists?” (Bush 57). His continuation of his long epic poem proves he did not. Instead Pound brought to his new poetic form what he found most important about the novel and its new prose style. The poet’s transcendentalism would be mixed with the novelist’s imagery of the everyday. In 1913 Pound discussed this prose tradition of poetry:

What may be called the “prose tradition” of poetry, and by this I mean that it is a practice of speech common to good prose and to good verse alike...It means constatement of fact. It presents. It does not comment. It is irrefutable because it does not present a personal predilection for any particular fraction of truth...It washes its hands of theories... (*Approach* 662).

The result was to be similar to that of the newly-forming modern novel—a total work, with beginning and end, but with modified content conforming to the external pressures of modernity. In this respect, Henry James acted as comrade-in-arms to Pound.

An expatriate like Pound who never forgot America. James searched his reality for something he called “felt life,” a morality that should exist dislodged from experience. Through his reading of novelists such as James and Flaubert, Pound noted that “the novel...has become, by analysis and psychological inquiry, the history of contemporary ethics-in-action” (*Letters to Joyce* 71). This “felt life” may be compared to what Pound later called *paideuma*, a term borrowed from the German anthropologist

Leo Frobenius, and meaning a “revealing tangle or complex of inrooted ideas and the ‘grisly roots’ of those ideas in action (Tytell 71). This study of *paideuma* was to lead Pound to find life’s “luminous details.” the “germinal and active principles of an era” (Tytell 71) he believed would allow him access to modify such details in art and create a new *paideuma*. James intrigued Pound because he was “always to retain an idealist belief that knowing reality is always a pursuit. an endless aesthetic and social quest” (Bradbury 214). Pound saw James searching through *paideuma*. In spite of his situation as an exile, James embarked on a distinctly exploratory “American quest for reality” where “his work as a whole... becomes an elaborate search for the sufficient impression and the significant form—and finally an essential foundation of all modernist fiction... which the novel, with its roots in both myth and density of detail, embodies” (Bradbury 214).

Yet Bradbury’s assessment of James falls short by relegating James’ strategies to strict adherence to the requirements of fiction. James did indeed influence Pound’s poetry, which also found “significant form” from the “sufficient impression.” or “luminous detail.” in his version of the epic poem. Pound’s epic adopted a novelistic form, “with its roots in both myth and density of detail.” Like James’ novels, Pound’s poetry takes on the aura of a “made” object that is multi-dimensional, that reflects the writer’s temperament not through a traditional narrative dialogue though a narrator may convey details, but through objects themselves, the total becoming a single “managed and composed impression” (Bradbury 216). Kenner describes what James does in this way:

James made not stories but “things,” and did not write them but “did”

them. They took “doing”...He was helped by conceiving that he did not tell but *make*: making objects, substantial as statues...The story enters the mute world and partakes of the enigmatic silence of objects, though attention may discern “the figure in the carpet.” (Kenner 27)

Pound was impressed with James’ “factive” personality as an artist, as one willing to take an active role in the management of reality through his art. James was hardly interested in creating art for art’s sake though even James found it difficult to designate a specific purpose for the act of writing. But Pound read in James a secret longing for practical action, something Kenner finds reading James’s Prefaces, revealing where he “hugs secrets, talking round that overwhelming question, what the story may be [used] *for* (Kenner 23).

Although James’ later novels were increasingly unable to manage the societies he peered into, novels that “capture an increased sense of the disorder and contingency of modern European society” (Bradbury 217), Pound took James’ lead, answering that overwhelming question of what “the story could be for.” James provided Pound passage to an art form at once social, moral, beautiful, and reflective. In a late-Jamesian world that saw the inception of the Great War completely disillusion the Master, one that “no longer promises clear moral realization” (Bradbury 218), Pound believed he could do better with his art, solving the problematic fragmentation with action, reassembling a different totality. Pound’s work during and after WWI was to reform the novel; a poem such as *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* was ““an attempt to condense the James novel”” (Kenner 16). With James in mind, Pound continued his new poetic form and strategies. We know James was on Pound’s mind during the construction of *The Cantos* because he had written a long tribute to James for *The Little Review* in 1918. As John Tytell

points out, rereading James and the writing of the subsequent tribute was no doubt prepared him to write *The Cantos* (Tytell 41), acting on James' consideration of the psychology of the protagonist. Pound acts as a modern analyst in healing a war-torn society whose psychology is in need to recovery, taking on the objective strategies of the novel while incorporating epic and myth as form and content for the curative modern poem.

Epic and Myth, Modern Novel, and Poetry

Pound's co-option of novelistic form has a partial explanation in Georg Lukács' book *The Theory of the Novel* where he argues that the creation of the novel form is a direct effect of the experience of modern man. He begins by explaining that humanity has a need for totality, to recognize they live within a whole system that can be explained. Western society has been able to provide authors with a totality for our social systems explained within epic. From Homer to the Bible, medieval epic, Dante, God writes our totality and provides form and matter for our lives, a center based on mythological content for our epics.

When Nietzsche declares God dead to mankind, a new form of art has to be concocted to reestablish wholeness: "the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God" (Lukács 88). Lukács' theory offers insight into the totalitarian impulse of our modern writers. Pound's epic poetic form meets the criteria of Lukács theory of the modern novel, setting in motion a tradition that he traces back to ancient poetic forms. That the novel has its roots in poetic form leads us to consider how its fictional narrative strategies have contributed to the development of the twentieth-

century poem. Lukács' theory of the novel becomes an explanation for all twentieth-century art forms—form seeks to recover its completeness.

In order to understand the novel and its strategy and structure, Lukács traces its origins back to the epic and the ancient Greeks. According to Lukács, Greek society was closed—all was self-evident to the Greek citizen. No difference existed between experience and belief. When people lived the truth of their lives they had no need for alternate interpretations of experience. Therefore, for Greeks, form and life were one: “each action of the soul becomes meaningful and perfect in this duality...actions detach from the soul and become autonomous...” (Lukács 29). Lukács says this condition lacked subjectivity, “a ‘space’ or gap between what is given in experience and that given’s goodness, beauty, or truth” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 52). When society and self are whole, the epic reflects that wholeness—its narrative is cohesive; there are no individual heroes or authors portrayed in the distinct, particular, personal way we now consider this individual. Mikhail Bakhtin, in his reflections on the epic and the novel, further defines this cohesiveness in terms of language use within the art form. In describing the epic poem, he sets up a comparison between texts that are monoglossic and polyglossic. A monoglossic text is one whose roots are in antiquity, whose language is “closed” and “deaf”; its single voice closes discussion in an “absolute” fashion where tradition, “not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it,” is the subject for genres such as epic poetry (Bakhtin 12-13). Lukács' belief that these epics were “subjectless,” unable to provide an interpretation foreign to the reader/listener as they inherently “know” the tale, is supported by Bakhtin's idea of

monoglossia—the subjectless epic communicates to its audience through a known, shared language. Therefore Homer is faceless as are heroes such as Odysseus, “everymen” who fully embody the qualities and attitudes of the culture by using the culture’s “monochronic and valorized” language, where “temporal and valorized definitions are fused into a single, inseparable whole” (Bakhtin 15, 16). “Point of view and evaluation” are thus fused with the subject: “epic language is not separable from its subject” (Bakhtin 17). The Homeric epics are oral because they had no need to be written, as each citizen, when speaking the tale, was speaking himself. These oral tales carried on truths of mythical proportion; they became timeless, historical documents speaking of the unity of Greek society.

With the advent of philosophy a gap between self and world was created and written down for perpetual self-reflection. According to Lukács, the philosophical age moves from mythos to logos, where only words are left to recreate totality. The former unity lost, the dominion the oral epic poem held subsided in favor of tragedy and its new form, drama. Lukács tells us that with the advent of Plato and his ideas on forms “the divorce of form and life is complete” (Lukács 35). When man cannot know himself with regard to his world and offers different ideas of “goodness, beauty, or truth” from what is given in experience, we have Lukács’ subjectivity. This loss of the whole brought about the need for new forms to explain the world. Initially the Greeks created drama, a form independent from the epic yet still retaining a narrative impulse or life-modeling structure, to deal with this loss. Yet drama could not emancipate us from subjectivity. We were left with the Greek concept of tragedy that endeavored to hold

form and life together with narrative yet marked the loss of something once known or felt to be “true.”

In Lukács narrative authors afterward attempted to find form to overcome subjectivity, to once again connect self and world. Philosophy and religion, which tries to solidify philosophy into ritualistic doctrine and practice, posit “essence,” a truth beyond the scope of experience. Lukács marks the age of philosophy when “the essence, having completely divorced itself from life, became the sole and absolute, the transcendent reality” (Lukács 35). Plato’s Ideas of Forms becomes one such totality of meaning; Judeo-Christianity, another. Christianity models its concept of heaven on Plato’s ideas, modifying the philosophy of essence to create a new community of citizens unified to their “world,” what Lukács calls a “new *polis*...a paradoxical Greece” (37,38), giving its perfect form of heaven a perfect author in God. J.M. Bernstein informs us that:

With the separation of life and form into the separate dominions of time and eternity the possibility of history, of time requiring the mediation of form, becomes possible; and it is thus here that the Greek world merges, meets and unites with the Biblical world in Christianity. Jewish and Christian universal histories allow history to be real without ever being absolute; the horizontal movement of history is, at every moment, linked vertically to the God who provides history with its form: paradise, fall and history, paradise regained. (*Philosophy of the Novel* 62-63)

In Biblical narrative humans position themselves within a perpetual history created as a given form to model. This history moves from the “horizontal, metonymic, present structure of Homeric discourse by possessing a vertical, metaphoric, absent dimension which creates a foreground/background perspective which *is* the space of a synthetic self” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 60). Yet Bernstein’s synthetic can reflect only one rigid

idea of essence (in this case Christianity's) in only one rigid form: paradise. fall. paradise regained. Religion's preservation of this rigidity may be seen to be "totalitarian" in both of our modern senses of the term: creating a totality and forcing an ideology on the individual. What we would now come to call Judeo-Christian discourse deeply influences modern writing as the point of departure for both adoption and rejection of strategies to regain totality. As humans progressed in history, new paradoxes disrupted the retention of totality, eventually leading to the anti-formulaic representations of reality with us today (as an anti-formulaic representation requires a form to reject).

With the advent of the Enlightenment the totality expressed by Christianity was disassembled, paving the way for the novel to become new form for expressing narrative reality. Humans had come to believe that they themselves created forms. Lukács traces this back to Kant, calling this phenomenon man's "productivity of spirit." That man knows he creates forms allows for the dissolution of forms based on transcendental reality. Humans began working on creating their own forms rather than relying on those authored by God. As a result of this, different discourses came to the forefront to provide meaning, including history, "the production of different explanations of the same phenomenon," and fiction, "the creating, authoring of counterfactual worlds which serve as alternative interpretations of a shared domain of experience" (*Philosophy of the Novel* 52). A variable, human-created history and fiction dominated the Enlightenment, opposed to closed, unwavering epics and mythological tales. For Lukács this circumstance allows for the creation of the novel as

an “intentional movement” to recreate totality through manipulating an art form “wholly of this world for it is the only art form which explicitly themetizes the disappearance of *a priori* forms and struggles with its own necessary productivity and openness” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 66. 63). The form of the novel itself not only attempts to create this new totality but also makes the struggle of the creation of this totality evident. Lukács intends to show how this individual struggle marks the modern movement from public to private concerns, a “shift of form from a social precondition to an intentional product of narrative that marks out the historical uniqueness of the novel” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 66). For Lukács art becomes an individual endeavor separated from and no longer representative of any universal utterance. “a visionary reality of the world made to our measure... autonomous: it is no longer a copy, for all the model[s] have gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever” (Lukács 37).

He goes on to reason that the individual production of narrative also symptomatizes modernity’s fragmentation of the social world. He believed that “the very disintegration and inadequacy of the world is the precondition for the existence of art and its becoming conscious...” (Lukács 38). Humans suffer the loss of the totalities exemplified in epic, myth, and biblical writings, where “community and shared experiences of value and order are replaced by individual experience and volition” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 70). In this loss of totality we forfeit a method to regulate human action, losing the moral or ethical component of our lives; gone is the “marked convergence between ethic as an interior factor of life and its substratum for action in

the social structures” (Lukács 74). Those laws, attitudes, and mores seen as evident in epic societies are so no longer. Nor, according to Lukács, can they be recaptured from epic forms in order to guide modern discourse since they are no longer components of our belief—for we now require forms that are forward-thinking, “visionary.”

The new form of the novel requires a comparison to old forms to be understood. Lukács demonstrates how the characteristics of society effect narrative form and strategy. And it is the new form with which Lukács is ultimately concerned—as Bernstein points out, his theory is “not about a past unity which is forever lost to us, but about a present of separation which needs to be seen *as* fragmented in order to be understood correctly (*Philosophy of the Novel* 75). Bakhtin also is concerned with present art forms that seem to be fragmented. We can understand this fragmentation in modern art through a reading of its polyglossia, or the many voices of a polyglot world that Bakhtin sees finding its way into new genres such as the novel. Polyglossia reverses the epic’s monoglossia. It appears as the world expands through industrialism, becoming a global community: “the period of national languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end” (Bakhtin 12). Bakhtin theorizes that at the height of the novel’s dominance as written art form, boundaries marking “territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, generic languages within literary languages, epochs in language and so forth” break down and “completely new relationships are established between language and its object (that is, the real world)” (12). This acceptance of many voices into an artistic work, as the author steps out of the world of tradition and of myth and moves into what Bakhtin calls

the “zone of contact” of the present, tells of the shift in the communicative approach by the artistic subject.

Through fragmentation the novel reflects both the loss of unity *and* a rebellion against forms that deal with this loss, emphasizing the impossibility of returning to once-used forms:

A totality that can be simply accepted is no longer given to the forms of art; therefore they must either narrow down and volatilise whatever has to be given form to the point where they can encompass it, or else they must show polemically the impossibility of achieving their necessary object and their inner nullity of their own means. And in this case they carry the fragmentary nature of the world’s structure into the world of forms. (Lukács 38-39)

Experience of the modern world must be broken down in order to control it and reformulate cohesively; the modern author must “fictionalize our experience...fail to be true to the world” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 76) since what was self-evident no longer seems so. Whether this new form succeeds through a “denial of the world” or fails “through a respect for the demands of experience” is up for the critic to decide: both conditions mark what Bernstein calls the “antimony of the novel” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 76).

Structure: A New Form for the Epic

Walter Benjamin is an ideal critic to comment on the connection between novelistic form and the formation of a new poetic aesthetic employing historical models to the modern age. Benjamin approaches the modern recuperation of the whole by historical parts in his essay “The Storyteller.” Modern plurality replaces the original totality, fragments represent it. This newly-created totality, or “written history,” comes

out of all the fragments of traditional epic. In his essay, Benjamin compares this totality to a “white light” (Benjamin 95), a combination of past “lights” or historical illuminations for the present. The modern artist provided insight for the reader, his own illumination for a dark world. Joseph Conrad typifies this modern striving toward insight. Kenner points out that his dictum for the writing of novels, outlined in his own preface to his novel *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, was the duty of the novelist “‘above all to make you *see*,’ his mind’s eye fixed in some ideal space” (Kenner 27).

For the modern, ideal space existed in the past. High modernists such as Joyce, Eliot, and Faulkner assemble their art in measure with totalities found in antiquity, whether Greek, medieval, or antebellum American. Pound’s use of epic thus mimics the artistic action of other epics—he also wishes to make us *see* the ideal past. Following his vision of his ideal, the reader can reestablish an ethical community based on value and order. But through Lukács we have learned that past forms cannot be reclaimed in their entirety. The modern novel seeks to solve this problem. Within the situation of the novel Pound recognized the need for poetry to also adapt its form and become “visionary” to fit the modern situation. The search into the past for structure forces the artist to also look at the present for forms to express reality. Earlier forms such as the epic seem to resist the moderns’ desire to “make it new”:

From our perspective, the epic appears homogenous and undifferentiated because the very categories and terms of classification which gave us an access to the world are inapplicable, in their modern radicality and separation, to it...but because in its unity it denies or resists those categories in their irrevocable plurality, interpretation tends to freeze that resistance into an origin...it affirms the weakness as the strength...coerces us into seeking an escape from history, into recovering the origin... (*Philosophy of the Novel* 71).

The new fragmented form that Lukács describes combines fragments of past totalities into new ones. For the public “good” the artist adopts and adapts homogenous forms such as epic for an age of the productivity of spirit, where there is no separation between self and society and the individual can create his own forms, with “ideological individualism [as their] essence” (*Philosophy of the Novel* 70). As we will find in our examination of Pound’s form, this heterogeneous modern form, at once formulaic and fragmentary, still preserves a totality for the modern reader. Pound, perhaps more than the other moderns, was aware this form must be new and also must be able to be *seen*. The point of form is to provide structure so that the content of art, its ethical message, can be understood. Kenner reminds us of how the novel of our era, despite its fractured nature, can be described in terms of space, wholeness, structure:

We say that a novel has *structure*, being more like a building than a statement; we talk of *surfaces* and *depths* and *insight* which suggests peering into a window, and *outlook* which suggests gazing out of one. We accept Mr. Forster’s distinction between *round and flat characters*...we talk about the novelist’s management of *point of view*. The word *perspective* comes in handy, and *foreground* and *background*, not to mention *levels of meaning*.... Space, with its talk of structures, was whelming verbal art...and we still talk as though fictions existed in three-dimensional space (Kenner 27).

Pound’s foray into re-creating the epic poem, his Jamesian “made object,” let the fragments of life live on, where “myth, language, poetry, fact, lie disposed in a common reality...the validation of literature by a living eye” (Kenner 143), managed and composed by the ever-present author. What for Lukács made fiction also becomes substance for poetry. In an essay on John Dryden, Eliot says “a great poet is a poet who extends the use of verse; who makes poetry out of what we took for granted to be only a

matter for prose” (Coyle 79). Pound embodied his era’s ideological aesthetic of totality within his art.

The modern epic Pound called *The Cantos*, driven by a return to origins and totality, did not go back as far as the Greeks to capture a whole which to model society. His epic was to be based on a closed recognizable system whose vestiges remained in Pound’s era, albeit shattered. The recognizable archetype would be Christianity. For Pound, Dante, encapsulated in his Christian universe, achieved the proper combination of form and content to make meaning of life. In an early letter to his mother while still in college Pound wrote that there was no “phenomenon of any importance in the lives of men and nations that you cannot measure with the rod of Dante’s allegory” (Tytell 23). Lukács concurs, perhaps explaining Dante’s appeal to the modern:

Dante is the only great example in which we see the architectural clearly conquering the organic, and therefore he represents a historico-philosophical transition from the pure epic to the novel. In Dante there is still the perfect immanent distancelessness and completeness of the true epic, but his figures are already individuals, consciously and energetically placing themselves in opposition to a reality that is becoming closed to them, individuals who, through this opposition, become real personalities. (Lukács 68)

In his essay “The Cantos of Ezra Pound,” Louis Zukofsky discusses *The Cantos*’ connection to Dante’s epic and its consequent inclusiveness: “[*The Cantos* is] closely related in method and spirit to the kind of ideation found in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (which refers to Virgil, who refers to Homer). It is an ideation directed toward inclusiveness” (Coyle 78). Dante’s epic merges the closed world with the individual spirit. Pound needs Dante to create a story with a narrator who is both poet and contains the seed of modernism—the ability to act and change the world.

Most critics do not see *The Cantos* as a complete story with a traditional narrator and protagonist. They claim it has “a lack of uniformity and rational sequence...of continuity in time, space, voice, context, theme, and form, [which is] is often the central reason for questioning its integrity as a whole” (Fogelman 191). According to Marianne Korn:

What the *Cantos* does not contain, in terms of an epic, is of course a narrative in the sense of an Aristotelian action with a beginning, middle and end, and a sequence of temporal and logical causality.... Put simply we *expect* a fiction of such length to possess a plot. But this expectation is constantly defeated. (Korn 129)

Korn is right; readers have been conditioned to expect some sort of connectedness in a story. Korn, however, is not justified in her assessment of Pound’s *Cantos*. It is a unified narrative containing a plot, though not in the Aristotelian sense. *The Cantos* is a story that is held together by character—the factive personality—though this character is modified and changes positions throughout the work. Sometimes he serves as one of the story’s many heroes, sometimes as Pound himself, the narrator/author. Both Hugh Kenner and Bruce Fogelman refer to the early narrator of the poem as a “showman,” intentionally leading his audience down the path of explanation (Kenner 361; Fogelman 176)—a slant rhyme with “shaman” that reflects in modern terminology the shifting Lukácsian modification of myth by the modern artist. Pound does act as master of the movies in the first drafts of *The Cantos* (known as The Ur-Cantos):

Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello!*
But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,
Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing’s an art form
Your *Sordello* , and that the modern world
Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in;
Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery
As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles?

(I stand before the booth, the speech; but the truth
Is inside this discourse—this booth is full of the marrow of wisdom.)
Give up th' intaglio method. (Bush 53)

Using Robert Browning's *Sordello* as a guide, Pound at first chose to begin his long poem not with Dante, Homer, Virgil, or any of their "heroes," but with *himself*, a persona creating a discourse to explain his reasons for writing this poem and the factive personality structuring it. He "aspired to a continuity built on the framework of the dramatic monologue" (Fogelman 177) to reaffirm the place of the individual in his poetry. Pound's own use of the word "showman" in the first Ur-Canto refers to the "showman's booth" of Browning's *Sordello*, a "trick" Pound "turned at my will into the Agora" (Bush 57). This "booth," as Ronald Bush suggests, is the "clearest statement in Pound's canon about the narrative procedure of the *Cantos*" (Bush 76). Here Pound converts Browning's seemingly objective narration, a man describing the action that takes place in a diorama booth, into a *meditation* on world events from the Agora:

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

This is our introduction to Pound's discourse, one in which he does not repeat but comments on events, appropriating Browning's dramatic monologue to create a narrator as character with the capacity to provide an alternative history, to remark on other's perceptions: "And there were not "those girls", there was one face." His perspective as author differs from the epic hero who travels the globe on his quest; he sits on the "Dogana's steps / For the gondola's cost too much, that year." As a poor poet

he cannot afford to travel, but as a man of action nevertheless, he can convey what matters to his readership. Here Pound adopts Browning's challenge from *Sordello* to "impart the gift of seeing to the rest," calling poets of this sort the "Makers-see" poets.

Bush goes on to explain that

Poetry, for Browning, must not only dramatize emotional experience; it must also communicate to its audience (and thus *make* them *see*) how experience is grounded in an individual life...*Sordello*, then, and the cantos modeled after it, intend to be a new kind of narrative poetry—a poetry that portrays not just an action but an authentically modern dramatization of the way an action acquires significance within an individual intelligence. (Bush 78,83)

Much like Dante in *The Divine Comedy*, Pound the factive author transmutes to Pound the factive character in a condition equal to that of Homer's Odysseus and Virgil's Ulysses. They are exiles who need to return "home" to bestow the gift of their experiences to their communities. The passage above that begins Canto III reminds us Pound's ultimate goal is to create a fictional totality that returns us to our origin. He emphasizes his review of the world is fiction of his own making, and may or may not be accurate: "And peacocks in Koré's house, *or there may have been*" (emphasis added). Stephen Sicari tells us that "the poet's language can create the illusion that works, a fiction of origins...the 'truth factor' is not the important matter...what he creates is a fiction...so he can restore humanity..."(Sicari 27). Pound's fiction, shaped by the modern era, and so a fragmented unity, reflects chaos, a "maze of incoherent, competing, relative truths" (Bush 80). Yet this fiction craves form, and Pound returns to the closed systems of past totalities for a structure:

So you worked out new form, the meditative,
Semi-dramatic, semi-epic story,
And we will say: What's left for me to do?

Whom shall I conjure up; who's my Sordello,
My pre-Daun Chaucer, pre-Boccacio,
As you have done pre-Dante?
Whom shall I hang my shimmering garment on;
Who wear my feathery mantle, *hagoromo*;
Whom set to dazzle the serious future ages? (Ur-Canto I in Bush, 56)

We find the answer to that question from the first of the Ur-Cantos to be Pound himself, albeit a Pound whose character of his narrative must conflate with past epic heroes to organize a "plot." In his revision of the Ur-Cantos that becomes the opening for his "Draft of XXX Cantos," he combines his character with Dante, giving up Sordello and the obvious, interfering narrator for one who is less obtrusive and more convincing in a modern, objective sense, much as James in his later works. Pound made this change in the early 1920's to remove the ego from the work, a modern custom advocated by Eliot in his *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and Joyce in his *Portrait of a Young Man as an Artist* in the section regarding the impersonal author "standing above the work, paring his fingernails." This impersonality provide a sense of objectivity more palatable to a modern "multi-valued" readership (Kenner 366); history is only one man's view. Lukács suggests that because of modernization, the alienation of man from himself "takes the form of a dualism between fact and value, between what is and what ought to be" (*Philosophy of the Novel* 57). Pound still desired control over his work, but he looked toward removing the appearance of subjectivity. The narrative structure itself was to provide this: "The Ur-canto urge to be present and talking...reflected an anxiety about keeping control; but a structure incorporated its own controls" (Kenner 360). The restructuring of the Ur-Cantos, advancing the removal of most of the Sordello material, was the first step in Pound's project of form becoming

the totalizing principle for his narrative.

Pound first chose Homer's *Odyssey* to set his factive character in motion, adopting the theme of the wandering hero to mimic his own search for meaning as poet-quester.⁴ The wandering hero Pound adopted was not directly from the Homeric tradition, but a modified one found in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, one transformed from Homer through Virgil into a wanderer in search of beatitude—Dante himself. This use of Dante continued throughout Pound's development of the epic. Many years after beginning *The Cantos* he still thought of Dante's epic as the guiding structure: "For forty years I have schooled myself, not to write an economic history of the U.S. or any other country, but to write an epic poem which begins "In the Dark Forest," crosses the Purgatory of human error and ends up in the light, and *fra i maestri di color che sanno*" (*Selected Prose* 167). Pound considered Dante a master of the "not just... master of those that cut apart, dissect and divide. Competent precursor of the card index" (*Culture* 317, 343). In this sense Dante prefigures both Flaubert and James, who worked in the presentative method to provide truth. The light of Dante, however, had been the organizing principle of God's word, an end used as a means for organization. Yet this principle Pound feared would not be relevant for the modern world. He admits in a letter that the "stage set à la Dante is *not* modern truth. It may be OK but not as modern man's" (*Letters* 293). Dante's epic end could not regain totality, but Pound could use the epic form as a means. He knew that there was need for form; he could not "allow the fragmented anarchy of the modern world to dictate an aesthetic design to ignore order and form altogether" (Sicari 9). The pragmatic aspect based on the artistic

impulse toward totality forced him to allow the formulaic influences of the past and present to serve as a new “principle of cohesion for its culture” so that it might order the society’s future (Sicari 14). Sicari believes that Pound’s conviction was an individual conclusion that his attempt to restore unity to society must “take place within the complex and violent world of history” (Sicari 12). Although the latter part of Sicari’s statement holds true, Lukács teaches us that it is not an individual conclusion—the modern authors’ involvement in history is simply a natural extension of modernity. Pound has no choice to involve himself in history and his epic poem modeled on Dante will have no choice than to meet the demands of the dominant modern art form previously discussed.

In fact as late as 1959 Pound likened the structure of *The Cantos* to “a sort of detective story” with a bi-partite structure with a traditional “turning point in the poem towards the middle” where “one is looking for the crime” (*An Interview with Pound* 172). This description would seem to contradict his statement made just a few years earlier that *The Cantos* conformed to the tri-partite structure of Dante’s *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradisio*, which was established from the biblical paradise, man’s fall and his history, and paradise regained. Although this contradiction may disrupt an understanding of the traditional unity of this narrative, it actually helps give the poem form by gathering the epic form and the modern form into one. Due to modern inclusiveness both structures apply, working on each level to challenge the reader who becomes the detective not only to solve the crime but also to solve the mystery of form Pound hoped the reader would recognize from the novel.

Pound's new form employs the same strategies of foreshadowing, repetition, and circularity that mark modern fiction. It would adhere to The Vorticist doctrine Pound and Wyndham Lewis created: the natural synergy between artist and felt experience created form and form would be the expression of energy. This vortex is a "radiant node or cluster...from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing" (Tytell 109), a form Kenner calls "patterned energy" that acts much like Yeats' gyre in which experience, history, and ideas interact. Yet there is a difference, for a Vortex has a solid, graspable element within: "a Vortex is a circulation with a still center" (Kenner 239). The "still center" is the totality or kernel of meaning that becomes still in its modification, the graspable core onto which the reader hangs the swirling fragments of narrative, lyric, myth, document, memory, anecdote, visionary moments, satire, and personal (authorial) ideology. Think of Pound's poem in terms of the structure of an atomic particle: we find individual particles with their own structure traveling on non-intersecting paths to guide the matter in cyclical patterns around the still center, or nucleus, at supersonic speed. Pound's "atomic poem" is made up of two elements, one having a bi-partite structure (his electron, if you will, or the modern detective story) and one having three parts (his proton or epic form based on the biblical totality). Pound manipulates his "atom" by changing its structure, substituting and combining their elements, manipulating their speeds and paths, creating wholes never recognized before in this new form. Although the atom's nucleus, or wholeness, does not change, the way we look at it does because of the structures swirling around it. Pound offers us a new perceptive, a modern microscope revealing what the age saw as

the disease of modernity. Pound refers to his manipulation of the latter of these forms (Dante's epic) in a 1927 letter to his father:

- A. A. Live man goes down into the world of the Dead
- C. B. The 'repeat in history'
- B. C. The 'magic moment' or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidian into 'divine or permanent world.' Gods, etc. (*Letters* 210).

The cyclical nature of this movement itself mimics the Vortex's shifting display of ideas. Starting the pattern with A. provides the lesson or experience needed to gain a glimpse of the divine. Humans must learn from the past. Although Dante's hero, progressing from the world of the Dead through Purgatory to Paradise, moved in a straight narrative to gain the view of Beatrice and ultimately God, Pound's addition of the "repeat in history" and his movement back and forth between glimpses of the divine and these repetitions found in history of this very cycle interrupt the traditional narrative structure of the epic, revealing what Lukács knows is difficult for modern man—to reach the divine through his new art form. This new structure may be seen as a new "plot" line ready for the characters of its narrative to enact.

The Relation of Character to Narrative

Bruce Fogelman remarks that the first three cantos have overlapping cycles that "able to embody all of the archetypes for the subject rhymes of the rest of the poem" (Fogelman 180). These archetypes, present throughout history and passed down to us in myth and epic, are now conferred through character. Pound's variation of the epic structure allows the epic hero, formerly a static container of his society's ideology, to change. Pound the narrator sheds his Sordello-like personality to develop into a character adopting the traits of Odysseus, Ulysses, and the subsequent "heroes" we find

later in the *Cantos*. The movement and transformation of character, like that of the structure of the whole, creates a “vortex” with a still center based on Pound’s ethical/economic ideology. *The Cantos* begin with Odysseus, who becomes Virgil’s Ulysses, who then develops into Pound the author, and moves back to Odysseus, later germinating into the character(s) of Sigismundo Malatesta, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Confucius, and even Benito Mussolini. It is important to recognize the character trait of wandering hero AND the factive personality in all of these figures, for the factive hero who will continue his wandering for meaning and, in the case of all of these characters, order. Pound the individual is also represented in all of these characters. Through their descriptions, experiences, and actions, they will lend insight into Pound’s personal ideology. He scours history to find his cadre of “intelligent men” to present his universal order of *The Cantos*. He does this to show the intelligent men of his own era that, if he can revive ethics, a new order can be achieved, read within an ordered work of art. We will find that all of the characters of *The Cantos* are “refracted dimensions of the poem’s unified sensibility” (Fogelman 181).

Canto I begins famously with the word “And,” suggesting Lukács’ theory of the continuation of the epic while suggesting that Dante’s quest for totality needs to be reinstated once the paradisiacal vision of God has been lost. Following his revision of the Ur-Cantos, Pound the expatriate, “exiled” American searching for that Lukácsian *polis* that would reestablish the individual with his community, begins his poem not with himself as narrator, but with his correlate Odysseus, another man of directed will, himself *in medias res*, starting his sea journey home. Yet in the first five lines Pound

immediately establishes he will be a fellow traveler:

And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to the breakers, forth on the *godly* sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also
Heavy with weeping...(I. 3; emphasis added).

This journey is a spiritual quest, on a “godly sea,” meant to alleviate the pain of living.

Their bodies, “heavy with weeping,” have suffered for too long in a divided society,

fractured by hate and war:

Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides
Of youths and of the old who had borne much;
Souls stained with *recent* tears, girls tender.
Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads...

These many crowded about me, with shouting,
Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts;
Slaughtered the herds, sheep slain of bronze:
Poured ointment, cried to the gods... (I. 3-4; emphasis added).

By use of the Greek Homeric allusion. Odysseus and Pound begin the journey and the cycle of visitation of the dead. For Pound, his visitation had “recent tears” shed for the “men many, mauled” of World War I; his alliteration gives force to the nightmarish event. Pound wishes to silence the “shouting” of the crowds, the chaos of the modern world, and *The Cantos* will act as a “poured ointment” to sustain the masses.

In his letters and poetry, as Tytell points out, Pound often displayed the attitude that the masses were “like sheep to be herded” (Tytell 81). In his *ABC of Economics* Pound says that the masses are “too demnation stupid and too ignorant to acquire so rudimentary a perception of cause and effect” (*ABC of Economics* 37). Pound’s meeting with Elpenor in the underworld in this Canto demonstrates that the masses play

a role in their misfortune: “‘Elpenor, how art thou come to this dark coast?...’/‘Ill fate and abundant wine’” (I,4). The image of slaughtered sheep insinuates both the masses slaughtered in war and, through irreverent sacrifice, the failed pacification of the dead. Pound’s charge will make his own utilitarian sacrifice to save the “dead” of the modern era, not allowing useless sentiment to halt his progress. Anticlea, Odysseus mother who speaks to her son pitifully in the Andreas Divus’ translation of the Homeric epic, is here “beat off” (I,4) by Pound; the “repulse of Anticlea is an expression of the obsessively directed, pragmatic disposition that occupies much of the poem” (Fogelman 182). That he tells Divus, whose translation of Homer he was using to model his poem after, to “lie quiet” (I,5) at the end of this beginning Canto proves Pound’s was a new epic taking the place of the old. The last words and punctuation of the Canto, “So that:”(I,5) prepare us for the journey ahead, connecting this canto and the amalgamation of its heroic author/narrator/character with what follows. Yet Pound as narrator of this canto refocuses again on the character of Odysseus rather than himself—“And *he* sailed...” (I,5; emphasis added)—to prepare the reader for the further conflation of heroic character that follows in the rest of the poem, to establish a new composite hero for the fragmented era, to use his new historical structure for the epic and the formulaic cycle, to move the action to a close.

Canto II continues to involve the narrator in his presentation of the factive character concerned with order. It begins with the leftover Sordello material from the revised Ur-Cantos which Pound still found necessary to the final product even after three revisions because it introduces the reader to the rhetorical question of the author:

Hang it all, Robert Browning,

There can be but the one "Sordello."
But Sordello, and my Sordello? (II.6)

The answer is yes to both questions. The reader is required to see the "one Sordello," the Ezra Pound who is in control of this poem. Pound's Sordello in Canto II goes on to introduce the reader to a maze of factive characters of history such as So-shu, Picasso, and Homer, all of whom, like Pound, are "concerned with realizing an ordered vision amid chaos" (Fogelman 184). From this point we move quickly to a mythic narrative told by Acœtes, the current captain of the ship, a witness of the capture by pirates of a "young boy" who, according to Terrell in his *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, is the young god Bacchus or Dionysus, the god of wine, fertility and ecstasy (Terrell 6). This story, Pound's "repeat in history," reveals the loss of the unified. Here it is manifested in the pagan Greek myth rather than the Christian biblical one, yet nevertheless it demonstrates a loss where humans had a connection through their totalized gods to the earth. The method of telling is what is important. That Acœtes is Pound is without question: Pound's ludic introduction to the character is meant to reveal the combinatory efforts of the author with regard to his characters: "Aye, I, Acœtes, stood there, and the god stood by me" (II.7). The personal pronoun "I," used within the nautical phrase of affirmation "aye, aye," is a trick that makes the reader realize Pound's own involvement—not only is he standing by the god on his sea-venture, but also is in command of the ship. The affirmation of "aye, aye" plays another role for it is a comment made after receiving a command or order; we as readers fall into line as the story ends with a didactic element in the forefront. All that the author has experienced

and seen is ritualized for us in its telling. Pound repeatedly “chants” the lines “I have seen what I have seen” (II,9) to make the story real by repetition and to cement the connection between the story and a trusted teller. Bush reminds us that the “voice of Cantos I-VII never varied from the reverent tone of ritual chant” (Bush 240). Pound becomes a shaman advising and consequently us. He tells us the “truth” found in experience we must know for the benefit of our own fate: “...And you, Pentheus, / Had as well listen to Tiresias, and to Cadmus, or your luck will go out of you” (II, 9). This dual-levelled advice, of the author and the characters, aids us in seeing the poem as a whole; Pound lets us listen to his actors in his re-writing of history.

