

9-1-2015

# "The Fact of God": Form and Belief in British Modernist Poetry

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**"THE FACT OF GOD": FORM AND BELIEF IN BRITISH  
MODERNIST POETRY**

by

**ANNAROSE FITZGERALD**

B.A., English, Barnard College, 2004  
M.A., English, University of Connecticut, 2006

DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
English**

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

**July, 2015**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I am indebted to my advisor, Matthew Hofer, for his care and attention to this project. His guidance has taken my writing and critical thinking skills to new heights, and shaped my transition from graduate student to professional scholar. I thank my committee members, Gary Harrison, Aeron Hunt, and David Chinitz, whose challenging questions, research recommendations, and phrasing suggestions helped me to contextualize the contributions of my work within modernist studies and recent literary scholarship at large. For her feedback on some of my earliest formations of these chapters, I would also like to thank Stephanie Spong, as well as Genesea Carter for her encouragement through the arduous stages of completing first drafts.

My parents, Daria and Robert Fitzgerald, instilled in me a love for literature and a drive for intellectual pursuits that motivated me throughout my graduate career. My sisters, Maria and Daria Fitzgerald, kept me in good spirits when health issues made writing even more of a challenging feat. Last, but certainly not least, I am deeply indebted to my husband, Christopher Steinke, whose constant and boundless supply of love and patience continues to inspire my life and work.

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation analyzes the relationship between the concept of metaphysical belief and the poetic innovations enlisted to articulate this belief in the works of British modernist poets W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, T.S. Eliot, Basil Bunting, Philip Larkin, and Thom Gunn. Moving from Celtic mythos to Buddhist philosophy, Anglo-Catholic prayer to ancient Greek burial rites, I argue that spirituality and poetic experimentation were reciprocal influences: modernist experimentations in poetic form had a direct impact on how poets represented and articulated metaphysical beliefs and practices, and these metaphysical concepts themselves significantly affected these poets' development of their craft, prompting consideration of what makes poetry itself believable for modern readers.

While several studies analyze the religious and spiritual interests of modernist writers, demonstrating that secularization does not accurately categorize English literature of the early twentieth century, my project moves beyond proving that modernists were believers and instead employs belief as an active critical term for literary analysis. Each chapter examines how a particular British modernist poet employs belief as a condition that allows poetic form and metaphysical concepts to intersect in productive ways. Rather than merely dismissing or advocating for belief in certain metaphysical concepts, these poets scrutinize, re-conceptualize, and re-imagine poetic forms, spiritual ideologies, and religious structures so as to render belief in the metaphysical, and in poetry as a conduit for the metaphysical, to become relevant and necessary possibilities in the twentieth century.

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## Introduction: Modernism, Poetic Form, and the Metaphysical

“(You shall not look upon the fact of God and live!)”<sup>1</sup>

Whether the substitution of “fact” for “face” represents a deliberate choice on the part of poet Mina Loy or a typographical error from her original manuscript, it nevertheless illuminates the compelling presence of the metaphysical themes in her work and that of other British modernist poets at the start of the twentieth century. Although they challenged and doubted the validity of particular religious frameworks to bring about apprehension of the divine, these poets never ceased to work under the assumption of the metaphysical as “fact” toward which their poems might aim readers. In spite of what J. Hillis Miller describes as the “gradual withdrawal of God from the world” and into remote abstraction that developed steadily through the early modern period, not even the manmade devastation of the Great War deterred pursuits to make belief a direct and meaningful presence in modernity.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the desire for the population to look upon God as “fact” extended beyond contemporary religious ideologies. Political and economic lessons of historical eras and civilizations long gone, understandings of the human condition derived from ancient mythologies, and archaic forms of languages and dialects no longer in use all became central in the modernist project to see what language could do to adjust modern perceptions and values. Whether seeking a return to specific ritualistic practices and doctrines that had been cast off as irrelevant in the new century or a more general adoption of certain ideologies they deemed vital to the economic, political, or social health of British culture, British modernist

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<sup>1</sup> Mina Loy, *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, ed. Roger L. Conover (Highlands, NC: Jargon Society, 1982), 175.

<sup>2</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God: Five Nineteenth-Century Writers* (1963; Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 1.



poets seriously considered how poetry might restore belief in certain concepts as “fact”—or at least establish the aesthetic conditions under which belief would become possible.

My dissertation argues that British modernist poetry, in particular, provided a means to make belief, if not affirmable by “fact,” at least a relevant possibility for a world that could never again sustain ignorance of the actual, scientifically viable causes of floods and lightning bolts. In it, I analyze the relationship between the concept of belief and the poetic innovations enlisted to articulate this belief in the poems and poetic statements of modernists W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, T. S. Eliot, and Basil Bunting. Moving from Celtic mythology to Buddhist philosophy, Anglo-Catholic prayer to ancient Greek burial rites, I argue that metaphysical issues and poetic experimentation were reciprocal influences: modernist experimentations in poetic form had a direct impact on how poets represented and articulated metaphysical beliefs and practices, and, in turn, these concepts themselves significantly affected these poets’ development of their craft. In this explicit exchange between poetic form and metaphysical concepts, modernist poets not only prompted consideration of what makes poetry itself “believable” for readers, but also introduced “believability” as an important category for the history and criticism of poetry.

These poets did not engage certain ideologies merely to advocate for or dismantle them. Rather, their poetry’s engagement with metaphysical concepts and discourses facilitated these poets’ critical investigations of the types of thought and affect that could enable linguistic and aesthetic representation to carry precision, meaning, and, ultimately, truth. From Yeats’s proffering of the conventional lyric form to render the extraordinary and ethereal in modernity, to Bunting’s lauding of a seemingly more primitive oral culture as a means of making poetry endure within the limits of temporality and mortality, each poet in

my project seeks ways to exploit formally as well as conceptually the tension between the traditional and the unexpected in order to produce a convincing and believable poetics for modernity. Their various strategies for testing the strengths of more traditional religious and literary forms—and often both types of form at once—demanded that they not only accommodate the new in modern life and thought but contribute to its very invention.

My project analyzes British modernist poets' attempts to strengthen language's potential for expression and representation through engagement with the metaphysical. Their personal attitudes toward and involvement with metaphysical belief vary widely, but each poet demonstrates a keen interest in fostering a close and dynamic relationship between poetics and the metaphysical to situate belief as a legitimate and worthwhile concept at the dawn of the twentieth century. *Belief*, a key term throughout my project, appears prominently throughout each chapter. While the *OED* defines belief with religious connotations, e.g., “the trust that the believer places in God,” more general definitions encompass belief as a state that does not necessitate a religious or spiritual object, but rather stands as an affect privileging the credulity of a particular object or idea. Stripped of its religious connotations, belief can mean “the mental action, condition, or habit of trusting to or having confidence in a person or thing,” or as the object of the affect itself, as “a basic or ultimate principle or presupposition of knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> Belief's Germanic root *lieben*, “to love,” along with its prefix *be* for about, opens up an even broader way to consider the state of belief, as “about love,” a state that does not necessarily suggest unequivocal conviction or trust. As Rodney Needham has observed, belief encompasses multiple connotations of trust, faithfulness, and

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<sup>3</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “belief,” accessed October 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/17368?redirectedFrom=belief#eid>.

sincerity across languages and cultures, making all definitions of belief contingent in nature.<sup>4</sup> While studies of the metaphysical in literature often use faith and belief interchangeably, I deliberately use belief rather than faith so as to align my analyses with modes of thought and affect rather than of action. Although faith would also serve as a useful term, its primary definitions as “the quality of fulfilling one’s trust or promise” or “the duty of fulfilling one’s trust” are more suggestive in guaranteeing an action or efficacy that the state of belief does not always yield.<sup>5</sup> My conscious engagement of this term in my project’s title and throughout attempts to account for the vast differences in the levels and practices of belief that these poets introduced as possibilities in their work.

A capacious as well as familiar term in discussing an individual’s relationship to the metaphysical, belief helps me articulate the multifaceted stances modernist poets assumed when dealing with spirituality in a way that does not mandate the presence of specific attitudes or practices. Belief, for the poets in my project, entails neither the absence of doubt nor the exclusion of other ontologies in order to promote one absolute path to spiritual fulfillment. Several poems integral to this study posit belief alongside and in dialogue with such less-trusting states as doubt, ambiguity, and ambivalence. These twentieth-century poets’ engagement with metaphysical concepts frequently exemplifies eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume’s supposition that the ability to conceive of, or even to understand an object, does not necessarily lead to belief in the object’s existence, for, as he states, “We conceive many things which we do not believe.”<sup>6</sup> Hume cites divinity as the ultimate

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<sup>4</sup> Rodney Needham, *Belief, Language, and Experience* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1972), 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “faith,” accessed November 13, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/67760?rskey=JCyd17&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>.

<sup>6</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (1740; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), 624, Google Books, accessed December 1, 2014, <http://books.google.com/books/reader?id=a-rWAAAAMAAJ&num=13&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&pg=GBS.PR17.w.1.1.0>.

construct for which belief has no impact on conception: “When I believe of [God] to be existent, my idea of him neither increases nor diminishes.”<sup>7</sup> Poems by Loy and Eliot render detailed illustrations to steep the reader in very specific Christian practices, yet their poems do not always posit belief as the end goal of such representation. In contrast, poems by Pound, Yeats, and Bunting either syncretize the strands of a few different conceptions of divinity and eternity or else they gesture toward such conceptions in ways that do not allow for ready categorization within any specific religious tradition, yet they nevertheless frequently promote the potential for belief without stipulating any easy apprehension of the belief’s object. These poets sought expressions that would thoroughly account for the surprising and complex ways belief can manifest in relation to an object or idea which fails to gain recognition in the epistemologies of science, history, or other ways of knowing that are more reliant on physical evidence and on the notion of objectivity as an attainable premise.

The increasing presence of relativity in early twentieth-century modernity’s scientific discourse and practice forms the foundation of my interest in modernist literature’s dealings with the metaphysical. Michael Bell’s introduction to his study of myth in modernist literature highlights how science itself, because it expanded into areas that relied less on Newtonian observation and more on the “speculative calculations” required for discoveries in fields such as electricity and astronomy, became conscious of its own discipline itself as more aligned with myth than could previously be surmised.<sup>8</sup> Combined with the relegation of religion to the status of myth, as well as the shift in perception associated with the Heisenberg principle, the move from a Newtonian to an Einsteinian view of the universe

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 624.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Bell, *Literature, Modernism, and Myth: Belief and Responsibility in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15.

contributed to a revised understanding of myth's place in the formation of modernity. As Bell puts it, "instead of myth being the early stage out of which the sophisticated intellectual disciplines of modern culture developed, it is rather the permanent ground on which they rest, or even the soil in which their roots are invisibly nourished."<sup>9</sup> Understanding the truth claims of science and religion alike as dependent on the subjective and relative, however, resulted in belief as a category to be scrutinized rather than dismissed. The ability to remain conscious of various epistemologies of myth, while holding onto certain (often problematic) convictions themselves, makes belief a driving force in the work of Pound, Eliot, Yeats, and other high modernist writers, according to Bell.<sup>10</sup> Throughout their employments of metaphysical belief in various religious and non-religious forms, all five poets in my project epitomize Bell's situating of belief in modernist literature as both worthwhile and worthy of skepticism.

While science increasingly questioned its own objectivity, modernist philosophers called into question any possibility for objective perception and blurred the lines drawn between the physical and metaphysical. Henri Bergson's 1911 *Matter and Memory*, which greatly influenced Loy and other modernist writers, posited matter as neither a realistic nor idealistic conception, but rather "an aggregate of 'images'" defined as "an existence placed halfway between the 'thing' and the 'representation.'"<sup>11</sup> Considering matter as images, Bergson argued, would allow for common ground between the system of science, "wherein each image, related only to itself, possesses absolute value" and that of "the world of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Bergson, introduction to *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (London: Allen and Unwin, 1911), xi-xii.

*consciousness*, wherein all the images depend on a central image, our body, the variations of which they follow.”<sup>12</sup> Then, rather than ask “whether the universe exists only in our thought, or outside of our thought” or whether realism or idealism provide the best means of apprehending the universe—lines of inquiry which put the systems of science and consciousness at irreconcilable odds—we could instead ask how these two “systems of images” work together to act on our bodies and, in turn, incite us to certain actions on those images.<sup>13</sup> Bergson’s concept of images as a means of mitigating the realism / idealism duality became highly suggestive to modernist thinkers and writers who had grown weary of modernity’s tendency to elide scientific epistemology with absolute truth.

Modernist philosopher T. E. Hulme, who rejected the “principle of continuity” that evolutionary theory had perpetuated and amplified in the nineteenth century, was particularly interested in the implications that Bergson’s ideas might have for understanding the process and reception of artistic endeavor. By the early twentieth century, the principle of continuity had, according to Hulme, rendered modernity to view all discontinuity as “apparent,” but ultimately explainable through either a mechanistic worldview (i.e., that of mathematics and physics), or a religious view that merges the processes and discourses of biology with those of theology.<sup>14</sup> Hulme saw Bergson’s concept of reality as formed by images acting on the body, an especially important and revelatory theory because it could shift attempts to understand art “from the level at which it is a more or less successful attempt to describe what you feel about the matter,” and re-positioning this understanding to a level that “enables

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> T. E. Hulme, “Humanism and the Religious Attitude,” in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 1924), 25-26, Google Books, accessed March 4, 2015, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?printsec=frontcover&output=reader&id=QuvgAwAAQBAJ&pg=GBS.PR2>

you to state [the work of art] as an account of actual reality.”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, by articulating our perception of reality as the absorption of images, Bergson provides a means to articulate the “unforeseeable” component of artistic creation that cannot be explained by knowledge of the color palette, the artist’s model, or any of the other individual factors contributing to the process of creation, which, Hulme observed, “is not necessarily a mere synthesis of elements.”<sup>16</sup> Hulme’s meditations on Bergson exemplify the ways in which the ever-increasing opacity of both art and science in early twentieth-century intellectual life played a significant role in shifting modern perceptions of art from an alternative to absolute reality, to a potential reality in its own right.

Whether or not they acknowledged or engaged directly with Bergson or Hulme, this disruption in the hierarchy of scientific and artistic discourse nevertheless contextualizes the boundary-pushing between the speculative and the proven that the poets in my project deemed crucial to their poetic theories and techniques when handling metaphysical subject matter. Although poetry is by no means the exclusive genre in which these five writers and other prolific modernist authors explored the potential for truth in metaphysical concepts, I examine modernist poetry exclusively because its self-reflective consciousness as a language art calls attention to issues of belief in a way that is important to distinguish from the rhetoric of prose. Modernist poetry remains conscious of the relationship between linguistic constructs and the conveyance of meaning in a way that even the more experimental, Joycean prose of modernism does not rival. Rendering issues of metaphysical belief in poetry as opposed to prose, these five writers charge themselves with conveying meaning in the

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<sup>15</sup> Hulme, “Bergson’s Theory of Art,” in *Speculations*, 167.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

metaphysical while simultaneously calling into question the very relationships between language and meaning on which their work must rely. This relentless tug between conveying and reflecting in modernist poetry places the concept of belief—in the poem’s metaphysical topics and in the poem itself—into a sharp and compounded focus that bears analysis apart from modernist prose pieces that revolve around metaphysical concepts. My analyses of poets dealing with overtly religious frameworks and discourses alongside and in conversation with those who engage the metaphysical less directly belie Pericles Lewis’s supposition that “the novel tends to approach the sacred more obliquely than poetry.”<sup>17</sup> The poets in my project demonstrate repeatedly that, in poetry, obliqueness is the only way to approach the sacred, the profane, and the many other descriptors that codify their respective stances toward metaphysical perceptions and concepts.

Modernist poets’ reflections on their artistic processes intersected productively with the modern unification of art and science on the same plane of subjective truth-telling. Eliot observed the shared inability of poetic and scientific discourses to account for their processes’ outcomes solely through knowledge of their composite parts, and used this observation to articulate the poet’s creative process. His detailed comparison of the poet’s mind to a “shred of platinum,” in which the creative process operates much like a chemical reaction, helps to articulate the approaches of my project’s five poets toward issues of metaphysical belief. Like the platinum that causes two gases to form an acid which “contains no trace of the platinum” itself, Eliot argues, the mind of the poet shows none of the original emotions in the final product of the poem, even though such affects are essential to its

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<sup>17</sup> Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4.



production.<sup>18</sup> Eliot's analogy has been helpful in my thinking of what I aim to accomplish by grouping poets occupying varying stances toward the metaphysical and affiliations with different modes of religious ideologies and affect into a single project on poetic form and belief. Each poet employs certain pieces of iconography, ritual, and ideology not to express, advocate for, or blatantly reject a stance of unmitigated belief, but rather to mimic the role of "shreds": catalysts for pushing language to the utmost limits of expression so that these limits are transgressed in a manner that is, if not always entirely believable, at least temptingly convincing. As my close readings demonstrate, these catalysts work to shape poetic forms, making these form better able to re-invent, re-present, and re-configure the metaphysical in significant and generative ways. Whether or not their work consistently—or ever—embodies absolute belief in any divine schema or transcendent universe, the poets in this project all demonstrate a voracious compulsion to engage such schema in shaping poetry itself into a believable, and thereby vital, force in the modern world.

Each chapter features a different poet, and highlights certain interactive relationships between particular metaphysical concepts and modernist poetic techniques. These interactions place the question of belief at the center, whether in the poem itself or in the metaphysical experience the poem attempts to posit, so as to test the strength of poetic language and technique. How these poets maintain belief as an active and fluctuating state in the early twentieth century bears relevance to conversations surrounding metaphysical belief in the early twenty-first. As horrific acts and devastating biases continue to be perpetrated in the name of religious ideologies claiming premiums on moral order and such advances as the

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<sup>18</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 1919, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975), 41.

detection of the Higgs Boson particle continue to enhance our understanding of the complexities of the physical universe, we, too, must constantly disrupt and adjust the language used to sustain and define belief.

### **Literature Review**

Over the last decade, scholars have put increasing pressure on secularization theory, largely fueled by Nietzsche's oft-quoted "God is dead," to the point where clearly the term "secular" affords neither a fair nor responsible assessment of the vastly complex, nuanced, and intricate representations of the metaphysical in the modern era.<sup>19</sup> In *Formations of the Secular*, Talal Asad provides a compelling anthropological study of the origins of secularism as a concept in post-Enlightenment Western society that examines the myriad and often violent ways that religious discourse and ideology manifests itself in cultures insisting that they have adopted a secular state. Asad's observation that "although religion is regarded as alien to the secular, the latter is also seen to have generated religion" has pioneered a growing field of scholarship on religion's prominent place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and encourages a deeper look at modern literary periods that scholarship has historically regarded as purely secular.<sup>20</sup>

Since Miller's *The Disappearance of God*, several works have emerged to emphasize the tremendous influence of the metaphysical on the lives and texts of modernist writers. The religious and spiritual affiliations of such major modernists as Yeats, Pound, and Eliot are certainly not news. As Adam Gopnik of *The New Yorker* recently pointed out, "Nearly all the

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<sup>19</sup> Frederich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, in *Basic Writings*, Modern Library Edition (1882; New York: Random House, 2000), 171.

<sup>20</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 193.

great modernist poets were believers.”<sup>21</sup> Lara Vetter’s chapter “Religion: Orthodoxies and Alternatives” in David Chinitz and Gail McDonald’s *Companion to Modernist Poetry*, surveys the prominent place that metaphysical belief occupied in American and British modernist poetry throughout the early and mid-twentieth century. Her concise yet rich account details how modernist writers took on religious issues from re-configuring divinatory figures in orthodox and alternative spiritual practices to questioning what, if any, productive relationship the scientific strides of the new century might have to modernity’s ongoing quest for spiritual fulfillment.<sup>22</sup> Such work as Vetter’s represents the culmination of valuable recent scholarship that illuminates the diversity of methods in which the metaphysical remained, if often ineffable, worth pursuing via orthodox and alternative methods alike.

Recent modernist scholarship has done much to demonstrate that the criticizing, and even doubting, of religious tradition does not automatically undermine metaphysical belief. Pericles Lewis, for example, in *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel*, analyzes how novelists from Henry James to Virginia Woolf positioned church buildings and other vestiges of a supposedly defunct Christian religious presence as forces to be reckoned with and dwelt upon.<sup>23</sup> Gregory Erikson, whose study *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature* challenges Miller and those who ascribe to his viewpoint, posits that “God did not disappear,

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<sup>21</sup> Adam Gopnik, “Bigger than Phil: When Did Faith Start to Fade?,” *The New Yorker*, February 17, 2014, accessed March 11, 2014,

[http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2014/02/17/140217crat\\_atlarge\\_gopnik](http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/atlarge/2014/02/17/140217crat_atlarge_gopnik).

<sup>22</sup> See Lara Vetter, “Religion: Orthodoxies and Alternatives,” in *A Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. David E. Chinitz and Gail McDonald (Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014). The spiritual interests of modernism, Vetter points out, were not always antagonistic towards or isolated from scientific and rational forms of knowledge. She notes that while “[Hart] Crane fretted that ‘science has brought light—but it threatens to destroy the idea of reverence, the source of all light’ (Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, qtd. in Vetter, 103), Loy touted “‘a growing expectation that science will eventually confirm the institutions of the founders of religion’ and, like Jean Toomer, posited a “pseudo-scientific theory that humanity had reached the endpoint of biological evolution and was moving toward spiritual evolution” (103).

<sup>23</sup> Pericles Lewis, *Religious Experience and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

but can be found inscribed and disguised within the difficulty and contradictory nature of many modernist works' structures and ideologies."<sup>24</sup> Other scholars point toward modernist literature's more overt engagement with religious traditions. There has been a growing trend toward seeking explicit, revelatory connections between the metaphysical concepts that shaped modernists' personal philosophies and the aesthetic concepts promoted in their literary and critical work. Timothy Sutton's *Catholic Modernists, English Nationalists* explores the influence of such prominent Anglo-Catholic converts as T. S. Eliot and Graham Greene on the aesthetics of British literary modernism.<sup>25</sup> In *Reading the Underthought: Jewish Hermeneutics and the Christian Poetry of Hopkins and Eliot*, Kinereth Meyer and Rachel Salmon Deshen analyze the effects of Christian theology not only on these poets' works, but also on their own close readings and interpretations of these texts as Jewish readers while drawing parallels between the interpretive possibilities presented by Hopkins and Eliot and those practiced by rabbinical scholars on Hebrew scripture.<sup>26</sup> Patrick Query's *Ritual and the Idea of Europe in Interwar Writing* situates the ritual of the Catholic Mass, along with the rituals of verse drama and bullfighting, as sites from which interwar writers could imagine a European future that would challenge and mitigate prevailing ideas of continental politics as "fiercely divided...between communism and fascism."<sup>27</sup> Modernist writers, as these studies point out, were indeed interested in the engagement and perpetuation of traditional belief frameworks. In *Angels of Modernism*, Suzanne Hobson urges recognition of the ways that modernist writers engaged with older and more traditional religious

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<sup>24</sup> Gregory Erickson, *The Absence of God in Modernist Literature*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy J. Sutton, *Catholic Modernists, English Nationalists* (University of Delaware Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Kinereth Meyer and Rachel Salmon Deshen, *Reading the Underthought: Jewish Hermeneutics in the Poetry of Hopkins and Eliot* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

<sup>27</sup> Patrick R. Query, *Ritual and the Idea of Europe in Interwar Writing* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), 4.

frameworks even while seeking new and alternative means of spiritual expression in such forms as Christian Science and Theosophy. She notes that “While modernist writers greatly increase the terminology available to describe phenomena that escape the immediate grasp of consciousness and the senses, they are far from averse to using ready-made religious languages to achieve the same ends.”<sup>28</sup> These innovative works have spearheaded some much-needed attention toward the compelling contributions that knowledge of religious traditions and spiritual concepts can make to analyzing modernist texts in addition to understanding the historical and cultural contexts that pervaded modernist authors’ lives.

Although the metaphysical has become an especially significant area of modernist literary scholarship as of late, serious thought to the aspects of poets’ spiritual affiliations that had once been isolated in the realm of biography began much earlier. Prolific modernist scholars Demetres Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette have identified the significant ways in which a greater knowledge of the various pagan and occult traditions that interested Pound, Yeats, and Eliot can enrich our understanding of their contributions to the modernist legacy. As early as 1979 with *A Light from Eleusis*, Surette posits Pound’s interest in the Eleusinian mysteries, the initiation rites for the fertility cult of Persephone and Demeter, as crucial to the structure of Pound’s modernist epic *The Cantos*.<sup>29</sup> Tryphonopoulos’s *The Celestial Tradition* builds on Surette’s research to emphasize how Pound’s use of the mysteries actually “enacts an initiation for the reader” to partake in directly rather than “report on an initiation” or narrate an epic journey for the reader to observe as a bystander.<sup>30</sup> Attributing the modern

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<sup>28</sup> Suzanne Hobson, *Angels of Modernism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 9.

<sup>29</sup> See Demetres P. Tryphonopolous, *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound’s The Cantos* (Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992) and Leon Surette, *A Light from Eleusis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

<sup>30</sup> Tryphonopolous, xv.

trend toward atheism to the loss of these fertility rites in the Christian tradition, Pound seeks to bring these mysteries back into the modern world through a “mystery text” that the reader must grapple with to move toward enlightenment.<sup>31</sup> James Longenbach’s *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* examines the collaboration between Yeats and Pound during the winters they spent from 1913-16 in Ashdown Forest and highlights Pound’s readings in Yeats’s occult studies as informative to his own Imagist and Vorticist theories.<sup>32</sup> Surette’s *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot and the Occult* highlights how more serious attention in general to these poets’ interests in the occult—interests that literary scholars have either ignored or treated as an “uncomfortable problem”—can, in fact, provide a more complete picture of modernism’s relationship to the past by challenging prevailing understandings of modernism as centered around acquiring “context-free knowledge” and transcending historical contingency.<sup>33</sup> From Yeats’s studies of the Rosicrucian mysteries during his time in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn to T. S. Eliot’s use of the Grail mythology in *The Waste Land*, the various strands of occultism that informed these poets’ major texts very much bound their work to a strong sense of past traditions used to apprehend the metaphysical.

As evidenced by several authors’ conversions to Christian sects that are largely characterized by more mainstream and public forms of ritual, religious tradition in the present mattered to modernism as well. Lyndall Gordon’s *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, for

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<sup>31</sup> As Tryphonopolous observes, Pound rails against Christianity’s removal of “the real meaning in the present-day Church ritual of the Mass and the suppression of the mysteries and their adherents” (2). The deliberately obscure poems are meant to place the reader in the position of a new initiate seeking to learn the hidden mysteries of an occult rite (8).

<sup>32</sup> James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>33</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1993); 6,3.

example, presents a compelling analysis of how Eliot's conversion to Anglo-Catholicism developed in tandem and in relation to his pursuits as a poet who "at each stage of his career...defined his identity and measured his distance from perfection."<sup>34</sup> My project is much indebted to these scholars and to the many others since who have steered the conversation away from questioning religion's place in discussions of a "secular" age and, instead, moved it firmly toward more interesting questions of how metaphysical belief engages with and complicates the poetics of an age that viewed itself as, paradoxically, yearning for spiritual sustenance yet starkly aware of the many ways their era's scientific and technological superiority suggested that this yearning was meant to be outgrown.

### **Religion and Belief in Modernist Poetry: Situating my Work in the Field**

My project is and is not a study of modernism and religion. Its juxtapositions of Christian Science with occultism, Eleusinian rites with Anglo-Catholic prayer, and other forms of metaphysical belief that manifest in widely varying degrees of religiosity—and in ways that are not always recognizable to modernity as "religious"—offer an important contribution to a body of scholarship that tends to polarize organized religion from more alternative and individualized practices. Vetter, even as she accounts for modernist authors who converted to and wrote about Christianity, privileges "spirituality more broadly conceived" as the dominant force of religion in the modernist period, whereas "organized religion...commenced a slow decline."<sup>35</sup> Just as church attendance and other public acts of worship cannot afford a comprehensive assessment of the presence of metaphysical belief in any given era or culture, these same prescriptive categories will not yield a thorough

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<sup>34</sup> Lyndall Gordon, *T. S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 231.

<sup>35</sup> Vetter, 103.

definition of organized religion. To consider the etymology of “religion” in the broadest sense leads to, as the Welsh poet David Jones describes in his essay “Art and Sacrament,” the Latin root *ligio*, the same root of *ligament* and *obligatory*, and thereby a conception of religion as “that which binds man to God” in a manner not unlike a ligament that binds one organ to another so that it may function properly.<sup>36</sup> While Jones’s large poem *The Anathemata* features a religious speaker reflecting on the religious aspects of Catholicism in the rituals of the Mass and in the history that these rituals claim, many poems treat historically religious subjects in a manner that does not focus on the religiosity of the poet or speaker. Vetter, while citing Jones’s text to define religion as “that which binds humans to the divine, this world to a world beyond,” seems to define religion only in terms of public participation in specific, mostly Christian, rituals.<sup>37</sup>

I employ the term *metaphysical* as an overarching term that allows me to discuss religious and spiritual forms, as well as poems and criticism that aim toward metaphysical concepts more generally. Bunting, for example, addresses the human condition of yearning for transcendence and immortality yet does not explore this yearning through any specific framework or ideology, and moreover, does not suggest any sort of divinity or otherwise elevated condition toward which this yearning aims. Rather, his interest lies in poetry’s ability to transcend, or at least provide an alternative for, a space beyond that which the physical senses and empirical evidence alone can access. I position the spiritual as a subcategory of the metaphysical that denotes a divine presence, an elevated ontological state, or some sort of superior level of understanding or apprehension that the metaphysical could

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<sup>36</sup> David Jones, “Art and Sacrament,” in *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings*, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 158.

<sup>37</sup> Vetter, 95.



make possible. While Yeats, like Bunting, offers poetry as a means of accessing the metaphysical, his poetry and criticism point toward such access as elevating the soul and connecting with divine presence. However, while eliding metaphysical access with a superior state of being, and sometimes employing certain spiritual frameworks in order to do so, Yeats also resists proscribing access to spirituality in a way that could be deemed religious.

Religion, in my project, becomes a subcategory for spirituality and is applied to poetry and criticism that engages specific conduits for accessing various spiritual conditions. I alternate between the terms *religious* and *spiritual* in order to differentiate between the states of engagement that various poems suggest within structures designed to foster belief. My deployment of *religion* and *religious* attempts to highlight moments where these poets conceive of certain spiritual concepts and conditions as needing very specific types of obligatory practices to be rendered efficient—rather than the mere presence or absence of the iconographies, rituals, or prayers typically regarded as the signposts of organized religion. Loy, for example, places prominent markers of organized Christianity throughout her work, yet does not always treat them religiously in the sense of mandating such markers as irrevocable presences for accessing the divine. Pound, on the other hand, espouses affiliation with no organized religion as recognizably practiced in modernized Western culture, yet treats the concept of ritual in *The Cantos* as a seriously religious practice even when no clear affiliation to a particular religious sect is made. He foregrounds the importance of maintaining a level of conscious discipline and regularity in ritualistic practices, regardless of the particular religious structure to which the ritual belongs. Yeats, as Vetter points out, evades critics' attempts to devise a comprehensive and definitive assessment of his spiritual

viewpoints.<sup>38</sup> While many of his spiritual pursuits stood as alternatives to more mainstream forms of public worship, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn predicated itself on a hierarchical structure and stringent guidelines that would seem just as regulatory as that of many Christian churches of the early twentieth century or today. Conversations about organized religion in modernity, however, tend to conflate organization with popularity and thereby situate most non-Christian groups as alternatives to organized religion. The poetry and criticism featured in my project offer many more ways to conceive of organized religion in the modernist imagination than Eliot's conversion to a more orthodox and mainstream form of Christianity. By moving between the descriptors of religious and spiritual in each chapter, I aim to honor how these poets engage with the tropes of religious discourse in ways that do not fit neatly into the prevailing narrative of a clean break between organized religion and a more general interest in the metaphysical.

The difficulty with analyzing the vitality of "organized religion" in a given literary culture becomes all the more compounded when considering that the presence of "religion" need not, in fact, have anything to do with divinity. Jacques Derrida's assessment of religion as an institution in which "its essential relation to both faith and to God is anything but self-evident" has informed my own approach toward religion in modernist poetry, especially in my inclusion of Bunting, the poet whose work shows the least affiliation with any reach toward divinity.<sup>39</sup> Although Bunting demonstrated political solidarity with his religious upbringing in Quakerism by refusing conscription during World War I, later making his imprisonment the backdrop for his sonata poem *Villon*, he is not, as are the other poets in my

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 104.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 33.

project, particularly interested in engaging certain religious traditions as influences on poetic technique. Rather, Bunting addresses the religious treatment of literary culture itself as sacred and immutable in spite of longstanding evidence that tastes and definitions can and do change with the passage of time. His essay “The Written Record” compares treatments of esoteric forms of knowledge to “special cults piously observed by their guardians, specialized in their respective rituals” in which practitioners “try to invest these specialized rituals with a taint of the universal.”<sup>40</sup> Bunting develops the religious metaphor in his attack on modern literary culture’s obsession with paper and the printed record, which causes certain words to become “logically objectified as Universal and Divine” in spite of evidence that their meanings change over time.<sup>41</sup> He singles out Eliot, “whose whole-hearted and unreflective devotion to paper makes him worthy of the position of Archdeacon in the Province of Literary Criticism,” as the most egregious example of the inherent solipsism resulting from the suggestion of divine and universal permanence in particular aesthetic standards.<sup>42</sup> Bunting, however, also aspired to a type of transcendence in his poetry through an attention to auralty that might access a type of endurance, which, if not divine, would be at least better able to withstand the ravages of time to which more tactile arts fell prey. His poetry and criticism, while not often incorporating organized religion, posit literature as having the potential for evoking religious response in a culture that points toward nothing divine beyond the words themselves.

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<sup>40</sup> Basil Bunting, “The Written Record,” in *Three Essays*, ed. Richard Caddel (Durham, UK: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1994), 14.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

Aside from his having produced some of the best British poetry of the twentieth century by far, the inclusion of Bunting in this study—as opposed to W. H. Auden, David Jones or another British modernist whose work more easily lends itself to a discussion of religion and spirituality in modernist literature—furthers my goal of breaking down the dichotomy between organized religion and, to borrow Vetter’s phrasing, “spirituality more broadly conceived.” If spirituality is to continue providing fertile ground for modernist scholarship, such work must remain vigilant for the temptation to assess the presence of organized religion by narrowly defined terms that cannot do justice to the intricate ways that modernists positioned religious practice and ideology in their poetry and criticism.

My inclusion of Bunting’s less traditionally “religious” poetry also offers the necessary and compelling placement of modernist authors whose work remains comparatively obscured alongside and in conversation with those whose voices have been and continue to be the loudest in defining modernism and the modernist period. While Longenbach, Surette, and Tryphonopoulos have greatly enhanced our understanding of major modernists’ spiritual interests, their studies represent just that: those authors whose reputations as “major” poets have long been cemented into the collective consciousness of literary scholarship and continue to absorb the lion’s share of recognition in anthology formation and syllabus design. While my project builds on and responds to this work, I also incorporate lesser-studied modernists Mina Loy and Basil Bunting who, although known to British poetry specialists, have not been deemed canonical staples to the same extent as Eliot, Yeats, and Pound. Although Loy and Bunting had significant interactions with their more prominent peers who held their work in high esteem and incorporated many related modernist techniques of style, their work has remained less readily available in print and less

likely to be included in British literature and poetry anthologies. In addition to Loy and Bunting less actively promoting themselves as exemplary critics and arbiters of literary taste, the generational gap between Bunting and Pound (Bunting being 15 years younger) and Loy's status as a "woman writer" with different topics from male high modernists have perpetuated these poets' status as complementary but not essential to the definitive modernist canon. Whereas comparative work between Yeats, Eliot, and Pound has often been assumed mandatory, Loy and Bunting are more frequently studied in isolation.<sup>43</sup> These studies, while making crucial contributions toward a broader understanding and appreciation of these poets, miss opportunities to foreground the persuasive and intriguing connections that occur across the works of "major" and "minor" poets.

My particular focus on the metaphysical demonstrates that including these poets alongside and in conversation with Yeats, Eliot, and Pound reveals Loy and Bunting's significant reactions and responses to the form and content propagated by more dominant voices of literary modernism. Moreover, it foregrounds dynamic relationships between poetics and metaphysical concepts that shaped the contours of the three more prominent poets' critical and literary work—relationships that could possibly lead to a broader understanding of literary modernism as a whole. Chapter Two's analysis of how Loy both challenges and validates the importance of material forms in apprehending divinity follows Chapter One's analysis of Yeats's work to restore belief in the seemingly hackneyed conventions of literary symbolism. While the former grounded her work in various strands of

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<sup>43</sup> A notable exception to these poets' general exclusion can be found in Keith Tuma's *Fishing By Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), which includes chapters on both Loy and Bunting in its case for bringing attention back to the large body of twentieth-century British poetry that had been dismissed or neglected in favor of American.

Christian theology and the latter in a fusion of Celtic mythology with occultist ritual, both poets push back against the prevailing notion of symbolic representation as incompatible with the poetic innovations of a new century that called for techniques of minimalism and (as Pound famously phrased it) “direct treatment of the thing.”<sup>44</sup> In a similar manner, the struggle Bunting’s mason undergoes in *Briggflatts* to craft enduring, palpable evidence of lost men and forgotten circumstances—on headstones that are no less vulnerable to decay than the men they memorialize—foregrounds the extent to which a search for material, concrete manifestations of their spiritual perspectives dominates the approaches of Pound and Eliot, even as they express anxiety over the emphasis on materialism in a society increasingly dominated by the bourgeois concerns of capitalism. My inclusion of Loy and Bunting complicates dominant readings of British modernist poetry as much as it broadens prevailing conceptions of which authors should have the most say in defining a literary movement that was incredibly nuanced and varied in England alone.

By conducting a study on the metaphysical in the works of modernist writers who all made poetry their primary genre of choice, my project highlights poetry in an area of modernist scholarship that, by and large, either favors novels or encompasses both poetry and prose without reflecting on the distinctions between each. By incorporating a range of different approaches to the metaphysical in modernist poetics, I draw attention to poetry as the privileged means of literary and artistic expression for each of the writers in my project in a way that Sutton’s and other studies of modernist Christian writers do not. Although a multi-author study of modernist poetry foregrounds differences in poetic technique and subject matter, it also illuminates a shared interest in poetic expression—and moreover, in poetic

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<sup>44</sup> Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” in *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 3.

expression as an especially useful means for addressing and engaging with belief. I want to examine authors who share an interest in poetry's function of, as Charles Baudelaire phrased it, "adapting style to subject"—an interest that placing different spiritual iconographies and traditions in contact with each other can foreground in productive and compelling ways.<sup>45</sup> Bunting's assessment of literature's function as "to explore the resources of language and make language available for all existing or potential thoughts" characterizes how each of these writers' poetic techniques expanded the resources language had available for articulating difficult and ineffable metaphysical concepts.<sup>46</sup> Bunting's Quakerism seemingly shares very little common spiritual ground with Eliot's avowal of a strictly orthodox religious viewpoint. However, Bunting's emphasis on the spoken word as a means of achieving the permanence that literature preserved on paper is lacking scrutinizes the relationship between poetic form and spiritual efficacy in a similar manner to how Eliot's religious poetry tests the ability of language from Anglo-Catholic liturgy and prayer to afford the experience of metaphysical understanding. Both poets challenge certain poetic and spiritual forms, including those for which they are advocating, to *do* the work with which they are charged.

The desired results from such work vary greatly, but Regina Schwartz's use of the term "efficacy" in *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism*, which she defines as "to make something *happen*," as is expected of religious rites, best accounts for the range of outcomes toward which these poets aim.<sup>47</sup> To "make something happen" in a poem successfully might yield a manifestation of the divine in an apprehensible, if not palpable,

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<sup>45</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Three Drafts of a Preface," *Flowers of Evil*, ed. Marthiel and Jackson Matthews, trans. Doreen Bell, Roy Campbell, et al. (New York: New Directions, 1955), xxvii.

<sup>46</sup> Bunting, "Observations on Left-Wing Papers," *Three Essays*, ed. Peter Quartermain, *Sharp Study and Long Toil: Basil Bunting Special Issue*, ed. Peter Lewis (Durham, UK: Durham University Journal, 1995), 46.

<sup>47</sup> Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 7.

presence inspired by the rite of a specific religious tradition. In a different poem, the poet might only aim for the possibility of a metaphysical transcendence having neither roots in a particularly religious approach, nor even in anything necessarily divine. Although the aims of these modernist poets differ from those of the seventeenth-century metaphysical poets whom Schwartz describes as “not afflicted by embarrassment at the poverty of signs, at the inept ways in which language falls short of conveying the sacred,” they proceed in trying to afford some sort of access to a world beyond while remaining ever aware of the inadequacy of their chosen medium of words to such a task.<sup>48</sup> Still other poems featured in my project aim only to restore faith in the potential of language, when used responsibly and attentively, to make celestial realms, spiritual concepts, mythological worlds, orthodox ideologies, and other metaphysical frameworks occupy a vibrant and vital space in modernity’s collective consciousness—even if absolute belief never quite becomes a guarantee. As Charles Taylor points out in *A Secular Age*, a range of responses and relationships to the metaphysical fall on the spectrum between the two extremes of belief and unbelief; the yearning for something transcendent can exist even when one holds no belief in a specific divinity or even in anything transcendent whatsoever.<sup>49</sup> The poets in my project all posit uniquely modernist poetic theories and techniques to explore what, if anything, certain poetic forms might do to enhance, revise, and complicate the place of spiritual efficacy in modernity.

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Taylor’s description in *A Secular Age* of what he calls “the middle condition,” in which we, although not ascribing to any particular spiritual paradigm have “found a way to escape the forms of negation, exile, emptiness without having reached fullness” and are “doing some things which...contribute to our ordinary happiness” or “to what we conceive of as the good” (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007, 6-7). While Taylor ultimately ascribes to a secular view of post-Enlightenment modernity, his analyses of the various ways that yearnings for and experiences with the various types of fulfillment and revelation typically sought in spirituality can aid an understanding of the broad ways that modernist poets conceived of the relationship between poetic language and spiritual experience.



### Defining British Modernism: Dates and Regions

When embarking on a project that argues for the strong influence of metaphysical beliefs on the development of modernist literary technique, one must think seriously about what exactly constitutes as modernist, a term that scholars have continued to dissect over several decades and several books. The period of modernism, loosely couched within the parameters of the beginning of the twentieth century to the end of World War II but often spilling further back into the *fin de siècle* and further forward into the 1970s, is, as with most literary periods in the present climate, constantly under scrutiny and revision. In their introduction to *A Companion to Modernist Poetry*, Chinitz and McDonald acknowledge that attempting to define modernism by limiting it to a certain historical period or certain stylistic markers is problematic. Rather, what they propose is to “conceive of modernism in historical terms as the response in expressive culture to a particular global modernity—one associated with, for example, the final phase of Western imperialism, first-wave feminism, the political and ideological developments surrounding the two world wars, and the advent of technologies of mass culture.”<sup>50</sup> While mindful of the impossibility of citing an exact date for modernism’s end, Chinitz and McDonald suggest acknowledging “that the social conditions that had nurtured modernism rapidly gave rise to others.”<sup>51</sup> While I find Chinitz and McDonald’s outline helpful in my own selection of modernist poems, I have pushed the timeline a few decades before and after the world wars. My modernist timeline begins in the mid-1890s, explicitly with Yeats’s 1893 publication *The Rose*, a seemingly conservative volume of traditional lyric poetry that, I argue, had great importance to his later works more

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<sup>50</sup> David E. Chinitz and Gail McDonald, introduction to *A Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. David E. Chinitz and Gail McDonald (Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 1 (hereafter cited in text as *CMP*).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

categorized as “modern.” My project ends with a discussion of Bunting’s 1965 *Briggflatts*, a six-part autobiographical verse composed by a poet who sought out and cultivated a close and productive relationship with Pound, one of the loudest voices of the period from World War I until the 1930s known as “high” modernism. I begin and end with these eras and texts not to refute those who would argue for a longer or shorter time span—indeed, we can see traces of modernism as early as the 1860s and as late at least the 1980s—but to elucidate what I see as productive exchanges between modernist technique and traditional and alternative forms of metaphysical thought and affect in British modernist poetry. Fueled by the political, social, and cultural shifts witnessed at the advent of the twentieth century, modernist poets sought to develop a poetics that would best express what was happening in this world and offer some possibility for contemplating what might be rendered accessible beyond it.

The specification of place poses just as vexing an issue as that of time. Because the British Isles provided the site for many literary developments and rich exchanges between writers that would shape the contours of what is known as modernism in English poetry today, I have made British poetry the focus of my project while remaining ever aware of how contentious a term “British” might be when writing about poets whose lives were by no means confined to one geographic location. With the exception of Bunting, who himself is frequently marginalized by his Northern heritage from a tradition that places London at its epicenter, each of the poets in my project can and do hold prominent places in literary traditions elsewhere: Yeats in the Irish and Loy, Pound, and Eliot in the American. Just as my locating modernism within a specific historical timeline is not meant to refute other modes of periodization, my identifying these poets with a movement that responds to a

tradition having strong roots in British literary culture is not intended to deny their influences by and on other regions. My classification of the works in my project as “British modernist poetry” is informed not only by these poets’ own espousals of British literary identity (as with Eliot and Pound), but also by the strong responses to British culture that inflect their choices in poetic technique and in the modes of spiritual affect that their poetry sought to dismantle, reconfigure, or renew.<sup>52</sup> Drew Milne has observed that even as “attempts have been made to claim Loy as an ‘American’ modernist,”—and Marjorie Perloff, among others, has certainly provided a strong case for doing so—“her intellectual trajectories and geographical displacements are also characteristic of British modernism. Loy’s work dismantles and satirizes what it might mean to be an English or British woman.”<sup>53</sup> Her poetry collections *The Last Lunar Baedeker* and *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* demonstrate that, for Loy, British female identity is bound up in a Victorian religious culture predicated on an expectation that women both deny their sexuality and be able to bear and raise children, as exemplified by the figures of Mary and the Christ child. While Yeats emerges as a leading voice for Irish independence in such iconized poems as “September 1913” and “Easter 1916” to name just two, his concern that the English language be made to withstand the task of preserving Irish heritage in verse cements him as an essential part of British literary tradition before even considering the close and generative relationship he developed with Pound while

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<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Pound’s “What I Feel about Walt Whitman,” in which he declares his intention to “scourge America with all the old beauty” in *Early Writings*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (London: Penguin 2005), 130, qtd. in Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 56.

<sup>53</sup> Drew Milne, “Modernist Poetry in the British Isles,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 149. Marjorie Perloff, however, also provides a compelling case for situating Loy in the American tradition by foregrounding Loy’s “invention of an intricately polyglot language—a language that challenges her more conventional national idiom of her British (as well as her French or Italian, or, paradoxically, even her American) contemporaries.” See Perloff, “English as a ‘Second’ Language: Mina Loy’s *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*,” in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet* (Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation, 1998), 133.

in England. Moreover, a focus on this poetry as emergent from and responsive to British literary culture helps me to draw out significant commonalities and productive clashes that arose in these poets renderings of the relationship between poetic technique and metaphysical apprehension. While these poets often (and sometimes quite publicly) disagreed with each other's poetic and metaphysical theories, an affiliation with and proximity toward British literary culture in the first half of the twentieth century proved essential to developing a dialectic that continues to enlist the transcendent as the ultimate litmus test for what, if anything, language might do in modernity to render the fabricated palpable and the fantastic plausible.

**“Mak[ing] it New” while “Pawing at the Ancients”: The Paradox of Form in Modernist Poetics and the Metaphysical**

My definition of modernism and modernist poetics is predicated on a heightened interest in poetic form that, developing alongside and in response to the advances in science and technology, the rise of urbanization, and the devastation of the world wars, largely characterizes contemporary analyses of what distinguishes modernism from the literary periods preceding and following it. The concept of form both resists and invites attempts at serious study and codification. Angela Leighton's seminal survey of form emphasizes form's complexity as a construct denoting a definitively palpable shape while simultaneously needing an accompanying adjective to make its signification complete.<sup>54</sup> Throughout my close readings and analyses, I address form as a term denoting a sort of Platonic ideal that poets strive toward but never fully realize, as well as the shape of a visible, audible, and

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<sup>54</sup> Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

palpable device at work in a poem.<sup>55</sup> To situate these poets' work within the context of modernism as a whole, I will begin with a focus on form as conceived in modernist poetic theory more generally and then attempt to demonstrate how this heightened focus on form, and a rigorously conscious emphasis on form as craft, foregrounds spirituality and belief as integral to the developments and experimentations of modernist poetics.

These poets' strong interest in literary form both fueled and was fueled by an interest in forms used to define and access the metaphysical (e.g., forms of ritual, prayer, mythology, and iconography) and in whether an attention to form, in both the literary and the metaphysical, might somehow enhance the viability and relevancy of the content that various forms shape. The poetry selections my project features indicate key moments in which these five poets explored the circumstances under which attention to form might enhance content—making issues of spirituality, religion, mortality, and divinity not only expressible, but authentic, meaningful, and relevant to modernity. In situating my readings and analyses in what these metaphysical forms represented for these poets and their literary agendas, I frequently engage *mythos* rather than the more contemporary term *mythology*. Bruce Lincoln notes that whereas *mythos* connoted a type of speech that had the authority of the gods behind it, *logos*—which has become synonymous with “facts” and “logic” in modernity—originally referred to the excessively ornate and elaborate phrasings needed to dupe others into accepting false information.<sup>56</sup> While the *OED* defines *mythos* as “A body of interconnected myths or stories, esp. those belonging to a particular religious or cultural

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<sup>55</sup> My idea of form as both tangible and abstract is inspired largely by Leighton's introduction and her characterization of form's inherent paradox as being both “self-sufficient and self-defining” yet also “restless, tendentious, a noun lying in wait for its object” (1).

<sup>56</sup> Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3-18.

tradition” or “an ideology; a set of beliefs,” these poets frequently align their use of a culture’s mythos with its roots in the Greek word for truth—specifically, for a type of truth backed by the weight of the gods’ authority.<sup>57</sup> Although I work most closely with the concept of mythos as truth in Chapter Two, I often engage mythos rather than myth or mythology in my other chapters as well in order to move away from the dualism of “myth” versus “fact” that tends to accompany usage of the latter two terms. I intend my frequent use of mythos to foreground the ways that, for these poets, to draw on the *mythos* of a given era and culture involves considering the possibility of a *mythos*, in the sense of a truth, that such stories might reveal to modern times.

Modernists believed that the unprecedented changes that ushered in modern life required new forms with which to articulate them, and moreover, forms that were not to be found in the more popularized, easily digestible print culture dominated by prose. David Ayers quotes from Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* the lines asserting “the age demanded an image / of its accelerated grimace,” to situate modernist poetry as a reaction to a print culture presuming to speak for and reflect the needs of a unified mass population at a time during which longstanding political institutions and scientific methodologies were breaking down as quickly as new ones were evolving.<sup>58</sup> Poetry, as Ayers reflects, was granted marginal space at best in this demand for a homogenized and mass art: “At the turn of the twentieth century, the legitimacy of poetry had become limited and tangential, fostered in coterie that stood at the end of a set of traditions which only with some difficulty could maintain the claims of the artistic sensibility against the realities of commerce, history, and

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<sup>57</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “mythos,” accessed October 28, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/17368?redirectedFrom=mythos#eid>.

<sup>58</sup> David Ayers, “Modernist Poetry in History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 24 (hereafter cited in text as *CCMP*).

science.”<sup>59</sup> Yeats’s fear that poetry was becoming part of the “counting-house” class and Pound’s “make it new” imperative, for example, reflect the modernist poet’s imperative to make the craft assume a relevant, engaging, and vital presence in the pulse of the modern age.<sup>60</sup> Fredric Jameson emphasizes the high stakes with which modernists situated their artistic innovations, surmising that “the force of the imperative to innovate or to ‘make it new’...has always seemed to constitute the fundamental logic of modernism” so that it can “offer[s] to redeem, reclaim, redeem, transform and transfigure the *koiné* of a capitalist daily life into an Ur-speech in which our authentic relationship to the world and to Being can be reinvented.”<sup>61</sup> Positioning themselves as relentless seekers of the “new” has, as Michael H. Whitworth observes, sometimes yielded a tendency to skew the history of English poetry in their favor: Pound, for example, “gives the impression that the conventional metrical line of iambic pentameter had run unchallenged from Shakespeare to Wordsworth (and beyond) until modernist poets were brave enough to tackle it.”<sup>62</sup> Michael Levenson and Isobel Armstrong, too, have done much to point out the ways in which modernist writers conveniently distanced themselves from literary histories, especially from those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with which they held more in common than they would like to admit.<sup>63</sup> Rather, Whitworth proposes, the “new” of modernist poetics comes from how

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>60</sup> See W. B. Yeats, “What is Popular Poetry?,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 4, *Early Essays*, ed. George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2007). Yeats, wanting to return poetry to a previous age “before the counting-house had created a new class and a new art without breeding and without ancestry” resonates with Ayers’ assessment of modernists’ anxiety that poetry had been relegated to “coteries” and no longer a real presence (10).