Canto III continues the ritual cycle by interjecting Pound into the world of the dead though this world can now be any era in history where he believes unity has been lost, its members “dead” as a result. Pound gazes out from the steps of the Dogana to offer us his experience of these eras and his means of combating this “death-in-life.” Like Pound, Canto II recounts a story of a factive hero dealing with a public that attempts to sidetrack his actions, that denies community. The story of “My Cid” parallels that of Acœtes, Odysseus, the future heroes of *The Cantos*, and, as we have said, Pound the author. Cid is a hero who lives in an era of “drear waste.” The art of Cid’s day is in decline; it cannot stay whole, cannot regain its total form to bring health to its society: “Drear waste, the pigment flakes from the stone, / Or plaster flakes, Mantegna painted the wall. / Silk tatters, ‘Nec Spe Nec Metu’” (III, 12). Not only beauty sustains community, but beauty tempered with order (cantos IV-VII go on to take up this theme in greater detail). The Latin line that ends canto III means “neither by

hope nor by fear”; as Terrell points out, Pound means with action one must achieve (Terrell 10). This canto does not end, as did the first two, with the third part of the cycle, the glimpse into a final “magic moment” or vision of paradise. Pound’s call for action takes precedence and the form at least momentarily ruptures. The first two parts of the cycle must continue, with every so often a glimpse into paradise, until the final vision of paradise. Whereas the first two cantos contain the cycle within themselves, compressing for the reader the pattern to become quickly acclimated, the pattern expands throughout the entire work of *The Cantos*. Individual cantos now perhaps contain one element of the cycle to be ended within what we can designate a section, or entire sections or groupings of cantos may also be seen as one part of the cycle. This expansion does not deny the order that holds this work together: it merely allows room for Pound to expand his characters, to adhere to the modern impulse for toward totality, to find utopia on earth.

How can Pound envision paradise when his poem evokes the dross of his own time? Canto IV begins with a view of the smoldering Troy, a civilization of beauty, following its destruction. Rather than using the specific details of the past to merely recount history, Pound employed Troy as an analogue to World War I, to make the reader see that beauty can be recreated after destruction, to show “what direction should be pursued in order to create the next, millennial civilization of the latest Troy, Europe in the aftermath of World War I” (Comens 48). In order to control and act upon it he mythologizes his own era, restoring its beauty through language. Pound calls forth the myths of antiquity and *his own* created fiction, “the power of poetry and recorded

words” (Terrell 11) to restore destroyed civilizations, including the shattered one he called his own: “ANAXIFORMINGES! Aurunculeia! / Hear me...” (IV, 13). As Bruce Comens points out, Pound’s phrase “Hear me” enjoins his reader and the muses Pindar and Catullus to whom he makes this invocation. The ambiguity provokes confusion between the reader and speaker that allows Pound, as artist in search of beauty, “to establish his dominant position as master enjoining his pupil to attend well, while at the same time inviting the pupil to identify with him, thereby assuring his agreement and...commitment” (Comens 46). The reader is subtly manipulated to follow Pound on his quest for beauty. This search is as much a concern for these cantos as for all artists in history who speak to Pound:

The old men’s voices, beneath the columns of false marble...
 ...the paintings a shade too oiled...
 Moves before me, phantom with weighted motion,
Grave incessu, drinking the tone of things,
 And the old voice lifts itself weaving an endless sentence.
 We also made ghostly visits, and the stair
 That knew us, found us again on the turn of it,
 Knocking at empty rooms, seeking for buried beauty (VII. 24-5).

Pound refers to the search for beauty made by a recent predecessor here, a pursuit that he—“we also made ghastly visits”—has been included in. The reference here to the old voice is Henry James, the weaver of the “endless sentence,” whom Pound described as an artist of “atmospheres, nuances, impressions of personal tone and quality” (*Literary Essays* 324). The above passage characterizes Pound’s attitude toward James perfectly. Although Pound was impressed with James’ attention to detail and nuance and the way he adopted the impressionistic method of looking at life, his “paintings” were “a shade too oiled,” with too much gloss and not enough content. Pound felt James paid attention

to what was not important to the ordering of humanity. He saw James' art as making a "damn'd fuss about furniture" (*Literary Essays* 308). Thus James' art, and Pound's own before his writing of *The Cantos*, becomes "ghostly" or not real, not concerned with meaning behind human life or how civilization can keep itself from destruction. Pound's new art is therefore both new and old, as Lukács would have it, new in its impressionistic, novelistic sense, yet old as it attempts to return to the origins and order found in epic forms.

Much like a novel, Pound's poem presents its narrative through the characters and their individual narratives. As I have argued, the narrative circulates a cycle where the narrator, a character of his own fiction, becomes a man of will and action. Pound quests like his epic characters, for both beauty *and* order, and the different characters culled from history we encounter in this poem are uniquely Pound's men, admirable for their potential power and accomplishments. Pound establishes unity by way of characterizations that demonstrate, through the tracing and adjusting of histories, a code of ethics that continues to frame *The Cantos*. Yet all these men are not the same. What makes Pound's a modern epic rather than a mere model of the ancient form is that through the movement of history, through substitution of one for another, his characters *develop*. They do not remain static. They will follow the pattern set initially by Pound, rising and falling with the civilizations they represent. Then characters will be, like Eliot's fragments contained in *The Waste Land*, shored against the ruins of civilization. Pound's reference to these fragments at the very beginning of canto VIII indicates that his characters will act in much the same way, forming a cohesive group to combat the

despair of his era. Pound portrays the achievement of order as a difficult task, worthy of epic consideration.

In Cantos VIII-XI we encounter Malatesta, the next character to exemplify the *difficult* attempt toward order. Peter Makin claims that “the whole organization of the Malatesta Cantos is to present difficulty” (Makin 141), synonymous with the political adversity Pound faced trying to convince American leaders to adopt Douglas’s economic theory. Malatesta found himself in a lifelong conflict with other political factions, namely Popes Pius II and Paul II, who intended to keep him from controlling Rimini. Malatesta was a great patron of the arts possessing a desire for beauty, a characteristic that Pound saw as a significant for building community. Malatesta’s struggle to search for and maintain beauty embodied the revolutionary energy Pound admired in his factive heroes, yet like James’ influence on Pound. Malatesta could not be the final model of the complete epic hero for he also was too much concerned with beauty and not enough with the ordering of humanity. Pound further developed the Malatesta character in the later cantos because “his constructive effort lacks an ethical dimension...[he] seeks to create beauty but does not aim at social order” (Sicari 73). Neither does the Malatesta foil, Baldy Bacon, who in canto XII juxtaposes with Malatesta. Pound reintroduces himself at the beginning of the canto as omniscient observer—“And we sit here under the wall...” (XII, 53)— the narrator maintaining his license to shift back and forth in time to introduce Bacon as a character of Pound’s own age. Bacon is also a factive hero, energetic, clever, driven, but one guided by the wrong principles, not in search of beauty or order but money: “...Baldy’s interest / Was in

money business” (XII, 53). The word “interest” introduces us to Pound’s theme of usury while the phrase “money business” echoes the common expression “monkey business,” suggesting the insanity of money lending. Pound reminds us here of the modernization of his work, dealing with modern concerns not only, as I have argued, in a similarly formulaic fashion as other modern writers but also with the same content. *The Cantos*’ intensifying presentation of contemporary subjects “paralleled ...the work of Eliot, Lawrence, Mann, and other modernist writers” (Bush 265).

Immediately Pound continues his “repeats in history” and character development in the next canto. Canto XIII’s main character is Confucius, an alternative to Malatesta and Baldy Bacon. Confucius (Kung) exposes us overtly to Pound’s notion of order:

And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:
If a man have not order within him
He can not spread order about him;
And if a man have not order within him
His family will not act with due order;
And if the prince have not order within him
He can not put order in his dominions.
And Kung gave the words “order” and “brotherly deference”
And said nothing of the “life after death” (XIII, 59).

Pound saw this philosophy of order, progressing from the individual to the family to the state, as the cure to his society’s ills. That the state needed someone powerful not only to give example but also eventually to enforce order on its citizenry suggests what the factive character of *The Cantos* needs. History fails to produce order, in spite of the characters that Pound presents. Confucius needs development because he is not in himself factive. The giver of sound advice, he has no power to act on his advice (for

example, he declined to rule China). This person of action has not yet been found our society still exists in chaos. The first volume of *The Cantos*, written as *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, begins with Odysseus' descent into the underworld and ends again with a similar descent, a foray into the disgust and filth of a modern "Hell" peopled with the contemporaries of Pound and commonly referred to as the "Hell" Cantos, modeled after Dante's *Inferno*. Emerging from hell, Pound continues to wander and search for the perfect factive hero, combined with the good qualities of Malatesta, Bacon, and Confucius, a seeker of beauty and order but also with the power to establish it. *The Cantos'* new section starting with canto XVII, begins again *in medias res* with the same words "So that" (XVII, 76) that ended canto I, establishing the beginning of the cycle once again.

Pound saw the need to reestablish a concrete art to combat the fragmentation of the world, something dense in detail that a reader could understand and take with him, reinstituting a sense of solidity to human society. He believed form contained meaning: it is within form that one could regain a program of ethics and morality his world desperately needed. He turned to the epic form to universalize and cohere histories he used to rewrite his present history rapidly being written toward destruction. Yet he also turned to the novel, for in the novel he saw an art form that was active, not static. It was a form where ideas and ethics could be expressed in dynamic form, a moving, living, breathing art that closely represented the modern experience in its polyglot, subjectless style. Pound saw the novel breaking the elements of the world down so they could be reformulated, replacing the otherworldly abstraction found in Romantic art in believed

impractical for making a better social milieu. Therefore Pound attempted to create poetry from the best of what the novel and the epic had to offer. As Lukács and Bakhtin demonstrate how the novel evolved from the epic, we find a contradiction within Pound's attempt to conjoin the two forms. According to Lukács and Bakhtin, the novel is an epic that has no center and thus no direction. Although he relied on Christian archetypes and a Dantian model for the moral basis of his work, Pound attempted to depart from the traditional narrative style of epic by removing plot and subject, creating a novelistic story of pastiche, polyglossia, and apparent formlessness. But he found that one could not have an epical-novelistic, narrative poetry without a center—the story of history Pound wrote for his time needed to cohere around some nucleus. That nucleus is built through the traditional narrative element of character, contrived by and constructed from the subject Pound wished to leave out.

Character as Factive/Fascist Hero

“I am trying to base a system on will” (Pound, *Selected Prose* 238).

Within Canto XXXI, the beginning of a new section Pound entitled *Eleven New Cantos*, we find another of Pound's factive heroes important to the reader of *The Cantos*, a person directly connected to our unique American history who displays the inner workings of our own system of government and its “loss” of an order once established in the founding of democracy. Not only can an American reader understand through this character Pound's likes and dislikes for the democratic system, but we can also relate to his greatest ideas of order through this character, sharing with him a distinct American sensibility of the tough, tenacious, capable trailblazer as we move

closer to his perfect hero. This practical American hero, Thomas Jefferson, will provide the link to Pound's modern hero Benito Mussolini. Pound heralds Mussolini as author of a totalizing, utilitarian system. Fascism, like *The Cantos* provides humans with an ideal state and Pound quickly became enamored with Mussolini's revolutionary scheme. Pound's book entitled *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* attests to the connection between the two men, connecting democracy and fascism, making fascism more palatable for an American reader. Yet within *The Cantos* the connection is made into art and becomes part of the whole experience of life.

Pound admired Jefferson because he was an American who "was all over the shop, discursive, interested in everything" (*Jefferson* 66). This sensibility allowed Jefferson to be involved in the arts as well as politics, making him a more refined figure than Malatesta whose "activity that may appear discursive and rambling actually was directed toward a noble and highly ethical end" (Sicari 83). As a leader and organizer of a new government Jefferson found himself in Pound's favorite circumstance, with the opportunity to manage a new beginning that also opens up the possibility for paradise: "Jefferson found himself in a condition of things that had no precedent in any remembered world. He saw like a shot that a new system and new mechanisms MUST come into being to meet it" (*Jefferson* 62). He possessed a new country with which to work, pure, open frontier that came with an abundance of new resources, a place where a new civilization without antecedent could be created. That Jefferson came to this new land with original ideas for organizing its community and pursued putting his ideas into place made him, in Pound's eyes, an artist. Pound speaks of the opportunity for the

artist in his book on Jefferson:

There is also the opportunism of the artist, who has a definite aim, and creates out of the materials present. The greater the artist the more permanent the creation. And this is a matter of WILL. It is also a matter of the DIRECTION OF WILL. And if the reader will blow the fog off his brain and think for a few minutes or a few stray half-hours he will find this phrase brings us ultimately both to Confucius and Dante. The whole of the *Divine Commedia* is a study of the "directio voluntatis" (direction of the will). (*Jefferson* 15-17)

Here Pound reminds us of what he believes his cantos have in common with Dante's epic—both tracts study the willful hero, each setting up the artist as the society's privileged person who can organize community. Given this definition of the artist, the movement from Jefferson as artistic leader to Mussolini is easy. Both men in their historical milieu "take advantage of the given opportunity to impose, by the sheer power of will, new conditions that might lead to a healthy civilization" (Sicari 88).

Cantos XXXI-XL are Pound's "historical" accounts of Jefferson's effort to set up the new nation according to his artistic will. Jefferson was to be admired because he "transformed revolutionary and wartime disorder into civic order" (Chace 51). Yet later cantos act as a testament to Jefferson's inability to maintain an order based on Confucian "brotherly deference" due to the actions of the villainous Alexander Hamilton and others enacting economic policies by creating the national banking system. Pound conjectured if America cannot realize its loss of order through the study of its own history, or create a new order by adhering to the dictums of great leaders, then a new hero must direct it. Mussolini becomes this great man for Pound. His introduction in the last canto of *Eleven New Cantos* is our glimpse into paradise of this section; here this particular cycle comes to an end. In this canto he speaks with and is

ordained by the powerful leader. After sending Mussolini a copy of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, he documents Mussolini's response at the start of canto XLI: "'Ma Qvesto.' said the Boss, 'è divertente.' catching the point before the aesthetes had got there..." (XLI, 202). Pound took this to be an affirmation, a sign of Mussolini's genius. Pound verified that he and Mussolini were after the same goal, and Pound's responsibility, following this endorsement by Mussolini, is to become hero of his own epic. He can, as a "politically powerful poet" (Sicari 98) convert a real man, Mussolini, into a mythical figure in order to convey the shared credo would regain order for civilization contained in the words of Mussolini Pound quotes: "Discipline the economic forces and equate them to the needs of the nation" (*Selected Prose* 298). The crime to be solved in this unfolding detective story of *The Cantos* is the human's devaluation of life, including the citizen's work and relations with his fellow beings, and the weapon used in that crime, seen near the midpoint of the work, is his involvement in usury. This devaluation culminates in the famous *Usura* canto XLV much discussed by critics. Only a willful, factive hero able to tame the economic forces can remove a usurious weapon. Here we may understand the workings of Pound's totalitarianism. He is not out, as Sicari points out, to coerce and dominate the masses, but rather "to use the available power to amass and distribute goods equitably so that people are free to enjoy the world" (Sicari 104). To accomplish this he becomes a creator of discourse.

In the Dynasty cantos (LII-LXXI) that follow, he reintroduces Confucius as a counselor in control of the discourse produced by the state. Confucius was the advisor to the many emperors inventoried in the Dynasty cantos who gave historical and

didactic commentary: “History is a school book for princes” (LIV, 280)—“for the good of the state” (LIII, 269). Pound, like Confucius, also thought he controlled history. He employed it as discourse for the leaders of his era to “render it useful to men in high official position” (*Confucius* 19). In the Adams section of *Dynasty* directly following the Confucian cantos we return to America. This juxtaposition tells us America is the community Pound wishes to influence. The Adams’ cantos reveal America as a community that has lost its order, a country in need of a discourse.

We may think of Pound’s *Cantos* as a “school book for princes,” an entire lesson of world history propagating a message of economic revolution. As artist Pound is totalitarian in his creation of this whole. Yet as an American artist he is aware that he is in danger crossing the line into despotism. Pound, an American whom as any American avidly defended freedom, opposed what he considered to be coercion and anti-democratic tactics. He reveals a distinction between totalitarianism and order in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*:

DISTINGUISH between fascism which is the organization, with the organizer as its head, to whom the power has not been GIVEN, but who has organized the power, and the state of America, where the press howls that we should GIVE power to Roosevelt...(*Jefferson* 108).

Yet desire for order, or totality, for Pound, is based on a “system of will,” and traverses into totalitarian’s other sense of the word. Pound’s overt political stance marked in the *Fifth Decad*—particularly in canto XLVI’s statement, “...seventeen / Years on this case, nineteen years...” (231)—sounds personal, forceful, direct, angry, and coercive. He took it upon himself as lone artist of his era to fix the broken structure of his world: “Our culture lies shattered in fragments, and with the monetology of the usurocracy our

economic culture has become a closed book to the aesthetes” (*A Visiting Card* 10). Art had to be transformed from an individual action of imaginative beauty to one of directed order, to be modified by influences from his artistic lineage. Pound tells us that “I am perhaps didactic; so in a sense, or in different senses are Homer, Dante, Villon, and Omar...It’s all rubbish to pretend that art isn’t didactic. A revelation is always didactic...” (*Letters* 180). Both in art and in life, this “revelation” was to become “revolution.” William Chace comments on Pound’s rage for order: “his mind was to make all things cohere...[he] became bold enough, in time, to conclude that as much beauty inhered in the transformation of the world through totalitarianism as through imagination” (Chace 105). We see Pound’s art, his words, syntax, and images, working along with the form of the entire poem to create a discourse that forces the reader to sympathize with his ideas by controlling our response.

How the “I” Sees: The Character’s Language and Vision

“When any man is able, by a pattern of notes or by an arrangement of planes or colours, to throw us back into the age of truth, everyone who has been cast back into that age of truth for one instant gives honour to the spell which has worked, to the witch-work.”
(*Literary Essays* 432)

“...and that certain images be formed in the mind / to remain there / *formato locho*.”
(LXXIV, 446)

“...the seer is inseparable from what is seen.” (Kenner 381)

It was not what Pound saw but what he fancied to see that became his story in *The Cantos*. Lukács has discussed the late nineteenth-century separation between a subject and his society that forces the subject not to report truth of his experience but rather what the subject *desires* to see, in turn creating a new art form to express this

desire. Terry Eagleton calls this transformation of perception into aspiration the formation of one's ideology, another late nineteenth-century idea: "Ideology aims to disclose something of a relation between an utterance and its material conditions of possibility, when those conditions are viewed in the light of certain power-struggles central to the reproduction...of a whole form of social life" (*Ideology: An Introduction* 223). Using Jameson's idea of the "political unconscious," we may see that Pound's aesthetic approach to totalitarianism is driven by an attempt to reconvene with his society that ultimately discloses his personal ideology, and his satisfaction of this desire through a historical form totalizes his ideology; "an articulation of all the ideological possibilities of a text is that "libidinal apparatus" (fantasy) of the author trying to work out the contradictions in his "commitment to history" as some sort of ideological closure" (*Political Unconscious* 48). Pound's authoritarian ideology represented his power struggle with those who controlled the world's economics. In a mind distorted by the extreme disposition of his will, Pound believed Jewish bankers responsible for the usurious tactics that diminished the purchasing power for the worker, sending economies and civilizations into tailspins.⁵ That Pound lived through two world wars and a worldwide economic depression only solidified his belief that bankers and munitions makers were the only ones profiting in a scheme in which money becomes commodity and not measure of a worker's labor or effort. Pound's art exposed this situation in an attempt to change it.

Pound's writing of *The Cantos* both reveals and acts on his economic beliefs. As Jameson proposes, "the aesthetic act is ideological, and the production of the aesthetic

or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, inventing imaginary or formal solutions to unresolvable social contradictions” (*Political Unconscious* 79). Pound attempted a *narrative* formal solution to what he saw as the contradictions of his age, where humankind’s capacity for evil proliferated even as the benefits due to the expansion of industrialism and advances made in such areas as science, medicine, and transportation increased. In Lukácsian fashion, Jameson describes this narrative strategy of the modern novelist in terms we may rightfully apply to Pound, describing its complexity, use of history, and attempt to control and totalize:

The novel is more complicated...if it inscribes the irrevocable brute facts of history, it does so in order to “manage” those facts and to open up a space in which they are no longer quite so irreparable or definitive. It is a didactic work and political object-lesson that seeks to transform the events of empirical history into an optional trial run against which the strategies of the various social classes can be tested. (*Political Unconscious* 164)

Jameson heeds Eagleton’s call for the critic to reveal how through “the ‘imaginary’ of ideology; or of aesthetic taste, reality comes to seem totalized and purposive” (*Ideology of the Aesthetic* 87). Critics must find within the text of the modern artist a “political unconscious” to make explicit the crisis of culture, encapsulated in struggles for power while attempting to solve it.

A key to Pound’s political program lies in the beginning of his essay entitled “The Serious Artist” where he reveals the purpose that drives him towards revolution:

It is obvious that the good of the greatest number cannot be attained until we know in some sort of what the good must consist. In other words we must know what sort of animal man is, before we can contrive his maximum happiness, or before we can decide what percentage of that happiness he can have without causing too great a percentage of unhappiness to those about him. (*Literary Essays* 41)

In the language of rationality, of enlightened thought, of science, of utility Pound continued the post-Enlightenment utilitarianism, championed by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and transmuted by artists and writers such as Ruskin and Morris⁶ into an organic socialism, with their brand of socialism becoming his. As Coyle rightly tells us, Pound “aestheticized the notion of utility,” creating an artistic totality where “economics, aesthetics and politics were all vitally interrelated” (Coyle 39,40). For Pound, aestheticizing utility meant developing new linguistic strategies based on the “rational” and “scientific”—a new poetic language—to complete his cultural work. By examining his poetics we understand their connection to his ideology and see how Pound used language as a heritage to pass on to future American poets. Robert Casillo notes how one part of Pound’s ideology connects to his poetics: “Pound’s anti-Semitism and fascism, far from being adventitious, aberrant, or marginal features of mind and work, are inseparable from his linguistic strategies...” (*Genealogy* viii). He used language to perpetuate an ideology, to make it real and utilize it. To consummate this action, his poetic language conformed to the era’s demands on prose, making Pound’s poetics a part of modern discursiveness. Pound’s *Cantos* became a system of anti-system or a totality of anti-totality— a tract proposing freedom for the individual who must conform to the tenets of a totalitarian system that claimed to mend wholeness with fragments.

Not only the form but also the linguistic strategies involved with writing an epic poem in the modern era demanded new strategies for writing verse. Pound dubbed this method Imagism, to respond to the summons that poetry, like prose, should be realistic.

T.E. Hulme, the theorist who informed Pound's Imagism, was concerned that conventional ways language dealt with reality had exhausted the possibilities of expressing the poet's emotions. John Gage tells us that Hulme believed language failed to communicate because it had become too clichéd, limiting the poet to "impersonal, stock perceptions" (161). This idea provided Hulme with the "need to reform language, to imagine a poetry of images which was composed in spite of language, somehow" (161). This meant giving new life to old words. Words refer to objects; they are signs for the objects that they represent, usually only known through sense perception, mainly sight. To give language "new life" by imbuing words with new referents, the imagist poet replaced the stock perception or the clichéd referent, the old way of "seeing" things, with a new method based on the sense perception of sight. In theory, this new method of perception leaves the reader with "indeterminate possibilities" that the individual imagination can attach to the words of the poem. For the Imagist meaning comes not from the poet coercing the reader with stock referents. In fact, Pound once said that the function of literature "is not the coercing or emotionally persuading, or bullying or suppressing of people into the acceptance of any one set or any six sets of opinions as opposed to any other one set or half-dozen sets of opinions" (*Literary Essays* 21). For these modern writers meaning lies in the truth of the nature of *things*. Pound and others thought this meaning "natural" and self-evident, one that contends with morality for ethical good. The poetry will renew ties between the perceiver and object, to strengthen "the application of word to thing" (*Literary Essays* 21), and eventually make readers "see" how life can fit with natural law. This new vision would

reclaim for the individual an existence before the inception of Lukács' subjectivity, whole once again, in the context of his surroundings. Based on his education by Hulme, Pound believed that "the function of art is to strengthen the perceptive faculties and free them from encumbrance, such encumbrances, for instance, as set moods, set ideas, conventions" (Gage 15). One is able to experience what Pound calls the "inevitable laws of nature" (Gage 15) when liberated from such impediments. The new strategy of Imagism facilitated an independent sight for America that once encouraged its people to form a new community based on Jeffersonian "self-evident truths."

The image, then, is autonomous; it stands in nature. Pound tells us it is "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time...the presentation of such a 'complex' instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art" (*Literary Essays* 4). The imagists thought the presentation of this "complex" expedited the reader's own annexation into natural law. This assumption has important consequences for the artist and his art, for if truth exists, is self-evident, and is stated "pure and simple" in nature, then no persuasion or rhetoric by the artist would be needed. (Gage 39) Pound believed "the poetic fact pre-exists" (*Literary Essays* 54). The artist does not create; he merely finds. There is no artifice to art, and there is no thought involved interacting with the object. It is merely there and must be accepted as truth. At this point we can follow Pound's movement to the artist's objective method and observe how he uses it to re-create a lost totality.

Pound called for the artist to present scientifically, objectively, to “consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap” (*Literary Essays* 6). Pound’s comparison of science and advertising demonstrates the struggle between the good and evil that comes with the advancement of industry. Pound preferred science because it has the potential for good that can bring about ethical change, whereas advertising forces the reader to continue in an economic system supporting the usurers and devaluers of human life. He tells us that “the serious artist is scientific in that he presents the image of his desire...the arts provide data for ethics” (*Literary Essays* 46). Pound desires a universe that supports one conclusion from his scientific explorations. He reclaims totality where the individual and his community could maintain a general health. As Gage reminds us, Pound’s is a “faith that there is only one correct set of moral principles, determined by a natural moral law, which the accurately perceived data of the imagist will point to, just as the scientist’s inquiries depend on a certain faith that there is one correct set of physical principles which a correctly applied scientific method will disclose” (152). Pound’s poetry, professedly self-revealing, divulges an equation of the objective presentation of life objects to reveal the answer to life: “by image I mean...an equation; not an equation of mathematics, not something about *a*, *b*, and *c*, having to do with form, but about *sea*, *cliffs*, *night*, having something to do with mood” (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 92). The revelation of an equation for life must be objective; it is a standardized, automatic, and mechanical action:

It does not matter whether the author desire the good of the race or acts merely from personal vanity. The thing is mechanical in action. In proportion as his work is exact, i.e., true to human consciousness and to the nature of man, as it is exact in formulation of desire, so it is durable and so it is “useful”; I mean it maintains...the health of thought outside

of literary circles and in non-literary existence, in general and communal life....One "moves" the reader only by clarity. In depicting the motions of the "human heart" the durability of the writing depends on the exactitude. It is the thing that is true and stays true that keeps fresh for the new reader. (*Literary Essays* 22)

Pound either assumes the reader understands the equation that denotes a particular value to words such as "cliffs" "night" and "sea" or that he must make evident the relationship; he must either rely on stock referents for those words or enforce his own for the reader. Because the poetic revolution of Imagism involves vacating the first operation Pound engages, it is the latter of the two.

Pound compares the process of presenting images to the mechanical manufacture of a "durable" good that in turn can be used. A reader in an industrialized nation can understand this as a process thought of as "natural" by those participating in it. His objective presentation of "facts," indicating the modern proclivity toward impersonality, was a way, then, of conflating the artist as "see"er (seer) and presenter of the objects. The scientist/artist universalizes the I/eye by objectively presenting life so that anyone is capable of seeing "truth" in life. This "new reader" Pound refers to at the end of the above description that is seemingly freed from the constraints of a conventional way of seeing and empowered by the new poetics.

Yet as Gage brilliantly argues, a problem is inherent in a system of art using language to reveal self-evidentiary truths *and* deeming itself responsible for the improvement of society's behavior. We assume that the scientist looks at facts without reference to his own individual values and that he would not be "motivated by a desire to win anyone over to his values" (Gage 138). But imagist poets, and Pound in

particular, create images in their art that assert emotions that, in turn, maintain ethics never free from value; ethics, "by definition, denotes something which is desirable, a purpose which is taken to be worthwhile" (Gage 137). Pound has told us that "the serious artist is scientific in that he presents the image of his desire." Remembering Lukács, whose theory of the novel describes the modern artist creating an art to fulfill desire, we find Pound's universe he wishes for is revealed through his new scientific method. The artist's wish to achieve this ethical state, however, cannot be impartially reported in an objective manner or removed from the art itself. The imagist artist is involved in an artifice infected by his personal ideology:

However objectively presented, an "image" represents a selection of details...such a selection, then, exhibits a poet's attitude towards the subject. It is this attitude which makes certain details of a subject relevant while other details are necessarily left out. Given a certain attitude, only some details matter. (Gage 137)

Poets who claim to be "objective" force the reader to see what they intend. That persuasion, part of objective poetry, has been overlooked. Poetics becomes a strategy of persuasion, convincing the reader to believe in the poet's idea(s) toward a new totality, "capable of persuading the reader that an unconventional glimpse into reality could be had" (Gage 54). Thus the anti-systematic, anti-rhetorical, anti-conventional assertions of the imagists became in itself a rhetorical system. Gage seeks the conventions imagists used to create the illusion of objectivity, persuading their readers through the manipulation of sense perception to accept the "truth" and not, therefore, to think for themselves. Imagists, according to Gage, wrote poems "because the things they saw were convenient vehicles for the things they thought" (Gage 90). We can understand

this in light of Howard Nemerov's suggestion that artistic reliance on making meaning through direct sight is an inherently paradoxical, distinctly modern artistic method:

modernism in writing is chiefly about ...*seeing*, seeing as superior to thinking, as opposed to thinking, and something the poet must do instead of thinking if necessary. One notes already the suspicion of a difficulty, that all this affirmation of the eye at the mind's expense is an operation carried out and a decision taken by the mind, not the eye. (Nemerov 154, 152)

Imagists used this removal of thought as a way of achieving an unchallenged acceptance of ideology, a totalitarian method of achieving totality.

The artist, much like a propagandist, controls the information we see and manipulates both how we see it and its context, thereby leading us to certain conclusions. The methods used by imagist poets are subtle, yet effective. Poetic techniques such as analogy, metaphor, and juxtaposition provide all structures to obviate the construction of individual meaning. Although the imagist goal was to give language "new life," allowing the individual imagination of the reader to charge words with the "indeterminate possibilities" of new referents, the reader is unable to make his own meaning. Gage reminds us that "analogy...is not a literal appeal...there is no reason that it should make sense at all except for its power to move the reader through a process of thought" (79). The opportunity for readers to fill in their own imaginative response closes off; the author does it for us. A procedure such as repetition also has a similar effect. Used to project inevitability, repetition creates stasis in meaning. As the narrative moves, the meaning or point of the story remains well established.

Pound holds his narrative together by these structures. I have discussed, in terms of character, how Pound's perfect hero had transformed during the course of the

narrative. The movement from Odysseus/Ulysses to Dante and Malatesta, Jefferson, and finally Mussolini occurred by analogy and contrast, rhetorical “structures which allowed them to convince the reader that the mind is ‘arrested with a picture’ by manipulating the *way* in which the reader’s experience ‘runs along to a conclusion’” (Gage 107). Characters such as the Cid (canto III) and Baldy Bacon (canto XII) are foils juxtaposed with characters such as Odysseus and Malatesta, foils very much like their counterparts but slightly different in *moral certitude*, the specific characteristic Pound is trying to illustrate to his readership. Pound’s hint to the reader of a Jefferson and Malatesta comparison is given at the beginning of canto XXXI. Pound begins the canto with the Malatesta family motto, “Tempus loquendi / Tempus tacendi” (XXXI, 153), followed by an array of fragments from letters from written by Jefferson, who as we have seen earlier, is compared by analogy to Mussolini. Not only are characters compared in this way but so are whole cultures. The Greeks are juxtaposed with the Romans, merely by switching source material for the epic characters of Odysseus and Ulysses—Homer compared to Ovid—from canto I to canto II. Both these civilizations are compared to the modern world immediately as we encounter the watchful narrator in canto III, as his own version of events becomes source material. Italy of the Renaissance period in the Malatesta cantos (VIII-XI) follows with the Modern Hell of London (XIV-XVI) demonstrating the need to return, through history, to a unified society held together by aesthetic desire. The Jefferson cantos of XXXI-XXXIV, distinctly American, are contrasted with the European cantos of XXXV-XXXVI; the letters of Jefferson, practical prose, are compared to the emotional poetry of Cavalcanti.

both by contrast attempting to “bring sight to such reason” (XXXVI, 177). In the Dynasty Cantos we find an equal split between the ten cantos of Confucius and the ten of Adams. Each represented moral order for Pound, thus linking east to west, China to America, and a past government based on empire to our “present” American democracy. Pound justifies his the use of his historical method through analogy and juxtaposition by elevating the “histories” and cultures he believed the best examples to demonstrate to the reader how the factive, ethical hero heals a civilization.

Repetition, a strategy employed in the preceding paragraph to convince the reader that Pound’s use of analogy was deliberate, was also used by Pound to solidify his arguments. Pound’s use of repetition, particularly his own modeling of the epic catalogue, granted one method of repeating elements of a culture, or a personality, or a “history” to get his point across. Early in the Malatesta Cantos he repeats the word “And” at the beginning of each poetic line, simulating a catalogue of events that leads the reader to spin *quickly* through Rimini’s history in a compressed way, noting the *many* accomplishments of Malatesta:

And he fought in Fano, in a street fight,
 and that was nearly the end of him;
And the Emperor came down and knighted us,
And they had a wooden castle set up for fiesta,
And one year Basinio went into the courtyard
 Where the lists were, and the palisades
 had been set for the tourneys,
And he talked down the anti-Hellene,
And there was an heir male to the signor,
And Madame Ginerva died.
And he, Sigismundo, was Captain for the Venetians.
And he had sold off small castles
 And built the great Rocca to his plan,
And he fought like ten devils at Monteluro

And got nothing but the victory...(IX. 34).

Pound depends on this speed to “bombard the reader with a great deal more information, and at a faster rate, in an apparent attempt to obliterate all resistance” (Comens 69). His use of this repetition technique can be found throughout his poem. He does so principally in the earlier cantos (IX, XIII, XVIII, XXI, XVI) to acclimate his reader so that later cantos such as the Confucian Dynasty ones repeating the application of Kung’s moral dicta over and over through the entire dynastic chain of China’s and Japan’s emperors, eighty-four pages worth, do not get stale, so the lessons can be rapidly accepted and inculcated. The most famous example of Pound’s use of repetition is in his attack against usury in canto XLV. Here, again, his goal is didactic and his rhetorical strategy through the use of language most obvious:

With *Usura*
With usura hath no man a house of good stone
each block cut smooth and well fitting
that design might cover their face,
with usura
hath no man a painted paradise on his church wall
harpes et luz
or where virgin receiveth message
and halo projects from incision,
with usura
seeth no man Gonzaga his heirs and concubines
no picture is made to endure nor live with
but it is made to sell and sell quickly
with usura, sin against nature,
is thy bread ever more of stale rags
is thy bread dry as paper,
with no mountain wheat, no strong flour
with usura the line grows thick
with usura is no clear demarcation
and no man can find site for his dwelling. (XLV, 229)

The phrase “with usura” is important enough to begin the canto, a sort of title. Pound’s

opening the canto with a repetition of the phrase controls what follows—the steady repetition and Pound’s subsequent definition of the phrase: “CONTRA NATURAM” (XLV, 230). The first twenty lines make up just one sentence, barely pausing by punctuation for the sake of breath. That this one “whole” canto is laced with repetition, one part of the entire *Cantos* whose repetition is noted in the one “whole” sentence, one part of the entire canto XLV, illustrates how Pound compounds repetition throughout many parts equaling “wholes” to set the entire “whole” in motion. Seen within *The Cantos*, the theme of usury repeats throughout the work to become the contrasting plague of the ethical good sought by the artist.

Ezra Pound never ceased his quest for totality and unification. Even in his poetic strategies he reduced all to a single ideal. Pound’s employment of the ideogram culminates his linguistic strategy, achieving in one principle the rhetorical goals of all the strategies outlined. This method sought to collapse the categories of developmental and accumulative structure while achieving the same effects which results in a poetic “strategy” related to juxtaposition. In the ideogram, the combination of images develop instantaneous transitions between them to help the entire “grouping” make meaning through the comparison of the images *without its seeming so*. Because the transitions become transparent, the ideogrammic method, therefore, accumulates. The order of the groupings becomes lost in a combination, magnifying the message the images convey in accord with Pound’s personal idea of justice. We are left with unconscious comparisons of images that give the appearance they are “pure, natural outgrowths of intuited or directly perceived reality—the visionary basis” (Comens 60).

Pound's poetics leave out the opportunity for reflection. His poetics involve a method of perception and (non) contemplation that inform his entire discourse which, of course, must be exemplified by the poet through his art: "the poet's job is to define and yet define again till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice" (*Letters* 277). The language of men, the single words and simple descriptions of the simple masses that could never convey the emotion Pound sought, must be replaced. Pound intended to make his method of perception and non-contemplation practical. For Pound, the world is to become "a seamless whole, where language unites subject and object, where definition produces clarity, clarity produces justice, and justice produces the perfect state, by definition perfectly attuned to the natural (or divine) order" (Comens 61). Yet Pound really asks from his reader a blind faith in the artist's language and no others. His idea that "the image is the word beyond formulated language" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 88) demonstrates his distrust of the languages created by ordinary men whose referents to words were the basis for evil, words that had nothing to do with "right reason" but established and condoned by logic and reason. Pound's new language and method of creating it have their basis in logic, in scientific observation, in equations involved with accumulation and subtraction, in economics and value, in language and rhetoric—in short, in the unified logic of one mind. Pound's role as utopian "see"er/seeer takes on even a greater status in his poem, more totalitarian and authoritarian in nature, when real world events again meet art. Once his perfect hero Mussolini, the practical man who had a chance to lead the masses into a paradise where the economic system would be righted, perishes as an option, the form and strategies of *The Cantos* labor to

meet the challenge of continuing the creation of both artistic and worldwide totality.