<sup>61</sup> Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essays on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 148.

<sup>62</sup> Michael H. Whitworth, “Rhythm, Form, and Diction in Modernist Poetry,” in *CMP*, 4-5.

<sup>63</sup> See Isobel Armstrong’s introduction to her volume *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 1993). She notes the “silence” that has characterized twentieth century handlings of Victorian poetry, in which “T. S. Eliot’s dismissive account of Tennyson deflects attention from the Tennysonian echoes in *The Waste Land* and *Four Quartets*” and “Yeats, virtually quoting Shelley in ‘The Second Coming,’ silently appropriates Tennyson’s ‘The Kraken’ as the governing motive of his poem” (2). Michael Levenson’s *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1984) also attempts to recover some of

these poets “create new forms that retain their freshness” by “drawing on a wealth of inherited techniques, and adapting them to new needs.”<sup>64</sup> Throughout my project, I approach these poets’ positing certain techniques as new in a way that attempts to reflect their seeing it as such.

Modernists, although highly selective about the traditions they wanted to claim, remained very interested in citing tradition as the root of their innovation. Whitworth’s articulation of the conscious engagement with tradition that was actually “new” about modernists’ work—aside from the poets’ desire that it be viewed as such—speaks to an inherently paradoxical strand in modernist thinking about their contributions to the arts. While Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” remains the most recognizable piece of English literary criticism insisting on the necessity of the past for the innovation of the present, Paul Valéry describes the obsession with the past in World War I as endemic to the entirety of what he terms “the European soul,” which “While inventors were feverishly searching their imaginations...for the means of doing away with barbed wire, of outwitting submarines or paralyzing the flight of airplanes...sought refuge, guidance, consolation throughout the whole register of her memories, past acts, and ancestral attitudes”<sup>65</sup> In 1922, James Frazer highlighted connections between ancient mythologies and contemporary religious practices in *The Golden Bough*, which became widely popular throughout high modernism and influenced the work of many modernist writers and thinkers.

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the Victorian and Romantic strands that modernists declared as irrelevant to an art form they saw as unprecedented by the previous two centuries’ poetry. Modernists, Levenson observes, saw a “thorough historical discontinuity” in their work which manifested in some extreme dualisms: “Victorian poetry has been soft; modern poetry will be hard (Pound’s terms). Humanist art has been vital; the coming geometric art will be inorganic (Hulme’s terms). Romanticism was immature; the new classicism will be adult (Eliot’s terms)” (ix).

<sup>64</sup> Whitworth, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Valéry, “The Crisis of the Mind,” 1919, in *Paul Valéry: An Anthology*, ed. James R. Lawler (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 96.



Pound, Yeats, and Eliot, frequently praised ancient cultures as eras during which a greater attention to language led to a heightened ability to maintain proximity toward the divine, and therefore a heightened capacity for knowledge and the understanding of truth. For them, to study the ancients was not just to find out where poetry had been, but to anticipate where it ought to go so as to possess the same sort of force and capacity for truth-telling in the future. Pound described his own “pawing at the ancients,” which involved drawing heavily Homer and Confucius alike as paradigms for a better modernity in *The Cantos*, as “one struggle to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again.”<sup>66</sup> Yeats and Bunting both reach back into aural traditions from which, they insist, much can be learned about conveying a sense of immediacy in rhythm and intonation. Eliot, although later claiming to regret the “wild goose chase” that his work with Jessie Weston’s scholarship had wrought, was much indebted to Weston’s scholarship on the fisher king rites in *The Waste Land* and to Frazer’s *Golden Bough*.<sup>67</sup> When reading these modernists’ descriptions of “the ancients,” one must keep in mind that, much like their perceptions of the new in modernist poetic innovations, their perceptions of the old are positioned to help articulate their specific poetic agendas. Pound, who, as Rachel Blau DuPlessis points out, “idealized historical figures [such as Mussolini] whom he saw as embodying transformative, masculine will,” projects this same idealization onto the figure of Odysseus, whom he praised as one who respected ritual and the gods and embodied the antidote to the materialistic culture of capitalism.<sup>68</sup> My analyses of these poets’ uses of histories and mythologies foregrounds what their idealistic renditions of “the ancients”—often so ancient

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<sup>66</sup> Pound, “A Retrospect,” in *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 11.

<sup>67</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Frontiers of Criticism,” *The Sewanee Review* 64.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1956), 534.

<sup>68</sup> Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “H. D. and Revisionary Myth-Making,” in *CCMP*, 124.

as to be constructed from sparse versions of mythologies recorded and translated centuries later—were meant to demonstrate: the possibility of a society in which contact with the divine was indeed a viable possibility because of the attention paid to the rituals of representation, of which language was an essential component. These modernist poets regarded the very ancient past as a time in which the culture’s attention to language fostered a greater respect for the cosmos as well as earth.

### **Chapter Summaries**

Generally, I proceed in chronological order of the publication dates for the texts most prominently featured in each chapter; i.e., although Eliot became an established force on the high modernist scene well before *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, his chapter appears after those of Yeats, Loy and Pound whose earlier poems constitute the bulk of my close readings. This ordering also best generates thought on the connections I foreground across these authors’ respective poetic styles and renderings of the metaphysical. Chapter One posits Yeats’s work with the rose symbol as an intricate syncretism of ancient occultism, Irish mythos, and English literary convention that renders symbolism a powerful and believable force in modernist poetry. Chapter Two analyzes how Loy engages the feminized domestic spaces that her modernist male peers largely shunned in order to re-configure otherwise ineffectual Christian tropes as conduits for a potentially fulfilling metaphysical experience. By following Yeats with Loy, I highlight the contributions of both as poets who strove to reclaim the innovative potential of conventions that other modernists deemed too stale to contribute to a literary agenda for the new century. Pound, situated in Chapter Three between Loy and Eliot, resonates with both poets’ interest in the relationship between religious knowledge and spiritual efficacy in his use of mimetic techniques in *The Cantos*

that, I argue, are largely inspired by his appropriation of the *Nekuia* ritual from *The Odyssey*. Chapter Four describes Eliot's use of distraction—in the direct use of the term itself and as a method of poetic technique—as a manner of fostering a hermeneutics that allows for greater understanding of the divine and new forms of knowledge that an otherwise focused reader might miss. Chapter Five ends with Bunting's positing of sound-based poetic techniques as a means of achieving something of the transcendence and endurance that his peers often sought in written culture. My conclusion delves briefly into selections from Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn, later twentieth-century British poets who, although not typically categorized as “modernist” per se, take on interactions between poetic language and belief through religious structures in a way that expands on the challenges Yeats, Loy, Pound, Eliot, and Bunting have raised in their work.

## Chapter 1: From the “Proud Rose” to the “Empty Sea-Shell”: Yeats’s Modernizing of the Symbol

When approaching Yeats criticism, it might seem that there are two poets to be discussed under one name: the early Yeats, the skilled lyricist whose work is prominently featured in Irish literary surveys, and the later, whose work has more in common with literary modernism. While the early Yeats is primarily concerned that his work should “sing the ancient ways” for the sake of representing, reviving, and ultimately saving his country’s interest in the Celtic mythos that distinguished Ireland’s heritage from that of its British colonizers, the later poet is deemed a modernist whose work perhaps embodies a greater level of experimentation and complexity. Although T. S. Eliot claimed not to regard Yeats’s “earlier and his later work almost as if they had been written by two different men,” his lukewarm endorsement of Yeats’s 1893 *The Rose* has likely played at least some part in the ongoing elision of Yeats’s modernist legacy with *The Tower* and other works thereafter.<sup>1</sup> Yeats himself contributed toward this division; after all, on the one hand he called himself “the last Romantic” and later, on the other hand deliberately omitted Irish poets from his 1936 Modern Poetry Broadcast for they prioritized nationalistic over aesthetic issues.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Although Eliot’s aim was to show that Yeats had the unique distinction of writing good poetry in his middle age—a rarity for most English language poets—he makes this claim under the assumption that his earlier work was somewhat lacking. He describes the poems of *The Rose* as “satisfactory in isolation, as ‘anthology pieces,’ as they are in the context of his other poems of the same period” and cites two poems in the collection, “When you are old and grey and full of sleep” and “A Dream of Death” as “beautiful...but only craftsman’s work, because one does not feel present in them the particularity which must provide the material for the general truth.” See “Yeats,” 1940, in *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975), 250-251 (hereafter cited in text as *ESP*).

<sup>2</sup> W. B. Yeats, “Modern Poetry: A Broadcast,” 1936, in *Collected Works*, vol. 5, *Later Essays*, ed. William H. O’Donnell (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1994), 100 (hereafter cited in text as *CWLE*). Rather than give way to an “impersonal philosophical poetry,” he observed, Irish poetry “moved in a different direction,” which was largely attributed to the folk tradition of which they were writing.

Moreover, the publication dates alone of *The Rose* and *The Tower* could make a strong case that one poet's work was dominated by the nationalist concerns of the late-nineteenth century and the other's by the formal innovations of twentieth-century poetics.<sup>3</sup>

While scholarship has been somewhat reluctant to stray from the poet's own assessment, especially given his ambivalence toward modernism, more recent work has begun to blur these lines and to argue for an understanding of Yeats's Irish identity that works with rather than against his more modernist writings.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I will explain how this blurring yields productive and interesting ways to understand a common thread that runs throughout his poetry: that of how belief works in terms of poetic forms and the metaphysical subjects these forms contain.

Recent readings of Yeats have sought to reconcile his more conservative Irish lyric forms with his later high modernist verse, finding value in his earlier works and in his Irish identity as not only informative to shaping his modernist poetry, but compelling in their own right. In her introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to W. B. Yeats*, Marjorie Howes states that his middle and later works "gave him much in common with modernism," but she declares *The Rose* "just as intellectually rigorous, complex, and concerned with conflict as his later works."<sup>5</sup> Noting how Yeats's Irish heritage and interests has largely rendered him "either an absent presence or simply a foil to the central figures of Eliot and Pound," Anne Fogarty attributes Yeats's difficult placement in modernism to "the notorious slipperiness

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Finneran, "'From Things Becoming to the Thing Become': The Construction of W.B. Yeats's *The Tower*," *The South Atlantic Review* 63.1 (Winter 1998), 35.

<sup>4</sup> In his introduction to *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, Yeats posits that if "recording the fortuitous scene or thought" suffices for a poem, then "perhaps it might be enough to put into some fashionable rhythm—"I am sitting in a chair, there are three dead flies on a corner of the ceiling." See *CWLE*, 194.

<sup>5</sup> Howes, Marjorie, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to W.B. Yeats*, ed. Marjorie Howe and John Kelly (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3; 9 (hereafter cited in text as *CCY*).

and imprecision” of the term modernism itself than to Yeats’s work.<sup>6</sup> Revisions in modernist studies to account for the complex definitions and manifestations of modernism internationally, Fogarty argues, ought to include Yeats more actively, “precisely because of the unwieldy, multi-faceted nature of his artistic and political career.”<sup>7</sup> Most recently, Edna Longley’s *Yeats and Modern Poetry* contests suggestions in earlier criticism that “modernism can de-Irish Yeats’s poetry.”<sup>8</sup> Like Fogarty, Longley emphasizes Anglophone modernism as an international movement as a means of bringing Yeats’s Irish and modernist identities together, proposing that “If Yeats slips through the cracks” in conversations about where Ireland fits into modernist literature, then “the remedy may not be to talk of ‘modernisms’ or ‘poetries’ but rather to revisit the inter-national [sic] dynamics that created modern poetry in English.”<sup>9</sup> As modernism becomes increasingly understood as taking on various forms of national interests and identities, as well as various poetic techniques, scholarship will likely find less need to make the case for unity between Yeats’s Irish and modernist strands explicit.

Like the above-cited critics, I wish to foreground the importance of Yeats’s entire legacy in shaping current definitions of modernism. However, I find the themes and styles that dominate Yeats’s earlier Irish-centered lyrics just as formative to, and informed by, the Pound/Eliot-centric conversations on British modernism as they are to modernism more globally. In particular, I want to highlight Yeats’s active engagement of a literary and poetic device that fell under intense scrutiny during the evolution of high modernism: that of the

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<sup>6</sup> Anne Fogarty, “Yeats, Ireland, and Modernism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 127.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>8</sup> Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 44.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

literary symbol, which British and American modernism rejected as passé for the modernist agenda of maintaining accuracy and concreteness in expression. Yeats's retention of the literary symbol as a believable and revelatory device throughout his career holds relevance not only for my immediate interests in belief and poetic form, but also for the interests of modernist scholarship more broadly. In this chapter, I propose that Yeats's syncretism of Irish folklore with Rosicrucian occultism, along with some influence from Romantic poetry and poetics, engendered a new and useful way for modernism to conceptualize literary symbolism. By strongly suggesting yet never mandating or taking for granted the possibility of access to the metaphysical, Yeats's symbolism makes a critical contribution to one of modernism's central issues: that of making poetry believable even as the familiar poetic conventions and affectations necessary for such belief many no longer work for the identity and preservation of a literary tradition.

My readings of symbolism in selections from *The Rose* and *The Tower* argue that we should read Yeats as one poet whose earlier work with lyrics and Irish folklore played an active and essential role in making possible his later ventures into modernism. While Yeats's identity and reception as a poet began earlier than *The Rose* and continued after *The Tower*, I focus exclusively on these volumes to foreground some of the major poems where Yeats engages symbolism most directly and where he most frequently calls its relevance and validity into question. Additionally, I want to ground my analysis in the two collections that most typify the polarization of early and later Yeats. *The Rose* takes as its title the literary symbol that British and American modernists singled out explicitly in their desire to create distance from poetic conventions past, while *The Tower* is regarded, as Richard Finneran phrases it, "simply one of the most seminal volumes of Modern Poetry, indeed of poetry in

English as we know it.”<sup>10</sup> In aligning Yeats’s critical and literary work with some of the more prominent ideas of modernism, I am not suggesting that firmly defining Yeats as a modernist is the only way to garner closer attention to his early work. However, if aligning him with a literary movement that continues to get attention for its complexity helps to illuminate his complex engagement with poetic conventions, then it will be an important start—and one that is not entirely unwarranted, in spite of Yeats’s own self-proclaimed ambivalence to modernism. Before analyzing how Yeats’s work with symbolism in *The Rose* fueled the development and problematizing of this literary device in *The Tower*, I will first contextualize Yeats’s poetic theories within the conversation about symbolism in British poetry at the cusp of the twentieth century, and then elucidate the ways in which Yeats’s own use of symbolism evolved from and responded to different elements of his metaphysical, Irish, and poetic interests.

### **“For Dilettantes and Women”: British Modernism’s Rejection of the Symbol**

For the British and transatlantic modernists, symbolism stood in the way of allowing poetry to realize its potential as an important art form in modernity. Making poetry believable went hand in hand with making it accurate, and with achieving a precision that did not take for granted that poetic conventions once deemed effective would prove so in the new century. If such accuracy of meaning were not achieved, the very survival of poetry as a serious art form was at stake, for, as Pound warned, “As long as the poet says not what he, at the very crux of a clarified conception, means, but is content to say something ornate and approximate, just so long will serious people, intently alive, consider poetry as balderdash—a

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<sup>10</sup> See Finneran, note 3.



sort of embroidery for dilettantes and women.”<sup>11</sup> The tiresome repetition of conventional literary symbols precipitated Pound’s attack on poetry as “balderdash.” As the most prominent of such symbols—and the very title and central symbol of one of Yeats’s earliest collections—the rose was become a sort of effigy to be destroyed or abandoned in pursuit of a poetics that would convey meaning better than conventional symbols and other “ornate and approximate” devices. No longer inserted to invoke love, romance, or beauty, the rose was now something to be shunned in favor of finding new, unexpected, and most importantly more “direct” means of expression for abstract concepts and emotions.<sup>12</sup> Transatlantic modernists wasted no time in sending up the hackneyed rose and its symbolic significance. Marianne Moore’s “Injudicious Gardening,” for example, mocks Robert Browning’s fastidious removal of the yellow rose from his garden after he discovered that, according to the popular Victorian glossary *The Language of Flowers*, yellow roses signified infidelity.<sup>13</sup> Her “Roses Only” addresses the rose directly, as though centuries of praise had given the flower itself a kind of presumptive arrogance and superiority, with such missives as “You / cannot make us / think you a delightful happen-so” and “You would look, minus / thorns— like a what-is-this, a mere / peculiarity ( ll. 11-16 ).”<sup>14</sup> Gertrude Stein’s “rose is a rose is a rose” did not even bother to acknowledge the privileged place the rose once occupied as

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<sup>11</sup> Ezra Pound, “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), 41 (hereafter cited in text as *PSP*).

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Pound’s call for “direct treatment of the thing” in ““A Retrospect,” in *Pavannes and Divinations*, 1918, in “Ezra Pound [1885-1972],” *Modern American Poetry*, accessed February 28, 2012 [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/pound/pound.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/pound/pound.htm). While Eliot’s “objective correlative” as defined in “Hamlet” may at first seem akin to literary symbolism, as it denotes a “formula” of a “particular emotion,” this model does not charge a single object with evoking it, as does symbolism, but rather “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events” (*PSP*, 48).

<sup>13</sup> Moore reacts to Barrett Browning’s fastidious hold on the symbolic significance of this color by declaring, “I could not bear a yellow rose ill will / Because books said that yellow boded ill” (3-4). In *Little Magazines, 1915-1919*, in *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, ed. Grace Schulman (New York: Viking, 2003), 89.

<sup>14</sup> Moore, “Roses Only,” in *The Poems of Marianne Moore*, 120.

being able to signify more than its properties as a flower.<sup>15</sup> While Eliot and Pound kept the rose in some of its familiar contexts, such contexts held a striking change in the rose's form, its beauty no longer viable. The girl of Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," for example, stands on the desolate urban streets while holding a "paper rose"; in "Little Gidding," the young girl becomes an old man, who instead of holding the flower bears a burnt rose's ashes on his sleeve, the flower's remnants heralding the start of a new age as "Dust in the air suspended / marks the place where a story ended" (II, ll. 2-4).<sup>16</sup> Decades after high modernism, poetry was still not finished with reminding readers of the rose's irrelevance, as in Pound's Canto 74 where "rose in the steel dust" powerfully contrast the idealistic beauty we might hope to see in poetry and the realities of the modern world for which poets must now account.<sup>17</sup> A literary aesthetic that valued "direct treatment of the thing" and "a simplicity and directness of utterance" had no room to account for a collection that relied on symbolism, and on such a single symbol, so blatantly.<sup>18</sup> Not taking a word's potency for granted still concerned later British modernist Basil Bunting as well, who urged literary critics to be wary of the "halo of sentiment" that can form around words when their meanings and uses persist unquestioned over time.<sup>19</sup> Modernists themselves so strongly wanted to disassociate their poetic theories and forms from symbolism that it is little wonder Yeats's *The Rose*, harboring the infamous symbol in its title and charged with upholding its value, has remained largely excluded from discussions of Yeats's later modernist work.

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<sup>15</sup> Gertrude Stein, "Sacred Emily," in *Geography and Plays* (Boston: The Four Seas Company, 1922), 187.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, "Rhapsody on a Windy Night," in *Prufrock*, 1917 and "Little Gidding" in *Four Quartets*, 1944, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1971), 15; 139.

<sup>17</sup> Pound, "Canto LXXIV," in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1971; New York: New Directions, 1993): 469.

<sup>18</sup> See the above-cited *Pavannes and Divinations* as well as Pound's "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," 41.

<sup>19</sup> Bunting, "The Written Record," in *Three Essays*, ed. Richard Caddel (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1994), 8.

In spite of the beatings the rose endured so often at the hands of transatlantic modernists, one American modernist speaks to the rose's continual importance even though no longer serves the function it once did. Although William Carlos Williams's "The Rose is Obsolete" acknowledges that "The rose carried weight of love / but love is at an end—of roses," its petals serve as the start of greater possibilities:

From the petal's edge a line starts  
 that being of steel infinitely fine, infinitely  
 rigid penetrates  
 the Milky Way  
 without contact—lifting  
 from it—neither hanging  
 nor pushing—  
 The fragility of the flower  
 unbruised  
 penetrates space. (ll. 32-42)<sup>20</sup>

Instead of ridiculing and destroying the flower, or any stale literary convention, what might be done is to consider how such a convention could be used to access something more—something otherwise as ineffable as the Milky Way if not for a poet who renders it in a verse that takes nothing for granted. Should poetry demand constant questioning as to how the traditions of the past fit with the concerns of the present, the mythos it conveys might be relevant in the new century. Although Yeats's rose may seem at first to fall into the poetic

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<sup>20</sup> William Carlos Williams, "The Rose (The rose is obsolete)," in *Collected Poems*, vol. 1, 1909-1939, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986), 195-96.

contexts and structures of the past, his use of the symbol has far more in common with what Williams envisioned for the rose's future: a symbol that is neither "hanging" around in the margins long past its relevance, nor "pushing" for significance whether or not it is deserved, but rather conceptualized and articulated in a new way for the new era of poetics.

Yeats, too, was concerned with making poetry believable and achieving the most accurate expression. Although her book is not primarily concerned with pre-World War I Yeats's inclusion in modernism, Helen Vendler's *Our Secret Discipline* has done much to position Yeats as having more common ground in his earlier career with modernism in his constantly re-working of old forms to "convey the full urgency of his experience...with tireless and tenacious originality."<sup>21</sup> Yeats's acute concern with form, extends to the rose, which, for his poetry, could never be rendered a mere cliché. Nor was it part of the "ornate and approximate" type of description that Pound and the transatlantic modernist tradition so feared. His rose was not intended to be the rose of English literature; rather, it was a symbol that could be rigorously capacious without becoming arbitrary—a feat which posed a direct challenge to modernist preconceptions of symbolism's limitations.

Yeats conceptualized and executed the rose symbolism as a cultural and spiritual syncretism aspiring to occupy the metaphysical ideal and the concrete real simultaneously. George Mills Harper's seminal study of Yeats's time in the Golden Dawn suggests that Yeats learned of the rose's use in occult ritual as well its function as a conduit to the transcendent.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Helen Vendler, *Our Secret Discipline: Yeats and Lyric Form* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007), 377.

<sup>22</sup> Just a few years prior to the publication of *The Rose*, Yeats became an official member of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, an exclusive and secretive occult society that derived its practices and teachings from a variety of ancient and occult traditions. Rosicrucianism, derived from the teachings of its alleged fourteenth-century founder Christian Rosenkreuz, heavily influenced the Golden Dawn's teachings and rituals. As George Mills Harper has noted, the Golden Dawn originally began as a branch of the Rosicrucian Order, as founded by William Westcott; for members seeking to advance to a particular degree in the Golden Dawn, Westcott prepared a study manual on the Rosicrucian Order's history. The title of *The Rose*'s first poem, "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time," refers to the central symbol of Rosicrucianism, the cross, or rood, at the

Not just a stand-in for the expression of romance or beauty, though it was still expected to connote both, this rose gained its symbolic significance from its potential to recall the union of opposites—namely, the “female” rose blooming on the cross of Christ’s death.<sup>23</sup> Rachel V. Billigheimer has done much to illuminate and explain the multiple influences that shaped the poet’s understanding of the rose’s symbolic capacity throughout his work, including and beyond the poet’s occult studies. She posits that in Yeats’s poetry, “The rose, which links the subjective feelings of the poet to a divine essence, becomes a symbol of both the concrete in the world of time and idealized immortality.”<sup>24</sup> Drawing on selections from *The Rose* and *The Wind among the Reeds*, Billigheimer identifies the multiple levels of metaphysical, personal, and mythical significance alike that Yeats places on the symbolic rose. His earliest uses of the symbol in *The Rose* employ the symbolic flower as “a spiritual essence in Irish mythology and culture” as well as “an apocalyptic symbol based on the occult idea of the rose as representing divine light descending to the universe” while also symbolizing Maude Gonne and his feelings toward her.<sup>25</sup> Later, when Yeats became more interested in the esoteric and involved with the Symbolist movement, the rose also become employed as “a symbol anticipating the new spiritual era.”<sup>26</sup> Billigheimer also observes that William Blake, oft-cited throughout Yeats’s early criticism, likely informed Yeats’s rose symbolism as well, rendering it “akin to Blake’s ‘inward sun.’”<sup>27</sup> Far from being affiliated with the “traditional stock of symbols” that Daniel Albright has cited to separate the early Yeats from modernism,

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center of which a rose is placed. For further information on the use of Rosicrucianism and the “rosy cross” in the Golden Dawn, see George Mills Harper. *Yeats’s Golden Dawn* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 9-11.

<sup>23</sup> A. Norman Jeffares, *W.B. Yeats: A New Biography* (London: Continuum, 2001), 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> Rachel V. Billigheimer, “The Rose of Ireland in the Early Poems of W. B. Yeats: Eternity is in the Glitter on the Beetle’s Wing,” *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 91.363 (August 2002), 276-283.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-78.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

the rose was as complex and multi-faceted as the occult teachings from which it emerged.<sup>28</sup> While his modernist peers rendered the rose's past as a one-dimensional hindrance to achieving a fresh poetics for the present day, Yeats saw it as a means of granting modernity access to the metaphysical by recalling spiritual schemas that demanded language enter the cosmos while speaking on behalf of the personal and ordinary.

Billigheimer's analysis of the different levels of personal, spiritual, and national significance Yeats extracted from the symbolic rose helps to clarify Yeats's understanding of symbolism in general. Yeats saw no conflict between the immense capacity of significance expected from the rose and the precision needed to maintain control of poetic language. Indeed, he did not at all view symbolism as the direct yet arbitrary correlation with an object or idea that modernists decried. The symbolism for which he advocated in his critical essays, in fact, was a type of symbolism that Pound himself praised and admired, yet did not see as possible for English poetry. Rather, it existed only in the occult literature that Pound and Yeats studied together during the winter of 1913-14, and it was this type of symbolism that, James Longenbach has pointed out, would later influence Pound's adoption of the direct treatment in Imagism.<sup>29</sup> Pound was careful to separate an occult symbol that, as "appearing in a vision," would have "a certain richness and power of energizing" from the familiar "literary" symbols rehearsed in the English literary tradition and posited that "if the supposed meaning of a symbol is familiar it has no more force, or interest of power of suggestion than any other word, or than a synonym in some other language."<sup>30</sup> For an

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<sup>28</sup> Daniel Albright, "Yeats and Modernism," in *CCY*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 78.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, 78.

English poet writing from a tradition in which the “supposed meanings of symbols” were taken for granted, a literature that relied on symbolism would lack the “richness & power of energizing” that could come from the symbols appearing in vision. Yeats, however, never separated the symbolism appearing in visions during meditation from the symbolism he admired in poetry and the other arts. Decades after the publication of *The Rose*, he remained firm in his stance on the symbol’s potential, which was not simply what “a very modern Dictionary” would term ‘the sign or representation of any moral thing by the images or properties of natural things,’ ” but rather synonymous with what his role model William Blake termed “‘Vision or Imagination’ ” as “ ‘a representation of what actually exists, really or unchangeably.’ ”<sup>31</sup> Although he separated “symbols that evoke emotion alone” from the more sophisticated and complex “intellectual symbols which evoke “ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions,” he observed how such intellectual symbols could evoke divine and celestial worlds when coming upon them during meditation on the natural world as well as in poetry.<sup>32</sup> While many high modernists regarded symbolism as a device on which too much unwarranted expectation had been heaped, Yeats thought the real problem of symbolism in modernity lied with expecting too little.

Because Yeats’s definition of the symbol was very different from how it had come to be understood by English modernism, and its manifestation was not in the clichéd use of the rose in English poetry that modernists decried, a crucial understanding of his symbolism is lost if restricted to the clichéd use of familiar symbolism that Pound and others dismissed. For him, what Pound was referring to as “literwary” symbolism, holding longstanding yet

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<sup>31</sup> Yeats, “Symbolism in Painting,” in *Ideas of Good and Evil, Collected Works*, vol. 4, *Early Essays*, ed. George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2007), 108 (hereafter cited in text as *CWEE*).

<sup>32</sup> Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” in *CWEE*, 115; 119.

arbitrary correlations between a symbol and its significance, was actually not symbolism at all, but allegory, which, as the symbol of the rose had come to be in English literature, is “loved less for the meaning than for its own sake.”<sup>33</sup> The Romantics, especially Coleridge’s discussion of symbol and allegory in *The Statesman’s Manual*, inform Yeats’s own distinction between these two terms. Coleridge defines a symbol as the “translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial, or of the Universal in the General.”<sup>34</sup> Allegory, in contrast, is “but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses.”<sup>35</sup> Yeats’s use of the rose to symbolize Maude Gonne and Helen of Troy, the Rosicrucian occult mysteries and specific figures of Celtic mythology, at simultaneously and uncompromisingly, resonates with Coleridge’s definitions of the symbol as having the capabilities to evoke the particulars from the general and vice versa. What distinguishes Yeats’s concept of symbolism and its manifestation in his poetry, is a merging of this mutually beneficial exchange between the personal and universal with a syncretism that invites multiple generalities alongside and in dialogue with the particular. In so doing, Yeats introduces the challenge of maintaining a paradoxical yet crucial multiplicity of possibilities for meaning and apprehension, all the while not sacrificing precision and immediacy in his verse. This appropriation of varied strands of past mythologies and occult mysteries in a symbol that renders them immediate to his contemporary verse makes Yeats’s early work not only suitable for but critical to an

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<sup>33</sup> See Yeats “Symbolism in Painting,” in *CWEE*, 108. On the same page, he also attributes England’s dislike of symbolism to mistaking it for allegory: “In England, which has made great Symbolic Art, most people dislike an art if they are told it is symbolic, for they confuse symbol and allegory.”

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Statesman’s Manual, or The Bible, the Best Guide to Political Skills and Foresight: A Lay Sermon, Addressed to the Higher Classes of Society* (London, 1816), 36. Google Books, accessed January 18, 2014, <https://books.google.com/books/reader?id=40ISAAAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.



understanding of British modernism's relationship toward the metaphysical frameworks of the past.

### **Yeats, Modernism, and Mythos in *The Rose***

Yeats's work with the rose and his insistence on the ability of symbolism to manifest the transcendent in poetry have much more in common with the precision modernists wanted poetry to actualize than with the clichéd abstractions they wanted it to avoid. Pound's and Yeats's different definitions and categorizations for symbolism directly resulted from these poets' common goal, that poetry would make readers fully aware of the significance and relevance of their culture's mythos in the current times: the ancient stories, creatures, and events that, although fictional, remain a foundational part of the culture from which they emerged. Though mythos has long been synonymous with "mythology" and with therefore ancient fictional tales, the word "mythos," as Bruce Lincoln points out, was once used in the ancient Greek tales to signify a character's words as having the authority of truth and of strength, verified by the gods themselves.<sup>36</sup> Though the fictional stories of mythology had long been seen as inferior to the scientific rationale of what the Greeks termed *logos*, some modernists re-contextualized ancient mythologies for modernity in order to bring an understanding of language as having the potential for accessing *mythos*, or truth.<sup>37</sup> The myth of the Fisher King in Eliot's *Waste Land* was juxtaposed with quintessentially modern scenes. In recalling Odysseus's journey in Pound's *Cantos*, one could seek redemption from the capitalist greed that had overtaken the modern era. In his early collections and especially

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<sup>36</sup> For a history of the truth of *mytheomai* (mythos) that the ancient Greeks associated with such heroes as Odysseus and juxtaposed against the falsehood and deception of *legein* (logos), see Chapter One of Bruce Lincoln's *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3-18.

<sup>37</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 18-19.

*The Rose*, Yeats sought to keep Celtic mythos alive in the pulse of modern life, not only in Sligo where the Irish language was still spoken. For all three writers, the use of ancient mythology and the mythos it engendered were crucial components of speaking to the concerns of contemporary culture.

While the importance of mythology to modernist writing is not news, it has been primarily understood as a means as a means of offering hope for renewal amidst destruction.<sup>38</sup> This assessment is accurate in terms of theme; however, what was needed for Anglophone poetry to convey this theme was not any sort of renewal at all. English readers did not need any “renewal” of the presence of mythos in their literature. In fact, it was precisely the several decades’ worth of appreciation for mythos as rendered in the British canon—an appreciation that took comprehension for granted—that eventually made symbolism and other traditional means of conveying mythos appear weak. To get British readers to value mythos demanded not a renewal, but a rupture of the order that was already in place for reading, writing, and scholarship at the end of the nineteenth century. By introducing new types of poetics, and thereby forcing readers to adapt to unfamiliar reading practices, British modernists invoked mythos in ways that did not entail a renewal but rather a complete departure from the methods used previously for engaging with and understanding a text. Just as the symbol of the rose had been so overused as to become ineffective in modernity, so, too, had the dissemination of mythos as it appeared in the classical literature that had long been a part of Western education prior to the twentieth century. The logos of

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<sup>38</sup> See Edward Larrissy, “Myth, Legend, and Romance in Yeats, Pound, and Eliot,” in *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Corine Saunders (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 438. The idea that “The use of myth, legend, and romance is intimately bound up with ideas of renewal” is provided as a given in the first sentence of Larrissy’s article, and while I do not disagree with this assessment, I also feel it is important to distinguish the theme of renewal with the poetic theories that informed the conveyance of this renewal in poetry.

scientific thought had not just set itself apart as superior to mythos, it had also crept into the preservation of mythos itself, dictating the terms under which works of British literary and cultural history were to be understood and valued. Pound frequently complained of the undiscerning way in which information was accumulated without any reflection on its significance, lamenting that “There are many fine things discovered, edited, and buried. . . . dumped in a museum and certain learned men rejoice in their treasure.”<sup>39</sup> Eliot, too, spoke of the tremendous weight that the ancient Greek and Roman classics had placed on British literary culture, remarking that people either loved or hated them, often without really knowing what they were talking about.<sup>40</sup> He regretted the “wild goose chase” that scholars had undertaken for the mythos in *The Waste Land*.<sup>41</sup> As the endless accumulation of information that was expected of nineteenth-century philosophy students did nothing to separate “mere learning” from anything that could engender the imagination or any sense of mystery, Pound decided that there “must be some other way. . . . to make use of that vast cultural heritage.”<sup>42</sup> To make use of this heritage was to make sure that it did not remain buried, but that it was presented in a poetry that would make readers unable to rely on traditional reading habits to access it. Presenting familiar mythologies in unfamiliar contexts and in forms that did not follow a linear narrative ensured that readers could not simply assume they knew what they had found before picking up the next book and accumulating the next piece of knowledge. Now, they would have to consider what sorts of meaning might

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<sup>39</sup> Ezra Pound, “I gather the Limbs of Osiris,” in *PSP*, 23.

<sup>40</sup> In his 1944 “What is a Classic?,” Eliot argues that in the way a classic is defined in popular culture, “to call any work of art ‘classical,’ implies either the highest praise or the most contemptuous abuse, according to the party to which one belongs. It implies certain particular merits or faults: either the perfection of form, or the absolute zero of frigidity” (*ESP*, 115-116).

<sup>41</sup> Eliot, “Frontiers of Criticism,” *The Sewanee Review* 64.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1956), 534

<sup>42</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 55.

be revealed when the traditional ways of conveying meaning in a literary text had disappeared. While British writers had long since “discovered, edited, and buried” Homer’s works, they could no longer take Homeric mythology for granted once Pound placed Odysseus in a monumental work of poetry that included aphorisms from Confucius and details from the political intrigues of Sigismundo Malatesta. If mythos was now to be valued for holding an active and relevant truth for the modern age, modernism would have to develop a literary aesthetic that led readers to see it as such. Dismantling such literary conventions as the symbolic rose would ensure that readers, if they did not discern the mythos in the poetry right away, would begin to discover it through the challenging reading process that the new poetry demanded. In order to re-contextualize myth and thereby vitalize mythos, modernists first had to de-familiarize it.

Yeats, like Pound and Eliot, valued what mythos could mean for modern culture. Throughout his career, he insisted on a strong correlation between the poet’s ability to evoke the mythos that mythology was once thought to hold in ancient times, and the reader’s ability to believe in and actually experience the metaphysical worlds that mythology established. To Yeats, poets that engaged mythos could actually manifest the divine worlds that the poetry creates. He made this claim early on in “The Symbolism of Poetry” and later in “If I Were Four and Twenty” not only affirmed it but directly attributed the “strength and weight of older writers” to their sincere belief in the existence of evil and punishment.<sup>43</sup> Though such a statement advocating the role of the poet’s personal belief might seem anathema to the

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<sup>43</sup> In “The Symbolism of Poetry,” Yeats uses the example of gazing at a symbol found in nature, the moon, to describe what should happen if someone were to recognize the symbolic significance held by the moon in ancient times: “if I look at the moon herself and remember any of her ancient meanings, I move among divine people, and things that have shaken off our mortality” (*CWEE*, 119). See also Yeats, “If I Were Four-and - Twenty,” in *CWLE*, 42-43.

modernist project, an insistence on the value of mythologies from a variety of traditions remained a prominent feature throughout British and transatlantic modernism. So, too, did the disdain for the logos of scientific and economic thought that in Yeats's circles had taken over writing and scholarship.<sup>44</sup> His statement that "certainly a cultivated man is not one who can read difficult books...but a man who brings to general converse and business, character that informs varied intellect" could be easily inserted alongside Pound's refusal to read the British Library collection in its entirety.<sup>45</sup> Concurring with Pound that "the best of knowledge is 'in the air,' or, if it's not the best, at least the leaven," Yeats criticized the "scientific folklorist" who would attempt to get the most "accurate" accounts of legends.<sup>46</sup> Although his situating of Celtic folklore resonates with Matthew Arnold's definition of the Celtic as "always ready to react against the despotism of fact'," Yeats situated Celtic mythology as less of a reaction than a proactive move for modernity its own right.<sup>47</sup> He wanted literature to be appreciated not for its level of difficulty or for its accretion of 'fact,' but for its ability to move contemporary readers to experiences of mythos beyond the inane "facts" that could be perceived through logos.

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, his description of logic as "a machine", which if it goes "unhelped...will force those present to exhaust the subject" in *Estrangement: Being Some Fifty Thoughts From a Diary Kept by William Butler Yeats in the Year Nineteen Hundred and Nine* (Dublin: The Cuala Press, 1926), II. In the same year, he also addressed the consequences of an overuse of logic in "If I were Four-and-Twenty" with "Logic is loose again...and because it must always draw its deductions from what every dolt can understand, the wild beast cannot but destroy mysterious life" (*CWLE*, 44).

<sup>45</sup> Yeats, "If I Were Four-and-Twenty," in *CWLE*, 35.

<sup>46</sup> Yeats, "To the Editor of The Academy," 2 October 1890, in *Collected Letters, Volume I: 1865-1895*, ed. John Kelly and Eric Domville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 229; Pound, "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," in *PSP*, 23. Yeats, too, cited Blake's "A Vision of the Last Judgment" in "The Symbolism of Poetry" when describing the effect that viewing the moon could have if one knew the symbolic significance the moon had in ancient times (*CWEE*, 119). Later on, I will discuss this excerpt further and its relation to other poetic devices as well.

<sup>47</sup> Matthew Arnold, *The Study of Celtic Literature* (London, 1867), 85, Project Gutenberg, accessed February 1, 2012, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5159>.

For readers to access a re-vitalization of mythos that stemmed from the Celtic mythology, however, they did not need the de-familiarization required for the re-conceptualization of British tradition, but rather a reminder that Celtic mythos could still be rendered familiar in the English tongue. The Celtic mythology of *The Rose* was not something that had been “discovered, edited, and buried;” it had not even really existed as active and vital in the English language. Jan Plug has rightly attributed the anxiety to record Irish folklore to a desire for the country’s history to exist, but it is even more important to note the pressing need for this history to exist in the English language.<sup>48</sup> At the same time that English increasingly eclipsed the Irish language at the turn of the century, Yeats saw the preservation of Irish poetry in English as not only a way to preserve the Irish culture and literary tradition, but as a vital means of political expression for the country’s sovereignty.<sup>49</sup> Such literary conventions as the heroic couplet and the symbol were not familiarities that needed to be broken, as they were for the British modernists, but essentialities that needed to be preserved for a mythology with roots in the oral as opposed to the written tradition.<sup>50</sup> While British modernists needed a new way of presenting the mythologies from the stories that had been written into English for centuries, Yeats first needed to prove that the

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<sup>48</sup> Jan Plug, “The Specular Nation: Yeats’s Myth of the Irish,” in *The Centennial Review* 43.1 (1999), 136.

<sup>49</sup> See Yeats, “To the Editor of United Ireland,” 17 December 1892, in *Collected Letters, Volume I: 1865-1895*, ed. John Kelly and Eric Domville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 338. In response to the United Ireland editor’s review of Douglas Hyde’s lecture “The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland,” Yeats offers an alternative for preserving Irish identity as the Irish language dies out, wondering: “Can we not keep the continuity of the nation’s life...by translating or retelling in English, which shall have an indefinable Irish quality of rhythm and style, all that is best of the ancient literature?” (338).

<sup>50</sup> According to Yeats, what was currently passing for “popular poetry” in Ireland was not the poetry of the common people at all, but the poetry of the English middle class that had its roots in the written tradition rather than in the oral tradition from which Celtic mythos had originated. Reflecting on younger Irish poets who were seeking a style, he posited that “journalism sometimes urges them to desire the direct logic, the clear rhetoric of ‘popular poetry.’ It sees that Ireland has no cultivated minority, and it does not see, though it would cast out all things, that this literary ideal belongs more to England than to other countries” in Yeats, “What is Popular Poetry”, in *CWEE*, 9-11.

mythology of Celtic legend could exist solidly and actively in the English language. Just as he admired Blake for being “a symbolist who had to invent his own symbols” for England so, too, he had to make his own symbols for Celtic literature.<sup>51</sup>

Establishing a symbolism that could serve consistently for re-contextualizing this mythology was not a way of shrouding things in obscurity, but provided exactly the sort of direct access to experience that British modernism sought by de-familiarizing the conventional. Recent scholarship has foregrounded how Yeats’s symbolism revitalized Irish literary heritage in a way that also breathed new life into British literary culture. Patrick Query has pointed out the influence of Yeats’s “personal imagination” on otherwise conventional and ineffectual symbols for the purposes of preserving a national culture; this re-purposing of convention for current relevancy both resonates with and contributes significantly toward modernist approaches to the past.<sup>52</sup> Vincent Sherry has characterized Yeats’s conceptualization of the symbolic in his poetry and prose as a means of addressing the fin de siècle period’s “experience of exhaustion” with British culture while Britain’s status as a major imperialist power drew to a close, which then “turn[ed] the literary sensibility toward the Celtic fringe as the wellspring of a new energy.”<sup>53</sup> Yeats rendered the familiarity and recognition that modernism deemed conventional as crucial for allowing Irish identity to become re-vitalized in the modern age.

Although the rose is first called upon to revive Celtic literature, Yeats uses it throughout for recalling the mythologies of ancient Greek and Christian tradition as well. The

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<sup>51</sup> Yeats, “William Blake and the Imagination,” in *CWEE*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> Patrick R. Query, “‘The Shoulders of Priests’: Yeats and the Irish Limits of Symbolism,” *Yeats-Eliot Review* 20.2 (2003), 27.

<sup>53</sup> Vincent Sherry, *Modernism and the Reinvention of Decadence* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 82.

rose could not only be relied upon for signifying the characters and contexts of the mythos directly and immediately, but, because it was not the substitute for a more apt expression of love or beauty that it had become for British literature, could also preserve the sense of mystery and ambiguity essential for any compelling piece of literature. Angus Fletcher has observed that the use of some sort of secrecy is an essential part of literature's strength and appeal. A secret provides an essential device for a text to convey its meaning as well as allow for interpretive possibilities; Fletcher explains, "It appears that some form of secrecy, even reaching the ineffable, will give to literature the power to raise the question: what does this mean, what does it really mean?"<sup>54</sup> Throughout *The Rose*, Yeats not only remains obscure about exactly what the symbol is supposed to mean, he also makes it difficult to see exactly how, or if, it accomplishes this significance across myth from varying traditions and contents. Unable to take the role of the symbol for granted, an unrelenting alertness to the poetics must be maintained.

In this deliberate withholding of what the rose "means," Yeats's conceptualization of symbolism shares ties with that of the French Symbolists of the late nineteenth-century—the movement that claimed him as a major source of inspiration. While Yeats and modernism as a whole became increasingly distanced from the Symbolists, Arthur Symons's dedication of *The Symbolist Movement* to the modernist poet was not entirely unwarranted. Stéphane Mallarmé took care not to conflate symbolism's potential for evocative suggestion with an inevitable tendency toward obscurity. Prioritizing the "ideal" of symbolism as "to *suggest* the object," Mallarmé posits that "To *name* an object is largely to destroy poetic enjoyment,

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<sup>54</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 98.



which comes from gradual divination.”<sup>55</sup> He acknowledges that the risk of obscurity from such evocation is “a dangerous thing”; however, he also asserts that “if you avoid the work [the suggestion of symbolism] involves, you are cheating.”<sup>56</sup> From *The Rose* to *The Tower*, Yeats remained well aware of the responsibilities that evocation entailed, perhaps even more so because of the capaciousness and simultaneity he demanded of the rose. Moreover, he also does not shy away from naming, but delineates explicitly the gods, goddesses, and the immortal worlds they are meant to evoke. Writing for a literary tradition that stood in danger of fading from the English language if its characters and adventures were not named, Yeats must reconcile the need to name with the need to maintain a level of mystery that promotes interest and engagement.

Yeats did not wait until his future collections to address the risks that come with insisting on both suggestion and capacity as the symbolic rose’s strengths. By actively engaging a symbol of which so much is asked, Yeats negotiates the balance between the demand for poetics to be familiar and reliable enough to be accessible, yet mysterious and ambiguous enough to be engaging. Both *The Rose* and *The Tower* show that such demanding work involves not merely the prioritizing of national identity over poetic craft, but a real concern for the ways that these competing and equally important priorities must inform each other in the poet’s search for how belief is established, experienced, and re-invented in ways that are necessary across cultural and historical moments.

When a poet attempts to re-situate mythology for contemporary readers, belief depends on the power of the poet’s speech to manifest the realms and experiences belonging

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<sup>55</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, “The Evolution of Literature,” in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 21.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

to a certain tradition. That this speech's *ethos* is rooted in its being spoken, rather than written, remained as important for Yeats and the Celtic tradition as it had been for Homer and the Greek tradition. Just as Homeric mythology rendered male protagonists' words as truth bestowed directly from the gods, the poet situated the invocation to the muse as a direct request to these immortal beings for credibility and accuracy in their verse.<sup>57</sup> Yeats offered Celtic myth as relevant material for the younger generation of Irish writers composing in English. He urged these writers to derive their inspiration from the poetry in Celtic that had its roots in "unwritten tradition"—in other words, from the verses of an ancient people who directly believed in the mythologies they narrated—rather than from the poetry that "presuppos[ed] the written tradition."<sup>58</sup> Yeats's sense that orality possessed more immediacy and authenticity invokes the Platonic relegation of writing as the "bastard" of knowledge and unable to adapt if called into question.<sup>59</sup> James Pethica points out that, for Yeats, oral culture "offered a milieu seemingly immune to the linguistic and political dislocations visible in the published literary record," which colored written folklore in different degrees of Irish and English national interests.<sup>60</sup> Thereby, oral culture might become a means of achieving a coherency and authenticity that written culture could not afford.

What had been passing for "popular poetry," the poetry of the people, was the style adopted by the middle class (mostly British and Anglo-Irish) writers who were only familiar with the characters and plots of Celtic and other ancient mythos from renderings in the overly

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<sup>57</sup> Lincoln cites examples of such figures as Cronus who not only commit themselves in words to death-defying feats, but do what they claim they will. Unlike the decorative but false logos, the speech of mythos is "raw and crude, but true." (12).

<sup>58</sup> Yeats, "What is 'Popular Poetry'?", in *CWLE*, 5.

<sup>59</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Digireads, 2009), Google Books, accessed February 18, 2015, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=iCIodKfVoAgC&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GB.S.PP1>.

<sup>60</sup> James Pethica, "Yeats, Folklore, and Irish Legend," in *CCY*, 131.

ornate affectations of poetry in English.<sup>61</sup> By going back to the “beliefs of the people like Allingham,” Yeats thought, Irish writers would not only “find it easier to get a style” distinct from the English, but would also establish more direct proximity to these beliefs themselves in the poetry, as it would “glimmer with thoughts and images” of those ancient cultures who held such beliefs.<sup>62</sup> If an Irish poet at the dawn of the twentieth century could not have the direct authority of the gods behind his words as the ancients were thought to have held, he should at least write of his poetry in a way that embraced or reminded his or her readers of the real power of mythos that the ancients thought such mythos could hold.

The idea that the spoken word has the power to intimate mythos is present in the first appearance of the symbol in *The Rose*'s first poem. The rose is not only addressed directly but is requested explicitly for the poet to be able to “sing,” not write, the ancient ways. Although a lyric, Yeats's “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time” begins with an invocation akin to those found in the much longer ancient epics. For the speaker, the rose acts as a sort of muse:

Red rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days  
 Come near me while I sing the ancient ways:  
 Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide;  
 The Druid, grey, wood-natured, quiet-eyed,  
 Who cast round Fergus dreams, and ruin untold  
 And thine own sadness, whereof stars, grown old  
 In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea,

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<sup>61</sup> Yeats, “What is Popular Poetry,” in *CWEE*, 7.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Sing in their high and lonely melody (ll. 1-8)<sup>63</sup>

This rose, however, has a far less defined relationship to the poem's content than do the muses of another prominent epic with which Yeats was very familiar, that of *The Odyssey*. In the 1879 prose translation that Yeats had read extensively, Homer's speaker knows exactly what the muse is needed to do, as he commands, "Tell me, Muse, of that man, so ready at need."<sup>64</sup> Allen Mandelbaum's translation, while much more recent, uses "tell" to convey a similar precise and direct relationship between the muse and the mythos, with "Muse, tell me of the man of many wiles."<sup>65</sup> Yeats's speaker's command is a striking departure from Homeric mythology; the command for the rose to "come near" carries none of the precision or direct action of "tell." Moreover, in spite of its foregrounding in the title and first lines, the rose's influence invoking Celtic mythos remains unclear. Though the colon implies that the speaker is merely composing a list of what the rose should be near for, such detailed descriptions of Cuchulain and the Druid imply that he perhaps knows what should be told already, with or without the rose. Although he does not describe the rose's "own sadness," he claims that another source, "the stars grown old / In dancing silver-sandalled on the sea," will "Sing in their high and lonely melody" of this sadness which is the rose's "own" yet is not even told of by the rose itself. While his poetics need a familiarity that can be relied upon and a symbol that will hold a vital role in these images, Yeats must also refrain from proffering any precise formula for how exactly the rose will be involved. What happens with Yeats's

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<sup>63</sup> Yeats, "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time," in *The Rose*, 1893, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 31 (hereafter cited in text as *CP*).

<sup>64</sup> S.H. Butcher and A. Lang, *The Odyssey, Done into English Prose* (London, 1879), 1. Google Books, accessed September 6, 2012, <https://play.google.com/store/books/details?id=3oMC AAAAQA AJ>. As James Longenbach notes in *The Stone Cottage* (Oxford University Press, 1988, 245), Yeats quotes Lang and Butcher's translation in his work for Lady Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*.

<sup>65</sup> Allen Mandelbaum, *The Odyssey of Homer* (New York: Bantam, 1990), 3.

rose, an English word that takes on a much more capacious and significant role when engaged by an Irish poet, has been described by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Robert Brinkley as what occurs when a writer of a minor literature must use a major language. Though writing in the major language, the author adopts a “deterritorialized tongue suitable for strange, minor uses.”<sup>66</sup> Striking a balance between a Mallarméan evocation that welcomes intrigue, and an accessible familiarity that re-vitalizes national culture, Yeats employs the symbol in a way that does not take its significance for granted.

Such lack of precision might, in fact, serve in getting him closer to the apprehension he wants the “ancient ways” to bring about. As the first stanza continues, the speaker not only refrains from using any more precise command than “come near,” but also pulls back from describing the precise imagery from the mythos he wants the rose to help foster:

Come near, that no more blinded by man’s fate,  
 I find under the boughs of love and hate,  
 In all poor foolish things that live a day.  
 Eternal beauty wandering on her way. (ll. 9-12)

Although no character’s names are mentioned and no specific references are given to name this “eternal beauty” as a part of Celtic mythos specifically and exclusively, the speaker nevertheless affirms that the rose’s proximity will allow access to this “eternal beauty.” It is important to the speaker, as it was to Yeats’s own aesthetic, that this “eternal beauty” be found in the ordinary and mortal world, for, as he later claimed in *The Symbolism of Poetry*, “unless we believe that outer things are the reality, we must believe that the gross is but the

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<sup>66</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Robert Brinkley, “What Is a Minor Literature?” *Mississippi Review* 11.3 (Winter/Spring 1983), 16.

shadow of the subtle.”<sup>67</sup> Just as Yeats assumes the existence of belief in a reality beyond the “outer things,” the speaker’s belief is also assumed, asking only that he may “find” the “eternal beauty” that he already seeks. The end-stopped lines and concluded prepositional phrases like “find under” and “in all” affirm this sense of surety, as each line ends with a resolved phrase that builds another component of where and what he will find. Although the rose is only “near,” the symbol’s presence will result in the speaker’s ability to find the beauty he believes exists “In all poor foolish things that live a day.”

Yet as much as these lines affirm a precision in the speaker’s goal, they also retain a sense of vagueness, and it is this vagueness that is essential for allowing both speaker and reader to learn what purpose the mythos of these “ancient ways” is to serve. Not only are we challenged to picture such abstractions of “love” and “hate” as having “boughs,” but to know what sort of shape “eternal beauty” might take while having no palpable metaphor at all. Moreover, because this beauty is “eternal” but also “wandering on her way,” readers cannot know for how long this beauty will last, if something “wandering” can indeed be eternal at all. While this juxtaposition of profound eternity with fleeting transience resonates with “The awful shadow of some unseen Power” that “visits with inconstant glance / Each human heart and countenance” in Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” Yeats compounds this disjointedness by rooting it in a hint of familiarity and accessibility.<sup>68</sup> That one can know the stories from Irish myth and even be inspired by these heroes’ daring feats, yet be nevertheless unable to make this beauty endure, makes its “wandering” all the more pointed.

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<sup>67</sup> Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” in *CWEE*, 117.

<sup>68</sup> Percy Shelley, “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” 1816, in *Complete Poems* (New York: Random House, 1994), Kindle edition.

This tease of familiarity and accessibility manifests in the way that Yeats uses Roman myth as well. Those familiar with the “golden bough” of Aeneas’s tale, might be confused with possible allusion to Roman mythos in a poem that began as a very explicit tribute to Celtic mythos. Yet the extension of *The Aeneid*’s golden bough and other forms of ancient ritualistic practice can provide some clue as to how such a reference might actually be an appropriate expression of the speaker’s purpose in singing of Cuchulain and Fergus. James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, the seminal compendium that foregrounded and re-conceptualized ancient magic and mythos for modernist literature and was first published in 1890, states that the tree from which Aeneas plucked the bough to give to Proserpine was thought to grow in a sanctuary at Nemi where an ancient cult used it to worship Diana. Though it was forbidden that anyone should take its boughs, a runaway slave could attempt to take one and should he succeed, was given the opportunity to slay the cult’s reigning priest and take his place.<sup>69</sup> In this context, the “boughs of love and hate” under which the speaker is to find “eternal beauty” helps to articulate how Yeats conceptualizes the potential of mythos if brought back in his poetry. While Yeats was influenced to some degree by the Romantic and Victorian renderings of ancient mythologies, those of William Blake and William Morris in particular, he also yearned for a means by which Celtic myths could be rendered just as present in the English language as other ancient mythos had come to be.<sup>70</sup> By giving just the

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<sup>69</sup> Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study of Magic and Religion*, 1890, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1922), 3.

<sup>70</sup> Regarding Yeats’s earlier works, Eliot remarks, “There was much also for Yeats to work out himself, even in technique. To be a younger member of a group of poets, none of them certainly of anything like his stature, but further developed in their limited path, may arrest for a time a man’s development of idiom. Then again, the weight of the Pre-Raphaelite prestige must have been tremendous.” He goes on to suggest that Yeats’s early work is derivative of Morris: “The Yeats of the Celtic twilight—who seems to me to have been more the Yeats of the pre-Raphaelite twilight—uses Celtic folklore almost as much as William Morris uses Scandinavian folklore. His longer narrative poems bear the mark of Morris” (“Yeats,” in *ESP*, 252).

slightest allusion to the epic content that had long been part of England's classic literature, and inserting it into the lyric form so crucial for the Celtic mythos with the oral roots he wanted his poetics to preserve, Yeats is, in a sense, "taking" the bough—in other words, claiming the same authority for Celtic mythos in the English language that the Roman, Greek, Arthurian, Christian, and other traditions of mythos written into the English literary canon had established for centuries. Rather than establishing legitimacy by appropriating the mythologies deemed important to the English poetic tradition, Yeats asserts the Celtic mythology as having just as much importance to English poetry as the Greco-Roman mythologies preceding it. The rose, long regarded as the ultimate symbol of opposites from occult practices, is indeed a most fitting symbol to be engaged in this work of uniting the authority and accessibility that the English language held for the younger generation of Irish poets with the firm cultural heritage and national identity that could be revived through Celtic mythos. In asking the rose to "come near" that he may find "eternal beauty" "under the boughs of love and hate," the speaker asks for just that: a way to find the inherent beauty of mythos by appreciating what is useful about the English language while not growing so complacent and accepting of English nationalism as to lose what is potent about his Irish heritage.

However, because the "eternal beauty" of this myth is described as "wandering on her way," a need to remain alert to the direction and movement of such beauty remains critical. "Wandering" in the present progressive tense defines this beauty's direction as both unpredictable and ever-changing. The reader, therefore, must be aware at all times of this beauty's ability to move toward—and away—in unexpected directions from the rose that is charged with symbolizing the mythos. While Yeats's rose is indeed called upon to help the



speaker find beauty as it had long been assumed to do in British literature, its presence is requested for a beauty that is far more evasive and unstable, keeping its significance from persisting unchallenged. Such evasiveness, however, is not necessarily a welcome attribute in a symbol that is supposed to be relied upon consistently. If this eternal beauty is always “wandering on her way,” to follow her too closely might mean to lose access to those “poor foolish things that live a day” as much as it could yield possibilities for the ethereal realms of mythos:

Come near, come near, come near—Ah, leave me still  
 A little space for the rose-breath to fill  
 Lest I no more hear common things that crave;  
 The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,  
 The field-mouse running by me in the grass,  
 And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass. (ll. 13-18)

While the speaker wants the rose’s presence, he is also wary of what might happen should such a potent but abstract symbol come too close. Hazard Adams has noted that telling the rose to “leave...a little space” could express the fear that such total absorption with the symbolic would render his poetry inaccessible.<sup>71</sup> The rose’s presence might, in fact, shift the speaker’s “ancient ways” in directions that cannot be foreseen, avoided, or even desirable. There is now the fear that once the rose comes near, the “eternal beauty wandering on her way” will eclipse the more ordinary and material aspects of daily life, as the speaker lists potential losses that might result. Similarly to the list of things that the rose’s proximity would help him find, each line describing what the rose’s presence might cause him to lose is

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<sup>71</sup> Hazard Adams, *The Book of Yeats’s Poems* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1990), 48.

end-stopped, making his affirmation conclusive and certain and at conclusion of each line. Indeed, the abstraction of symbolism might not leave room for the material realities of human beings who inhabit a world in which the “weak worm” does not have the strength to signify anything greater than itself and its own properties. This, too, is the world that literary modernism would come to prefer in the decades to come, as Pound’s admonition to “go in fear of abstractions” urged aspiring poets not to use a symbol to replace direct expression of the idea or experience.<sup>72</sup> Yeats suggested this potential for over-immersion in abstraction in recounting his own experiences of writing verses that put him “in a trance,” as well as in his listening to the peasants of Sligo for their versions of Irish lore.<sup>73</sup> Should the rose be relied on too heavily, the very people whose heritage this symbol is charged with preserving may not even be heard, their tales reduced to the sort of writing that the middle-class was mistaking for “popular poetry” but which did not have its roots in the actual oral tradition of the common people at all.

Yet even while the speaker directly addresses the consequences of leaning on a rose whose physical properties might have little to do with the mythos it signifies, he remains unwilling to relinquish it entirely. The enjambment between “Ah leave me still” and “A little space for the rose-breath to fill” makes it unclear whether he is asking the rose to leave him entirely, or to leave him just “a little space.” Moreover, even if we assume that the first line is intended to inform the next, it remains unclear as to what, if anything, he wants of the rose to remain. He could be asking for the rose to leave him “still” as leave him alone in peace, or

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<sup>72</sup> Pound, “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” *Poetry Magazine* (March 1913), Poetry Foundation, accessed 5 September 2012, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/toc/6>.

<sup>73</sup> In “The Symbolism of Poetry,” for example, Yeats provides an anecdote of a time when the process of writing verse actually put him in a trance and he was woken up only when his pen fell and he had to stoop to pick it up. From this experience, he believed that “in the making and understanding of a work of art, and the more easily if it is full of patterns and symbols and music, we are lured to the threshold of sleep” (*CWEE*, 118).

for the rose to “still” leave a little space for its breath to remain even after the rose itself is gone. Although the speaker fears losing access, he is perhaps even more afraid of the extreme abstraction that should manifest if the rose and any trace of it should disappear entirely. Although Arnold somewhat shared with Yeats the concept of Celtic literature as a much-needed alternative to the nineteenth century’s privileging of realism, his essay also undermined the legitimation of Irish literary heritage by perpetuating long-held colonial stereotypes of the Celts as too undisciplined to generate a strong literary culture apart from the guidance of their English rulers. Pethica foregrounds how “Arnold characterizes Celts as ‘sentimental,’ ‘sensuous,’ and ‘quick to feel impressions,’ but lacking the steadiness, patience, or sanity’ to succeed either in practical affairs or in shaping great art.”<sup>74</sup> While Pound and other modernists can afford to destroy any sense of familiarity that comes with reliance on symbolism, it is very important for an Irish poet writing in English to have a symbol that can recall the many different facets of its mythos unfailingly. If there is a risk to placing such heavy weight on a single symbol, it is a risk that must prove worth the taking.

In the hands of a skilled lyricist, the risk of losing direct expression to abstraction remains a prominent aesthetic concern. Although poetry can mitigate the possibility of abstraction while still retaining the symbol’s presence—and the poet can express and even augment the presence of the concrete and ordinary world—there nevertheless remains a risk to losing “common things” in the rose’s proximity toward the metaphysical. With “heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass,” Yeats conveys fear for the physical and mortal world’s loss while simultaneously rendering it a palpable poetic presence. The slow speed of the mostly monosyllabic line affects a sense of fatigue while the aspirate sounds of “heavy” and “hopes”

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<sup>74</sup> Pethica, in *CC Yeats*, 134.

mimic the sound of breath. Moreover, the iambic pentameter also establishes the firm presence of these “mortal hopes,” as the words “toil” and “pass” receive the last two stresses of the line. Though the rose may threaten to move the speaker’s thoughts into abstractions and away from the more palpable concerns of ordinary humanity, the poet can render these concerns in such a way that their expression is intensified and not at all precluded by the abstraction of the rose. By pushing back against symbolic abstraction, the poet can present mythos in a way that promotes both innovation and accessibility while remaining vigilant to the possibility that the symbol for recalling such mythos might become the type of symbolism British modernism would rally against: a cliché with a force that is always expected but never delivered.

The force of Yeats’s rose, however, lies just as much in its ability to signify mythos as in its unpredictability. Yeats’s symbolic rose may not always live up to the reader’s expectations of significance because there is absolutely no expectation that the rose will guarantee access to mythos. If the speaker were to leave the worm and the field mouse to pursue the spiritual insights of mythos, he would not be automatically granted access; instead, he would “But seek alone to hear the strange things said / By God to bright the hearts of those long dead” (ll. 19-20). The rose’s presence bears no irrevocable promise that the speaker will actually hear these “strange things,” only that he will “seek” them. Maintaining consistency in the meter is especially important in presenting and affirming this necessity of doubt in the symbol. The disciplined adoption of a particular poetic meter, in this case iambic pentameter, necessitates the addition of extra syllables from “seek alone to.” In a similar manner, adopting the rose’s potential as a symbol necessitates a preparation for adjustments that might need to be made when accommodating its limitations. These adjustments in poetic

technique foreground an awareness that belief in the symbol cannot automatically yield an absolute connection with the “strange things” he seeks to know from Celtic mythos. Whereas Pound would dismiss emphasis on rhythm because “it tends to . . . pull [the artist] away from the thing,” Yeats uses rhythm as a means of establishing proximity to the mythos the symbol is charged with signifying.<sup>75</sup> In “The Symbolism of Poetry,” Yeats posits that “The purpose of rhythm . . . is to prolong the moment of contemplation . . . to keep us in that state of perhaps real trance, in which the mind liberated from the pressure of the will is unfolded in symbols.”<sup>76</sup> In this poem, however, the suggested uncertainty of the symbol to deliver on its significance, rather than its guaranteed success, both “prolong[s]” this moment and maintains skepticism of the rhythm’s ability to manifest “trance.” In turn, the phrase “seek alone to” also solidifies the rhythm, and the “moment of contemplation” that the rhythm facilitates. Whereas modernism saw the symbol’s lack of guarantee as reason to reject symbolism completely, Yeats saw it as an important reason to retain the symbol: indeed, the potential for doubt in the symbol proves a necessary and vital component of the integrity of his lyric. The poem’s rhythm becomes tighter and more consistent, not compromised, as a result of this admittance. Instead of a rhythm and a symbol that detract from “the thing,” “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time” presents two poetic devices that not only draw attention to each other, but to the mythos they are to frame and recall.

As the poem ends with the same call for the rose’s presence with which it started, ‘Red rose, Proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days,’ rhythm and symbol continue to work together to affirm and welcome the ambiguity in whether the symbol will lead to the spiritual insight of

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<sup>75</sup> Pound, “I gather the Limbs of Osiris,” in *PSP*, 42.

<sup>76</sup> Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” in *CWEE*, 117.

mythos. Instead of dismissing the symbol's abstraction as incompatible with direct and accurate expression as would his modernist peers, Yeats now posits that an awareness of the rose's limitations does not preclude its potential as a symbol for metaphysical insight. The speaker's invocation to the rose and the ability to "hear the strange things said / By God" are in no way synonymous, nor do they need to be for the invocation to continue. This affirmation of the rose's necessity, even in the midst of doubt, seems to anticipate and resonate with Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*: "I may be sure of something, but still know what test might convince me of error. I am e.g. quite sure of the date of a battle, but if I should find a different date in a recognized work of history, I should alter my opinion, and this would not mean I lost all faith in judging."<sup>77</sup> Just as Wittgenstein's mistaken date does not compromise one's confidence in judgment, the poet's ability to foster belief in the symbol is no less potent for the lack of guarantee that has been introduced earlier. Rather, this ability is now stronger for having survived the scrutiny and doubt that the concept of logos had once engaged for destroying the cultural credibility of mythos. By Yeats's refusal to mitigate doubt even while upholding the symbol's potency recalls Keats's concept of "negative capability," which the Romantic poet describes as "when man is capable of being in uncertainties...without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."<sup>78</sup> However, by legitimizing the fear of over-immersion in abstraction for poet and speaker alike, Yeats also refrains from situating the "fact and reason" of a materialist worldview as "irritable" or as necessarily antagonistic toward the possibilities of imagination. Yeats's rose does not need

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<sup>77</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), 66.

<sup>78</sup> Keats, *Letters*, vol. 1, ed. H E Rollins, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 193.

logical proof that its potency will yield results, but the real possibility that it can, if reader and speaker should “but seek” the metaphysical worlds that the mythos is meant to manifest.

The embracing of an ambivalent but still needed symbol in this first poem of *The Rose* prepares us for the reappearance of the rose in subsequent poems which further prompt the reader to consider the limitations and merits of such a ubiquitous symbol. Such ambivalence is compounded since the symbol is used not only to evoke Celtic mythos, but for Christian and ancient Greek mythos as well.

Although perhaps unexpected after the first poem’s insistence on the Celtic alone, Yeats saw such capaciousness as instrumental both for his definition of belief and for the conveyance of Irish subject matter. In “Ireland and the Arts,” Yeats would posit that “If our craftsmen were to choose their subjects under what we may call, if we understand faith to mean that belief in a spiritual life which is not confined to one Church, the persuasion of their faith and their country, they would soon discover that although their choice seemed arbitrary at first, it had obeyed what was deepest in them.”<sup>79</sup> For Yeats, to write with “the persuasion of their faith and their country” did not necessitate an exclusive focus on the Celtic content alone, even while metaphysical beliefs and national heritage merged to make a vital and recognizable Irish literary tradition. In his own work, Yeats fosters a syncretism of different forms of personal and cultural mythos as a means of re-vitalizing Irish literary heritage in a way that avoids cultural provincialism. Throughout this syncretism, however, he remains ever-vigilant to the challenge of asking the rose to carry much weight in so many different contexts. This challenge prompts the reader to consider what the rose’s presence might still

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<sup>79</sup> Yeats, “Ireland and the Arts,” in *CWEE*, 153.

provide, even while it carries the risk that it cannot provide all the significance demanded of it.

A sense of mystery alongside and working with significance is crucial to what Yeats believed symbolism should provide, a quality that can invite access to a certain experience of mythos even as it remains uncertain how this access is working. As someone who left two different occult organizations because he opposed their prohibition of questioning and criticism, and who would later rant against the damning effects of logic on intellectual thought, Yeats did not believe that spiritual experience could be explained or revealed through a consistent procedure of thought, action, or ideology.<sup>80</sup> Yeats saw the Symbolists as fighting against the nineteenth century's drastic turn toward a type of "realism" that left no room for the imagination and instead proffered "the element of evocation, of suggestion."<sup>81</sup> *The Rose* engages mythos in a way that evades any logical explanation for how the title symbol and other symbols work, and is all the stronger because this evasion keeps readers thinking about how it works. In "The Rose of Peace," the "you" the speaker addresses may be symbolized by the rose of the title, or stand as a separate character in her own right. Whoever she is, and whatever her relation to the rose, her power is still confirmed, as she would inspire Michael the archangel to abandon "God's war's" and instead "go weave out of

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<sup>80</sup> Yeats resigned from the Theosophical Society, however, in 1890, after criticizing them in a *Weekly Review* article. He wrote to John O'Leary, "They wanted me to promise to criticise them never again in the same fashion. I refused because I looked upon request as undue claim to control right of individual to think as best pleased him" (*Collected Letters*, Vol. I, 234). As George Mills Harper writes, Yeats would also leave the Golden Dawn in 1903 after his increasing frustration with the leaders' refusal to allow individual members to direct their own mystical studies or to converse with other group. Yeats became part of the Stella Matutina, a group that agreed to still adopt the Cabbalistic system of degrees and hierarchies that other Golden Dawn members wanted to abandon (*Yeats's Golden Dawn*, 124-125).

<sup>81</sup> Yeats, "The Symbolism of Poetry," in *CWEE*, 115. When Stein and Pound did use what Marjorie Perloff terms "symbolic evocation" in their poetry, these were rendered so that it was always unclear when terms should be taken as symbols and when they should not.



the stars / A chaplet for your head” if he saw her beauty.<sup>82</sup> This might refer to the ubiquitous depictions of the Virgin Mary as Our Lady of Peace with a chaplet of stars around her head, but, similar to the slight nods to the Irish landscape in “The Rose of the World,” nothing denies or confirms this in certainty. The ambiguity of the relationship between the rose and the figure addressed by the speaker becomes further compounded when the speaker mentions that even “God would bid his warfare cease...and softly make a rosy peace / A peace of Heaven with Hell.” Now, the suggestion that the abstraction of “peace” could have a “rosy” color or other physical properties of a rose is raised, and must be joined with the allusion to Marian imagery in the first stanza. If this were not enough to confuse any reader, the “peace” of “a peace of Heaven with Hell” is also a crypt word for its homophone “piece.” Not only does it remain uncertain who or what the object of the speaker’s admiration is, but the effect of this “you” is blatantly ambivalent. This “peace” could be an actual reconciliation of Heaven with Hell, or a “piece of Heaven with Hell”—in other words, something that mixes these two distinctly opposite realms without actually ceasing “God’s warfare” at all. Such ambivalence is an inevitable risk when adopting a symbol such as the rose that is not guaranteed to signify everything with which it is charged. Should Michael “his deeds forget” upon seeing who or what the rose is signifying and devote all his work to this object, either a peace between good and evil, or a “piece” of good mixed with evil might ensue. So, too, should the poet become captivated by the symbol, the mythos the poet was trying to render by calling upon the symbol might be lost, as the speaker of “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time” feared might occur. Nevertheless, neither “peace” nor “a piece” can be achieved if the poet does not take this risk in making the symbol active and present in some way.

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<sup>82</sup> Yeats, “The Rose of Peace,” in *The Rose, CP*, 41.

Other than its mention in the title, the rose in “The Rose of Battle” seems to have no bearing on the rest of the poem. However, what the poem implies about the relationship between the symbol and the mythos it signifies provides an important and complex way to read the rose and other symbols throughout the collection. Other than its mention in the poem’s title, the rose does not appear in the poem’s text at all, but instead becomes eclipsed as the lips become a symbol in their own right, of the feminine beauty that led to devastation and destruction in two different traditions of mythologies:

Who dreamed that beauty passeth like a dream?  
 For these red lips, with all their mournful pride,  
 Mournful that no new wonder may betide,  
 Troy passed away in one high funeral gleam,  
 And Usna’s children died. (ll. 1-5)<sup>83</sup>

Though these lips are particularized “these red lips” and detached from any specific figure, they remain an essential part of the mythos of both Troy and Ireland. Phrasing, too, achieves a strong statement about the real presence yet ambiguous significance of the lips. As the positioning and phrasing of the line “Mournful that no new wonder may betide” can be read as modifying and thus personifying both “these red lips” and Troy, the same emotion is shared by both the country and the symbol while it remains unclear whether such sharing is a coincidence or directly caused by the lips. Troy might have “passed away” because of its being mournful in its own right, or because the lips gave such a “mournful” quality. The “Mournful” clause also places the mythos of the Celts, with “And Usna’s children died,” into the same ambiguous relationship with the lips that share but do not necessarily affect the

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<sup>83</sup> Yeats, “The Rose of the World,” in *The Rose, CP*, 41.

emotion of the figures in the mythos. Moreover, the “And” negates any sense of temporal or hierarchical relationship between the mythos of the Trojans and that of the Celts. The lips can and do engender access to the tragedies of both, without one being any more important than the other, putting into question how such a symbol can be both particularized and universalized simultaneously. If it can be invited but not mandated to signify both, then perhaps symbolism can be employed without risking obscurity. In allowing room for the lips to be both independent of and essential to the mythos of both ancient traditions, Yeats’s poem works in a manner not unlike Pound’s Canto II, in which the figure of Helen belongs indisputably to the familiar myth of Troy even as she becomes universalized to the entire Canto. By making certain affiliations with the symbol possible and valid but not mandatory or proscriptive, Yeats’s lines posit mythos doing far more than recalling the traditions with which a passive audience would already be familiar. The lips can signify mythos in such a way as to foster familiarity while resisting the passive complacency that modernists feared such familiarity might engender. Even as we know that “these red lips” are an important symbol for both Greek and Celtic mythos, we do not and cannot know the precise nature of this symbol’s significance for either. As Angus Fletcher reminds us, such strategic ambiguity in a piece of literature causes us not to despair of its relevancy, but rather to engage with it further.<sup>84</sup> For Yeats’s poetics, the use of a symbol is crucial for allowing this type of engagement to happen.

Thus far, my readings have emphasized that Yeats’s retention of a more traditional poetic convention does not prohibit this convention’s being called into question and even doubted at times. Making the symbol suggest multiple potentials for significance, alongside

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<sup>84</sup> Fletcher, 98.

and in dialogue with the potential for doubt, would not be possible without paying rigorous attention to syntax. In “The Rose of the World” as in “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time,” Yeats’s syntax both affirms and questions the symbol’s efficacy. This strategy not only advocates for his idea of the symbol as a complex entity in its own right, but posits that syntax and symbolism can be used to inform both the poetry’s meaning and each other’s role in facilitating this meaning, creating something compelling and captivating from what might otherwise fall into an ineffective cliché. In this way, Yeats’s early work provides something more than a mere demonstration of the “passionate syntax” he later described as crucial for his writing:

I must seek, not as Wordsworth thought, words in common use, but a powerful and passionate syntax, and a complete coincidence between period and stanza. Because I need a passionate syntax for a passionate subject matter, I compel myself to accept those traditional metres that have developed with the language.<sup>85</sup>

Because he must express Celtic mythos within the conventions of English language, his lyrics do indeed mandate him to “accept those traditional metres” that provide the foundation for the English lyric. Even while the rose’s precise role remains ambiguous and the symbol does not remain the unquestioned stylistic trope of English poetry that it once was, Yeats nevertheless lends the stylization of iambic pentameter to his invocation of the rose in “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time.” However, this “passionate syntax” that stands apart from the colloquialisms of the everyday does not only arise from a complete acceptance of meter,

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<sup>85</sup> Yeats, introduction to *Essays*, in *CWLE*, 212-213. As Marjorie Perloff has pointed out in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, the concept of “symbolic evocation” is something that such modernists as Pound and Stein used themselves, although in these authors’ works it was always unclear when terms should be taken as symbols and when they should not (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 18.

but also from the sudden rupture and rejection of such meter that is otherwise intact. In “The Rose of the World,” the abrupt ending of “And Usna’s children died” stops just short of realizing the expectation of iambic pentameter set up by the previous lines. Such a sudden ending troubles the ability of English language and meter to render Usna’s mythology with accuracy and vitality. While the unexpectedly short line enhances the feeling of tragedy from the death of Usna’s children, and cuts the line short of its iambic syllables just as the children’s lives were cut short of mature adulthood, it also deprives the Celtic story of the space allotted to Troy. While Yeats’s stylized English verse renders the “passionate subject matter” of his country’s present or former mythos, cutting the iambic line short also provokes serious consideration as to what the consequences of such preservation will be, whether this mythos will be just as powerful in English, or, like the lives of Usna’s children, stopped short of its potential. However, unless the poetry allows both possibilities to co-exist, belief in the mythos will go unexamined, causing the lips, the rose, and any other symbolism charged with this belief to become exactly the sort of dull conventions that modernism would push against.

Although Yeats mentions meter alone as an example of the conventions he seeks for obtaining the “passionate syntax” his poetry and subject matter demand, phrasing and diction are also essential for maintaining this constant alertness to the relationship between the force of Celtic mythos and the English language in which the mythos must now be conveyed. The second stanza of “The Rose of the World” describes the “lonely face” that “lives on” in a vague realm—a realm that may or may not be affiliated with Ireland or a country with a similar chilly climate. Moreover, the lines do not even specify whether this location is actual or ethereal:

We and the laboring world are passing by:  
 Amid men's souls, that waver and give place  
 Like the pale waters in their wintry race,  
 Under the passing stars, foam of the sky,  
 Lives on this lonely face. (ll. 6-10)

While the stanza invites association of this “lonely face” with the lips that caused destruction for both Troy and Usna in the first stanza, nothing confirms or denies this in certainty. The “men's souls” are also not affiliated with any specific mythos, nor are they affirmed as belonging to the dead or the living. We cannot know what it means for these “men's souls” to “waver” as a tangible and physical object might, or whether they might “give place” to the “laboring world” or to the realm of mythos. Although this ambiguous movement of “men's souls” might have been appropriated from the beliefs about a witch or a wizard's soul that Yeats would later describe for Lady Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs of the West of Ireland*, a soul that “passes into the body of air and can transform itself as it please or even dream itself into some shape it has not willed,” no further Celtic allusions confirm or deny this.<sup>86</sup> The “pale waters in their wintry race” also suggest without confirming an affiliation with Celtic mythos and the Irish landscape from which it originated. Should the reader assume that this phrase does hold a Celtic allusion, it still cannot be confirmed as to whether the “pale waters” signify a geographical or an ethereal and imaginative location, nor whether the “wintry race” refers to the actual ancestors of the Irish people, or to the myriad of characters from Celtic myth. Furthermore, this phrase could refer to both the world of mythos and the geographical

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<sup>86</sup> Yeats, *Witches, Wizards, and Irish Folk-Lore*, 1914, *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland*, Lady Gregory, 1920, in *CWLE*, 76.

location and actual inhabitants of Ireland simultaneously while making no distinction between each. The nameless and un-contextualized “lonely face” continues with this fusion of the geographical and the mythical, since it could be the face of a particularized and actual living woman such as Maude Gonne, as “this” could imply, the face of a character of mythos, or a face that merits no particularization at all. By including phrases that invite associations with but do not proscribe attachments to different types of personal, mythological, and national allusions, Yeats holds precision and mystery in a delicate and complicated balance. He affords the “lonely face” symbolic significance in its own right, as well as for its possible affiliation with the symbolic lips, all the while allowing neither to rest as the dominant point of entry by which we must access the poem.

Yeats does just as much to convey ambiguity with the smaller words surrounding these potential symbols as he does with the placement of the symbols themselves. While an appreciation for prepositions’ impact on meaning may not have been articulated directly in theory until Gertrude Stein would laud them as “something you can be continuously using and everlastingly enjoying,” this poem provides a powerful example of how a preposition can both clarify and cloud a meaning.<sup>87</sup> The “on” of “lives on this lonely face” can point to the location of “foam of the sky” and connote an enduring and interminable life for the face itself: a face that can but might not signify the mythos the poet references so subtly. By making certain affiliations possible but not inevitable, Yeats’s poetics renders symbolism as effective, but effective only if it does not persist unquestioned. Such work anticipates Yeats’s statement in *Per Amica Silentia Luna* that originality will happen not because the poet seeks

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<sup>87</sup> Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar,” in *Writings, 1932-1946* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 315.

it, but because he prioritizes passion first: “It is not permitted to a man who takes up pen or chisel, to seek originality, for passion is his only business, and he cannot but mould or sing after a new fashion because no disaster is like another.”<sup>88</sup> While “The Rose of the World” begins by holding onto the traditions of each mythos, the desire to render this tradition as present inevitably yields something new.

Although literary modernism and its most prominent poets would not peak until decades after Yeats began his career, Yeats knew just as well as other modernists that literary conventions could only be effective for conveying mythos if rendered in a way that probed, rather than affirmed, any stable relationship between form and meaning. As much as *The Rose* demands that Celtic mythos be considered a force in English poetry, it also, perhaps more pressingly, asks what poetic devices and conventions do to inform experience with mythos in general. In setting up and then breaking down iambic pentameter in “The Rose of Battle,” for example, Yeats demonstrates conventional English meter as being able to create an abruptness that lends immediacy to the idea of death, yet cuts short the telling of the mythos. Offering such symbols as the lips and the face that function on both accretive and independent levels of significance, Yeats suggests that symbolism can move the poem further and closer to the narrative at hand.

While Yeats fosters ambiguity toward English poetic convention throughout *The Rose*, he at times steps back and frees the verse from this otherwise relentless questioning. In “The Sorrow of Love,” for example, Yeats employs a convention made especially prominent in English poetry by the Romantics—namely, the use of nature to provide relief and perhaps transcendence to man’s grief:

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<sup>88</sup> Yeats, *Per Amica Silentia Luna*, in *CWLE*, 14.



The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,  
 The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,  
 And all that famous harmony of leaves,  
 Had blotted out man's image and his cry. (ll. 1-4)<sup>89</sup>

In this stanza, a smoothly executed iambic pentameter and rhyme scheme remains mostly perfect, all the while working with personified nature imagery to render a scene that promotes closeness both to the physical world of nature and to the celestial world of the transcendent and ethereal. While Pound feared the literary and political chaos that would ensue if poetry “ceased to ‘cling close to the thing,’” Yeats’s nature imagery that both mimics man’s cry through the sparrow’s “brawling,” and relieves it through the “brilliant moon and all the milky sky” and the leaves’ “harmony,” resists a black and white approach to whether natural symbolism increases abstraction or proximity toward “the thing” portrayed—and, moreover, posits that proximity, if “man’s cry” needs relief, should not necessarily be the poet’s first and foremost goal.<sup>90</sup>

In the second stanza, Yeats fuses the Symbolists’ aspirations of mystery through evocation, with modernism’s experimentations in bringing past mythologies to present life. Here, the poem moves the poem further from the mortal concerns of man and absorbs his sorrow in those that Greek mythology has illustrated:

A girl arose that had red mournful lips  
 And seemed the greatness of the world in tears,  
 Doomed like Odysseus and the laboring ships

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<sup>89</sup> Yeats, “The Sorrow of Love,” in *The Rose, CP*, 45-46.

<sup>90</sup> Pound, “Selections from *The New Age*,” in *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, ed. Harriet Zinnes (New York: New Directions, 1980), 26.

And proud as Priam murdered with his peers; (ll. 4-8)

Making no attempt to connect this stanza to the first, or the girl's "red mournful lips" to the lips in "The Rose of the World," these mythological allusions work to suggest and evoke a possible connection rather than name it explicitly. They neither presume nor prohibit a connection toward "man's image and his cry" from the first stanza; the "red mournful lips" might signify both the cause of man's cry and that of the "world in tears." Holding the particular and common in equilibrium against the celestial and mythical, Yeats renders a symbol that allows and invites readers to remain with the sorrows of the man, but does not force choice between the local and the universal; the poem offers both a version of Pound's "direct treatment" of the situation at hand and a chance to contemplate the sorrow on an epic scale. In this way, Yeats presents a compelling expression of a situation that might result in "The Sorrow of Love," which can seem comparable to the disasters of mythic times even while having no bearing on the lives of anyone else except for the individuals involved.

Returning to an altered version of the natural imagery from the first stanza, the third and final stanza suggests that the actions of the second stanza somehow altered the images of the first:

Arose, and on the instant clamorous eaves,  
 A climbing moon upon an empty sky,  
 And all that lamentation of the leaves,  
 Could but compose man's image and his cry. (ll. 9-12)

Suggesting a continuation of action from where the second stanza's last line left off, and repeating "arose" from the first, the final stanza presents a connection between all three stanzas without delineating the precise nature of such a connection. The sky, now "empty"

and with a moon that is no longer “brilliant” as it was in the first stanza, is also “empty” of potential for alluding to a world beyond and above the natural. While the first lines of the stanza suggests that nature now somewhat reflects sorrow rather than relieves it, however, “could but compose” sustains ambiguity as to whether the natural world affords sufficient conveyance of “man’s image and his cry.” Denoting “could only,” the phrase “could but compose” begs the question of whether composing is the best, or simply the only recourse, that both the poet and the natural imagery he employs can provide to honor the grief of human subjects. Even while Yeats commands his craft, he puts the ability of poetics into question, never taking for granted that knowing how to write a poem will allow re-vitalization of the mythologies he seeks. This conscious skepticism toward craft, Pound would later emphasize, was needed for poetry to move forward as vital and relevant in the new century, since poetry does not always express things better than could have been done in prose.<sup>91</sup> If Yeats’s English poetry is to provide access to the mythological, the personal, and the natural all at once, these different levels of significance must be presented as possibilities that the poet constantly calls into question, rather than as proscriptive mandates that must exist simply because they are rendered in poetic verse.

An earlier version of this poem published in *The Countess Kathleen* (1892) foregrounds Yeats’s ability to render evocation and mystery even when employing a more direct, linear narrative structure. Vendler reads this earlier version in her discussion of the poem, describing the “parabolic” structure that the poem embodies by beginning with the man able to find solace in nature, then being brought into the mythic with his experience of

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<sup>91</sup> See, for example, Pound’s instructions in “A Retrospect”: “Do not re-tell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose,” 1935 in *Literary Essays*, New York: New Directions, 1968, 5.

the girl, and then no longer able to find solace and consolation in the natural world, which is now indelibly tainted by the man's experience of love.<sup>92</sup> The poems, she observes, takes its form from the Shakespearian douzain.<sup>93</sup> In this version, which employs the first-person and provides more guiding phrases that make explicit connections between all three stanzas, the mystery of how and if the images of the three stanzas connect is somewhat weakened:

The quarrel of the sparrows in the eaves,  
     The full round moon and the star-laden sky,  
 And the loud song of the ever-singing leaves  
     Had hid away earth's old and weary cry.

And then you came with those red mournful lips,  
     And with you came the whole of the world's tears,  
 And all the sorrows of her laboring ships,  
     And all [the] burden of her myriad years.<sup>94</sup>

And now the sparrows warring in the eaves,  
     The crumbling moon, the white stars in the sky,  
 And the loud chatting of the unquiet leaves,  
     Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Vendler, 154-155.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>94</sup> Vendler notes the article's omission from the poem in *The Countess Kathleen*, and its re-insertion in the 1895 *Poems* (396).

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 155.

Compared to the version in *The Rose*, this poem now makes an explicit and thereby prescriptive connection between the speaker, the object of his love, and the natural imagery that changes to reflect the speaker's profound experience. The speaker now addresses the owner of the "red mournful lips" directly, adding the demonstrative "those" to imply a proximity and familiarity not rendered in the later version's "A girl arose that had red mournful lips." However, the mystery remains in the second stanza; the speaker alludes neither to a specific mythological tradition, nor to whether the "world's tears" connect the speaker to the world of mankind or to an alternative and imaginative world. While the last lines of the first and final stanzas end on the same phrasing, the earth of "earth's old and weary cry" now fuses man and nature as inhabitants of the same earth. Although the last line more firmly conveys sorrow's impact, with "Are shaken with earth's old and weary cry" rather than "Could but compose man's image and his cry," using *earth* invites associations with both the human and terrestrial, whereas man in the later version invites only the human. By maintaining ambiguity as to whether the sorrowful experience of the second stanza has "shaken" nature alone, or both man and nature, Yeats also maintains a sense of mystery that opens the story to increased possibility of meaning even while delivering a more explicit narrative. Vendler points out the poem's "unity of movement," which she attributes to Yeats "obeying his 'nineties' aesthetic of the unbroken note": the form and tone do not change according to the speaker's changed emotions.<sup>96</sup> I would venture that maintaining a "unity of movement" not only adheres to nineties aesthetics, but also anticipates British modernism's experimentations with relationships between various poetic techniques and belief in the objects, events, and experiences these techniques were charged to evoke precisely and

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 155.

compellingly. By keeping the form intact while the speaker's emotions promote rupture, Yeats demonstrates that retaining Shakespearian and other older English verse forms does not necessarily eliminate believability in the speaker's experience or in its expression through natural and mythological references.

**“Of Her, Whose History Began”: The Rose's Legacy of Tradition**

In his work with the symbolic rose, Yeats demanded capaciousness in addition and in productive relation to believability. Seeking to render his country's mythos compellingly in the language of its colonizer, Yeats expects the rose to absorb and account for complexly interwoven levels of significance throughout his poems. While maintaining a level of familiarity was crucial for revising and transforming Irish mythos as recognizable and enduring in the English language, Yeats nevertheless shared the concern of modernism in creating a poetics that would engage readers in a sense of mystery and complexity. As these readings demonstrate, this concern affected poetry that was not specifically or exclusively about Celtic mythos, and led to a poetics that rendered an ever-productive exchange between form and content. In turn, working with and knowing when to break the conventions of English verse, enabled Yeats to maintain the rose as a powerful and capacious symbol while allowing for more freedom in imagining what such capaciousness would look like.

By resisting explicit delineation of the rose's precise contribution to his poetic technique, Yeats leaves a legacy that allows this symbol—and literary symbolism in general—to exemplify both tradition and innovation. In “To Ireland in the Coming Times,” Yeats re-imagines the rose's traditional symbolic significance in a newer and more ambiguous context as “the red-rose bordered hem,” an ornamentation rather than a symbol:

Know that I would accounted be

True brother of a company  
 That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong  
 Ballad and story, rann and song:  
 Nor I be any less of them,  
 Because the red-rose-bordered hem  
 Of her, whose history began  
 Before God made the angelic clan,  
 Trails all about the written page. (l. 1-9)<sup>97</sup>

While this hem is given as the cause, its precise contribution remains as vague as the rose's in "To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time." Whereas previous poems alluding to female figures often made some specific mention or at least slight allusions to some female figures from myth, none are provided here. Moreover, we cannot be certain whether "the red-rose-bordered hem / Of her" indicates a cloth personified as female, or a female figure around whom a hemmed cloth is draped. This nameless figure may serve a function not unlike that of the dancing chorus women Siegfried Kracauer describes in his definition of the "mass ornament" endemic to the modern age; since we are viewing the image of the red-rose-bordered hem as a whole, the identity of the individual woman remains invisible.<sup>98</sup> Yeats prevents the female figure from being completely subsumed as part of the hem, however, by citing her origins, dating them earlier than "the angelic clan" of God. He further develops her distinction by also leaving it ambiguous as to whether she, too, was made by God—as the supreme deity of contemporary Western monotheism is typically called—or by some other

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<sup>97</sup> Yeats, "To Ireland in the Coming Times," in *The Rose, CP*, 56.

<sup>98</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays*, trans. Thomas Y. Levin (Harvard University Press, 1995), 78.

type of phenomenon or spirit, perhaps one that more conventionally accepted traditions of mythos in Britain would not recognize. Even as she serves as a vehicle for the ornamentation of the hem, she remains somewhat visible as an individual, one whose identity warrants more distinction than those who serve the capitalistic agenda in Kracauer's "mass ornament" concept. The rose, where it was once charged with signifying particular female figures from Celtic, Greek, and Christian myths, with the risk that this might not be accomplished in the single symbol of a flower, can now border each woman distinctly, taking her form without eclipsing her.

As earlier poems in the collection have revealed, the ability to distinguish and allude to a particular figure, however, need not necessarily prompt a rigid conformation to expectations of how a certain device will work. Though a hem on a garment is intended to keep the fabric from fraying and give it consistent definition, the movement of the hem as it "trails all about the written page" belies this conventional function. This is a border that moves in no predetermined or controlled direction, one that perhaps even moves beyond the poet's control. No longer able to predict the vivid images of Cuchulain, Deirdre, and the Druids that the rose had once been charged with signifying, this speaker knows only where Irish literary tradition has been by evidence of the hem's trail; it cannot be ascertained where it will go as the hem "travels all about" in the present tense. Yeats's Irish hem put into verse the very same emphasis on the importance of understanding literary tradition that Eliot's essay on the future of English language poetry articulates almost thirty years later in "Tradition and the Individual Talent": "Some one said: 'The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did.' Precisely, and they are that which we



know.”<sup>99</sup> For an Irish poet who seeks to restore and resituate Celtic mythos as significant and memorable in English as it had been in its original language, and to give force to any mythos his poetry conveys, knowing how to use the symbol in such a way that its significance remains recognizable but not cliché is key to maintaining a foothold in the past while anticipating the changes of the future. As Yeats’s career as a poet and critic continued, the concept of a shifting border remained valuable for considering how the human mind works as well to achieve connection with the universal. In “Magic,” he declares “That the borders of our minds are ever-shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another, as it were, and create a single mind, a single memory.”<sup>100</sup> Although “Magic” was written to declare his own spiritual philosophy and anticipates his subsequent break from the Golden Dawn, it merits consideration in context of the evocation of mythos in *The Rose*, throughout which readers are called upon to shift perceptions of how significance and meaning are conveyed. Just as a poem’s borders encompass mythos to varying degrees, with a direct reference to context and character in one moment and a puzzling allusion in the next, perceptions and expectations must be adjusted to consider how a symbol can hold many significances while signifying one mythology in its particularity. So that *The Rose* can “sing the ancient ways” in a manner that respects tradition but anticipates the need for contemporary and future relevancy, poetic conventions must be allowed to shift even as they maintain a noticeable familiarity.

**“Some Marvelous Empty Sea-Shell Flung”: Ambivalence and Ambiguity in Yeats’s Twentieth-Century Symbolism**

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<sup>99</sup> Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 1919, in *ESP*, 40.

<sup>100</sup> Yeats, “Magic,” in *CWEE*, 25.

A combination of Yeats's own statements on modernism, critical essays that have followed Eliot's precedent of obligatory but hollow praise for *The Rose*, and the severe effects of ageing that had taken a toll on Yeats at the time he was writing *The Tower*, all contributed to the ongoing perception of the latter collection as more experimentally complex than the former.<sup>101</sup> When the rose returns in *The Tower*, the poet offers no direct apostrophe to the once-cherished symbol. Rather, in "My House," he seeks "An acre of stony ground, / Where the symbolic rose can break in flower."<sup>102</sup> Wishing for the rose to break but also be "in flower" provides an intriguing ambivalence for the symbol's presence. While he wishes that this symbol so particular to his earlier work and to the establishment of Ireland's literary legacy in English should thrive, something markedly different needs to happen for this to occur—something as noticeable as the jarring contrast between "break" and "flower." It is the breaking that helps the symbol to flower into its full potential, and indeed, a break is quite appropriate for the title of the series in which "My House" appears, *Meditations in Time of Civil War*. After the devastating chaos that the fight for Irish sovereignty had wrought in the

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<sup>101</sup> In addition to its place in the modernist canon, *The Tower* has also been studied with Yeats's biography, as he was not only getting older, but finishing the collection while coping with a bleeding lung. The first poems, which are also two of the most famous, "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Tower," directly confront the hardships of ageing, with such lines as "Consume my heart away / sick with desire / And fastened to a dying animal" (*CP*, 217, ll. 21-22) and "Decrepit age that has been tied to me / As to a dog's tail" (218, ll. 3-4). The solution, then is to replace the impermanence of nature with the endurance of artifice, calling in "Sailing to Byzantium" for the "sages standing in God's holy fire" to "gather me / Into the artifice of eternity." In "Sailing to Byzantium," he declares "Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make," thereby replacing the inevitable mortality of nature with the permanence of man-made metalwork (ll. 25-27). Virginia Pruitt's "Return from Byzantium," for example, posits that the two poems should be read together: the solution posed by "Sailing to Byzantium," that the poet "consume [his] heart away" in order to transcend the physical world and its limitations, is addressed in *The Tower* as an unfeasible idea. (*ELH* 47.1 [Spring 1980]), 150. In Edward Larrissy's *Blake and Modern Literature*, Yeats's solution for establishing an eternity is that "the eternal appears as a static golden wall on the outer margins of existence," separated from the "heart" (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 26. I do not wish to dismiss the very real concerns with ageing in these and other poems throughout the collection, but we must also not allow the different stages of his life to preclude a reading of his earlier work as informative to his later.

<sup>102</sup> Yeats, "My House," in *Meditations in Time of Civil War*, in *The Tower*, 1928, *CP*, 201-202.

new century, what Ireland needed was not to be reminded of their former mythos, but to see it rendered in a way that could still prove relevant for the age during which those who returned after rushing to the side of Cathleen Ni Houlihan never returned unscathed. Richard Ellman has cited this defining trait of this series as written by “a man of means and position” who was seeking a symbolism more appropriate to his status.<sup>103</sup> This symbolism, however, connotes far more than the newfound material wealth in Yeats’s personal life, but a new development in his poetic endeavors. Whereas he ended *The Rose* with a recognizable yet adaptable symbol, the border of a hem that allows for certain possibilities without precluding others, the *Meditations* series of *The Tower* posits a symbol that can adjust to the past and the present, even as the present remains far from the idealized past.

Honoring both the mythos of tradition and the brutal actualities of the new century poses a challenge not only because such invincible figures as Cuchulain are irreconcilable with the real destruction of the present day: it is because the conception of mythos itself is being re-shaped in the Irish imagination, to such an extent that the power the Irish Ascendancy once held now seems as fantastic as “stars dancing silver-sandalled on the sea.” In “My House,” the speaker wonders whether a fountain were still the more appropriate choice for a symbol of the families who once lived in these houses:

Mere dreams, mere dreams! Yet Homer had not sung  
 Had he not found it certain beyond dreams  
 That out of life’s own self-delight had sprung

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<sup>103</sup> Richard Ellman, *Yeats: The Man and the Masks* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979), 243. As Ellman notes, Yeats’s popular success made it possible for him to move his to an estate in the western Irish countryside. With such poem titles as “My Ancestral Houses,” “My House” and “My Table,” Ellman argues, Yeats was now adopting the symbolism of “a man of means and position.”

The abounding glittering jet; though now it seems  
 As if some marvelous empty sea-shell flung  
 Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams,

And not a fountain, were the symbol which  
 Shadows the inherited glory of the rich. (ll. 9-16)<sup>104</sup>

David Young has noted how the “central ordering effect of the symbol” has been lost in other parts of *The Tower*, where unlike in *The Rose*, a “shift” in symbolic meaning occurs in the movement from one poem to the next.<sup>105</sup> Here, however, not only is the symbol at the center of the speaker’s concern, but the speaker wants to ensure that the relationship between symbol and significance is appropriate to the situation. Aware that the wonder of “the abounding glittering jet” has a long history of signifying “life’s own self-delight” dating as far back as the ancient poetry of Homer, the speaker must consider his choice to replace the symbol carefully. The line’s accent falls on the “now” to emphasize his reasoning and to separate an understanding of “the inherited glory of the rich” from its idealization in previous ages. The rhyming of “sprung” and “flung” further develop this reasoning by hinting at the differences between Homer’s Greece, where Odysseus always returns home, and Yeats’s Ireland, whose heroes’ have often had to flee their homes for fear they might be destroyed. Whereas the active and transitive verb “sprung” denotes agency for the fountain that could bring forth a jet from “life’s own self-delight,” the passive and intransitive “flung / Out” now suggests an object of less agency more suited to represent “the rich” now as they no longer

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<sup>104</sup> Yeats, “My House,” in *The Tower*, CP, 225.

<sup>105</sup> David Young, *Troubled Mirror: A Study of Yeats’s The Tower* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), 9.

possess the authority they once had. Moreover, by using the same word to describe both the fountain's streams and the ancestors of these houses, Yeats implies that the term "rich" might no longer denote abundance as it used to, and perhaps even denote the opposite. Once secured primarily through firm evidence of lineage and origins, the power of wealth is becoming increasingly easier to obtain in twentieth-century Britain by means other than land inheritance, as the sea-shell is brought "Out of the obscure dark of the rich streams." One can no longer be certain of the rich's origins, or even of what it means to be "rich" once that term is used in description. Streams may be "rich" because they are full of water, or because whatever they possess is of good quality. Additionally, it is impossible to determine whether having an abundance of water means anything significant unless the streams are in an area where water is otherwise scarce. Unlike the rose whose power can be taken for granted undefined, the fountain and the sea-shell that replace it require an evaluation of why each symbol may or may not adequately convey the concept with which it is charged.

Having posited an alternative and potentially more accurate symbol for the Ascendancy class and its declining power, the speaker is still not content to leave this new symbol alone. In questioning what makes a symbol adequate, the poet must also define and clarify the symbol's responsibilities. For "the marvelous empty sea-shell," being an appropriate symbol means that it "Shadows the inherited glory of the rich." The transitive "shadow" necessitates the constant and complete presence of its object alongside it, unlike a symbol that does not require the actual object or idea it signifies to be present. Furthermore, to *shadow* can denote several different functions. While one definition renders shadow synonymous with symbolize, others articulate this function as something entirely different,

and even more actively beneficial to its object.<sup>106</sup> While a sea-shell and a house both provide basic shelter, they also offer a form of protection that does something more. The physical structures of each protect the evidence of what once existed there, long after the mortal creatures who inhabited these structures have left. Being “empty,” the sea-shell maintains the evidence of the original purpose and meaning it had for a particular creature while also having space to contain new meanings for the next owner, who may appropriate it in new and unprecedented ways. Long after the once-powerful ancestors have left, either dying or moving to escape the effects of civil war, Yeats and others can still walk through this house and know of the family’s previous grandeur. At the same time, the house can still be inhabited by a new family, who might use it for new purposes. As the speaker later speculates that “maybe the great-grandson of that house, / For all its bronze and marble, ‘s but a mouse [sic],” Yeats suggests that symbols must be prepared to accommodate the changes in the situations they signify—as a grand house can preserve evidence of the ideals to which the family once aspired while allowing room for the timidity of the man who now inherits it (ll. 23-24). This is essential for preserving an honest and comprehensive perspective of history that accounts for the once idyllic lives of the rich while accepting the changes that occur as years pass, and making the family that has been relegated to a mythic past just as present as they were before. Neither the fountain of the ancestral house nor the rose denounced by transatlantic modernism can accommodate the changes of time, because they literally provide no physical space with which to do so, and instead the poet must take for granted that their symbolic significance transcends cultural and historical contexts. Like

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<sup>106</sup> See, for example, such early definitions of “shadow” as “To protect or shelter (a person or thing) from the sun” and “To shelter or protect as with covering wings; to enfold with a protecting and beneficent influence” in *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “shadow,” accessed March 3, 2012, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/17368?redirectedFrom=belief#eidhadow>.

his influence Blake, Yeats must devise a new symbol where tradition has left no suitable precedent.

Just because a new symbol might be more relevant than an earlier one, however, does not guarantee that it will be. The seashell poses the same risk posed as that of the rose that might lead the speaker too far from “common things that crave” in “To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time,” and though no suggestion of this risk occurs here, the story of what happened to “The Sad Shepherd” who told his woes to a seashell in Yeats’s 1889 collection *Crossways* so that the shell “Changed all he sang to inarticulate moan / Among her wildering whirls, forgetting him” (ll. 27-28).<sup>107</sup> In his 1904 “Adam’s Curse,” Yeats again brings back the shell, this time as a metaphor for the moon, another tired symbol for romantic scenes. Though “worn as if it had been a shell,” the moon does not seem to suit the needs of the speaker and his love interest, as he muses “That it had all seemed happy, and yet we’d grown / As weary-hearted as that hollow moon” (ll. 32; 39).<sup>108</sup> While likened to a shell in its ability to be “worn” around whatever it encompasses, it still remains “hollow,” unable to fully embrace the significance demanded of it.