Maintaining The Character's Paradise: Pound's Strategic Reprision

The Pisan section of *The Cantos*, written while Pound was interred on charges of treason following World War II, and considered by many to be Pound's greatest achievement, helped him finally to gain national recognition and respect as a poet and won him the Bollingen prize in 1949. The critics that awarded him this prize found what they believed was a repentant man paying penance, especially for his obvious hatred toward Jews.⁷ The awarding of this prize and the style of the Pisan cantos, less apparently didactic and more imagistic in structure, led critics to believe Pound had given up his crusade for order.⁸ For these commentators *The Cantos* are part of a Romantic, transcendental "ongoing, endless flow, orderly but not ordered, of which Pound merely wishes to assert...the existence" (Comens 48). This notion implied that *The Cantos* gave up its moral call for ethical order and turned toward the abstract and mystical, but such a reading denies Pound the continuation of his fascist and anti-Semitic sentiments. (Comens 48) Critics turn to the famous lines found in canto LXXXI in order to demonstrate Pound's humbling retreat from his call for order:

‘Master thyself, then others shall thee beare’
 Pull down thy vanity
Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail,
A swollen magpie in a fitful sun
Half black half white
Nor knowst’ou wing from tail
Pull down thy vanity
 How mean thy hates
Fostered in falsity,
 Pull down thy vanity,
Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity,
Pull down thy vanity,

I say pull down. (521)

Some critics believe this self-admonition. Pound speaking to himself. Yet, right after this passage comes one whose tone is opposite, almost conciliatory:

But to have done instead of not doing
 This is not vanity
To have, with decency, knocked
That a Blunt should open
 To have gathered from the air a live tradition
Or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.
Here error is all in the not done,
All in the diffidence that faltered . . . (521-22).

The second passage describes Pound's action as performed in *The Cantos*. "To have gathered from the air a live tradition / Or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame" expresses Pound's use of history to recapture order, employing the "insight" of other's fine old eyes—Homer, Dante, even James—to make it a "live tradition," one meaningful in the present. In a precise juxtaposition, Pound sets his character against the ignorant masses—"half black half white"—who allow themselves to be "fostered in falsity," nurtured in a government run by profiteers. This vanity or unwillingness to hear and understand their condition from someone like Pound brings about a society full of hatred—"rathe to destroy, niggard in charity." Pound begs his readership to pull down *their* vanity, using a familiar biblical and, therefore, didactic style—words such as "rathe," "niggard," "beare," "thyself," "thee"—to get his message across. Sicari's assessment of the passage seems accurate when he proposes "the language and the tone are those of a prophet castigating the people who have failed to live according to the heritage of love" (146). But I would question Sicari's use of the word "love," replacing

it with the word “Pound,” for Pound’s heritage, one based on ethics and morality but not necessarily love, must be followed.

As we may ascertain, Pound had not quite ended his quest for order. In terms of Dante’s model, he had finally reached that “dark wood.” Upon the death of his fictive hero Mussolini, *The Cantos* are left with only Pound as a character. His imprisonment compelled this character to cleanse himself of his own past, manifested in the poem as he states in the first canto of the section that “rain also is of the process” (LXXIV, 425). He must traverse his personal “purgatory,” temporarily losing his to continue his role as utopian seer to guide his readership. The Pisan cantos separate themselves from the failure of fascism and Mussolini to reflect on Pound’s own involvement in “the revolution.” That Pound the character needed to rejuvenate his “image,” especially after he had been accused of treason for broadcasting for Mussolini during the war, was obvious to the artist, who used the Pisan cantos as a sort of therapy to both clear his name and his consciousness for himself. He becomes nameless, “Oÿ TΙΣ” (425), a “man on whom the sun has gone down / nor shall diamond die in the avalanche / be it torn from its setting / first must destroy himself ere others destroy him” (430). Pound’s naming himself Oÿ TΙΣ works in many ways to provide clues to the direction of this character. The name universalizes the Poundian character, who becomes a typical modern citizen also suffering the devastation of war; his name is “the name of my family” (425). It also sloughs off his former identification with his failed fictive hero and the direction he formerly undertook: “What you depart from is not the way” (425) writes Pound as he admonishes his character. Pound must leave his past to recreate

himself, and in so doing he restarts the cycle of myth, becoming the “faceless” and “timeless” author and hero who can fully embody the qualities and attitudes of one total culture to pass those qualities on to future generations. Finally, we must remember that ΟΥ ΤΙΣ is the name Odysseus used to trick the Cyclops to make his escape and continue his journey. Pound wishes to “trick” those who believe he was fascist, anti-Semitic, and guilty of treason. He will continue on “the great periplum” that “brings in the stars to our shore” (425). This great periplum is the journey to see the light of those heavenly bodies, “correct geography; not as you would find if you had a geography book and a map, but as it would be in ‘periplum,’ that is, as a coasting sailor would find it” (*ABC of Reading* 43-4). In the end, the Pisan cantos justify Pound’s actions and exonerate him of guilt, heightening his own status as seer of the ideal, where “the self, seemingly forced to admit its subjection, would yet emerge in a position of mastery” (Comens 80).

Pound continues to use imagism as a poetic strategy. Although now “whole chunks” based on analogues culled from history to determine ideogrammic patterns are missing, his style is still “agglutinative,” leaving out syntax that would order images according to rational logic. In its intricacies and its interwoven clauses the Pisan cantos draw together elements of the past and present, not unlike his imagist technique. But here instead he shifts subject rather than form. The subject of the Pisan cantos is not universal history and myth, but personal history and myth made into man. These fragmented images mold into a mass where the connections between them lay within Pound’s character himself, a present to remind the reader of all the minutiae of one

particular artist's "tale of the tribe." The Pisan cantos become, in large part, a self-reflexive strategy, a cohesive to reconstruct the self shattered by war and its consequences so one self may continue on its quest for order. That self, perceiving images, using language, thereby reduces all to "one principle" (*Culture* 15) and becomes that one principle to which a body of imagery can be attached.

If the self then becomes the principle to collect and understand images, that self's mind, measured by its mode of thought, is tested. Pound proceeds to test the mind's thought process to measure if the self has reached a state of becoming one with its object or, in other words, has reached its goal of totality. It is clear that Pound, especially seen in the increasing number of references to him late in this poem, uses a philosophy of measuring thought devised by Richard St Victor, an eleventh century scholastic thinker. He tells us in his *Guide to Kultur* that "Richard St Victor had hold of something: sic: There are three modes of thought, cogitation, meditation, and contemplation. In the first the mind flits aimlessly about the object, in the second it circles about the object in a methodical manner, in the third it is unified with the object" (*Culture* 77). Pound employs this paradigm throughout *The Cantos*, combining it with Dante's epic to give a meaningful form for the poem. *The Cantos* are populated with people at different stages of thought, minds that flit aimlessly are consigned to Hell, minds seen to be circling about the object in a methodical manner inhabit Purgatory, and when minds reach the comtempletitive stage, they reach Paradise or union with the object. The Pisan section revealed Pound's own purgatorial pilgrimage; his own mind circled around or meditated on the images of his past. Pound the character becomes

silent after the Pisan section, achieving his understanding and movement through Richard's last mode. Pound's use of the Chinese ideogram, the perfect reduction of words to one principle, is interestingly used in the Rock Drill and Thrones sections, the final part of *The Cantos*, demonstrating that some synthesis has been accomplished by the character Pound, who has come to an understanding in his journey. Pound alone has come to this understanding and taught his readership, alone among the many characters of his narrative *and* his contemporaries:

But the lot of 'em, Yeats, Possum, Old Wyndham
had no ground to stand on
Black shawls still worn for Demeter
in Venice,
in *my* time,

my young time
OIOS TELESAI ERGON...EROS TE

[so as to finish the job...and love] (CII, 728; emphasis and translation added).

How well we have learned Pound's lesson is a different matter Pound takes up at the end. As the traveler comes closer to paradise, order becomes harder to discern for the reader in the final part of *The Cantos*. Since divinity, or order, for Pound manifests itself through the intelligence of men (*Confucius* 20), his exclusive use of the imagistic technique is an intentional stratagem to demonstrate his own intelligence, which he must do if he wants us to accept him as all-knowing seer. He then "tests" the reader's own intelligence by presenting fragments drawn from various texts in swift, ideogrammic fashion, "always broken off to prevent any narrative logic from allowing easy connections to be made" (Sicari 153). He tests the reader's intelligence since the pattern has already been set, the method of "seeing" these images have been taught in the previous sections of the poem and in his many prose tracts. The earlier cantos not

only provide the form but also divulge the many images merely recapitulated at the end of the poem in a less ordered fashion. Only those mindful to have paid attention or intelligent enough to figure out the connections between these images, to see them operating under one principle of utopian order, deserve enough to reach that state. He requires the reader to read by his methodology to come to his final meaning, training the reader in a totalitarian fashion to see totality, to force us to read into the fragments of his modern era, using these very fragments of perception and language, to make sense. Referring back again to the epic form as he, Odysseus, and the reader are making their sea-journey home Pound asks us whether we have followed him on his journey and heeded his training: "Hast'ou seen boat's wake on sea-wall / how crests it?" (CX, 777). He commands us not to give up his vision of totality and his "divine" ordered method of totalizing: "God's eye art 'ou, do not surrender perception" (CXIII, 790). Pound the character and the artist has seen utopia, knows it can exist, validated it by history (the community of Siena comes quickly to mind), and taught us *how to see it*. He has made a grand analogue of meaning, a totality called *The Cantos*, so we can find both a utopian totality and the complete system of creating it through an ordering of language based on sight. His lament at the end of the work begging "forgive"ness for "what I have made," his final canto beginning with the line "I have tried to write Paradise" (CXX, 803), is thought of by many critics as his admittance of failure that *The Cantos* did not cohere as a whole. But it is not a failure for the artist. The reader fails if he can not make it cohere and for this Pound begs forgiveness, telling us that he bestows upon us the ability to gaze into the whole that can provide us insight into a future of moral unity: "I

have brought the great ball of crystal; who can lift it?" (CXVI, 795) We must make it cohere, and in a modern era devoid of unity, this is difficult:

And I am not a demigod
I cannot make it cohere.
If love be not in the house there is nothing. (796)

But for Pound and for this reader, "it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere" (797). In the lament at poem's end we can read Pound's call for acceptance of his attempt to recreate totality, an attempt as "natural" for the modern artist as the totality being recreated. Pound's call for silence is futile—"Let the wind speak / that is paradise" (803)—for the modern human's desire to totalize is natural, even into the poetry of our era.

In his attempt to create a new style of poetry by combining epic and novelistic forms, Pound's reliance on character to hold together his tentative formations tells of his art's ideological underpinnings. In a sense the epical qualities of his art dominate the novelistic, and the subject of Pound's work, namely Pound himself, enacts his ideology of willful civism. Pound's characters of his narrative are the heroes of a new totalizing system (based on fascism) to replace capitalism, heroes that take it upon themselves to change the world. In their (his) quest for this change, Pound imparts a new style of relating to the world, a seemingly objective way of managing things so as to restore a relationship of value between subject and object. Pound's Imagism, a scientific method of establishing the artistic connection between word and world, was thought to empower the reader as the world, for the first time, could be seen for the way it really is, without the illusions of capitalism clouding one's vision. Yet this objective method that

supposedly reveals self-evident truths allows, instead, Pound to communicate his *personal* world vision in didactic fashion. Pound's story of our world and its history is not impartially reported. He controls information through poetic techniques, forcing the reader to accept his views. In this way Pound maintains his vision of the world, a vision that is whole in its ideological content, goals, and method of delivery. *The Cantos* then are not only an entire work held together by its own brand of narrative created through the amalgamation of epic and novelistic form, but it embraces an element of those forms (character) to meld into the work the author's total vision—his ideas and his strategies for making those ideas come to fruition. Pound's work is ultimately complete: *The Cantos* are order through narrative, ideology, and rhetoric.

Chapter 3

Olson's (Uni)verse

"Maybe Pound discloses to you a method you spontaneously reached for in all this talking and writing. What about doing on a smaller scale—the West? But he has already taken the same frame, as you will note from your notes on the poem to be called "West" you wrote 4 yrs. ago. But should you not best him? Is his form inevitable enough to use as your own? Let yourself be derivative for a bit. This is a good and natural act. Write as the father to be the father." (Charles Olson, *Olson* 11)

Father(ing) Olson

Pound is an important precursor for later American poets. That later generation also lived in an era marked by political ferment, including global war. In creating poetry to act upon cultural mores and attitudes, Pound displayed a factive personality to admire and a political text to model. Later poets such as Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, and Louis Zukofsky—although Zukofsky was more of a contemporary of Pound's—were highly influenced by Pound's political texts, in terms of both his poetics and his ideology of totality.⁹

The initial foray by these poets into what we consider the postmodern era (Charles Olson was one of the first artists to use the phrase) is branded with a poetics directed by politics, intent on continuing Pound's probe of society's morality and values. Robert Duncan sees Pound's influence as essential at a critical moment:

For my own generation, our elders...specifically Pound...remain primary generative forces. Their threshold remains ours. The time of war and exploitation, the infamy and lies of the new capitalist war-state, continue. And the answering intensity of the imagination to hold its own values must continue. The work of our elders in poetry was to make "a Dream greater than Reality"—a time-space continuum in which their concern for quality and spirit, for romance and beauty, could survive. Estranged from all but a few among them, they made a new dimension in

which eternal companions appeared. (Beach 163)

Pound's activity as an artist in his society was not a new historical circumstance, but during the difficult modern years his action seemed to these poets a solitary response against those who devalue "quality and spirit." Pound wished to reform the age.

Pound's diatribe against bankers was an attack on our dependence on money to produce value. Such an allowance renders "money a master rather than servant of its possessor, a force that governs individual creativity by the impersonal circulation of the wealth which creates market value" (Dewey 92).

Olson was attracted to Pound's charge to create an ideal society where the artist's forms overcome capitalism's strangulation of humanity, overturning money-making systems and demanding instead an order that could regain the basic human desire for beauty and truth. Anne Dewey reminds us of Pound's belief in artists "as makers of the structures people inhabit, both physically and spiritually," to maintain and exercise "the power to instill the knowledge of divine order which fosters social harmony" (Dewey 92). The poet, as communicator, maker of art, conceiver of utopia, recognizes and attempts to use for spiritual rather than material ends the power of language. Making this recognition, a certain number of American poets, from Pound to the present, wish to destroy the "glowing surfaces," the shiny language of capitalism. Olson's desire to be active in shaping his world no doubt connects him with Pound's activity. Although he detested Pound's fascist political stance,¹⁰ he admired his "confident, cocky voice firing out its certainties in brusque, telegraphic injunctions" and was "affected by the energetic, aggressive authority of [his] literary and cultural

criticism” (Clark 98-99). Olson was the first artist to defend Pound when he was tried for treason. His polemical essay “This is Yeats Speaking” adopted the authoritative voice of William Butler Yeats to argue that Pound’s Pisan broadcasts should be judged not by courts but by literary peers who would better understand what he was attempting to accomplish. Olson believed that perhaps Pound’s peers would be more forgiving if they knew artistic motivations lay behind otherwise inexplicable actions. Olson attempted to justify Pound’s affinity with Mussolini. “*Il Duce*, Olson wrote, seemed to have ‘taken that other chaos of men’s lives up in their hands, had worked to master it as we do ours...’. Olson sided with Pound in opposition to ‘a leveling, rancorous, rational time’” (Clark 422-23).

Olson, like Pound, was in the business of removing the old and replacing it with the new, something solid, tangible, and concrete whose totality the reader could objectively experience. This totality is the “new dimension” where beauty survives for the next generation of poets who continue Pound’s quest for a utopia. If art’s function is to impel the viewer to act humanly, then the artist is responsible for communicating rather than just providing mimesis. The poet helps the reader see beyond the surface. Like Pound, Olson believes the way to understanding is through changing public perception of surroundings, “reenact[ing] the dynamics which have made the present what it is and which point to some particular possibilities in the future” (Barua 2). As chaotic and fragmented for Olson as it was for Pound, the human condition must be transmitted as a single, knowable whole.

Yet Olson believed Pound’s efforts to remove the glowing surfaces were a

beginning but were not thorough enough: “cleanings, yes, but we want scourings” (*Encounter at St. Elizabeths* 92). As most poetic successors deny their heritage to create the space to develop a new style, Olson repudiated Pound’s artistic action as politically ineffective. He believed Pound was “out of phase” and announced an “antithetical” strategy for his generation of poets, one to “hold the mirror up to authority, behind our respect for which lay a disrespect for democracy as we were acquainted with it” (*Encounter at St. Elizabeths* 30). Although they shared the same “disrespect for democracy,” according to Olson Pound was “behind the times” (*Encounter at St. Elizabeths* xvi). Olson believed he had to develop Pound’s methods in order to make them applicable to the present. Olson correctly believed that Pound had failed to convince readers of *The Cantos* of ethical examples they could use to change society. The content of Pound’s poem—not the form—was antiquated, his politics too old to be useful: “Pound can talk all he likes about the *cultural lag* in America...but he’s got a 200 year *political lag* in himself” (*Encounter at St. Elizabeths* 52-53). Like Williams before him, Olson saw Pound’s standard for “culture” as a necessary but extremely personal and elitist poetic. Olson thought Pound overly disparaged the masses and left out the common American. In a letter to Cid Corman, Olson explains that *The Cantos* resonates “the social snobbery and fascism of the Poundian kinetic.” He ends his letter by saying that “the whole Italian stuff, and Dante, is of this social order: the American upper class seeking a social home!” (Evans 289). Olson’s concern for the common man, the fact that he disagreed with Pound on class lines, may have originated from the difference in their backgrounds—Pound grew up as a wealthy Philadelphian,

Olson hailed from the working-class town of Worcester, Massachusetts, the son of a postman. This difference impelled Olson to criticize Pound's poetry on the same grounds that James' fiction was criticized almost a century earlier—too cosmopolitan, too European, approving the culture of Europe over America, using it to belittle our culture. Olson thought Pound ignored Whitman's call to view the potential and opportunity for the artist in his own country, to "sing" what was great about America. Olson wondered how a poet could heal a diseased culture in his own country by using unfamiliar cultural models.

Olson saw Pound's objective poetic project as tainted with too much personal ideology, agreeing with William Carlos Williams that because of his never-ending attack on world economics Pound disrupted the poet's relationship with objects. Olson modified his term *objectivism* to *objectism*. the change in term influenced by his reading of Alfred North Whitehead, designating "a more valid formulation" of the poet's relation to the object. Pound's imagism/objectivism stood for "'absolute value" in language by use of the direct referential power of poetic expression to empower the artist to express true reality, "an 'energy' or a 'charge of meaning' within language that links it directly to an experience of the world and it gives it a status independent of its existence within an arbitrary linguistic code" (Beach 22-23). But Olson's "objectism" represented "the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as Ego, of the subject and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which modern man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects" (*Selected Writings* 23-24). While

Pound's aesthetic privileged the ego, Olson tried to remove it.

Olson's proposed removal of the ego facilitates the direct transference of energy from object to reader in order to remove the "mind" from the observer. Since objects to be surveyed exist prior to the creation of the poem, the act of finding them is random. Olson tells us that "observation of any kind is, like argument in prose, properly previous to the act of the poem, and, if allowed in, must be so juxtaposed, apposed [*sic*], set in, that it does not, for an instant, sap the going energy of the content toward its form" (*Selected Writings* 20). The achievement of a "literal transmission" of experience depends on the random formation of objects by the perceiver. The act of writing a poem removes not only ego but what ego carries with it in terms of ideation, like prefixed notions of classifying reality. Erasing thought from the creative process eliminates any preconceived meaning gathered from observation; no laws, precepts, axioms, theories, or philosophies can be applied. The poem extols the meaning of the relationship between perceiver and object, self and world. As Paul Christensen points out, the poem's structure comes to express this meaning "and, quite possibly...the thinking process itself" (Christensen 83).

The way to reveal this structure is through a poetics that "projects" the self-object situation. Olson called this poetic strategy "projectivism," an innovative way of writing poetry dealing with contemporary times. Yet Pound's imagism is clearly the foundation for projectivism, as it conveys both the totality of form and the energy (or action) of the poetic to reach form through the *visual* experience of objects. Here Olson's ideas are merely derivative of Pound's imagism that suggested a new method of

considering the world, freeing the “perceptive faculties” from the “encumbrances” of “set moods, set ideas, conventions” to allow experiences included by the “inevitable laws of nature.” For Olson, “image is truth, not image, except as without image it is impossible to present truth (An image may be defined as any proximate object to which there is a flow of feeling)” (*Objectivists* 107). Olson conveys Pound’s imagistic attack against stylistic conventions, rupturing all “which brings us up, immediately, against tenses, in fact against syntax, in fact against grammar generally, that is, as we have inherited it” (*Selected Writings* 21).

In trying to “make it new” once again, Olson is trying to make language represent the world in a new way: “it is my impression that *all* parts of speech, suddenly, in composition by field...spring up like unknown, unnamed vegetables in the patch, when you work it, come spring” (*Selected Writings* 21). Olson’s story “is a familiar one, then, of the loss of an original wholeness” (Kuberski 179) once possessed within a totalizing, representational language. He believes that language has become too generalized, alienating us from objects. By re-infusing the lost specificity of language back into words, we may return to an original use of language where “what precedes must have been a time of things, when language was tied to its referents, and itself was a thing” (Kuberski 179). The paradox in this return to origins must be explained, thought about, and ultimately redeemed by the same generalized language Olson attempts to replace. Because he cannot change the language that fragments the reality of immediate experience, Olson must alter the way we use language by creating a way to use it that expands the comprehensiveness of meaning.

Much has been made of Olson's rebellion against Pound, which supposedly allowed him to create a more open, democratic poetics. Yet his "holding the mirror up to authority" becomes an authoritative action in its own right, revealing an aspect of his own artistic personality that intrinsically identifies him with Pound's authoritarianism. Tom Clark explains Olson's seemingly ruthless version, in a letter to Robert Creeley, of Bloom's anxiety of influence, outlining a practical attempt to "kill" the "fathers" Pound, Williams, and Stevens:

To outflank the masters, solidarity would first have to be established among the rebel ranks. "Let's you and I, by God, write for each other!" ... "It's the only deal." As part of that "deal," they would pool their literary contacts and try to commandeer as many publishing venues as possible. The procedures of annexation, Olson suggested, should be swift and brutal. "I swear—what we have to do is, quick, intimidate 'em. And then go right ahead sans regard, sans anything, but, make use of 'em." (Clark 180-81)

Despite such an egotistical call for rebellion, Olson went on to condemn Pound for having too much arrogance and ego, an ironic accusation considering that Olson too, at least in theory, wished to carry on the modernist tradition of impersonality:

Perhaps, as I sd [sic] before, I am only arguing with myself, that is, I am trying to see how to throw the materials I am interested in so that they take, with all the impact of a correct methodology AND WITH THE ALTERNATIVE TO THE EGO-POSITION. (*Selected Writings* 83)

At the same time, however, Olson praised Pound's own use of the personal, what he later will accept as the "correct methodology" for writing poetry:

Ez's epic solves 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 assumption, that there are intelligent men whom he can outtalk, is beautiful because it destroys historical time, and thus creates the methodology of the Cantos, viz, a space-field where, by inversion, though the material is all time material, he has driven through it so

sharply by the beak of his ego, that, he has turned time into what we must now have, space & its live air. (*Selected Writings* 82)

Olson recognizes Pound's power of the personal, a rhetorical strategy within poetry to "outtalk" the opposition. Despite what Olson said about ridding his poetry of ego, he fully adopts Pound's poetic methodology because it provided a "context" for a "process" based on "politics" incited by a factive "will" (*Letters for Origin* 129). Although Olson found fault with Pound's content, he would adopt his rhetorically powerful methodology, taking it, ego intact, into an American culture where the reader has a better chance to learn about Olson's own sense of culture. He transmits his agenda through an epic text, *The Maximus Poems*, giving weight to his message in the poem's use of historical document while softening the sharpness of his personal will by creating the "mythical" figure Maximus to do his bidding—we will find the similarities between Olson and Pound too great to ignore, both in what they wanted to accomplish and how they used art to do so. Like his poetic father Pound, Olson saw art's function as a way to better our lives, to compel us to change. Olson writes that "art is the only twin life has—its only valid metaphysic. Art does not seek to describe but to enact" (*Selected Writings* 61).

The artistic differences between Pound and Olson help define the separation, by critics, of the modern and postmodern eras. As Pound is known to be one of modernism's chief legislators, Olson is considered to be a "leading thinker and strategist" (Hoover 3) of postmodern poetry. Regarding the general relationship of postmodernism to high modernism, Frederic Jameson writes, "radical breaks between periods do not generally involve complete changes of content but rather the

restructuring of elements already given: features that in an earlier period or system were subordinate now become dominant, and features that were dominant now become secondary” (*Postmodernism* 123). For Olson, Pound did not finish his objective story of the past and did not *fully* develop the power or “magic” of the storyteller who formerly bridged the gap between subject and object (world) to describe the human’s place in nature. Olson had different ideas than Pound about what he would use in place of Jefferson, Confucius, and Mussolini —the quasi-mythical histories of the Mayans and the Pilgrim settlers. Although Pound and Olson both employed myth and history in their poetry, Olson focused on the myth in history rather than the history in myth. Olson’s using myth in this denotative manner—for example in conjunction with historical documents—recalls what Pound did to discard preconceived classical notions of seeing the world. Both Olson and Pound believed these notions, passed on through discourse, painted “false faces” in place of the real and devalued our status. If myth restores the connection between sign and object, thus restoring language’s role, were *both* Olson and Pound postmodern poetic progenitors? In an essay that questions Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ideas on language and reality, Don Byrd asks: “Is it possible [that]... ‘What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use?’ Is there a possible poetics which takes the complex practice of language, speech and writing, those still partially functional tools, however degraded they have become in a capitalist society, as its primitive grounds... Is it possible to give poetry peace?” (Byrd 10-11). We critics may answer both questions positively. Olson and Pound are postmodern progenitors, but they differ from postmoderns in important ways. They do

not propose the non-referentiality of language but invite language to describe reality, thereby giving reality meaning. They paradoxically insist on a human presence that takes an active role in creating the language/meaning/reality paradigm while still, through the use of history and myth, insisting on the permanency or archetypal status of certain truths, making them seem inevitable and unalienable.

Critics see Olson's "post-modernist advance" beyond Pound's influence as "a consciousness-change, a sense of sweeping anti-westernism and de-rationalism" (*Postmodern Advance* 6). But it really continues Pound's anti-rational ideology. Olson saw Pound's practice as using the "past for its own sake," like Eliot's idea of "tradition" creating an ordered, "human positionalism" that denies the personal activity or "energy" of the individual to make meaning (*Letters for Origin* 6). Olson had recognized the contradiction in Pound's form and content in presenting his cultural critique, leading to his presumption that Pound was too rational and formulaic, too much concerned with order. This presumption guided Olson to profess a new tactic for wresting coherence from the confusing fragments of contemporary life, attacking these shards with a "cyclotron" to "'bust apart' the ossified perceptions of Western culture" (Beach 87).

Critics see this as a postmodern advance beyond Pound:

We are invited to formulate the connection between Pound's "indomitable chaos," which must be "yanked and hauled" into ordered form, and Olson's "elements" needing to be broken apart by the violent means of the cyclotron. Unlike Pound, Olson is no longer interested in "dominating" a chaos but rather in exploring in painstaking detail the world around him. His metaphor is technological rather than personal and heroic; it suggests a "postmodern" process of fragmentation and re-integration rather than a modernist ethos of masculine virility and physical force. Olson's conception is less concerned with control and order than with discovery. (Beach 89)

I disagree that Olson is less concerned with control and order. However much he and Pound theorize about objectivity, impersonality, anti-rational and abstract thinking to clarify meaning, his practice did not match his theory.

If chaos is the central metaphor for postmodern writers to consider, Olson had long recognized that the chaos of the modern period obliged writers to create totalizing form. In a letter to Creeley, Olson would call this form “a syncretic world-poem where locality and field are crucial” (Beach 164). Jameson has noted the difference in the way the postmodern and modern deal with the chaotic shifts between eras. Instead of having his factive character search for unity as Pound’s did, Olson centers him in a place he built and controlled, focusing his narrative on setting. By shifting Pound’s terms, Olson provided an epic guide for the masses formulated through place, space, and geography. Olson’s *Maximus* reminds us of the direct connection between space and the individual: “I come back to the geography of it” (*Maximus* II.14); as the character/narrator in this epic setting called Gloucester he continues the narrative procedures set forth by Pound, including spoken and written narratives, dialogue, letters, and documents in the larger text. Olson’s elimination of time by involving space also assists in making history more important “now.” In this way Olson creates myth that self-perpetuates instead of merely making myths out of men as did Pound; he mythologizes both Gloucester and himself as Gloucester’s healer, placing a greater value on community and its stable location in order to fabricate a straighter, more permanent path for citizens to reconstruct that community. In a sense he does what Williams does with *Paterson*—where city becomes man, man becomes city—leaving no room for divergence from the one path

toward utopia.

As a poet concerned with value of human life, Olson does not reject Pound as Paul Bové and other critics claim, but modifies his strategies to continue the endeavor to create utopia. Olson continues Pound's use of history as a basis for his poetry, including historical documents, letters, dialogues, and narratives that extend "outside the boundaries of a single period, a single culture, or a single discipline to form a personal vortex of usable ideas" (Beach 113). These historical facts become "images of human possibility: a series of exempla from history of good and bad conduct in order to define his sense of essential humanity which can lead to the formation of a polis" (Barua 10). Olson rendered history as myth to express self-evident truths about our world. Like Pound's *Cantos*, Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, written in epic form, contain a narrative told by a grand persona representing the author's position, aiding in his creation of totality. Olson's epic adapts Pound's techniques of the formation of narrative poetry, through use of documents to create a poem that can be managed by a single narrator. The sequence's coherence "greatly depends upon the obtrusively unique vision and voice of the poet, a poetry closer to what Olson called Pound's 'Ego-Position'" (*Objectivists* 99). Olson, like Pound, also denounces the personal in poetry, yet cannot help being personal. Some critics object to the idea that Olson and Pound are *not* personally involved with their poetry, that they have successfully separated their ideology from their form. But this incomplete notion is tainted by our own "Romantic ideology"—our reading of American poetry lacks the social context McGann urges us to consider. Others, as we have seen in Pound's case, suggest a possible explanation for

this contradiction that the poet, despite his intention to be objective, is too much concerned with changing the world. Perhaps, however, the criticism of egoism by poets makes the reader accept their personal message. Except that they had different totalities/politics to promote, Olson is, in fact, much like Pound—both were men of action, writers of propaganda. They emphasized their status as artist, that privileged position from which to criticize and exhort, by denying their ability and need to manipulate both reader and world. The egoless theory gives the ego greater status in their work: “The productive paradox—need we say it? —is that such denunciations or denigrations can only be made by a subject, that is by an ego, whose use of language in a revelatory fashion makes him the center of communal attention, thus reifying the importance of assertive egoism” (Bertonneau 146-47).

Olson’s project for poets is to seek and create wholeness for the masses. Like Pound, both the reasoning behind and the agent for creating totality is a pervasive ideology of the *active intellect* twentieth-century American poets share. The poet has imaginative knowledge that transcends the material world, forcing moral form on immoral chaos—“thought is the ‘magnetic’ force creating physical form” (Dewey 91). This old idea, connected as it is to Kant’s theory of the modern realization of our status as human creators of all things, was reintroduced to modern artists through Henry Adams, whose *The Education of Henry Adams* had a profound effect on both Pound and Olson. In his explanation of the thirteenth-century thinkers, Adams proposes the mind as an agent to solidify culture:

We deal with a Multiplicity and call it God... the thirteenth century supposed mind to be a mode of force directly derived from the intelligent prime motor, and the cause of all form and sequence in the universe—

therefore the only proof of unity. Without thought in the unit, there could be no unity, without unity no orderly sequence or ordered society. Thought alone was form. (Adams 428-29)

The Ideology of Active Intellect

Replacing the production of value through money with life-affirming, valuable, intellectual action is a main concern of the poets of our century. Olson tells us that “value is perishing from the earth because no one cares to fight down to it beneath the glowing surfaces so attractive to all” (*Selected Writings* 59). He also criticizes what he calls, in the first poem of the *Maximus* sequence, our “pejorocracy” (I.3), a society for which communication is “spray-gunned” (I.2), when “all is become billboards” (I.2) and “those who use words cheap” (I.9) create the “mu-sick (the trick/of corporations, newspapers, slick magazines” that “whine to my people, these entertainers, sellers” (I.10) that sickens us with the desire for money. Olson follows Pound and Williams in criticizing capitalism: “o kill kill kill kill kill/those/who advertise you/out)” (I.4). Each shares a common ideology. According to Olson, “the poet is the only pedagogue left, to be trusted” (*Human Universe* 19). We can begin to examine Olson as a totalitarian poet while understanding that he also was clearly involved in this poetic process of teaching his readership—in this case, the action of destruction, as critics see postmodern poetry, placing Olson within a mode that not only destroys the capitalistic order that forces language to particular signs but also dissolves his relation to his poetic forefathers such as Pound.¹¹ Yet Olson’s practice is not entirely destructive.

In the poem “Maximus, to himself,” Olson’s grand persona Maximus states “we grow up many/And the single/is not easily/know’n” (*Maximus* I.52). The “single” is the

totality, a single form or method to lead readers to recapture human value. Dikbakar Barua asks a rhetorical question pertaining to Olson's role in this project, suggesting the poet is a democratic seeker, one of many offering a perspective (Barua uses the word "wisdom" where I would use "totality"): "he may also...make dialogues, discuss ancient texts, throw what light he can...But does he also seek the "wisdom" which must be sought individually, and if he does, can he communicate knowledge of "wisdom" to others through poetry? (Barua 2). This question opens a further one, if Olson is merely engaged in the search for a single way of knowing his readers can understand, or if he attempts to communicate a personal form readers can accept. Barua argues that Olson's wisdom is communal, his poetry a guide to the value of the citizens' own labor. Yet some critics notice that Olson's creative stance does not allow the reader personal entry. Robert von Hallberg sees Olson's poetry as a manifestation of self-assertion inevitable in an era of multiplicity: "Self-assertion, by way of conjecture, takes the place left vacant once truth is seen to be too multi-dimensional for communication: if one cannot express the absolute truth, one can at least communicate one's own sense of it... choos[ing] a plane of reality, the level of truth, that is most meaningful to you, and write a history that is your own" (*Objectivists* 100-01). We may begin to postulate that Olson's perspective is individual; as artist, he has completed the labor for the citizens.

Through the intellect one may develop first the ability to ascertain need for a new unity (to see a fragmentation in society caused by a reliance on money value) and then to create unity for life. The poetry of the intellect, formed by the intellect, that L.S. Dembo calls "cantus firmus" (Dembo 282), stands against the advertisers, those who

make words cheap, “the very creators of the acquisitive society” (Dembo 282), the “pejorocracy.” Here two factions use language to create two different ways of life based on total systems— economics, for the capitalist, aesthetics, for the artist. Although Dembo sees their difference in what each tries to accomplish, implicitly emphasizing that each is involved in a persuasive endeavor, “whereas one impels the people to buy, the other calls upon them to practice austerity” (Dembo 282), he fails to recognize the separation these poets make between passivity and activity. Purchasing, using money, is passive because the value assigned to the purchaser is merely a result of the arbitrary denotation of the dollar and the goods it obtains. Practicing austerity or, in better words, practicing a serious, alternative system of human value, requires active participation in the act of valuation. The poets persuade us to use a system of active participation through active intellect. Dembo’s recognition of “what Creeley describes as a characteristic of the Maximus poems is also one of its main themes: active knowledge, with its particularizing language, is an ideal to be achieved” (Dembo 279). Do these poets persuade us to actively find knowledge using intellect, or do they even have a certain kind of knowledge they wish to convey? As we analyze the political life of poets like Pound and Olson taking artwork to the masses, we can decide, through a close reading of the ideological content of their poetry manifested within both form and content, whether in their public sphere they represented the people’s mission or merely perpetuated their own agendas.

Critics such as McGann and Jameson remind us that personal ideology contaminated the role of the politician and the artist as creators of forms disclosed in

law or art. Those in positions of power, appointed (or sometimes, mostly in the case of artists, self-appointed), present themselves as ambassadors of truth, justice, and happiness. It seems inevitable then, as our guides, that they will consider themselves in a position of mastery, skilled at leading. But when their exertion of energy oversteps boundaries of acceptance, when we can no longer agree with their authority, we finally take notice and expose their ideology.

Michel Foucault has theorized that even if authority figures no longer act upon our physical bodies overtly, they can still discipline covertly. For Foucault, this guidance becomes discipline, so deeply interwoven in the fabric of our lives that it risks becoming “lost.” He calls these hidden disciplinary transactions micropowers, “infinitesimal (disciplinary) procedures. . . which continue to flourish in the interstices of the institutional technologies” (*Micro-Techniques* 261). In this era now dominated by scientific empiricism, “abstract” disciplinary forces may be in control of an individual mind capable of being “known” by science (psychologists, medical doctors, psychiatrists) as a “describable, analyzable object” (Foucault 190). Supervision, correction, and training of “knowable man” (Foucault 390) are all enacted within institutions such as schools, hospitals, and the military through a variety of techniques such as regulation of time and space and imprinting of prevailing ethics and morality. Foucault creates a “common matrix” for his “technology of power,” connecting *knowledge* of human beings and their environment with their ability to be controlled (*Micro-Techniques* 259). The forces who understand whom they control use this knowledge as a basis for their authority. When Don Byrd suggests that “humanistic

politics is haunted by totalitarianism: liberal capitalism and democratic socialism no less than fascism and communism are supplied by technologies—some subtle, some blatant—for enforcing the coherent vision” (Byrd 27), he echoes Foucault and suggests how technology applies to art. Our poets, as proponents of humanism and politicians, are themselves aesthetic technologists, whose vision claims territory by describing it, combining technology with their vision of a moral and humane world.

Olson took it upon himself to oppose his self-described “rancorous time” by getting involved in politics, following through on those nicknames given to him in college: “Stage Manager Olson...the Politician—the Pusher-of-other-people-Around” (Clark 20). His activism and political aspirations brought him to the Office of War Information to write press releases, pamphlets, radio speeches (ironic in the sense that Pound’s crime was broadcasting lies), and journal articles for the Foreign Language Division, where “psychological warfare...functioned as a key component in the propaganda machine” (Clark 77). Olson’s “highly developed powers of persuasion” (Clark 78) were used to their fullest; not only was he able to convey information clearly but, like any good propagandist, also used “the trick of politics,” shaping words “in an imaginative, aggressive fashion” (Clark 76-77), in the name of unity and democratic politics through warfare. Olson worked for the Common Counsel for American Unity, writing for their quarterly journal *Common Ground*. *Common Ground*’s objective, outlined by its editor Louis Adamic in the journal’s Autumn, 1948 inaugural issue, was to reinstate “the old American Dream, the dream which, in its powerful emphasis on *the worth* and dignity of every human being, can be a bond of *unity* no totalitarian attack

can break” (Clark 73-74; emphasis added). This goal allowed Olson to reestablish human value through the re-creation of lost unity, offering a philosophy that would extinguish our collective despair. In one of his pamphlets calling Spanish-Americans to arms Olson declared, “ACTION was America's answer...” (Clark 79).