Although I have tried to move away from discussing Yeats’s later work as more developed and thereby superior to his earlier, the prominence of the sea-shell in poems at the both the beginning and the midpoint of his career must not be ignored, especially with the vastly different outcomes of its use in each. Both poems acknowledge that the device engaged to invoke or instill a mythos may not always work; but neither *The Rose* nor *The Tower* sees the potential for failure as cause for despair. Rather, this risk of loss is simply a non-negotiable fact with which the poet must cope while employing the poetic structures and

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<sup>107</sup> Yeats, “The Sad Shepherd,” in *Crossways*, 1889, *CP*, 9.

<sup>108</sup> Yeats, “Adam’s Curse,” in *In the Seven Woods*, *CP*, 89-90.

conventions available to him in a given language. The alternative, to retain the symbolic and other literary conventions that have been expected to manifest both mythos and the possibility of belief in the metaphysical concepts that myth can evoke—regardless of whether it actually does so—is never an option.



## Chapter 2: “Parsimonious Presentations:” Mina Loy and the Necessity of the Material

In the evening they looked out of their two windows  
 Miovanni out of his library window  
 Gina from the kitchen window  
 From among his pots and pans  
 Where he so kindly kept her  
 Where she so wisely busied herself  
 Pots and Pans she cooked in them  
 All sorts of sialagogues  
 Some say that happy women are immaterial

-Mina Loy, “The Effectual Marriage”<sup>1</sup>

Mina Loy’s satire of her affair with Giovanni Papini is just one of her many poems that contrast the very real importance of the material in women’s lives with the “angel in the house” ideal that Victorian culture cemented well into the early twentieth century. In fact, “Gina’s” ability to fulfill her proper place as the “happy” and thereby “immaterial” woman in the home depends on rootedness in the materials that surround her. From the pots and pans Gina cooks in to the milk receipt on which she composes her poetry, these materials of domestic life tell us something about Gina’s place in the home and the low priority her art must take for this “effectual marriage” to survive.<sup>2</sup> Such items as those that compose a proper middle-class household matter to Gina, and they matter to Loy, in ways that, arguably, they do not always matter for male modernist poets. When “the pianola / ‘replaces’ Sappho’s barbitos” in Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, and the typist’s parlor divan becomes both a clothes rack and a place to receive her lover in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, they

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<sup>1</sup> Mina Loy, “The Effectual Marriage, or The Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni,” in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger Conover (New York: The Noonday Press, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1996), 36 (hereafter cited in text as *LLB*).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39. Reference to the milk bill is taken from the following lines: “When she was lazy / She wrote a poem on the milk bill / The first strophe Good morning / The second Good night / Something not too difficult to / learn by heart.”

become sources of pointed anxiety, the ultimate emblems of a world in which (as Pound describes in *The Cantos*) “no picture is made to endure nor to live with / but it is made to sell and sell quickly.”<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, urging an adoption of the poetic techniques that had emerged “before the counting-house had created a new class and a new art without breeding and without ancestry,” suggests that the Irish literary revival maintain a distance from those who inhabit such middle-class spaces as Loy features prominently in her work.<sup>4</sup> For Loy’s poetry, and especially for the lives of her female characters, there is no such thing as a vision of a culture in which the materials of middle-class domesticity do not characterize a significant component of the human experience—even when they hinder the spiritual development and intellectual pursuits of her female characters.

This refusal to balk at the mundane materials of domestic spaces, or to blame them for the downfall of civilization, poses a challenge to Loy’s complete acceptance in the modernist legacy. Loy shares an emphasis on these materials with such nineteenth-century poets as Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Emily Dickinson, whose work modernists also largely dismissed when defining their predecessors for the new century. Although a significant strand of modernism did incorporate the mundane and the ordinary, Loy’s status as a heterosexual woman writer has compounded her interests in ordinary domestic scenes so as to compromise her status as a significant modernist poet.<sup>5</sup> As Loy continues to gain more solid footing in the high modernist canon, critics preface their scholarship with speculations

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<sup>3</sup> Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, 1920, in *New Selected Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: New Directions, 2010), 112; T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1971), 44.

<sup>4</sup> W. B. Yeats, “What is Popular Poetry?,” in *Collected Works, Vol. IV: Early Essays*, ed. George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2007), 10.

<sup>5</sup> See Liesl Olson, *Modernism and the Ordinary* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press), 2009. Olson observes that although “Literary modernism takes ordinary experience as its central subject,” such focus on the ordinary has been overlooked in favor of the “extraordinary” (3).

as to why it has taken so long for Loy's work to be appreciated. Much of the reasons offered are common to issues all women writers in a male-dominated genre face. Pound, although one of Loy's strongest advocates, referred to her and Marianne Moore as "these girls" while offering such qualified praise as "(while I have before now seen a good deal of rubbish by both of them), they are interesting and readable (by me, that is)."<sup>6</sup> Eliot favored Moore, seeing her as a "child" whose work could be fostered into critical acclaim and, moreover, lacked the explicit eroticism of such poems as Loy's "Songs to Joannes."<sup>7</sup> Other early praise emphasized her physical beauty and charming presence at parties over her poetic technique, while later critics foregrounded her roles as wife and mother.<sup>8</sup> As Roger Conover points out, Helen Vendler and Nicholas Fox Weber used their reviews of Carolyn Burke's seminal biography of the poet "to take Mina Loy to task for what they consider her dubious behavior in the sphere of sexual and domestic responsibility."<sup>9</sup> Miranda Hickman, while acknowledging that "we are past the era of pioneering revisionary feminist criticism," nevertheless "find[s] it important to place the accent on the feminist work of these women modernists, who wrote out of conditions in which condescending assumptions about the 'poet as woman' . . . created significant intangible obstacles for women writers."<sup>10</sup> These

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<sup>6</sup> Pound, "A List of Books," in *Little Review* 4.1 (March 1918): 7-8, qtd. in *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907-1924*, ed. Robin G. Schulze (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 452.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the expectations for modernist women poets, see Sheila Kineke, "T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, and the Gendered Operations of Literary Sponsorship," *Journal of Modern Literature* 21.1 (Summer 1997). Kineke cites Eliot's assessment of Moore as "one of the strangest children I have ever had anything to do with" as well as Moore's response calling Eliot a "strange parent" (123). She also points out the contrast between Moore's "complex but sexually neutral" poetry and Loy's "explicit heterosexual eroticism" (129).

<sup>8</sup> Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry* magazine during the peak of the modernist movement once declared, "I may never have fallen very hard for this lady's poetry, but her personality is quite irresistible. . . . Yes, poetry is in this lady whether she writes it or not." See "The Editor in France," *Poetry* 1923, 95-96.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Conover, "(Re) Introducing Mina Loy," in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, ed. Maera Schreiber and Keith Tuma (Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation, 1998), 257 (hereafter cited in text as *MLWP*).

<sup>10</sup> Miranda Hickman, "Modernist Women Poets," in *A Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. David E. Chinitz and Gail McDonald (Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 148.

surprisingly recent criticisms of Loy's personal life (Burke's book was first published in 1996) serve as powerful reminders that the biases modernist women writers faced from their contemporaries have not entirely disappeared from the critical landscape.

Other obstacles, however are unique to writing about female and feminized subjects in an age where the prevailing aesthetic entailed a strict dismissal of the personal, famously called for in Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent."<sup>11</sup> That Loy herself foregrounded her departure from the subjects of male modernists certainly has not helped; Drew Milne points out that "While [Loy's] poems could be read as exemplary negotiations of problems familiar from critical accounts of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, her work satirizes the more monumental and heroic postures of her modernist male contemporaries."<sup>12</sup> Susan Gilmore posits that the anagrams and name changes in Loy's autobiographical poems offer "'impersonality' ...not as an aesthetic prerogative, but a false choice facing an audience Loy designates as female."<sup>13</sup> I propose that not merely the intrinsically personal, or sexual, nature of Loy's subject matter alienates her from male-dominated British modernism; indeed, many of her poems leave little to no trace of biographical context. Rather, her subject's rootedness in materiality—especially prominent in but not limited to poems featuring female subjects—sets her work apart.

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<sup>11</sup> Eliot's "Impersonal theory of poetry" defines the poet's process as "a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (41, emphasis mine). Comparing the poet's mind to a shred of platinum that serves as a catalyst for a chemical reaction to take place, Eliot surmises that "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates" (42). See *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Drew Milne, "'Modernist Poetry in the British Isles'" in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 148.

<sup>13</sup> Susan Gilmore, "Imna, Ova, Mongrel, Spy: Anagram and Imposture in the Work of Mina Loy," in *MLWP*, 272.

While the relationship between the metaphysical and the material, the negotiation of physical circumstances with metaphysical aspirations, remained at the core of the modernist project, Loy's poetry embraces the material in a way atypical from the work of her male peers. Where Yeats's aging man yearns to free his soul from the "dying animal" of his body and escape to a civilization that no longer exists, Loy's expectant mother in "Parturition" lingers on the excruciating physical pain of labor that so sharply contrasts with the ethereal idealization of motherhood.<sup>14</sup> The parlor scene that frustrates and inhibits Pound's Mauberley provides a playground on which Loy's child persona Ova in *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* can make discoveries about the world. Josh Weiner attributes Loy's interest in the material to an "intense desire to reconcile the facts-on-the-ground of material life and a spiritual ambition."<sup>15</sup> A "reconciliation," however, suggests an incompatibility of the material with the spiritual that belies the very real way that each depends on the other throughout her poetry.

Moreover, the types of "material life" Loy foregrounds merit distinction from the ways that her more prominent peers defined the material. When Pound does showcase the value of material objects, these take the form of "monuments": the buildings—often of ancient origin and no longer viable as functional spaces—that stand as reminders of what a society that valued the arts over profit could create. Similarly to the "hammered gold and gold enameling" of Yeats's *Byzantium*, the material in Pound's *Cantos* must be sufficiently grand to provide a means toward something superior to and beyond the physical world. For Loy, the material bears a different definition: the mundane, quotidian objects that comprise the homes, gathering spaces, and streets of daily life, as well as the corporeal frames that

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<sup>14</sup> This reference is taken from line 22 of Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," in *The Tower*, 1928, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 218.

<sup>15</sup> Josh Weiner, "The Return of Mina Loy," *Brick* 90 (Winter 2013), 116.

sustain human existence in the physical world. These materials are rarely grand, sometimes inconvenient, but remain as much a necessity of metaphysical possibility as they are to physical existence.

This chapter unpacks the active, meaningful, and interdependent relationship between the material and the metaphysical that occurs especially in those poems featuring female speakers and subjects, but also remains a common thread throughout her collections.

Although many of her poems do depict moments where the material hinders access to the metaphysical, Loy never offers an avoidance of materiality as a viable solution. Rather, her poetry offers a means by which language can de-familiarize, re-configure, and, ultimately, transform the material in such a way that it becomes a vital necessity, and no longer an encumbering obstacle, to spiritual fulfillment. Such engagement with the transformative properties of language makes her work modern indeed. Re-framing Loy's poetry as an essential contribution to modernism, rather than as an alternative or reaction to a male-dominated movement, broadens the understanding of literary modernism as a movement that revised the topics of poetry just as much as its language.

Even while they shunned the domestic and material concerns that had governed Victorian literature, many of the new century's most prominent artists and thinkers seriously considered materiality when seeking out viable spiritual models for the current age. Some of the twentieth century's most popular religious and philosophical movements provided Loy with the means to work through her own ideas of the material and the metaphysical. Mabel Dodge encouraged her to read Henri Bergson, whose *Matter and Memory* aimed for a middle ground between arguments that privileged either the physical or the metaphysical as the truth

of the mind's perception.<sup>16</sup> Loy's interest in Christian Science, which began when a practitioner helped improve her daughter's infant paralysis and continued when Gertrude Stein encouraged her to attend its services in Florence, likely familiarized her with Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy's position on the material versus the spiritual.<sup>17</sup> To Eddy, who asserted that "Spirit and matter no more co-mingle than light and darkness" and instructed followers to "silence the material senses" during prayer, the material was no more than an illusion preventing one from accessing the metaphysical.<sup>18</sup> Futurist F.T. Marinetti, with whom Loy had an affair, promoted, on the other extreme, a complete obsession with the material, even arguing that artistic and intellectual progress could only occur by destroying any material evidence of the past.<sup>19</sup>

Loy, however, challenged such ideas even as she incorporated them prominently into her own work. Her concept of the material did acknowledge that it can hinder spiritual and

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<sup>16</sup> For Loy's relationship with Mabel Dodge and their study of Bergson among other up and coming twentieth century philosophers, see chap. 7, "Delightful Dilettanti (Florence, 1910-13)" and chap. 8, "Risorgimento (Florence, 1913-14)" in Carolyn Burke's *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 119-141; 143-163. In his desire to affirm "both the reality of spirit and the reality of matter," Bergson inspires Loy's own insistence on affirming both. However, Bergson's aim "to lessen greatly, if not to overcome, the theoretical difficulties which have always beset dualism" also suggests that more reconciliation between matter and spirit are possible than Loy implies in her work.

<sup>17</sup> According to Burke, Loy's conversion to Christian Science began when a practitioner called Mrs. Morrison prescribed Loy's daughter Joella a diet of beef broth and donkey's milk, which "produced some improvement" in Joella's paralysis (117). Although Loy had already been attend Christian Science services regularly by the time she met Stein, the church's popularity with Stein and other respected artists in Florence encouraged her to remain. Moreover, because even the most avant-garde circles still regarded Jews with suspicion, Christian Science provided Loy, Stein, and others with "an acceptable alternative to traditional religions" (131).

<sup>18</sup> Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, 1875 (Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1994), 281 and 15. Eddy situates the exclusion of materiality at the very center of Christian Science practice with such assertions as "Christian Science destroys material beliefs through the understanding of Spirit, and the thoroughness of this work determines health" (186) and "Divine Science, rising above physical theories, excludes matter, resolves things into thoughts, and replaces the objects of material sense with spiritual ideas" (121).

<sup>19</sup> See F. T. Marinetti, "The Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism," in *F. T. Marinetti: Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus, trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2006). Proclaiming the futurist mission "to free our country from the endless number of museums that everywhere cover her like countless graveyards," Marinetti saw no value in preserving any material productions of the past: "Admiring an old painting is just like pouring our purest feelings into a funerary urn, instead of projecting them far and wide, in violent outbursts of creating and of action" (14-15).

intellectual growth, but her answer lay neither in the evasion nor destruction of materiality. One of her earliest poems, “The Prototype” composed in 1914, mocks the Christian denial of physical suffering by calling attention to the hypocrisy of a crowd worshipping a wax icon of the Christ infant on Christmas Eve while ignoring the welfare of an actual infant and its impoverished mother.<sup>20</sup> “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots” juxtaposes the idealization that “Love is a god / White with soft wings” against the actual economic exchange that marriage involves.<sup>21</sup> Once Loy calls attention to the material circumstances that infringe upon an idealized rendering, they remain an indelible part of the emotional affect or spiritual experience at stake. Unlike Bergson, Loy has no interest in finding a way to mediate the uncomfortable and unwelcome clashing of the material with the metaphysical ethereal; her interest lies not in settling an abstract argument between philosophical schools, but in foregrounding the profound ways that spiritual perceptions and aspirations must contend with the material obstacles that surround one’s daily life. Whereas Yeats’s ponderings in such late poems as “Vacillation” and “A Dialogue of Self and Soul” engage the material and spiritual in civilized debate, Loy nods to the more violent clash in the works of such younger modernists as James Joyce. In “Joyce’s Ulysses,” Loy declares that “The Spirit / is impaled upon the phallus,” powerfully suggesting that the spirit is not only bound to the flesh, but—as a concrete object vulnerable to impalement—is itself comprised of material substance (ll. 16-17).<sup>22</sup> No imagined Byzantium, no return to belief in the gods’ direct intervention, no prescribed reading list of ancient classics—essentially, nothing that Yeats, Pound, or Eliot would offer as antidote—could mitigate the all-encompassing force of the material.

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<sup>20</sup> Loy, “The Prototype,” in *Three Early Poems*, 1914, in *LLB*, 221-222.

<sup>21</sup> Loy, “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots,” in *LLB*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Loy, “Joyce’s Ulysses,” in *LLB*, 88.



Given the masculinized and sexualized violence of this image, it is tempting to read the spirit's impalement as resignation to an unwanted preoccupation with materiality. Loy's own ambitions, after all, were thwarted by the circumstances of a patriarchal society as well as by the individual men with whom she was involved—most prominently, her unhappy marriage to Stephen Haweis.<sup>23</sup> While many of her poems do lament the prohibitive and oppressive impact that material circumstances have on women's professional, personal, and spiritual aspirations, there are just as many instances where the poet's awareness of this relationship benefits the subject described. Once accepted that the material will always remain an inseparable part of metaphysical access and experience, materiality becomes not something to be lamented, but rather to be engaged with in pursuit of a presence beyond it.

**“Accurate Draperies”: Moving Beyond the Material Obsessions of the Victorian Age**

In *The Anglo-Mystics of the Rose*, a selection of poems excerpted from *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* for publication in *Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables*, Loy's aim to achieve metaphysical transcendence through the bounds of the material is especially apparent. Based on Loy's own “mongrel” upbringing with her British Christian mother and Jewish father, the original collection chronicles the intellectual and artistic development of a girl called Ova. Although Loy provides no clear explanation as to why the poem's title changed from “Anglo-Mongrels” to “Anglo-Mystics,” the use of “mystics” highlights Ova's

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<sup>23</sup> Loy and Haweis met as art students in Paris. As Burke depicts it, they began an ambivalent friendship which consisted mainly of a friend asking Loy to “look after” Haweis, and of Haweis asking Loy to loan him nearly all of her allowance which he could not repay. According to Burke, Loy did not quite know what happened on the night that led to her pregnancy; she recalled only that she “fell into a hypnotized state while Stephen read to her” and “Awakening the next morning, she found herself half undressed and Stephen naked beside her” (84). Loy's father agreed to provide financial support for Loy and Haweis under the strict terms that they were to get married immediately and remain so (86).

religious education and spiritual development, as do the excerpts selected for *Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables*.<sup>24</sup>

However, Ova's life also demonstrates that Loy was not blind to the context from which her male peers were so anxious to leave the parlor and kitchen behind in the literary endeavors of the new century. In the Victorian home of her childhood, Ova's ability to seek any kind of spiritual, artistic, or intellectual endeavor is blocked by the constraints of the ideas and behaviors her mother deems appropriate for the type of home she wishes to keep. The space of Ova's home manifests her mother's deep anxieties that they belong to a proper British household, complete with the material objects that compose it. In the first poem of *Anglo-Mystics*, "Enter Esau," this anxiety extends to the mother of Ova's future husband. Though from a much wealthier background, the mother of "Esau Penfold," based on Loy's husband Stephen Haweis and his late mother, is no less anxious that the objects in her house tell a specific story about her family and play a role in cultivating her place as a member of London's literati. Though framed in late-nineteenth-century American culture, Thorstein Veblen's theory of "conspicuous consumption," a term coined to describe the prominent acquisition of material goods as a means of either maintaining or achieving social status, aptly fits the mindset of Patricia Penfold and Ova's mother. For both women, there is no higher goal for their domestic spaces than to elevate their social circumstances.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> According to Burke, when Jonathan Williams compiled poems for *Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables*, he excluded most of the poems about Loy's parents from *Anglo-Mongrels*. While she describes Williams' selections as "the sequence having been retitled "The Anglo-Mystics of the Rose," there is no indication of whether this change was made by Williams or Loy.

<sup>25</sup> See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1912). Veblen describes not only the goals of conspicuous consumption to display the privilege of the leisure class, but the extreme pressure felt by all classes to retain its customs: "No class of society, not even the most abjectly poor, foregoes all customary conspicuous consumption" (85). Not only are "high-bred manners and ways of living" means of practicing conspicuous consumption (75), but so are "The more reputable, 'presentable' portion of middle-class household paraphernalia" which serve as "apparatus for putting in evidence the vicarious leisure rendered by the housewife" (85). Such domestic spaces as those described in Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels*, therefore,

“Enter Esau” attests to the effects of such obsession with material display at a reception held for Patricia Penfold’s latest publication, *The Infant Aesthete*, to the point where the people in the house become objects for display themselves and the book’s content is devoid of any significance save for its role as an object presented to enhance Ms. Penfold’s status. Calling attention to the trend of favoring appearance of artistic merit over its actual presence, this is perhaps the poem in which Loy comes closest to reaching Pound and Eliot’s anxiety over the obsession with materiality in modern British society:

Patricia Penfold’s preface      Fresh  
 from the publishers  
 the ‘author’s  
 copy’      circulating at the small  
 and informal reception  
 for wiseacres and waisted-women  
 ‘To view’      Esau and his authoress  
 in their accurate draperies      for Lady Bliss  
 ‘s classical costume ball (ll. 4-12)<sup>26</sup>

That it is Patricia Penfold’s preface, and that the preface is “fresh,” is of far more importance than the preface’s contents. The “face” of “preface,” as followed by “fresh,” enhances the predominance of the author instead of her work, which is itself reduced to an object for display. Employing a technique similar to Pound’s in *The Cantos*, Loy offsets in quotes the colloquialisms that distort a society’s ability to understand what makes a piece of artistic

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are responsible for projecting a very specific image of the housewife’s status and in so doing, represent the household as a space where privilege and leisure reign supreme.

<sup>26</sup> Loy, “Enter Esau,” in *The Anglo-Mystics of the Rose*, in *Lunar Baedeker and Time-Tables*, ed. Jonathan Williams (Highlands, NC: 1958), 53 (hereafter cited in text as *AMR/LBTT*).

production valuable; producing the “author’s copy” “to view” is the main event of the ball, not whether the actual contents of the book are worth reading. Indeed, the “author’s copy” itself is merely a means by which to display Ms. Penfold and her son; the placement of “To view” directly adjacent to ‘Esau and his authoress’ conveys what is really on display. Even if the book were to actually be read rather than viewed superficially, a group sarcastically dismissed as “wiseacres and waisted women” does not seem to be in any position to judge a book’s literary merit. “Waisted” also carries the crypt word “wasted,” possibly applicable to the potential of these women whose only role is to appear in the properly “waisted” dress for these kinds of parties, or to the author herself who seems to be spending more time on promoting her work than producing it. Wearing “accurate draperies” as though pieces of furniture that must suit the room’s decor, “Esau and his authoress” are reduced to objects that exist solely to compliment this scene. The use of “accurate,” conveys the severity of dress selection in this scene while simultaneously mocking its inflated importance; the worst that could happen should clothing be “inaccurate” is that the wearer might not be invited to similar events in the future—events which, as the previous lines imply, are probably not worth attending. Finally, the last lines of the stanza complete Esau and his mother’s status as objects for proper presentation in this scene. The party occurs not for Ms. Penfold’s book as we are first led to believe, but for “Lady Bliss / ’s classical costume ball.” The enjambment severing Lady Bliss from her apostrophe forces the reader to drag out the “s” sound, recalling the sound of whispering gossip likely to occur at this sort of gathering. Moreover, it foregrounds Lady Bliss as the person whom this display is intended to celebrate, thus making a very modern statement on the declining value of the literary arts in modernity: the power of

evaluation falls not to the one who can produce the best literary work, but to the one who can throw the best ball.

Esau, being the child of the authoress on display, has a particularly important role to undertake, a role he shares with other children raised in a Victorian household. Being posed for a portrait in a highly affected and unnatural position, his position as a displayed object in his mother's life is not merely implied, but declared explicitly in the next stanza:

The boy      one bare arm  
 thrust through a gossamer  
 toga    of Tyrian rose  
 is holding out an orb

--There is a portrait of him in that pose labeled 'Esau holding an orb' (ll. 13-16)<sup>27</sup>  
 Loy's skillful use of spacing foregrounds the complete loss of the boy as a cogent individual, even as a human being. There is no actual relationship delineated between the boy and the bare arm, not even an indication of whether this arm belongs to him. Such objectification recalls the theme of Christina Rossetti's sonnet "In an Artist's Studio," which calls out the male artist's tendency to depict his female model "Not as she is, but as she fills his dream," yet expresses this theme in a poetic rendering that is distinctly modern.<sup>28</sup> Because the gossamer material, the toga cut, and the Tyrian orb color are separated by a line and a space, each image is lingered on and isolated from the images that come before and after. Loy has

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>28</sup> Christina Rossetti, "In an Artist's Studio," in *Complete Poems*, ed. R. W. Crump (New York: Penguin, 1990), 796.

effectively made what is supposed to recall a Victorian, pre-Raphaelite portrait into a Cubist painting. The composite whole of a docile Grecian child holding out an orb is interrupted by the disjointed cluster of fragments that call attention to their individual features even as they render the unified composition. Such emphasis on the material objects that simultaneously eclipse and foreground Esau recalls the child portrait obsession of the nineteenth century that Bill Brown has described in the explanation of his term “thing theory.” Defining “things” as “the objects that are materialized from and in the physical world that is, or had been, at hand,” Brown analyzes an 1892 portrait by John Singer Sargent that depicts children posed in various positions around gigantic porcelain urns.<sup>29</sup> What Brown finds particularly striking about the portrait is “the way that it discloses how children, dolled-up, can be beloved as material treasures, and how treasures can become objects of something like parental affection.”<sup>30</sup> Posed with decorative household objects—sometimes with objects larger than themselves—to indicate their parents’ socio-economic status, these children are meant to be viewed as indicators of their parents’ class, loved more for their status as precious objects than as human beings. These lines, with the material objects physically interrupting the picture’s narrative of “The boy is holding out an orb,” articulates the child portrait trend in Victorian households in a way that only a modernized sense of language and aesthetics can. As the Cubist technique allows the viewer to see the multiple fragments that contribute to the coherent image, Loy’s poetic syntax presents both the portrait intended for display and the myopic obsession with the material markers of opulence essential to making the display

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<sup>29</sup> Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

work. In this way, Loy suggests that perhaps twentieth-century technique is not as anathema to nineteenth-century subject matter as her peers might think.

As Loy would later observe, Esau Penfold's model Stephen Haweis remained permanently affected by his mother's taste in material luxury. Though he himself had to borrow money from Loy and others to maintain his lifestyle, he retained a sense that possession of his mother's objects, and of her family name, guaranteed him a certain stature regardless of his own professional success. Loy's novel *Esau Penfold* features a caricature of Haweis expecting a female visitor to be impressed with his mother's objects.<sup>31</sup> A similar fate might have befallen the female child, based on Loy, in the second part of "Enter Esau." She, too, is made to pose for a portrait that prioritizes the material surrounding her:

A middle-class child

is propped upon a chair

of chestnut cretonne

painted with maroon

acanthus leaves and big buff water-lilies (ll. 62-66)<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Caring for his mother's things as a means of preserving her memory is of utmost importance to Esau Penfold in the novel version. Drafts from Chapter One describe him "caressing a thing ever so soft and fragile," what he calls a set of "little dresses" that belonged to his mother, telling the female protagonist Sophia: "These are American and cost five francs. 'Observe,' he said 'how delicate I am in handling them ————— So used my mother to stretch her ancient lace, having washed it first in a suds ————— upon a bottle, and stand it in the sun to bleach.'" Loy, "Esau Penfold," n.d., YCAL MSS 6, Box 1, Folder 22, The Mina Loy Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. Burke also attempts to capture Loy's experience when visiting Haweis's Paris studio for the first time: "Stephen began opening drawers full of family treasures. These relics were mementos of his mother, whose death seemed not so much a disappearance from his life as a dematerialization. There was the sleeve of the strawberry satin dress his mother had worn when presented to Queen Victoria, There were place cards from his mother's dinner parties, inscribed with the names of important Londoners. Not only had Stephen saved his mother's clothing and amber beads (the ones he always wore), but he also venerated the objects that she had treasured" (82).

<sup>32</sup> Loy, "Ova Begins to Take Notice," in *AMR/LBTT*, 55.

As in the description of Esau's portrait, the spaces and enjambments call attention to each aspect of the color, texture and pattern composing the material object featured, to the point where the isolated and individualized features of the chair, not the child, are what the viewer is meant to see. Like Esau and his model Haweis, this child develops an obsession with the material objects that surround her. The next poem of *Anglo-Mystics*, "Ova Begins to Take Notice," depicts her constant pursuit, much to her mother's and nurse's chagrin, of the material objects that comprise the carefully kept domestic spaces. For Ova, however, these objects are not the end themselves, but a means by which she can engage with a realm transcending the bounds of the Victorian household and its strict standards of behavior that confine her, and beyond the bounds of what she is permitted to see and touch.

A typical toddler, Ova is enthralled by the as-yet unfamiliar objects surrounding her, and things a mature adult would take for granted as commonplace fascinate her. Moreover, her lack of knowledge as to these objects and their practical uses allows for these objects to be transformed in a way that would be otherwise impossible. As "the staring baby / stumbles to the fire" (ll. 10-11), a fireplace becomes "colour-thrusts / of the quintessent light" and "Elysian / fields of flame" (ll. 15-16; 19-20).<sup>33</sup> Stripped of any conception of their utilitarian and scientific function, "father's physic bottles" become a vehicle through which to see a "prismatic sun-show" (l. 55; 54).<sup>34</sup> De-familiarized through the use of a baby's perspective, the objects of science and of domesticity are equated and both become objects of a child's diversion, nothing more. Such a blatant removal of context answers criticism from such earlier reviewers as Conrad Aiken, who found Loy's more egregious uses of scientific

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 57.



discourse in her poems, what he described as “quasi-scientific pomposities,” as reason to dismiss her work in *Others*.<sup>35</sup> Writing from Ova’s stance, which cannot and will not distinguish between the fire that warms a room and the physic bottles intended for more “scientific” (and historically masculine) work, Loy has no interest in being “quasi” scientific—and, in fact, has no interest in being scientific at all. Instead, she offers a position from which an encounter with a particular material object can yield an alternative and alien experience to its intended function. Ova’s encounters, though brief they may be, provide hope for an alternative to the fastidious relegation of the material to its “accurate” context and presentation as seen in “Enter Esau.” Just because one’s world is so small as to see nothing beyond a Victorian parlor does not mean that one is prohibited from having experiences that transcend it.

In fact, the narrow perspective of a toddler, whose correlations between language and material object are just starting to evolve, enables Loy to embrace a cornerstone of modernist poetics: the materiality of language itself. By calling attention to words as having properties of sound and shape in their own right, modernism aimed to increase consciousness of the relationship between the words on the page and the ideas they were charged with conveying. If accomplished, familiar words could be used to articulate new ideas; in turn, ideas grown tired from expected and conventional articulations could find improved and more effective expression in new combinations of words. The modernist re-invention of the symbolic rose, which I discuss in my readings of Yeats’s early poems in Chapter 1, provides an especially powerful example of this movement to free words from hackneyed connotations. Besides being an active participant in this re-invention with her use of the rose in *Anglo-Mongrels*,

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<sup>35</sup> Aiken’s 1919 review is cited in Conover’s introduction to *LLB*, xv.

Loy was also a close friend and ardent admirer of one of its most significant founders.<sup>36</sup> In “Gertrude Stein,” Loy praises Stein as a “Curie / of the laboratory” for her ability “to extract / a radium of the word.”<sup>37</sup> For Stein, the word constituted a physical piece of matter in its own right, deserving attention in and of itself apart from its function in a particular sentence or phrase—and, moreover, separate from the needless constraint imposed by most punctuation. While the ability to free a word from its expected associative properties is an extreme challenge for adults, making pieces like Stein’s “Tender Buttons” notoriously difficult to read, it comes more naturally to a child such as Ova, who, in “Ova Begins to Take Notice,”

finds  
nothing objective new  
and only words  
mysterious. (ll. 108-111)<sup>38</sup>

Although Ova’s status as a child confines objective experience to the bounds of her household, her means of expression is not confined to any particular set of words. Having experienced the world through objects first, there is still some mystery as to how these objects might be articulated and presented—even while the objects themselves never change. These words and their functions are so mysterious, in fact, that to Ova they actually become objects themselves, their own properties worthy of consideration and discovery. When “a new word comes to her” (l. 112) she “watches / for its materialization” (l. 114-115). Ova’s

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<sup>36</sup> My first chapter provides a more extensive discussion of the various send-ups that Loy and her contemporaries gave to the symbolic rose. Loy especially calls attention to the rose as a symbol of British hegemony, in Anglo-Mongrel’s title and elsewhere. “Joyce’s Ulysses,” for example, beckons the Irish modernist to “with Ireland’s wings / flap pandemoniums / of Olympian prose / and satirize / the imperial Rose / of Gaelic perfumes” (ll. 21-26). See *LLB*, 88-89.

<sup>37</sup> Loy, “Gertrude Stein,” *LLB*, 94.

<sup>38</sup> Loy, “Ova Begins to Take Notice,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 59.

receptivity to this new word recalls how Mabel Dodge in her correspondence to Loy once described Stein's process, declaring that Stein's method "was to wait for words to 'rise from the sub-consciousness to the surface of her mind.'"<sup>39</sup> Focused on the word itself as an object that "materializes," rather than on what object the word could or should convey, Ova embodies Stein's attentiveness to the materiality of language so as to remain open to new possibilities for meaning.

In this poem, the word that "materializes" before her is diarrhea, overheard as "iarrhea" during a diaper-changing for her infant sister. With no other guidance from the adults as to the word's meaning, other than "It is quite green," Ova must surmise for herself the word's significance:

"It is  
quite green" She hears

The cerebral  
mush    convolving in her skull  
an obsessional  
colour-fetish

veers  
to the souvenir  
of the delirious ball  
deleted

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<sup>39</sup> Burke, 146.

in the ivied

dust

lets fall

an optic-ray

upon the cat's eyes horse-shoe

pinned to a bended bust

And instantly

this fragmentary

simultaneity

of ideas

embodies

the word. (ll. 145-164)<sup>40</sup>

Ova's conception of this word may be influenced by, but not confined to, the adults from whom she first learns it. While the placement of "She hears" ties it to the mutterings of the changing table, its capitalization and syntax could also link it with her own "cerebral mush." With the use of "mush" and its connotations of more crass and taboo bodily functions, Ova's brain is also materialized, rendered an object capable of being represented as possessing the same grotesque features as the "iarrhea" it conceptualizes.

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<sup>40</sup> Loy, "Ova Begins to Take Notice," in *AMR/LBTT*, 61.

Although her “Songs to Joannes” has received far more attention for its graphic emphasis on the taboo, awkward physical aspects of sexuality, this suggestion that the human brain might share physical properties of excrement also merits consideration as a revolutionary poetic move. By rendering Ova’s understanding of language as a very material process, Loy debunks the idea that only certain classes of people can access the knowledge that language provides. However bound by material circumstances, the acquisition of knowledge remains a material, physical function for all—one that comes perhaps as naturally to the skull as a soiled diaper comes to an infant. While Pound and Eliot never ceased to warn readers of the many years of laborious discipline involved in the acquisition of knowledge through language, the verbs that punctuate the start of Loy’s next two stanzas, “veers” and “lets fall” connote a severe lack of disciplined direction. Rather than allowing pre-existing expectations to determine how the word is absorbed and processed, Ova’s acquisition of *iarrhea* bears out Steven Pinker’s assertion that speech perception is controlled by acoustics and not by knowledge of context. Citing the oronyms of children’s songs, phrases such as “I scream” and “ice cream” that can be divided up with different boundaries when heard, Pinker points out that we “simply hallucinate word boundaries when we reach the edge of a stretch of sound that matches some entry in our mental dictionary.”<sup>41</sup> Having no “mental dictionary” by which to situate this new word, Ova cuts off the “d” and begins the new word at “i” for *iarrhea*. Absent of context, she seems open to however the day’s objects might lead her to an understanding of the word. Moreover, in spite of its being described as “instantly” occurring, this accidentally directed process takes time, as evidenced by the space it consumes on the page. For Loy, a word’s “materialization” not only calls attention to its

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<sup>41</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Language Instinct* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1994), 173.

status as an object apart from the associations to which it has been proscribed, but also foregrounds the material process of placing words in meaningful, effective relationships to the experiences surrounding them. Without predetermined contexts to rely on, one is left alone to decide how a word might be interpreted. If, as Loy declared in “Modern Poetry,” “The structure of all poetry is the movement that an active individuality makes in expressing itself,” then the structure of Ova’s interpretive process within Loy’s poem must account for her lack of experience with the “mysterious” words she is just discovering.<sup>42</sup> In Ova, a persona for whom much of the English language is still foreign, Loy’s work demonstrates how the type of experimentalism that Pound and Eliot, writing from adult personas while addressing an educated readership, was possible in the more traditional, narrative structure that modernism deemed necessary to disrupt.

That this structure should yield something richer, more ambiguous, than it would were the word’s expected associations immediately grasped is significant as well. What results from this process is a “fragmentary / simultaneity / of ideas” that “embodies / the word” (l. 160-64).<sup>43</sup> Ideas not only have a definitive action on the word—rather than the word acting on or embodying a pre-determined idea—but are rendered similarly to the ideas Loy presents in the children’s portraits of “Enter Esau”: both as fragments and as complete entities. What occurs with Esau’s portrait is, therefore, distinctly characteristic of the modernist aesthetic that strove to distinguish the capabilities of meaning for poetry from that of prose. Such a challenge entailed a great many careful decisions to be made, be they in line breaks that need mimic neither the structure of a sentence nor that of long-established poetic

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<sup>42</sup> Loy, “Modern Poetry,” in *LLB*, 157.

<sup>43</sup> Loy, “Ova Begins to Take Notice,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 61.

meters, in phrasings that would convey a character's essence in ten lines as memorably as in a 600-page Dickensian novel, or in words that could foreground their own visual and auditory attributes even while remaining instrumental to the general representation of the poem's subject. While other high modernists dictate that these decisions improve with rigorous study (often in several different languages) for aspiring adult poets, Loy derives her technique from the perspective of a child lacking even the vocabulary of her native English language. Treating her discovery of a new word as she would any other material object of fascination, Ova derives a plethora of possibilities for meaning that might remain hidden to those with more education as to what "iarrhea" must mean. Such possibility pushes the limits of the relation between word to thing, refusing to take this relation for granted as a fixed, stable correlation.

That words can and should "materialize" with unprecedented meanings and contexts remains a priority to Loy the adult poet as well. Merging her British childhood with her immersion in the art scenes of Florence and New York, her Jewish heritage with her Christian education, Loy engaged discourses and vocabularies that were indeed as "mongrel" as the title of her first collection implies. Such appropriations of the English language into new contexts holds powerful implications for the influence of Loy's work and its resistance to privileged cultural and linguistic assumptions. Marjorie Perloff has suggested that Loy "invents" an "intricately polyglot language that challenges the more conventional national idiom of her British (as well as her French or Italian, or...even her American) contemporaries."<sup>44</sup> To Elisabeth Frost, Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels* "counters the determining

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<sup>44</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "English as a 'Second' Language: Mina Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*," in *MLWP*, 133.

power of culture” so as to render culture “a potential determining system, yet one that can also be challenged.”<sup>45</sup> Pound upheld Loy as the ultimate example of *logopoeia*, a term he coined to describe when a poet “employs words not only for their direct meaning” but also for “the context we *expect* to find with the words, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play.”<sup>46</sup> However, Pound’s term presupposes a certain type of speaker, writer, and reader—all of whom operate from a place of shared knowledge—that does not encompass the circumstances of a speaker such as Ova, who is immersed in the adults’ world yet not always privy to the contexts used for making meaning. Through Ova, Loy does more than challenge the contexts of words’ conventional uses: she rejects the assumption that one must have conventional knowledge in order to have meaningful reading experiences.

### **A “Ludicrous Halo” or a “Circle of Pain”? Mina Loy and the Material Realities of Childbirth**

While a child speaker might absorb words innocent of their proscribed connotations, Loy is well aware that her adult subjects—and her adult readers—cannot. Sometimes, when a word “materializes,” its expected connotations and conventional contexts can be so prohibitive as to allow no room for contemplation apart from these contexts, or beyond the material circumstances from which they emerge. In “Parturition,” a poem composed at a time when the physical details of childbirth were still taboo, Loy faces the ultimate challenge for a modernist poet: the task of directing readers’ attention in a way that focuses on the text’s presentation of an event rather than on a pre-conceived notion of anything the event ought to

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<sup>45</sup> Elisabeth A. Frost, “Mina Loy’s ‘Mongrel’ Poetics,” in *MLWP*, 150.

<sup>46</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 25.



signify or reveal. Whereas Pound took up this challenge by attempting to revise prevailing understandings of specific historical figures and events in *The Cantos*, Loy's shorter and more tightly focused poem aims to revise how a general concept of the recurring event of childbirth is viewed. Titling her poem with a word that denotes the arduous process of creating a literary text as much as it denotes that of birthing a child, Loy was well aware of the difficulty her poetic endeavor would involve. Her *Feminist Manifesto* called for a paradigm in which women would no longer be divided "into two classes the mistress, & the mother" when "every well-balanced and developed woman knows that it is not true."<sup>47</sup> Motherhood was idealized, but the process by which a woman arrived at that role was anathema, a source of shame that could not even be mentioned. As Tara Prescott has observed, in even addressing the process of childbirth directly Loy took an unprecedented move in late Victorian literary culture, since, "Just as a woman's 'delicate condition' was euphemized out of sight and hearing, pregnancy and childbirth endured a similar 'confinement' in literature: referenced or alluded to, but never fully revealed, examined, or celebrated, and certainly not from a woman's point of view."<sup>48</sup> Should the woman be unmarried at the time of conception, as was Loy for her first daughter, the urge to conceal the circumstances of pregnancy and childbirth intensified commensurately. Any attention at all on the advent of motherhood as a physical process, one that did not require marriage, automatically carried an emphasis on the circumstances by which the child was conceived and a judgment of the mother's sexual behavior. When fin de siècle and early modernist writers did embrace the topic of sex and of the unplanned pregnancies that could result, they

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<sup>47</sup> Loy, "The Feminist Manifesto," in *LLB*, 154.

<sup>48</sup> Tara Prescott, "Moths and Mothers: Mina Loy's 'Parturition'," *Women's Studies* 39 (2010), 195.

still emphasized the material as shocking. What this topic might reveal about the changing cultural landscape of England at the turn of the century was of much greater importance than a focus on the topic itself. How, then, can a poet write about the physical experience of childbirth in this era, calling attention to the material contours of this event as worthy of examination in its own right and freed from political discussions on either extreme about the place that sexuality and motherhood were meant to occupy in the new century? In order to render a poetic expression that maintains a sharp focus on the materiality of this experience, Loy's solution is to make this experience evade definitive expression altogether.

The poem begins by describing the experience of pain as something that, although physical, lacks a clearly defined space in which it is located. Loy's speaker describes her experience thus:

I am the centre

Of a circle of pain

Exceeding its boundaries in every direction. (ll. 1-3)<sup>49</sup>

This pain is at once finite and perpetual, able to be described as a particular shape but also in no way confined to that shape. Just as the stanza's last line exceeds the boundaries proscribed by the lines before it, the speaker's pain exceeds the poet's quest for a consistently defined structure. The statement that "The business of the bland sun / Has no affair with me" recalls the "Fear no more the heat o' the sun" from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, cited by T. E. Hulme as a prime example of how even a verse that conveys something beyond the bounds of man's physical scope can remain "faithful to the conception of a limit" by somehow "standing

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<sup>49</sup> Loy, "Parturition," in *LLB*, 4.

outside it, and not quite believing it.”<sup>50</sup> With a pain “exceeding its boundaries,” however, Loy has no interest in respecting limits to experiences in the physical world or maintaining a distance between her speaker and the incredulity of this experience. Addressing a topic that is at once very real yet inaccessible to a significant portion of the human population (and more specifically to the men who dictated the standards of literary taste in Loy’s era), Loy refuses to mitigate its incredulity by “standing outside it.” Instead, she boldly suggests that a lack of limits does not compromise a verse’s authenticity.

Moreover, Loy takes care to ensure that this experience stays somewhat evasive.

Exactly where the pain originates remains untraceable:

Locate an irritation            without

It is                                    within

Within

It is without

The sensitized area

Is identical            with the extensity

Of intension (ll. 11-17)<sup>51</sup>

The very phrasings that should provide direction and clarity here work actively against the achievement of either. The prepositions that should provide an answer promote more obscurity, lacking both objects and definitive placements on the page. They can be read in multiple directions, in a straight line down the page or attached to the phrases that introduce

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<sup>50</sup> T. E. Hulme, “Romanticism and Classicism,” in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 1924), 143, Google Books, accessed March 5, 2013, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=QuvgAwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PA119.w.1.1.69>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

them. Although “the sensitized area” can be introduced by “It is without,” the enjambment suggests that this reading is not definitive, as does the enjambment separating this area from “is identical.” Just as the pain has no boundaries, the syntax conveying it provides no definitive limits for where one phrase ends and the other begins. Repetition of the weak, declarative verb “is” further contributes to the pain’s ubiquitous force; neither the pain’s source nor its effect can be fully comprehended. In spite of the last three lines providing some sort of description of this sensitized area—which may or may not be the source of this irritation—the difficulty of perceiving it is compounded even further. Although “intension” denotes a degree of physical force, it also refers to “the internal quality of a notion or concept”; moreover, there is also suggested the crypt word of “intention,” as in the purpose or reason behind a particular action or expression. Both the irritation and the “sensitized area” (since the “Is identical” phrase can be read attached to either) can be “identical with the extensity” of a physical movement or with some sort of unknown and abstract internal quality that comprises them. Pound urged new poets to “go in fear of abstractions,” but in this case neither the concrete nor the abstract conceptualization of the word “intension” does anything for a clearer, more precise articulation of the experience described. A reading of intension as “intention,” however, posits that such obscurity is not unwelcome. The degree to which we understand the pain’s “intension” is determined by the poet’s “intention,” the will to sharpen or to confuse the reader’s focus on the event described, and on the material, physical circumstances of this event. Loy’s “intention” to provide multiple, equally ambiguous, options for reading this labor scene allows for complete immersion in the excruciating and limitless chaos of the speaker’s experience—instead of on the discourses of

shock and scandal that would otherwise envelope a poem about childbirth in the late Victorian era.

Loy's bold embrace of abstraction only tightens as the poem unfolds. As the birthing process continues, the speaker's descriptions become steeped in metaphorical expression. After "climbing a distorted mountain of agony" and finding that "another mountain is growing up" once she reaches the summit, she hears her own voice as "the gurgling of a crucified wild beast" that "Comes from so far away" (ll. 41; 47; l. 56). Pound's early warning that poetry should become "balderdash—a sort of embroidery for dilettantes and women" if it "ceases to cleave close to the thing" is fully realized in Loy's use of metaphor: the poem does indeed address women's experience exclusively and does so in language far away from the topic at hand.<sup>52</sup> Yet, as her speaker observes, such metaphors make her articulation of the experience more accurate, not less:

And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth  
Is no part of myself  
There is a climax in sensibility  
When pain surpassing itself  
Becomes Exotic. (ll. 57-61)<sup>53</sup>

Loy's descriptions move further away from the event the poem sets out to describe because the pain of labor is far away—from anything the speaker can conceive of as actually happening to her own body under ordinary circumstances. The only way to express it, and to bear it, is to remove it from the material reality of her body and displace it into other

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<sup>52</sup> Ezra Pound, "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," in *Selected Prose, 1900-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), 41.

<sup>53</sup> Loy, "Parturition," in *LLB*, 5.

contexts. In order to modernize the perception of childbirth, and divorce it from tired Victorian pruderies, Loy must flout one of the most prominent doctrines of modernist poetics. By removing her experience from the discourses of obstetrics, anatomy, or sexuality that would “cleave close” to the experience of childbirth, Loy lessens the risk of compromising the speaker’s narration with readers’ preconceptions of an event which they may or may not have ever experienced. Similarly to how Pound and Eliot decontextualize pieces of histories and mythologies familiar to an educated Western readership, Loy defamiliarizes an event that readers would presume to understand in terms of the culture’s prevailing narratives of women, motherhood, and sexuality.

Once the pain has subsided and the baby is born, the speaker can now identify with the respectable role of mother, one that makes her a figure of almost religious reverence in Victorian culture. Recalling the lines of a Catholic rosary prayer, she describes herself as being “absorbed / Into / The was—is—ever—shall—be / Of cosmic reproductivity” (ll. 105-106).<sup>54</sup> While aligning herself with the ultimate omnipotence and permanence of the Trinity seems initially a source of empowerment, the poem’s final religious references, which compare the new mother’s room to a church, are significantly more ambivalent:

The next morning  
 Each woman-of-the-people  
 Tip-toeing the red pile of the carpet  
 Doing hushed service  
 Each woman-of-the-people  
 Wearing a halo

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 7.

A ludicrous little halo

Of which she is sublimely unaware (ll. 125-132)<sup>55</sup>

Whereas no sense of time or place has been delineated previously, there is now a clear time marked that separates the woman's experience of labor from the night before. Arriving, "the next morning," these women are ignorant of the pain that had to occur in order for them to be able to tip-toe delicately around the new mother and offer her congratulations. Morning is also the time during which most Christian church services occur, complementing the "hushed service" and the halos to render the bedroom a scene of religious worship. While the red carpet can also contribute to the church atmosphere by connoting the procession of an important church ceremony, it can also recall the blood from the birth that has just occurred, or even possibly the loss of virginity that would have had to occur for the child to be conceived. Both the physical details of conception and birth, and the ethereal reverence projected onto motherhood, remain an integral part of the speaker's experience—however much her visitors would like to ignore the former. That the women do "hushed service" to her as a mother only after the physicality can be hidden speaks to an issue Loy raised in her prose: the societal ideal that a woman separated her roles as "the mistress" and "the mother" when "every well-balanced & developed woman knows that it is not true."<sup>56</sup> The repeated phrase juxtaposing the singular modifier "each" with the collective phrase "woman-of-the-people" foregrounds the loss of these visitors' own individual identities as well. Like Ms. Penfold and the other women at Lady Bliss's costume ball, their significance lies solely in their ability to be "of the people," representing the social ideal of women rather than their

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>56</sup> Loy, "Feminist Manifesto," in *LLB*, 154.

individual selves. Whereas the speaker embraces her role as a spiritual figurehead in the schema of “cosmic reproductivity,” she is markedly less enthusiastic about the posturing on the part of her and her visitors that such a role demands on earth.

Even while these women help to perpetuate the dichotomy between the mistress and the mother, they remain ignorant of their complicity in fostering this unrealistic expectation. By describing their halos as “ludicrous,” derived from the Latin *luda* for “play,” Loy emphasizes both the falsity of this scene that idolizes the new mother and suggests, disturbingly, that this falsity is enjoyable, as any game of pretend would be; the playful alliterative quality provided by “little” also aligns the women with children playing at an adult scene of religious ritual that they do not fully understand. Moreover, as the speaker archly voices, they are not supposed to understand; being “sublimely unaware” sets them high above such vulgar physiological concerns as the physical processes of conception and childbirth. By rendering these women as elevated and aloof from material concerns, religious discourse also makes them more like children, thus placing them in the paradoxical and incongruous position of being both above and inferior to men. When the poem ends with an Old Testament statement on the creation of men and women as distinct beings, Loy therefore puts the sincerity of the speaker’s thanks for such separation into question:

I once heard in a church  
--Man and woman God made them—

Thank God. (ll. 135-137)<sup>57</sup>

While Loy’s invocation of these verses does not suggest favoring one sex over the other, readers having even a cursory familiarity with these lines in their original context would

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<sup>57</sup> Loy, “Parturition,” in *LLB*, 8.



know the significance of what was missing. The King James Version translates this excerpt of Genesis 1:27 as “So God created man in his owne Image, in the image of God created hee him; male and female created hee them.”<sup>58</sup> The American Standard Version, first appearing just 15 years prior to the poem’s publication, provides an identical translation: “And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.”<sup>59</sup> Lest one attempt to read “man” as encompassing all of mankind, any inclusivity is immediately squelched with the male pronoun “him.” Although God created both male and female, one was made in God’s image and the other was not. While the speaker could be thanking God sincerely for her ability to have the role of motherhood that her male counterparts can never experience, and possibly for the ability of “making” that belongs to poets as well as mothers, there also remains the ambivalent possibility of a more sarcastic form of thanks—a thanks for binding religious experience to an infallible sense of women’s inferiority. That the speaker be included into “The was—is—ever—shall—be / Of cosmic reproductivity,” and that even her worshippers are possessed of their own halos, is of little worth if they must pay the price of denying reproduction’s material realities that are anything but cosmic.

### **“Gentle Jesus” and the Sauce Tureen: Naming and Accessing the Divine in Material**

#### **Form**

While Victorian secular culture perpetuated the idealization of women as ostensibly “above” but in practice subordinate to men (e.g., Ruskin’s “Queens’ Gardens” and Coventry Patmore’s “The Angel in the House”), British women in the twentieth century still had to

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<sup>58</sup> Genesis 1.27, King James Version.