Fueled by personal hatred of consumer society, the propaganda Pound broadcast for the Italians paralleled what Olson wrote for the United States government. Each poet possessed a vision propagandized within poetry rejecting consumer culture. As Barua and others point out, Olson goes on to posit a “knowledge” of the world to counteract that used day-to-day. Olson believes that ignorance of moral knowledge “is responsible for all social and political evils” (Barua 4). Olson’s dilemma, like Pound’s, lay in the difficulty of communicating his knowledge. If understanding in a democracy needed to be “individual, experiential, and intuitive” (Barua 4), how could a poet who held a particular idea of the operations of the world change how we function? How could he convince others of his “neutral” and “objective” tenets? No objective utterance could accomplish this task; yet Olson tried, for he believed that an artist, the proprietor of a special intellect, possessed knowledge others did not have or could not obtain alone. Barua suggests that Olson can communicate this knowledge only to people like Robert Duncan, who already “understand”:

for Robt Duncan,
who understands
what’s going on
-written because of him (*Maximus* II.37).

Barua believes that this communication of special knowledge is due to their sharing of similar life-experiences, but it is also due to a shared ideology that artists gave a

not reduced in moral significance as the poem progresses. His poetic view of reality based on immediate perception leads to moral posturing, what J.H Prynne calls “the moral structure of immediate knowledge” (Barua 3), propelled by rhetorical strategies that mask the personal while persuading the reader to act against what Olson finds appalling. He will attempt to create an alternative totality, based on primitive history, from which readers can learn. This vision and singular purpose of mind and intellect permit Olson to begin his most influential essay on the state of reality, *Human Universe*, with what Tom Clark calls “the authoritative tones of an archaic lawgiver coming down from his mountain to deliver truths revealed: “There are laws” (Clark 203).

The Ego as Character

“And what I write
is stopping the battle...” (Olson, *Maximus* I.97).

Olson applies the explosive force of his creativity to produce an idea of utopia that individuals can use to shape their lives. One image is that of the model man: “The only interesting thing/is if one can be/an image/of man...” (*Maximus* III.101). In his *Maximus* sequence this image is the Maximus persona himself, long debated as a representation of the poet.¹² According to the poet, Maximus is not Olson: “it is not I,/even if the life appeared/biographical” (*Maximus* III.101). Olson says he creates a fictional Maximus to represent collective citizenry “to make our image of a union of ourself,” what Clark sees as “an image of perfect wholeness amid chaos” (Clark 273). Yet, if this image connects to knowledge in Olson’s poetry, we must see the model as representing the poet’s knowledge, not the readers’. Its image is personal, reflecting the unique intellect that understands, analyzes, and expresses. Olson’s poems, despite his

denying self-exhibition, are highly personal—one would have to agree with Peter Baker when he tells us “the notion of *persona*—of “Maximus” as a mask for a depersonalized Olson—is clearly inadequate” (*Poetic Subjectivity* 186). In a poem such as “Maximus, to himself,” Olson describes Maximus describing himself as a poet dealing with the past investigation and continuing expression of his own knowledge:

I have had to learn the simplest things
last. Which made for difficulties.

I have made dialogues,
have discussed ancient texts.
have thrown what light I could. offered
what pleasures
doceat allows (Maximus I.52)

I know the quarters
of the weather, where it comes from,
where it goes

It is undone business
I speak of this morning,
with the sea
stretching out
from my feet (Maximus I.53)

We find the character Maximus functioning as the poet Olson in numerous places, most telling when Maximus himself reflects on his poetic status. In “Maximus, to Gloucester, Letter 11,” Maximus compares himself to the citizens in Olson’s historical examples, commenting on how his knowledge (and subsequent expression) differs from (by being superior to) others’:

That a man’s life
(his, anyway)
is what there is
that tradition is

at least is where I find it,

how I got to
what I say (*Maximus* I.48).

And again:

 Historie
come bang in the midst of
our game! Actors,
where I have learned another sort of
play (*Maximus* I.49).

Olson is not an actor in the human drama on the world's stage but is head-writer, reworking life's script as he searches through and revises tradition. He does so even though he realizes and expresses the contemporary poet's invisibility and ineffectualness. The sarcasm in the example below strengthens his idea that the age is in dire need of "troubadours" to reinstate the American dream, chastising other poets in responsibility (including Pound), making Olson/Maximus seem all the more powerful for his contribution:

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,
Rappallo,
Quattrocentro-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. yur lost, you
found, you:
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 (Maximus I.71-2).

Olson's Maximus opposes not only past poets. Maximus viciously attacks Vincent Ferrini, a Gloucester acquaintance and fellow poet, editor of a local literary magazine. Ferrini's real-time presence in the poem marks Olson's presence as well, for an impersonal persona could not assault Ferrini as writer and editor:

I begin to be damned to figure out where we can meet. I liked your own house,
that first day I sought you out (you will recall that I came to your door just because I had read a poem by you in just such a little magazine as you now purport to edit
A magazine does have this "life" to it (proper to it), does have streets, can show lights, movie houses, bars, and, occasionally,

for those of us who do live our life quite properly in print as properly, say, as Gloucester people live in Gloucester you do meet someone
as I met you
on a printed page

or if you have to be romantic

your magazine might excuse itself
if it walked on those legs all live things walk on,
their own

that is, it might,
if you knew that a literary magazine is not,
for example,
politics

(even a man's own personal politics—
what sticks out in this issue is verse
from at least four other editors
of literary magazines

do you think such scratch-me-back
gets by our eyes; the few of us there are
who read? (*Maximus* I.23-4)

Here Olson records an actual visit to Ferrini, as well as poetic politics. Accusing the magazine of romanticism and inbreeding (among other things), Olson criticizes it for having nothing to do with Gloucester's reality: "the very accusation reveals Maximus' intimate knowledge of the local life, a knowledge that is necessary to the precision of authentic writing" (Dembo 282). Yet not Maximus' knowledge but Olson's own is advocated over Ferrini's as Olson continues the process of "becoming," both as a new citizen colonizing Gloucester and a new poet entering a new "political" field (Ferrini had been living in Gloucester and writing poetry some 30 years before Olson arrived). Ironically accusing Ferrini of what he himself attempts, in this "becoming" Olson creates an alter ego, Maximus, who fuses poetic *and* political in a spokesman not only for Gloucester but the world, to bring about a new way of life through poetry, to "fashion the Word (he is the 'Man in the Word') that will illuminate the pattern in human events" (Dembo 288-9). Perhaps he saw himself like Lycaon (whom he admired), an ancient proponent of cannibalism and human sacrifice, a "'Founder...a City-Founder...a Religion-Founder'...a vivid example of 'the purer type' of leader, the

wise ruler-priest whose acts become ‘LAWS’” (Clark 219-20). He does in fact fantasize about having enough power to influence people, to change life in his own city-state. In a letter to Ruth Benedict, anthropologist and former OWI colleague, he declared: “I have a feeling you will know what I mean when I regret we are not city states here in this wide land. Differentiation, yes. But also the chance for a person like yourself or myself to be central to social action at the same time and because of one’s own creative work. I envy Yeats his Ireland” (Clark 94). The political power Yeats as poet felt compelled to yield in his Ireland was to be captured on a small scale in Olson’s classroom as a teacher at Black Mountain College:

Expounding his antihumanist corrective code for his faithful writing-student followers (“my tribe”), Olson would now take on not only the textual emphases but the teaching style of some aged ancient patriarch. oracular. dogmatic and utterly committed to the significance of his message. So intensely had he come to identify with the ideas he represented, in fact, that in students’ eyes he now seemed the living image of his own absorption, dominating classroom discourse without challenge....(Clark 204)

Yet even greater was his attempt to reach out to the larger world through his poetry, to create in his own image his own “city-state.” The neoteric Olson/Maximus was to make of locality a new totality, the new Gloucester, that could represent *his* ideas.

Setting

“I take space to be the central fact to man born in America” (Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 11).

“Poem 143. The Festival Aspect” is a text that resonates Olson’s major poetic idea of space, represented in his rendition of the city-state, capturing within the central trope (destruction and reconstruction) of “three towns” Olson’s desire to unify life and

recreate totality by establishing community to advance truth as an alternative to the
“lost” trinity of western religion:

The World
has become divided
from the Universe. Put the three Towns
together

The Individual
has become divided
from the Absolute, it is the times promised
by the poets. They shall drop delta
and lingam, all forms
of symbol and mystery. As well as all
naturalism. And literalness. The truth

is fingers holding it all up...

... The three Towns
are to be destroyed, as well as
that they are to be made known,
that they are to be known
that there is no three Towns
now, that without three Towns
there is no Society, there is no
known
Absolute... (Maximus III.73).

Olson chose to employ setting as a stabilizing formula, the American experience, for his epic, a lack he saw in Pound's work. Repairing American society from a European perspective proved ineffective. Olson uses Gloucester, Massachusetts, to emphasize “the culture of advertising as well as the usurious power of money as elements destructive of local culture” (Dewey 106). Like the rest of America, Gloucester was “as much as a lost cause as the rest of the culture, all its individuality washed out by the pervasive mediocre mass-market totality” (Clark 225). The portrait of American experience Olson adopted from Williams's *Paterson* made cultural criticism more

understandable in terms of location, providing opportunity for change in terms of a more tangible “space” rather than ethereal “time.” The attack on Vincent Ferrini demonstrates the importance of the individual in relation to the local in space. Olson believed one must be solidly connected to the local before working to change it could be effective. Thus for Olson, “geography, actual earth, and the actual human body constitute value...not just because they constitute *topos* or place, but because they also determine one’s own relation to that place, to space, to history, and to one’s own action” (*Poetic Subjectivity* 189).

Yet merely to present space was not adequate. Olson needed to fuse Williams’ “localism” to Pound’s call for change. Olson reveals this fusion of space to action (the inanimate to the animate) in a letter, stating Williams “gave us the lead on the local,” in *Paterson*, while Pound’s *Cantos* was “one long extrapolation...on WILL,” a text where the poet could “be political” (*Letters for Origin* 130). Politics attracted Olson most—“the blast instead of the story” (*Letters for Origin* 129)—even though it was through story that the “blast” could communicate. In order to attain the end of change Olson was willing to modify Pound’s means. Although Pound was geographical in *The Cantos*, turning time, for Olson, “into what we must have, space & its live air” (*Selected Writings* 82), Pound’s journey took him to Europe. Olson cried out for a survey of the local to find among our ruined fragments a new, usable totality:

And now, when they, these professionals, are catching on (EP’s 35 yr lag, surely), to the validity of the total life of a people as what cargo art discharges, I am the one who is arguing that the correct way to come to an estimate of that dense & total thing is not, again, to measure the walls of a huge city but to get down, before it is too late, on a flat thing called a map, as complete a survey as possible of all, all present ruins, small as most of them are. (*Selected Writings* 73)

Olson would validate “the total life of a people” by basing a form on American soil, like Pound’s use of history to find “a new localism, a *polis* to replace the one which was lost...from 490 b.c. on” (*Special View* 25). In this new *polis* people could reconnect to their society, as in former times. This renewal drove Olson’s actions as politician and poet reacting to the spiritually impoverished postwar. He had written to a friend, Frances Boldereff, “of his hopes for a new America, hailing the emergence of ‘a green republic now renewed.’ She replied that in the current explosion of materialism she saw no evidence of such renewal, and challenged him to provide some” (Clark 146).

Olson’s answer was his *Maximus*, announcing his new *polis* Gloucester. The long poem delineating the downfall of culture, this guide also provided instructions for its renewal. The *Maximus* Poems were to be pods of rejuvenation; Olson likens them to Tansy, the pungent, medicinal flowers grown in his childhood, their bright yellow color and strong aroma quickly noticed, covering the ugliness and stench of capitalism:

Tansy buttons, tansy
for my city
Tansy for their noses

Tansy for them,
tansy for Gloucester to take the smell
of all owners,
the smell

Tansy
for all of us (*Maximus* I.9).

Olson’s description of historical events (in the above case, personal experience) set within space rather than time (as his memory of the tansy flowers becomes flowers that inhabit Gloucester), reveals through juxtaposition “inherent schemes of order...grasped

only within a space-time matrix independent of a diachronic understanding of experience” (Beach 103). Within these, the American citizen belongs and, as Foucault reminds us, this occupation of ordered space allows him to be known, watched, and therefore guided in covert ways. Olson himself defines the American in terms of space, the human as a single unit, though made up of parts, that can be observed, measured, and subsequently “figured out”: “An American/is a complex of occasions./themselves a geometry/of spatial nature (*Maximus* II.15).

Dembo points out that “Maximus’ ‘trade’ (and therefore his identity) is the reconstruction of *polis* with the tools of language or, in practical terms, the articulation of a vision of man’s moral history and fate...In this way he seeks to fulfill himself as a poet and to bring about the new Gloucester that is a revitalization of the ideal forms of the old” (Dembo 288-289). As Olson leads us to this new *polis*, he adds up the parts in his own created formula (as exemplified by the following first line):

Plus this-plus this:
that forever the geography
which leans in
on me I compell
backwards I compell Gloucester
to yield, to
change
Polis
is this (Maximus II.15).

Olson’s interest in community is shared by postmodern poets as the community of poets attest who resided in Black Mountain, San Francisco, and New York. As we will see, Olson went further than trying to establish community through art; in attempting to build a physical artistic community he transforms a personal ideological

stance on American culture into a communal one, establishing and propagating his message not only through his theoretical and artistic work, but also his performance as community leader. It is necessary to view how his practical life at Black Mountain College was involved with his poetry and vice versa. For both the artist and the critic, Black Mountain becomes Gloucester's real-life representation of the poet's art, providing a physical space for the poet to act upon, further enlightening us about the personal ideology and composition that shaped art.

Olson's first stint as an instructor, then rector, at Black Mountain reveals his practice as a form of poetic preaching:

Between the lines of the poet's hortatory address to his sea-city one makes out vague outlines of the neo-archaic stronghold of his imagination, the projected city-state Black Mountain, last sanctum of idealistic dissent within the cultural Wasteland of "Big Boy, the emerging World State" and a place where it was still possible "to invert totality – to oppose it – by discovering the totality of any-every-single-one of us." (Clark 225)

Olson comprehended his status at Black Mountain, an experimental arts college that had fallen on hard financial times in the 1950's, as savior—he actually suggested to Martin Duberman, who was writing a history of the college, that he title his period:

the Afterwards,
or the Original Damsel Re'deemed
you might call 1951 on
—with no end date known or in sight! (Duberman 352)

He would redeem his model *polis* made up of "islands of men and girls" (Clark 235) with lessons on the creation of totality. According to a former student, Fielding Dawson, Olson would show his students how to combine "all those nouns and dates, the histories" into a "massive singleness," his "constant obsessive fix on details" that made

him a sort of God to them who formed his own reality “like a creative child, rearranging his life and the world so that it will all be at his fingertips” (Clark 235). The students’ reactions to Olson were mixed—they ranged from “intense dislike to blind adulation” (Duberman 391)—differing on each end of the extreme (much like a totalitarian leader, resolutely loved or hated). One student whom Duberman cites insisted Olson was “basically a charlatan”:

in thought and teaching he is a faddish member of the New York and Washington avant-garde. At the time he was here his gods were Pound, Kafka, and [Victor] Berard. And he taught according to the tenets of his (current) gods. I neither liked nor respected him. We had a few students, most of whom, fortunately, are gone, who regarded him as a master and themselves as his disciples. Their work was imitative rather than derivative, and their attitudes dogmatic, snobbish, and limited. My own interest in Pound came almost in spite of Olson rather than from him.
(Duberman 391)

The students’ perception of Olson’s “charlatanism” was due, in part, to the paradox suffered by the twentieth-century American poet: the freedom an individual artist has to observe and discover what he openly proposes in his poetry is contradicted by an underlying authoritarian agenda necessarily set and adhered to in order to promote change. According to some of his students, Olson’s classroom demeanor was a sign of his unbending will. Even though he invited his students to participate as equals, Olson dominated, allowing no room for questioning. He perpetuated his views on culture, as he did in his poetry, by creating a domineering, almost God-like persona beyond question. This, coupled with his rhetorical skills, made Olson a pedagogical force to wholly reject or accept. Students described him as being “mythic... he cast himself that way and probably we students did so cast him. He had a way of surrounding himself

with a special aura” (Clark 143). When students challenged him, Olson’s political savvy took over. There was “no squaring off with that guy [because] he was so deviously in his ways of sidestepping and moving himself back into domination square” (Clark 143). Here at Black Mountain Olson achieved what Clark describes as his long-sought “experience of dominance” (Clark 143).

Portraying Olson in his activity as an academic gives insight into his activity as an artist. Olson believed in art’s practical role in the advancement of humanity. The artist “becomes responsible to a literal socio-cultural order, on which his work depends for its completion” (Byrd 27). Observing the artist in actual space helps readers enter into the space of the art. On a smaller scale, the socio-cultural order at Black Mountain foreshadowed the utopia of *Maximus*, including the process of *how* to go about fashioning and conveying it. These Black Mountain poets believed themselves as powerful and (more) intelligent than the ill-equipped political leaders of their day (Olson thought Truman a fool) who actually made history. Through Olson’s activity in the FDR administration and Pound’s with Mussolini, they searched for a way to make a difference in the political arena. Although Olson did not have the ear of a powerful man he *did* speak to Roosevelt on occasion, but did not advise since he believed FDR’s New Deal administration would bring about the changes he sought. He did have access to space to develop his ideas and as Byrd warns, “poets who cast their work in actual space must be considered especially dangerous because, even more than the politicians who are sometimes able to ignore uncritical details, they are likely to have a ruthless urge to coherence” (Byrd 27). Finally, “spatial” poetry and pragmatic politics connect.

Robert Harbison reminds us that:

Dictatorship appears first in twentieth-century Europe sponsored by a poet, in D'Annunzio's brief government of Fiume from 1919 to 1920. Politics becomes ritual again, confused with religion, and society appears to take on the coherence of a work of art, at least while the crowd is assembled listening to the leader who is its ruling principle, its wholeness. This is no sterile estheticism but the poetry of act, the people not simply spectators but the artist's material, to be formed into his monument like the readers of pornography. (Byrd 27)

Although Olson is no dictator, his drive toward coherence, inspired by good intentions, manifests itself in his desire to influence history. The "poetry of act" becomes an attempt to remake history, ultimately revealing the totalitarian strain of Olson's personal ideology.

History + Form= Myth

"I see history as the one way to restore the familiar to us to stop treating us cheap."
(Olson, *Special View* 29)

An early poem in the second volume of the Maximus poems reports a modification in Olson's inception of *polis*, structuring the geographic from the historical. Olson presents a geography shaped by the active intellect. The recognition that the intellect is central to investigating the past, that history is also personal, an imposition of one's mind, initiates the poem's explicit statement of a willful, ideological representation of history:

This, is no bare incoming
of novel abstract form

It is the *imposing*
of all those antecedent predecessions, the precissions
of me, the generation of those facts
which are my words... (Maximus II.14, emphasis added).

Barua speculates on Olson's motivations: "it is as if Olson is trying to make everything he knows cohere and present an image of his mind or self" (6). The contradiction in Olson, as in Pound, came when the artist's attempt to create coherence through the selection of random historical facts denies ideology developed during this process: "what I call DOCUMENT simply to emphasize that the events alone do the work, that the narrator stays OUT, functions as pressure not as interpreting person, illuminates not by argument or "creativity" but by master of force...the art, to make his meanings clear by how he juxtaposes, correlates, and causes to interact whatever events and persons he chooses to set in motion" (*Human Universe* 127). The facts do not speak for themselves. They are selected, organized, and presented to deliver a particular message. What defines the artist is the driving force of intellect behind the creation. Olson also admits in the same tract "some instrumentation in man's given which makes selection possible" (*Human Universe* 9)—the poet's will; in this case, to establish totality.

Olson became the poet-historian he so admired in Pound. As historian, he was able to take on the role of social critic, using those elements he believed relevant to his part of America. In doing so, he reasoned with different historical periods and figures. Gone were the classical European models, "the historicism plaguing all Europeans, and so the world, by proselytizing from the center" (*Human Universe* 155). For Olson, the center was the present, not the past. He required an American perspective, devoid of a European legacy, to regard "the substances of history now useful" that "lie outside, under, right here, anywhere but in the direct continuum of society as we have had it" (*Selected Writings* 83-84). Pound's "admitted insistence to stay inside the western box,

Gemisto, 1429 A.D., up” (*Selected Writings* 129) failed to explain the poet’s dealings with the modern world. For Olson, history had to apply to the “living present” (*Selected Writings* 84). Olson’s practical use of history was embraced by Robert Creeley, a collaborator who wanted postmodern poets to make the objects of life relevant to the perceiver, much as Pound proposed thirty years prior in his manifesto for Imagism. History is to be another of those objects treated directly when contending with a “complex occasion” such as the human’s place in the world. In his introduction to Olson’s *Selected Writings*, Creeley summarizes Olson’s particular use of history to explain that history is ever-present, a part of the phenomenology of the now:

When a man walks down a street, he walks it only *now*—whether the date be 1860, 1960, or so-called centuries ago. History is a literal story, the activity of evidence.

In short, the world is not separable, and we *are* in it. The fact of “Apollonius of Tyana” is not *then*, so to speak—at some remove in time because its person is, as we might say, historical. Each moment is evidence of its own content, and all that is met with in it, is as present as anything else. Apollonius *is* a present instance. (*Selected Writings* 8-9)

Yet, as I have considered in the last chapter, Pound’s treatment of history is similar when he includes materials to exemplify, contrast and extend what is now happening. History is also “now” for Pound as he creates a narrative with a protagonist whose reflection on the past illuminates a present situation of despair while offering “lessons” to be learned. Olson merely expands on Pound’s canon by connecting his material to his era. The more familiar the content, the more effectively it will resist chaos. In writing a letter to Cid Corman concerning the formation of a literary magazine (what was to become *Origins*), Olson directs Corman to select work of a topical, yet unifying nature:

do you, Cid Corman, think that you can put out a PUSH, now, by not following up on the FIRST PRINCIPAL (the non-deductive, but formal

totality of a man, say, in each issue) to the SECOND PRINCIPAL, the same, from p.1 to page 75 (you say) AS OF THE WHOLE REALITY NOW? (*Corman Correspondence* 1 40)

Olson shared Pound's belief that poetry can reflect the total reality by using history.

Olson's attempt to critique culture from an anti-rational stance, what Pound also

wanted, succumbs to the era's need for form and the artist's ultimate desire to control.

The initial impulse *not* to order, yet still to tell and teach, inevitably dissipates as the

poet adopts a totality instead that tries not to show its order but must have a structure

that professes his message. To be given significant form and articulation, the objects of

life, like the words of a poem, needed to be re-embodied with meaning and reinstated in

our lives. For Olson, document and historical "fact" became the solids on which to feed

the masses through an "archaic" delivery system, with "document taking over the

onetime role of magic in the human mystery, fact that of religious ritual" (Clark 124).

To answer Clark's question, fabricating the historical epic as myth is the way the

postmodern deals with "the mass quantity of data before him," without "succumbing to

the hypermaterialistic supermarket culture of the present" (Clark 272).

The Authority of Myth

"He had the tradition in him, deep, in his brain, his words...It enabled him to draw up from Shakespeare. It made Noah, and Moses, contemporary to him. History was ritual and repetition when Melville's imagination was at its own proper beat." (Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* 13)

The mythological allows for the subjectivity of the historical poet to be

accepted, as his words become tradition, part of the cultural landscape; the text of the

poem gives universal sanction to the poet's experience. The individual within the myth

tradition intrigues Olson, as the human who has lost the center is reassembled by the

epic, given “the chance to join knowledge to culture. and with the weapon, shape dignities of economics and value sufficient to make daily life itself a dignity and a sufficiency” (*Human Universe* 19). The individual will be revealed to and for himself. it seems, as the specific content of a formal re-enactment of some moral action or quest: “THE MORAL IS [ALSO] FORM...and the MORAL ACT is the honest ‘sincere’ motion in the direction of form” (*Letters for Origin* 83). In this understanding of art as moral ceremony we locate Olson’s interest in ancient myth and its factive heroes. The factive hero is just that, a hero, who is continually “pushing against the limits, seeking a way out. Homer gave his hero the central quality of the men to come: search, the individual responsible to himself” (*Call Me Ishmael* 118). In Olson’s view the mythologizing of the factive hero came about by first changing the terms of his locale that contained the world he had to know and later regulate. Thus, “the myth-work is also and always a social-political stance, allowing for the integration of grounded locale and wider cultural awareness,” moving the “geography of actual place, actual reality, to the comprehensive mythological view that serves as human kind’s guide back to that reality” (*Poetic Subjectivity* 185). Olson employs Herodotus as a historian—one who *subjectively* presents history in a narrative, almost fictionalized manner—on whom to model his own historical presentation: “I would be a historian as Herodotus was, looking / for oneself for the evidence of / what is said” (*Maximus* I.100). Olson’s regard for Herodotus as a historian motivates his extension of the narrative, mythological element in American poetry. History reflects what humans actually are involved in daily from past to present, expressing common activity “ingrained in our daily lives,” as

“what man does” (*Special View* 14,26). Olson believed Pound’s poetry lacked this portrayal of man’s daily life—and thus was ineffective in carrying his message to the masses. For Olson, Herodotus was the “last historian to be taken seriously as...a mythologist, a ‘poet’” (*Special View* 21). Using Herodotus as a basis for his thought, Olson creates poetry he deems “mutho-logos, the practice of life as story” (*Special View* 21). In order to understand exactly what Olson meant, we might consider a source through which he gained knowledge about Herodotus and his method. J.A.K. Thomson, a writer with whom Olson was familiar, explains the difference between Muthos and Logos:

So far as we know, the first to distinguish between Muthos and Logos, was Pindar...Muthos, the false story, is contrasted with Logos, the true...It is from this usage that ‘myth’ has come to mean (in the words of the New English Dictionary) ‘a fictitious narrative’...It is only when the need arises to discriminate between the false story and the true, between imagination...and demonstrable fact, that [Plato] follows Pindar and calls the false a Muthos. Yet the converse does not hold, and in normal usage Logos did not mean a true story. It means simply a Story. (*Guide to Maximus* 145-46)

The ancient Greek separation between myth as imagination and logos as demonstrable fact exposes the gap Lukács described as the introduction of subjectivity, the separation of humans from their society. Through Lukács we see modern artists attempt to close this gap with totalizing *fictive* forms. The impulse toward narrative continues into the postmodern with Olson, via Pound, attempting to combine the objective, what can be considered the “demonstrable facts” of our daily lives, with what the artist filters through his subjective imagination, ultimately producing a fiction based on fact. Olson’s poetry would combine the elements of myth and “truth,” creating a narrative

form for recounting history, a historiography [that] shares with its source an impulse to push the course of human events toward the status of myth” (McPheron 195).

Story is paramount for our American poets as a way of making the “truth” more palatable while preserving its aesthetic appeal. Olson modeled his art on that of Herodotus for this reason, as Thompson explains:

Nothing matters to the Story Teller but the Story...It is assumed by the Story Teller and his audience that the story is true; destroy that assumption and you destroy his method. Herodotus is perfectly well aware of this. He is critical enough, and this often comes out in his comments on a Logos. But in telling the Logos itself criticism is suspended, the atmosphere of belief is carefully and beautifully preserved. It is this which makes the real difference between him and Thucydides, who saw that his business was to destroy the *Muthodes*, the Mythic element in history, the Logoi, because they cared nothing for accuracy. It was the business of Herodotus to save them. (*Guide to Maximus* 146-47)

The business of the modern artist, carried through Herodotus to Olson, was also to restore this mythic element to convey personal truth. Olson reveals the personal nature of the writing of history, the historian’s “poetic license” in conveying “truth”: “...but no one but an herodotean may fool around with such fraudulence & fantasy practiced on document...The trouble is, it is very difficult, to be both a poet and, an historian” (*Selected Writings* 129-30). Olson writes multiple versions of the same story only attributed to him as narrator/historian. The shift between truth and fiction is noted in two poems, each entitled *Maximus, to Gloucester*. “Letter 15” corrects “Letter 2” `s story about the landing of a ship through difficult, stormy weather, giving import to the action—the resolute “sight” of the stout seaman pulling the cargo ship through to safety. The fictionalizing of the early story helps Olson to make his message clear through

allegory and metaphor: our sight, in spite of our “blindness,” must stand firm in trying times. Yet, once this is revealed as inaccurate, it loses some of its force:

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.
(*Maximus* I.67)

Or does it lose power? Olson used a story that has become legendary, capturing with it, in its retelling, the mythic power that had already made it famous. By Olson’s claim that this story is false, or at least needs to have some of its elements corrected, he exerts authority while the story remains intact. Olson is in possession of truth, the historian with the straight facts, but the tale loses no power as a result of this modification while Olson (as *Maximus*) gains it, albeit subtly, in the minds of his readers.

The mythic intends to “eliminate” or, at best, to hide this personal authority, by universalizing it throughout the dissemination of information. This counters Thucydides’ “objective” strategy intended to achieve the same result. Olson’s modification of the two necessarily preserves the individual. His poetry is created by a perceiver alone in his perceptions, gathering and compacting common knowledge into mythic narrative for the benefit of his readers:

Obviously the word ‘history’ is a word—unless you take it to root—which doesn’t have any use at all. And the root is the original first use of it, in the first chapter if not the first paragraph of Herodotus, in which he says ‘I’m using this as a verb *istorin*, which means *to find out for yourself...*’ After all, Herodotus goes around and finds out everything he can find out, and then tells a story. It’s one of the reasons why I trust him more than, say, Thucydides, who basically is reporting an event...(*Muthologos* I, 3).

Christopher Beach, in his excellent study of Olson's poem "To Gerhardt, There, Among Europe's Things, of Which He Has Written in His 'Brief an Creeley und Olson,'" argues that Olson criticizes Pound for being too objective; in other words, he is too much like Thucydides' mere reportage. Beach claims that Olson believes "Gerhardt cannot assume the power or 'magic' of his predecessors merely by invoking them, just as Pound cannot create a vital *paideuma* with his 'back references,' his 'ruins,' and the 'old pieces' he has picked up in Europe and China" (Beach 96). As with Pound, the modern impulse to combine the objective with narrative remains intact. The difference between Olson's and Pound's method of combining "muthos" and "logos" exists in a subtle passing on and reshaping of form and content, but not in radical change. With new myths and new creations, Olson takes a position as a shaman who continues Pound's story of passing on of "old" elements of culture to create a "new" one in the present.

Magic and the Dialectic of Myth

"...In place of the local spirits and demons there appeared heaven and its hierarchy; in place of the invocations of the magician and the tribe the distinct gradation of sacrifice and the labor of the unfree mediated through the word of command. The Olympic deities are no longer directly identical with elements, but signify them." (Adorno and Horkheimer 8)

Both Pound's and Olson's combinatory practice may be explained by Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as these Marxist thinkers make a connection between myth and enlightened thought. Myth produces understanding of the world "as all or nothing" (Adorno 24). To think of the world as total helped at first to explain the individual's unity with it, then, as the self separated

from society during the introduction of subjectivity, helped to place the individual in a hierarchical position in relation to the world. The shaman or magician retells the human story, in order to regain unity in the totality, introducing ritualistic imitation to appease the power of nature. In this sense, myth is a strategy of containment to keep the society in *active* pursuit of a utopian reconnection to totality. As Adorno and Horkheimer put it:

Myth intended report, naming, the narration of the Beginning; but also presentation, confirmation, explanation...Narrative became didactic at an early stage. Every ritual includes the idea of *activity* as a determined process which magic can nevertheless influence. (Adorno 8, emphasis added)

These stories became vehicles for domination and power, forcing listeners to actively participate in the spirit-appeasing ritual to maintain order. This ritual perpetuated itself, as do all rituals, by repetition and mimesis. The myth reflected life as closely as possible. Magic itself sought to represent those very chaotic elements such as “the wind, the rain, the serpent without, or the demon in the sick man” (9).

It is important to realize that the shaman or teller of the tale creates “magic”: the shaman’s role is itself a *fictive*, communicative act. When Olson tells us of the “three stages of feeling” involved in his *Special View of History*, he refers to the conditions Adorno and Horkheimer outline:

The first is that in which the multiples of anything crowd in on the individual; the second is that most individual stage when he or she seeks to impose his or her own order of order on the multiples; and the third is the stage called satisfaction, in which the true order is seen to be the confrontation of two interchanging forces which can be called God and the World. (*Special View* 50)

The two interchanging forces are the order-seeking individual and the multiple things of the objective world, respectively, in Olson’s terms, God and the World. (*Objectivists*

104) Olson, as order-seeking shaman, makes multiple demands of the postmodern world he wishes to control through the practice of magic. Adorno's magic becomes Olson's poetic practice, a ritualistic naming of objects the poet/shaman wants to affect. These magical rites are specific to what they represent; in the case of the poet/shaman they manifest language created at the function of perceiver and object. Magical incantation controls the individual reader/listener, leading to the symbolic realm: "What happens to the enemy's spear, hair or name, also happens to the individual; the sacrificial animal is massacred instead of the god. Substitution in the course of sacrifice marks a step toward discursive logic" (Adorno 10). Even though magic, the means of expression, is fictive, the result rings true: "Magic is utterly untrue, yet in its domination is not yet negated by transforming itself into the pure truth and acting as the very ground of the world that has been subject to it" (Adorno 9). The practice of magic is the only way humankind can reach utopia; magic practices are "guaranteed roads to redemption" (Adorno 24). Adorno and Horkheimer imply that this expression of the world and our attempt to reach unity with it become eternal, whether through Jewish creation myth or the religion of Olympia. Each myth dominates the world and "signifies self-repetitive nature, which is the core of the symbolic: a state of being or a process that is presented as eternal, because it incessantly becomes actual once more by being realized in symbolic form" (Adorno 17).

This self-reflexive nature, moving toward discursive logic through substitution, helps enlightened thought replace myth while, in turn, it adopts mythic elements to maintain influence. The conclusion that "myth is already enlightenment; and

enlightenment reverts to mythology” (Adorno xvi) clearly states the unending process of domination of peoples through this constant representing of the world. “Myth turns into Enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity.... Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them” (Adorno 9). With the beginning of a Kantian productivity of spirit that recognizes man as the creator of his own forms, “milieu-bound practices of the medicine man” are replaced by “all-inclusive industrial technology [that] required first of all the autonomy of ideas in regard to objects that was achieved in the reality-adjusted ego” (Adorno 11). Science replaces magic as a system by which the individual expresses his relation to reality. Like magic, science pursues the same aims—control—by the same means—mimesis. Objectivity, the Enlightenment’s new way of looking at the world, does not require specific representation of the object, nor does it permit a sacrificial substitution such as God for explanation. Instead, “representation is exchanged for the fungible—universal interchangeability” (Adorno 10). Everything in the world is matter. There is no need for representation because there is a “direct” translation made by the perceiver. In this way, the ideas of science appear autonomous. All is mathematical, therefore infinite, but an infinitum that can be known as petrified and controlled scientific object through formula so all ideas are universalized to reach conceptual unity. This notion “expresses the hierarchical constitution of life determined by those that are free. The individuality that learned order and subordination in the subjection of the world, soon wholly equated truth with the regulative thought without whose fixed distinctions universal truth cannot exist” (Adorno 14). The “regulative thought” of enlightenment

that produces a universal truth similar to myth (though no longer based on god or spirit) also perpetuates itself as enlightened thought becomes mythical.

Yet there may be a difference between myth and enlightenment as there was still specificity of representation between the images and language used by the shaman and the objects he invoked: “On the magical plane, dream and image were not mere signs for the thing in question, but were bound up with it by similarity or names...” (Adorno 11). Olson maintained the distinction between specific and abstract representation distinguishes writers who anthropomorphize images from those who represent them by real objects. In an essay entitled “The Mystery of What Happens When it Happens.” he rejects conversion of religion to “dogma” and art to “automatic and artificial notions of the function of the creative man” (Dewey 103), supporting instead a “materialism” and “objectism” that sustains Adorno and Horkheimer’s ideas on objectivity. For Olson, mathematical “quantity as an expression of force, and quantity as a birthplace of myth” (Dewey 103) becomes the starting point for his modern myth. Distinctions between mythic and real, therefore, are negligible and are lost in the rational world of enlightened thought, bound to dissipate as representation is used, through substitution, to control meaning for the individual self. Mythical ritual replaced by mathematical formalism becomes “the ritual of thinking...[that] turns thought into a thing” (Adorno 25). The apparent paradox of the dialectic lies in the fact that the enlightenment, that defends itself against mythic determination, “dissolv[ing] the injustice of the old inequality—unmediated lordship and mastery” (Adorno 12), still remains closely connected to myth even as it convinces us of its objective definition of reality:

Mathematical formalism, however, whose medium is number, the most

abstract form of the immediate, instead holds thinking firmly to mere immediacy. The more the machinery of thought subjects existence to itself, the more blind its resignation in reproducing existence. Hence enlightenment returns to mythology, which it never really knew how to elude. For in its figures mythology had the essence of the status quo: cycle, fate, and domination of the world reflected as the truth and deprived of hope. In both the pregnancy of the mythical image and the clarity of the scientific formula, the everlastingness of the factual is confirmed and mere existence pure and simple expressed as the meaning which forbids. (Adorno 27)

Our poets convert objects they see in our world to myths that become social truth. Olson unveils his poetic objectivism as “evidence of the process of poetry as approaching truth with no other guise than itself” (*Muthologos* II.26). The *Maximus Poems* are a “total” collection that explains, like any standard mythical collection, the meanings and mysteries of life, becoming the modern era’s sacred writ. For example, when asked about his thoughts on the Tibetan Book of the Dead, Olson tells us: “I purposely stay away from it because I have my own book” (*Muthologos* I.46). This book, the *Maximus*, in its progression from objective poetry to myth, moves from “polis to cosmos... subservient to no creed or system,” forcing the reader to accept its tenets and “agree with Olson that [his own] idiosyncrasy is a most powerful creative principle in mythology” (Maud 160). As Olson relies on both the mythic patterns that comprise his poetry and his own status as grandiose myth-maker, one sees with von Hallberg that the *Maximus* “becomes more and more a matter of assertion, his assertion of understanding and certainty, and less and less... a process of discovery for either Olson or his reader” (*Objectivists* 106).

As the elements of enlightenment replace magic, Olson asserts his will by playing with language as the specific representation of the world. In Olson, myths and

archetypes have a nominative power, “naming forms of human experience which cannot be otherwise described” (Barua 15). These objects along with their names help Olson reintegrate the human into the right place, connecting to things in the world, counting the self as one of the objects in the world and permitting the perceiver to see and name reality. The human as perceiver and namer is a privileged position as Thomas

Bertonneau notes:

Despite the tendency toward nihilism, Olson never thinks that “the human” is a sign without a referent or that “the human” is, in radically relativistic terms... whatever the interpreter wishes or pragmatically requires it to be. The human is not something “constructed,” differently by different parties and arbitrarily in all cases, as contemporary thought delights in asserting. Rather, the human remains something specifiable, a kernel of reality that can be sought out and understood through language.... Because a real human presence exists which can be the object of predication... as Olson argues, “language is a prime of the matter,” and this in turn necessitates that the anthropologist (the investigator of the human) “examine, first, the present condition of the language” (Bertonneau 122).

The power of myth both to name and to give to humans the power of nomination—solidifying myth’s connection to language—was not lost on Olson. Paul Christensen observes that Olson used myth in “at least three different ways... (1) as encoded historical documents; (2) as ‘eternal objects’ or as permanent forms of human experience; and (3) as archetypes of the unconscious” (Barua 14). By employing myth, especially in the first of Christensen’s examples, Olson attacks “the epistemic discourse of abstraction which institutes a separation between the sign and the object,” striving “to restore the full denotative power to words by writing a poetry of facts” (Barua 14). So Olson’s theory of language remains referential, an “old-fashioned... correspondential theory of language” (Bertonneau 122-123) where the poet/historian “is able to discover

what amounts to truths about a characteristic and immutable human nature” (Bertonneau 120). Giving the human a role in creating reality while using history and myth which are “not individual creations and do not support a logocentric view of life” (Barua 13) is a central paradox in Olson’s poetry. Studying the theory and the practice of Olson’s poetry reveals how history proves that “sight” into reality has been damaged, fragmenting man’s relationship with his surroundings, and the myth shows great heroes finding their way back toward a unified solution to this chaos. The great poetic hero of the new era regains this “sight” as the *one* human privileged to read the archetypes that exist (but are hidden) for all. The poet’s duty is to then “project” these insights to the people.

Practical Poetics

“Nothing is accident, and man, no less than nature, does nothing without plan or the discipline to make plan fact.” (Olson, *Human Universe* 7)

Olson’s seminal essay “Projective Verse” stages the future poetic practice for contemporary American poets. Olson’s statement on poetics intends, in Olson’s own words, to bring about a new “stance toward reality” to “lead to new poetics and to new concepts from which some sort of drama, say, or of epic, perhaps, may emerge” (*Selected Writings* 15). This assertion clearly sets Olson in the Poundian tradition of guiding poetic content through artistic form to produce a narrative of epic proportion to expose “some simplicities that a man learns” (*Selected Writings* 16). Presenting everything experienced in a direct manner transforms it into something that may be considered (f)actual, so that poetry can claim the status of philosophy, “contesting with the modes of knowing” (Byrd 23). This knowledge can be used, as Plato used it

hundreds of years before to combat a decaying empire. to find the unifying principle in things. Olson believed knowledge gained and communicated through poetry, written by an “actual, a willful man” provided the world with “the true word for what has been called totality” (*Special View* 36). Olson’s quest for knowledge works in tandem with a poetic methodology; totality and methodology purposefully married. In a letter to Cid Corman, Olson defined his use of the words “totality” and “methodology.” “Totality” is one’s experience and recognition of the world as “one” (*Letters for Origin* 106). The only way to know and regain totality is through active participation in the real:

- 1) TOTALITY is the character of reality now &
- 2)... METHODOLOGY is the discipline to master it and the totality of a person, and his expression, is the degree of his act of organization, efficiency (obviously, this way, human) and quantity (in a sense of how much he manages to include...)
and the methodology is
 - 1) to have a path
 - 2) and that such a path is always accomplishable by the habitual practice of orderliness and regularity in action. (*Letters for Origin* 107)

The path, or the methodology to reach totality, to master, organize, and order *expression* “of a person.” involves Olson’s new “shout” that returns the human to the totality of the world through the use of language—this he called poetic “projectivism”.

Projectivism is to place the “self” directly in contact with the environment. Objects, as they are being transferred from the perspective of the poet to the poem, must neglect “any ideas and preconceptions from outside the poem” (*Selected Writings* 20). This poetic form intends, as did Pound’s imagism, to obliterate conventions that would interfere with perception, creating a direct representation of world through language. Conventions overdetermined the human, ensnaring us in irrefutable but false images.

Our western thought, based on Aristotelian and Platonic thinking, leads to a “dogmatic stagnation” of the mind that permits us to be “hypnotized” by the advertisers who cheapen our existence. (Bertonneau 121) The way to break out of these conventions is to make thought infinite, limited only by individual possibility, to make humans once again responsible for ordering their chaos:

... When things
Are knots where instance
Hides order, and a man
Does not run as sheep... (*Maximus* I.128).

Olson’s metaphor for this way of thinking is an “open field”—again a representation within space. In his “COMPOSITION BY FIELD” (*Selected Writings* 16) the poet will *project* his objects in an “OPEN” fashion, a new poetic form “opposed to inherited line, stanza, over-all form, what is the ‘old’ base of the non-projective” (16). But now, the “space” of Olson’s poetry seems infinite, contrasting with his idea of a knowable, circumscribed *polis*. In elaborating this field-based poetics, Olson expresses the “unstable relation between the individual poet and the social forces” (Dewey 85) that not only structure his poetry, but that his poetry wishes to control.

Poetics created in an open field are apparently democratic, intended to include everything without regard to personal ideology. Here, influenced by Alfred North Whitehead, Olson believed he differed from Pound. Whitehead’s study, *Process and Reality*, taught Olson that in recreating reality the artist must “impose his or her order on the multiples,” chaotic objects. After this necessary artistic ordering, the artist must then include everything left out, so as to “acquir[e] real unity with other entities” (Whitehead 245), fixed and constant: “it is [an entity] exactly what it is, by reason of *its*

objective definition” (Whitehead 314, emphasis added). The poet is responsible for verbalizing this objective definition in order to “maintain definition, order, certainty, and limitation in a time when gravitational limitations had become insignificant and the boundaries around particles of matter were seen to be anything but absolute or certain” (*Objectivists* 88). According to Whitehead each object in the world goes through a process of becoming itself by interacting with other entities:

Each actual entity is, in Whitehead’s system, a process first of becoming itself and then of becoming every other actual entity: according to his interpretation of the theory of relativity, no two actual entities are unrelated; each actual entity “feels” every other actual entity. This term for this “feeling” is prehension... if positively, one actual entity transmits itself... to another; if negatively, Whitehead would say that one actual entity “decides” not to form itself out of the energy of the other actual entity. (*Objectivists* 89)

As the objects define themselves through this active prehension, the poet engages a similar process, defining his world by interacting with and defining its objects. Von Hallberg says Whitehead’s process aims at the unity of all entities. Whitehead’s ideas on the unification of discrete matter “opens up narrative and discursive possibilities for an objectivist poetry” (*Objectivists* 95). Olson adopted Whitehead’s idea of achieving unity through motion as central to his own poetics: “Anyhow, this is my aesthetic. And my *ethic*—simply, that I do take it that it is motion—the motion of matter—which is the mark of the spirit of man—in the dust” (*Objectivists* 94, emphasis added). Whitehead “cleared out the gunk/ by getting the universe in,” allowing for “self-action” by the poet to search for a new poetics in which to represent this process: “The poetics of such a situation/ are yet to be found out” (*Maximus* II.79).

This all-inclusive poetics focusing on the active—word as verb—continues

Pound's strategies. Poetic "action" comes in Olson's adaptation of the ideogrammatic method as well as in his "techniques of repetition, syntactic and semantic play, minimalist composition, juxtaposition of diction, and in the increased mixing of poetry with other media [which] are all outgrowths of Pound's work and ideas" (Beach 27). Olson's extension of Pound's techniques not only demonstrated "how far a new poet can stretch the very conventions on which communication by language rests" (*Selected Writings* 21), but also connected form to content in such an indestructible way that the perception and expression of our world were encapsulated together into one story. Where Pound employed ideograms rather than words to express active meaning within an image, Olson's trope is an "energetic" image conducting reality to the printed page. Energy, like Pound's truth, exists even before the poem's creation; all that is needed is the poet's vision. Olson's desire to collapse all form into content is an articulation of this poetic—he tells us in "Projective Verse" that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXPRESSION OF CONTENT" (*Selected Writings* 16)—in this way language, without changing words, can again become referential and "action" (movement or "energy") can be expressed in terms of imagistic/objectivist tenets of perception first espoused by Pound. In order to transfer the energy properly to the page one acutely perceives the world and directly and *immediately* translates it: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION" (*Selected Writings* 17).

Yet the idea that Olson is offering an unmediated reality or disembodied perception must always contend with egotistical narration, an interpretive rendering of

his perception(s) of history as the narrator deciphers history and experience. Mark Karlins reminds us of Olson's historical method as he constructs the history of Gloucester through the "eyes" of others' documents, demonstrating a mediated reality: "Finally the layout gives us different angles of perception. There is an attempt to fill in a complete picture by using more than one report, which is similar to Olson's method as a whole, with his continual retracing and use of different sources" (Karlins 50). The intimacy between history and the individual perceiver is further made "total" as language, the human's means for communication, reflects experience's immediacy. The poetics of Objectism, a language of immediacy, brings history into the present. Olson's poetics of immediacy employ rhetorical strategies developed by Pound. The totality Olson creates is not with an original language but "a language that deliberately and conspicuously denies itself originality" (*The Scholar's Art* 39), a language of apparent simplicity and openness that, like Pound's, mimics the chaos of the objective world and puzzles readers who expect logical categories. Olson's poetics is also rhetorical, exposing his own ideology. Although he projects discrete perceptions in order to "cut away... a disreputable language and culture obviously divorced from things," he cannot "conceive of these discrete things without offering idealized representations as a perceptual given, and then 'forgetting' that he has done that" (Kuberski 181-82). His ideals do adulterate his perception, however. A poet like Olson who writes of historical events, "... who focuses on the interactions between people ... cannot relate fully the interactions of people without analyzing motives, since most human interaction is purposeful. Hence poetry *must admit ideational discourse*—unless

motives are to remain unanalyzed and implicit—because motives are often ideas, ideas of value, ideas of self-interest, and so on” (*Objectivists* 96, emphasis added). For us, then, Olson’s poetics, while claiming openness, have a hidden purpose as he expresses his ideology of the active intellect attempting to shape and control objects. They are then “humanistic,” enfranchising the act of human creation—the “making is more valuable than what is made, because only by activity is man fully human” and, thus, the “fiercer the activity the greater its affirmation of humanity” (*Objectivists* 92-93). The fierce artist is favored even over the written poem and the seen object. Energy, activity, man’s kinetics, the energy to create, shape *polis* out of things—not the passable energy of things but the energy of man—becomes the aesthetics for poetry. Kuberski tells us that “Olson’s Being, Presence, Spirit, [is] a kind of poetic or metaphysical principle not very different from the kinds that circulate in the German Idealists. Olson’s Energy may be undistinguishable from such philosophical protagonists, and so his poetics must itself be considered in such a context” (Kuberski 182). Finally, energy becomes a way of evading crass materialism, a moral tenet on which to rest our spiritual happiness:

...Excessive
energy
anyway—in a society like America energy if it is not moral is only
material. Which cannot be destroyed is never destroyed is only
left all over the place. Junk. (*Maximus* III.89)

Rather than a forward-thinking writer who radically changed the face of poetics, the metaphysical principle of Olson’s poetry aligns him with predecessors. Olson uses history, returns to the archaic, uses myth and objective poetics as strategies to regain linguistic referentiality and compel his readers to redeem humanity by finding the

language to counterbalance alienation and fragmentation. The idea (founded by the poets themselves) that they were part of some avant-garde that would go beyond all previous forms of poetic thought with their “new” notions of how poetry could improve the social situation is inaccurate. Olson illustrates the “ambiguous position of the avant-garde, which, trying to make it new, perpetually recreates a ritualistic, thoroughly archaic scene of (its own) origin, without recognizing that that is what it is doing” (Bertonneau 143). Deriving from poetic forebearers, Olson continues to use poetry, rather than prose, in an objective, intellectual fashion, to instigate social reform. The “open” objective poetry he advocated and continued to perpetuate, imagistic and anti-rhetorical, conflicts with the practice of his ideology. Even as he emphasized the necessity for “seeing experience freshly and expressing it cleanly,” he still “loaded his own conversation and writing with literary reference points, refracting—or at the very least, footnoting—his experience via Homer, say, or a troubadour poet” (Duberman 397). We may locate Olson in a rhetorical continuum of poets who, while centered in history, ultimately accomplished a reunification of man with his present surroundings. The way to consummate this was to play with language, to regain a connection between words, objects, and experiences. Stating that he merely placed “words or actions... side by side in the order of their occurrence in nature, instead of by an order of discourse or ‘grammar’” (Clark 201), Olson coerced his readers into accepting his connections, creating a form that imposed meaning on his reader rhetorically while claiming in theory to not have done so.

Olson’s rhetoric is most obvious in his use of quotation—“far more than a

technique...[it] is the very expression of Olson's mode of thought, one which is scholarly and investigative, rigorous and highly directed and, ultimately, authoritative" (Karlins 36). The quoted material demonstrates objectivity, taking us away from the words of the subjective poet (and his persona, Maximus) to something historical, original, larger than the poet and his work. It is through quotation that Olson professes his work as mythical, archetypal, and universal, portraying at once the concrete of his world and the universals of history (exhibited in quoted facts). He compels the reader to consider the material imbued with powerful and historical authority, of fact, reminding us that "the *mind* (not simply the senses) is being addressed" (Karlins 36). Yet we cannot forget Olson as creator, priest, and shaman of his own myths; the "knowledge" he offers not archetypal, but esoteric, isolated from the majority of readers' intellect. Take for example this quoted material found early in one of his sequences:

"In the midst of plenty, walk
 as close to
 bare
 In the face of sweetness,
 piss
 In the time of goodness,
 go side, go
 smashing, beat them, go as
 (as near as you can

 tear

 In the land of plenty, have
 nothing to do with it
 take the way of
 the lowest,
 including
 your legs, go
 contrary, go

 sing (*Maximus* I.14).

The quotation marks signal this passage as an excerpt from a historical tract when in fact it is modeled on a sixteenth century English lyric from *Gammer Gurton's Needle* that begins: "Back and side go bare, go bare/Both foot and hand go cold..." (*Guide to the Maximus* 28). Note Pound's use of part of the same lyric in canto LXXX:

His helmet is used for a pisspot
This helmet is used for my footbath
Elpenor can count the shingle under Zoagli
Pepitone was wasting toothwash
As I lay by the drain hole

Oh to be in England now that Winston's out
Now that there's room for doubt
And the bank may be the nation's
And the long years of patience
And labour's vacillations
May have let the bacon come home...

Let backe and side go bare
and the old kitchen left as the monks had left it
and the rest as time has cleft it" (Canto LXXX 514-5).

Pound describes his hellish conditions in Pisa, fantasizing about being in England to take a chance for revolution. Responding in time to him, Olson takes this lyric from Pound and creates a personal dialogue by using a source that quotes still another source. In Olson's version we find a violent, revolutionary charge rather than Pound's passive fantasizing and eventual surrender to "time" which eventually forces the "old kitchen" to remain "bare." Olson's removal of his verse from the actual historical document is important, yet using quotation marks gives the "naïve reader...one impression: that of authenticity, of the insertion of actual historical document" (Karlins 40). Only the reader who actually looks at Butterick's annotations can figure out that it is a historical

document or even in Pound's words, but Olson's own words respond to a personal condition and ideology (in this case, a call for action). Yet we accept Olson's words with the authority of quotation—even though they are not his—expecting a circumstance from the past to elicit, in archetypal fashion, a particular response for the present.

Another way in which Olson rhetorically uses quotations is with the open quote. Using the last example, we may see that the quotation lacks an end. This lack of an end quote allows the original voice of the narrator, along with his personal ideas, to blend with a text that purports to be document. The intention is to rid the poem of "ego," but it actually establishes the reverse, exhibiting all the more how the documents have been adopted, manipulated, transmuted by the personal. Olson even suggests that this adoption is intentional—he appropriates material and uses it as his own: "I am interfused / with the rubbish / of creation" (*Maximus* I.149). The content of the poem is fully held, (re)created, and expressed by the omnipotent poet as he makes the effort to clean up this rubbish by becoming part of it. As he intersperses quotation with non-quoted text, this forces the reader to believe that *all* the text is in some ways original (contextually), allowing Olson the rhetorical strategy of quotations to highlight the important phrase or idea. Finally, Olson's use of document through quotation gives *The Maximus Poems* a "semblance of being one piece...making a smooth transition between Olson's words and the words of others...[it] becomes one of synthesis" (Karlins 40). Karlins suggests the *Maximus* poems reaches for "a sense of quantity, of a building-up of quotes until what results is weight and bulk" (Karlins 37). Rhetorically, it is difficult

to argue with someone who has built a case for revolution with the support of hundreds of historical instances, dialogues, and examples. The Maximus sequence, Olson's answer to chaos, his total work, presents ideas within (the appearance of) others' words, suggests (but also eliminates) a democratic aesthetic, and goes on, in the name of democratic action, to further break the boundaries between (the artist's use of) poetry and prose in order to construct, in an authoritative manner, his artistic totality.

What Olson does is to take prose and unify it with poetry: by breaking it up into poetic lines he converts prose to poetry. At several points material is added, especially in his direct addition of legend and fairy tale (found in *Maximus* II.19, II.21, II.31), historical documents, and letters, to remove the *Maximus Poems* from the realm of poetry altogether. One such letter is an adaptation of Walter H. Rich's description of the coastal region of the gulf of Maine:

If the marine features
Of this region are radically different from
Those of other coastal bodies of the eastern United States.

So, too, the shore land, battered as it has been by sea and
Storm or worn by glacial action or by Arctic currents,

Is no less remarkable. No other section of the eastern United
States has a similar coast, so serrated, indented, and ragged...

tides are seldom over 4 feet in their range, but beginning at
once at the north of Cape Cod with a rise of from 7 to 10
feet these increase quite constantly as they go eastward,
reaching about 28 feet in the neighborhood of the original
Micmacs, and touch their highest point in Fundy Bay, where
in many places is a rise and fall of 50 feet,

and in some few places tides
of 70 feet are reported. These Indian tides are probably

the greatest in the world... (*Maximus* II.175).

Olson begins the letter/poem breaking the line following “marine features” as if to highlight this and to set the tone for what is to follow: this will be a poem describing marine features of a coastal land, a land that is “radically different”—note how Olson in the third stanza breaks “United/ States” by line to emphasize the separation, the uniqueness of this area from the rest of the country. Olson’s initial use of couplets pays homage to this land’s uniqueness; the heroic form indicates that this topic is special. Olson terminates use of this form when Rich’s prose moves into description; Olson leaves “details” to be conveyed in a more traditional paragraph form as exemplified in the fourth stanza above. These details are not rhetorically important for Olson, and this prose “area” does not require the reader’s response to be tempered by the designs of poetry. Olson does not concern himself with the details of the tides but this land as Indian land—the Micmacs are mentioned casually by Rich in the prose section of the stanza (and subtly accented by Olson as he places them at the beginning of a poetic line). Olson expands this brief mention of the Micmacs, returning to the couplet form in the next stanza and *changing* Rich’s original word “Fundy” to “Indian.” Now the tides become Indian tides and not Fundy tides, and Olson can now add his own material to the letter, giving personal import to Rich’s dull facts. Near the end of the letter but compacted between stanzas of Rich’s original is Olson’s commentary—myth, language, perception, and the positive return to origin—encapsulated in the short stanza on the Micmacs:

The mists of the Indians
on the land, the flow,
from the ice, of the hidden
speech, the tales they tell

of the m'teoulin, of the masques performed
in the waves, of the Indian watchers making on
to these other men who have come to the shore. (Maximus II.176)

Olson connects his poetic techniques to a prose tract to persuade. By using particular line and stanza breaks he modifies the prose line to isolate words and empower history, giving new emphases to others' text. The resulting poem now contains Olson's thought.

Another method Olson uses to combine prose and poetry is to interject his own voice against the voice of his material, amalgamating and eventually appropriating the preferred voice of the poem. He generally uses this method as a way of "argumentatively undercutting his source" (Karlins 44). An example of this poetic voicing is when he includes a letter written by Richard Hawkins, an explorer who plans a trip to America, to demonstrate what he sees to be an imperial, capitalistic attitude that takes root in the founding of this country:

"to make perfect discovery of all those parts
where we should arrive, known as well as unknown, their longitudes
and latitudes, the lying of their coasts, their head-lands (Cape
Ann, your head-land), their ports and bays (Gloucester!), their cities,
(o America), towns and peoplings (o you Americans), their manner
of government (ha!), with the commodities which the countries yield
(your goods, citizen, your polis), and of which they want and are
in necessity" (in necessity, fellow cits? what is your necessity?)
(Maximus I.64)

Olson's emotional commentary, interjected within Hawkins' letter, is marked off by parenthesis. The passionate responses as Olson struggles with Hawkins' rhetoric used to justify the exploration (and colonization) of America for England is his own way of persuading against the colonialist's argument. The style of Olson's rhetoric is "however not of logical persuasion, but of rhetoric in its pejorative sense, as emotional

jousting with and jabbing at an opponent. Yet it is this very emotional style itself which allows the audience to identify with Olson and which is central to the reading of the passage” (Karlins 45). Karlins quotes Kenneth Burke on how stylistic identification is used as a rhetorical tool:

A speaker persuades an audience by the use of stylistic identifications: his act of persuasion may be for the purpose of causing the audience to identify itself with the speaker’s interests; and the speaker draws on the identification of interests to establish rapport between himself and his audience. So there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification... and communication (the nature of rhetoric is “addressed”). (Karlins 45)

Olson attacks Hawkins, an exploiter of language to hide his intentions, as he in turn manipulates his readers to provoke them to action or to learn Olson’s version of history. Again, Olson interjects self into document to “spin” Ben Smith’s assessment of John Burke (a political foe to Smith):

“Obsessed by fear,” said Piety
with face of fat,
“worried his life away” (I can see Burke,
worrying—who knows a thing or two,
has written on his mouth of a weasel much
munching, a few places Smith
will never get into, who likes
long legs) Burke sat there and heard ths parabolist
(the business man is now the minister) go on

“worrying,
something frightful was going to happen
to him” (when surely,
by all the vetos
of his voting record Burke’s
attention
on what was happening
to the city, that it was being ribboned,
dolloed up like Smith himself) “the fear,”

sd the ponderous Harvard fullback,

“the object of his fear” (Burke’s fear)
“never came. The fear itself” (o city’s
whore) “like a beast in the jungle,
devoured him” (what a morsel,
Burkey) “and he was unable”
(here we have it—city hall)
“to make any constructive
move”—la. (*Maximus* I.143)

Olson positions himself as a knowledgeable interpreter of the scene. He gains the reader’s confidence with use of phrases like “I can see” and “when surely,” assuming his readers have similar points of view that Gloucester politicians (and, therefore, politicians in general) are corrupt and ignorant. His commentary seems part of the quotation, creating a “sudden synapse” between the two voices felt by the reader as a “shock of recognition” (Karlins 46); it therefore becomes a communal interpretation that brings the reader over to his side.

Olson mixes the boundaries of prose and poetry further through the inclusion of lists. Supposedly, the list “is language prior to aesthetic transformation” (Karlins 52), the introduction of information to perform what Olson calls “DOCUMENT” simply to emphasize that the events alone do the work, that the narrator stays OUT” (*Human Universe* 127). In such lists Olson subordinates the information to his ideology rather than his stated concept of organizing the objects of the world. In this case, a list of provisions needed at Stage Head Settlement in the year 1624-5 demonstrates the simple items a community needs to establish itself, expressing a simple life based on a labor that establishes the human’s connection with the earth (in this case, the world of fishing):

they required

7 hundredweight biscuit bread			
@ 15/ per hundred	£ 5.	5.	0
7 hhds of beere or sider 53/4 the tun	20.	0.	0
2/3 hhd beef		3.	7.
2			
6 whole sides of bacon	3.	3.	0
6 bush. pease	1.	10.	0
2/3 firkin butter	1.	0.	0
2/3 cwt. cheese	2.	0	
1 pecke mustard seed		6.	0
1 barrel vinegar		10.	2
15 lbs candles	1.	0.	0
3 pecks oatmeal		9.	0
2/3 hhd/ aqua vitae	3.	0.	0
2 copper kettles	3.	0.	0
1 brasse crock	1.	0.	0
1 frying pan		2.	0
1 grind stone		5.	0
2 good axes, 4 hand hatchets, 4 short wood hooks, 2 drawing irons, 2 adzes		16.	0
4 arm saws, 4 hand saws, 4 thwart saws			
3 augers, 2 crowes of iron, 2 sledges, 4 iron shovels, 2 pick axes, 4 mattocks,			
4 cloe hammers	5.	0.	0
heading and splitting knives	1.	5.	0
so much hair cloth as may cost	10.	0.	0
pinnaces sails	2.	10.	0
8 fishing boats iron works	2.	0.	0
10 boats' anchors, ropes	10.	0.	0
canvas to make boats sails and small ropes			
2 saines, a greater and a less	12.	0.	0
10 good nets at 26/ a net	13.	0.	0
fitting for them at 25/ each	10.	0.	0
2000 nails to build houses at 13/4 the thousand	1.	6.	8
4000 nails at 6/8 per 1000	1.	6.	8
2000 nails at 5 d per hundred		8.	0

(*Maximus* I.118).

Olson makes a point of *totaling* the cost of provisions in his poem—"Whitbourne total £ 113. 12. 8" (*Maximus* I.119)—and preserves the vertical layout of the list to make it seem all-inclusive. The thoroughness of this list drives Olson's point home—to

establish a settlement does not take much, in terms of provisions and money. America can survive with basic provisions and sustain itself without need for extra capital or fancy paraphernalia.

There are also times where Olson makes his lists, or catalogues of information, look like prose to compete with other's histories of the same object, era, or entity. Here, Olson compares his view or "map" of Gloucester with Edward Johnson's 1892 "quaint and graphic account" (*Guide to Maximus* 211) of the settlement:

Mr. Edward Johnson: "yet that there have been vessels built here at the town of late" I haven't noticed any single adult, the children however and up through 17 at least on the Fort or Fort high school men whatever hour of the day I see them even early on the Boulevard and a couple of them in uniform with rifle R.O.T.C. don't look like cowboys and English:

Stefansson's ice, what trade replaced Pytheas's sludge with, man goeth novo siberskie slovo only a Chinese feeling not Canton silk or Surinam Rose-Troup to you, Gloucester, solely gave you place in the genetic world, she said Richard Bushrod George Way etc. she put you back on the launching platform said woman said John White planter Conant said Budleigh she said Cape Ann she said dorchester company she said so much train oil quarters of oak skins as well as dryfish corfish fox racons martyns otter muskuatche beaver some even entered as 'coats' thus indicating there were Algonquins left after smallpox? It looks as though Miss Rose-Troup connects back to Champlain the number of wigwams show Freshwater Cove above Cressys in Tolmans field near Half Moon or possibly the old Steep Bank where Kent Circle maybe it's Apple Row or Agamenticus Height

the river and marshes show clearly and no Indians along the Beach forest on Fort Point wigwams again at Harbor Cove in fact all up between what 1642 became the harbor and the town in other words "Washington" St to Mill River and on Fore Street to Vinsons Cove otherwise Indians about East Gloucester Square and then it's action: Champlain discovering the Indian attack to Sieur de Pountrin—court in ambush at the head of Rocky Neck, old European business as seven or eight arquebusiers the depths of the channel more interesting as from Eastern Pt and the compass rose thus: (*Maximus* I.151).

At first glance, one would consider this historical prose; with the form apparently in paragraphs and sentences which lends authorial credence to the content of the paragraphs. Olson, however, runs his details together, almost haphazardly, to create the illusion that he is presenting *all* the details involved, without missing one. Thus the details, and not the form, differs from Johnson's—forcing the reader to consider the substance of what is being presented over the style. The reader already has been trained to read historical details within this style; now it is for Olson to appropriate “feel” of prose to convey personal details. Again, the reader's response is led by the design of prose; in this case, narrative prose the author can directly control in both details and story. The artist, as Olson himself has said, indeed “illuminates ... by master of force...the art, to make his meanings clear by how he juxtaposes, correlates, and causes to interact whatever events and persons,” and I would add artistic forms, styles, and poetics. “he chooses to set in motion” (*Human Universe* 127).

Forms, styles, and poetics adopted from Pound and adapted to correspond with Olson's idiosyncratic personality influenced what Donald Allen termed (in his 1960 Grove Press anthology) “The New American Poetry.” Olson led off that edition with his poem “The Kingfishers,” that “ringing Olsonian incitement to perpetual revolution: “what does not change/is the will to change”” (Clark 287). Olson was seen as a poetic revolutionary and a leader of a new movement in writing that dealt with language and its representation of objects in a new way, championing an “open” poetics to perpetuate and maintain a socio-political poetry. Olson's direct forebearers, the poets of “L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E,” are the most interested in Pound and Olson as political poets.

embracing a common commitment to using poetic strategies to effect social change. These postmodern poets may be seen by critics and themselves to be succeeding their modern origins by developing a radical modification to Olson's proposed open objectivism, making poetry and the language contained within it even more non-referential, democratic, and free to readers to empower them and give them agency in a capitalist world, yet their use of similar strategies as their poetic forefathers, especially in the use of poetics, exposes similar political ideologies of "totalitarianism" in their wish to unify society through a quasi-authoritarian use of an active intellect that applies language to the goal of unifying all thought.

Chapter 4

The Political “World “ of the Language Poets

“Let us undermine the bourgeoisie.” (Ron Silliman, in Hartley)

“Writing itself is a form of action.” (Silliman, *New Sentence* 4)

As poetry moves into postmodernity, it is often accused of reductiveness on two fronts. Critics see the “simplicity” of expressivist poetry leading to a deep but inconsequential subjectivity. The ludic word games influenced by French deconstruction theory seem bent on legislating the meaninglessness of our world. But a group of postmodern poets who “play” with language—led by Charles Bernstein, Barrett Watten, and Ron Silliman—continue the Pound/Olson tradition by maintaining an intellectual, proactive approach to the writing and reading of poetry. Though some critics think otherwise, language poets are neither expressivist nor ludic: their relationship with their modernist precursors reveals a certain political characteristic of poetry passed down through the century that provides the reader with meaning.¹³ Bob Perelman, another leading member of the language group who composes this political poetry, reflects on what he sees as poetry’s purpose:

Poetry is really not written on a desert island. It’s a social art. Some of my favorite poets imagine poets as antennae of the race or social receptors. We catch a whole spectrum of different voices and make something out of it. I think that’s where poets most usefully exist, in hearing the variety of the society’s speech and responding to that variety.
(*Interview with Bob Perelman*)

Language poets see themselves as directly echoing Pound’s message to act against inequities in a social system based on money instead of human value. Pound and Olson

considered themselves not only “receptors” or articulators of social conditions but agents to change these conditions. Yet language poets disagree with Pound and Olson as to how to accomplish change. They see their work, in a postmodern vein, as fragmented, non-referential, non-rhetorical, and non-totalizing, giving the reader opportunity to make his own meaning from the text. Their poetry, Marxist in theory, “disdains Pound and Eliot for their politically conservative themes” (Hoover xxxv), claiming an anti-authoritativeness as it is rid of subjectivity. This chapter, however, will outline both the ideology and poetic practices language poets share with Pound and Olson, demonstrating that language poets employ similar rhetorical strategies as they simultaneously deny them. Although the language poets’ program seeks political change through a non-totalizing use of language, the agenda they share continues this century’s poetry of totality.

Where Pound emphasized economics, language poets comment on the imbalances of power reflected in the use of language by those in control. As with Olson’s rant against the “sloganeers,” language poets attack capitalist communication. Charles Bernstein, one of language poetry’s chief theorists, notes how the inequality operates: “In a society with such spectacularly inequitable distributions of power, the very idea of public space has been befouled—not by the graffiti of the folk but by the domination of the means of communication by those dispossessed of their connection with just such folk” (*A Poetics* 5). Language poetry wishes to expose this unfit condition and eliminate the use of language by those who appropriate it in a “dirty,” profitable way. Note Perleman’s metaphors of undressing and cleansing in this excerpt

from “Cliff Notes”:

Because the languages are enclosed and heated
each one private a separate way
of undressing in front of the word window
faces squashing up against it
city trees and personal rituals of sanitation
washing the body free of any monetary transaction. (Hoover 498)

Although Pound battered the dominant system with his unique use of language, language poets fault him for adding “natural” order. In his struggle against the universal he also became universal: “Pound, or part of him, wished to control the valuation of the materials he appropriated by arranging them in such a way that an immanent or ‘natural’ order would be brought into being” (*A Poetics* 122). Pound’s great achievement is his creation of poetry by using ideological swatches from many social and historical sectors. His “complex, polyvocal textuality was the result of his search—his unrequited desire for—deeper truths than could be revealed by more monadically organized poems operating with a single voice and a single perspective” (*A Poetics* 123). Yet Pound’s wish was ultimately to order these materials into a single vision for his readership:

Pound’s ideas about what mediated these different materials are often at odds with how these types of textual practices actually work in *The Cantos*. Pound’s fascist ideology insists on the author’s having an extraliterary point of “special knowledge” that creates...order. (*A Poetics* 123)

Language poets reject coherence based on the human standard since that subject has already been determined, given a position in the hierarchy of capitalist society. Order based on an already fixed position is necessarily autocratic and totalitarian. Language poets see the objectivist/projectivist movement as an attempt “to rediscover a

physical ordering of the language...within individuals (individualism is the codification of serialized “man”), operating on the metaphoric equation of a page as scored speech” (*New Sentence* 15). They consider the past art of Stein, Joyce, or Hemingway as subjective, “existing within the confines of the dominant reality” (*New Sentence* 15). Modernists, supported by Marxist critics like Adorno, believed in the autonomy and wholeness of their art outside the “grip of administered culture” (*A Poetics* 104).

Subjectivity is corrosive for the language poets: their removal of the subject parallels the modernist impulse to hide the speaking subject in poetry. For language poets, the subject always carries some “predetermined Truth of a pancultural elitism” (*A Poetics* 122-3), an Heroic Individual who, as an historical continuum that leads to some future utopia, must be relinquished. From Barrett Watten’s “Statistics”:

We are at liberty “to take ‘the’ out of ‘us.’ ” to have selves “not here” in the machinery of the dramatic monologue to “smash, interrupt.” (Hoover 536)

Instead of an order provided by an elitist subject, language poets provide diversity that looks not toward the future but at a present timelessness to express many different cultural perspectives. This, of course, casts doubt on the totalizing structure of reality and on the identity of the individual and his language.

Language poetry offers yet another linguistic art to combat capitalism. By definition, this poetry is “(sometimes) non-referential, (occasionally) poly-syntactic, (often) politically committed, (in places) theoretically inclined, and that (in some cases) enacts a critique of the literary” (*Language Writing and Literary History* 126).

According to its unofficial manifesto, it intends to eliminate the notion of subjectivity:

“Around 1970, a number of writers, following the work of such experimenters as Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky, began writing in ways that questioned the norms of persona-centered, ‘expressive,’ poetry” (*Aesthetic Tendency* 261). In the manifesto, the listed “experimenters” do not include Pound or Olson, whose personas cancelled out their politics. Language poets see even these “objective” poets as still carrying on propaganda through an ideological strategy that corrupts language. Contrasting himself with other avant-gardists, Bob Perelman explains that language poets go about their political goals differently, although both schools wish to “make power” or restore agency to the reader/citizen:

Suppose within the girdle of the next quatrain
are now confined two mighty literary movements
whose poly-headed and abutting fronts
the perilous narrow years spin quite differently:

the Objectivists, in the marginalized trunks,
speaking American to one another as if to a crowd of energized
workers

and the language writers, wearing codeless uniforms,
passing notes a bird would sing if birds would only read.

Piece out these imperfections with your writing. Into a fresher word
divide and multiply each word and make imaginary power, that is, make
power. (*Language Writing and Literary History* 138)

The language poets’ power comes from changing language’s representation and reproduction of reality.