<sup>59</sup> Genesis 1.27, American Standard Version.

contend with this idea as embedded in religious tradition even as the New Woman was gaining ground. Loy, who constantly sought out religious and philosophical frameworks that would grant access to meaningful and transcendent metaphysical experience, displayed a particular interest in the issue of social inequality within such frameworks. Her “Aphorisms on Futurism,” written during her brief stint with the movement, declared that “the smallest people live in the greatest houses/ BUT the smallest person, potentially, is as great as the Universe” and that “HITHERTO the great man has achieved greatness by keeping the people small.”<sup>60</sup> When she later countered Marinetti’s futurism with *The Feminist Manifesto*, she rejected the pedestal-status of women from the Victorian age, “for / The man who lives a life in which his activities conform to a social code which is a protectorate of the feminine element—is no longer masculine.”<sup>61</sup> She found women’s “superior Inferiority” an especially troubling reality in Christian doctrine. Poems that feature Christian subjects constantly highlight the severe discrepancies between the spiritual authority conferred on religious leaders and the lack of actual significance they possessed in the households and communities in which they resided. While Ova’s mother is in charge of her education in “Religious Instruction,” the “atheist father” “*presides* over / the prattle of the church-goer” (ll. 5-6, emphasis mine) in their home.<sup>62</sup> The young male clergy, or “Baby Priests,” with their “Truncated juvenility” in “The Black Virginity” are not immune to this false assumption of authority either—nor is the god they serve (ll. 1; 10).<sup>63</sup> When reading Loy’s portrayals of the sentimentalized Christ figure on which Christian doctrine is based, it becomes clear that such

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<sup>60</sup> Mina Loy, “Aphorisms on Futurism,” in *LLB*, 150.

<sup>61</sup> Loy, “The Feminist Manifesto,” in *LLB*, 153.

<sup>62</sup> Loy, “Religious Instruction,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 67.

<sup>63</sup> Loy, “The Black Virginity,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 42.

false authority can be attributed to the longstanding complexity of materiality's place in the Christian tradition.

Whether as a symbolic representation of divine presence, as iconography to commemorate and provide a focal point for divine worship, or even as a vessel through which a direct manifestation of the divine can occur, the material has always been essential to Christian doctrine and worship. Although the extent to which bread and wine can manifest Christ's body and blood when a clergy member performs certain rituals varies widely between different Christian sects, these and other material objects remain a significant component of the Christian experience. In the concept of the Trinity, the divine assumes three different forms, each of which holds certain potential for material conceptualizations of the divine: the omniscient Father who assumes a more remote and ethereal presence, the Son who inhabits a human body and endures corporeal suffering on earth, and the Holy Spirit that is sometimes represented in the material form of a dove or a flame. As Eric Auerbach has observed, Christianity heralded the shift from sense-based to non-sense-based symbolism for literary as well as for religious culture.<sup>64</sup> Because modernism took literary (or what Pound termed "literwary") symbolism to task and questioned the ability of non-sense based symbolism to provide an accurate representation of the signified, the treatment of religious symbolism in modernist poetry situated around Christian discourse and tradition posed a challenge.<sup>65</sup> Just decades prior to the advent of high modernism, Yeats articulated the

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<sup>64</sup> Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 18.

<sup>65</sup> Literary modernism's relationship to symbolism is discussed in detail in my first chapter. Pound, for example, rejected what he called "literwary symbolism," in a letter to Dorothy Shakespear. See James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 78. Yeats, however, defends symbolism as valid and meaningful device for the arts as it is for religion in such essays as "The Symbolism of Poetry" and "Symbolism in Painting." See Yeats, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, *Early Essays*, ed. Richard J. Finneran and George Bornstein (New York: Scribner, 2007), 108-112; 113-121.

ongoing trend in literary and visual culture to elide all symbolism with allegory.<sup>66</sup> Although he explained why symbolism was actually superior to allegory, the former giving “bodiless things bodies” and the latter only imposing superfluous and replaceable forms and meanings, such conflation persisted into the twentieth century with modernism’s dismissal of the symbol as an inferior means of representation. While Loy was steeped in modernist techniques, she could not ignore the real significance of the material symbol in the Christian theology that provided a formative aspect of her own religious education as well as that of her character Ova. Moreover, Loy also had to take into consideration that even as Ova is taught to worship a god who can become anthropomorphized into a material form, she, like other girls educated under the proprieties of a Victorian household, is also grounded in a theology that positions her own flesh as adversarial to religious interests.

While such poems as “Parturition” and “The Prototype” overtly criticized the duality between the angelic, virginal mother figure and the sexualized mistress popularized in Victorian secular culture, Ova’s perspective shows how this denial of the body is sabotaging the religious faith it aspires to promote. The desire to anthropomorphize the divine Christ as an object of worship while simultaneously turning away from the realities of the human body creates a paradoxical relationship to the material in Ova’s religious upbringing that is difficult to reconcile. As Keith Tuma observes, such poems in *Anglo-Mongrels* that foreground Christ’s “failure to appear in contemporary world” are a direct and inevitable

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<sup>66</sup> Yeats, “Symbolism in Painting,” in *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 108. Samuel Taylor Coleridge had articulated this distinction between symbol and allegory, defining allegory “a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses” against the symbol which is “characterized by a translucence of the special in the individual” and “always partakes of the reality of which it is intelligible.” See *The Statesman’s Manual* (1916), 36-37, Google Books, 2010, accessed March 10, 2013, [http://books.google.com/books?id=40ISAAAAIAAJ&source=gbs\\_slider\\_cls\\_metadata\\_7\\_mylibrary](http://books.google.com/books?id=40ISAAAAIAAJ&source=gbs_slider_cls_metadata_7_mylibrary). Pound, however, seems to ascribe such abstracted “picture-language” to any kind of symbolism in literary production.

result of the “refusal of the body” propagated by the Victorian Evangelicalism of Loy’s mother.<sup>67</sup> Because Christianity teaches her to recognize and conceptualize the divine in human form, yet dismisses the human body for the sake of upholding a moral code, Ova is left with a Christ whose presence she cannot apprehend.

Ova’s religious upbringing foregrounds how the anthropomorphized yet invisible Christ figure presented to children cannot encapsulate the power that a divine figure must possess in order to gain the respect and awe of followers. What “Ova Has Governesses” describes as “an assumed acceptance / of the grace of God / defamed as human megalomania precludes any hope of a fulfilling religious experience (ll. 17-19).<sup>68</sup> In “Religious Instruction,” Christ is one who will

come with his light  
of toilless lilies  
“To say ‘fear  
not it is I’  
wanting us to be fearful. (ll. 24-28)<sup>69</sup>

In “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” Christ does not arrive at all, let alone with lilies. Instead, Ova has only “the gentle Jesus” who is too shy to reveal himself and whose unseen behavior is comparable to that of “a mouse or a fairy.”<sup>70</sup> Because the adults offer a form of the divine that predicated itself on timidity and invisibility, it seems to Ova that “The ghoulish clouds /

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<sup>67</sup> Keith Tuma, “Mina Loy’s Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,” in *Fishing by Obstinate Isles: Modern and Postmodern British Poetry and American Readers* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 146; 149.

<sup>68</sup> Loy, “Ova Has Governesses,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 64.

<sup>69</sup> Loy, “Religious Instruction,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 67.

<sup>70</sup> Loy, “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 65.

hide God” (ll. 48-49),<sup>71</sup> who, if he really were as powerful as others claim, “should / have made the world / a musical box” (ll. 51-53).<sup>72</sup> Loy posited in “Notes on Religion” that humans had such difficulty accessing the divine not because God was absent, but rather because “he’s far too obvious for human beings to see.”<sup>73</sup> Such well-meaning people as Ova’s mother and governess ascribe unnecessary forms to God that obscure divine power and render Christ ineffectual.

The question of form, and of its potential for generating possibilities as much as restrictions, remained an important question for the modernist movement. As Eliot pointed out, strategic experimentations in poetic form that were seen as “free verse” were not, in fact, “free” from all structure. Rather, rhyme was now no longer restricted to following constant patterns in “the exacting task of supporting lame verse” and instead “could be applied with greater effect where it is most needed.”<sup>74</sup> Pound’s call to “make it new” sought to make old forms more relevant to the modern age.<sup>75</sup> Even as Loy’s Ova poems cautioned against what the imposition of unsuitable forms would mean for spiritual life, her prose recognized the general importance of form in the creative and intellectual processes of human beings. Sara Crangle’s edited collection of Loy’s prose not only makes more of Loy’s work available to the general public, but also helps to situate Loy as a forerunner in modernist thought about the significance of form. In the dialogue “Mi and Lo,” Loy articulates that “Man is not the conceiver of form” and therefore finds the impulse to search for form motivated by the already-existing forms of the “phenomena” sought. Rather, the speaker *mi* describes, “Form

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<sup>71</sup> Loy, “Ova Has Governesses,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 64.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>73</sup> Loy, “Notes on Religion,” ed. Keith Tuma, in *Sulfur* 27 (Fall 1990), n.pag.

<sup>74</sup> T. S. “Reflections on *Vers Libre*,” in *Selected Prose*, 36.

<sup>75</sup> Pound, *LIII*/265.

is a signal reconnoitered by the intellect on its march to the illimitable,” leading the other speaker *lo* to conclude that “it is the confinement to form that incites the intellect to exceed itself.”<sup>76</sup> Loy argues that form is not only necessary for man’s intellectual motivation, but, as she suggests in “Tuning in on the Atom Bomb,” for maintaining the very parameters of existence itself. Upon witnessing the destruction of physical form, the speaker describes the experience as having “faced a glaucous continuity of evacuated space, a universe constructed of intangibles crushed one upon another like endless proportionless strata of inexistent glass, reflecting nothing.”<sup>77</sup> On the other hand, Loy also recognized the downside when advancements in technology assumed too prominent of a role in the restriction of form. Seeking a crocodile as a tame playmate, the children of her story “The Crocodile without any Tail,” have a fairy use a “bone-magnet” to remove its teeth and later on provide the animal with a set of cardboard teeth to make a profitable sideshow at the fair.<sup>78</sup> By using the quasi-science of the “bone-magnet” to dictate a form that serves their wants, the children produce a ridiculous and ineffectual being that serves as little purpose as the timid Christ of Ova’s nursery. These largely neglected prose texts not only provide informative context for Loy’s poetry, but add Loy’s voice to the discussions of form that prominently characterized the modernist movement as a whole.

By critically examining the forms that guide religious traditions, particularly those of Christianity, Loy addresses how form can remain flexible and adaptable while avoiding the chaos she describes as “a universe constructed of intangibles.” Like Pound, who dismissed

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<sup>76</sup> Loy, “Mi & Lo,” in *Stories and Essays*, ed. Sara Crangle (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011), 267 (hereafter cited in text as *SE*).

<sup>77</sup> Loy, “Tuning in on the Atom Bomb,” in *SE*, 287.

<sup>78</sup> Loy, “The Crocodile without any Tail,” in *SE*, 17-24.

the “paralysis” caused by Christianity’s inflexible dogma, Loy recognized the restriction that Christianity’s rules often placed on intellectual freedom and critical thought.<sup>79</sup> For the woman in “My Catholick Confidant,” who obeys the church’s ban on contraceptives despite her family’s inability to support another child, “to question tradition is like denying God.”<sup>80</sup> Loy, however, diverges from Pound in her solution, which is not to dismiss Christianity altogether as irreconcilable with the creative and intellectual demands of the twentieth century. Rather, by working with the anthropomorphized forms of the divine presented to Ova, Loy makes Christianity not only reconcilable to the demands of modernity, but an integral part of the thinking about form that shaped the innovations of literary modernism. While she anticipates the re-purposing of Christianity for modernity that Eliot would attempt in the 30s, Loy just as readily points out the conceptual flaws in a religious framework that wants its members to deny their own flesh while contemplating the corporeality of the divine.

In “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” Loy works within and around the limits of Ova’s anthropomorphic yet invisible Christ figure to provide a more accessible and relatable figure for her young female character’s spiritual life. She maintains the framework of Christianity even while problematizing it by evaluating, unraveling, and later reconfiguring the relationship between the divine’s name and the form it denotes. In this poem and elsewhere, what has most enabled the complacent acceptance of an overly sentimentalized and ineffectual Christ figure is a carelessness for how the name “Christ” is engaged to signal both divinity and humanity. For Loy and for the Judeo-Christian tradition she inherits, the names

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<sup>79</sup> Pound makes his position on the incongruity of Christianity with artistic and intellectual development clear in several of his prose texts and throughout *The Cantos*. His idea of belief as rendered by Christianity as “a cramp, a paralysis” is described in “Religio,” *Selected Prose*, 22.

<sup>80</sup> Loy, “My Catholick Confidante,” in *SE*, 223.



“Christ” and “Jesus” are never interchangeable: each signals a specific degree of material manifestation, along with a specific level of potential for this manifestation to yield access to the divinity sought. According to Christian Science founder Mary Baker Eddy, the name Jesus cannot encompass the divine attributes of Christ, and moreover, the one is “not properly a synonym for” the other. Rather, Eddy surmises, while “Christ expresses God’s spiritual, eternal nature,” Jesus was exclusively a “human name” shared by many other Hebrew men of that time.<sup>81</sup> Whether or not Loy read this exact passage from *Science and Health*, a small slip of paper from her archival collection, on which the names Christ and Jesus are placed on top of each other vertically and divided by a horizontal line, suggests a familiarity with Eddy’s idea.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, this separation of names for divinity’s spiritual and material forms also recalls the thoughts on naming of Loy’s early artistic and spiritual mentor Gertrude Stein. Stein’s statement in “Poetry and Grammar” that “A name is adequate or it is not” speaks particularly to Ova’s experience with trying to access a divinity whose title of “Christ” is woefully inadequate for the passive and humanized depictions that accompany him.<sup>83</sup> For the material not to hinder the spiritual, only names that signal the latter must be used.

Like any other modernist poet questioning the relevancy of familiar expression, Loy knew that ensuring a name’s adequacy entailed far more than the name selection alone; diligent attention to the poetic technique used to showcase this name is just as crucial, if not more so. Yet the issue of naming alone does not suffice to answer for Ova’s lack of spiritual

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<sup>81</sup> Eddy, 333.

<sup>82</sup> Loy, “Christ / Jesus,” n.d., YCAL MSS 6, Box 7, Folder 187, The Mina Loy Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.

<sup>83</sup> Gertrude Stein, “Poetry and Grammar,” in *Writings 1932-1946* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 313.

fulfillment. While the “gentle Jesus” of “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence” is rendered too shy to be ineffectual, the “Christ” of “Religious Instruction” makes only a halfhearted attempt at establishing his authority by telling people not to fear him yet expecting the opposite.

Anticipating Saul Kripke’s assertion that a name need not connote anything essential to an object’s description, Ova’s case proves more nuanced than an illustrative example of Stein’s or Eddy’s emphasis on the correct choice of names.<sup>84</sup> In “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” she manipulates the anthropomorphic language commonly used to bring Christ’s image closer to human understanding. While criticizing the empty sentimentality that removes both the Christ figure and the child Ova from a place where spiritual fulfillment can occur, she posits a model of spirituality that invites the possibility to transgress canonical religious models even while appropriating the traditional language of Christian narratives. By configuring a traditionally limiting and proscriptive space so that a more fulfilling relationship with divinity can occur, she also suggests that material limitations need not hinder spirituality as Eddy claims. In showing how poetics can make names “adequate” as well as expose their insufficiency, she offers naming as a means of acknowledging the limitations of materiality while not dismissing its significance for spiritual success.

From the opening stanza of “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” Loy’s poetics merge dependency on both spiritual and material, abstract and concrete, manifestations of Ova’s access to faith: “Ova is at the mercy / of the enigmatical behavior / around her” (ll. 1-3).<sup>85</sup>

The phrase “at the mercy” locates Ova in a place of abstraction, but also connotes more

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<sup>84</sup> See Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 26-27. Deriving his theory from John Stuart Mill’s *A System of Logic*, Kripke offers such names as “The Holy Roman Empire” and “The United Nations” as examples of names that do not provide no descriptive accuracy to the object named. More relevant to Loy’s project, he observes that the name “God,” might cause people to ask, “does it describe God as the unique divine being or is it a name of God?”

<sup>85</sup> Loy, “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” *AMR/LBTT*, 65.

specific material and spiritual contexts. While “Mercy” shares the root of such words as “mercenary” and “mercantile,” indicating some sort of exchange of fees or goods, its usage has evolved into the religious connotation of being subject to the benevolence of a divine being, whose favor cannot be won by the payment of material wealth. Perhaps Ova can enter into a material exchange of “payment” for being able to understand or mitigate this behavior—or perhaps she cannot. Moreover, the very nature of her status as a child involves the fusion of the divine with the material, as the adults can assume a role of such absolute authority as to render themselves divine to the child; it is no coincidence that the Judeo-Christian God is also called “father.”<sup>86</sup> In a later poem in *Anglo-Mongrels* called “The Gift,” Ova makes a painful discovery regarding the relationship between money and her own father’s authority when she asks her father for a sovereign and is embarrassed upon finding that he has tricked her and given her a coin worth only a farthing. The enjambment between the first and second lines neither confirms nor denies a reading of mercy in the divine or material context, and the stanza’s completion leaves these two possibilities still available. Although the material may hinder access to the divine, there is simply no way to remove the material context without removing the metaphysical; indeed, the same phrase calls toward both.

Defined as “ambiguous, obscure, perplexing,” the word “enigmatical” itself in “enigmatical behavior / around her” supports ambiguity as to whether this behavior stems from the divine or from the human and material realm. “Around” extends this ambiguity by

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<sup>86</sup> Sigmund Freud, whose work Loy read while in Florence, attributes the need for religion to “a child’s feeling of helplessness and the longing it evokes for a father” in *Civilization and its Discontents*, 1930, trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Johnathan Cape and Harrison Smith, 2010), 21. Though published after “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” it nevertheless helps to foreground the rhetoric of fatherhood surrounding more orthodox models of Christianity.

simultaneously implying the degrees of impact this behavior could have on Ova, since it refers to being “Here and there with no fixed direction’ and to “surround, encompass, or envelop.”<sup>87</sup> Not only is the spiritual or material context of this behavior unclear, but its effect as well. Choosing a preposition that connotes both arbitrariness and deliberate impact yields possibilities for the nature of Ova’s access to the spiritual realm. The significant weight of “around” carries also exemplifies Stein’s penchant for “the continuously using and everlastingly enjoying” appeal of this part of speech.<sup>88</sup> In Ova’s case, “around” can indeed be used “continuously” for different meanings. While it is possible that Ova is surrounded and thereby powerless, “around” might also suggest a lack of order and direction on the adults’ part, thereby providing hope for her to escape their stifling influence.

Loy’s merging of specificity with ambiguity in these lines offers a spiritual model that is not incompatible with her statement in “Aphorisms on Futurism” that “There are no excrescences on the absolute to which man may pin his faith.”<sup>89</sup> Her dismissal of “excrescences” on faith does not preclude the existence of “the absolute”; it only claims no guarantee for accessing the absolute through particular forms of materiality. Similarly, the nominalizing article “the” in “at the mercy / Of the enigmatical behavior” leaves traditional connotations intact, while a lack of modifying detail opens multiple possibilities for Ova in relation to how she might access spirituality, and how these modes of access affect her. Ova could be influenced by behavior that is of a material or a spiritual nature, or from both

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<sup>87</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “around,” accessed June 22, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109784?redirectedFrom=around#eid>.

<sup>88</sup> Stein, “Poetry and Grammar,” in *Writings*, 334.

<sup>89</sup> Loy, “Aphorisms on Futurism,” in *LLB*, 151.

simultaneously. This influence could help as well as hurt access to a satisfying metaphysical experience.

Whatever the effect of such “enigmatical behavior,” the poem assists neither Ova nor the reader with determining the best means of conceptualizing it. This presentation of different possibilities of reading a text that yields multiple interpretations for how certain pieces fit together provides a prevalent theme for the project of modernist poetry as a whole. Pound, for example, registered a deep frustration about how his contemporaries accumulated research indiscriminately and to no productive end for the present.<sup>90</sup> *The Cantos* attempted to exemplify compelling epistemological possibilities for the societal improvements that might occur if scholars took the time to configure meaningful insights for themselves instead of just taking for granted how things fit together. So, too, Loy begins “Notes on Religion” with the mandate to engage in active thinking in the midst of such a wealth of possibilities: “The human mind has got to assemble for itself out of the infinite variation—a new fundamental.”<sup>91</sup> When the material and the spiritual are both distinct possibilities for interpretation, and neither eclipses the other, the responsibility to assemble how—or determine if—they work together must rest on the beholder. This holds powerful implications not only for the poem and Ova’s agency in her spiritual life, but for modernist thinking on poetic form. Modernism sought to create a verse that would suggest possibilities of meaning, but also demand that readers work to figure out those possibilities for themselves. In his study of the occult in literary modernism, Leon Surette draws a parallel

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<sup>90</sup> See, for example, *Guide to Kulchur*, in which Pound describes the nineteenth-century system of philology study that “aimed at burying the young student in research before he knew what he was after” (New York: New Directions, 1970), 54.

<sup>91</sup> Loy, “Notes on Religion,” n.pag.

between the hermeneutics of occultism and those of modernist literature, each of which rely on the premise of some sort of “hidden” meaning. While occult meanings remained hidden to the uninitiated, modernism regarded such meanings in literature as available to those willing to pursue it.<sup>92</sup> To Pound, literary meaning could be revealed to those who were willing to undergo “careful first-hand examination of the matter” while always remaining aware that “meaning is not a set, cut-off thing like the move of knight or pawn on a chess-board.”<sup>93</sup> As Demetres Tryphonopoulos has observed, the deliberate obscurity of Pound’s *Cantos* is in fact meant to serve “a rhetorical purpose: the enlightenment of the reader!” for whom meaning will be revealed if the text’s difficulty is seriously engaged with.<sup>94</sup> Ova must accept this challenge to dwell in the uncertainty denoted by the “enigmatical behavior” if she is ever to access the metaphysical knowledge that her adult caretakers moderate and guard.

The next lines continue to be unhelpful in this task of discerning what such “enigmatical behavior” might reveal, even for such a curious person as Ova. Lines three through six, describing that “only One behaves / unlike all others / the gentle Jesus,” continue with this ambiguity even as Jesus is set apart from the first stanza.<sup>95</sup> Since the origins of this behavior as material or spiritual remain unclear, it is unknown whether these lines set Jesus apart from materiality or spirituality, from human or divine actions. Furthermore, the phrase “only One behaves” connotes a more colloquial use of “behave” as in to act properly, but again, since it is unclear from what or from whom Jesus is being set apart, it is impossible to know the precise nature of this behavior. In omitting the appositive punctuation of a comma

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<sup>92</sup> Leon Surette, *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and the Occult* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), 27-30.

<sup>93</sup> Pound, *A B C of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934), 17; 36.

<sup>94</sup> Demetres Tryphonopoulos, *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound’s Cantos* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992), 8.

<sup>95</sup> Loy, “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 65.

or colon between “the gentle Jesus” and “unlike all others,” Loy also suggests that “only One” refers to another subject entirely, one that might even lie outside the poem’s scope. In leaving the relationship between the name and the behavior ambiguous, Loy allows the name of Jesus to encompass more possibility than what a more precise description would provide. While “the gentle Jesus” establishes the presence of familiar Christian sentimentalism, the presence of tradition does not shut out alternative ways of accessing divinity manifested in the material realm.

Yet even the word “gentle” itself can speak to more possibility for Ova’s relationship with the divine. When Ova speaks, she uses “the Gentle” and is said to “love the Gentle,” instead of “the gentle Jesus.” In these instances, “Gentle” is capitalized as though it were a pronoun for God and is detached from the human and material Jesus, lacking the connotative baggage that it might otherwise have. Though gentle could denote a passive person, or as the *OED* describes, “one who is easily managed,” “gentle” is also described as “yielding to pressure, pliant, supple.”<sup>96</sup> When gentle is considered as having a quality of pliability, and also detached from the sentimentalized image “the gentle Jesus,” the word becomes significant in terms of Ova’s ability to forge her own relationship with divinity and in terms of Loy’s poetic project. By placing “the gentle” as Ova’s object of devotion, Loy sets up the possibility for the Victorian and domestic traditions of Ova’s world to be included as valid and meaningful subject matter in the experimental poetics of modernism. It is important that Ova loves “the gentle,” the flexible, instead of the “gentle Jesus” with the restrictive view of sentimentality that accompanies it—and it will be important further on in the poem when

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<sup>96</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “gentle,” accessed May 5, 2010, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/17368?redirectedFrom=belief#eidgentle>.

“the gentle Jesus” phrase returns but in a boldly different context from what it signified before. The word “Gentle” of course can also hint toward Gentile, a nod to the Jewish tradition of Loy’s father, of which her mother was embarrassed. Though the child Loy may have been powerless against her mother’s religious tyranny, Loy the adult poet can make divinity a more accommodating concept for Ova and for the heritage that has formed who she is. Contesting those such as Pound, who dismissed Christianity as unamenable to the modernist agenda of experimentalism and innovation, Loy posits that even the most popularized and engrained versions of Christian divinity can indeed be “made new” with modernist poetic techniques.

When “unseen behavior” of “the Gentle” is compared to “a mouse or a fairy” this divine figure becomes even more flexible to interpretation (ll. 7-8). A comparison with these storybook creatures further relegates Jesus to the sentimental and ineffectual. But at the same time these creatures’ “unseen behavior” has the power to elicit fear. A mouse can be a kitchen-invading menace, and a fairy can be a ruthless creature who steals children from their families.<sup>97</sup> Loy also brings up conflicting images of Jesus as both harmless and frightening in “Religious Instruction,” with a Christ who comes to say “fear / not it is I / wanting us to be fearful” (ll. 26-28).<sup>98</sup> This combination of fear and benevolence does not get Ova any closer to understanding Jesus’s role as the divine Christ, nor to having any sort of fulfilling experience with this divinity. By foregrounding the inherent contradictions within Christian sentimentalism, Loy exemplifies one of the core motivations of literary modernism: the desire to establish closer and more revelatory connections between signifier and signified. If

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<sup>97</sup> See, for example, Yeats’s, “The Stolen Child,” inspired by the legend that fairies would lure children away from their homes and families, in *Collected Poems*, 20.

<sup>98</sup> Loy, “Religious Instruction, in *AMR/LBTT*, 67.



the word “Jesus” continues to be used interchangeably with fearsomeness and reticence, and this paradox remains ignored and unexamined, the word will lose its capacity to signify either. What modernism aims to do, however, is not to abolish such ambiguity, but to foreground its generative possibilities for poets and readers.

Ova’s housemaid does the important work of showing how modernist poetics can use ambiguity to enhance meaning rather than blur it. Like the “gentle Jesus,” she is rendered as both meek and potentially influential. Unlike the mouse or fairy, however, the housemaid’s influence not only does not come from fear; it is also rendered actual through its physical position in the text of the poem. Though described as “a pale pitiful housemaid,” she is the only person other than Ova who takes action in the poem, as she “bowed / healingly / between / her and the loud / maternity” (ll. 25-29).<sup>99</sup> This act of bowing is the only action that occurs in the poem other than Ova’s speaking, and is far more present than both the “shy savior” and the “loud maternity.” Ova’s mother is not even shown in any sort of active role in “Religious Instruction,” her actual instruction only dismissed as “prattle” (l. 6).<sup>100</sup> Although “bowing” enacts the subservient relationship of servant to mistress, this maid bowed “between” and not “to” or “before” the mother—and moreover, Ova’s mother is not even described as having any affiliation with her or even any personhood, but rather as a concept, “the loud maternity” that may or may not have any authoritative influence over the child. The large space between “her” and “the loud maternity” further emphasizes the ability of the housemaid to have real agency in preventing the loud maternity from hurting Ova, and “healingly” on the line above suggests that the housemaid may even be able to reverse or fix

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<sup>99</sup> Loy, “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 66.

<sup>100</sup> Loy, “Religious Instruction,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 67.

what Ova has been taught before about the gentle Jesus who will not even show himself in public.

While she may not be able to erase the effects of Ova's education, she at least offers Ova a more palpable and satisfying way of relating to the divine other than "the gentle Jesus" who is too afraid to even show himself to a little girl. Instead, the housemaid

Has told her  
of Gentle Jesus  
our excuse  
He dipped his hand into the sauce-tureen  
and allowed his disciples to do the same

And that for every infantile  
Indiscretion  
there is absolution

in Christ's name. (ll. 30-38)<sup>101</sup>

The enjambment and blank space between "our excuse" and "Gentle Jesus" creates an ambiguous connection between the two phrases. Instead of alluding to redemption from sin, as does the traditional Christian rationale for Jesus's life and death, "our excuse" not only suggest an invitation to transgress without repercussion, but places no conditionals on what might warrant such an "excuse." In fact, this stanza posits Jesus as the advocate rather than the antidote of sin and transgression. While "Gentle Jesus" performs a domestic and feminized task, the act of dipping one's hand into a tureen, or communal food pot,

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<sup>101</sup> Loy, "Christ's Regrettable Reticence," in *AMR/LBTT*, 66.

transgresses against the proper rules for kitchen etiquette. Not only might this act have the more practical consequence of spoiling the sauce, but the more general consequence of one individual's behavior influencing the larger group's experience of the pot's contents. In this way, a single person's transgression, even that of "a pale / pitiful housemaid," can potentially affect others' experience. By naming and using an object typically associated with the domestic and female sphere, this Jesus figure not only welcomes women into the power of individual transgression, but renders the female sphere and its influence as not only essential but welcome for transgression. Furthermore, the idea that Jesus "allowed others to do the same" reconfigures the Last Supper narrative, which has been interpreted to varying degrees across Christian sects as a commandment to materialize Christ's presence in the ritualistic sharing of bread and wine. In this poem, "allowed" gives permission but does not mandate this particular materialization, offering yet another level of freedom in the way Ova and others can choose to access the divine—and in the way that readers can access the poem.

Unlike "the gentle Jesus" whom Ova is supposed to worship but who does not even reveal himself, "the Gentle" posits a means for Ova to materialize Christ in a way that is concrete and perhaps more effective than the passive Jesus, but still allows for more choice in whether she engages this materiality. Yet the poem's conclusion does not quite embrace the newfound materialization of the divine:

And she  
 is credulous  
 as all hungry  
 imaginations in Man  
 swallow the parsimonious

presentations put before them (ll. 39-44).<sup>102</sup>

Perhaps man constantly seeks these material presentations of the divine, for the simple reason that they are all they have. “Credulous” speaks to the ambivalence of such ready “swallowing,” as it can mean “ready or disposed to believe” but also “apt to believe on weak or insufficient grounds.” However, Loy’s choice of “parsimonious”—which not only implies stinginess but can also mean “economical” or “sparing”—posits that such minimalism might not necessarily be cause for despair.<sup>103</sup> In other words, this presentation might provide only what is needed for satiation, without the superfluous sentimentality that Ova’s mother had projected onto her own materialization of the divine in human form.

This “parsimonious” presentation may also prompt a re-contextualizing of the earlier lines “in lurking discretion / is the wary / perfection / of a shy savior” (ll. 9-12), which are syntactically supposed to modify the “unseen behavior” of the “gentle Jesus.”<sup>104</sup> Physically detached from Jesus and given their own stanza, however, they just make a general statement that perfection is found in discretion, which is also emphasized by their slant rhyme.

Perfection of the divine image, then, might be found less in Jesus’s reticence to be seen than in a general discretion when choosing how and if to materialize the divine. When “infantile indiscretion” then appears after the gentle who dipped his hand into the sauce tureen, it offers not only the comfort that Ova and others who commit small sins will be absolved, but also the hope that Ova can have a fulfilling spiritual life apart from the traditions dictated by her mother. The image of Jesus as a shy savior who needs to be coaxed out by a little girl, is,

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>103</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “parsimonious,” accessed May 5, 2010, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/17368?redirectedFrom=belief#eidparsimonious>.

<sup>104</sup> Loy, “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 65.

quite literally, an “infantile indiscretion,” in that this sentimentalizing of Jesus renders him “infantile” and thereby fails to be discrete and careful about how the divine is portrayed. In “Christ’s name” there is not only absolution for sin, but a way to reclaim the spiritual aspect of the divine. Additional descriptors—of him as a fairy-like creature or of the flowers he bears in the aforementioned “Religious Instruction”—become unnecessary and even detrimental to the connotative power of referring to him as Christ rather than as the human form Jesus. Amidst a literary movement so defined by the search for the best and most innovative word choices, the clipped lines and blank spaces that permeate “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence” and other *Anglo-Mongrel* poems exemplify the powerful and generative qualities of silence and minimalism left by the legacy of modernist verse experimentation.

Although accessing the divine through material projections need not always yield a superior spiritual experience, the demand for material sustenance amidst the spiritual world prevails. Beyond *Anglo-Mongrels*, Loy retains a model of spirituality that depends on material forms and contexts. In *Lunar Baedeker*’s “Apology of Genius,” engagement with the divine and transcendent depends on a materiality that subverts the constraints of the physical world even while insisting on defining spiritual fulfillment in material terms. For these spiritual seekers, described in the first line as “Ostracized...with God” (emphasis mine), a lack of acceptance in society aligns them with the spiritual—and moreover, to a manifestation of the spiritual that depends on rejected and undesirable material forms.<sup>105</sup> Rendered first “Lepers of the moon / all magically diseased” and then “sacerdotal clowns / who feed upon the wind and stars / and pulverous pastures of poverty,” those with the utmost

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<sup>105</sup> Loy, “Apology of Genius,” in *AMR/LBTT*, 77.

physical and financial aberrations, those for whom “accurate” ball attire let alone an invitation would be impossible, are the ones with exclusive access to a celestial realm that embraces what the material priorities of society reject (ll. 4-5; 15-17).<sup>106</sup> As with Ova’s re-imagined Christ figure, the spiritual entails an engagement with the material, but not in the way that tradition mandates or expects. For Loy, materiality can only provide access to the spiritual if the most unpleasant and offensive aspects of the material world are embraced. In “Joyce’s Ulysses,” “The voice and offal / of the image of God” provides Joyce with the ability to “make Celtic noises / in these lyrical hells” and manifest the mythos of the culture England has historically suppressed (ll. 3-6).<sup>107</sup> Such a statement, with the use of “offal” and “image,” posits a paradox of distance and intimacy inherent in accessing the divine. Joyce may only be able to provide an “image,” but his rendering does not shy away from the aspects of the divine that readers may not want to face—any more than they would want to face a cow’s intestines alongside a prime cut of steak.

**“[T]he Chances of Your Flesh / Are Not Our Destiny”: Materiality in the New Century and in the New Poetics**

Loy’s local re-imaginings of the relationship between the material and the spiritual in her poetry resonate with the larger social changes beginning to occur at the turn of the century. By challenging the ways that preconceived material forms dictated spiritual access, Loy’s poetry contributed to larger conversations about social hierarchies, material circumstances, and access to opportunity.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>107</sup> Loy, “Joyce’s Ulysses,” in *LLB*, 88.

Because they do not limit their material perceptions of the spiritual to conventionally accepted forms, the speakers of “Apology of Genius” can subvert the limitations typically proscribed by the materiality of the flesh:

You may give birth to us  
 or marry us  
 the chances of your flesh  
 are not our destiny – (ll. 21-24)<sup>108</sup>

Here, Loy posits the concrete, material evidence of flesh as the purveyor of chance and no more of a guarantee than spirit. Neither their material circumstances as children, nor as adults, dictate who they might become or what they might do. Even while emphasizing the importance of the material, Loy challenges the materialistic determinism popularized by Marxism and Darwinism throughout the nineteenth century. At the time of this poem’s publication in 1923, a divide between “flesh” and “destiny” likely rang true with Loy and other young women who were raised in Victorian households that prioritized marriage only to discover that they, apart from and in spite of their spouses, could forge their own artistic and intellectual paths.

“Lunar Baedeker,” a poem often noted for its attention to the ethereal, holds just as much emphasis on how certain materializations might be re-imagined beyond their limiting contexts and connotations. Deriving its title from a popular series of travel books, this “guide” to the moon also offers a guide by which some of the domestic objects once intended to comprise proper Victorian households can be rendered accessories to the new century’s vices:

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<sup>108</sup> Loy, “Apology of Genius,” in *LLB*, 77.

A silver Lucifer

serves

cocaine in cornucopia

To some somnambulists

of adolescent thighs

draped

in satirical draperies (ll. 1-7)<sup>109</sup>

Once the fallen angel who tricked humanity into serving his vengeance against the divine, Lucifer has now become part of a silver tea service for the express purpose of serving humans. That this silver service provides cocaine, once a legitimate prescription for a variety of ailments and banned as a dangerous narcotic just before *Lunar Baedeker*'s first publication, further confuses how this scene is to be read, as does the cornucopia's ability to signal both excessive decadence and sufficient provision. By isolating the two verbs of these stanzas, "serves" and "draped," onto single lines, Loy foregrounds the behaviors proper to Victorian women's entertainment: to "serve" guests while "draped" (as per the mothers of *Anglo-Mongrels*' Esau and Ova) in appropriate attire. What surrounds them, however, inspires ample ambivalence as to just how proper these behaviors are. Loy describes the guests being served with an alliterative phrase that imitates a dreamy, trancelike state and hints at the impropriety of the hour at which the party is held, as does the visibility of their adolescent thighs. Their draperies, being "satirical," do nothing to conceal the very physical and sexual aspects of the bodies they are supposed to hide, calling attention to the draping of

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<sup>109</sup> Loy, "Lunar Baedeker," in *LLB*, 81.



proper attire even as the style is mocked. While fin de siècle novelists and playwrights have been given most of the credit for exposing the decline of Victorian values, Loy's poetry demonstrates that the instruments for this decline can be found just as prominently in the typical and innocent material effects of domestic life. Through the eyes of the poet, materials once employed to dictate the restrictive terms of Victorian behavior are modernized to foster and accommodate the changes of the modern age.

The parlor scene that was one a sign of a society consumed with material banalities is transformed into a space where transgression can and does occur—and not just a transgression of social values. Later in the poem, this also becomes a space where “‘Immortality’ / mildews... / in the museums of the moon” (ll. 44-46).<sup>110</sup> With the very concept of immortality subject to the process of decay, Loy rejects both the Futurist aspiration to remain always in the present by privileging the new, and the modernist ideal of creating art that will endure through the ages. Being in a museum, “immortality” itself is no more than a material construct, one that cannot evade destruction even as efforts are made to preserve and contain it for posterity. That this museum belongs to the moon, a longstanding symbol for evoking the celestial and transcendent in poetry, puts into question whether immortality belongs as a feasible poetic goal; not even the moon can help immortality deliver on its promise. Rather, Loy is most interested in concentrating on the material realities of what is mortal—not so that these materials can be preserved, but that they can be transformed and re-contextualized to suit the needs of the current age and its circumstances. Moreover, by de-emphasizing the early modernist premium on immortality, Loy anticipates the aesthetics of later modernist Basil Bunting, who, although inspired by high modernism, abandoned

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 82.

Pound's marble and Yeats's monuments in favor of an attention to the natural processes of death and decay that bring forth life. As crucial as it is not to project unnecessary and unsuitable forms of materiality onto the spiritual, the importance of the material—even and especially considering its limitations and the potentiality for its decay—can never be forgotten. While objects may not always endure in their present states, poetry can always introduce and illuminate their potentialities to be utilized and engaged with in alternative, and sometimes more productive, forms and contexts.

Loy's poetry challenges and expands the high modernist canon to embrace innovation in content as much as in form. As much as high modernists positioned their work against the prevailing values of Victorian popular culture, their dismissal of mundane and ordinary materiality resonates with the denial of the body that women raised in Victorian households experienced on a daily basis in their spiritual and social education alike. Loy not only addresses the social consequences of such denial in poems and essays that showcase the taboo subjects of sexuality and childbirth and call out the false distinction between mistress and mother, but considers the aesthetic consequences of a poetics that privileges more publically and historically significant forms of materiality at the expense of the private and ordinary. Her work offers hope for the modernist aesthetic to thrive both in spite of and because of a culture's relationship to the material circumstances that inform their domestic lives and metaphysical longings. From a publication reception that values the author's attire over the book's contents, to a religious education offering a divinity made less accessible in human form, a pre-occupation with the material will continue to cling to the new century as it did to the old. Loy's only concern is to engage this obsession in a way that illuminates what poetry can do to foster possibilities both within and beyond the material forms it presents.

While the use of poetic language to foreground, evade, and transform certain forms of materiality in order to arrive at the abstract and the metaphysical is unique neither to Loy nor to literary modernism as a whole, Loy takes an unprecedented approach. Instead of assuming an adversarial relationship between material concerns and metaphysical longings, or between mortal bodies and immortal worlds, her poetry highlights the myriad ways in which the material and the metaphysical co-exist and inform each other. Material forms are neither barriers toward superior ways of thinking, nor mere stand-ins for elusive worlds and abstract concepts. They cannot be neatly isolated from the poet's spiritual questions or aesthetic goals, even and especially when they at first seem incongruous. Loy's approach to the material forms that comprise daily existence in late Victorian and early modern society—forms that her peers often found troubling or inconvenient—insists that a poetics for the new century include those for whom milk receipts and diaper changes afford more creative opportunity than strolls through ancient European ruins.

### Chapter 3: “At Most but Painting, Yet Most Like the Life”: Mimesis and Homer in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*

“Thus many tales Ulysses told his wife, / At most but painting, yet most like the life”

–*The Odyssey*, translated by George Chapman<sup>1</sup>

*The Cantos* remains a prime example of the crucial and complex connections that might be made should the modern education system take Pound’s advice and focus on the significance of accumulated knowledge rather than on its volume. Telling the mythology of a man who must seek wisdom from the dead before he can return home to rule his land successfully, Homer’s *Odyssey* conveys the relevance that Pound’s other source texts, ancient and modern alike, hold for the poem and for the decayed state of Western civilization as Pound saw it. Yet for a poet so invested in revolutionizing the relationship between poetic form and its content, *The Odyssey* offers at least as much to *The Cantos* in structure as it does in premise: the *how* of the hero’s accomplishments is just as important as the *what*. In order to vanquish the false authority that his wife’s suitors have established in his house, Odysseus must not reveal himself directly, but must hide his identity until armed. While fashioning a false persona, even inventing a history of his relationship to the real Odysseus, the hero discovers the truth about which servants have remained loyal to the household. Moreover, his disguise as a companion of Odysseus elicits an emotional response from Penelope as though she were actually hearing the truth of her husband’s adventures. In other words, the survival of his reign as the true king of Ithaca depends implicitly on his ability to prevaricate, or as Allen

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<sup>1</sup> George Chapman, *Chapman’s Homer: The Odyssey*, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 334, ll. 287-288.

Mandelbaum translates it, to “mime the truth” rather tell it.<sup>2</sup> By depicting key moments in Western civilization through methods other than what historians, translators, and university professors would use to access truth, Pound’s poetic project also relies on falsehoods, or at least on blatantly unorthodox methods of truth-telling, for the truths of economic, social, and cultural histories to survive meaningfully in the twentieth century. The technique of the modern poet and the ancient hero differs only in name. When Odysseus uses lies to arrive at truth, it is “guile” or “tact,” an attribute of his uniquely sharp mind. When a poet or artist does, it is mimesis, an enhanced representation of the natural world that has been noted as a feature of all artistry since ancient times.

This chapter argues for the concept of mimesis, in its ancient and modern forms, as a significant and productive framework through which to read *The Cantos*. For a monumental work of modernism that is so often discussed in terms of what it lacks—a cohesion that would render the poem a modern epic, a respect for historical accuracy, and an ability to see past the poet’s own Fascist ideology—mimesis offers an avenue to approach the text based on what Pound does aim to accomplish: a new way of seeing old familiarities of history and mythos. Pound was well aware that mimetic properties of art, even while they rendered a “true” portrayal of the given object, could reveal significant aspects of the original that might otherwise be missed without the artistic representation. His understanding of the improvement mimesis might work is best illustrated by his description of the bust created for him by sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska: “A kindly journalist ‘hopes’ that it does not look like me. It does not. It was not intended to. It has infinitely more of strength and dignity than

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<sup>2</sup> *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1990), 385.

my face will ever possess.”<sup>3</sup> Homer’s Odysseus, by artfully rendering himself as a vagrant who looks nothing like the king of Ithaca so as to move Penelope to tears, exhibits a similar notion of the enhanced—and thereby improved—versions of truth that mimesis might afford.

In Pound’s twentieth-century epic, as in Homer’s ancient, the world of mythos and its methods of truth-telling are privileged over the public world of modernity, which often valued methods that were incomplete at best and fraudulent at worst. He railed against the indiscriminate reiteration of documented dates, places and events that had come to suffice for historical knowledge without any real understanding of what past events signified for the present state of political, economic, and cultural affairs. Most egregious, however, was the modern reliance on the inflation of interest rates on credit, or *usura* as Pound defines it in Canto XLV, to take the place of actual production.<sup>4</sup> This blatant disregard for the correspondence of interest to production was indicative to Pound of a larger lack of concern for the correspondence of language to meaning. Should a critic make a general statement about something he has not studied and observed extensively, his fraudulent action was comparable to writing a bad check—even with a cursory knowledge of the historical and scientific facts of a situation.<sup>5</sup> Modernity, though defined by advancements in technology,

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<sup>3</sup> Ezra Pound, *Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 49 (hereafter cited in text as *GB*).

<sup>4</sup> While Pound provides examples of *usura* throughout *The Cantos*, canto XLV features his most direct explication of *usura* and its consequences. In his N.B. at the end of canto XLV, Pound defines *usura* as “A charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard to production; often without regard to the possibilities of production.” See *The Cantos* (1971; New York: New Directions, 1993), 230 (hereafter cited in text as canto and page number, e.g., II/6).

<sup>5</sup> Pound asserts, “Any general statement is like a cheque drawn on a bank. Its value depends on what is there to meet it. If Mr. Rockefeller draws a cheque for a million dollars it is good. If I draw one for a million it is a joke, a hoax, it has no value. If it is taken seriously, the writing of it becomes a criminal act.” He then reasons that “The same applies with cheques against knowledge. It Marconi says something about ultra-short waves it MEANS something. Its meaning can only be properly estimated by someone who KNOWS.” See *A B C of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934), 25 (hereafter cited in text as *ABCR*).

historiography, and scholarship intended to yield superior means of truth-telling, was, according to Pound, further away than ever from the truth.

Homer's epic myth, although classified as fiction in modernity, provided a better model for arrival at the truth than did many of the accepted forms of truth-telling in the modern poet's own era. The ancient poet's style privileged a level of vividly persuasive detail that yielded a much-needed example for the level of careful and rigorous perception Pound saw lacking in modern accounts of historical events. Homer describes battles with the keen eye of a physician treating wounds rather than of a historian documenting the general political outcomes of events, and geography from the vantage point of a sailor at sea rather than from a geographer's map.<sup>6</sup> Telling Penelope of her seemingly lost husband's adventures in a manner that inspires extreme emotional connection, Odysseus mirrors what his creator and other writers must do to tell the truth, and more importantly, to make the truth effective and relevant. What makes Homer still worth reading, and *The Odyssey* "still news," is the poet's ability to write about events with great detail and with an ability to choose the precise words and phrasings that would best make them present and immediate for ancient and modern audiences alike.<sup>7</sup> In an age that privileged secondhand assumption over observation and generalities over particulars, the "slant" truth of Homeric mythology is, arguably, one of the most truthful texts that remains available to modernity.

Pound's attempt to develop a new and enhanced understanding of the value of mythos for modernity—an understanding that often places mythos on equal terms with historical

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<sup>6</sup> As Pound observes, Homer's descriptions of battle wounds were so "fit for coroner's inquest" that a physician wrote a book to argue that Homer was an army doctor. Homer's geography, while "not as you would find it if you had a geography book and a map, but as it would be in a 'periplus,' that is, as a coasting sailor would find it." See *ABCR*, 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

knowledge— speaks throughout *The Cantos* to the general trend of modernism’s efforts to establish a literary strategy for revisionist history. Modernist writers sought innovative means of literary expression not only to better capture the events of the present, but also to reveal aspects of the past that would otherwise go unnoticed in prevailing historical accounts. This entailed not only the ability to generate different understandings and interpretations of historical documents, but also a willingness to discern for oneself what exactly might qualify as valid historical knowledge. Just five years prior to the publication of Pound’s first thirty cantos, William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* presented a collection of prose pieces featuring the author’s own interpretations of prominent historical figures whose legacies had earned them mythic status in American culture. Williams posited this fusion of mythos with history as an attempt “to re-name the things seen” and to “have recognized new contours suggested by old words.”<sup>8</sup> T. S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” while not an outright call to blur the lines between mythos and history, suggests that a present-day perception can enhance the way in which the historical past is interpreted, since “the conscious present is an awareness of the past in a way and to an extent which the past’s awareness of itself cannot show.”<sup>9</sup> Dovetailing with Williams and Eliot, Pound’s modernist epic poem seeks to establish a revisionist strategy that would make the emotions, settings, and experiences of the past more immediate, relevant, and credible to modernity than they otherwise are when couched in the familiar and comfortable methods of historiography, linear narrative, literal translation, and other conventionally accepted methods of truth-telling. His revisionism, however, is unique in its emphasis on mimesis, especially in the

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<sup>8</sup> William Carlos Williams, preface to *In the American Grain* (1933; New York: New Directions, 1956), n.p.

<sup>9</sup> T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975), 39 (hereafter cited in text as *ESP*).



cantos that revise the mythos of ancient Greece and Rome with a modernist aesthetic.

Mimesis provides a means for Pound to banish the dichotomy between fact and fiction that stands at the core of modern thought and thereby to wrest readers away from comfortable familiarities and certainties of what qualifies as truth and as valid methods for obtaining it.

### **Mimesis, Mythos, and Truth in Pound's Poetics**

Although “mimesis,” as Plato and Aristotle used it for the fine arts, suggested a deliberate move away from truth, understanding the role of mimesis in *The Cantos* and in Pound's poetic theory requires reaching back even further, back to a time before the term “mimesis,” and even before language itself, came into being.<sup>10</sup> As Walter Benjamin points out, the earliest forms of mimesis were gestures not to escape from reality, but to establish an intimate and effective connection with reality. Ancient cultures considered certain processes to be so imitable as to manifest the natural phenomena or object imitated: the rain dance would, if performed well, produce rain for crops. Mimesis in ancient times, therefore, was “really a life-determining force.”<sup>11</sup> Surmising that the earliest mimetic gestures were intended to manifest palpable change in the conditions of the natural world, Benjamin posits hieroglyphics as the way by which mimesis gained admittance to writing, and language, therefore, as “perhaps the highest level of mimetic behavior,” possessing non-sensuous

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<sup>10</sup> Plato first coined mimesis in *The Republic*, translating it as “imitation” while deeming it “only a kind of play or sport” and “thrice removed from the truth.” See *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, 1894 (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 2000), 259. Aristotle, on the contrary, states that the falsehood of an imitative art such as poetry allows for it to be “a more philosophical and a higher thing than history” by expressing the “universal” over the “particular.” Declaring that “it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened but what may happen,” however, Aristotle shares with Plato the concept of mimesis as inherently including a deliberate degree of removal from reality. See *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher, 1895 (Mineola, NY: Dover Thrift Editions, 1995), 17.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, trans. Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 333.

similarities like the dances and magic practices used to affect the natural world.<sup>12</sup> Although privileging spoken language as having a closer proximity than written language to its signified objects, Jacques Derrida has also suggested a mimetic aspect to language since it “signifies ‘mental experiences,’ which themselves reflect or mirror things by natural resemblance.”<sup>13</sup> The ability of language to have such power, not merely to signify or recall certain emotions, events, and ideas but to actually manifest them in an immediate and direct manner, lay at the core of the modernist project for Pound and his contemporaries. From Pound’s dictum to omit any word that does not contribute to the “direct treatment of the thing” to Eliot’s “objective correlative,” which would remove the author’s personal emotions in order to arrive at the feeling’s truest expression, modernism sought to return to a use of language that would be closely and indelibly connected to what it aspired to bring about.<sup>14</sup> The “Lifeless air become sinewed” that Acoetes witnesses in Canto II during the manifestation of the god Bacchus expresses the process that Pound insists must take place on the page if language is rendered immediate and appropriate to the subject at hand.<sup>15</sup> Such a use of language would have what Stephen Halliwell has defined as the crux of mimesis in the past and present: the ability to connect to the “real” world by providing “an accurate and moving representation of its own, self-contained world.”<sup>16</sup>

As Pound saw it, poetry was failing both the test of accuracy for its own world and its relevance for the public world. The nineteenth-century Symbolists ascribed arbitrary and

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 333-34.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing,” in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 11.

<sup>14</sup> See Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” in *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 3 (hereafter cited in text as *LE*). Eliot’s “objective correlative” appears in his 1919 essay “Hamlet” in *ESP*, 48.