For this reason language poets study capitalist use of language. They take political responsibility by demonstrating how current language practice robs us of our agency and value. Their aim is to show “what qualities writing has or could have that contribute to an understanding or critique of society, seen as a capitalist system”

(Hartley). Their anti-bourgeois agenda is summed up by Jennifer Moxley:

Instead we should annoy the power mongers by using poetic propaganda to launch a ruthless critique of them and their buddies and to expose the world of contradictions surrounding us. For poetry, my friends, is like, a sit-in at the luncheonette of language, and we should refuse to get up and walk across the street to the "poets only" diner. Poetry is the insistence that we partake in the expression of our lives, in all their various contexts and manifestations. (Moxley)

Moxley refers to the contention between language poets, who believe they are attempting to change society, and academic poets, who have historically set agendas for how to read and write poetry, their values "part of a fabric of social constructions that maintains coercive economic and political hierarchies" (*A Poetics* 6), maintaining power by serving the bourgeois as professors and poet laureates.¹⁴ Jerome McGann refers to these two groups as poets of "opposition" and "accommodation." Poets of accommodation are the subjective ones, mentioned earlier, "marked stylistically by a moderated surface urbanity and substantively by an attempt to define 'social' and 'political' within a limited, even a personal, horizon" (*Alternate Routes* 255). In the poem "Things" we find Perelman directly attacking these poets as those "who so greyly / evade address, preferring instead / to throng the stadiums and airwaves / and glacial showrooms" with "*New Yorker* poetry-water / *New York Times* rational apolitical germ-free water" (Hoover 501, 500). Our cultural acceptance of this poetry that infiltrates mass publications is validated by what McGann calls a "Romantic Ideology," privileging a poetry that "accommodates the critical view that poets want nothing more than election to a hall of fame" which can be "glossed without reference to ideology as such, because the ideological disposition of the canonizing institutions would otherwise

stand revealed” (*Anthologizing American Poetry*). Poets of opposition counter subjectivity, seeing it as disruptive to their attempt to change life in “imperialist America” (*Alternate Routes* 257). Poetry cannot be both subjective and social if it is to bring about real political change. “The test of a ‘politics of poetry,’ ” Barrett Watten has observed, “is in the entry of poetry into the world in a political way” (*Alternate Routes* 257).

Our Loss of Value

As Marxism critiques capitalism’s effects on workers, language poets critique capitalist language practices, altering their impact on the language of poetry. In his essay “Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World” language poet Ron Silliman espouses Marx’s famous 1859 dictum as the basis for his writing: “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men (*sic*) that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness” (*New Sentence* 7). With regard to poetry and the use of language, the mode of production that determines human life decides the structures and “natural” laws of language with “the primary impact on language and language arts...the rise of capitalism” being “in the area of reference...directly related to the phenomena known as the commodity fetish” (*Disappearance* 122). According to Silliman, when language becomes subjected to the social dynamics of capitalism, “words not only find themselves attached to commodities, they *become* commodities and, as such, take on the ‘mystical’ and ‘mysterious character’ ” (*New Sentence* 8). Capitalism has commodified our words.

making language mysterious and detached from us. Because “the words are never our own,” they become “our own usages of a determinate coding passed down to us like all other products of civilization” (*If By Writing* 167). We lose our social context when words fail to bind us into human community. Majorie Perloff discusses this loss from a pedagogical standpoint:

Those of us who have taught courses on poetry are familiar with the student with a very high IQ, say a computer science major, who cannot make anything of a poem like Blake’s “London” because he or she cannot conceive of a linguistic or social context in which one might refer to a soldier’s “hapless sigh” as “Run[ning] like blood down palace walls.” In the discourse of medical textbooks or legal briefs, such statements simply make no sense. (Perloff 234)

Once society has lost the ability to define itself through language, it loses its identity, value, and place in the world.

How does this happen?

Ron Silliman explains the cause for this privation while introducing possible solutions. He uses Walter Benjamin’s theory of aesthetics outlined in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Benjamin posits that the production of art, a reproduction of the world and its objects, becomes mechanical in our machine age, no longer imbued with aesthetic value. Benjamin notes: “In principle a work of art has always been reproducible...Mechanical reproduction of a work, however, represents something new” (Benjamin 218). This mutation is felt first in the product/producer relationship, for with mechanical reproduction comes uniformity. Equivalence becomes a ruling paradigm instead of the uniqueness of art. Science and mathematics serve to conceal theories of equivalence as they postulate that “things equal to the same thing are

equal to each other” (Sklar 14). Equivalence begets substitution, exchange, and reproduction—this principle extends itself into the economic sphere via the *universal equivalent* of money.

In Marx’s critique objects are not valued on the basis of themselves or the labor that produced them but assigned an intangible monetary value. Marx writes of this in *Capital*:

When we bring the products of our labour into relation with each other as values, it is not because we see in these articles the material receptacles of homogeneous human labour. Quite the contrary; whenever, by an exchange, we equate as values our different products, by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them. We are not aware of this, nevertheless we do it. Value, therefore, does not stalk about with a label describing what it is. It is value, rather, that converts every product into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, we try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of our own social products; for to stamp an object of utility as a value is just as much a social product as language. . . . It is, however, just this ultimate money form of the world of commodities that actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers. When I state that coats or boots stand in relation to linen, because it is the universal incarnation of abstract human labour, the absurdity of the statement is self-evident. Nevertheless, when the producers of coats and boots compare those articles with linen, or, what is the same thing with gold or silver, as the universal equivalent, they express the relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society in the same absurd form. (Marx 74, 76)

Marx’s idea of objects “stamped” with value, converted into hieroglyphics to be read, informs Silliman’s understanding of language. But Silliman extends Benjamin’s idea of art (and Marx’s anticipation of it) into commentary on the production of language, a commodity that becomes stamped, valued, and fetishized. Thus, according to Silliman, the “social basis of reality was transformed... where previously the manufactured

objects of the world submitted themselves to the fetishizing and mutational laws of identity and exchange solely through an economic process, they now did so on a new level, that of information” (*New Sentence* 48).

Art and language lose their value as mechanical reproduction removes artist from object and language-user from words. Benjamin describes the sensation of the direct connection between artist and object as aura, taken out of its constituting context, now destroyed by equivalence. Aura establishes the presence of the artist within the work, enacting a relationship of intersubjectivity that recognizes self-presence, the perceiver who establishes self and meaning from the artist’s perception, translation, and expression. Aura once created the value within this relationship.

Benjamin theorizes that until our mechanical age aura was protected by its use in ritual or cult functions: “the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (Benjamin 223). The revered artwork, unapproachable in its ritualistic state, protects its relationship to artist and meaning.

Mechanical reproduction invalidates ritual with aura:

For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual. To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the “authentic” print makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics. (Benjamin 224)

Silliman glosses Benjamin’s term *politics* as economics: “Politics, it turns out, means economics, use subordinated to exchange” (*New Sentence* 49). Economics affects the

referential quality of art when art and language are based not on aura but on substitution and exchange. Language poets speculate that language itself perpetuates the exchange system by universalizing, conventionalizing, and constituting the perceiver through mechanized forms or style. The reader becomes passive without an intersubjective relationship with the artist as other. How can the reader recreate meaning without the labor of engagement with the aura? In the case of poetry meaning can no longer be created by the reader.

Language poets base their work on the theory that capitalism is built on a system of exchange that universalizes the individual and stays attached to capitalist ideology. Experience is homogenized with desire, allowing producers to sell more products. Nick Piombino laments conformism caused by homogeneity: "It is abundantly clear to most people in the United States by now that if you conform in your thoughts you will fit in" by learning the codes of capitalist language (Piombino 233). These codes appear as narrative, the unified author, the passive reader, and, ironically, even totalization itself:

The intentionalist cliché of normative literature programs—that each word in a text contributes to the meaning of the whole—is a tautology at best. The equation of such intention with a fixed point, a unitary monad called author, however, has enabled such programs to fulfill their primary social mission of incorporating literature, a dangerously anarchic enterprise that directly engages the reader's subconscious at the level of desire, into the broader ideology of individualism upon which Western culture and particularly Western capitalism are founded. (*Task of Collaborator* 144)

As individuals using capitalist language and its codes we lose value and power. Forms such as narrative allow a unified subject to project a uniform, conventional reality through time and space so that the "real" that realism expresses in the novel becomes

the “index of everyday life and thus of the ground of [capitalist] ideology” (Ross 193).

This realism is passed on through art, perpetuating a way of life as capitalistic tenets are reified, made solid in our cultural sense in spite of our historical opposition. We are left without the ability to move forward, caught in a capitalistic continuum:

Reification won't get you out of the parking lot.
Nor will mastery of the definition of sounds
in the throat, the bottomless pit, out of which
these things which we, transparent, self-refuting
hold to be self-evident.

So one, sad triste morte
goes all the way home to zero
with its blinding simile reflecting the furniture
off the original digit standing there
back in the frozen reified narrative of the parking lot
a past you can count on
safest investment
without things to get in the way
of the simple law of outward push. (Hoover 500, 501)

Language poets see capitalism as an artificially constructed reality. They attack the normative power of language, whether in prose or poetry, that aids in its (our) formation. Silliman talks about how “respect for the separateness and integrity of the consumer is lost when a dramatic monologue is constructed by means of normative syntax, classical metrics and a deliberately recessive linebreak”—it is these “devices that render the reading subject passive and unaware of their own presence” (*New Sentence* 174). He believes normative language practices are used by those who are fundamentally committed “at the level of the reader’s experience...to passivity, to the subject which can only observe, incapable of action” (*New Sentence* 174). The idea that reality is constructed through language invites the question of whether change is

possible. Through linguistic strategies that promoted action, modernists like Pound and Olson were also committed to change what they saw as capitalism's false valuation of the human, yet were unable to reject the use of capitalism's normative language.

This change involves uncoupling language from its conventionalities (*Alternate Routes* 272). The program Bernstein calls "guerilla warfare" places poets on the same level as their adversaries, ad men who use the materials of our culture to form their "official" image of what we are:

Poets would have to be as alert to the presents of their cultures as the designers of TV ads; which means a willingness to engage in guerrilla warfare with the official images of the world that are being shoved down our throats like so many tablespoons of Pepto Bismol, short respite from the gas and the diarrhea that are the surest signs that harsh and uncontainable reality hasn't vanished but has only been removed from public discussion. That means we can't rely only on the tools and forms of the past, even the recent past, but must invent new tools and forms that begin to meet the challenges of the ever-changing present. (*A Poetics* 3)

As it stands, the language project seems derived from Pound's and Olson's, against their own cultures of bankers and advertisers. The difference claimed by language poets and their followers is that they go one step further, examining how texts make "networks of meaning understood as thoroughly socialized," questioning how language and its users go about making the subject, "the making of Americans—the making of me, myself & I—of you, yourself & us" (Andrews 25). Language poets do not intend to shape "limits" with their poetry but to set in motion "conversations, arguments, dialogic contexts, which are *open-ended*, which take Charles Olson's 'limits are what we are inside of' and ask, continually, what those limits are" (Smith xi). This difference demonstrates how art is ideological (and should not be so) and critiques the ideological

in representation. In this way the poetry of the movement is political, supposedly without offering any alternative politics. This shows how poetry can alter language debased through stylistic innovation. This innovation will reverse the normal order of value, the canon, and many other forms backgrounding and foregrounding the avant-garde. Innovation places all writing styles on equal terms, making dominant language minor:

In order to fully develop the meaning of a formal rupture or extension, we need a synoptic, multilevel, interactive response that accounts, in hopefully unconventional antiauthoritative ways, for the sexual, class, local-historical, biographical, prosodic, and structural dimensions of a poem. This would mean reading all writing, but especially official or dominant forms of writing, as in part “minority” discourse in order to partialize those cultural and stylistic elements that are hegemonic and to put all writing practices on equal terms from a social point of view. (*A Poetics* 227)

New language styles and conventions make the current standards and authority provisional. Like their forefathers, language poets see their craft offering these new choices—every aspect of writing “reflects its society’s politics and aesthetics; indeed, the aesthetic and the political make an inseparable *poetics*” (*A Poetics* 227). We now turn to a study of “language” poetics, focusing on their transformation of tradition.

Programs of Opposition: Bernstein’s Absorption

Language poetry works to deny subject and totality, providing agency for the reader. Capitalist discourse represses an active reader through unity and rhetorical persuasion. The theories of three language poets demonstrate similar strategies, including disparate elements to interrupt the continuity of conventional narrative reading. These include both the materials of the poem and its forms. Using both

conventional and non-conventional language, language poets show how social construction and authority disengage us from language.

What Charles Bernstein calls absorption is one alternative to conventional narrative. A poem, a “spongy substance, absorbing vocabulary, syntax, & reference.” offers, instead of one unifying perspective of an event, many contrary materials and perspectives: “contradictory logics, multiple tonalities, polyrhythms” (*A Poetics* 22). A poem that absorbs these materials takes the reader immediately into the text. By absorption Bernstein means “engrossing, engulfing completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie, attention intensification, rhapsodic, spellbinding, mesmerizing, hypnotic, total, riveting, enthralling: belief, conviction, silence” (*A Poetics* 29). An example from his poem “Part Quake” demonstrates the compound aspect of the absorptive poem:

Half-inscribed and half-distended, though
such polarities con't [*sic*] hold, X informs
Y of Z, A bedevils B, Q
convinces R to protest S, M remains
sidelined. How to work that in,
a world that so impinges that
we, an entity it's impossible to
overcredit, push back with a
might that makes only the heavenly
a force with which to contend. (*In the American Tree* 273)

We sense that Bernstein, like his predecessors, desires totality in a multifarious world, albeit an alternate one.

Poets like Pound and Olson created metaphors of speed, light, and energy for these scenes that pulled the reader's attention inward toward the poem—Vorticism, Imagism, and Projectivism unified the text with the reader. Pound's explanation of the

Vortex demonstrates the relation of emotion and action: “Emotion seizing up some external scene or action carries it intact to the mind; & that *vortex purges it of all save the essential or dominant dramatic qualities*, & it emerges like the external original” (Pound, *Selected Prose* 375). But Bernstein believes that poems absorbing through what he terms “casual unity” do not work—they too obviously attempt to absorb through strategies of unity; they strive too hard to be “effective” and seem “phony or boring or un compelling” (*A Poetics* 38).

Bernstein suggests adding antiabsorptive elements to the poem, in order to disturb and shock the reader through metrics and sound. So Bruce Andrews confronts the audience with harsh street slang, scatology, or “second-person accusations provoking questions (‘Isn’t nature bored with your devotion?’ ‘Hey, Fuckhead’) & first-person deprecations (‘Mash me to a pulp’)” (*A Poetics* 35), practices that “invoke & assault the reader with the exploitive, racist, sexist underside of our collective syntactic & metaphoric practices... mak[ing] obtrusive the social & ideological nature & function of language habits in which we are ordinarily so absorbed as to ignore or repress” (*A Poetics* 35). Anti-absorption is

artifice, boredom, exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction, digression, interruptive, transgressive, undecorous, anticonventional, unintegrated, fractured, fragmented, fanciful, ornately stylized, rococo, baroque, structural, mannered, fanciful, ironic, iconic, schtick, camp, diffuse, decorative, repellent, inchoate, programmatic, didactic, theatrical, background muzak, amusing: skepticism, doubt, noise, resistance. (*A Poetics* 29-30)

Antiabsorption not only shocks but at the same time pulls the reader back into the text by a combination of absorption and antiabsorption to increase reading: “This is an

approach I find myself peculiarly attracted to, & which reflects my ambivalence (as in wanting multiple things) about absorption & its converses. In my poems, I frequently use opaque & nonabsorbable elements, digressions & interruptions, as part of a technological arsenal to create a more powerful ('souped-up') absorption than possible with traditional, & blander, absorptive techniques... This is the subject of much of my work" (*A Poetics* 52).

This tactic creates dual points focusing the reader toward the center to interpret what Bernstein (with Forest-Thomson) calls an "image complex":

"Poetry is like a swoon with this exception: *it* brings you to your senses." The oscillation of attentional focus, & its attendant blurring, is a vivid way of describing the ambivalent [*sic*] switching, which I am so fond of, between absorption & antiabsorption, which can now be described as redirected absorption. The speed of the shifts ultimately becomes a metric weight, & as the pace picks up, the frenzied serial focusing/unfocusing enmeshes into a dysraphic [*sic*] whole—not totality—an *alchemical* "overlay and blending" as Piombino notes, forming what he terms a "combinatorial" or, in Forrest-Thomson's words, an "image-complex." (*A Poetics* 78)

This new kind of reading mirrors Pound's use of speed, image, and ideogram. Bernstein makes it a point, however, to differentiate his style of absorption from that of realism's and lyric poetry's, indirectly suggesting that his poetic forefathers belong in this group.¹⁵ He underestimates his poetic and strategic (and therefore rhetorical) debt to Pound. Bernstein sketches out a new poetic program that makes the reader conscious of his own participation in rhetoricity. To enlighten the reader the poet must provide information to help readers identify their relation to language. The language poets want to be rhetorical but subtly, denying the subjectivity of art. Pound and Olson also wanted to do this. Bakhtin is cited by Bernstein to justify this denial of the poetic subject:

Bakhtin puts this very eloquently in a 1970 interview in *Novy mir* (tr. V. McGee): In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be *located outside* the object of his or her creative understanding—in time, in space, in culture. For one cannot even really see one's own exterior and comprehend it as a whole, and no mirrors or photographs can help; our real exterior can be seen and understood only by other people, because they are located outside us in space and because they are *others*.... A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning: they engage in a kind of dialogue, which surmounts the closedness and one-sidedness of these particular meanings, these cultures. (*A Poetics* 186-87)

We must comprehend the world into which we are absorbed, not an exterior hyper-reality forced on us. The reader must come to this understanding alone even though Bernstein admits that “something powerfully absorptive is needed to pull us out of the shit, the ideology in which we slip—mind altering as the LSD ad used to put it” (*A Poetics* 76). Poetry can alter our minds, offer “a vision-in-sound to compete with the world we know so that we can find the worlds we don't” (*A Poetics* 76). But is poetry merely a vehicle by which we change our perception or is the poetry telling us how to do it?

Watten's New Objectivity

Barrett Watten questions reality by introducing disparate elements into a poem, deconstructing categories without admitting any final meanings. Writing creates recognition for materials and sequences outside syntax and cultural reference. We see this new taxonomy in his poem “Plasma”:

Light grows from the corners of the state map.

The universe is shaped like a hat. I lose interest and fall off the bed.

Tips of the fingers direct the uncontrollable surface.

The dim-witted inhabitants fuse with the open areas. All rainbows end in the street.

Subtitles falling in show water rolling underneath. (*In the American Tree* 27)

Asserting new relationships in material previously considered incongruent brings about a “subjectivity effect” when the assertions “have become ourselves,” even continuing to “call existence into question” (Brito 23). These assertions produce both distance and proximity to content so that we can be close to our world without appropriating objects. We thereby avoid using the same sign-to-signified relationship for them.

Watten asks for a new science, an objectivity that, through poetry, will allow for numerous interpretations. Yet this objectivity has its own scientific method, which Watten sees as “fundamental to aesthetics as we know it” (Brito 27). Through it we gain critical knowledge of the object while still maintaining “an attitude of distance” (Brito 27). Watten illustrates this distancing of knowledge in his discussion of the modernist’s objectification (of an autonomous artwork) that psychologically became “a form of ‘killing off threats’ to the unity of self” (Brito 27). Language poets displace this modernist psychology onto the objective properties of language. A poetry that allows for numerous interpretations opening out into language “would seem to be one solution to the artistic need for an objectified ground against which the grandeur of life would stand out” (Brito 27). Watten keeps the modernist science of objectivity intact to provide a structure in “poetics of ‘language’ ... a workable ground for modernism that leads to real solutions for the dilemmas it proposes” (Brito 28).

Paranetical discourse, a device we have considered with Olson, modifies

modernist objectivity so that its interpretations and structures are not definitive. He begins his poem "Statistics" with this idea:

There is no language but "reconstructed" imaged parentheses back into person "emphasizing constant" explanation "the current to run both ways." (Hoover 536)

Watten proposes that we use parenthetical discourse to add " 'word viruses' that would invade and inhabit the host bodies of texts"(Brito 26). He admits the device is "thematically motivated" (Brito 27) by using separate textual "voices" that interrupt and disrupt the authority of the writer. As Bakhtin has shown, the additional discourse created dialogues with the conventional to illustrate how ideology is conveyed:

I was interested in this effect as it would interrupt the textual surface ... and anticipate the resistance of a reader in accepting the authority of the text (on the side of consumption, perhaps, but here due to alternative meanings, interruptions). If ideology is structured in the way dialogue is subordinated in recorded speech (as for Voloshinov) [pseudonym for Bakhtin], here the textual surface flips back and forth between the locus of this effect being on the side either of the writer or the reader. (Brito 26)

By offering "other," hidden perspectives the text defamiliarizes and shifts perception. The Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky has pointed out that through the juxtaposition of two different interpretations of the same set of facts—one known in the "ordinary" way and one through revelation of its secret—a "semantic shift" occurs, "a frame shift by means of which perception takes place" (Brito 21). Private meanings interact with social meanings more generally, while private language "qualifies the public and creates a new ground on which instrumental meanings can be modified and redefined... it is not simply a matter of opposition" (Brito 21).

Traditional modes of communication do not allow "other" voices to infect the

text. Watten sees this mode of communication as ritualistic; without feedback a dominant “addresser” communicates to a passive “addressee.” This structure is instilled in the speaker and reader and in language itself. One of the best-known models of this dynamic of communication is Roman Jakobson’s:

The ADDRESSER sends a MESSAGE to the ADDRESSEE. To be operative the message requires a CONTEXT referred to, graspable by the addressee, and either verbal or capable of being verbalized; a CODE fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and addressee; and, finally, a CONTACT, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication. (Jakobson 66)

This mode of ritual is based on what Watten calls “everyday life”(in Jakobson’s terms. the code and context involve “everyday life”). Watten applies Henri Lefebvre’s theory that it is the ritual of the “everyday” that makes the “initial intention” of the addresser and the “ultimate understanding” of the addressee “no longer opposed” (*Conduit of Communication* 32). Because the central dynamic of the everyday is expressed in terms of time—“everyday life is made up of recurrences: gestures of labor and leisure. mechanical movements both human and properly mechanic, hours, days, weeks. months, years, linear and cyclical repetition, natural and rational time” (*Conduit of Communication* 34)—everyday life becomes a “sociological point of feedback” where “relations are constantly reestablished” through these recurrences (*Conduit of Communication* 34).

The project of taking language out of the rituals of everyday and putting it back into circulation as a “ ‘new and improved’ fragment” (*Conduit of Communication* 34) shows how the reader is dominated by the addresser in this ritual: “What remains would

be to show how these processes occur in language, not just in strategies for its use, and that they do occur there, constantly” (*Conduit of Communication* 36). This restoration reverses the mechanism of communication, creating a “sequence of linguistic artifacts at zero degree, where communication would be refigured toward a horizon that would force a recognition of the prevalent systems of metaphorical dread” (*Conduit of Communication* 37), a “zero point” that echoes Roland Barthes’ “zero degree” writing, a “transparency interrupting communication and relationships just at the moment when everything seems communicable because everything seems both rational and real” (*Conduit of Communication* 37). This “zero point” indicates how art simultaneously denies the agency of the subject/addresser by merely expressing a chain of events “whose links can be unsnapped and reassembled to create different orders...in effect, a construction set, its parts laid out to suggest, on the one hand, likely assemblies (narrative or logical sequences), but also separated by means of the formal dynamics of the poem (line length, stanzas, italics, ellipsis) to highlight their functionality as shifting, variable instrumentalities” (Robinson 64). In pursuing Watten’s New Objectivity we are left (supposedly) at zero point, with the denial of the artistic subject.

Silliman’s New Sentence

Like Watten’s New Objectivity, Ron Silliman’s New Sentence intends to rejuvenate language. His Marxist theory of language considers how capitalism changes it from reference (social) to referentiality (alienation from user and use-function). Silliman is interested in the connection between capitalism and artistic genres, discussing how capitalism created and profited by the rise of the novel. He notes that it

set “the preconditions...the invention of the optical illusion of realism, the final breakdown of gestural poetic forms” (*Disappearance* 126). He believes the way narrative is used in novels is responsible for these illusions and losses. Realism and narrative need to be modified to change the dynamics of the prose form; because of them the human “gesture,” freedom of the reader to resist, is repressed. In every novel Silliman sees a gesture, a poetic “screaming to get out”: “Repression does not, fortunately, abolish the existence of the repressed element which continues as a contradiction, often invisible, in the social fact. As such, it continues to wage the class struggle of consciousness” (*Disappearance* 126). This conflict is much like Bakhtin’s struggle for *parole*, the repressed voice present in the “unity of individual speech” (Bakhtin 264), heard within the *langue*, the dominant language of a society. Because the novel is driven by the twin engines of referentiality and narrativity, this “parole” or gesture cannot surface. Poetry must revive the poetic, make conscious the human struggle for value, to reconnect the reader to objects again.

In his manifesto “Intraview,” Steve McCaffery declares that poets must “demystify” the commodity fetish of prose, revealing “the human relationships involved within the labour process of language [which] will involve the humanization of the linguistic Sign by means of a centering of language within itself” (*Intraview* 189), reestablishing what language poets call “the rights of the signifier” (Perloff 228). Silliman’s “new sentence” recognizes the signifier as maker of its own meaning. It is “the first prose technique to identify the signifier (even that of the blank space) as the locus of literary meaning. As such, it reverses the dynamics which have so long been

associated with the tyranny of the signified and is the first method capable of incorporating all the levels of language, both below the horizon of the sentence *and above*" (*New Sentence* 93). Silliman's idea of the signifier recalls Frederic Jameson's description of the postmodern cultural text: "The isolated Signifier is no longer an enigmatic state of the world or an incomprehensible yet mesmerizing fragment of language, but rather something closer to a sentence in free-standing isolation" (*Cultural Logic* 28).

Sentences display use and exchange value. Even "the child's one-word sentence is communicative precisely because (and to the degree that) it represents a whole. Any further subdivision would leave one with an unusable and incomprehensible fragment" (*New Sentence* 78). In our postmodern world we are left with isolated signifiers, textual shards that resemble sentences since they attempt to convey within their brusque structure some sort of idea. For Silliman, the sentence becomes the smallest unit available to signify meaning and he wishes to erase any earlier uses, including the novel's inclination to create a fully referential tale through meanings that exist beyond the level of the sentence. His goal is to re-freshen the sentence as the postmodern signifier.

Changing how sentences are used in traditional prose modifies the novel through poetry. Pound also refitted the novel for his poetry to reclaim power for the signifier or meaning-maker. Silliman sees novelistic prose as an indicator of refinement, an index of upper-class notions, not a genre of the masses. Prose divides class because its sentence is based on a written syntax that can be deemed "correct," one that does not appear in

spoken language. The educated know this syntax; such writing also affects speaking:
“‘Educated’ speech imitates writing: the more ‘refined’ the individual, the more likely
their utterances will possess the characteristics of expository prose” (*New Sentence* 79).
The idea that syntax clouds individual expression is one stated by other language
poets—for example, Rosmarie Waldrop in her poem *Inserting the Mirror*:

Visibility was poor. The field limited by grammatical rules, the foghorns
of language. (Hoover 316)

Silliman wishes to change the logic of the sentence that blinds us, dividing community.

Silliman modifies prose within the prose poem, dematerializing sentences so
“new” ones can be formed. The grammar of the sentence transforms into prosody;
sentences form rhythmically rather than syllogistically. Prosody replaces grammar as an
agent of coherence illuminating meanings the reader makes between the gaps.

Discussing Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*, Silliman describes what his own new
sentence is designed to accomplish:

The syllogistic move above the sentence level to an exterior reference is
possible, but the nature of the book reverses the direction of this
movement. Rather than making the shift in an automatic and gestalt sort
of way, the reader is forced to deduce it from the partial views and
associations posited in each sentence. (*New Sentence* 84)

The gaps between sentences, like line breaks in a traditional poem, draw our attention to
the sentence as unit of meaning. Silliman, like Watten, makes meaning from a chain of
events, a compounding of detail that coheres within prosody:

Detail is cast upon detail, minute particular on minute particular, adding
up to an impossibility of commensurable narrative. With every new
sentence a new embarkation: not only is the angle changed, and it’s
become a close-up, but the subject is switched. Yet maybe the sound’s
the same, carries it through. Or like an interlocking chain: A has a
relation to B and B to C, but B and C have nothing in common (series

not essence). (*Alternate Routes* 268)

Gesture is also added in this formation of the new sentence. Gesture is action in Silliman's opinion, and this gestural action is lost because of the advance of science and the psychology of consumption: "The obliteration of the gestural through the elaboration of technology occurs across the entire range of cultural phenomena in the capitalist period. It is the principle affective transformation of the new material basis of production" (*New Sentence* 41).

Olson's claim that "art does not seek to describe but to enact" also sought to reinstate gesture as projective verse animated poetry. Humans labor to make meaning; language sloughs off predetermined constructions and sign/signified relationships.

Poetry is a source for agency:

From Gertrude Stein to the present, poets have increasingly emphasized that meaning in poetry falls on the side of the signifier—and that it is not deferred to any hierarchic abstraction such as character, plot or argument. It is only through the signifier that the cultural limits of the self, the subject, become visible. It is there, and there only, that direct perception takes place in a poem. (*New Sentence* 146)

With Pound and Olson direct perception was to be conveyed from artist to reader; the signifier was still artist. When they consider whether reader or writer constitutes the signifier and declare the reader the meaning-maker, language poets deny the artistic subject the role of creator of meaning.

The Denial of Subject

If Inman refers to the era of the pre-capitalistic narrative hero as the "good old days" (221) he does so knowing modernists from Whitman to Olson saw this hero as representative. But language poets deny that the poet (subject) can represent all men.

According to Albert Gelpi, this disdain for the subject partly comes as a result of its participation in totalitarianism and from the paradox (read: hypocrisy) involved in what modernists claimed and what they actually did:

On the aesthetic level, then, the Postmodernist position formulated itself as a critique of the paradoxes inherent in Modernism. According to Nick Piombino's "Writing As Reverie," the centripetal Modernist effort to unify pieces into a coherent collage gives way to what is unapologetically "an esthetics of fragmentation and discontinuity." To the disillusioned Postmodernist the vaunted claims of Modernism were spurious and dangerous. The Modernist master merely put the mask of impersonality on the Romantic ego-genius, and any such exaggerated individualism led to an elitist pose of disdain for politics that itself masked the equally elitist sympathy for totalitarianism which helped make Fascism and Nazism and Stalinism possible. (Gelpi)

Language poets realize the contradictions of an objective poetics practiced by a subjective author and a poetry of social action that reduces "the body of a poet's work to little more than personality" (*Stray Straws* 41). If there is an apparent author for the poem, there is a subject manipulating language. Jed Rasula warns us that "if one concedes a right to manipulate language, a concession has already been made to the manipulation of human beings" (*Politics of, Politics In* 320).

Language poets dismiss ego-organization of their poetry because it is a social construct; the subject is not (and should not be) individual: "Subjecthood is not an essence preceding social existence. It's not what's left over once the dross has been drained away. It is the dross. It is a convergence of practices, a point of production. A product, not a producer" (Inman 223). The self should not be the primary feature of writing since it exists only within social relationships. The "perceiving I" disappears into "the anonymous, decentered ego echoing the polyglossia of popular culture"

(Gelpi). The subject is replaced as the moment of writing as event, action, that can only happen after the “author” dies. As Bruce Andrews writes in “Code Words”: “Author dies, writing begins. . . Subject is deconstructed, lost. . . deconstituted as writing ranges over the surface” (Gelpi). This loss reconstitutes the object world as word becomes signifier, not user. Words replace traditional narrative characters: “Identity devolves into language in the process” (Brito 29).

The purpose for Watten’s ironic proposal, to be considered later, is to show that without subject or author a text can have no predetermined message or final conclusion. Roland Barthes also tells us that “once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (*Death of the Author* 146). The author’s meaning removes agency from the reader. This kind of limitation creates totalities. Inman sees this happening in narrative:

Narrative triumphs precisely through the consolidation of isolate detail, fragmented experience. It solidifies. Things all come together at the end of the episode, denying social atomization by the production of a kind of aesthetic afterlife where things will be made whole again. Its closure indicates not only that of the unitary subject’s, but the possibility of closure itself. Case closed. I peeked at the end of the book before I got there. (Inman 223)

Language poets insist that time is always present, echoing Olson’s “history is now.” “Presentness” has no authority or power structure. Susan Stewart writes: “Its movement is perpetual but not hierarchical; it does not rise to a conclusion, it simply keeps going” (McHale 19). When the reader’s expectation is grounded in the presentation of a story through a subject, disrupting chronology defends against the “reduction of poetry to

‘mere’ autobiography” (*New Sentence* 175). Once the reader is present, action begins.

The text must yield a dialogue between reader and writer. Indeterminacy breaks down constraint—as Bernstein tells us, enabling a conversation “not to stare mutely, or to utter minimally directive words & be consumed by the other—but to allow room for response while responding in turn” (*A Poetics* 187). Language poetry is ordered by production rather than reproduction. The reader no longer reflects and reproduces the intended meaning of the author. Allowing for the reader to be a producer, as Watten admits, is much like the writerly text in Barthes’ *S/Z*, a call for a writing that would “make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text” (4). But making the reader a producer requires a plan.

Language poets see poetry itself as a “map” for readers to learn how to read, to “interpolate from the space of the page out onto a projected field of ‘thinking’...that the meaning of the text is constituted only in collaboration with the reader’s active construction of this hypertext” (*New Sentence* 183). The ideological is located aesthetically: “My [Watten’s] ‘aesthetic program’ would be to locate the form of the ‘aesthetic’ in the temporal continuum of the ‘ideological’ ” (Brito 15). The reader learns from the aesthetic that the act of communication is embedded in ideology but also carries completely personal meaning. An inherent contradiction develops from the claim of non-ideological reading requiring ideology. This contradiction causes even Barrett Watten to ask:

But clearly an exception is implied if ongoing cultural projects, such as this one or my own, are characterized as following a “program.”
“Program” implies method; methods are totalizing, therefore totalitarian;
and if there is an “aesthetic program,” I hear it being asked, does it
include me? (Brito 15)

Rebuttal: The New Synthesis

“Art is by definition an antithesis to what is . . . it is separated from reality by the aesthetic difference. . . . It can only act on it through its *immanente stimmigkeit*, the intrinsic rightness of the relation of its elements [i.e. through its form]. Only as a totality, through all its mediations, can the work become knowledge, not in its single intuitions.”
(Adorno in Waldrop 55)

“Coming out of the political culture of the late 1960’s, I sometimes imagined that one should seize these means of power rather than simply refuse them or try to operate without them. But this is a very questionable tactic. I hesitate to call it a strategy, because insofar as you seize these authoritative modes, you become them. There’s no way to use them without reproducing them. So it’s always an ambivalent thing, and I don’t think it’s possible not to err when you do this. You err on the side of power.”
(Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* 153)

Adorno and Bernstein make us question whether language poet’s artistic and political program is not both authoritative and totalitarian. Given their theories, how does the artist who rejects commodity maintain a stance against it while denying the writer agency? Just by recognizing its existence can we change the social construction of reality through writing? Is recognition of the status quo the only possible message? Is the “language” project finished? How could its admittedly difficult poetry effect change?

One way is through group identity, like the Imagists, Futurists, Vorticists, Dadaists, and Black Mountain poets. A group identity combats the dominant ideology of capitalism situated in powerful governments, religions, and aesthetic movements. Group identity opposes the dominant one by its rhetoric: “What is efficacious in social change is not the ‘being’ of a marginal social group but its assertion of identity and the leverage this brings to bear on conditions” (Ross 192). Politicians cultivate audience through group organization. To get people involved and “on your side,” you have to

create a platform from issues important to others so the voter can easily identify. Once the identification between audience and political group is made, the politician knows who and where his audience will be. Democrats know their voters' values, attitudes, and beliefs, such as liberalism. They also know their voters' particular regions and states, and have an idea of their race, gender, age, and economic makeup. Language poets must also develop a political "party." Jed Rasula, a poet and critic closely associated with this movement, emphasizes the need to find and keep an audience, noting that "a politics in and a politics of American poetry can never arrive at a full collaboration between writer and reader without the deliberate location and cultivation of an audience" (*Politics of Politics In* 322).

Like their predecessors, language poets have formulated their "party" in non-academic circles since the academy fosters and transmits false values:

In general, for a person of color, a woman, a member of the working class, school is the first place where she is encouraged to exchange the richness of her experience and the values of her community for standards that run directly counter to her sense of solidarity. Even a child knows the terms of the exchange are unjust. (Hunt 200)

These poets have shunned the academy, establishing "an elaborate network of small presses and talk series, a network which has possibly allowed for a greater degree of cross-fertilization and of independence from the defining process of academic criticism than perhaps any group since the Black Mountain school" (Hartley). Yet the subsequent audience for this school was strictly academic. While shunning academia, language poets are still conscious of it, constructing their practice around complex theory.

In trying to convert academicians who support the dominant system and use

conventional language, language poets subject themselves to criticism that exposes their contradictions. As critics we question the claim to provide agency to a reader through an aesthetic program when the artist himself has no agency. If readers are socially constructed through language, we must wonder whether while still using it ourselves we can prepare them to stop using the language. Charles Altieri asks whether art can change things if it is not devoted to representing these social conditions: “the direct assertion of political ends makes it extremely difficult to show how forms of meaning not devoted to representing social conditions can carry such broad implications” (Altieri 303). Altieri goes on to reason that by rejecting conventional language, language poetry’s claims of being political are necessarily rejected also:

Like much of modernist art...L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing finds those practices so contaminated that it must base most of its energies on deranging the language from its conventionalities. But much of that art can also go on to reject the claims of the political which are normally carried in such language. (Altieri 303)

The answer lies in the fact that language poetry to be political maintains its own ideology and rhetorical delivery system. Thus when Bruce Andrews says that language poets can (and must) change the “social contract” through a “total encompassing & *maximizing*” of praxis (Andrews 32), he believes in totalizing the language poet’s individual program so it can be read in a specific way. Agency can only be had through agency, and though the language poets deny it to the writer they implicitly admit that without it they fail. Standing in the middle proclaiming both the social construction of reality and the reader’s real agency to make meaning can be precarious for Barrett Watten: “Even so, the ratio here between private expression and public scale is

significant—both for what it is as expression and for what it recursively inculcates in the subject” (Brito 16). Peter Baker is quick to underline the verb “inculcate” in this response. He suggests that to understand what the verb “inculcates” is saying “requires an examination of some specific instances in the poetry, along with some statements of intent” (*Code of Communication* 252). Reviewing language poetry, its “political unconscious” will reveal its intentions to inculcate a response from its audience through a program that requires it to appear authoritative and total. Although the language poet’s “critical moves against the speaking subject and the referent...are part of the effort to draw both into the framework of the total poetical action...in order to withdraw from the reader all ethical or ideological resorts” (*Response to Altieri* 310), it inserts its own ideology. As Fredric Jameson has said of the novel, we may consider the underlying (and contradictory) “contractual arrangements” between readers and writers of language poetry—to consider how this poetry is an “ideologeme whose outer form, secreted like a shell or exoskeleton, continues to emit its ideological message long after the extinction of its host” (*Political Unconscious* 151) or, in this case, the creator/artist/subject of its work.