<sup>15</sup> Pound, II/8.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 3.

thereby ineffective correlations between signifier and signified.<sup>17</sup> Translations of the best classical texts into English fell flat as translators paid more attention to literal and metrical precision than to the emotions and experiences the original text was meant to inspire.<sup>18</sup> The problem was not that language itself was an inferior means of expression as compared to other means of artistic representation. On the contrary, as articulated in his definition of Imagist poetry, Pound posited language, particularly language in poetic form, as the exclusive and most efficient means of representation for a given image.<sup>19</sup> What Pound saw lacking in most available translations of ancient epics was a sense of the amount of language necessary. In a letter to W. H. D. Rouse regarding the translator's pending edition of Homer's *Odyssey*, Pound suggested that a translator had just as much artistic responsibility as a poet of original works to be selective in the material included: "I don't see that one translates by leaving in unnecessary words; that is, words not necessary to the meaning of the

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<sup>17</sup> More about the modernist movement away from the literary symbols that had grown familiar in the nineteenth century is discussed in my first chapter. James Longenbach, for example, cites a letter Pound wrote to his wife when she inquired about the definition of symbolism, in which he describes the familiar, "literary" symbol as having "no more force, or interest of power of suggestion than any other word, or than a synonym in some other language." See *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 78.

<sup>18</sup> As Stephen Yao observes, a strict adherence to literal and metrical accuracy, regardless of whether the text successfully conveyed the intended emotion and affect in English, was considered essential to translation prior to the advent of modernism: "Before Pound (and modernism more generally), literary translation functioned primarily as a means of deploying the authority of the classics. Hence, the most renowned translators in English of previous eras—Golding and Chapman in the Elizabethan, Dryden and Pope in the Enlightenment, and Browning, Rossetti, and Swinburne in the Victorian—all derive their reputations specifically as translators from their renderings of various Latin and Greek writers and other figures explicitly connected with the classical tradition. See "Translation" in *Ezra Pound in Context*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 37.

<sup>19</sup> In "Affirmations—As for Imagism," Pound states that "When an energy or emotion 'presents an image,' this may find adequate expression in words. It is very probable a waste of energy to express it in any more tangible medium. See *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), 376-377 (hereafter cited in text as *SP*). His *Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* recalls an earlier essay, first published in *Blast*, in which he assigns certain types of "concepts" and "emotions" as belonging solely to the expression afforded by a particular art form: "If sound, to music; if formed words, to literature; the image, to poetry; form, to design; colour in position, to painting; form or design in three planes, to sculpture; movement, to the dance or to the rhythm of music or verses." See *GB*, 81.

whole passage.”<sup>20</sup> As Pound advised in “tenets of Imagist faith” at the beginning of his career in 1913, words should be carefully and judiciously chosen so as not to risk distancing the poem’s language from the subject at hand. Such principles as “direct treatment of ‘the thing’ whether subjective or objective” and the use of “absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation” not only were essential to his articulation of Imagism, but remained a priority throughout his career.<sup>21</sup> Pound’s lifelong concern that “the thing” remain the center of attention—even as poetic form remains the privileged means of the thing’s expression—has invited critics to use the terms *mimesis* and *mimetic* to analyze his craft.

The importance of mimesis to Pound’s poetics, and specifically, of mimetic theory in its ancient origins, has long been a feature of *Cantos* scholarship. As Donald Davie has observed, the primacy of things (*res*), as opposed to words (*verba*), in Pound’s poetic theory and practice lends itself readily to a mimetic approach in spite of the fact that Pound does frequently use certain forms of word play to approach his historical subjects in *The Cantos* rather indirectly.<sup>22</sup> Pound himself adopted Thomas Aquinas’s famous *Nomina sunt consequentia rerum*, or “Names are consequences of things,” as an integral part of his poetics.<sup>23</sup> Joseph Kronick traces mimesis in Pound’s work back to a linkage between the act of mimesis and the act of production that begins with Socrates and continues into Pound’s desire to make the link between language and production, or “the measurement of words and

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<sup>20</sup> Ezra Pound to W. H. D. Rouse, February 1935, in *Selected Letters 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Faber and Faber, 1950), 269 (hereafter cited in text as *SL*).

<sup>21</sup> Ezra Pound, *LE*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Donald Davie, “*Res and Verba in Rock-Drill and After*,” in *Ezra Pound’s Cantos: A Casebook*, ed. Peter Makin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 218 (hereafter cited in text as *EP’s Cantos*).

<sup>23</sup> In his memoirs of sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska, Pound uses Aquinas’s statement to explain the rationale for naming the Vorticist movement. Fueled by imagism, vorticism describes the concept of an image so powerful that it becomes a “VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.” See *GB*, 92.

coins,” more exact.<sup>24</sup> Pound’s foregrounding of Flaubert’s “*le mot juste*,” the word that affords the best possible means of expression, resonates with this idea that a word should “measure up” to what it is meant to convey—and consequentially, that the plainest words are not always the most suited to the task.<sup>25</sup> Beginning with the anecdote of Pound and Eliot’s visit to the shockingly convincing bison paintings at the caves of Excideuil, Hugh Kenner contrasts Pound’s mimetic art in *The Cantos*, as it points toward a more tangible and visible image outside of the text, with Eliot’s idea of mimesis, which is more logo centric and rooted in the text alone.<sup>26</sup> Although Kenner does not use the term “mimesis” specifically when foregrounding the importance of *The Odyssey* as a framing device, he describes Pound’s vision for *The Cantos*—a translation of the cultures and languages of the past in order to bring knowledge to the future—as imitative of Odysseus’s journey to the underworld.<sup>27</sup> Leon Surette has responded to Kenner’s approach by highlighting the Eleusinian fertility rites performed by the cult of Demeter, and the rites’ re-enactment of Persephone’s descent to and ascent from the underworld, as essential to Pound’s understanding of Odysseus as *The Cantos*’ hero. Because Pound only includes the parts of *The Odyssey* which parallel certain rituals of the Eleusinian mysteries, the sexual conquest of Circe and the descent to the underworld made possible by this conquest, Surette asserts that although these are not the

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<sup>24</sup> Specifically, Kronick foregrounds Socrates’ idea of a “just state,” one in which debts are paid, as achievable through mimesis, specifically the telling of fables that impress children’s minds with examples of justice. See “Resembling Pound: Mimeses, Translation, Ideology,” *Criticism* 35.2 (Spring 1993), 219. For Pound and for his ancient predecessors, the state of economic production depends on the ability to use language effectively, and to care about the precise relationship between word and thing.

<sup>25</sup> Pound, “A Retrospect,” in *SP*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Hugh Kenner, “The Possum in the Cave,” in *Allegory and Representation*, ed. Stephen J. Greenblatt (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981): 128-129.

<sup>27</sup> As Kenner states quite frankly, “Odysseus goes down to where the world whole past lives, and that the shades may speak, brings them blood: a neat metaphor which we need not be told is a metaphor, since it is simply what is in Homer.” See *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 360 (hereafter cited in text as *PE*).

most important acts in *The Odyssey* itself, they are the most important acts in contextualizing *The Cantos*.<sup>28</sup> Pound's *Odyssey* selections, in other words, are based on those which imitate the rituals of the Eleusinian rites most closely.

While I am not the first to read Pound as mimetic, nor to focus on Homer's influence on *The Cantos*' framework, I wish to foreground mimesis as a critical force Pound's poetic technique, and moreover, to argue that that his poetry becomes mimetic through employing very particular forms of "direct treatment" that are arguably more ancient than modern. Though Surette rightly points out the deliberate exclusion of the rest of *The Odyssey* in favor of the underworld visit, Pound's keen interest in Homer and *The Odyssey*'s entirety throughout much of his career begs that critics consider what these selections do to contextualize *The Odyssey* as a whole as well as its use in *The Cantos*. Odysseus's union with Circe and subsequent descent may not be the most important parts of his journey, but they make a strong statement about what enables the hero to be successful in the journey thereafter. It is crucial to recognize that Odysseus can speak with the dead, and thereby devote himself to the necessary task of learning from the ancients, only because he inhabits a world that makes this incredible feat and others possible through a direct, precise and irrevocable link between the word and the thing represented. Examples abound both before and after the visit to the underworld that cement an indelible unity between word and thing and make the consequences of such unity clear, for better or worse. The Cyclops' hope of vengeance dissolves once he cries that "noman" or "Nohbdy" has wounded him.<sup>29</sup> Circe

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<sup>28</sup> Leon Surette, *A Light from Eleusis: A Study of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 55.

<sup>29</sup> Various translations of this excerpt abound. Pound, for example, uses "I am noman, my name is noman," in LXXIV/446. while Robert Fitzgerald's Book IX uses "Nohbdy" (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 156. It is also likely that Pound noticed S. H. Butcher and Andrew Lang's use of "noman" in their prose translation. See *The Odyssey of Homer* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 145.

vows not to harm Odysseus and his men if they go to bed together, and Odysseus, in spite of her earlier deceit and his wariness, enters her bed chamber and thus into a mutually binding agreement that neither shall harm the other. Such an indelible link between the words and what the words seek is not only possible, but mandated in Homer's verse because it speaks of a world dominated by *mythos*, speech imbued with divine authority, as opposed to *logos*, speech lacking divine authority and thereby in need of man's rhetorical dressing.<sup>30</sup> By relying on the authority of the gods rather than of man, Homer has developed the "ear, ear for the sea surge / and murmur of old men's voices" that so many of Pound's contemporaries, those who valued distant metaphors, non-sense based symbolism, and other skillful applications of *logos* as the means to establish validity, did not.<sup>31</sup> Faced with the task of precision in a language that had become so far removed from the topics it was charged to convey, Pound saw in Homer a commitment to an immediate, essential, and dynamic relationship between poetic verse and the experience it was supposed to manifest.

To read Pound's verse as mimetic only by focusing on his own critical statements that privileged "the thing" and its "direct treatment" misses what Homer's contribution really meant for Pound. Odysseus is a hero in both Pound's text and Homer's not just because of his respect for the gods, but because of the unity between word and thing that this respect for the gods mandates. His skill in war, in love, and in nautical navigation is a function of understanding the full implications of the unity between word and thing. Although Pound does not use material from *The Odyssey's* final books in *The Cantos*, the scene between Odysseus the beggar and the unsuspecting Penelope merits consideration for its pointed

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<sup>30</sup> For Lincoln's contrast between *mythos* and *logos* in the Homeric era, see note 56 of the introduction.

<sup>31</sup> Pound, II/6.

celebration of what words, even “false” words, can affect in the hands of a skillful artist. Not surprisingly, the translations of *The Odyssey* he most valued were those that highlighted Odysseus’s ability to use his words in such a way as to produce powerful emotion on the part of the listener. Chapman, for example, translates a moment in the scene where the beggar tells Penelope of how he knows her husband as “Thus many tales Ulysses told his wife / At most but painting, yet most like the life – / Of which her heart such sense took through hir eares.”<sup>32</sup> Pope’s Odysseus, in that same scene, “With fair similitude of truth beguiles / The queen’s attentive ear”<sup>33</sup> and Rouse’s hero, in whose translation Pound assisted, “made his long invention seem just like the truth.”<sup>34</sup> For Pound’s poetic project, it is crucial to consider how each of these translations emphasizes the falsehood of Odysseus’s tale: the story of Odysseus’s homecoming is, ultimately, testimony to what a well-executed mimetic art can do to render itself immediate and present in the real world. By focusing exclusively on *The Odyssey* in Canto I, Pound makes a bold claim to the strength of the relationship between his modernist epic and the events it conveys throughout. Odysseus’s readiness to foster and respect the indelible link Pound believes possible between word and thing is as much a model for how critics ought to approach the ancient, and modern, characters and events as it is for what readers are to gain.

### **“Lie Quiet Divus”: Mythos, Ritual, and Translating the Truth in Canto I**

Since most of *The Cantos* jumps relentlessly across cultures, myths, and eras, Canto I is unique in its immediate and vivid foregrounding of *The Odyssey*. The command “Lie quiet Divus,” directed toward Homer’s most popular Latin translators, suggests the way that this

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<sup>32</sup> Chapman, 334, l. 287-288.

<sup>33</sup> *The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Alexander Pope (London: J. Walker, 1811), 307.

<sup>34</sup> W. H. D. Rouse, *The Odyssey: The Story of Odysseus*, 1937 (New York: Signet Classic, 1999), 217.



mythos demands to be approached: this is not an attempt to translate Homer with slavish metrical and literal precision, but to present the sensations and emotions in a way that moves readers whether the syllabic count matches the original or not.<sup>35</sup> To this end, Canto I presents a world in which objects and sensations carry no additional significance beyond their own presence, not even providing a hint of context for the first several lines so that the reader cannot possibly begin by experiencing the text as a translation of a familiar Western myth. The ship that carries the crew and its animals is just that: each word that describes it is intended to enhance the reader's immediate and precise experience of its journey, including such archaic-sounding coinages as "pitkin." In his seminal study of mimesis in ancient literature as compared to modern, Eric Auerbach points out the shift that occurred from sense-based symbols in ancient texts to non-sense based symbols in the Christian texts that provided much of the familiar and prominent symbolism in modern art, literature, and drama. Bread and wine, for example, could not have assumed the meaning of sacrifice and bloodshed in Homer's age as it holds in the Common Era.<sup>36</sup> Asserting several times throughout his prose that Christian dogma had to elicit belief through external force alone, Pound blamed Christianity for exacerbating the distance between words and meanings in modernity. The claim that "Christ follows Dionysus," therefore, highlights not only Christianity's appropriation of pagan traditions, but its co-option of language itself from the mimetic to the symbolic realm.<sup>37</sup> In ancient times, the mimetic arts served the purpose of making the audience see, hear, and sense firsthand the emotions and ideas imitated. By the

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<sup>35</sup> Pound, I/5.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 18.

<sup>37</sup> This line is taken from part three of Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, his earlier and shorter verse lamentation of the state of modern culture and its devaluation of the arts.

twentieth century, this purpose had long been relegated to the discipline of science—and even scientific approaches became distanced from the objects studied, as Pound illustrates in *How to Read* by the example of Agassiz insisting that his student “look at the fish” rather than repeat its Latin classification.<sup>38</sup> The mimetic sound qualities of canto I’s opening lines, adapted from the Anglo-Saxon, prompt us to do just that: to *look* at the ship that “Bore us with bellying canvas” and the crew “Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward” rather than breeze through a story that has long been familiar to the English language.<sup>39</sup> By eliding the specific historical and cultural context, Pound emphasizes the already-present elements of human universality that make the hero’s journey relatable and moving—regardless of whether it stands as an “accurate” translation of a canonical Western text.

The withholding of Circe’s name and thereby the context of Canto I’s first few lines is an integral part of Pound’s desire to make us look, listen, and feel Odysseus’s journey through the poetry. In order to convey the archaic nature of the *Nekuia*, a ritual that he understood to be ancient even in Homer’s time, Pound chose a more archaic-sounding form of modern English similar to what he had done to capture the archaic feel of the original Anglo-Saxon for “The Seafarer.”<sup>40</sup> When considering Benjamin’s supposition that the earliest forms of language were intended as powerfully mimetic, it seems no accident that

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<sup>38</sup> Pound, *ABCR*, 17-18.

<sup>39</sup> Pound, *I/3*.

<sup>40</sup> In *The Pound Era*, Kenner, who defines Homer’s *Nekuia* as “a tale of visiting the dead, which archaic bards...rendered audible through somewhat different words every time they recited it” (147), alludes to Pound’s letter to Rouse dated 23 May 1935 in which he states “The *Nekuia* shouts aloud that it is older than the rest, all that island, Cretan, etc. hintertime, that is not Praxiteles, not Athens of Pericles, but Odysseus.” See *SL*, 273. As Kenner observes, *The Seafarer* “maps the sound, not the meaning” of the original Anglo-Saxon, an emphasis on sound which Pound carried into the first lines of canto I. See *PE*, 350.

Pound's attempt to achieve an archaic form in the first lines also happens to result in the most mimetic words:

And then went down to the ship,  
 Set keel to 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, and winds from sternward  
 Bore us outward with bellying canvas  
 Circe's this craft, this trim-coiffed goddess. (ll. 1-7)<sup>41</sup>

While the poet drags us through the plodding slowness rendered by these mostly monosyllabic verses, the experience of weariness that occurs through this long journey is prioritized over the fact that this journey is a translation of *The Odyssey*. Each step of the preparation to set sail is meticulously labored over. Just when the lines start to pick up speed with “Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea,” and it feels as if the ship is moving as the lines are moving, the “and / We” enjambment begins a line that returns to the same tedious pace, and we are brought into the crew's process as they “set up mast and sail on that swart ship.” The use of “swart,” an Old English word for “dark,” suggests the primacy of sound as a conveyance of the poem's experience—and moreover, a sound fostered exclusively by English. The plosive “b” and “p” sounds of “Bore sheep aboard her” then slow down the verse so drastically that the previous lines seem almost swift in comparison. Even though English is not *The Odyssey*'s original language, the poetry must remain a mimetic act, one that should include, Pound advised Rouse, “all the possible masteries of English” if it is to

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<sup>41</sup> Pound, I/3-5.

transfer affect and emotion and not just mere information.<sup>42</sup> Asserting that the Greeks achieved the maximum effect of *melopoeia*, the term he coined for poetic technique governed by sound, Pound sought English diction and syntax that would render its equivalent.<sup>43</sup>

Although Pound saw much to be admired in the Greeks, he did not take for granted the potential that belonged uniquely to English. The close placement of “bore” and “aboard,” together with the assonance they share, places weight on the poem’s line and on the ship itself, a weight that “and our bodies also” adds to and drags out.<sup>44</sup> By repeating “bore” again for the action of the wind, a natural phenomenon and the responsibility of the god Aeolus, Pound suggests a unity between man, nature, and mythos, all three of which must contend with the heaviness of this task. Using *bore*, a word that connotes the labor of weight for man and wind alike, Pound renders mythos, nature, and man as occupying the same physical space and having the same experience of this space. While the sounds insist that the crew’s labor be experienced independent from any knowledge of its context—be it true or false, fiction or history, natural or supernatural—Pound reclaims the power of language to manifest the world it expresses.

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<sup>42</sup> These lines are from a letter dated 23 May 1935, but they serve as only one instance of many during which Pound stressed the importance of having a strong command and care of the English language for Rouse’s project. While he concedes that “blank” words might be used “for the timing, the movement, etc.,” he posits that these might be placed “perhaps never, or at any rate not usually where the original author has used them.” His clarification of earlier feedback to Rouse divorces the addition of words from the enhancement of meaning, as he writes, “When I suggested your doing a translation with all the meaning, I didn’t mean merely to put back words, or translations for words.” Later on, his letter dated March 18th, 1939, from Rapallo takes the concept of translation back to its Latin root meaning “to carry over”, with “Tain’t what a man sez, but wot he means that the traducer has got to bring over. The implication of the word.” See *SL*, 269-71.

<sup>43</sup> Pound, *ABCR*, 42.

<sup>44</sup> As Pound points out, without the “tags” that indicate parts of speech in Latin and Greek, “It makes a difference in English whether you say man sees dog [or] dog sees man.” His criticism of Milton for writing “Him who disobeys me disobeys” to mean “Who disobeys him, disobeys me,” exemplifies the awkwardness and confusion that results from treating English as an inflected language. See *ABCR*, 50-51.

By prioritizing action over context, Pound's poetic language demonstrates little concern for whether this mythos should be recognized primarily for its ancient significance or deemed relevant to the present: that the words produce the experience of labor they are charged with conveying is recognition and relevance enough. This effacement of the reader's preconceptions parallels the effacement of the crew's potential oppositions to the detour, rendered by the "also" addendum, in favor of the sheep required to perform the *Nekuia* successfully. Pound was likely familiar with one of the prevalent nineteenth-century theories on the relationship between mythos and ritual in ancient times, a theory that positioned belief in the mythos as secondary to the ritual's correct performance.<sup>45</sup> On observing the processions and rituals of Easter week performed in Rapallo, Pound remarked that these rituals did not seem to come from the participants having "learned it in school" or "read anything" telling them what to do and why.<sup>46</sup> This ancient concept of the primacy of action to belief is one that Pound sought to reclaim for modernity, especially after Christianity had propagated the view that belief must be present, and even forced if not.

While Pound's work remained entrenched in his own beliefs, he nevertheless viewed "belief" itself as "a cramp, a paralysis, an atrophy of the mind in certain positions."<sup>47</sup> Etymologically rooted in the German *lieb*, or love, belief is not synonymous with the type of careful examination and perception Pound deemed necessary for establishing credibility, nor

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61. The theory that ritual came before belief in ancient mythos was first posited by nineteenth-century biblical and Arabic scholar William Robertson Smith.

<sup>46</sup> Ezra Pound, "European Paideuma" with Afterword and Notes by Massimo Bacigalupo, in *Ezra Pound, Nature and Myth*, ed. William Pratt (New York: AMS Press, 2002), 11. In canto XLVII, Pound emphasizes the Rapallo women's strict focus on the ritual of leaving shoots to sprout on the church altar for Easter, a focus that places the action of the ritual over any belief that might exist: "Wheat shoots rise new by the altar, / flower from the swift seed. / Two span, two span to a woman, / Beyond that she believes not / Nothing is of any importance" (237).

<sup>47</sup> Pound, "Religio," in *SP*, 52.

with the type of knowledge that would distinguish a verifiable statement from a hoax.<sup>48</sup>

Establishing a poetics that makes the text direct and immediate, prior to revealing whether the actual context derives from a “believable” story or not, Pound’s rendering of Odysseus’s journey demands of readers the “active, instant, and present awareness.” Such awareness, as he surmised in *Guide to Kulchur*, “is NOT handed out in colleges and by the system of public or popular education,” but rather remained a responsibility that each individual must undertake for himself.<sup>49</sup> Though Pound, as Ira B. Nadel has observed, “anticipated that his readers would understand the sources, allusions, and origins of his work,” such knowledge does not allow the sources of *The Cantos* to be skimmed, recognized, or set aside with the confidence that one knows exactly how to interpret and connect them.<sup>50</sup> Instead, as Odysseus and his crew must perform the *Nekuia* without completely understanding why, canto I must be read not as another translation of a well-known story, but as a text that brings its own experience with or without a comprehensive understanding of its context. The poet’s ability to “make it new,” as is called for in Canto LIII, therefore requires delving into the very old, to a pre-modern, pre-Christian mindset in which the proper execution of an action mattered more than whether one “believed” or “understood” this action’s efficacy.<sup>51</sup> Consequentially, a poem’s mimetic properties necessitate moving away from a reading process guided by what the text is expected or understood to do and toward a process guided by what the poet has actually produced to treat the subject directly and meaningfully.

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<sup>48</sup> See the previously cited comparison of bad monetary cheques to cheques against knowledge in *ABCR*, 4.

<sup>49</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 52 (hereafter cited in text as *GK*).

<sup>50</sup> Ira B. Nadel, introduction to *Ezra Pound in Context*, 1.

<sup>51</sup> Pound, LIII/265.

In keeping with ancient mythos' favoring the ritual's proper actions over the agent's pre-determined belief, Pound renders the rites in such a way that Odysseus and his crew are placed in the background, obscured by the objects and actions that the rites entail:

The ocean flowing backward, came we then to the place

Aforesaid by Circe.

Here did they rites, Perimedes and Eurylochus,

And drawing sword from my hip

I dug the ell-square pitkin;

Poured we libations unto each the dead,

First mead and then sweet wine, water mixed with white flour.

Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death's-heads;

As set in Ithaca, sterile bulls of the best

For sacrifice, heaping the pyre with goods,

A sheep to Tiresias only, black and a bell-sheep. (ll. 17-27)<sup>52</sup>

Because Pound made a point of despising affected poetic language and syntax, subject-verb reversal here is significant. The syntax of "Came we," "Here did they," "Poured we," and "prayed I" foregrounds the action completed by placing the verb before its subject. Besides doing the right actions, it is also important that the place for conducting these actions is "Aforesaid by Circe," a phrase which gets a line all to itself and precedes the details of the rites to come. If the most valuable "hearsay" is in the tradition of the gods, as Pound states in "Religio," what makes these rites possible is that the crew listens to what Circe, who has the gods behind her, had instructed regarding the rites' proceedings. That the issue of whether

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., I/3.

they believe her or not is never raised, even when her trustworthiness ought to be in question, suggests powerfully the primacy of action over belief that carries the men through a successful performance of the *Nekuia*.

The description of the *Nekuia* itself pushes the boundaries of mimesis even further, positing that poetry can not only connect with something in the “real world” but actually manifest it. In these lines, mimesis fosters not only the direct and immediate treatment of a fictional world, but an elision of the strict distinction between fiction and fact that modernity has long posited as truth. Some of the sounds and rhythmic patterns that resonate from the opening of canto I, which describes a very practical and familiar act of loading a ship and preparing it for departure, resonate through these lines that narrate a much less familiar and arguably less believable or realistic act (for Homer’s audience as well as ours) of temporarily revivifying the dead. The action “And drawing sword from my hip,” both rhymes with and somewhat echoes the rhythm of “And then went down to the ship” of line 1, as “Bore sheep aboard her” not only corresponds in meter with the “black and a bell-sheep” set aside for Tiresias, but also with “Poured we libations” and “heaping the pyre.” By recalling the rhythms and rhymes used for describing the preparations of more realistic and familiar acts of the physical world with those used to describe preparations for entry to the spiritual world, Pound closes the gap between what is real and what is not, what is reasonable and what is superstitious. For this crew and the poem that portrays them, everything that is made possible through mythos, through the support and wisdom of the gods, is believable as truth. In taking the time to complete the necessary actions for each task, they have made the summoning of the dead no less possible than the sailing of a ship. Subsequent cantos attest that much of what is regarded as real in modernity, particularly the faulty credit accumulated from an



interest-driven economy, is in fact as false as *mythos* has come to seem. Though relegated to the realm of falsehood in modernity, *mythos*, if rendered through a mimesis that establishes meaningful contact with its figures and events, holds real value for a society that believes profit can be accumulated “without regard to production.”<sup>53</sup>

This emphasis on action over predetermined belief would be useless, however, if not for the willingness of a certain individual to perform the action with care. The syntax of “I dug the ell-square pitkin,” placing the “I” of Odysseus first in between statements that place the verb first, suggests the importance of this one man’s presence to the ritual. If Benjamin’s proposition is considered, and the earliest forms of mimesis were rituals designed to manifest, albeit in a “non-sensuous similarity,” the events sought, then Odysseus shows himself having the ultimate skill in the mimetic arts as early as this segment of his journey long before his verses inspire Penelope to weep for her “absent” husband. When the dead begin to rise from the place prepared, Homer’s hero both exemplifies and anticipates what such English critics as Wordsworth and Shelley would claim several thousand years later about the superior ability of poets to connect with the metaphysical through language. By calling attention to Odysseus’s skill in mimetic artistry, Pound also highlights the skill of the poet charged with making Odysseus’s underworld immediate and significant on the page of a twentieth century poem. The “I” responsible for digging the ghosts’ space would remain unable to tell what happened there if not for the poet’s skill in rendering it. Such alliterative phrasing as “Men many, mauled” and “the impetuous impotent dead” overwhelm the tongue and make a challenge of enunciating and distinguishing between words as Odysseus strives to keep back the dead from overwhelming his store of blood until Tiresias should appear (ll.

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<sup>53</sup> See Pound’s definition of *usura* in note 4.

32-40).<sup>54</sup> Moreover, highlighting these words' mimetic properties prompts relationships between them that would never occur otherwise. These relationships provide additional information about Homer's underworld and the states of those who inhabit it. The men remain indelibly and indistinguishably tied to their affiliations with "many" others, all of whom are "mauled" as their identities become eclipsed by the armies they served. Though the "impetuous" impulses of the dead belie their being "impotent" ever to act on their desires again, these two qualities are irrevocably and pitifully linked. This would be an extremely unwelcoming and hostile place for a man who is accustomed to being singled out for his heroic deeds and to enjoying any privileges to which his heroic status entitles him. Although Odysseus is narrating the story, the poet's mimetic skill reveals more than what the hero's brave front alone would tell.

The importance of the poet to the mythos reverberates throughout centuries' worth of *Odyssey* translations and is crucial to understanding the modern poet's task in composing a twentieth-century epic. Robert Fitzgerald's narrator commands, "Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story."<sup>55</sup> While S. H. Butcher and Andrew Lang's narrator, using "Tell me, Muse," seems to be more dependent on the muse for information, this dependency belies the wealth of information that follows; this speaker seems to know "of that man, so ready at need" before the tale even begins.<sup>56</sup> The poet must not only be prepared to listen to the gods, the ultimate source of mythos' truth in ancient times, but to grasp the responsibility such privileged access entails. This task extends not only to communicating the many aspects of the hero's experience and emotion, which audience knows already to be important to the

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, I/4.

<sup>55</sup> Fitzgerald, 1.

<sup>56</sup> Butcher and Lang, *The Odyssey*, 1.

mythos, but also to illuminating the people and events who might otherwise be deemed insignificant. Homer's focus on Elpenor, the deceased shipmate who had remained nameless until his fall from Circe's roof, is fitting for Pound's emphasis on the particularities that shape historical consciousness. Because Pound saw no hope for cultural, economic, or intellectual progress until the smaller details of history were understood and connections were made from these details between different times and lands, Odysseus and his men cannot return home until they attend to the details of Elpenor's burial. For Pound and for Homer, the seemingly mundane is what restores the ability of a civilization to thrive. In ancient times and modernity, poetry alone provides the space for these smaller particularities to be made apparent and immediate. No longer an anonymous crewmate of lowest rank, Elpenor and his request for a proper burial cannot be ignored.

While Elpenor's burial has remained a low priority as the crew focused on getting to the place where the *Nekuia* should take place, they must now face that he has remained "unwept, unwrapped in sepulcher, since toils urged other."<sup>57</sup> The similar sounds of *unwept* and *unwrapped* link the lack of proper burial action to a lack of proper respect and emotion for the deceased; the excuse that "toils urged other" becomes flimsy at best. What the crew had neglected in favor of the *Nekuia*'s importance now becomes a major component of the ritual itself. Odysseus must, therefore, heed Elpenor's request for burial—made all the more present and laborious by the aspires of "he in heavy speech" that precedes it—before he can hear Tiresias and continue with his journey to Ithaca. By rendering the otherwise familiar English language and words in such a way that forces us to linger, Pound also forces the reader to take the proper steps in proceeding through the text before continuing. Through

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<sup>57</sup> Pound, I/4.

poetry, Pound can counteract what Slavoj Žižek has described as the tendency of ritualistic performance to create an impassioned and complacent distance from the experience sought—as one might feel that they have experienced humor by passively watching a sitcom with a laugh track.<sup>58</sup> Unlike Žižek’s sitcom, this is not something that can be skimmed with the satisfaction that one has “read” a classic; we must actually contend with the nuanced experiences that the words’ sounds manifest. Whereas Aristotle posits that the focus on the universal instead of the particular is what makes the mimetic art of poetry reveal “a higher truth” than that of history, what Pound takes from Homer is that particularities are the only area that poetry should foreground if it is to make relevant the history that has been written in the blandly universalized, uninformative templates of prose.<sup>59</sup> The mimetic power of poetry can reveal that “*A man of no fortune, and with a name to come*” because mimesis ensures that his name will come and will endure (l. 56).<sup>60</sup>

Through Elpenor’s appearance in Canto I, Pound proposes that mythos can teach modernity how to prioritize its historical knowledge in order to determine what is most needed for regaining its long lost ability to tell the truth. When later cantos switch frequently and abruptly between mythological and historical contexts, often containing the poet’s own renditions of what occurred at certain historical events, it becomes apparent that Pound wants mythos to be more directly integrated into historical consciousness—even to the point where he places mythos and history on the same level of authenticity. Lincoln has observed that what validated mythos as truth for the ancients was not that it coincided with historical or

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<sup>58</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 34.

<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, *Theory of Poetry and Fine Art, with a Critical Text and Translation of The Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (London: Macmillan and Co., 1898), 191.

<sup>60</sup> Pound, I/4.

scientific fact, but that it aligned with the wisdom of the gods.<sup>61</sup> Whereas Christian texts must bear reference to the historical world and contain no inconsistencies within them, the mythos of ancient texts did not fall apart should inconsistencies occur when the text is placed against historical understanding, as Auerbach's comparison of *The Odyssey* with the Old Testament's story of Abraham and Isaac illustrates.<sup>62</sup> If a figure such as Odysseus had the authority of the gods behind his words, his words were considered true. Homer's emphasis on the irrevocable link between name and truth resonates with Pound's assertion that "In writing, a man's name is his reference."<sup>63</sup> Pound's Latin revision of the opening lines of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the Word," in Canto LXXIV allude to the privileged position that the earliest language occupied in ancient times as an immediate conveyor of what it represented: "in principio verbum / paraclete or the verbum perfecta: sinceritas."<sup>64</sup> Should the speaker be "sincere" in seeking to manifest what was spoken, the word would indeed be "perfect," not in need of the ornate elaboration that for the ancient Greeks was termed *logos*. What happens to historical consciousness in the Cantos is not that it is, as Perloff has described, "undercut."<sup>65</sup> Instead, Pound renders a world in which historicity is irrelevant to the ability of mimesis to render the truth of what is witnessed and experienced. If the poet is sincere in the effects sought, Penelope will weep at a fabricated story told by a constructed persona, Pound's modern readers will see Sigismundo Malatesta as an intellectually aware patron of the arts worthy of respect, and poetic language will at last reclaim the power to affect the natural world.

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<sup>61</sup> Lincoln, 3-18; Segal, 61-62.

<sup>62</sup> Auerbach, 14.

<sup>63</sup> Pound, *ABCR*, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Pound, LXXIV/447.

<sup>65</sup> Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 183.

## **“I Have Seen What I Have Seen”: Credibility and Immediacy in the Mimesis of Pound’s Ovid**

Canto II, which relates Ovid’s story of the metamorphoses of Bacchus, emphasizes the immediacy of affect as the true test of poetry, and moreover, the receptivity to such affect as the true test for readers. Pound’s framing of the story is itself a powerful means of foregrounding what he wants readers to take from this mythos. Originally, this section in Ovid’s text is titled Pentheus, and remains Pentheus’s story throughout with a warning of the consequences that result from refusing to honor the gods. The story ends with his being torn limb from limb by his own mother and others whose worship of Bacchus he had tried to forbid. In this version, Acoetes speaks only briefly of the time when Bacchus appeared on his ship disguised as a young boy; the story then shifts the focus back to the arrogant Pentheus who imprisons Acoetes before Bacchus saves him. Pound, however, omits Pentheus from the mythos almost entirely, save for when Acoetes gives him a brief warning to respect the gods. In order for Pound to convey the importance of careful reading and perception, it is crucial to position Acoetes at the center of the story and Pentheus at the periphery. While the fear of Pentheus’s fate can perhaps inspire the type of unexamined belief that Pound saw as paralyzing the ability to think and perceive for oneself, the details of Acoetes’s triumph provides a workable model for responsible readers to emulate.

When Acoetes tells what he has seen of the god’s manifestation after his crewmates had kidnapped Bacchus disguised as a young boy, he evades a clear delineation of any relationship between his worship of the god and the sights he has seen: “Fish scales on the oarsmen / And I worship / I have seen what I have seen” (ll. 94-96).<sup>66</sup> This story illustrates

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<sup>66</sup> Pound, II/9.

Pound's declaration in "Religio" that "It is better to perceive a god by form, or by the sense of knowledge, and, after perceiving him thus, to think what god it may be."<sup>67</sup> Not insisting on a direct causality, Acoetes is in the state Pound wants perceptive readers to adopt; the stagnant prejudice of belief must not hinder the ability to see what is present on the page. In turn, the poet must not assume that the reader's inclination to "worship" a certain mythos, creed, or historical event will carry a poem. Like Odysseus's successful performance of the *Nekuia*, Acoetes' worship of Bacchus need not relate to anything he has seen regarding the god's manifestations, nor to whether he believes any of what he saw. By engaging a conjunction that yields no direct relationship between the two statements, these lines exemplify the great potential and weight that Pound's transatlantic modernist colleague Gertrude Stein claimed this part of speech could hold.<sup>68</sup> "And" denotes a blatant lack of causality between the fish scales that have appeared on the crew and Acoetes' declaration of worship. Rather, it was his ability to perceive that the boy "has a god in him" long before the crew began to turn into sea creatures that spared him—not whether Bacchus had revealed himself by credible means. What Acoetes has "seen" does not even have a conjunctive to join to the previous statement, yielding no relationship whatsoever between sight and worship. Whether or not his account can be proven credible by science or history, what has been "seen" is of no consequence if mimesis cannot reveal these events effectively.

For Pound, poetry was made effective not by rendering a faithful translation or appealing to the reader's familiarity with a prominent reference, but by transferring an

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<sup>67</sup> Pound, "Religio," in *SP*, 52.

<sup>68</sup> In "Poetry and Grammar," Stein describes a conjunction as "not varied but it has a force that need not make any one feel that they are dull" and surmises that "conjunctions have made themselves live by their work." See *Writings 1932-1946* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 315-316.

immediate experience. Such mimesis mandates that reading cannot be a passive process and, instead, insists that the reader do the work of piecing together the various possibilities that the lines provide. As Acoetes becomes rapidly immersed in the chaos of the “ship stock fast in sea swirl” (l. 48), the reader must remain in this confusion as well, having to discern how bits and pieces of disjointed fragments connect to form a coherent representation of Bacchus’s lynxes that suddenly appear.<sup>69</sup>

And out of nothing, a breathing  
hot breath on my ankles  
Beasts like shadows in glass,  
a furred tail upon nothingness.  
Lynx-purr, and heathery smell of beasts,  
where tar smell had been,  
Sniff and pad-foot of beasts,  
Eye-glitter out of black air. (ll. 71-78)<sup>70</sup>

As with Odysseus’s preparation of Circe’s ship, these lines of metamorphosis prioritize the action over its context. The reader, along with Acoetes, must figure out what exactly is happening, and what is the source of the breath that seemingly appears “out of nothing.” The slant rhyme between “breathing” and “nothing” enforces this state of both having and lacking something tangible to grasp for knowledge of this experience, breath being both palpable and invisible. These sentences recall the ideogrammic method that Pound advocated after being inspired by Fenollosa’s essay on the Chinese written character in that they follow a

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<sup>69</sup> Pound, II/7.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 8.



succession of thought that accretes as the sentence progresses, demonstrating what Fenollosa termed “the transferences of force from agent to object.”<sup>71</sup> However, this transference of force is suddenly cut short when carried onto a concept that only confuses and obscures the placement of the subject, as it does in “a furred tail upon nothingness.” Because there is no effable image on which to place the tail, its initial presence is called into question. The “Sniff and pad-foot of beasts” do not seem to have palpable origins, nor does the “eye-glitter” since it comes only “out of black air.” While the tar smell has become a scent of the past, the actual presence of a lynx still cannot be affirmed; only its purr is heard and the body parts mentioned are so fragmented from each other as to compose no coherent picture. Moreover, the alternating indentations of these lines create two additional series that can be scanned by isolating the indented lines from the justified. Each set of lines essentially presents the same succession of fragmented images, still refusing to affirm a composite whole of the lynx. That these parts encourage different ideas of how the image might be perceived exemplifies the more dynamic type of imagery that Pound termed Vorticism. Rather than being a more stagnant and one-dimensional “idea,” a well-presented image should be “a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”<sup>72</sup> This multi-faceted and dynamic image is juxtaposed with such earlier, more imagistic phrasings in canto II as “the blue-gray glass of the wave tents them” and “Quiet sun-tawny sand-stretch,” which present a single, unified image on which to focus.<sup>73</sup> Multiple possibilities exist for the truth of what is actually happening in the fragments of perceptions and sensations that Acoetes

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<sup>71</sup> Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1936), 7.

<sup>72</sup> Pound, *GB*, 92.

<sup>73</sup> Pound, II/6.

experiences, yet nothing is confirmed—including whether these sensations indicate a real lynx or just the presence of lynx-like features. Instead, an assessment of the truth is placed entirely in the reader's hands as the lines demand that various possibilities be considered for how and under what circumstances these disjointed images compose a whole, or whether they remain as co-existing yet incoherent parts.

Acoetes' fragmented account fosters the direct treatment that was so valued in ancient mimetic works; simply stating that lynxes appeared would be inadequate to express the shock, fear, and incredulity that a crew would feel if land animals suddenly appeared on a ship adrift. In a modern society that has grown so accustomed to treating subjects more figuratively and distantly, this directness comprises one of the major difficulties in reading *The Cantos*. D. S. Carne-Ross points out that Pound's literality adds a level of alienation not present in equally obscure modernist texts like *The Waste Land* so that "Not only does the thing, in Pound's best verse, not point beyond itself: it doesn't point to us."<sup>74</sup> However, even an awareness that Pound will not provide us with an easy way to read allegorically or symbolically for a statement on mankind does not help with such scenes as this. Not only does the verse point exclusively towards "the thing," but it also points toward multiple and conflicting possibilities for how the thing can be interpreted and experienced—possibilities that are left for the reader to grapple with alone. The truth of what Acoetes has "seen" lies only in what readers might glean from the poem's rendering; much can be both assumed and dismissed from the depictions of the crew's transformation into various aquatic creatures. Ideogrammatic fragments present clues that simultaneously reveal and conceal the experience of the moment at hand. Such lines as "Medon's face like the face of a dory / Arms

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<sup>74</sup> D. S. Carne-Ross, "The Music of a Lost Dynasty: Pound in the Classroom," in *EP's Cantos*, 199.

shrunk into fins” provide no instructions for how images are to be processed and contextualized (ll. 113-14). The completeness of Medon’s transformation is left ambivalent while his face remains only “like” that of a dory and the arms become fins are not affirmatively attached to him in spite of their following a description of his fish-like face. The description of “Fish scales over groin muscles / lynx-purr amid sea...” provides only a vague proximity for the relationship between the human and the animal body, the fantastic manifestations wrought by the divine Bacchus and the otherwise ordinary sea of the mortal crew. The muscles might still be visible with fish scales over them, or Acoetes might be witnessing a disappearance of the human body while the fish scales take over (ll. 117-18). By presenting lines that suggest without proscribing certain experiences, Pound demands that the truth be sought only through the practice of careful, close reading, a process which in his lines entails consideration of multiple possibilities for interpretation. Because the truth must be actively sought through the piecing together of various ways that the lines may or may not cohere to provide a clear picture of the ship and crew’s transformation, rather than passively accepted in a more direct narrative form, this truth rejuvenates itself with each reading, and can only be the more authenticated when different possibilities of meaning are allowed to co-exist. Just as a comparison between Medon’s face and that of a fish does not deny a complete transformation, the presence of the fish scales do not negate the body underneath. Through presenting multiple and potentially conflicting versions of what occurred on the ship and how, Pound embraces the ancient concept of mimesis as an act that does not depend on uniformity and consistency to be credible. Furthermore, such inconsistencies and multiple possibilities of interpretation not only coexist without compromising the story’s integrity, but enhance the poem’s ability to render Bacchus’ mythos immediate and present. Although

Acoetes declares that “It’s a straight ship” to suggest that the crew is steering the boy away from Naxos, the poem’s rendering of the ship’s events must be anything but “straight” if it is to remain compelling (l. 46).

**“Knowledge the Shade of a Shade”: Making the Past Present and Relevant**

A poem mostly set on a ship constantly diverted from its intended course, *The Odyssey* provides a framework for understanding the truths Pound wants *The Cantos* to provide. That Odysseus cannot journey “straight” home, but instead must make several detours to seek knowledge from various human and divine sources, is a crucial component of his significance to Pound’s poetic project. In Canto XLVII, the description of Tiresias and his instructions to Odysseus suggest that the knowledge most valuable to him will not be the type of knowledge that the world of the living typically seeks:

Through overhanging dark, to see Tiresias,  
 Eyeless that was, a shade that is in hell  
 So full of knowing that the beefy men know less than he,  
 Ere thou come to thy road’s end  
 Knowledge the shade of a shade,  
 Yet must thou sail after knowledge  
 Knowing less than drugged beasts. (ll. 6-12)<sup>75</sup>

Tiresias, although “eyeless” and not a “beefy” man of living flesh, knows much more than the living. The prominent space gaps between “thy road’s end” and the start of “Knowledge the shade of a shade” emphasizes just how removed Tiresias’s type of knowing—the knowledge of the past’s ghosts, or shades--has become from Odysseus’s present and how

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<sup>75</sup> Pound, XLVII/236.

long it will take him to reach this. The level of removal connoted by the “shade of a shade” alludes to the knowledge of Pound’s present as well, especially his lament of the contemporary approach to knowledge that favored endless accretion for its own sake without considering the connections of past events to the present.<sup>76</sup> Although a technical impossibility, the idea that knowledge can be “a shade of a shade,” distant even when it appears to have been obtained, bears consideration with Pound’s concept of belief as an “atrophy of the mind.” While one may think sufficient knowledge for a credible belief has been obtained, it nevertheless remains only a “shade of a shade” and must therefore continue to be pursued actively. By failing to render knowledge of the past in a direct and relevant manner, modernity has made the knowledge to be gained from the past into something as remote as “a shade of a shade.” Nevertheless, as Tiresias command to “sail after knowledge / knowing less than drugged beasts” suggests, the only way to redeem these shades of the past and the knowledge they hold is to make some attempt at recovery even as ignorance remains.

In seeking to make knowledge of the past an active and vital component to the present, Pound’s poetics resuscitates an idea that has long faded away in post-Enlightenment, post-mythos civilization. As Horkheimer and Adorno have observed, art alone has fulfilled “the urge to rescue the past as something living,” but must be kept at a distance from the practical knowledge necessary for society’s functioning: “As long as art does not insist on being treated as knowledge, and thus exclude itself from praxis, it is tolerated by social praxis in the same way as pleasure.”<sup>77</sup> Odysseus’s successful avoidance of the Siren’s song, which tempts sailors with knowledge of “all that has ever happened on this fruitful

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<sup>76</sup> Pound, *GK*, 54.

<sup>77</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 25.

earth,” is, according to this theory, one of the earliest hints of modernity’s relegation of art to the realm of pure pleasure where it lacks any practical use for society’s proper functioning.<sup>78</sup> However, such a reading ignores the multiple instances during which Odysseus’s practical success—and sometimes his very survival—depends on engaging an art that resurrects the past in the service of vital knowledge in the present. His construction of a beggar’s appearance and persona provides knowledge of the servants who have betrayed his household in his absence. Without actual knowledge of past wars and of how Odysseus was attired when he first left Ithaca, his fabricated story about his friendship with Odysseus would not have the emotional power that it does for Penelope. Last, but certainly not least, is the marriage bed, which, as Odysseus recounts its elaborate construction, is rendered a work of art.<sup>79</sup> This art, with the knowledge of their shared past that accompanies it, affords Penelope the ultimate verification that the man who so convincingly played a nameless vagrant is indeed the man for whose return she has waited. Understanding *The Odyssey* as a poem that positions the past as a valuable source of knowledge to the present, and does this especially through mimetic art, allows its significance to Pound’s use of the past in *The Cantos* to become clear. It is not enough to argue for knowledge of the past as relevant to the present. Because the present has already dismissed the past as something to be “discovered, edited, and buried” away from practical application, art alone—and for Pound the art of poetry—can render these images in a way that de-familiarizes them so that their relevance cannot be ignored.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>79</sup> Odysseus makes both the labor and artwork that has gone into his marriage bed known, as he “made it fair with inlaid work of gold and of silver and of ivory” after he had taken care to build the immovable frame around the trunk of an olive tree. In S. H. Butcher and A. Lang, 382.

<sup>80</sup> Pound, “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” in *SP*, 22.

Both Pound and Homer valued particularization, the use of specific details as opposed to generalities as a means of making the mimesis of poetry immediate. Although the Sirens do use art to tempt the sailors to destruction, the generalities of their song contrast sharply with the detailing that Odysseus uses in his verse as a beggar, and with the details that Homer uses in his descriptions throughout. Whereas the Sirens only claim in general to “know all things, all the travail that in wide Troy-land the Argives and Trojans bare by the gods’ designs,” Odysseus satisfies Penelope with such specific recollections as the “purple cloak / of wool with double folds” bearing a gold brooch that “displayed a hound / that held a speckled stag in his forepaws” to earn her trust.<sup>81</sup> Such generalities as the Sirens present are devoid of the specifics that make a mimetic art able to imitate an object or event precisely and effectively. Instead, the Sirens offer only a template similar to what Pound describes as the prevalent model for writing history, in which any date or event can be inserted.<sup>82</sup> When considering the details Odysseus weaves into his own art, therefore, it cannot be assumed that his avoidance of the Sirens represents the need for a productive society to avoid any treatment of art as productive knowledge; rather, it urges the avoidance of a particular kind of art, one that assumes the intention to deliver “all things” will suffice. When art is done well, through the use of particulars to bring about mimesis effectively, it strengthens a society rather than destroys it. Moreover, these particulars can represent the past so as to have an enduring and meaningful impact on the present.

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<sup>81</sup> Butcher and Lang, 198; Mandelbaum, 386.

<sup>82</sup> See Pound’s rant against the prevailing method of historical scholarship in “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris”: “So-and-so was, in such-and-such a year, elected Doge. So-and-so killed the tyrant. So-and-so was banished for embezzling State funds. So-and-so embezzled but was not banished.” He goes on to declare that “By reading them with the blanks filled in, with the names written, we get no more intimate acquaintance with the temper of any period” (*SP*, 22).

## **“The Light Not of the Sun”: Homeric Epithets and the Symbiosis of Nature and Artistry**

For Pound, Homer’s frequent and repeated use of descriptive epithets provided a means for *The Odyssey* to endure in the present age, to the point that it was “3000 years old and still fresh,” as he wrote to Rouse.<sup>83</sup> He advised that Rouse’s translation should include “*recurrable* epithets—either to be simple and natural so that repeat don’t worry one, or else strange and part of a divine intended stylization.”<sup>84</sup> The depictions of “grey-eyed Athena” and the “wine-dark sea” present vivid colors and images for an audience to hear and recall when characters and scenes reappear, thus enhancing Homer’s ability to, like his hero, “mime the truth” through his mimesis. While Pound echoes Homer’s epithets throughout *The Cantos*, however, his versions both enhance and complicate the originals. Homer’s “grey-eyed Athena” becomes “Gray light, with Athene” in Canto XVII.<sup>85</sup> The consistently revealing epithet that provides at least some visualization of the goddess is now deliberately withholding and tells us even less than her name alone: this gray light may or may not be a part of Athena herself, and the vague “with” gives no indication of how this light is to be positioned in the rendering of a complete picture. Other descriptions act as a sort of reversal of the epithet’s purpose. Instead of providing an image to aid in perception, such phrases as “the boat drawn without sound / Without odor of ship-work” and “the light not of the sun,” not only refuse to add additional descriptive information, but also remove what little the reader might otherwise bring to an understanding of a certain concept (XLVII, ll. 26-27;

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<sup>83</sup> Ezra Pound to W.H.D. Rouse, 13 June 1935, in *SL*, 275.

<sup>84</sup> Pound, 17 April 1935, in *SL*, 273.

<sup>85</sup> Pound, XVII/76.







since it might seem as waves shift and the sun's rotation causes different shades to become more apparent. Moreover, the pairing of a color with its descriptive image suggests an innate and self-explanatory relationship that belies the real ways they contradict, or at least do little to inform, each other: a color obstructs an object's ability to remain "clear," salt is found in colors other than white, and there is nothing about a glare that necessitates purple. The reader must actively participate in piecing together the colors and consider how their simultaneous fusion and juxtaposition might comprise a single scene. Here, Pound seeks in verse what the Impressionist movement sought in painting, the involvement of the viewer's eye in building a cohesive piece from fragments of color. To stress the care that must be taken with color, in painting and in poetry, Pound quotes artist James Whistler, whom he claims once said that "The picture is interesting not because it is Trotty Veg, but because it is an arrangement in colour."<sup>91</sup> As Brian Jackson has observed, Pound's inspiration from Impressionism directly informed his poetry, in which he, too, would "present the impression, or series of impressions, that would create for his audience the sensation of participating in the experience directly by requiring them to reassemble perpetual fragments—impressions—into coherent wholes."<sup>92</sup> In adapting Homer's use of color in epithetic phrases, Pound insists that an effective mimetic art for modernity requires making the audience conscious not only of what occurs in a scene, but of how. That the process of conveying an accurate image entails the active, deliberate assemblage of pieces which the poet does not make self-evident in their relations to each other suggests that a scene's accuracy can be rendered only to the extent that

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<sup>91</sup> Pound, *GB*, 85.

<sup>92</sup> Brian Jackson, "Ezra Pound's Impressionism: Perpetual Mimesis and Mythic Time," *Interdisciplinary Studies: A Journal of Criticism and Theory* 11.2 (Spring 2010), 2.

the reader will allow it. A wily Odysseus can succeed only if Penelope is called to help, and the modern poet needs a perceptive reader willing to engage with the work the text demands.

However, even as Pound models his poetry from the participatory stance of Impressionism, these lines remove the most crucial component that Impressionists engaged to account for the variations in shading throughout a work: the shadows caused by the varying positions of the sun throughout the day. The sun, which could also account for the conflicting descriptions of “no cold there” and the “cool” rock of the cave, is dismissed once “the light not of the sun” is introduced. Removed from an explanation of science, the ultimate modern method of verification, all that remains is mythos, the truth of which depends on the speaker’s ability to render it effectively through mimesis. Peter Liebrechts traces “porphyry smooth” as also referring to Pound’s inspiration from Porphyry, who interprets Plato’s cave as “a symbol of both this material world and of the unenlightened life, that is, of a life in which one is, as yet, unaware of the existence of a higher, intelligible reality.”<sup>93</sup> Odysseus must leave both Calypso and Circe in order to ascend to this higher level of intelligence and no longer be bound by the senses. By pulling readers away from scientific explanation of the natural world, and not even making it an available option by which to gain intelligence of the scene at hand, Pound suggests that their modernity, and removal from mythos, is keeping them in the cave. If indeed we can consider Calypso and Circe as one person, as Liebrechts posits we can, then it is also important to consider that the goddess provides his means of escape from the world of the senses even while being the initial cause of his captivity in this world.<sup>94</sup> Abandoning the truth of science in pursuit of the truth of

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<sup>93</sup> Peter Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing and Printing, 2004), 168.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

mythos causes confusion, inconsistency, and disorientation, but mythos also provides the only way out. The enlightened life is not to be sought through the sciences, but through the mythos that both precedes and evades scientific rationality.

Nevertheless, the mention of porphyry in line 38 suggests that not everything in modernity need be set aside in pursuit of ancient mythos. Although the modern scientific means of reasoning are abandoned in pursuit of mimesis, one quintessentially modern tool, that of the typewriter and its facilitation of movement across the page, enhances the multiplicities of meaning that Pound's poetics seek to convey. Because the margins narrow and widen while these images continue to be presented, the lines of verse invite, but do not absolutely affirm, a reading of the indented lines as modifying the justified. The deliberate horizontal line created by the indentation that slopes downward from the "cliff green-grey" creates a sort of half-pyramid while it widens toward "the light not of the sun." These descriptions of the ancient world's mythos allow Pound to create an enduring physical presence in modernity; his mimesis not only imitates the scene for a new audience, but actually builds it in a way that its presence will endure. In addition to the suggestion of a pyramid's shape through the indentations, Pound also includes porphyry, used for much of the construction in ancient Rome, to posit a certain level of permanence and significance for his poetry. In an age for which "no picture is made, but to sell and sell quickly" as is described in Canto XLV, poets are all the more responsible for using their mimetic craft in a way that makes their ancient subjects endure.<sup>95</sup>

Porphyry also connotes another type of monumental structure essential to Pound's project: the marble built to rise from the canals of Venice during the Renaissance. According

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<sup>95</sup> Pound, XLV/229.

to Davie, Pound saw the connection Pound makes between ancient Greece and Venetian marble as fitting because the poet valued this stone “as a product of Mediterranean sensibility (related, for instance, to the Greek culture, similarly maritime, similarly marble-loving) and not, as Ruskin had guessed, related northward to Gothic.”<sup>96</sup> Not the natural light of the sun alone, but the sunlight’s interactions with the artifice of the well-hewn marble where it meets the water’s surface, is responsible for such color and light combinations as appear when the cave’s stone merges with the water’s surface.<sup>97</sup> The interaction between nature and man-made art produces something new, unprecedented, and beyond what nature alone has ordained feasible—as Pound observed when recalling the bust Gaudier-Brzeska made of him.<sup>98</sup> For this reason, Davie posits that “Where ‘marble’ appears, or ‘stone,’” in *The Cantos*, it is a sign of resurgence and renewed hope.”<sup>99</sup> The enduring artistic achievement inherent in such a structure as Venetian marble can, of course, be contextualized in terms of Sigismundo Malatesta’s portrayal in Cantos VIII-XI as a patron whose political failings should not outweigh his commitment to supporting quality art.

Because Canto XVII moves back and forth between references to Renaissance Venice and ancient Greece, the connection between the “porphyry smooth” Cave of Nerea and the marble partially submerged in the Venetian canals merits serious consideration. Pound forges a syncretism between two worlds that value the ability of art to work with and through nature in order to create something at once transcendent and plausible. In Homer’s verse as in

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<sup>96</sup> Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 29 (hereafter cited in text as *PS*).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>98</sup> See the previously quoted *GB*, 49 in note 4, as well as Pound’s recollection of what the sculptor told him he should expect: ““You understand it will not look like you, it *will*...*not*...*look*...like you. It will be the expression of certain emotions which I get from your character”” (50).

<sup>99</sup> Davie, *PS*, 129.

Pound's, mimesis depends on the use of something in the natural world, combined with the artifice rendered by the skill of the artist, in order to render something that is as effective as it is fantastic. Pound's explanation of the "highly artificial" forms invented by the thirteenth-century troubadours to express their real love for married women positions artifice as direct function of the desire to express the real.<sup>100</sup> While the dawn does not have actual human fingers in Homer's *Odyssey*, the beams of light that radiate naturally from the sun can produce the fantastic appearance of having "rosy fingers" when seen as streaks in the sky. For Pound, the construction of marble arches and columns that seem to emerge from the water's natural surface render such fantastic visions as "the forest of marble" and "the stone trees—out of water—" physically possible (l. 65-66).<sup>101</sup>

That art must work through nature, even while presenting something beyond nature, is a key concept of mimetic theory. Citing Goethe's definition of art as "above but not outside of nature," Halliwell surmises that mimesis "Makes contact with something more than nature, but while working *through* representations of natural phenomena."<sup>102</sup> Just as the natural interactions between sunlight and water best complement the man-made structures of marble, the mimetic artist's skill lies not only in telling "many a false tale" but in determining what pieces of truth from nature will work best with his fabrications to produce the most moving and immediate results. Although this resonates with T. S. Eliot's famous description in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" of how the poet's natural emotions and experiences must be processed by deliberate and skilled craft to be represented effectively,

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<sup>100</sup> As Pound observes, "No student of the period can doubt that the involved forms, and the veiled meanings in the '*trobar clus*,' grew out of living conditions, and that these songs played a very real part in love intrigue and in the intrigue preceding warfare." See "Troubadours—Their Sorts and Conditions" in *LE*, 94.

<sup>101</sup> Pound, XVII/78.

<sup>102</sup> Halliwell, 3.

the symbiotic relationship between art and nature is not uniquely modern, but an ancient concept of which modernism reminds us.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, whereas Eliot suggests that his theory applies mainly to the credible rendering of actual, past events, Pound and Homer's poetic projects encompass the use of naturally occurring events as essential to the poet's credible rendering of the unnatural and impossible.

**“Honey at First and Then Acorns”: The Truths of Form against Dubious Content in Circe's Ingle**

In Canto XXXIX, Pound extends the ancient concept of mimesis to demonstrate how it can add credibility to things that are known to be dubious, even in the world of the story's mythos. Pound's version of Odysseus's crew's transformation into swine under Circe's drugs foregrounds the moments of incredulity and ambiguity in the narrative perspective that go unexamined in Homer's version. Even a reading that privileges mythos as conveying truth will not serve to affirm the truth of this narration. In Homer's version, while the crew's experience of being turned to swine from Circe's drugs appears to be told by an omniscient narrator, it is actually Odysseus—who did not even arrive on the scene until after the change had occurred—relating the story in Alcinous's court. While the rules of mythos instruct the audience to hear Odysseus's version as true since he is a figure with the god's truth behind him, regardless of whether or not his vantage point allowed him to see the truth of what actually occurred in Circe's den, Pound's version presents a narrative voice that immerses us in the specifics of a mythos-centered world, yet breaks from the conventions of this mythos altogether. The possibility of two distinct narrative perspectives, either from Odysseus or from a crew member such as Elpenor, is raised, as is the possibility that both perspectives are

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<sup>103</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *SP*, 40-41.



at once true and false.<sup>104</sup> Although such sounds as the ““thkk, thgk”” of the loom are powerfully mimetic, the suggestion that the speaker might be partially under the influence of drugs compromises the reader’s ability to verify this perception:

In hill path: “thkk, thgk”

of the loom

“ ‘Thgk, thkk” and the sharp sound of a song

under olives

When I lay in the ingle of Circe

I heard a song of that kind.

Fat panther lay by me

Girls talked there of fucking, beasts talked there of eating,

All heavy with sleep, fucked girls and fat leopards,

Lions loggy with Circe’s tisane

Girls leery with Circe’s tisane

kaka pharmak edōken (ll. 1-16)<sup>105</sup>

The narrator, whomever he is interpreted to be, makes his unreliability clear from the start. He begins with an ambiguous statement of what exactly he heard while in Circe’s ingle, as “of that kind” could identify the song heard as either similar to that of a loom or as the actual sound of a loom’s work coming from Circe’s property. Both narrators also would not have had much time to lie in Circe’s “ingle,” or hearthside area, as Odysseus went to her

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<sup>104</sup> Although Carroll F. Terrell identifies the speaker as Elpenor, there also exists the possibility of Odysseus or another crew member being the speaker, as all the crew lay “in the ingle of Circe” at some point. See *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Vol. I (Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation, 1980), 159.

<sup>105</sup> Pound, XXXIX/193.

bedchambers and Elpenor was penned into the swine sty with the rest of the crew once she gave him “evil drugs,” as *kaka pharmak edōken* translates.<sup>106</sup> The inclusion of the drugs further pegs both narrative perspectives as dubious: while Odysseus was not actually present to see whether drugs did in fact cause the transformation, Elpenor was both present and privy to this transformation, but the drugs’ influence may have affected his perspective.

Nevertheless, the ability of Pound’s diction and phrasing to imitate the sensual stupor described presents at least as much validity as falsity to these two potential narrative perspectives. The slowness with which “All heavy with sleep, fucked girls and fat leopards” reads complements the alliterative and equally slow “Lions loggy” that follows. Whereas Homer’s mimesis takes for granted that Odysseus’s reputation as a divinely ordained hero will foster sufficient credibility, Pound engages the modern audience’s expectations of narrative convention to demonstrate how mimesis can render a scene credible even when its own context undermines it. As much as Pound craves a return to the ancient reverence for the mimetic properties of language, the mimetic texts of the ancient world that Auerbach describes—texts for which narrative consistency is not needed to maintain faith in the mythos conveyed—are no longer possible. Unable to depend on an assumed belief in the mythos itself, the poet’s skill in keeping words close to “the thing” becomes all the more pressing.

Pound’s poetics show how mimesis in modernity can both enhance and expand credibility where ancient mimetic verse did not deem it necessary. Attempting closeness between word and thing allows not only for increased precision, but for increased possibility

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<sup>106</sup> Terrell, 160.

in “the thing’s” purpose and meaning to the verse.<sup>107</sup> The similarity of sounds in “loggy” and “leery” calls attention to how “Circe’s tisane” can produce multiple and equally validated perspectives. Reading “loggy” to denote a sort of sluggishness, it appears that Circe’s tisane has both the power of compromising an awareness of one’s environment by causing a heavy stupor and the completely opposite effect of inducing a heightened sense of awareness, as with the girls who become “leery.” However, reading “loggy” with its alternative definition from the *OED* as “of a crop: of strong growth, rank” suggests an erection and thereby a sexual connotation which accompanies the girl’s “leery” state well.<sup>108</sup> For all the mythos provides to discredit its narrative perspective, the poet’s mimesis yields equal consideration to how such a drugged narrator can produce more than one credible rendition of the scene at hand.

Pound’s mimesis continues to use narrative perspective to the fullest extent. If the narrator is indeed drugged, then a single, unarguable version of what exactly occurred before Odysseus’s arrival is impossible. When describing the process by which Circe’s drugs were consumed in food, the conflicting versions of the meal’s order imitate the fuzzy recollection of one who has been drugged. Although Homer describes the men as maintaining their full mental capacities as swine, Pound’s lines suggest that the drugs might have affected their memory of the last moments before their transformation:

First honey and cheese

honey at first and then acorns

Honey at the start and then acorns

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<sup>107</sup> See the excerpt previously cited in note 22 from “A Retrospect,” in *LE*, 3.

<sup>108</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “loggy,” accessed April 30, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/109784?redirectedFrom=loggy#eid>.

honey and wine and then acorns

Song sharp at the edge, her crotch like a young sapling

illa dolore obmutuit, pariter vocem (ll. 31-36)<sup>109</sup>

Each of these descriptions of the meal's content and sequencing could be true as well as false. If the drugs were starting to take effect before the crew had finished eating and drinking, their recollection, like Elpenor's in the previous lines, might have been marred. On the other hand, they could also have the effect of heightened awareness as experienced by the "Girls leery with Circe's tisane." The image immediately following the food suggests the addition of Odysseus's voice, as, according to Homer's version, he alone slept with Circe, which then raises the question of whether he was the one describing the meal's sequence as well. Although sudden shifts in perspective, eras, and languages are common throughout *The Cantos*, Homer's narrative structure allows Pound to do something unprecedented by lingering on two different voices simultaneously within a single text. The fact that Odysseus's perspective describes a drug-induced transformation of his crew—which he may or may not have witnessed himself—means that Pound, in order to achieve mimetic accuracy for Homer's text, must not grant permission to abandon either Odysseus's perspective or that of the crew. The vantage point of Odysseus honors the ancient poet's representation, that of the crew honors the audience's awareness of Homer's flaw, and a verse in which both can co-exist is the only way to do this scene justice.

Taken from a story whose version of Odysseus and the Greek army directly conflicts with Homer's, the final line of this section further posits that effective mimesis should illuminate and embrace conflict within the scene portrayed. By immediately following a key

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<sup>109</sup> Pound, XXXIX/194.

piece of a Greek hero's journey with the Trojan queen Hecuba's grief at seeing the body of her dead son washed ashore, Pound does not merely "tell it slant," but tells it in a way that is utterly false, first to the Roman version of the mythos, and then to the Greek. While *Companion* editor Carroll F. Terrell translates "illa dolore obmutuit, pariter vocem" as "She hushed with grief, and her voice likewise," "pariter vocem" could also translate as "with one voice" or "voice together."<sup>110</sup> While conflicting voices unite, the familiar with the unheard of and the reliable with the dubious, the poet's mimetic skill presents both truth and falsity with one voice that at once respects and problematizes all possible versions of the truth.

Albeit a possibly dubious account of the crew's transformation, Odysseus's vantage point remains significant to Pound's articulation of his poetic project as a whole. By adding Odysseus's perspective, Pound foregrounds the significance of his union with Circe in the success of his journey to the underworld and then to Ithaca. As with the affected poetic syntax of the *Nekuia*'s description in Canto I, the use of metaphor to describe Circe's crotch is noteworthy against Pound's usual dismissal of the distance that such indirect language places between words and things. This "young sapling," however, closely connects the sexual union of Circe and Odysseus to the fertility rites of Dionysus and the fertile land supposed to result from the union between priestess and king. In this case, however, the "life" that results from their union is an encounter with death, and only through interacting with the dead will he gain the knowledge needed to survive the rest of the journey and eventually resume his life in Ithaca. The repeated exclamations of "ver novum" or "new spring" throughout the canto imply that this paradox of death's necessity to life is foreign to

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<sup>110</sup> Terrell, 161.

the typical poetic connotations of spring that privilege the season's new life as a triumph against winter's death rather than as a result of the decayed matter's fertilization. Whereas Eliot's April has no qualms about tormenting the "dead land" to bring forth life, the spring of *The Waste Land* provides an unequivocally "cruel" reminder of the death toll from a distinctly modern type of warfare.<sup>111</sup> Pound's "new springtime," in contrast, is both ancient and a cause for celebration. The description of "Spring overborne into summer / late spring in the leafy autumn" suggests that there cannot be a clear line between life and death, or between old and new. Spring's new life segues seamlessly into the crop's sprouting at summer, and the shedding of leaves at autumn recalls the spring that first enabled the leaves to grow. By introducing this "new spring" through this new means of articulating spring's purpose and process, Pound posits that mimesis must not only accommodate conflict and polarities, but showcase their essentiality to the mythos conveyed. Whereas Odysseus's return to the throne hinged on making the false resemble the true, Pound's return of language to its ancient mimetic capabilities requires showing how the true depends on the false—in the form of the paradoxical, the inconsistent, and the ambiguous—for its very existence.

### **"We Who Have Passed Over Lethe": The Past as Innovation**

The truth's dependency on the false could pose a challenge even for those who shared in Pound's modernist vision to accept. In fact, this concept extends to the poetic devices that Pound and his modernist colleagues dismiss as false to the accurate representation of emotion and object. Canto LXXIV's ending expresses that modernity's ceaseless advancements in striving to "make it new" must, inevitably and indelibly, link with the old:

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<sup>111</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, in *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Company, 1968), 53.

Hast 'ou seen the rose in the steel dust

(or swansdown ever?)

so light is the urging, so ordered the dark petals of iron

we who have passed over Lethe. (ll. 869-72)<sup>112</sup>

From the innovations of magnetism, iron filings produce a shape that is very old, both to nature and to art. The rose, a familiar flower employed so often to signify romance and beauty, had by *The Cantos*' publication lost its power for poets seeking to arrest readers' attention. Yet when rendered by the new type of artifice created by the magnet, the old symbol becomes a source of both light and order, and moreover, of light and order that also modifies the ancients of the last line, those who have "passed over Lethe" into the underworld. Here, the magnet is not as much associated with modern science as with the revelation of the intricate associations maintained by mythos. Swansdown, descriptive of both the filings' softness and of a common trope in modern adaptations of Greek mythos, fuses the old and new together so that each displays the other. The mimetic properties of the new art not only showcase the old, but illuminate it in a way that would not have otherwise been possible. In turn, the old symbolic tropes provide the language by which to describe the potential that the new art is manifesting. The poet's question of "Hast 'ou seen" does not take an affirmative answer for granted; only the extent by which mimesis allows the object to be "seen" can determine whether the light and order will come to fruition.

That light and order can and must be achieved through heeding the wisdom of ghosts remains a plausible, albeit challenging, feat for a man who appropriates a tradition in which the value of mythos is self-evident and unequivocal, unmarred by moments of inconsistency

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<sup>112</sup> Pound, LXXIV/445.

or ambiguity. However, a modern audience which has not only long dismissed mythos as false, but also has very strict conventions by which history, science, and other modern means of truth-telling can be validated, needs more than the wisdom of the centuries' worth of ghosts in *The Cantos* can provide. Pound's mimesis must provide a means not only to access the truth, but to show how this truth can become immediate, effective, and relevant only through the art that renders it.



## Chapter 4: “What You Thought You Came For”: The Poetics of Distraction in Eliot’s Christian Modernist Poetry

In an effort to mitigate the seeming clash between T. S. Eliot’s early modernism and his later espousal of Christianity, recent criticism has read *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* less for what the poems reveal about Eliot’s personal religious convictions than for how they invite readers to examine as well as partake in processes of spiritual and intellectual development. For Dennis Brown, both poems entail the reader’s participation as active listener in a “talking cure” for the speaker similar to what a therapist offers a client.<sup>1</sup> Kinereth Meyer and Rachel Salmon Deshen posit that the task of attempting to interpret *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* can become a spiritual experience in and of itself—even if Eliot’s religious beliefs do not match the reader’s own.<sup>2</sup> Ronald Schuchard points out that to read *Ash-Wednesday* exclusively as a “conversion” or “devotional” poem is to miss its power as a compelling love poem, inspired by a personal search for divine Love in the midst of struggling with human relationships.<sup>3</sup> G. Douglas Atkins links *Four Quartets* more closely with the pagan mythos of Homer’s *Odyssey*, locating Eliot’s work within the literary tradition of the “journey toward understanding.”<sup>4</sup> His more recent study, *T. S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian*, situates his

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<sup>1</sup> Dennis Brown, “T. S. Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*: Poetic Confession as Psychotherapy,” *Literature & Theology* 17.1 (March 2003), 2.

<sup>2</sup> See Part III of Kinereth Meyer and Rachel Salmon-Deshen, *Reading the Underthought: Jewish Hermeneutics and the Christian Poetry of Hopkins and Eliot* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010). Meyer and Salmon-Deshen read Eliot through the framework of Jewish interpretive practices, in which “the preoccupation with the text is itself considered holy, ranked sometimes even above prayer, as a way of communion with God” (213).

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 149-50.

<sup>4</sup> G. Douglas Atkins, *Reading T.S. Eliot: Four Quartets and the Journey Toward Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 47.

Christian-themed poetry as deeply concerned with developing precision in poetic language.<sup>5</sup> Such readings afford entries into productive discussions of Eliot's later work that are not pre-occupied with attempts to apologize for or reconcile Eliot's conversion with his participation in a poetic movement that largely drew upon ancient myth and dismissed Christianity as outmoded and irrelevant.

However, thinking more directly about what, if anything, Eliot's Christianity might have to do with modernism does not necessarily have to result in aporia. The reading practices demanded by these poems demonstrates that Christianity, as Eliot understood it, could have much to do with modernism. Through the concept of "distraction," a term appearing in *Ash-Wednesday* as well as several times throughout *Four Quartets*, Eliot uses Christianity to foster the very types of reading practices modernist poetics aimed to promote. Modifying neo-Marxists' more ambivalent stances on the diversionary tactics of distraction in artwork, Eliot uses distraction as a productive means of drawing readers away from the complacency of anticipated narrative conventions and interpretive practices and toward more dynamic, surprising, and complex interactions with modernist verse. Distraction, for Eliot, serves as a type of de-familiarization for otherwise recognizable cultural and religious references and poetic tropes in order to promote a more active reading experience. By forcing one to move away from a pre-determined concept of what an explicitly Christian referent means for the poem or for its speaker, Eliot engages distraction as a trope that promotes a modernist way of reading, in which context might inform but in no way governs interpretation.

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<sup>5</sup> See G. Douglas Atkins, *T. S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014).

I propose reading distraction in *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* in order to show that Eliot's Christianity as supportive and generative, rather than merely tolerant of, his contributions as a modernist. By constantly suggesting potential trains of thought and clues for context that might guide understanding, and then abruptly pulling them away, Eliot engages a form of distraction that trains readers to be attentive to the gap between what the poems' religious referents ought to offer and what the speaker can take from them. In "Burnt Norton," for example, he distinguishes between a distraction that opens up the mind to new experiences and interpretations otherwise ignored on a narrowly self-selected path toward spiritual apprehension, and distraction of an inferior kind—one that leaves man "distracted from" the enriching possibilities of the former. For Eliot, modernity lacks connection to the transcendent and divine not because of distraction per se, but because a distraction "empty of meaning" inhibits a distraction that could lead to more substantive, engaging points of focus:

Distracted from distraction by distraction

Filled with fancies and empty of meaning

Tumid apathy with no concentration<sup>6</sup>

Eliot's brand of distraction aims to move away from the inconsequential yet alluring "fancies" that readers of modernist texts had come to adopt as stand-ins for meaning. It discourages a hermeneutics predicated on solving puzzles or discovering obscure references and resists a positive correlation between context and content. Only through *distraction*, losing a pre-determined path to understanding, can the poetry bring readers "to care and not to care" (as *Ash-Wednesday*'s speaker requests from the divine) in a way that emphasizes

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<sup>6</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World Inc., 1971) (hereafter cited in text as *FQ*).

context at the expense of content and form. Distraction invites the reader to engage with the poem itself as a means of spiritual experience and not as a game to be won. A poetics of distraction comprises the main way in which Eliot, as Atkins puts it, “seeks...to bring his reader into the poems [of *Ash-Wednesday*], have him or her participate actively in its articulation of meaning and significance.”<sup>7</sup> The types of Christian prayer, ritual, and iconography that form an integral part of both *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets* demand dismissing the certainty of context-based knowledge and, instead, promote an openness to a distraction that allows understanding to enter through means otherwise inconceivable to the reader. Through a distraction that is at once unique to his orthodox Christianity and essential to his modernist criticism, Eliot demonstrates what is needed for literary modernism to continue fulfilling its goal of twisting, revising, and ultimately improving how people are attuned to the physical worlds they inhabit and the transcendent worlds they seek.

**“Distracted from Distraction by Distraction:” A “Productive Distraction” for Modernity**

To better understand distraction in Eliot’s poetry, it is first necessary to contextualize his developments of the term within the theories of his contemporaries. Although negative associations typically follow the *OED*’s definition of distraction as “a diversion of the mind or attention,” even associating this condition with “temporary madness,” neo-Marxist critics posited distraction as a productive state of mind during the 1920s and 30s.<sup>8</sup> Siegfried Kracauer saw potential in the distractions of Berlin’s movie theaters to contribute to social revolution because they “convey in a precise and undignified manner...the *disorder* of

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<sup>7</sup> Atkins, *T. S. Eliot: The Poet as Christian*, 56.

<sup>8</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “distraction,” accessed July 26, 2014, <http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/55730?redirectedFrom=distraction#eid>.

society.”<sup>9</sup> However, Kracauer asserts, “they immediately rob distraction of its meaning” by insisting that these shows not only belong to high culture (as evidenced by their often church-like architecture) but that they also represent an organic whole and not the disintegrated state of a society in chaos.<sup>10</sup> Only when film is presented apart from the trappings of high culture could it become a “distraction which exposes disintegration instead of masking it.”<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin’s theory of “reception in distraction” also sees the productive potential of film’s distractive properties. Rejecting George Duhamel’s assertion that film’s distraction poses absolute opposition toward concentration, Benjamin instead surmises that film, with its constant interruptions of moving images, promotes what he describes as “reception in distraction,” a state in which the public viewer becomes “an examiner, but an absent-minded one” who is able to focus on new tasks of apperception while maintaining attention on other tasks already mastered.<sup>12</sup> As Howard Eiland observes, reception in distraction is not only a product of a fast-paced modern world to Benjamin, but also a way to express a “new kind of learning.”<sup>13</sup> Kracauer and Benjamin, according to Eiland, distinguish between “*mere* distraction” and “productive distraction,” or between “distraction as a skewing of attention, or as abandonment to diversion, and distraction as a spur to new ways of perceiving.”<sup>14</sup> More recently, Michael Wood has pointed out distraction theory’s relevance to literary texts. Puns and other word-plays, which at first might seem mere amusing diversions from the main

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<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, “Cult of Distraction: On Berlin’s Picture Palaces,” *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987), 94-95.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 40.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Eiland, “Reception in Distraction,” *boundary 2* 30.1, 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

narrative in a Lewis Carroll or James Joyce text, Wood notes, might also call attention to the processes by which meaning is made.<sup>15</sup> Such hesitancy to afford distraction the same level of “respect” as concentration echoes the general consensus of earlier theorists who posit distraction as an inevitable condition that modern society must *learn* to make useful rather than a desirable aim in its own right.

Eliot’s engagement with distraction stands distinct from the Frankfurt School’s conception of distraction as an unavoidable byproduct of modernity’s increasing reliance on fast-paced, consumer-driven technology. His forms of distraction promote an active pursuit of this condition, not only in his explicit use of the term but also through a more general insistence on the value of abrupt pauses and interruptions. From the speaker’s plea in *Ash-Wednesday* that divinity “Teach us to sit still,” to the admonition in *Four Quartet’s* “Little Gidding” that “You are not here to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity / Or carry report. You are here to kneel,” the message to cease relentless pursuit abounds.<sup>16</sup> For, as “Little Gidding” warns, such single-minded pursuit may reveal that “what you thought you came for / is only a shell, a husk of meaning.” To proceed without loss of focus, in fact, is to risk missing a moment of understanding potentially greater than what one’s focus has initially sought. “The Dry Salvages” posits that while “to apprehend the intersection of the timeless / With time, is an occupation for the saint,” distraction is the only means by which ordinary people might come close to such transcendental moments of clarity.<sup>17</sup>

For most of us, there is only the unattended

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Wood, “Distraction Theory: How to Read While Thinking of Something Else,” *Michigan Quarterly Review* (48.4), University of Michigan Library, accessed July 3, 2014 <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?cc=mqr;c=mqr;c=mqrarchive;idno=act2080.0048.410;rgn=main;view=text;xc=1;g=mqrg>.

<sup>16</sup> Eliot, *Ash-Wednesday, The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World Inc., 1971), 61 (hereafter cited in text as *AW*); Eliot, *FQ*, 139.

<sup>17</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 136.

Moment, the moment in and out of time,  
 The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,  
 The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning  
 Or the waterfall, or the music heard so deeply  
 That is not heard at all, but you are the music  
 While the music lasts.<sup>18</sup>

Only when “lost in a shaft of sunlight” can one apprehend certain transcendent sights and sounds that more focused concentration would miss and thereby access the otherwise ineffable while remaining in the realm of the physical. By insisting on distraction as a primary means by which spiritual understanding occurs, Eliot’s late Christian poetry brings us closer to the objectives of the modernist project: that of pulling away from conventions that had lost their power to make the written word a potent and believable force in modern times.

The spiritual journeys these poems depict do not react against modernism, but against the interpretive practices that had—inadvertently and unforeseen by their authors—resulted from modernist texts. Like Benjamin, Eliot saw distraction as possible only for those who had mastered certain skills; by the time *Four Quartets* was published, much of his readership thought they had “mastered” the task of interpreting modernist poetry. By 1944, an educated populace had long been familiar with the conventions of modernist writing and its experiments in both form and content. At that point, scholars generally understood that because modernists often did away with the typical signposts used for literary interpretation, from clearly defined narrative structure to neatly organized patterns of verse, modernist texts

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 136.

might require more time and difficult labor to interpret. Sometimes this interpretation might even require delving beyond the primary text and into the historical and cultural contexts that initially inspired the author's context and schema. Throughout his career from *The Waste Land* to *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot's work embodied this type of experimentalism.

While such radical departure from the ways that literary texts had been creating meaning for centuries was intended to create more precise, relevant, and enduring impressions for twentieth-century readers, the challenges modernist texts imposed were having the opposite effect, even on their most enthusiastic readership. In "Frontiers of Criticism," Eliot addressed the "love of the cryptogram" that such texts as Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* had inspired and the "wild goose chase" for information about Tarot Cards and the Holy Grail on which *The Waste Land's* extensive footnotes had sent curious scholars. Eliot viewed these approaches as hindrances to the understandings and connections that might emerge if readers spent less time on the footnotes and more time on the poem itself. By seeking to solve the poem as though it were a riddle, rather than paying attention to the structure of the poem, readers were conflating "explanation" with "understanding." Explanation of a poem's context must not be the end goal in itself, Eliot urges, but rather a means by which one can "endeavor to grasp what the poetry is aiming to be."<sup>19</sup> Eliot wants readers and critics to care about context, but not in a way that places more weight on context than it deserves, for, as he goes on to assert, context may be of no help in achieving understanding since "There is, in all great poetry, something which must remain unaccountable however complete our knowledge might be of the poet. . . . When the poem has

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<sup>19</sup> Eliot, "Frontiers of Criticism," *The Sewanee Review* 64.4 (Oct.-Dec. 1956), 534, (hereafter cited in text as *FC*).



been made, something new must happen, something that cannot be wholly explained *by anything that went before*.”<sup>20</sup> Such tasks as reading the poem’s source texts, translating and defining archaic terminology, and seeking out the poet’s biography might provide guidance, but will only constitute a small part of understanding the moment that the poem seeks to convey. A. David Moody, describing his experience teaching *Ash-Wednesday* to a class of recovering addicts who knew nothing about the poem’s religious or biographical context, attests to this separation of background knowledge from productive reading experience.

Lacking the tools of literary scholars, these students nevertheless found lines “that answered their need and answered to their experience, as no amount of explication could have done.”<sup>21</sup>

Through a poetics that fosters distraction, Eliot aims to bring readers to a place where knowledge of context, even when thorough, does not preclude being open to influences that context does not supply. In *Ash-Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*, the constant gap between possessing knowledge of a particular religious framework and the ability to use this framework for a higher spiritual understanding encourages readers to think critically about how knowledge of context may or may not yield a superior reading experience.

Eliot’s conversion to an orthodox form of Christianity, especially his deliberate adoption of the word *orthodoxy* itself, makes the distinction between knowledge and understanding crucial to establishing an intelligent and responsible citizenship in the twentieth century. As Edna Longley points out, his shift from the term *tradition* in his earlier essays to *orthodoxy* in *After Strange Gods* was meant to connote “the exercise of all of our conscious intelligence,” whereas tradition, being “of the blood,” did not require this level of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 537.

<sup>21</sup> A. David Moody, *Tracing T. S. Eliot’s Spirit: Essays on His Poetry and Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 141.

active thought.<sup>22</sup> Distraction, for Eliot, counteracts this “substitution of education for instruction” and preference of “cleverness” over “wisdom” by resisting the mechanical decoding of writing through context that he believed had come to characterize the experiences of reading such complex writing as Joyce’s. Much as the movie houses of Kracauer’s 1920 Germany insist on the presence of an organic whole, the dominant interpretive practices for modernist literature now created a false sense of wholeness and coherence readily available if only one had the correct knowledge to unlock it. Distraction, or “*productive* distraction,” to borrow Eiland’s term, maintains and insists on a gap between the aspiration to wholeness and the presence of the wholeness itself—even and especially when belief in the achievement of wholeness is present. Eliot’s post-conversion poetry makes it crucial to distinguish between the appropriation of images, iconography, and prayer that suggest a narrative of wholeness and the actualization of wholeness itself. By placing the recognizable components of an orthodox religion into a configuration that constantly undermines any attempt to equate the narrator’s orthodox thinking with spiritual redemption, the trope of distraction throughout *Ash-Wednesday* fosters the active concern toward which Eliot’s adoption of orthodoxy aspires. For Eliot, productive distraction works as an essential complement to orthodoxy’s “exercise of . . . conscious intelligence”; it exposes fissures and gaps at the moments where the language most temptingly promises the resolve of Absolutism, and moreover, combats the dangers of thinking that wholeness exists simply through a desire to achieve it.

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<sup>22</sup> Eliot, *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1934), qtd. in Edna Longley, *Yeats and Modern Poetry* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 47.

This refusal to elide wholeness with the belief that wholeness can be achieved makes Eliot's Christian work radically and unquestionably modernist. His appropriation of Anglo-Catholic prayer and ritual into recognizable yet strange contexts treats religious convention similarly to earlier modernists' treatment of such poetic conventions as symbolism and iambic meter as in need of renovation for more accurate expression. In *Ash-Wednesday*, Eliot's poetics of distraction tentatively offers the promise that certain prayer and ritual holds for yielding access to the divine while maintaining a sharp awareness of how this promise can so easily be withdrawn—even if one believes unequivocally in the potential of these linguistic configurations.

**“That I Too Much Discuss:” Distraction in Community**

Eliot's brand of productive distraction requires moving away from a worldview predicated on one's isolated assumptions. As Lee Oser has observed, the prevailing characterization of modernism as privileging the individual over the collective has been a prime factor in separating Eliot's later poetry and criticism from his modernist roots.<sup>23</sup> Eliot's having, according to David Chinitz, “reconciled himself to the everyday culture around him and managed to enter the local human community” has given critics a convenient point for separating the earlier Eliot from the later.<sup>24</sup> This acceptance of community and collective thinking, however, lends itself to a modernist approach by complicating and expanding readily held assumptions about how poetic and religious language are meant to work.

Declaring in *Choruses from “The Rock”* that “There is no life that is not in community,” Eliot attributes the decline of spirituality in modern society not necessarily to a lack of belief,

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<sup>23</sup> Lee Oser, “Coming to Terms with *Four Quartets*,” in *A Companion to T.S. Eliot*, ed. David E. Chinitz (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 220 (hereafter cited in text as *Companion*).

<sup>24</sup> David Chinitz, *T.S. Eliot and the Cultural Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 17.

or even to a lack of knowledge, but to modern society's underestimation of the need for unifying community ideals.<sup>25</sup> Pound, who lampooned Eliot's inquiry as to what he "believed," relies on the pursuit of knowledge alone to access spiritual truth and to make such truth a vital force in the community at large.<sup>26</sup> His appropriation of *The Odyssey* in *The Cantos* seizes on Odysseus's exceptionalism and renders solitude a welcomed and essential factor in successful attunement to the gods.<sup>27</sup> Pound's epic hero inhabits a world in which the communal poses a negative distraction that would severely compromise his relationship with the divine, as when Odysseus must ignore the protestations of his crewmates who would rather travel straight home than heed Circe's instructions for entering the underworld. For Eliot's Christian convert in *Ash-Wednesday*, nothing divine can be earned from avoiding the other members of the community one hopes to join.

Although *Four Quartets* does share ties with the Homeric journey toward understanding as G. Douglas Atkins has demonstrated, Eliot's text foregrounds individual uncertainty in a manner unprecedented by *The Odyssey*. While Odysseus knows the names of the gods who wish to aid and thwart him, the speaker of "The Dry Salvages" surmises, "I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river / Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed, and intractable."<sup>28</sup> "The Dry Salvages's" speaker has "Only the hardly, barely prayable / Prayer of the Annunciation" to halt "the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage."<sup>29</sup> Unlike Odysseus, whose heeding of the gods eventually yields the tangible and

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<sup>25</sup> Eliot, *Choruses from "The Rock,"* in *Complete Poems*, 101.

<sup>26</sup> Pound, "Credo," in *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (New York: New Directions, 1973), 53.

<sup>27</sup> In a letter to Rouse from February 1935, for example, Pound highlights Odysseus's godlike exceptionalism compared to the epic's other mortals: "What about Zeus saying: 'How can I forget Odysseus, the fellow is one of us,' or 'How can I forget Odysseus, who is one of us, one of our own kind,' or 'almost one of us.'" See *Selected Letters 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Faber and Faber, 1950), 270.

<sup>28</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 130.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

worldly results of family and kingdom, no visible rewards await Eliot's speakers. The plea to be heard in *Ash-Wednesday*'s final line, "And let my cry come unto Thee" (61; 67), anticipates the advice in "East Coker" that "For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business" (128).<sup>30</sup>

This "trying" entails placement within a broader community of worship. In such lines in *Ash-Wednesday* as "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death" and "May the judgment not be too heavy upon us," the speaker not only asks for the intercession of someone other than the divinity sought, but also positions himself as part of a larger whole rather than as an individual; what he seeks for himself he must seek for all. Invoking Catholic common prayer, moreover, also suggests the responsibility of the community at large to work toward understanding of the divine. While attentive to his spiritual journey, he must not remain so focused as to become blind to how his prayer might affect or be affected by others.

Angus Fletcher's analysis of the two modes of thinking he calls Satanic and Quixotic help articulate the relationship between *Ash-Wednesday*'s emphasis on community and the productive distraction arising from collective thinking in the poem. Derived from Milton's Satan in *Paradise Lost*, Satanic thinking denotes the solipsism accompanying the idea that "The mind is its own place."<sup>31</sup> Because Satan's mind is indeed "its own place," he can never escape his mindset nor enlarge it; he is fixated on incessant rhetorical manipulation that allows no room for any sort of productive dialogue to lead anywhere else.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Fletcher defines Quixotic thinking as the type of productive thought process that emerged in

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<sup>30</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 128; *AW*, 61-67.

<sup>31</sup> Angus Fletcher, *Colors of the Mind: Conjectures on Thinking in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

literature with the advent of the novel. Quixotic thinking exemplifies the generative potential of this process, which, instead of making the mind “its own place” and thereby closed off to any sort of influence, expands and develops the mind through dialogue. In the case of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, the former’s dreams of fame and the latter’s for material wealth enrich and expand each other through a dialogue in which neither—unlike Satan—is invested in winning the argument.<sup>33</sup> Distracted momentarily from their own fantasies of glory, each man gets closer to a more comprehensive understanding of the “real Spain” than would have been possible in isolation.<sup>34</sup>

Fletcher’s terms are useful for understanding the move from the solitary to the communal in *Ash-Wednesday*, and why the speaker prays “that I may forget / These matters that with myself I too much discuss.”<sup>35</sup> This speaker seeks to avoid the type of solipsism that can accompany isolation, so therefore seeks out the plural pronouns “us” and “we” that are integral parts of Anglo-Catholic prayer and ritual. In part I, the vacillation between “I” and “us” represent a key component of the conversion experience. The speaker must not only articulate what he seeks from the divine, but also learn how and if his individual needs fit into the community of others who are also seeking the divine:

And pray to God to have mercy upon us

And I pray that I may forget

These matters that with myself I too much discuss

Too much explain

Because I do not hope to turn again

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>35</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 61.

Let these words answer

For what is done, not to be done again

May the judgment not be too heavy upon us<sup>36</sup>

The plural “us,” which includes both the speaker and a larger community of others seeking the divine, begins and ends this stanza, thereby physically enclosing the speaker’s “I” statements on the page. Only through thinking in the collective can one articulate what is needed for individual conversion and salvation. Moreover, as demonstrated by the different ways to read “I too much discuss” it is possible to think of others and oneself simultaneously without sacrificing individual expression and prayer. The double meaning of “too” that denotes both excess and inclusion allows the phrase to synthesize instantly the speaker’s own obsession over such matters (*too* much) with the acknowledgment that such obsession is shared with others in this situation of conversion (I, *too*, much discuss). An awareness of others is then accompanied by a gradual move from a prayer that asks God directly “to have mercy,” to a prayer that asks only that whatever judgment God has planned “not be too heavy upon us.” By positioning himself in a community of others seeking the same redemption, the speaker also develops an increased awareness of divinity as unable to be persuaded toward a specific action of mercy through prayer. Although he does ask that the judgment “not be too heavy,” the omission of “mercy” from the previous line suggests a movement away from more explicit petitioning. Awareness of others enables the speaker to express his own desires, as well as find other ways to consider the divine’s reception of his prayer and remain open to what the divine might provide. By introducing the distraction of communal thought as increasing receptiveness to different outcomes, Eliot suggests that communal awareness

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 61.

has productive possibilities for modernist reading practices, illuminating potential trains of thought and meaning that a single-minded focus might otherwise miss.

Eliot's emphasis on the importance of community to understanding not only furthers the modernist project but also confirms, as Lyndall Gordon and others have demonstrated, that his conversion was neither as sudden nor as divorced from his earlier interests as critical reception tends to suggest.<sup>37</sup> Although the poem narrates a Christian conversion experience, Eliot's extensive familiarity with Hinduism from his earlier career likely informs the speaker's desire to escape solipsism. After converting to Anglo-Catholicism, Eliot continued his friendship with Shri Purohit Swami, whose translation of *The Bhagavad Gita* was published in 1935. The text's protagonist Arjuna, although sincere in his desire to move forward on the right path, can only escape the indecision of his own mind by seeking the perspective of the divinity Krishna, who advises him to pursue "Right Action," which is neither action motivated by desire nor complete inaction: "He who acts because it is his duty, not thinking of the consequences, is really spiritual and a true ascetic; and not he who merely observes rituals or who shuns all action."<sup>38</sup> Arjuna, who has trouble staying focused on the divine "owing to the restlessness of [his] mind," needs the distraction Krishna's perspective affords to distinguish between the actions of his mind in solitude and the productive action needed for a successful battle.<sup>39</sup> In *Ash-Wednesday's* Part I, Krishna's

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<sup>37</sup> See Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1998). Eliot's reading of seventeenth-century sermons, as Gordon points out, began with John Donne's as early as 1919 and continued with Lancelot Andrewes' in the early 1920s when Anglican minister William Force Stead recommended them to him (212). She surmises that "Eliot's entry into the Church was not brought about by a ferment that mounted naturally to a point of action," but rather developed over the course of several years (211). More recently, the essay contributors for *T. S. Eliot and Christian Tradition* (cited above) offer insight into the multiple influences on Eliot's study of Catholicism that preceded his eventual conversion.

<sup>38</sup> *The Geeta*, Chapter VI, trans. Shri Purohit Swami (London: Faber and Faber, 1935), 42.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.



caution against the privileging of “action” for its own sake seems to appear in this brief nod to Dante’s Satan beating his wings in vain while trapped at the bottom of the ninth circle:

Because these wings are no longer wings to fly  
 But merely vans to beat the air,  
 The air which is now thoroughly small and dry  
 Smaller and dryer than the will  
 Teach us to care and not to care  
 Teach us to sit still.

Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death

Pray for us now and at the hour of our death.<sup>40</sup>

The speaker now recognizes that his own efforts, however earnest, are going nowhere, not even aided by the air that is supposed to yield space for aspirations toward flight. The “small and dry” air anticipates the death of air and the rest of the four elements in “Little Gidding.” Along with earth, water, and fire, air has long been charged with cultural symbolism in addition to its value as a life-giving necessity. Air, once omnipresent and ever-available for man’s use, becomes flattened out in two very brief lines: “The death of hope and despair / This is the death of air.”<sup>41</sup> Because air allows one to feel competent and self-sufficient, its presence fosters a sense of self-sufficiency that hinders inclusion in a communal ritual and creates the illusion that individual effort alone will suffice for achieving contact with the

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>41</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 139.

divine. Only when air becomes “smaller and dryer than the will” is one forced to move beyond the limitations of the individual mind and seek understanding elsewhere.

Since both speaker and reader can no longer take for granted the ability of air to do and to be what man needs for individual sustenance, a distraction from a predetermined way of thinking occurs, prompting an alternative to that once taken for granted as truth. Just as the speaker must now seek means of understanding beyond his own efforts, the reader must remain open to means of interpretation beyond the definitions and preconceptions initially brought to the text. Although Eliot admitted feeling that “the *kind* of suffering experienced by the Spirit of Evil should be represented as utterly different” than the “impression of a Devil suffering like the human damned souls” that Dante renders, his own religious poetry demonstrates the aptness of Dante’s stagnant Satan beating his wings for articulating the problem of understanding in modernity.<sup>42</sup> Eliot had the same criticism with religious poetry as he had with the reception of modernist literature: the conflation of sincere desire for a certain outcome with the outcome itself. In *After Strange Gods*, he criticized devotional poets for “writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel” and thereby assuming that their desire to reach a certain spiritual state translated to a compelling expression of such a state.<sup>43</sup> Rather than engage what Regina Schwartz describes as “sacramental poetics” with the sole purpose of “mak[ing] something *happen*,” Eliot wants his verse to foreground the conditions that facilitate efficacy and expose those that do not.<sup>44</sup> By becoming amenable to the

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<sup>42</sup> Eliot, “Dante,” 1929, in *Selected Prose*, edited by Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux), 216.

<sup>43</sup> Eliot, in *After Strange Gods*, 28.

<sup>44</sup> Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford University Press, 2008), 7.

distraction of a community beyond himself, the speaker ensures the individual desire for religious conversion is not mistaken for the actual experience of conversion.

While including himself in a community of worshippers provides a start to escaping solipsism, the speaker must also solicit the aid of those in closer proximity to the divine. In an effort to stop this endless and fruitless beating of wings that leads to no productive conclusion, the speaker draws from the intercessory prayer of the Hail Mary with “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.” Mary, although not a divine avatar like Krishna, occupies an elevated status in the Anglo-Catholic tradition as the human mother of Christ. Intercession, or the act of asking a being in closer contact with the divine to communicate with God on one’s behalf, is frequently employed in Catholic and Anglo-Catholic prayer. By moving from direct prayers to God toward the language of intercession, the speaker is in fact moving toward a greater understanding of the divine, because he now acknowledges other possibilities for achieving divine mercy beyond his own efforts. Rather than expatiate on what exactly is being prayed for, the speaker simply repeats the same excerpt from the prayer with a slight yet significant difference that further cements a place in the communal and away from isolated gain. The omission of “sinners” not only demonstrates the speaker’s openness to additional outcomes beyond what his own desires can conceive, but to additional ways of categorizing his current state. Moreover, this small alteration prevents readers from conflating the understanding of the speaker’s conversion experience with the recognition of these lines as being from the Hail Mary. Typically, the end of the Hail Mary would signify the start of another prayer in the cycle of the rosary, either another “Hail Mary” or the “Glory Be,” but modifying the prayer’s final line stops the expected cycle. Distracted from moving forward in the cycle, the reader must now linger on these lines with the speaker, being taught

indeed “to sit still” as the speaker has asked. Although such paradoxical thinking in “East Coker” as “In my end is my beginning” can be attributed to a longstanding Christian tradition of paradoxical thinking, *Ash-Wednesday* posits that stillness and movement are not, in fact, as paradoxical as they may seem.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the stillness of one’s efforts, and the resulting distraction from one’s narrow perspectives, is essential for any productive movement to occur.

### **“Because I Do Not Hope to Turn”: The Stillness and Motion of Distraction in Conversion**

In resisting the tendency of devotional poetry to conflate desire with outcome, Eliot presents the speaker’s movement toward the divine as gradual and even arduous at times. Although conversion denotes “the turning of sinners to God” as well as “the action of turning or directing (one’s mind, attention, actions, etc.) to some object,” the act of conversion itself, religious or otherwise, can also encompass a less finite motion: that of the continuous “turning round or revolving” around a particular center.<sup>46</sup> Rendering conversion’s turning as continuous rather than instantaneous, Eliot nods to the conversion narrative genre in the tradition of Augustine’s *Confessions*, Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and the many others emphasizing the gradual and labor-intensive progress of religious experience. Evelyn Underhill, whose *Mysticism* Eliot read extensively, makes a distinction between mystic and religious conversion that helps to frame the type of conversion *Ash-Wednesday*’s speaker seeks. Not to be confused with the “religious” conversion typically understood as “the sudden and emotional acceptance of theological beliefs,” the mystic conversion experience

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<sup>45</sup> As Oser points out, Eliot’s incorporation of paradoxical thinking can be linked to Augustine’s *Confessions*, as well as to the works of St. John of the Cross and John Donne (*Companion*, 29).

<sup>46</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “conversion,” accessed November 18, 2013 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40773?redirectedFrom=conversion#eid>.

Underhill describes is “not one-sided, not merely an infusion into the surface-consciousness of new truth, but rather the beginning of a life-process” in which “A never to be ended give-and-take is set up between the individual and the Absolute.”<sup>47</sup> Eliot, who, as Gordon notes, preferred to emphasize “rational progress” rather than “emotional states,” engages Underhill’s concept of mystic conversion.<sup>48</sup> Although *Ash-Wednesday* depicts only the speaker’s voice in the conversion experience, Eliot renders conversion a continuous “give-and-take” between speaker and divinity by allowing the speaker to pause, adjust, and ultimately expand his aspirations to permit outcomes for which neither desire for spiritual progress nor knowledge of religious teachings can account. One must not only be willing to petition the divine, but to listen for whatever responses may arise. For Eliot, as for Underhill, an ongoing openness to distraction from one’s self-determined path toward salvation comprises a key factor for successful participation in the conversion process.

In order to foreground conversion as resulting from a continuous process rather than a sudden epiphany, *Ash-Wednesday*’s opening lines depict the speaker’s hesitancy to arrive at an immediate articulation of his spiritual needs:

Because I do not hope to turn again  
 Because I do not hope  
 Because I do not hope to turn  
 Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope  
 I no longer strive to strive toward such things

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<sup>47</sup> Evelyn Underhill, “The Awakening,” Part II of *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, 12<sup>th</sup> ed., 1930, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, accessed July 2, 2014 <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/underhill/mysticism.toc.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon, 211.

(Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?)

Why should I mourn

The vanished power of the usual reign?<sup>49</sup>

Although these lines are inspired by Lancelot Andrewes's 1619 Ash-Wednesday sermon, which urges that "From God...we are never to turn our steps or our eyes," Eliot's adaptation is deliberately less eloquent and coherent.<sup>50</sup> The prominent garland of "Because" suggests that the speaker's desire to convert is far less significant than the ability to articulate why he desires it. In Eliot's poem, the speaker's hope not to turn must be revised and re-articulated three times before the speaker can move forward. This level of hesitancy comments on the strand of evangelical Christianity popularized by the Second Great Awakening in the mid-late nineteenth century and scrutinized in William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>51</sup> In studying the testimonies of those who claimed to have been "saved" by Christ as zealous teenagers and expressed doubts about the authenticity of their conversions years later, James surmises that conversion is perhaps something that occurs only once someone stops trying so hard to force it.<sup>52</sup> Eliot himself declared that he "hate[d] spectacular

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<sup>49</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 60.

<sup>50</sup> Lancelot Andrewes, "Sermon Preached before King James, at Whitehall, on 10 February 1619," *Sermons of Repentance and Fasting, Preached on Ash-Wednesday*, transcribed by Marianne Dorman, 2001. *Project Canterbury Library of Anglo-Catholic Theology*, accessed 14 November 2013 <http://anglicanhistory.org/lact/andrewes/v1/wednesday4.html>

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, Eliot's brief mention of James in "Dante," where he speculates that Valery has read *Varieties of Religious Experience*. This version of "Dante" appears in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1960), 170. Throughout her book, Gordon demonstrates that while not always in agreement with James, the religious thinker had a profound influence on Eliot's life and work.

<sup>52</sup> James relates the story of Stephen H. Bradley, a man who felt at fourteen that he had seen the Lord appear to him and then doubted later in life whether his conversion was truly as authentic as it had once felt. As an adult, Bradley spoke to a group of teenagers who absolutely "*knew they*" had been saved and were troubled that Bradley did not express the same level of confidence in himself. James then observes that conversion often occurs more successfully by a process of "self-surrender" rather than consciously focusing on an active struggle away from sin. See *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1902 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 169-70; 171-72.

conversions” and portrayed the joke that conversion could become if pursued with manic zeal in an exchange between Doris and Sweeney in *Sweeney Agonistes*:<sup>53</sup>

Doris:                    I’ll be the missionary

                              I’ll convert you!

Sweeney:                I’ll convert *you*!

                              Into a stew.