Decreation

“What seems to be discouraged in American politics is any active participation in the designation and description of public policy issues—a ceding of authority that politicians, journalists, and the public are forced to accept if they are to play the political roles to which they seem to have been assigned.” (Charles Bernstein, *A Poetics* 219)

Language poets compel others to act against the dominant and decreate the dominant ideology by converting reader passivity into activity. Nicole Brossard deems

this “making trouble”:

My “basic intention” was to make trouble, to be a troublemaker in regard to language but also with values of my own embodied by a writing practice that was ludic (playing with words), experimental (trying to understand processes of writing), and exploratory (searching). (Brossard 77)

From the perspective of the dominated, this trouble-making suggests Bernstein’s guerilla warfare or Comens’ postmodern tactics. Tacticians, when engaged in battle, do not have resources or power and must therefore resort to “cunning, deception, and wit,” or what DeCerteau, referring to Clausewitz’s theory of war, calls “the art of the weak” (*Practice of Everyday Life* 3). DeCerteau compares poetics to these tactics, calling poetics a “minor philosophy,” in Gilles Deleuze’s and Felix Guattari’s sense of “minor literature” (*Practice of Everyday Life* 37). How can such minor literature ever defeat the major literature that stands in its way, the Lyotardian “grand narratives” of history informing all aspects of our lives? How can a minor literature “defeat” major literatures when its own political goal is based on a politically forceful grand narrative, that of Marxism? Altieri sees this contradiction:

Yet McGann presumes to disparage the political force of the narratives that Marx and his followers used to elaborate that image and work out some of its possible consequences. Perhaps McGann would have advised Marx to take the more revolutionary route of encouraging readers to produce their own meanings rather than work analytically through the contradictions of the existing social structure. (Altieri 307)

By claiming a tactician’s role and destroying the enemy without having a “major” literature to take its place, language poetry’s tactics ultimately deny the “power they can muster,” as Altieri points out:

Clearly poetry will not do Marx’s work. But poetry did to a considerable extent shape the values at stake in Marx’s work, primarily because it did

not become so ambitious as to pursue the self-canceling project of making empty rhetorical claims that deprive it of the powers it can muster. (Altieri 307)

Language poetry proclaims a tactical anti-formalism but, to be political, must have form valuable enough to remain once the battle is over. What is there beside the standard practices of intentional communication? Is it worth fighting for?

If, on the other hand, one refuses that mediating role for art and, with McGann, seeks more direct political authority, it is likely that one will end up with little more than a very thin formalism desperately proclaiming in theory the significance it cannot locate in the specific works. Brecht loses to Lukács. (Altieri 306)

Language poets do not give up art's mediating role as quickly as Altieri would like.

"Sophism," says DeCerteau, "is the dialectics of tactics" (*Practice of Everyday Life* 38).

Although their modernist fathers were accused of sophistry also, language poets are not (and cannot be) intent merely on a program of decreation. Their tactics are contaminated by a heritage from which they try to free themselves. Eventually they must recreate a whole to replace what they have destroyed.

Modernists used language as a means to free the reader to "explore new principles of relationship...treating those relationships less as comments about the world than as literal testimony through which the experience of the work became substantial evidence for the claims the work asserted" (Altieri 304). They showed how language contributed to a new understanding of the powers of human action to resist indeterminacy. To demonstrate this new understanding, modernists separated subject and object to counter what they saw as an ineffective Romantic idealism that aggrandized the individual subject and its "organic model for the instantiation of seer

and seen, word, and meaning” (Gelpi). Yet, as we have seen, the rage for order persisted, making the modernist artist as hero reclaim himself to collect and connect the fragments of his society within his artwork. With this process of deconstruction and reconstruction the modernists tried to accomplish change; with this same process the language poets hope to do the same.

James Sherry’s “She’ll Be Comin’ ’Round” is an interesting example of this process. Sherry deconstructs a traditional narrative song and converts its repetitive, monotonous chorus to a new song by adding extra thematic material, expanding the original to fit in his society’s terms:

She’ll be comin’ ’round the mountain when the shell sometimes is
empty.

She’ll be comin’ sometimes and the shell is an evasion,
when she comes around the mountain
to put in an appearance;
and this is the introduction we’re all trying’ to come ’round to.

She’ll be drivin’ six white and well-bred young mares.
She’ll be tryin’ to be comin’, when one of the horses slips on a curve.
but the traces hold her up like a beautiful horse about to describe
the great vehicle she’ll conduct, when she comes.

And we’ll all go out to meet her when the well is dry and cracked
and the water is too neutral to hold
even a chance encounter when we’re trying to be comin’
and breathe too much or that’s what I
heard when tryin’ too hard to meet her, when she comes.

And we’ll all have chicken and dumplings in a context
of the human shell, water in the trough,
the gopher holes, how hot leather is in the desert mining town
except to the horses,
when she comes. (*Comin’ ’Round* 448)

The traditional song conveys hope as the unnamed yet heroic woman visits a town in

the hills. But in Sherry's version what we are left with is the everyday that perpetuates an uncomfortable status quo—the "gopher holes" marking the presence of rodents, the sticky "hot leather," the pedestrian "chicken and dumplings" eaten in "context of the human shell," a meal providing bare sustenance. Whoever comes out to meet this supposedly "special" woman in this forsaken place does so just to "put in an appearance" (the visit made mechanical) and so there is no consummation. The third stanza's blatant sexual imagery tells a tale of disappointment, unfulfilled desire, frustration, and sterility. Energy and passion cannot be consummated in this "desert mining town," as if T.S. Eliot's Fisher King continues to wait for rain as Sherry restructures and rewrites, completing the modernist story of redemption within the lines of the original song's chorus.

Bob Perelman also rewrites a traditional story in his ironically titled, subject-sanctioning, "An Autobiography." Perelman revisits the classic story of Oedipus and in doing so creates a personal dialogue with the modernist (Freudian) version to give his readership a new interpretation:

Everyone keeps shouting in my ears. But rest assured, dear papa, that these are my very own sentiments and have not been borrowed from anyone.

Has the reader ever been madly in love? One does not load up on odds & ends on the chance of their proving useful. The utmost reduction compatible with efficiency is the first & last thing to aim at.

But I am putting off for too long a necessary statement. My mother was a charming woman and I was in love with her. One night, when by chance I had been put to sleep on the floor of her room on a mattress, this woman, agile as a deer, bounded over my mattress to reach her bed more quickly.

In loving her at the age of six (a charming place with handsome horses) I

had exactly the same character as now. crusts & air spaces in layers...My way of starting on the quest for happiness has not changed at all, with this sole exception: that in what constitutes the physical side of love (it froze hard within a very short time). I was what Caesar would lie, if he came back to earth, with regard to cannon & small arms. I would soon have learned, and it would have changed nothing essential in my tactics. I wanted to cover my mother with kisses, and for her to have no clothes on. It was quite usual to feel one side of the face getting sunburned while the other was being frozen. A journey of this kind is no joke.

I abhorred my father. He brought with him memories of how it feels to be intensely, fiercely hungry. He came and interrupted our kisses. Be so good as to remember that I lost her, in childbed, when I was barely seven. You will easily conceive what I have had to bear—what courage and fortitude I have needed to endure calmly as things grew steadily worse between the depots. He came and interrupted our kisses.
(*Autobiography* 66-7)

The “quest for happiness” cannot come about until the struggle between subject (writing exclusively in the first person) and father has ended, or has at least been understood.

The writer reminds us of the struggle’s violence and innate power—“I was what Caesar would lie, if he came back to earth, with regard to cannon & small arms”—and of its importance. These are not the silly, inconsequential fantasies of a child: “A journey of this kind is no joke.”

From the first stanza we learn that Perelman is not only having a conversation with us, but with the “dear papa” he once “abhorred,” Freud. By using and discarding Freudian dream theory Perelman is making sense of his individual happiness:

Here I interrupted him. I said I was never in such a good humor when I was quite unknown. I complained to him of being appallingly hungry, of tragic dreams of getting food to eat, but of never having the satisfaction of dreaming that I was actually eating. Last night I did taste bread and butter. He laughed. “I assumed,” he said, “that you would be guided by your common sense and that you would have had more confidence in your father’s judgment which you know is so sound, than in your own futile wishes. For lunch we will have Wild Roll, shepherd’s pie, fresh

baked soda-bread, hot milk treacle, pudding, nuts, raisins, and cake. After that we will turn in for a sleep, and we will be called at 3:45, when we will reach out again from tile bunks and have doughnuts and sweets. We will get up then and have big cups of tea, and fresh cakes and chocolate creams. Dinner will be at six, and we will have thick soup, roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, cauliflower, peas, asparagus, plum pudding, fruit, apple pie with thick cream, scones and butter, port wine, nuts, and almonds and raisins.”

He raised his forefinger. “These seemingly trivial matters may often bring success, honor, and wealth, or, on the other hand, disgrace....”
(*Autobiography* 66-7)

The conflict centers on Freud’s assumption of his “son’s” belief in his theories that explain happiness and desire, the struggle between what the son wants to believe and Freud’s theoretical explanations that mechanizes us. “orders” our desires like a menu. He makes the trivial consequential, our self-consciousness sapping pleasure in life. The father organizes the child’s world before he goes to dream:

Trust no one! Keep your medicines! Go to bed early! Do not catch cold!
Perspire a little every morning! Be careful in your diet! Good night!
(*Autobiography* 69)

When Perelman rewrites the ending of the tale with which we are already familiar he painstakingly resists Freudian tenets by resisting the dream. From the first stanza Perelman has wanted to rely on his “own sentiments.” not those that have been “borrowed from anyone.” The final stanza ends on personal triumph leading to happiness:

By the painful process of forcing my eyelids apart with my fingers I was able to see a little, but the pain was severe. I endured six hours of agony, ending in a good long sleep, from which I awoke much refreshed. By midnight I was walking to the rookery, where I had great fun with the birds. (*Autobiography* 69)

Although language poets rigorously deconstruct the notions behind much

conventional use of language, including the idea of the subject as creator of art and (rhetorical) transmitter of a message, they often follow that deconstruction by reconstructing a writing practice and using traditional material. As poet Steve Benson has put it, these writers “markedly propose conscious value to what could otherwise be taken as impingements in a literature of autonomous display” (*For Change* 487).

Recreation of the Dominant

Like the modernists, the impulse of language poets toward political change is so strong it leads toward not only decreation of the old but recreation of a new. It is a situation that

requires discriminations of perception, and so of consciousness, which permit, indeed compel, us to understand ourselves and our situation more subtly and precisely, and thereby compel us to define the values and commitments upon which responsible choice and action depend. (Gelpi)

Because the focus is on the decreative aspects of the political program, language poets' study of language is seen as destructive rather than holistic. They suffer from “a kind of poor visibility, marginalization as a ‘special interest’ group dependent on a self-justifying chain of the avant-garde” (Hunt 203) rather than being seen as actual producers of an alternative unified culture based on their political vision. Yet language poetry's study of language as a mediation of consciousness develops a visionary culture. Some language poets (interestingly many of them female) actually state this idea explicitly. For example, Nicole Brossard:

My rapport with language is a matter of perspective on patriarchal knowledge and on its symbolic hierarchal/dualist field. It calls for *vision* rather than for subversion. It calls for awareness, concentration, sharpness. Vision goes beyond transgression because it brings forth new material. (Brossard 82)

Language poetry shows a depth of resonance and reference, an emerging coherence of perspective and statement. This poetry can be interpreted on the basis of the author's intention for creating the poem; the vision is made clear through the poet's method.

When the messages appear along with the intentions, the reader may see that these poets form their utopia along with their desire to reinvent language.

This utopia is not entirely easy to see. In the words of Frederic Jameson, language in our postmodern world is a "prisonhouse" that keeps us from following a path toward the ultimate knowledge of our society. Gelpi extends the trope further: "Theory swallowed all: poetry submerged into criticism and linguistics, words about words; even Marxism exercised itself not in political action but academic analysis" (Gelpi). Beyond this theory, however, all language, even as it theoretically opposes dominant practice in language poetry or linguistic theory, reveals its dual use as a vehicle for the ideas of the dominant culture. Oppositional language practices cannot escape the dominant sign/signified relationship of our cultural language, and therefore participate in and perpetuate the dominant culture. This participation is what Raymond Williams calls "writing of a residual kind... a form of contribution to the effective dominant culture" (Williams 45). We also must remember that language poets are artists who use a medium even as they are in the process of changing it:

And that quas independent quality extends even further: we get stuck with the old codes even as we try to negate them. We experience acute difference: autonomy without self-determination and group identity without group empowerment. (Hunt 200)

Therefore language poets are stuck in a precarious position—agents for change as part of the oppressed society. Hunt goes on to explain this position:

The effect of this can be sensed in the feeling of captivity we have before there is a psychic or social advance, the state of alienation we reside in: somehow the codes fit and do not fit us, somehow we are the agents of the prescribed predicates and not the agents. (Hunt 200)

This feeling of alienation parallels that of the modernist artist. The dominant culture then co-opts the artistic program, transferring to them its own agenda as Pound allied with Mussolini and Olson worked in the U.S. Government and the academy. Because the dominant culture maintains that it has a complete vision, the opposition is “alternately demonized or accommodated through partial concessions without a meaningful alteration of dominant culture’s own terms” (Hunt 202).

When opposition is forced to use the dominant culture’s ideological strategies the differences disappear between the two. The dominant (mis)appropriates language poetry’s tactics:

The advertising agencies and the newspaper headlines utilize language strategies unbounded by grammar which the new poetry has introduced. The advertisers limit the variation of grammar and change the instrumentality from ways of creating meaning to ways of getting people to buy product, but the effect is to undermine the divisions of grammar. (*Boundaries of Poetry* 231)

Advertisers learn the irreducible coding of language in order to serve their capitalist interests. Altieri postulates that not only the means but even the goal of language poetry, calling for the reader’s freedom to make meaning, becomes just another part of capitalistic commodification:

Is not such freedom to recast inherited materials a perfect exemplar of the right to treat language as a commodity to be manipulated in whatever ways I can get away with? That too is a social relation all too much in keeping with an order in which there is no responsibility to the continuities imposed by received disciplines or respect for the intentions of others. And shouldn’t I be able to make what profit I can from this field of economic possibilities, on the assumption that if each of us bends

the law to our own interest the dynamic competition will prove in society's best interests? (Altieri 305)

Capitalism touting consumer choice parallels but also obscures language poetry's call for readers to find meaning in texts. This derails opposition to the dominant culture's language since "the basic dodge of capitalist advertising consists in promising an undefined freedom that depends on a person's thinking that he or she is the only one on the block to compose a certain order or possess a certain way of arranging his or her world" (Altieri 306). Language cannot be treated as separate from the practices that constitute social life and little is learned from poems that make this separation. By claiming value exists in the reader's freedom, language poets also support capitalism and uphold the dominant ideology, "relying on the idea of the free, pleasure-seeking consumer that L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Writing's doctrines so pompously revile" (Altieri 306). Although they have denied ideology in their poetry, there are some signs of reconsideration. Now Steve McCaffery says "the gestural 'offer' to a reader of an invitation to 'semantically produce' hints at an ideological contamination" (*North of Intention* 124). As we consider how language poetry attempts to become a dominant ideology of its own we find its contamination by the dominant ideology becomes even clearer.

Ideology Totalizes

"The 'language' poets' account of their own texts seems, in other words, too monolithic and over-determined, not fine-grained enough to account for textual details, tending to flatten and reduce poems to a single reiterated message—an interpretative steamroller where something more like a set of dentists' drills seems called for." (Brian McHale 24)

McHale responds to the singularity of the political message of the language

program, reminding us there is nothing in language poetry that gives it immunity from reproducing the controlling idea(s) of dominant culture, in its difference from the dominant or in its originality. Erica Hunt further reminds us that the “fetishization of the new is well advanced in our society, and borrows from dominant culture that culture’s authority” (Hunt 204). Language poetry gains its own authority from the uniqueness in its call for counterhegemony, itself an ideological construct. Language poets hardly interrupt their political project with their poetry; their theory and practice attempt to “exemplify a unified political analysis that stretches from minutiae of writing and living as material practices to ideological generalizations” (*Language Writing and Literary History* 129). Bruce Andrews’s strategy of tactics can be seen as a counter-project whose total method is a quest to become the new standard.

This standard seeks a present-tense utopia “where there are no heroes but those who meet their obstacles and rewards here and now, no deferrals to a resolution in future time” (Ross 191). Although these theoretical strategies are repeatedly offered the poetry itself never wavers from a preconceived goal. It develops into a contemporary ritual only for their readers. In a conversation with Rosmarie Waldrop, Bruce Andrews suggests:

Your small press work brought home how specific and narrow [the readership for such work is]. Now there’s an entire tradition of countering formal expectations and [readers of these works] might only be looking for things that were surprising to some normal reader who would never touch these books. So that for those readers, the ones that you would actually be writing for, you wouldn’t be countering expectations or creating surprise at all. You would be giving them just what they want: exciting, “challenging” texts—but only challenging for those other guys who would never get *these* texts. (Waldrop 69)

To which Waldrop responds:

But you are right: what's called innovation can very quickly become mannerism and the expected thing rather than the unexpected. (Waldrop 69)

Mannerism is not necessarily a bad idea for a politician. The method to give agency to readers who think that they have none must be rhetorical. Language poetry's politics only work for those who can appreciate the obverse of conventional language.

At times we detect language poets revealing, in obvious fashion, their wish to be effectively rhetorical. Nicole Brossard's statement that "a text gives subliminal information on how it wants to be read" (Brossard 78) indicates hope that her poetry will affect an individual. Olson and Pound compelled others to act against the dominant through the "performative" aspect of their individual will. What Michael Davidson calls the performative is Olson's Projective Verse or Pound's Vorticism: "The speech act that most dramatically exemplifies language's ability to act on others is the performative" (Davidson 243). Whether promises, oaths, or declarations, such articulations are characterized "by their ability to put into motion what they announce" (Davidson 243). Language poets act on others through the performative. Hearing Ron Silliman read his poem "Sunset Debris" live I was immediately struck by the feeling that he somehow wished to control my response by a string of interrogatives read consecutively without break. Asking questions could allow for the dialogic "communication" between reader and materials that language poets seek to establish in the poetry, permitting readers to answer any questions they wish, yet Silliman's poem eliminates this opportunity by disrupting the reader's focus on the questions (this is especially noticeable when the poem is read aloud). This disruption leaves the audience with an extra-textual

impression conveyed through speed and tone that carries each question. The poem's rapidity threatens with a bombardment of unanswerable questions dealing with sociological, philosophical, and psychological aspects of our society, questions that veer from sex and violence to everyday trivia and overwhelm our course of thought. This routing of our ability to respond leaves the reader fragmented, helpless, uneasy, as if something were incomplete.

Praxis and Subject

After reading a language poem, one remains curious about its rhetoric. How can it be "performative," acting without a subject? Critics wonder how it can construct *anything* meaningful without a subject, even though the poets have some sort of "faith in the power of writing to construct" (Gelpi). Marjorie Perloff questions whether, with the function of the speaker and of referentiality called into serious question, such poetry might be seen as "no more than a mandarin game designed to entertain an elite coterie" (Perloff 218). She wonders if word games can ever convey the essentials of human endeavor:

What is the value, I have heard it asked, of these little word games when we all know that the business of poetry is to convey the concrete particulars of experience, the response of the sensitive individual to the vagaries of human suffering and struggle? (Perloff 218)

The answer lies within the poet's goal for writing and the praxis or action taken to complete it.

Through praxis, the writing that fulfills intention, language poetry's ideology is created. Bernadette Meyer says directly in "Studying Hunger" that as we "listen" to *how* a poem is written it reveals the author's explicit intentions. This expression is equally as

important as the expression of the author's goal—in this case, to create a “workable code” of language to express the relationship between self and world:

Listen

I began all this in April. 1972. I wanted to try to record like a diary in writing, states of consciousness, my states of consciousness, as fully as I could, every day, for one month. A month always seems like a likely time-span, if there is one, for an experiment. A month gives you enough time to feel free to skip a day, but not so much time that you wind up fucking off completely.

I had an idea before this that if a human, a writer, could come up with a workable code, or shorthand, for the transcription of every event, every motion, every transition of his or her own mind, & could perform this process of translation on himself, using the code, for a 24-hour period, he or we or someone could come up with a great piece of language/information.

Anyway

When I began to attempt the month-long experiment with states of consciousness, I wrote down a list of intentions. It went like this: First, to record special states of consciousness. Special: change, sudden change, high, low, food, levels of attention. And, how intentions change

Those were the intentions I wrote down, April first. Also, these questions: What's the danger? What states of consciousness & patterns of them are new to language? And what is the language for them?...

On April second, the first thing I wrote was “You wait.” The experiment went badly, real bad. I added to my intentions, this one: to be an *enchantress*, or, *to seduce by design*. I thought about sentences that stuck in your mind, like, “How long have you been head of this business?” and “You planned the disappearance of my desire.”

At 3:35 a.m. on April 2nd, I recorded that I had eaten too much food.

I was waging a constant battle against traditional language...(Mayer 410-i, emphasis added).

Despite her using a traditional form of the diary, Mayer's goal, to wage a “constant battle against traditional language,” is a major part of language poet's ideology,

intentionally conveyed as the poet becomes “an enchantress.” “seducing” us by her “design” that subtly outlines the subject’s intentions, goals, and progress. Language is an instrument to construct this ideology, expressing the poet’s intention, converting desire into what Daniel Barbiero calls “interest” (Barbiero 265). Barbiero defines ideology as “the instrumental use of language.” By using language to complete intention, it is “instrumentalized” and, therefore, “ideologize[d]” (Barbiero 265). Language, ideology, and intention are inseparably intertwined.¹⁶ If this is the case, if there are goals that are planned, actions to be taken with a common tool (language) known to all, the source that is inextricably bound to the other elements in this equation is the subject.

There must be a subject present before you have action; without a subject there can be no goals (whom do they belong to?), no intention (who sets the goals?), no language use (who is speaking?), no praxis. Louis Althusser tells us

every human, that is to say social individual, cannot be the agent of a practice unless he takes the form of a subject. The subject form is in fact the form that the historical existence of every individual, every agent of social practices, takes; for the relations of production and reproduction necessarily involve, as the integrating element, what Lenin called “ideological social relations,” which in order to function, imposes on every individual agent the form of a subject. (Inman 221)

When language poets separate subject from intention, this separation can only be seen as detrimental for the use of language and the creation of poetry. Not only does the loss of subject bore the reader, leading to “monotony and formlessness” (Perloff 234), it also removes the ideology, the intention/praxis element from language use.

Ask of the language poem, “Who is speaking?” Charles Bernstein offers a clue

when he aspires to write a “multidiscourse” text, a “work that would involve many different types & styles & modes of language in the same ‘hyperspace’. Such a textual practice would have a dialogic or polylogic rather than monologic method” (McHale 19). Brian McHale asks if in the language poem “no single consistent voice can be identified, can the juxtapositions of voices, registers, discourses and/or styles in the text be motivated in terms of some reconstructed image of interacting speakers?” (McHale 14). This question seems appropriate to introduce the “subject” in a Bakhtinian context.

Bakhtin’s theory of the dialogic imagination demonstrates the propensity of neo-Enlightened thinkers to rid themselves of conventional truths created, established, and maintained by art forms based on memory, tradition, and nostalgia. His examination of the transmutation of artistic forms like the epic into the novel showed the desire of writers to decommission themselves, authorizing the individual reader to deny traditional truths. Whereas the epic impulse was to form new images personalized by the author to valorize and perpetuate the past in the future, the enlightened desire to empower the individual through knowledge influenced poetry to contend with the present, to create images based on a direct representation of reality. According to Bakhtin, this desire propels the movement from myth to enlightenment, from epic to novel, from art containing a monoglossic to a polyglossic discourse.

Polyglossia, the many voices of a polyglot world, finds its way into new genres, such as the novel, as the world expands through industrialism and becomes a global community: “the period of national languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end” (Bakhtin 12). Bakhtin theorizes that at this time boundaries

marking “territorial dialects, social and professional dialects and jargons, literary language, generic languages within literary languages, epochs in language and so forth” break down and “completely new relationships are established between language and its object (that is, the real world)” (Bakhtin 12). Novelists first, then poets like Pound and Olson, wished to gain the perspective of contemporary reality, become more involved with it, immerse themselves in it to deal with it more effectively. This production of many voices into art, as the author steps out of the world of tradition and myth to move into what Bakhtin calls the “zone of contact” of the present, tells of a shift in language representation, foreshadowing a major element of language poetry.

Bakhtin saw this zone of contact accomplished through adoption of an empirical vision, offering a new yet still objective image to readers based on personal vision that “delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment—both scientific and artistic—and into the hands of free experimental fantasy...making possible free, scientifically knowable and artistically realistic creativity in European civilization” (Bakhtin 23). Dealing directly with reality and its objects—as the late nineteenth-century realistic novelists and early twentieth-century poets did—makes the object closer, more manageable, “where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it” (Bakhtin 23). This provided a new interrelation of artist, reader, and history. Including the objects of the world in art lets them “speak” for what they represent. This inclusion of objects produces what Bakhtin refers to in the novel as

dialogism, “a diversity of speech and voice” (Bakhtin 25) that makes up the artwork, no longer privileging the single artistic voice of the author. For Bakhtin, “the ‘depicting’ authorial language now lies on the same plane as the ‘depicted’ language of the hero” and, indeed, the “language” of any represented objects that speak directly to us. All of art’s competing voices destabilize the work’s authority and disenfranchise the authorial voice attempting to communicate. These voices “may enter into dialogic relations and hybrid combinations”(Bakhtin 27-8) and in these “conversations” meaning is finally made when reality sees, then speaks.

Often in language poetry we encounter the replacement of the unified and unifying presence of the first person subject with a seeming multiplicity of identities through which they refuse subject, becoming an “other.” This “other” subject is an object of the world, distanced from language. Not named as a traditional “I,” its presence is nevertheless felt as it searches for poetic content. It must compete with the subject of self, the writer using the language of the poem. An “I” tells the story and an “I, a system” (*Progress* 38) of the world whose many-angled perspectives present it. The latter “I” is visible to the reader in the poem since it is an object of language; we can see the diverse materials of the poem that originate from other contexts. The traditional subject “I,” representing the poet, is deliberately hidden. The effect is a separation between the language-using subject and language itself:

the I that is spoken escapes the I that is speaking, and becomes Other. The framework here appears to be one based on a relationality of subject and object...I no longer points back to the subjectivity using language in a praxis but instead is a kind of objectified subjectivity, which is to say an intention that has been exteriorized into language. (Barbiero 263)

Barbiero's relation of the other or objectified I to an exteriorized intention recalls his praxis/intention equation and the need for a subject to execute it. Barbiero's definition of this subject plays an important role in defining subject for the language poem:

A subject simply is an actor capable of engaging in purposive, skilled action within the context of a field constituted by a set of practices. Far from being a pre-given unity, the subject in fact is an acting entity made meaningful only within the context of the field of practices within which it acts, and within which its various ends can be pursued with some reasonable chance of success. (Barbiero 262)

If a subject is "an acting entity" made within the "context of the field of practices within which it acts," then the subject of a language poem must be considered the combination of the writer as subject (actor using language) and his "other" as object that works and exists within the field of the poem. This combined subject/object "I" becomes a total actor made meaningful by his action.

Perelman's poem, "My One Voice," expresses this fusion of the split subject:

At the sound of my voice
I spoke and, egged on
By the discrepancy, wrote
The rest out as poetry.

Read the books, duets
From nowhere say they speak;
Why not let them. Habitual stares
Leave trees in rearview mirrors.

I came from a neutral point
In space, far from the inside
Of any one head. O say can I
Still see the tabula rasa outshining

That rosy dawn on the near side
Of the genetic code. Doubt,
Thy name is certainty. Generations
Of recordings of the sunrise

Picture the light until the page
Is white and I predict
The present, hearing a future
In the syllables' erasing fade. (*My One Voice* 70)

In the first stanza the subject becomes other, listening to the voice in his mind moving him to write, defining the thoughtful self and the acting self. The second stanza begins with the ambiguous word “read” which may be considered as both the past tense and the present command. The thoughtful self remembers the past when he “read the books” while the active self commands the reader to “read the books.” The books themselves allow both the I as self and the I as other to play out these “duets from nowhere.” In the third stanza Perelman demonstrates the language poet’s credo of the subject’s neutrality—the result of its “split”—referring to the attainment of the unformed mind (“tabula rasa”) in achieving a new reality, an unformed social condition, a time when the “page is white,” not influenced or constructed by prefabricated “habitual stares.” Yet the context or field of practices, in which this split subject operates, contradicts neutrality. Perelman relies on a given social construct, our national anthem, to unify our political values (and capitalist) beliefs, conveying his message. The unformed mind is overturned by the reality of a mind formed by society; Perelman’s song can only make sense if we know and can react to Francis Scott Key’s recording of a particular “sunrise,” an image of a “rosy dawn” that the habit of “generations” of singing has ritualized. Perelman’s goal that he (O say!) can “still see” is to efface this song in the “syllables’ erasing fade.” He writes a song that erases reality—he can, as a thoughtful self, “picture the light” and, as active self, command us to do so. But this light is not new and Perelman’s impulse stems from previous generations, the light understood

from the light of Key's song. We depend on reference to the world's materials to express ourselves through "song"—much in the same way Perelman uses Freud in "An Autobiography" and Sherry uses the folk song in "She'll be Comin' 'Round." The unformed mind can never be achieved—the page can be erased only momentarily, at best, because neither of the "subjects" can be considered apart from their praxis or context.

The objectified "other" of the poem is unified with the subject/writer through intentions for the fulfillment of its praxis that it makes known and the goals "silently imposed" by those intentions (Barbiero 263). Barbiero concludes that, because the subject cannot be disassociated from its praxis through the expression of its intention, it also "cannot be separated from the reciprocal idea of the field in which praxis takes place: the subject always is the subject of a particular praxis" (Barbiero 263). The newly-constructed subject uses the material of the world, language, as a means to effect his praxis to fulfill his goal, to express meaning. This construction is a different use of the world's materials to attain intention, a new instrumentation where words have a praxis meaning rather than a semantic referential one. Yet we still are faced with subjects trying to convey meaning to a reader. We may conclude that the writing subject meets and becomes the world within the language poem; praxis is the source for the dialogic that we find—a dialogic unified by a world that we, as readers, can all understand.

World as Image Complex

"Down on the ground it looked like a human universe, even if from moment to moment a fantastic refiguring of incommensurate beliefs." (Watten, *Task of the Collaborator* 163)

It is the world as image that unifies the poet as subject with his language objects—the world is where poetic form becomes content, praxis gains meaning, and tactics make sense. The strategy of the language poet on this level of world is intentional and totalizing. The world is one of Forrest-Thomson’s “levels of coherence” or, more appropriately, “image-complexes” a reader uses to make sense of a difficult and obscure poem, enabling us “to assimilate features of various kinds, to distinguish the relevant from the irrelevant, and to control the importation of external contexts” (McHale 8). The world is the place where the reader reconstructs a situation, scene, event, and, in the case of language poetry, a subject, an intention, and an ideology. Direct rhetorical address is replaced by this image-complex, relevant to the Poundian tenets of imagism where the object speaks the message. Lyn Hejinian’s poem “The Erosion of Rocks” presents a rhetorical program to reconstitute an unblemished world by capturing this world *as image*, an amalgamation of unadorned details:

The erosion of rocks blooms. The world
that’s for you thanks (you) in actuality actuality.
Large broad marks without interruption.
Things as they fall in the hotel reduce
the view. This is in the world you
all add up, re miniature terms of detail.

Sugar, less coffee, a clean towel, the archive.
All add up to from the minute after after all.
The theater is less exciting. The shore worn
potable. The erosion of rocks less salt.
A carnival for posterity is a machine
in its early stages. A clean towel
pulled out. The theater suggests a house
a machine. I am irritated by this
contradictious optimism. The world pretends
to get a fair distance on unshod horses.
The theater shares the optimism of the carnival.

A conservative year is a suggestion. The mechanical use
of photos yours. Using nails
reduces the view. Things fall some of the way
out into the street a new scene. A grid
worn by water from one place to another. The erosion
of rocks, two away. The theater of holes dug for trees. (*Erosion* 62)

Hejinian's "erosion of rocks" is the erosion of the inanimate concrete "things" that are placed in our "view" that prevent us from seeing the world for what it is. She attempts to present this world (which will "thank" us for the effort) in "large broad marks without interruption," denying the "mechanical use of photos" that we participate in and that ultimately "reduces the view" of this world. The allusion to Benjamin is intentional because to contain them we mechanically reproduce the objects of the world, taking them from this world to a new place, whether that "place" is a photograph or, in this case, a theater and a hotel. In this reproduction aura is lost yet we deny this loss—we "pretend[s] to get a fair distance on unshod horses" or to maintain aura in this reproduction of the world's objects.

Hejinian suggests eroding this "machine"-like reproduction of the world with a new, fluid action where things "fall" and "add" in a non-ordered manner, an accretion that forces things back "out into the street a new scene," back out into the world. The metaphor completes itself in a binary expression—mechanics against fluidity, containment of objects against freedom, reproduction against extemporaneity. The binaries made whole are combined in the thematic image of the erosion of rocks, completed and "worn by water from one place to another." Hejinian has an *opinion* that "the theater is less exciting," displaying "irritation" for the way the world is

represented. So she presents a new theater to grow concrete things. When the blooms already on the tree die the whole tree needs to be replaced. She digs the holes to replant the new tree, which we know, from the first line, is the process which “blooms” of “eroding the rocks.”

Language poets seem to have heeded Jameson’s call for a “cognitive mapping” of our world (*Cultural Logic* 51) in order to know our place before we change it. Traditional means of representation show the world on the level of content and theme alone—what is actually needed is formal innovation that models the world on the level of form. (McHale 27) Language poets attempt to achieve this model, as the form of their poetry is directly a part of, rather than a carrier of, their message of change. This forces the reader to experience what they see as a current capitalist reality of painful deception. Form is a way of making us a part of the situation as language poets find it so their readers may see and transform it. Barrett Watten sees a lack of authenticity propelling this new form:

We have doom on the far side of the media undermining our brains. We do not believe our senses; the level of automatism we have to deal with is of an order the Formalists would not have believed. The necessity for technique is absolute in the face of this. (*Total Syntax* 15)

Language poets’ insistence on structure to carry message rather than speaker goes back to their disdain for the Jakobsonian paradigm of poetry. They urge a different method of communication focusing, as Watten says, on “inculcated” structures. In the structure of enclosed space the sending of a message can be hidden and denied yet still be present, communication takes place. Peter Baker’s article “Code of Communication: Conduit or Crypt” claims that these hidden messages are psychological manifestations of “that

which is unrepresentable at the core of the subject's unreachable desire, and which can only be expressed through a series of displacements" (254). Using Baker's theory, I would further suggest language poets might be displacing urges to be subjective that ultimately manifest themselves—in this case, within the image of the world that fits in the inculcation of these communicative structures. Writer and audience inculcate within each other their shared social network. Social structures are in place *in the world* before expression, and these worldly forms are used by expression to communicate.

From this point it is an easy step to poetry as an interchange between parties in a total transaction involving the entire world as a form for exchange. We can see "how poetry is like most human events—a dynamic interchange between various parties" that are "never completely visible or present to consciousness" yet "each of whom plays some part in the total transaction" (*Private Poetry* 126). As the world becomes the form for the exchange of messages, this exchange takes place within the poem. Everything exists in the poem and, therefore, there are no absolutes external to it—no standards exist outside since the poem is the world and the world is the poem. This corresponds, in a sense, to what Norman Fischer calls the "Total Presence" of a poem. The poem *is* the space/time/cultural context in which communication takes place. Fischer points out the inherent contradiction in the language poet's wish for removal of capitalist standards and absolutism for it leads to the creation of one:

That the sign is self-sufficient means that there cannot be any rules, any sort of syntax other than Total Syntax; that the confrontation that takes place within the work is a confrontation within the Total Present. This view would represent, paradoxically, an absolutism, whether it be absolutism of the self or of the text. (Fischer 42)

Although Fischer denies the perpetuation of this absolutism because of the existence of the poem's Total Absence (a lack which negates Total Presence), I would like, in turn, to negate Fischer's idea of negation with the existence of what I call the Total Subject, a Bakhtinian representation of the total society where the dialogism is contained within a single artistic realm. Thus the idea of World as image-complex for these poems remains an absolutism to carry a specific ideology of change.

The world becomes a New World that exists in contrast to the old (capitalist) one, using the form of the capitalist world as world (that structure that we know) as a way to express the new. Thus the New World may be seen as one that exists as a "negative" whole:

One grasps the implications of this negative as a whole. Viewing by scrutiny, and elimination of all of the individual parts, illuminates the whole. The original world which is wonderful is seen only by seeing its "negative" aspect, which occurs by duplicating it as wonderful.
(Scalapino 206)

We may see this duplication of world—how it becomes a negative whole—in the methods and theory of language poets. Charles Bernstein comments on how the tactics of language poetry mirror our communication whose devices reflect contemporary life:

Fast cutting, fragmentation, polyphony, polyglot, neologism may all be features of late twentieth-century life, in some areas, as much as aesthetic "inventions". My linguistic environment might include, within the space of an hour, bites of Donahue on incest, street fights in several languages, a Beethoven quartet with commentary, calls to the phone company followed by intimate discussions of personal affairs followed by a computer-voiced marketing survey—with a Weill song interpreted by John Zorn in the background, segueing into close readings of Spinoza followed by a recitation of the Brothers Grimm. (*A Poetics* 176)

Finally, we may see how the language poets' strategies, which explicitly

denounce coherence on the grounds of subject, audience reception, and narrative order. cohere on this larger level of world. Charles Bernstein's concept of absorption intends to include as many diverse materials as possible and models the world in its multidimensional grandeur, absorbing the reader through recognizable structures as s/he is fascinated by the largeness of this structure. His poem "The Blue Divide" is one of these recognizable structures:

An almost entire, eerie, silence floats above and between the fixtures that separate me from the doorstep. Slight rattle, rolling, scratches the space just behind me, which is helpful, if not necessary, to cast the reflections and echoes in just the way I'm accustomed. A table and window frame sit just ahead, to the side of the walls and corners, slat wood flooring, shelves, the tar-blackened driveway and terraced approach roads. A person waits in a boa about an hour away, floating in totally occasional manner. Stripped of its wood, unparalleled in respect to its riveting and displaced glare, incised by its dimensions, I feel the slight pang of an earlier sensation which rapidly switches in succession to images harder to identify at first, postcard sized shapes, rolling vertices. The sounds are *pervasive* and only from time to time increase in loudness which looks almost as if it were a tear or rip in the otherwise unbroken intensity. Bits of fabric—plaid, striped, glyphic—hang from fan gliders about 20 feet above and to the side arced formations of smoke languidly drift this way and that. Several hours pass the mood indiscernibly *shifting* to less substantive pleasures. The hallway rotating airily to the tempo of unforeseen reverberations. A small coterie remains behind to see that the ship departs smoothly, counting their change with an alternating frenzy and tedium. You ask for the lighter but remain seated, seem to recollect what you refused to say, purse your lips and, with a forlorn look, lapse back into thought, then begin to make suggestions for lunch. A fly makes its path *spiralling* over the campsite, arching toward the partially lit skylight and barraging full throttle into the screen. Men in blue suits and brown hats hurry over to the table and unpack their cases, gesticulating animatedly with their feet and hands. A tall, thin boy with grey callow eyes stares across the walk with forced attention, rubbing his legs and scratching his head, finally sinking into a dull, dejected slump which nonetheless gives the impression of greater ease. Barrels of fruit, uncovered and ageing, fill the area with a distracting odor; the inevitable subject of recurring fantasies for civic improvement. Tendrils, *assimilated* into the background glare, announce with glum resignation "far better for those with lighter hearts" imminent departure. Blocked,

buoyed, incessant, I take for the elevator, dash quickly to the folded bed clothing—you angling loosely toward the courtyard, suffused with contentiousness. After a long walk we return to an almost identical place—the mat on the one side, the hobby horse on another. *Paralyzed* by the smoke, dazed by the duplicity, an earnest but elderly gentleman hobbles somewhere along the periphery. Stooping, circling, tumbling, gliding while making his way to an adjacent watering hole. Not so nimble or quick-witted, the pool attendants make a final resolution to shore up their energies and make a clean break of it. By now the helicopter is annoyingly late and a considerable queue is backed up to the presenting section, obtrusively disrupting the ordinary course of commerce. I get on the megaphone and make these several points but the indifference turning to scorn of the onlookers is too uncomfortable and I turn to a medley of disconnected hits. You look so quiet there it seems a shame to disturb you, eyes lolling about to their own tune of distraction. The icy slope curves beyond reach, careless of index and anticipation. (*Blue Divide* 280-1, emphasis added)

“Pervasive,” “shifting,” “assimilated,” “paralyzed,” “spiralling”: these words describe feelings of reading this poem on the level of narrative. The characters of the story are clearly delineated, from the first-person speaker and his second-person companion (the “You” who “ask[s] for the lighter”) to the “men in blue suits” and the “tall, thin boy.” The plot is clear also: we are on a journey. Bernstein forces us to move from our inner world out toward the external one, travelling on an “elevator” into an unfamiliar dimension and returning to where we started. Absorbed in the reading of this psychological narrative, like the first person persona, we are left speechless as our former selves, ready to use the new language to represent the New World outside of the constructed selves he shows us.

The New World is also presented by Watten’s new objectivism, a compendium of diverse world materials ordered by the non-referential form of the new world rather than that of the old, linking logically disconnected elements by discovering their

connection within the “structural homology” (Davidson 244) of the world itself. For example, Watten’s “Complete Thought”:

I
The world is complete.
Books demand limits.

II
Things fall down to create drama.
The materials are proof.

III
Daylight accumulates in photos.
Bright hands substitute for sun.

IV
Crumbling supports undermine houses.
Connoisseurs locate stress.

V
Work breaks down to devices.
All features present.

VI
Necessary commonplaces form a word.
The elements of art are fixed. (*Complete Thought* 40)

“The world is complete,” Watten’s “complete thought,” is expressed within the initial line, itself a whole unit as sentence, its binaries contained within stanzaic units, the collection of stanzas grouped as a complete unit within the poem. Watten demonstrates the presence of many wholes to express the one, delineated in the progressive ordering of numbered stanzas. We understand his poetry whole through mathematical ordering, as he sees his world.

This computational account of our world is also made clear in Ron Silliman's poetry. Consider this opening example from his poem *Tjanting*:

Not this.
What then?
I started over & over. Not this.
Last week I wrote "the muscles in my palm so sore from halving the rump roast I cld barely grip the pen." What then? This morning my lip is blisterd.
Of about to within which. Again & again I began. The gray light of day fills the yellow room in a way wch is somber. Not this. Hot grease had spilld on the stove top.
Nor that either. Last week I wrote "the muscle at thumb's root so taut from carving that beef I thought it wid cramp." Not so. What then? Wid I begin? This morning my lip is tender, disfigurd. I sat in an old chair out behind the anise. I cld have gone about this some other way.
Wld it be different with a different pen? Of about to within which what. Poppies grew out of the pile of old broken-up cement. I began again & again. These clouds are not apt to burn off. The yellow room has a sober hue. Each sentence accounts for its place. Not this. Old chairs in the back yard rotting from winter. Grease on the stove top sizzled & spat. It's the same, only different. Ammonia's odor hangs in the air. Not not this.
(*Tjanting* 134)

As McGann points out, Silliman's work stands as a "vast trope of the human world" as it confronts past, present, and future by "dramatizing certain fundamental realities of social space and social relations" (*Alternate Routes* 269). The New Sentence recreates a repetitive, accumulative order for the universe he recreates, as sentences to make meaning depend on their preceding and proceeding sentences. Although Silliman means to be different from his predecessors because the goal of language poetry praxis is to change the conventional ("Not this"), his writing reflects a natural, worldly cycle—the cycle of birth and death casting back into decreation/recreation. Language poets like Silliman are attracted to seemingly provisional orderings for their poetic material such as the Fibonacci number series in the poem *Tjanting*. Although this mathematically-

based rule for generating material—the sequence of numbers (e.g. 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, . . .) in which each successive number is equal to the sum of the two preceding numbers—was meant to represent the way an objectively based dialectical process would reflect class struggle as it offers us an intrinsic form that coheres materials. Silliman himself admits it is “the mathematical sequence most often found in nature” (*Alternate Routes* 271).

The language poets are involved, as were Olson and Pound, in the creation of a complete “Human Universe” they believe lost because of the trappings and actions of capitalism. We recall Watten’s words from the epigram: “Down on the ground it looked like a human universe, even if from moment to moment a fantastic refiguring of incommensurate beliefs” (*Task of the Collaborator* 163). Olson’s method to create a new mythical universe, field writing, became, for language poets, an opportunity for “Field Reading” (*Alternate Routes* 265), privileging the reader in the communication dynamic rather than the writer. The question lingers about their intention as artists: why write when we already have a field, our own world, to read? Because this world is dominated by capitalistic reference, they could not allow us to keep reading it the same way; not only did the way have to change but also the world, both in its ideology and in its holistic recreation. This holistic recreation is why they bother to write, to make political art that works toward change. Adopting Pound’s singular vision of “kulchur,” the highly personalized and idiosyncratic collection of “luminous details” from a European past his ego sought to unite, Olson created a vision of the communal, of the “human universe” that gave language poets appreciation for the importance of a unified

communal vision as well as for the poet's direct relationship to the immediate environment. Following Olson's vision, the language poets continue the tradition of using individual intellect to search for and create totalities of art to change the world. Writing, as Alan Davies tells us, is "not a game... it's locution and address and reception and understanding" (Davies 175); it has a purpose the writer needs, to persuade readers. Language poetry is the artistic manifestation of the need for total persuasion. In the words of Lyn Hejinian, commenting as a language poet on the art of another language poet, this need for persuasion somehow rings truer than the language poets' own theory that would deny artistic "totalitarianism":

Art can be a manifestation of will, of decisive mental life. In Watten's work, as in Shklovsky's, this will, by definition both desire and intellect, is a force driving the work within an historical world. It is thus that Watten's *Progress*, for example, can be read as an epic, as can Shklovsky's *A Sentimental Journey*. Intentions are felt, and decisions reached, deep within the context of circumstances so powerful and so "other" that they might seem to be determinisms—while at the same time it is precisely these conditions which are convertible, conditions to be met—observed, construed, literalized into the ethos of the writers' work. (*Intro to Shklovsky* 73)

Chapter 5

Preservation of the Poetic "I"

"The memory of gratification is at the origin of all thinking, and the impulse to recapture past gratification is the hidden driving power behind the process of thought."

(Marcuse 31)

Shelley: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

Oppen: "Poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world."

(Waldrop 45)

"Passivity conquers all." (Olson, *Selected Writings* 58)

The American poet, from Bradstreet to Eliot, Whitman to Ginsburg, Poe to Ashbery, Emerson to Bly, has told a tale of our tribe and remarked upon our contradictory desire to live, act, and roam freely while remaining unified, bound to a shared set of laws, morals, and values. American poetry is a long-standing linguistic negotiation within a schizophrenic society, and, as Henry Adams' "multiverse" grows during the twentieth-century, our societal roles become more confusing and our paths to the American Dream more muddled. In our diversity, as we are prone to a constant questioning of our origins and, as a relatively new country, lack the direction an extensive heritage provides—we continue to suffer the growing pains of a new culture. In the befuddled, agitated state of cultural and personal indeterminacy, a condition most obvious at times of war, when the most irrational action committed by a culture occurs, poets reach for something solid and sane to provide order, design, and meaning. It is no coincidence that we find Pound's poetic agenda roused and galvanized by the motives and aftermath of the First World War, Olson's by the Second, and the language poets' by Vietnam. War is the culmination of our divided natures, expressing a corrupt desire

for material not fundamental to life. Consequently these political poets collectively resist mainstream ideology, attacking a capitalistic social system too unbalanced in its appraisal of the human condition responsible for perverting happiness by preventing an uncomplicated way of life, denying control of our destiny.

The capitalist machine, in its millions of permutations into our daily lives, is a behemoth that has no foreseeable end. Political poets attempt to create a personal space for the individual that is somehow untainted by those permutations, recovering the idealized notion of the New World when our country was first settled. Their nostalgia for this perfect world takes them to other histories beyond our own, other myths of origin we do not yet possess, other systems to reinstate a once-practiced way of life. This recovery becomes the basis for political poetry. History and its intellectual products combine with current social material, the resulting poem maintaining mastery in an indeterminate era by using language to understand things in a human way, creating new myths, images, and rituals for our modern world, restoring value once again to the artistic process and, consequently, our lives.

According to Marcuse and Benjamin, our artists are not unique in their response. Benjamin's idea that humans desire to create art and recapture aura in order to command value is advocated by Silliman:

It is through the decline and loss of aura that modern humanity affectively confronts the myth of identity and equivalence, the myth of exchange within which capitalism itself is inscribed. Benjamin was the first to recognize this confrontation, which further explains his reversal from a negative to a positive terminology to describe the "emancipation" of the object, the liberation of the signifier from its signified: within this movement, however hidden and mute, must lie the seeds of any future transformation of humankind. (*New Sentence* 54)

The twentieth-century poetic project to restore aura began with Pound's objective use of collage and pastiche in imagism. This project is inspired by a contention with the idea of capital, considered a by-product of labor conferring false value. Unfortunately for Pound, his struggle was focused on Jews and bankers, leading critics, including language poets themselves, to dismiss the message of his poetry as hate. His animosity, however, was not merely grounded in the economic substitution of labor value with monetary value. Pound looked for a scapegoat to blame for the loss of language's value during the rise of capitalism. He thought that Jews had transformed the nature of language by encoding it with mysterious meaning: "For Pound, Jews 'as falsification incarnate' [aim] to distort, misrepresent, and conceal language, to 'castrate' literature, origins, and tradition [and] are largely responsible for introducing abstraction, obscurity, verbiage, equivocation, ambiguity, and allegory into language" (*Anti-Semitism* 254). Pound believed that Kabalistic Jews introduced allegorical interpretation into the West and kept citizens "from the plain sense of the word, of the sentence" (*Anti-Semitism* 264). Thus for Pound the Jew stood for an indeterminacy that disrupted his own means of valuation, and Pound's "central desire" was to "banish the indeterminate from social life" (*Genealogy* 324).

He relied on alternative linguistic strategies to reestablish value. He saw an incorrect method of valuation *and* referentiality based on a perverted historical phenomenon (the immigration of Jews to America) as the cause of the problem. Pound set an example for later poets to follow. Olson's revulsion from capitalists who use language to "crowd out [the] participation" of the common person, protecting

“monopolies and businesses” from the “advancement in position of able men” (*Selected Writings* 58), led to a poetics of place based on Whitehead’s “presentational immediacy,” reviving value in a locale that can be known to the present reader, providing both space and time for action, extending art into an objective world while delivering that world in the recognizable form of epic, narrative, and myth. His projectivism, restoring human gesture to language that would destroy hackneyed versions of reality, was the method of language that would change the history of the present, how he saw life to be lived, creating instead a new, “human universe.”

Language poets are not far from Pound and Olson as they also call for alternative strategies for language art. Attacking not Jews or advertisers but the entire bourgeoisie, Charles Bernstein suggests poets must be willing “to intervene, to agitate, to provoke, to rethink, to take sides—using all the formal and cultural rhetorics at our command” (*A Poetics* 97). In attacking the social system of valuation, Pound, Olson, and language poets produce *political* poetry necessarily complex in its difference from the norm. It is complex, as suggested by Bernstein, because simple poetry would advocate and be made to serve capitalistic ideology, sustaining the status quo, universalizing man through commodification:

The possibly good intentions of “one art for all”[or language]—and the related agendas of clarity, plainness, accessibility—unfortunately tend to merge with the oligarchic marketing imperatives of modern telecommunications, “Keep your message simple and repeat it many times”—a formula that dominates not only American commercial advertising but also political and aesthetic discourse. (The “simple message” is the visible effect of a series of hidden agendas—all them ideologies—that remain obscured.) The cultural segmentation, complexity, and communicative refractoriness of much contemporary poetry, which excludes it from major-media dissemination, are in fact the kernels of its intertwined political and aesthetic value. (*A Poetics* 119)

When Bernstein tells us “*poetry is aversion of conformity in the pursuit of new forms*” (*A Poetics* 1), he echoes Pound’s call not only to “make it new”—it must now be difficult. We have our poet’s extremely difficult verse to prove that political poetry must be diverse and flexible to struggle against the dominant, monological system of capitalism, incorporating the unconventional and traditional—narrative and imagism, the objective and subjective, openness and closure— to license apparent contradictions, to propel a reader to read socially and to act, even if it means rejecting a certain action that ultimately must be performed for the greater good. Even if it means engaging in a form of literary hypocrisy.

We conclude that the political poetry of our century may not only be seen as rhetorical—persuading those of us so deeply involved with our culture to see it differently, censuring the capitalist system and customs we revere and are habituated to, changing the way we use language in support of that system—but it is necessarily so. These poets’ refutation of rhetorical poetry is essential so readers may begin to accept their messages. They must overtly reject rhetoricity if they are to appeal to us as individuals, as “free” architects of our destinies. Rhetoricity must be denied yet conveyed if poets are to fulfill their obligation and be sanctioned by the traditional role of poet as seer to gaze analytically into our society and fix its problems. Political poetry should be written and read in the way it once was—for the ancient Greeks, for Confucius, Dante and their public, for pre-capitalists, and for the initial explorers of America’s East Coast. To have a specific, important role in our society, competing with the language of capitalism that forces us to see reality in a distorted, abnormal manner.

replacing the ritualistic tracts of advertising that bombard us everyday—poetry itself must become ritual. It must cultivate its audience, speak to us, excite our senses through image, color, tone, innovation, and intellectual stimulation, qualities that captivate us. It must maintain our interest by employing familiar rules, appealing to customary protocols, inviting us to participate. Poetry must work to engage us, driving us into a hypnotic, dreamlike, meditative reverie if it would once again have importance in our lives.

Poetry must recreate what it is fighting against. It must be covert, complex, employing linguistic strategies the dominant has co-opted to persuade us of something different. Poetry inevitably employs the language and rhetorical strategies of its era to effectively communicate. The American linguist Edward Sapir theorizes that “human beings do not live in the objective world alone, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (Sapir 162). Poets cannot merely present an objective world for us to read; that world is already present without requiring representation. Poetry is a medium for channeling focus; it is a substance on which the reader may fixate. It must be whole, entire, and ascertainable regardless of its many aspects. Within the totality of our language, its practices, habits, rituals, and rhetorics, our poets *intellectually* create these separate, concentrated artistic totalities that legislate our experience, advancing our interpretation of their world perspective.

In an epigraph to this conclusion, Rosmarie Waldrop's quote tells us poets legislate a world in need of legislation, a thought with which Pound and Olson agreed. We find that the principal idea shared between our poets is that it is not for *any* poet to legislate but only poets who are actively directed toward knowledge or, in other words, active intellectuals. Language poets, like Pound and Olson before them, made a "very conscious choice to engage what Pierre Bourdieu has called 'the intellectual field'" (Smith ix). Rod Smith describes Barrett Watten's work as involved with "vocabulary, phraseology, rhetoric, and even *logic*, of the political, philosophical, economic, and scientific realms" (Smith ix-x). Language poets accept their pursuit as intellectual. "Is the poet, by definition, an intellectual? I think the answer is yes" (*New Sentence* 3). They direct "every authentic poetic project...toward knowledge" (Smith xi), intending that the intellectual, equipped with such knowledge, will change social and political realities and, to use Edward Said's terms, "speak the truth to power" (Smith x).

Political poets do not deny the worth of poetical action; they seek change not through deconstruction but reconstruction, a new way of conceiving the world. They disassociate themselves from deconstructionist poetics such as John Ashbery's that are non-political, anti-agentic, and reject new forms of socially-grounded meaning.

Yet the bracketing of the "transcendental signified" or the "death of God" does not entail a meaningless world—for these are realities of a modernist dialectical materialism as much as of a negative post-modernism. That is, once the hollow legitimacy of capital and kings has been exposed, the truths of the human world can begin to be *made*. (*A Poetics* 96)

It is an "intelligent" writing that exposes the illegitimacy of capital and conveys this fundamental information to its readership, Bruce Andrews believes. Poets can (and

must) reform what he sees as the “social contract” that society has made with capitalist interests and their language:

Writing that in this way public-izes, publicizing its way into the public sphere, can foster this recognition of the system, of what we’re up against: a recognition that’s at the basis of *social literacy*; a social comprehension or total encompassing & *maximizing* that we need to orient our praxis & re-envision the social contract. This is the method of “intelligence”, as Bakhtin defined it: “a dialog with one’s own future and an address to the external world.” And if writing can imply such a future, that future will serve as its radical prescription. (Andrews 32)

As language poetry attempts to create a new genre of writing that replaces the old, it perpetuates the political genre of Pound and Olson, preserving its own value within the genre “as institution.” Jameson tells us that “genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact” (*Political Unconscious* 106). This new contract demonstrates a certain “concern for the particular” (Ross 195), in this case the particular use of language, that is involved in Olson’s call to “put [the] establishment out of business” by “finding out how organized things are genuine, are initial” (Ross 195). What is genuine about the organizations of life, these poets also ask. Yet this pursuit of truth, the role of the intellectual poet, causes the major paradox suffered by all political poets in this century: their opposition to subjectivity and totality contradicts their end-directed and totalizing practice. The artistic will to organize and totalize reality through poetry, persuading us to accept this totality, incorporates this paradox in its endeavor. We must accept complex poetry as more than word games, permitting our poets to see and tell no matter how it may offend our postmodern liberality. Acknowledging how the paradox of totality is situated, critics will see current political

poetry as a potent conveyor of a meaningful ideology developed long ago and future political poetry as inevitably composed of inconsistencies, meeting the contradictory demands of language, creating art, and being “political” in a complex American culture.

Notes

¹ For example, Roy Harvey Pearce in his book, *The Continuity of American Poetry*, traces two distinct lineages from Emerson and Whitman, both portraying the autonomy of the American imagination and American poet as Adamic creator through this open form. Allen Ginsberg sees himself part of a group of poets working within the guidelines of this tradition; he proclaims himself, along with Ezra Pound, as one of “the rough writers of the Whitmanic, open tradition in America” (Ginsberg 93).

² Edward Hirsch is one critic who aligns Eliot and Pound as co-creators of an “American poetry firmly in a European context and tradition,” that emphasized “traditionalism, impersonality, and a transcendental European authority” (Hirsch 59). It is this belief in European authority that moved Eliot and Pound to the Right—Eliot toward Anglicanism and Pound toward Mussolini. Both poets have been accused of practicing anti-Semitism. Hirsch goes on to contrast this European influenced poetry of Pound’s and Eliot’s with the poetry of the “New World, a local, homemade American poetic” of William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. (Hirsch 65)

³ “Three Cantos” was first published in Harriet Monroe’s magazine *Poetry* at this early date; it was later revised and republished in *Dial* magazine in 1921.

⁴ Ronald Bush suggests that there may be a “casual sequence” between Pound’s removal of the personal narrator of the Ur-Cantos, his subsequent use of Odysseus as the “premiere persona” for his poem (194,193), and his reading of the initial chapters of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which Joyce was sending him to inspect for publication in *The Little Review*. That Pound selects Joyce as a model is no accident; Pound believed that Joyce worked in “prose tradition” of “realism” that Pound admired in James and Flaubert: “...constatation of fact. It presents. It does not comment.” Bush employs the first lines from the “Proteus” chapter as an example:

INELUCTABLE MODALITY OF THE VISIBLE: AT LEAST THAT
IF NO more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here
to read, seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot.
Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But
he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before of them
coloured. How? By knocking his sponce against them, sure. Go easy.
Bald he was and a millionaire, *maestro di color che sanno*... Shut your
eyes and see.” (201)

In spite of the narrator’s “removal,” we know a narrator is behind this passage, suggesting a foray into the consciousness of the character, a Jamesian “emotional register” of experience rendering the subjectivity of the mind that, for example, we find with Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*. These registers are guided “by the intelligence, the curiosity, the passion, the force of the moment” (James 301), where moment and narrator become one in revealing the many colors of life. I will note later how Pound picks up on Joyce’s phrase *maestro di color che sanno* when describing the structure of the cantos some forty years after their inception.

⁵ Pound's hatred for Jews centers on his belief that they prevented his adopted ideas of economic change to take place. Major Clifford Hugh Douglas devised a new economic system called Social Credit that would replace capitalism. Douglas's idea was that the power of government depended on taxation and credit, the invention and manipulation of money systems. Currency was the ostensible bedrock of such a system, but its value could be inflated or deflated according to the determination of bankers, who nearly always controlled government. The weaknesses of capitalism, according to Douglas, were those of distribution and a lack of purchasing power among the working class. Purchasing power would be extended in Douglas's new system through the issuance of dividends or credit to producers and workers. Douglas believed this system would end distribution difficulties. Governments would be able to pay these dividends and issue general certificates of credit to workers instead of collecting taxes. Douglas believed a nation's real wealth lay in the people's capacity to produce needed goods and provide needed services, but the banks with the aid of government had the power to print paper money regardless of production. Financial credit was controlled by the big banks, who were dictating usurious rates, Douglas charged, and dominated by an influential group of moneylenders, mostly Jewish, who conspired to assist the powerful and had the ability to create depression and finance war. Pound felt for sure that this was true and accepted Douglas's system (along with its animosity for Jewish bankers) as a gospel to reinstate value to the human. (Tytell 145-46)

⁶ Michael Coyle sees Pound at the end of a line of British writers whose utilitarian impulses led them to create (or propose) socialist communities based on a common belief that all societies are organic. Coyle tells us that "between Ruskin and Pound there flourished a variety of writers such as William Morris, Bernard Bosanquet, J.A. Hobson and A.R. Orage, whose work reaffirmed, perpetuated, and disseminated the principles of organicism and cultural totality. As they did so, these writers gradually transformed the controversial into the conventional and brought what had been a fairly rarefied critique of the modern state into something approaching a standard socialist attitude" (Coyle 45).

⁷ Powerful players in the world of poetry at the time, including James Laughlin, Pound's friend and publisher at *New Directions*, T.S. Eliot, E.E. Cummings, W.H. Auden, Allen Tate, and Joseph Cornell conceived a plan to award Pound the Bollingen Award.

⁸ Hugh Kenner may act as an model for those critics inclined to see The Pisan section as an end to his anti-Semitic ranting and call for radical change: "The Pisan cantos compose a peace with himself, the great poet forcing the angry propagandist to surrender all but a few cragged redoubts" (Kenner 474). Robert Duncan finds the Pisan sequence a "moving story of suffering and redemption":

And for the first time in the Cantos, in these Pisan cantos, some attitude of authority, some self is surrendered, so that a pose seems to have fallen apart, exposing the genuine, confused, passionate mind" (Beach 179).

⁹ Pound wrote many texts espousing his political and economic beliefs that were published as whole texts (*Social Credit: An Impact*, *The Money Pamphlets*, etc.) and as articles in magazines such as *Two Worlds*, *The New English Weekly* (published by A.R. Orage) and *New Masses*. In 1927 he even started a magazine *The Exile* as an outlet to publish his invectives against American reliance on usurious financial practices. His *direct* political engagement first consisted as a letter-writing campaign. He wrote letters to American senators and congressman (including William Borah from Idaho) advocating Major C.H. Douglas's Social Credit scheme, a plan to reduce taxes and nationalize credit, giving earning power back to the people rather than financiers. He also wrote to U.S. Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau to condemn New Deal practices as too socialistic. When these politicians dismissed him as a "crank" (Tytell 241), Pound turned to Mussolini, writing letters and eventually meeting directly with *Il Duce* to convince the leader to adopt and put into practice his ideas on economic reform. As I have acknowledged in the previous chapter, Pound's politics pervaded his poetry, becoming the core message his poetics were to convey. Poets such as Williams, Zukofsky, Oppen, Delmore Schwartz (and, as we will come to see, Olson) also wrote politically motivated poetry and prose (Williams' *In the American Grain* being the most notable example) and were correspondents with Pound and admirers of his direct involvement. Although they all shared an economic disillusionment with America they still disagreed with Pound's extreme beliefs—his anti-Semitism offending the Marxists Oppen, Zukofsky, and Schwartz and his fascism exasperating the staunchly democratic Williams. Yet even though they disagreed with him, they were conscious of their debt to him as they continued their own political writings—Schwartz, even though breaking ties with him, found it necessary to end his final letter to Pound, "ready to resign as one of your most studious and faithful admirers" (Tytell 251).

¹⁰ Olson's poem "Lustrum" evidences his abhorrence for Pound's fascist actions, revealing the schizophrenic wavering between hatred and respect for him:

So, Pound, you have found the gallows
you, with your fingers at your nose
and in your mouth the laugh, dirty or otherwise

They'll cant your body, canto maker.
Sudden, and your neck freckled red
will break as broke some others', nameless
—all but Booth—in the gray Washington snow
after another treachery, another war

Or do they shoot you now
And will it be a new thing here
to be a poet after you are broken?
Because they did not know the Pound
they killed was also Pound the poet

Or did they, and you were the prize of the lot
the Villon of their peace, the thing
they are always after, in day out
o enemy of the happy ending.

What the hell did you broadcast for?
Did you have to be historic, Yorick?
Mug the mike with your ABCs
you even made Galway Willie sneeze:
revolutionary simpleton.
Ezra Pound, American.

Who pays? These are not the great days.
No hunt, sir, and what you take for bays.
Propertius, are the rattle of cans
We who are younger here
could have helped you there:
This is a time to survive, exile

O Pound, forgive us, for shall we die
of better things than syphilis and treason
when we are old and blind:
your Heine left his mattress grave
and missed the bullets in the Rue de Slave
to have a look at Venus nate
in '48
and now it's you, another way
unblind and gay
lover of the obscene
by the obscene undone
fecit, Pound, fecit (A Nation of Nothing but Poetry 26-7)

¹¹ Paul Bové in his book *Destructive Poetics* sees Olson's poetics as being anti-formal, destroying any relation to his past. He suggests Olson insists "that the poet must stand in a destructive, not an imitative, relation to the past, with the result that the past is seen in all its uncertainties, ambiguities, and contradictions, and not in the formal certainty of an aesthetic fiction" (271). This, of course, allies Olson with the postmodern aesthetic of deconstruction through the use of an anti-referential language producing a formal, ahistorical art. I will go on to refute Bové by demonstrating Olson's adoption/adaptation of Pound's modern form to continue, through postmodernity, the poet's work toward totality.

¹² Reviews of Olson's poetry brought about disparaging comments suggesting too close of a connection between poet and persona. James Wright "called into question [Olson's]

position of preeminence”; Samuel French Morse “could find little but oracular aggressiveness” and Robert Bly called the *Maximus* “the work of ‘a Babbitt in verse’” (Clark 288, 289). Others, such as Ed Dorn, see *Maximus* as more universal, an explorer “searching substances of the inscribed field of Gloucester” that speaks about not a personal but “the human attitude” (Clark 236).

¹³ This chapter will reveal both contemporary criticisms’ defamation of “language” poetry considered to be inconsequential “word games” and the criticism of expressivist poetry, usually proffered by “language” poets themselves, as being too simplistic and self-centered to be effectively political, even though much of this expressivist poetry deals with public issues such as gender and ethnic equality.

¹⁴ We must first consider T.S. Eliot, who set the twentieth-century standard for the creation of a self-contained, austere, reverent verse that dominated poetry in academic and public circles for the majority of this century, as the father of this type of poetry, outfitting not only a new way of writing but of reading poetry. Eliot’s influence was wide, influencing poets such as Allen Tate and Robert Penn Warren who narrowed poetry to tracts on the depraved moral state of the world and offered a return to traditionalism and formalism in both writing and social decorum (see the “Fugitive” poet essay, *I’ll Take My Stand* for an introductory statement of this traditionalist movement). Formalism and traditionalism have been carried down a line of academic poets such as Robert Lowell and W.S. Merwin, who held important positions in the world of poetry. McGann, in his article “Contemporary Poets, Alternate Routes,” specifically classifies our current poet laureate, Robert Pinsky, in this tradition. Pinsky is one of the poets of “accommodation” to whom McGann later refers as adversaries to “language” poets.

¹⁵ Bernstein comments on realism’s “theoretical raison d’etre” (*A Poetics* 26) because of its ability to absorb the reader into the story by ignoring the reader, using transparent language as its major effect. He uses theory of Ford Madox Ford as an example for making realism a “classic case” of transparency. The reader becomes immersed in the story, as the reader is ignored, because the events are made to be significant, serious and substantial to the characters within the book whom are portrayed as ultra-realistic. Ford takes Flaubert to be the epitome of a realistic writer. According to Ford, this creation of an autonomous realistic event strengthens the reader’s belief in the story. Ford’s model for absorbing realism excludes melodrama and Dickensian character-typing because they compromise this belief. For Ford, “to be entertained by scoffing at the characters, or being made aware of their fictitiousness, prevents the ‘deeper’ absorption of the Flaubertian novel” (*A Poetics* 68). Bernstein likens this idea to the creation of nineteenth-century lyric poems that involved a self-absorbed address to a beloved, the gods, or the poet her/himself: an address that, “because it is *not* to the reader but to some presence anterior or interior to the poem, induces readerly absorption by creating an effect of overhearing in contrast to confronting” (*A Poetics* 32). Bernstein believes that Ford’s model and the distinction he makes within it “a fiction” since “texts are

written to be read or heard, that is, exhibited,” emphasizing how “the ‘teller’ or ‘way it’s told’ are allowed to come into focus affects the experience of ‘what’ is being told or ‘what’ is unfolding” (*A Poetics* 31). Thus he comments on the inevitable rhetorical aspect of writing and admits “nor is poetry, by nature emphasizing its artifice, immune from this dynamic” (*A Poetics* 31).

¹⁶ Without intention, there is no reason to use language. Barbiero claims that the utterer has a stake in language from the moment he realizes his intention to express meaning, therefore converting his intention into language. Because language is already a constituted instrument (by capitalism), the materials used are not neutral; the subject must use appropriated material to seek its own purpose. Barbiero explains that the subject desires something (x) and must appropriate it from capitalistic use. Intention is therefore referential (what is x) and appropriative (how I come to take x). It is this appropriative quality that is aligned with the subject’s intention to utter. The subject appropriates information in his mode of belief, and from this appropriation “value” is made for language. The value is inherent in language’s instrumental use, after appropriation, an instrumentality captured by subject’s intention in fulfilling his goal. The subject represents this goal to itself; it is a personal attitude toward information found extant in the world.

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- "Wallace Stevens' 'The Glass of Water'." *The Explicator* 53.4 (1995): 224-26.

Presentations:

- Chair of Panel, "Notes Toward 'Notes Toward A Supreme Fiction': The Use of Language in Contemporary American Poetry," *Northeast Modern Language Association* conference in Philadelphia, PA, April 1997.
- "Literary Laboratories: The Scientific Approach to Teaching Literature." *Northeast Modern Language Association* conference in Philadelphia, PA, April 1997.
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- “Shall We call Her A(u)nti(e): Flannery O’Connor as Antirealist.” *Twentieth Century Literature* conference in Louisville, KY, Spring, 1995.
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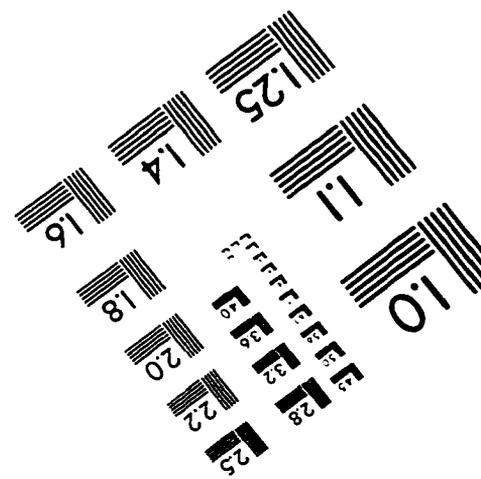
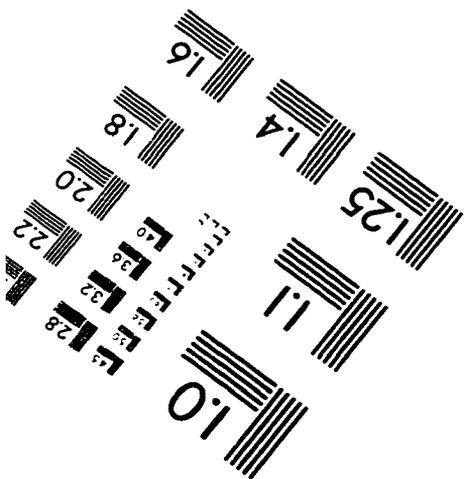
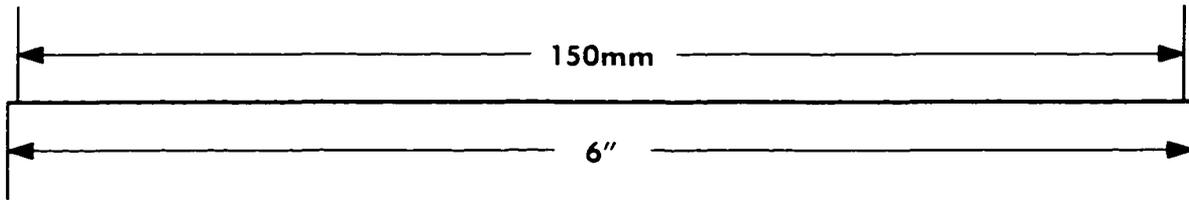
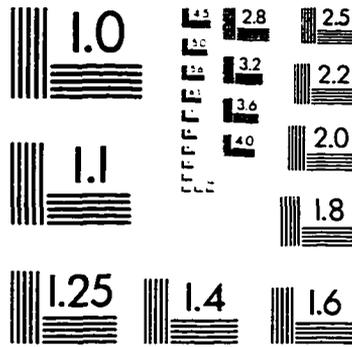
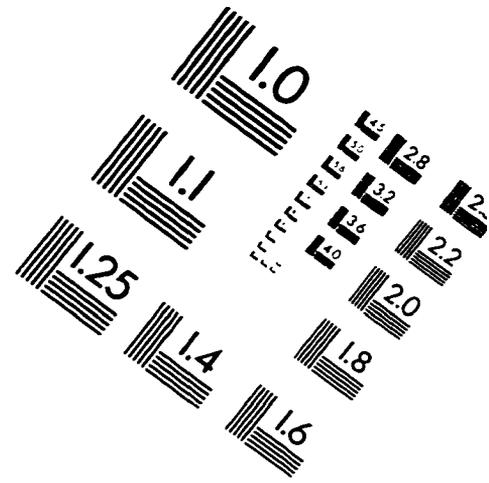
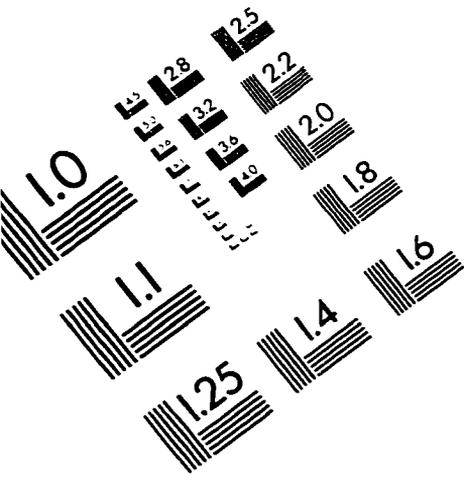
Honors and Awards:

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IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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