                              A nice little, white little missionary stew.<sup>54</sup>

In contrast, the conversion sought by *Ash-Wednesday*’s speaker cannot be pursued flippantly or in a temporary moment of desire to compete with peers. While “Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope,” the speaker resembles the mindsets of the teenagers in James’s text who saw that their friends were “saved” and wanted the same spiritual prestige for themselves.<sup>55</sup> By exposing a hint of ambivalence in the speaker’s sincerity, Eliot avoids for the speaker’s fate that of the devotional poets “writing as they want to feel, rather than as they do feel.”<sup>56</sup> Although he claims that he “no longer strive[s] to strive toward such things,” the parentheses surrounding the rhetorical question, “Why should the aged eagle stretch its wings?” suggest a sort of false modesty, as does the affectation created by the accented “e” in aged.<sup>57</sup> If he is not careful, the desire for conversion will lead him down the same paths of seeking worldly prestige as did the desire for “this man’s gift and that man’s scope.” Indeed, there is no reason to “mourn / the vanished power of the usual reign,” since the same desires still rule him as before his conversion. That desire is a hindrance is also observed in the last

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<sup>53</sup> Sharpe, Tony, “‘Having to Construct’: Disassembly Lines in the ‘Ariel’ Poems and *Ash-Wednesday*,” in *Companion*, 192.

<sup>54</sup> Eliot, *Sweeney Agonistes*, in *CP*, 80.

<sup>55</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 60.

<sup>56</sup> Eliot, *After Strange Gods*, 28.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

stanza of “Burnt Norton,” with “Desire itself is movement / Not in itself desirable.”<sup>58</sup> A caution against merging desire with desire’s ends serves a caveat to modernist readers as well: when the potential convert’s repetitive speech does not permit him to move forward, neither can the reader—no matter how strong the desire to get at the poem’s meaning and find the clues to yield the expected outcome of the prototypical “conversion narrative” experience.

By distracting the reader from habitual patterns of cognitive comprehension, Eliot fosters the conditions needed to enter a poem in the spirit of surprise and discovery, being open to more intuitive means of understanding rather than affirming what one has already learned from context. Although vastly different in style and tone, both *Sweeney Agonistes* and *Ash-Wednesday* stress the dependency of comprehension on certain, often arbitrary, linguistic conditions. As Eliot’s Sweeney states, a shared language is no guarantee of mutual understanding:

I gotta use words when I talk to you  
 But if you understand or if you don’t  
 That’s nothing to me and that’s nothing to you  
 We all gotta do what we gotta do<sup>59</sup>

For any sort of understanding to occur in *Ash-Wednesday*, attention to form must take precedence over attention to words. When the words one’s “gotta use” to make sense of the verse are no longer arranged in an expected pattern, we can be distracted from the pursuit of a successful conversion narrative and instead focus on how the speaker’s initial approach to

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<sup>58</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 122.

<sup>59</sup> Eliot, *Sweeney Agonistes*, 127.



the experience will affect its outcome. Sianne Ngai discusses the use of repetitive, often nonsensical patterns as a “doubling over of language that actively interferes with temporal organization of conventional syntax.”<sup>60</sup> The “temporary paralysis” that ensues in the mind is “not passivity, but...a condition of utter reciprocity,” a state that Ngai describes as both “shock” in this unexpected use of language and “boredom” in its repetitive pattern.<sup>61</sup> Such states in literature, Ngai suggests, are useful and necessary in how they “confront us with the limits of our capacity” and, in so doing, “prompt us to look for new strategies of affective engagement and to extend the circumstances under which engagement becomes possible.”<sup>62</sup> In making such prominent use of repetition at the start of *Ash-Wednesday*’s conversion narrative, Eliot calls into question the circumstances that are necessary for a sincere and lasting conversion to take place, as well as for what “turning” would actually mean for such conversion. By resisting the expected resolution of the “because” clause and putting the speaker’s spiritual aspirations into question, these opening lines also serve the goals of modernist poetic innovation, in which, as Peter Nicholls has observed, the “force of the new is to be felt not just in the content of the poem’s materials but in the form itself, as a dislocation and disordering of syntax.”<sup>63</sup> While the poem’s material derives from a religious orthodoxy seemingly antithetical to the modernist spirit of innovation, its form affords a distraction into new ways of perceiving this orthodoxy. *Ash-Wednesday*’s speaker does not merely “hope to turn,” to reject the realities of the modern world in favor of an older tradition, but, in putting a new form on an old tradition, to understand how the old and the

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<sup>60</sup> Sianne Ngai, “Stuplimity,” in *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 261.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 262.

<sup>63</sup> Peter Nicholls, “The Poetics of Modernism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (England: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 58.

new continue to act upon each other. Unlike in Andrewes's sermon, *turn* here, as well as *hope* in the second line, must remain intransitive because the poem's world cannot guarantee a clean break between the past and the present as its object.

Introducing and then distracting from a more typical conversion narrative pattern, the poem suggests an unprecedented attribute to the object, if any, of the speaker's aspirations. The lack of a clear objective in the first stanza anticipates the lines a few stanzas later, in which the speaker declares "Consequently I rejoice, having to construct something / Upon which to rejoice."<sup>64</sup> Tony Sharpe has cited these lines as exemplifying Eliot's changing religious and cultural affiliations later in his career, and the poet's need to "dissemble" the spiritual self toward which he strives so that he can eventually achieve it.<sup>65</sup> Just as the speaker cannot assume that turning toward a specific direction will suffice, he cannot assume that what he expects to "rejoice" upon will appear if he cannot construct it himself. That the speaker finds himself "having to construct something" is significant to Eliot and other modernist poets seeking to find new methods of expression and representation that would better suit the modern world, since construct can mean "To put together (words) in a syntactical arrangement; to combine in grammatical construction," which resonates with the kind of building modernists saw could be done with language.<sup>66</sup> Although I do not wish to suggest that Eliot's literary interests were subordinate to his religious devotion, it is important to point out how Eliot's use of this religious tradition holds much in common with the literary tradition modernists broke down and rebuilt in innovative and productive ways to

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<sup>64</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 61.

<sup>65</sup> Sharpe, 192.

<sup>66</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "construct," accessed November 18, 2013, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/40773?redirectedFrom=construct#eid>.

better accommodate the needs of a modern populace. Eliot's incorporation of Christian prayer and iconography works similarly to Yeats's employment of the literary symbol, Pound's deployment of classical mythology, and Bunting's use of relatively obscure Northern England dialects: they all "construct something" that would make people pay attention and not simply take for granted the ability of a certain literary convention to render the accurate and effective representation with which it was charged. The new forms they proffered would prove a distraction from old methods of plot-centric, linear reading.

While "having to construct something" denotes a type of motion that seems to clash with the speaker's hope to cease the movement of "turning," the act of turning requires both stillness and movement to work together. *Four Quartets* highlights the property of stillness in the world's center as essential for allowing the world to turn. Quoting the lines of "Burnt Norton," "Only by the form, the pattern, / Can words or music reach / The stillness," Atkins foregrounds "the inevitability of movement" as essential for *Ash-Wednesday*, a poem frequently read as a dismissal of movement.<sup>67</sup> "Burnt Norton" also reveals the dependency of movement on stillness, which makes the dance possible:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor  
towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,

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<sup>67</sup> Atkins, *T. S. Eliot, Lancelot Andrewes, and the Word* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 58 (hereafter cited in text as *EAW*).

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.

I can only say, *there* we have been: but I cannot say where<sup>68</sup>

This “still point” not only allows the movement of the dance to occur, but also ensures that the dance evades prescribed and definitive explanation of its meaning, context, or location. The only way to describe the dance is through negative terms, highlighting the inadequacy of words describing motion or stasis alone. It remains impossible to locate this dance, even while it is affirmed that “*there* we have been.” This concept of “the still point of the turning world,” a motion that is elusive yet precise, is found in *The Bhagavad Gita* as well. In Purohit Swami’s 1935 translation, the still point of such turning is the divine, already residing in the hearts of man. Krishna declares: “God dwells in the heart of all beings, O Arjuna! He causes them to revolve as it were on a wheel by his mystic power.”<sup>69</sup> W. J. Johnson’s more recent translation for Oxford employs “still” more directly in this verse, with “Arjuna, in the centre of the heart of all beings their lord stands still, mechanically revolving all creatures through his magical power.”<sup>70</sup> Several critics have discussed the influence of *The Bhagavad Gita* on *Four Quartets*. Russell Fowler, in particular, has emphasized Eliot’s use of the “still point” in connection with the *Gita*’s Krishna, observing that “Krishna’s instructions relate directly to Eliot’s still point as a suspension of activity and contrariety.”<sup>71</sup> The ability of “the dance” to encompass and syncretize a wide array of rituals from the mythos of different cultures, yet affirm no specific affiliation with any, earns it a position at

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<sup>68</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 119.

<sup>69</sup> *The Geeta*, Chapter XVIII, verse 61, 93.

<sup>70</sup> *The Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter XVIII, verse 61, trans. W. J. Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 80.

<sup>71</sup> Russell T. Fowler, “Krishna and the ‘Still Point’: A Study of the *Bhagavad Gita*’s Influence in Eliot’s *Four Quartets*,” *The Sewanee Review* 79.3 (Summer 1971), 415.

the “still point”—a place where contextual knowledge affords neither understanding nor articulation.

Eliot’s rendering of a “still point,” a place that encompasses more than what can be expressed, seems an important, late-modernist reconfiguration of Pound’s “vortex,” Yeats’s “gyres,” and William Carlos Williams’s concept of planes that converge at a point of light. Like Eliot’s “still point,” these concepts are employed to express a crucial place at which some sort of revelation occurs. Eliot’s “point,” however, is distinguished in that it does not seem to result from any sort of merging, intersection, or otherwise direct contact with any of the images, ideas, events, or objects that might inform it. For Williams and Pound, the direct merging of different factors is what makes the revelations of such centers possible. Writing for a readership that was now well familiar with how modernists appropriated diverse forms and content in order to stimulate new and richer perspectives, however, Eliot needed something that would not posit such a direct correlation between what the center revealed and the circumstances that surrounded and informed it. Because the “turning world” revolves around the point without making contact, it cannot help to inform or explicate it in any definitive way. This is not a point at which things come together to reveal meaning, but rather one which demands consideration of how meaning is made. The act of turning therefore provides a fitting motion for *Ash-Wednesday*’s speaker who wants to convert, yet does not “hope to turn” and wants to be taught “to sit still.” “East Coker” describes this desired movement as well, with “We must be still and still moving.”<sup>72</sup> Holding different meanings simultaneously—as denoting motionlessness and as a modifier to indicate motion’s persistence—the word *still* itself models the desired state. To be “still and still moving”

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<sup>72</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 129.

suggests a dynamism that can stave off what Pierre Bourdieu describes as the immobility caused by boredom. Being “an especially bitter terminal stage of a spiritual life no longer open to revival,” Bourdieu asserts, “the immobility of boredom...directs us to a conversion of feelings or passions away from movement, toward the motionlessness of states.”<sup>73</sup> At the same time, however, this “still and still moving” state does not devolve into the frantic zealotry that James’s study of newly “saved” converts describes. Instead, the turning that the speaker seeks for this conversion involves a stillness at the center from which to consider how best to express what this relationship with the divine would be. This stillness provides for distraction, allowing the speaker to remain focused yet not precluded from the possibility of being led elsewhere if necessary.

That stillness is an integral part of the ability to “turn” facilitates distraction from a linear and instantaneous path to salvation. Even once the speaker is better able to articulate the type of turning needed, this distraction from a predetermined path continues through a constant disconnect between the utterance of Christian prayer and the ability of such prayer to guarantee results. As a modernist writing for a readership that had long grown weary of the symbolism, ornate phrasing, and other literary conventions once assumed to render effective and lasting impressions, Eliot calls attention to the lost potency of religious conventions as well. In the allusion to Odysseus visiting the underworld in part III of “East Coker,” Eliot resists fusing the pursuit of divine understanding with its actualization, while situating the path itself as invaluable nonetheless. Modernized with “Industrial lords and petty contractors” and “the Stock Exchange Gazette” to replace the names of Troy’s defeated who “all go into the dark,” Eliot’s lines at first evoke the despair resulting from seeing the

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<sup>73</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action*, ed. Franck Poupeau and Thierry Discepolo, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2008), 153-154.

great and the mediocre all enmeshed in the same eternal fate. Then, a noticeable breakoff from the ancient epic occurs. Whereas the darkness of Homer's underworld is to be fled after Odysseus convenes with apparitions important to his journey and to the mythos as a whole, this is a darkness to be dwelt upon with no impetus to any action beyond a willingness to embrace it:

And we all go with them, into the silent funeral,  
 Nobody's funeral, for there is no one to bury.  
 I said to my soul, be still, and let the darkness come upon you  
 Which shall be the darkness of God.<sup>74</sup>

Elpenor's voice has been erased in this version, leaving "no one to bury" and no additional instructions for what to do upon leaving the darkness. In Eliot's version, the darkness is sought for its own sake, not for its leading elsewhere. The "darkness of God" posits a bold reframing of the instantaneous association of God with light so integral to Christian theology. By attributing darkness instead of light to the divine, Eliot resists prioritizing the spiritual destination over its journey, thereby making it impossible to engage in the type of thinking that would lead to taking proximity with the divine for granted.

Because it is so counterintuitive that a search for God would lead further into darkness, another key difference exists between Odysseus's deliberate pursuit of the underworld and the unexpected darkness that comes upon Eliot's speaker. This darkness is not actively sought, but rather occurs when one is distracted and interrupted from the current course. Eliot can only describe how this darkness comes about through depictions of moments that involve a marked interruption and a waiting for the expected course to

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<sup>74</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 126.

continue. It occurs “as in a theatre, / The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed” and “as, when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations.”<sup>75</sup> The state of being “between” highlights an ontological and epistemological crisis and escalates it into “the growing terror of nothing to think about” when “the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence / And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen.”<sup>76</sup> As uncomfortable, and even terrifying, as it may be to remain still in the darkness without any sense of what, if anything, is to follow, this state alone allows real revelation to occur:

But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.

Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:

So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.<sup>77</sup>

The slant rhyme, albeit slight, between the opposing states of “waiting” and “dancing” encloses and foregrounds the paradoxical state in which “darkness shall be the light” and “the stillness the dancing.” In this poem, only when one is “not ready for thought” can solipsistic thinking end and proximity with the divine have any chance to begin. Just as the path to God cannot be pursued through the expected course, the language used to express God’s presence cannot employ the same clichéd versions of “God is light” as has appeared through centuries of religious poetry and narrative.

### **“And God Said / Shall These Bones Live?”: Distraction between Corporeal and Spiritual**

Distraction gives new voice to the forms that God takes in the lives of man, especially to forms that are often more rooted in the tactile and physical than in the ineffable and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 127.



spiritual. To apprehend the divine in new forms and with new connotations stands at the crux of the speaker's conversion in *Ash-Wednesday*. Rather than seek God deliberately in darkness, *Ash-Wednesday*'s speaker must dwell in the realm of the physical world more than might perhaps be expected in a journey toward the divine. Hugh Kenner has described the "tension" between the corporeal and the spiritual that stands at the poem's foundation. This tension, Kenner argues, "is to be maintained as a fruitful and essential equivocalness, not 'solved' by relegating one half of the being to the earth and the other half to heaven."<sup>78</sup> Indeed, Anglo-Catholicism, as with any religion that engages material symbols as vehicles for reaching the divine, cannot consist of a complete rejection of the material for the ethereal. However, distraction might yield a more productive conceptualization of the speaker's experience than the constantly equal strain between two forces that *tension* suggests. Throughout the poem, the speaker is constantly pulled between the physical and the spiritual, and even when one appears to triumph over the other, must then seek to incorporate both again in order to arrive at the divine. At the start of Part II, a complete distraction into the physical and then to the spiritual remains an integral part of the speaker's establishing contact with the divine, and of the reader's attempt to process how such contact occurs:

Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper tree  
 In the cool of the day, having fed to satiety  
 On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained  
 In the hollow round of my skull. And God said  
 Shall these bones live? shall these  
 Bones live? And that which had been contained

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<sup>78</sup> Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1959), 265.

In the bones (which were already dry) said chirping:<sup>79</sup>

This physical description, sudden and graphic compared to the introspection of Part I, is made all the more rapid by the paratactic phrasing of “my lungs my heart my liver and that which had been contained.” There is no place for the intellect to exist here; the brain is only a nonentity held in the skull and there is no way to reconcile intelligently a narration of such a complete destruction of the body. When God’s voice enters, the possibility of divine intervention is introduced and it becomes more plausible that one might live even after having his body consumed by leopards. Yet “said” suggests a more affirmative, declarative statement than the repeated questions God asks, while “Shall” implies that the bones’ life has nothing to do with Him and is rather a part of their own resolve. The divinity’s questioning of what “shall” happen is foregrounded by the enjambment between the repeated “shall these” and “Bones live?” Phrased only as “Bones live?” it now becomes a rhetorical question, calling attention—even with God’s own voice near at hand—to the extreme unlikelihood of such an occurrence.

After creating a situation that not even an act of God might remedy, however, the speaker demands once again to consider a transcendence of the physical. By repeating the phrase “that which had been contained” from the previous lines, the speaker not only recalls the earlier, physically graphic images but also foregrounds the tie that these nameless entities of the brain and marrow share by being regarded simultaneously as both physical and capable of transcendence beyond the physical. Just as the brain is capable of imagination and invention beyond what the corporeal reveals, “marrow” suggests something essential to the human spirit which evades tangible description. Yeats, in “September 1913,” for example,

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<sup>79</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 61.

addresses the cowardly men who have “have dried the marrow from the bone” instead of retaining the spirit of fighting for their country.<sup>80</sup> In his early poem “Whispers of Immortality,” Eliot described metaphysical poet John Donne as one who “knew the anguish of the marrow.”<sup>81</sup> The parenthetical clause of “(which were already dry)” highlights complete separation of the bones from “that which had been contained” in them and belies the sounds of life suggested by the bones’ chirping. That the bones’ marrow can evade and transcend the prescribed limits of the body incorporates not only poetic but Christian tradition as well, which conceives of the soul as having a life beyond the body’s death and decay. Having been pulled into the physical, then the spiritual, and back to the physical, speaker and reader must now come to terms with how both corporeality and spirituality might co-exist in bones that are dry, but are “chirping” as though life remained. Distraction expands Kenner’s identification of the poem’s tension to highlight the bond between the physical and the spiritual occurring only after a relentless back-and-forth.

**“I Left Them Twisting, Turning Below”: Distraction and the Climb**

Even when the physical and spiritual are permitted to co-exist and inform each other, the question of how divine intervention occurs remains very much unanswered. Through the subsequent “chirping” of the Lady’s devotion to the Virgin Mary, Eliot highlights an elusive and complex relationship between the existence of a figure with divine attributes and the precise reason for this figure’s efficacy:

Because of the goodness of this Lady

And because of her loveliness, and because

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<sup>80</sup> W. B. Yeats, “September 1913,” in *Collected Poems*, ed. Richard Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 108.

<sup>81</sup> Eliot, “Whispers of Immortality,” *CP*, 32.

And because she honors the Virgin in meditation,  
 We shine with brightness. And I who am here dissembled  
 Proffer my deeds to oblivion, and my love  
 To the posterity of the desert and the fruit of the gourd.<sup>82</sup>

Here, Eliot emphasizes the importance of being part of a community, as in Part I, but also extends this emphasis with bold implications. Where the speaker directly prayed for the “us” previously in “Pray for us sinners...,” there is no indication that the Lady’s honoring of the Virgin was done with any intention of benefitting the community to which the speaker belongs. Moreover, the prominent “Ands” that join the Lady’s beauty and loveliness with her honoring of the Virgin denote no hierarchical relationship between the Lady’s mere existence and her actions toward the Virgin. While “goodness” might suggest the Christian use of “good” to denote holding favor with God, “loveliness” signifies both qualities of character and physical features, making it uncertain as to what exactly makes her so praiseworthy. What makes the bones “shine” is not only due to acts of honor not their own, but to attributes that have nothing to do with any deliberate honor yet play an equal part in the resulting “brightness.” Turning outward from one’s own intentions and actions prevents the solipsism that comes from Satanic thinking as described by Angus Fletcher. Whereas the speaker began his conversion with an exclusive focus on his own hopes, he now becomes “dissembled” and “proffer[s] [his] deeds to oblivion.” Just as his physical body becomes dissembled, his sense of selfhood must be dissembled so as to recognize the impact of others on his salvation—and vice versa. That “the dissembler” is also another name for Satan is significant as well, serving as yet another means by which darkness must be sought for light. His love is offered

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<sup>82</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 61.

not to his own conversion, not to the divine, and not even to the Lady whom he admires, but to “the posterity of the desert.” Although no real community is present here and the speaker remains alone, the relinquishment of direct causality between individual intention and divine grace is nevertheless an important step in the speaker’s progress. This ability to direct love toward something greater than one Lady speaks to what Schuchard describes as “a stage in [Eliot’s] struggle to move beyond desire toward a perception of beatitude.”<sup>83</sup> Unless distraction occurs from one’s isolated pursuits of divinity, an awareness of attributes and actions beyond the individual’s control will be missed. Such factors may affect an individual’s chances at salvation just as much—perhaps even more—than personal, deliberate efforts toward achieving divine grace.

Although individual effort is indeed a necessary component of reaching the divine, as evidenced by the speaker’s exertions in Part III when climbing a set of stairs, distraction must occur no matter how sound the individual’s pursuits may be. Adapted from Dante’s *Purgatorio*, Part III is the shortest piece of the poem and depicts the speaker climbing out of the “hope and despair” that comprises the interval between hell and heaven. A progression and improvement in the speaker’s state is evident with each stair he ascends. First, reverting back to the “turning” that he had hoped would no longer occur, the speaker turns to look back at what he leaves behind:

At the first turning of the second stair  
 I turned and saw below  
 Under the vapour of the fetid air  
 Struggling with the devil of the stairs who wears

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<sup>83</sup> Schuchard, 150.

The deceitful face of hope and of despair.<sup>84</sup>

With the exception of the second line, all the lines of this stanza rhyme together, emphasizing the trapped nature of the struggling “shape.” With the subsequent description of turning and seeing, “stair” might also be heard as “stare,” the action the speaker chooses that causes him to remain longer than necessary on this first stair; his decision to “stare” holds him on the “stair” and prevents advancement. The second line also carries *stare*, in the form of what John Shoptaw terms a “crypt word,” with its use of “saw.”<sup>85</sup> This ongoing presence of “stare” hints that the speaker’s situation is self-made, that he could distinguish and separate himself from the struggle with the devil if only he chose—yet he instead turns to see what occurs below. Because of this choice, he remains trapped on the second stair. The speaker’s choice to turn away from his upward climb to the divine and toward the devil below affords a pointed example of what occurs when one is, as described in “Burnt Norton,” “Distracted from distraction by distraction.”<sup>86</sup> In Part III of *Ash-Wednesday*, the speaker is distracted from making progress toward the divine by the distraction of the devil, on which he chooses to pause. Consequently, he must remain in a place in which the devil’s face signifies both “hope” and “despair” and therefore renders hope of definitive salvation ineffectual. The nicely rhymed lines have the quality of overly inflated language which might reflect “Burnt Norton’s” “tumid apathy with no concentration” refer; the speaker makes a poetic-sounding

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<sup>84</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 63.

<sup>85</sup> Shoptaw developed “crypt word” from poet John Ashbery’s use of the term to describe his changing the word “borders” to “boarders” in his unpublished poem “Games in the Sun.” Ashbery explains, “The original word literally had a marginal existence and isn’t spoken, is perhaps what you might call a ‘crypt word.’” See John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>86</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 120.

description of his climb, but goes nowhere. Turning back to see what one leaves does no good.

The second stanza illustrates a slight change in the speaker's attitude. Although he at last leaves the shape struggling with the devil, he still lingers on the stairs itself rather than on the divinity the stairs are intended to help him reach:

At the second turning of the second stair  
I left them twisting, turning below;  
There were no more faces and the stair was dark,  
Damp, jagged, like an old man's mouth driveling, beyond repair,  
Or the toothed gullet of an agéd shark.<sup>87</sup>

Once again, the speaker's decision to "stare" causes him to remain on the "stair." The accented acute *é* in *agéd* recalls the "agéd eagle" from the poem's opening stanza and the false modesty the speaker had assumed at the start of the conversion process. Although he presents the intent of making a necessary but difficult climb toward the divine, he appears more interested in showing off his trials with grotesque descriptions. Such figurative language as the comparison of a stair to two different types of mouths, one which marks age by an alarming absence of teeth (as "dribbling" can be heard in "driveling") and one marked by a fierce abundance, saturates the image of the stairs so as to compromise its presence. For this tendency of figurative language to detract from the actual object described, such elaborate metaphors were dismissed in the modernist poetic movement that Eliot embraced in early poems. While the speaker has succeeded in leaving the devil behind to pursue his

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<sup>87</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 63.

journey toward the divine, he still needs to learn that the point of enduring such a journey is not to be able to brag about all the terrifying things passed and how far one has come.

So that the speaker can avoid the temptation to mistake his ability to work with metaphorical language for the end of the spiritual journey, the third stanza introduces a distraction to stop the speaker from rhapsodizing about the grotesqueness of the ascent and remind him of why he is undertaking such a journey. While vivid imagery occurs here as in the previous stanza, this pastoral scene pulls both speaker and reader out from the darkness encountered on the lower steps:

At the first turning of the third stair  
 Was a slotted window bellied like the fig's fruit  
 And beyond the hawthorn blossom and a pasture scene  
 The broadbacked figure drest in blue and green  
 Enchanted the maytime with an antique flute.  
 Blown hair is sweet, brown hair over the mouth blown,  
 Lilac and brown hair;  
 Distraction, music of the flute, stops and steps of the mind over the  
     third stair  
 Fading, fading; strength beyond hope and despair  
 Climbing the third stair.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike the old man's mouth or shark's gullet, the comparison of the slotted window to the fig's fruit is a combination so strange that instead of soliciting any sense of pity for or marvel at the speaker, it instead promotes a closer focus on the window itself, requiring effort to fit

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 63.



these two radically dissimilar images together. The noticeable absence of any clear Christian framework might itself afford a potentially productive distraction for a reader eager to hunt for Christian referents to aid in interpretation.

“Drest in blue and green,” the figure invites consideration of both religious and secular contexts and puts into question whether such imagery ought to be read as religious or be taken as an indication that the speaker has moved further away from reaching the divine and now dwells only in the sensual and corporeal. Although blue could suggest a Marian figure, its combination with green prevents restriction of this image to Mary alone. As critics have noted, Emily Hale, a friend whom Eliot regarded as a sort of Beatrice figure, provided a major source of inspiration for *Ash-Wednesday*. The figure described here, however, remains anonymous and resists any attempts to “solve” the poem by tying it to the poet’s biography. The similarities between “blown” and “brown” force a slowness and attention to the line in order to ensure correct reading and pronunciation; the reader is meant to linger on this scene as much as the speaker. This slowness fosters a productive distraction in which a slow advancement ensures attunement to what is present, rather than an inflated attempt to describe the horrors of the past. By juxtaposing the sense of “Fading, fading” with the “strength beyond hope and despair” that the speaker now gains, Eliot emphasizes the loss that must occur for a real and significant change to be gained. The rhyming that once emphasized the speaker’s entrapment now returns, adding the “hair” of the figure playing the flute to the stair and despair from the first stanza. Distracted from the horrors of the journey and forced to pay attention to the brown hair of the nameless figure, the speaker is now able to ascend. Only when one’s strength fades—thereby ceasing the ability to turn back and to dwell on the horrors of the past—does it become possible to move beyond a realm empty of

meaning in which the opposites of “hope and despair” can both be portrayed by the same face.

**“A Different Kind of Failure”: Distraction as Movement toward the Word**

Throughout Part III, Eliot foregrounds the properties that words possess beyond their definitions: the connotations, sounds, and textures that allow for poetry to make lasting and meaningful impressions. When placed near another word with a similar sound, or used to depict a scenario beyond its traditionally expected contexts, even a single word has the power of distraction: to move the reader away from conventionally expected meanings and contexts and thereby allow for representation of a greater range of emotions and events. Eliot admired Lancelot Andrewes’s skill with words, noting how the bishop “takes a word and derives the world from it.”<sup>89</sup> This attentiveness to the power of individual words is worth noting in Part III’s final lines, appropriated from the last lines before the reception of the Eucharist in the Anglo-Catholic church service:

Lord, I am not worthy

Lord, I am not worthy

but speak the word only.<sup>90</sup>

These lines are spoken to prepare the individual to become a fitting vessel for the body and blood of Christ. The speaker acknowledges and respects the power that just a single word from God has to alter man’s circumstances completely and render him worthy of receiving the divine. Eliot’s emphasis on the power of words to effect real and significant change was

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<sup>89</sup> T. S. Eliot, “Lancelot Andrewes,” 1926, in *Selected Prose*, 179.

<sup>90</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 63.

shared by Pound as well, although Pound dismissed Christianity as a derivative and weaker form of Greek paganism. The direct correlations that each poet drew between a culture's attention to its language and the presence of the divine in that culture constituted a fundamental purpose of their engagement with literary modernism: to restore the power of language that had been lost among the tired and hackneyed conventions of English poetry. In order for modern society to believe that "the world" could be derived from "a word" and to start treating language with such belief in mind, poets would have to distract readers by placing words into new, strange and difficult combinations so that they could no longer take for granted *what* words were expected to do and must instead think seriously about *how*.

By the time Pound and Eliot had reached the peak of their publishing careers, modernism's attention to words had revealed its own set of complications. Twelve years after Eliot's *Frontiers of Criticism* decried how the reading of poetry had become a relentless search for meaning through context, Basil Bunting would categorize poetry's "meaning" as something "which the hearer feels, rather than understands."<sup>91</sup> Having trained a new generation of readers to see words as capable of complicating a verse's meaning as of revealing it, modernist poets now had to ensure that complication alone did not become the endgame. Eliot's "East Coker" resonates with the unforeseen consequences that accompanied the increased care that he now felt he had to take with words:

So here I am, in the middle way, having had twenty years-

Twenty years largely wasted, the years of *l'entre deux guerres*-

Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt

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<sup>91</sup> Basil Bunting, qtd. in Jonathan Williams, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal: Conversations with Basil Bunting* (Gnomon Press, 1968), n.pag.

Is wholly a new start, and a different kind of failure

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words<sup>92</sup>

When readers pursued the allusions hinted at with certain words of *The Waste Land*, they might shut off other possibilities of meaning and possibly become confident that they received everything the text had to offer. The increased possibilities with which words could be used in different contexts and combinations made the poets' task more difficult as well. The qualifier "only" implies that having "learnt to get the better of words" will not suffice for maintaining constant relevance in new and future literary traditions. Writing with a consciousness of the past and an eye toward the future (as Eliot urged in "Tradition and the Individual Talent"), poets had to consider all possible definitions, connotations—and all possible translations if foreign—of each word chosen. If just a single word could lead to several different equally valid meanings, it should hardly be a surprise that, as described in "Burnt Norton,"

Words strain,

Crack and sometimes break, under the burden

Under the tension, slip, slide, perish.

Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,

Will not stay still.<sup>93</sup>

In *Ash-Wednesday*, the stillness demanded of a sincere and lasting conversion is also required of the words used by the speaker. Such stillness becomes especially challenging in the lines that mention color in Part IV, where the speaker describes a nameless figure

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<sup>92</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 128.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

Who walked between the violet and the violet  
 Who walked between  
 The various ranks of varied green  
 Going in white and blue, in Mary's color.  
 Talking of trivial things  
 In ignorance and in knowledge of eternal dolour  
 Who moved among the others as they walked,  
 Who then made strong the fountains and made fresh the springs.<sup>94</sup>

The mere mention of color immediately precludes all possibility of allowing these words to stay still. As Michael Taussig has observed, the association of color with sacred symbolism dates back to ancient, pre-Christian eras and cultures and has remained strong through the present day.<sup>95</sup> The ties of green and violet with the Anglo-Catholic Church's liturgical seasons are no exception; it is impossible to read a poem titled *Ash-Wednesday* and not associate the appearance of violet with the violet vestments of the priest during the Lenten season to mourn Christ's passion and death. Violet, however, is also worn in the season of Advent in anticipation of Christ's birth. Green, the vestment color for the season of Ordinary Time that precedes both Lent and Advent, indeed holds "various ranks" according to whether the Ordinary Time precedes a season commemorating life or death. As the figure walks "between the violet and the violet," certainty of meaning becomes increasingly impossible; asked to remain between life and death, the reader can affirm neither. The resulting loss of

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<sup>94</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 64.

<sup>95</sup> Taussig posits that color, especially regarding its use in sacred ritual, has been used to indicate a direct connection between God and the human body, and that "Far from being symbols, distinct from their referents, the colors *are* those referents in a deeply organic sense." See *What Color is the Sacred?* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 8.

meaning is emphasized by the disappearance of “the violet and the violet” in the second line; the colors no longer have a reason to remain since they cannot signify meaning. Pound uses the example of the Chinese ideogram for red, which combines the signs for flamingo, rose, iron rust, and cherry, to affirm that color can be portrayed in language if only it draws on “something everyone KNOWS.”<sup>96</sup> In this case, however, knowing what these liturgical colors signify leads to more, not less, confusion of meaning. By substituting blank space for the names of liturgical colors, Eliot provides the stillness that the mention of the colors had disturbed. No longer burdened by having to guess at which part of the liturgical calendar is being referenced—whether the colors connote the “hope” of life or the “despair” of death—the reader can now achieve the “strength beyond hope and despair” to which the speaker had previously alluded in Part III. Just as the speaker needed to be distracted by the image of the figure on the stair in order to continue his journey upward, the reader needed to be distracted by the poet’s removal of colors with highly charged and opposing significances in order to remain with the poem and not prescribe a narrow interpretation based on color alone.

A blank space appears again in this stanza to have a similar effect after the description of the “who” as “Going in white and blue, in Mary’s color / Talking of trivial things                   ”. While Mary’s color points toward the paler shades of blue garments in which the Virgin Mary is typically rendered, that this figure is going “in Mary’s color” affords no indication of what part, if any, Mary herself plays in this scene. It calls to mind a scene from *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, in which “the women come and go / Talking of Michelangelo,” posturing an appreciation for “good” art without reflecting on what makes

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<sup>96</sup> Pound, *ABC of Reading* (1934; New York: New Directions, 1960), 22.

it so.<sup>97</sup> Whatever interpretation the reader is trying to make with the knowledge of “Mary’s color” will yield no more than trivial conversations that do not lead to understanding. Because “trivial” also hints at such concepts of great liturgical significance as the Trinity (of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) as well as the three days that comprise the Easter Triduum, the line posits that what is significant can also be trivial. The speaker’s observation in Part I that “what is actual is actual only for one time / and only for one place” foregrounds that what is significant in one context may be trivial in another. Therefore, rather than continue to pursue a line of speculation as to what “of Mary’s color” might mean, and frantically move from one definitive interpretation to another in hopes of solving the poem once and for all, it is better to pause in the blank space and dwell on how ambiguity itself constitutes an important part of the reading experience.

Distracted from attempts to locate these lines within a single, specific context, the reader then can remain, as does the walking “who,” “In ignorance and in knowledge of eternal dolour.” While knowledge of liturgical colors and seasons can be used to aid interpretation, such knowledge is tempered with ignorance to prevent readers from latching on to one meaning and closing off all possibility of others. This line can also describe the way that the suffering and pain denoted by “dolour” serves as an integral part of Marian ritual in the Anglican Church—particularly regarding the five sets of Hail Marys said in the Anglican rosary. Because each set commemorates a different mystery, either for the suffering of Christ or the joyousness of his birth and resurrection, one must constantly be ready to shift from knowledge of dolour to an ignorance that would allow for proper meditation on the more celebratory phases of Christ’s life. This ability to remain open to distraction both from

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<sup>97</sup> Eliot, *Prufrock*, in *CP*, 4.

and toward dolour, and to remain still in this ambiguous state in which suffering must be both acknowledged and set aside, is, ultimately, what allows for the divine to enter. Those “who” can understand suffering’s importance without giving it more weight than it merits have the power to effect change in others, who can then renew the fountains and springs.

These now “strong” fountains and “fresh” springs may at first seem to afford a resolution for the speaker who in Part I had declared “Because I cannot drink / There, where trees flower, and springs flow, for there is nothing again.”<sup>98</sup> However, the “again” of Part I foreshadows that this flourishing of life—and, moreover, the state of mind needed for such flourishing to take place—is not permanent. Although the next three lines continue the change that occurs in nature from walking “in ignorance and in knowledge” of dolour, they also highlight the challenge in allowing stillness to remain:

Made cool the dry rock and made firm the sand  
 In blue of larkspur, blue of Mary’s colour,  
 Sovegna vos<sup>99</sup>

While the phrasing positions these descriptions of blue as clarifying each other, the shades suggested by the mentioning of larkspur and Mary are very different colors; a darker, nearly violent shade for larkspur contrasts with the much paler blue of Mary’s garments. This contrast makes it impossible for the word “blue” to remain still while the reader must try to piece together whether the landscape is one color, or two separate that somehow blend together. Adapted from Dante’s “Sovegna vos de mal dolour,” or “Be mindful of my pain,” the final line’s command to “Be mindful” asks readers to refrain from attempting to resolve

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<sup>98</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 60.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.



the conflicting color imagery and simply just remain aware of the conflict at stake. Similarly to the blank spaces in the lines of the previous stanza, omitting the last part of the blank phrase affords a still space in which to “Be mindful” of the words just read rather than to move forward with any certainty of meaning. To be mindful does not mean to attempt to understand the poem by becoming familiar with Dante’s *Purgatorio*; indeed, the description of colors above demonstrates that an increased knowledge of referents can lead to less understanding. Just as the speaker must not assume understanding of the divine even when the once-parched landscape is revived, the reader cannot assume knowledge will do all the work of interpretation.

By deliberately introducing an ambiguity wrought by words that refuse to “sit still” in a definitive meaning, Eliot demonstrates what poetics can do to foster a distraction that makes stillness not only possible but generative to the practice of reading and interpretation. The assertion in “Burnt Norton” that

Only by the form, the pattern  
Can words or music reach  
The stillness, as a Chinese jar still  
Moves perpetually in its stillness.<sup>100</sup>

Emphasis on form can permit the stillness that prevents the mistaking of knowledge for understanding. The form or pattern creates a distraction that forces the reader to remain still and consider how and if certain words fit together and inform each other, rather than move forward with the certainty that a knowledge of words affords understanding. That “still” can both describe the Chinese jar’s state of immobility and emphasize its continued movement

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<sup>100</sup> Eliot, *FQ*, 121.

foregrounds how stillness is essential for productive thinking and interpretation. Moreover, it anticipates the final section of “East Coker” in which the speaker declares that “We must be still and still moving.”<sup>101</sup> Only by a form that allows words to remain still can any sort of movement toward understanding hope to begin.

The emphasis on stillness throughout *Four Quartets* and *Ash-Wednesday* accompanies the idea of silence posited in Parts IV and V of *Ash-Wednesday* as a solution for recovering words that have been lost or gone unheard. After a bird in Part IV sings “Redeem the time, redeem the dream / The token of the word unheard, unspoken,” the speaker asks in Part IV “Where shall the word be found, where will the word / Resound? Not here, there is not enough silence” and declares that there is “No time to rejoice for those who walk among the noise and deny the voice.” The disjointedness between the lines’ resonances in rhyme and the speaker’s distance from the word highlights that ostentatious form does not always yield accurate portrayal. This search for the word complements the modernist search for *le mot juste*, or the word that would provide the most direct contact with the object, emotion or event described.<sup>102</sup> Pound’s appropriation of John 1:1 in Canto LXXIV, with “In the beginning was the Word: sincerity, the perfect Word” suggests that going back to the very origins of language itself—an origin rooted in the direct relation of the divine’s word to the manifestation of the world—would produce the best chances for contact with the divine through language.<sup>103</sup> One need only take seriously the relationship between word and object, signifier and signified, in order to restore to language the capacity for divine truth. Eliot, too, attributed the distance between words and objects in modern language to a lost relationship

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>102</sup> Pound, *Selected Prose*, 7.

<sup>103</sup> Ezra Pound, Canto LXXIV, in *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1993), 447.

between words and the divine Word. He lamented that while the Bible was praised as “literature,” such praise was divorced from what first cemented its literary significance: that it was once taken as the Word of God.<sup>104</sup> On the other hand, he does not see sincerity as efficient for restoring this bond. In *Ash-Wednesday*, direct contact with the divine remains elusive regardless of sincere desire for the divine. The intercessory Hail Marys that ask for someone else to intervene with the divine on the speaker’s behalf mitigate any possibility of direct contact through prayer. Without any guarantee of divine intervention, the speaker’s words—and the divine Word toward which they aim—may indeed remain lost irrevocably, leaving the speaker in Part V to wonder what might happen should that be the case:

If the lost word is lost, if the spent word is spent

If the unheard, unspoken

Word is unspoken, unheard;

Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,

The Word without a word, the Word within

The world and for the world;

And the light shone in darkness and

Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled

About the centre of the silent Word.<sup>105</sup>

Without anything to distract from a projection of what would happen if the word is “lost” or “spent,” the speaker slips back into the very sort of frantic, solipsistic turning he had sought to avoid in Part I. There is no opportunity for stillness here as the speaker moves at a

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<sup>104</sup> Eliot, “Religion and Literature,” 1935, in *Selected Prose*, 98-99.

<sup>105</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 65.

relentless pace to make sense of the relationships between the word, the divine Word, and the world. Without the pause needed for attunement and reflection, movement here engenders an unfavorable sort of distraction, rather than the productive distraction afforded by the state of being “still and still moving” in “East Coker.” The inconsistent capitalization suggests that perhaps the speaker can’t even tell if the word “lost” is the divine Word or not. Although the statement that “the light shone in darkness” might suggest some divine manifestation, such light does not prevent the speaker from moving even further into the confusion of language caused by multiple repetitions of similar sounds. The homophones of “world” and “whirled” foreground how easy it is for misreading and, as a result, for misunderstanding to occur: to think that the “world” has been grasped when in reality one has only continued to “whirl” without reaching something more significant. Because it moves both “Against” and “About the center of” the “Word,” the speaker cannot articulate the direction of the world in any coherent way. The direction of “Against” is incongruous not only with that of “About,” but also with that of “whirling,” since a revolution does not involve direct contact. Moreover, because “whirled” recalls the action of turning introduced in Part I with the speaker’s start of the conversion process, the act of whirling “against” the Word could also be considered as turning away from the divine. Although the speaker can conceptualize a world turning around the silent “Word” of the divine, these lines create too much noise for the reader to be convinced of this possibility.

By introducing the concept of a “world” that revolves around the “Word” of God in lines that preclude its possibility, Eliot both pays homage to Andrewes’s ability to “take a word and derive the world” while demonstrating the inherent obstacles in such an attempt. Atkins’ reading of this section interprets “within/ The world and for the world” as

Incarnation, or “the paradigmatic insistence of the timeless and universal pattern that occurred in history with the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ.”<sup>106</sup> His analysis points out that while “the word is ‘lost,’ ‘spent,’” and even “‘unheard,’ it “does not mean that [the word] is either absent or not at work.” Rather, Atkins surmises, “the moving world ‘still’ whirl[s]” and furthermore, “may work by means other than words as such,” thereby leaving important space for humility to enter.<sup>107</sup> While the “lost” word can and does open the possibility for the humility necessary to approach the divine, it is also important not to ignore the real risks inherent in acknowledging the Word and the word as entities that do not always work together in the turning of the world. When the Word sought remains “unheard,” and the words remaining are no help in finding it, taking the world from a word can have the unforeseen consequence of giving greater weight to words than is deserved. The longer the speaker dwells on the lost “word,” the less precise his own words become, and the further away the divine Word moves from the world. While Pound believes that a sincere attempt to recover the Word will suffice to recoup words’ power to manifest the things they describe, Eliot demonstrates that sincerity alone will not suffice, and in fact, might lead one even further from developing a vital relationship between words and things. Even though *Ash-Wednesday*’s speaker cannot always find a satisfactory relationship between his words and the divinity he aspires to reach, the forms of distraction introduced throughout the poem ensure, at least, that this relationship is not taken for granted.

Knowing that the lost Word might remain lost even in an earnest search does not cause the speaker to give up his pursuit of the divine but rather to adjust expectations. The

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<sup>106</sup> Atkins, in *EAW*, 59. Andrewes’ definition of the Christian Incarnation appears in his preface, page viii.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

first lines of Part VI repeat the opening of Part I, only substituting “Although” for “Because” with “Although I do not hope to turn again / Although I do not hope / Although I do not hope to turn.”<sup>108</sup> Instead of assuming that access to the divine will occur *because* it is expressed, the speaker now realizes that the divine may remain aloof *although* he is able to ask to cease turning. Left alone, the speaker acknowledges that “the blind eye creates” visions of a paradise unseen, complete with “empty forms between the ivory gates” and “smell” that “renews the salt savour of the sandy earth.” Arriving in the penultimate stanza at “The place of solitude where three dreams cross / Between blue rocks,”<sup>109</sup> the speaker’s ending might anticipate a turn back into more of a Satanic mindset, allowing no room for distraction toward other possibilities beyond what his own mind can conceive. However, the last stanza suggests that isolation does not have to be the only possible outcome:

Blessed sister, holy mother, spirit of the fountain, spirit of the  
garden,  
Suffer us not to mock ourselves with falsehood  
Teach us to care and not to care  
Teach us to sit still  
Even among these rocks,  
Our peace in His will  
And even among these rocks  
Sister, mother  
And spirit of the river, spirit of the sea,

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<sup>108</sup> Eliot, *AW*, 66.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

Suffer me not to be separated

And let my cry come unto Thee.<sup>110</sup>

The speaker uses the collective “us,” but also acknowledges that salvation can arrive through different means. While invoking the “blessed sister” and “holy mother” suggests an intercessory prayer to Mary, the various “spirits” of natural landscapes broadens the range of potential figures—including those not necessarily exclusive to Christian tradition—that might be referenced by the “holy mother.” Asking to be taught “to sit still / Even among these rocks” indicates an awareness that distraction out of oneself and toward the divine must occur even when rocks comprise the only company available. That “Our peace in His will” is sandwiched between the lines that repeat “even among these rocks” recalls the theme of being “between” two objects or concepts that has resonated throughout *Ash-Wednesday*, from those “Who walked between the violet and the violet” in Part III to the time “between birth and dying” and “The place of solitude... / Between blue rocks” in Part V. These spaces between one certainty and another—the spaces that allow for ambiguity—are what allows for a complete surrender to “His will.” The phrase is itself ambiguous; it can suggest that the “peace” sought will be found in the divine will, while simultaneously positing that any “peace” is subject to His will and therefore may not manifest. After broadening the concept of the divine and the circumstances of His manifestation, such ambiguity then extends to the speaker’s status with the double-spacing of the final line from the plea “Suffer me not to be separated.” While asking only that the divine “let” his cry be heard suggests the speaker’s openness to a divine will that he cannot envision or anticipate, the line also creates a blatant

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 67.

separation from the community on whose behalf he had prayed, indicating a chance of turning back into isolation and into the type of frantic thinking that had occurred when he remained within the confines of his own mind. This hint of a possible regression serves as a powerful reminder to prioritize conversion's process over its outcome.

Eliot's poetics of distraction grounds us in the realm of the dynamic and possible while wresting our attention away from the stagnancy that accompanies the certain and traceable. Through lines that pause, stumble, then re-shape to move into a familiar yet palpably strange direction, *Ash-Wednesday* renders conversion a visible and audible presence on the page, a challenge impossible to skim. It brings the abstract, contemplative statements of *Four Quartets* regarding the need for stillness and paradox into careful action. By offering religious language, referents, and iconography as potential aids without making them strongholds against hermeneutical complexity, both poems grapple with the questions that modernism introduced. How do poets promote careful and attentive reading while maintaining an openness to different possibilities of productive interpretation? When is it responsible to rely on knowledge, and when does a surety of knowledge hinder the type of analysis that leads to understanding? The pursuit of the divine in Eliot's post-conversion poetry, because it requires both focused attention and an allowance of distraction toward different modes for accessing truth, indeed has much to offer modernism. By foregrounding the concept of distraction in some of Eliot's most overtly "Christian" poetry, critics can re-evaluate what constitutes the "modern."



## Chapter 5: “Laying the Tune on the Air”: The Transient Endurance of Sound in the Poetry of Basil Bunting

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

-Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias”<sup>1</sup>

Name and date  
 Split in soft slate  
 A few months obliterate

-Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts*<sup>2</sup>

Across vast ideological and aesthetic differences, Basil Bunting’s late modernist poetry resonates with the gap between knowledge and understanding that Eliot’s work so often foregrounded. In Bunting’s work, however, this gap manifests itself in a more concrete, and sometimes tragic, manner than in the misreading of literature. While the frail headstones of Basil Bunting’s *Briggflatts* seem a blunt and uncompromising reply to the monument of Shelley’s Egyptian king, the later modernist poet—who had been apprenticed to a stonemason—was well aware of how the promise of permanence could remain seductive even as the passage of time continued, relentlessly, to prove such promise hollow. Born in 1900, Bunting witnessed the ageing high modernists searching for a type of materiality that

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<sup>1</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias,” 1818, in *Complete Poems* (New York: The Modern Library, 1994), Kindle edition.

<sup>2</sup> Basil Bunting, *Briggflatts*, in *Complete Poems*, ed. Richard Caddel (New York: New Directions, 2000), 62.

would make art permanent and indestructible while coming to terms with their own deaths approaching. While Pound upholds stonework as a testament to man's ability to create enduring legacies in *The Cantos* and Yeats proclaims that "such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make" would best preserve his ageing body, Bunting's poems present unflinching reminders that no material form, living or not, endures permanently no matter how much it is built to do so.<sup>3</sup> From the speaker who anticipates a time when "Stones indeed sift to sand" in "At Briggflatts Meetinghouse" to the wall that proves no more resistant to destruction than the child it crushes during an earthquake in *Chomei at Toyama*, Bunting systematically rejects even the conceptual possibility of permanence for the physical world.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout poetry and prose, Bunting focused on separating the written word from expectations of permanence. Juxtaposing the painstaking work of the stone mason to whom he was apprenticed as a teenager against the knowledge that the headstones' inscriptions will "a few months obliterate," Bunting's most prominent poem *Briggflatts* extends a pointed reminder of material objects' vulnerability to the very materials that poets and other artists use to preserve their legacies. His essay "The Written Record" not only attacks Eliot's attempts to establish permanent, universal standards for literary taste in *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, but attributes the presumption that such standards are possible to a "paper culture" which insists that such vulnerable material will suffice to preserve words' meaning and significance unchanged throughout time.<sup>5</sup> Dedicated "To Violet, with prewar poems," ode 34 offers at best ambivalent assurance of the poet's legacy on paper with his anticipation

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<sup>3</sup> W. B. Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium," *The Tower*, 1921, in *Collected Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 194.

<sup>4</sup> Bunting, "Briggflatts Meeting House," in *Complete Poems*, 143 (hereafter cited in text as *CP*).

<sup>5</sup> Bunting, "The Written Record," in *Three Essays*, ed. Richard Caddel (Durham: Basil Bunting Poetry Centre, 1994), 10 (hereafter cited in text as *TE*).

that “this unread memento be / the only lasting part of me” (ll. 9-10).<sup>6</sup> Instead, Bunting prefers the spoken word as the medium by which different shades of meaning could be recognized, continued, and thereby allowed to persist long after the paper has vanished. Bunting’s emphasis on poetry’s aural tradition mandates that poetry remain “unread”: spoken, heard, and thereby kept alive in the ever-changing medium of language that favors a more transient endurance over an elusive permanence.

Although no specific religious framework stands as its focus, this chapter considers Bunting’s attention to sound and aural tradition in his poetry and criticism as a crucial reflection on British modernism’s more general metaphysical anxiety to invest in a permanence that could surmount the ravages of time. His criticism of scholarship’s reliance on written text not only takes Eliot’s dominance in Western literary culture to task, but also questions what he saw as an overarching “illusion of Permanence” resulting from “an accepted formalism that becomes logically objectified as Universal and Divine” when words preserved on paper are assumed to carry the same weight and meanings throughout all time.<sup>7</sup> For Bunting, emphasizing the importance of sound in written verse was a crucial means of counteracting the false and unnecessary equation of literary legacy with a permanence that would bestow on certain literary texts the same omnipotent status as religious texts regarded as the Word of the divine. Sound, possessing a transience that must always adapt to and move with the changes of time, could not contribute to the “illusion of Permanence” that Bunting observed had inflected conversations about literature.

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<sup>6</sup> Bunting, “Ode 34,” in *CP*, 127.

<sup>7</sup> Bunting, “The Written Record,” in *TE*, 8.

Bunting was neither the first nor the only modernist to emphasize the importance of sound in verse, or to recall poetry's origins in oral tradition. Pound, citing Dante's definition of poetry as "a composition of words set to music," sought to restore the connection between music and poetry that had been lost over the centuries.<sup>8</sup> Yeats repeatedly emphasized the need for poetry to be read aloud with as much care as it is written.<sup>9</sup> Bunting's approach to the relationship between poetry and music is unique in that he explicitly uses it to foreground—and, moreover, to celebrate—the transience of both art forms. In his lecture "Thumps," Bunting emphasizes the distinction between poetry and visual art that his modernist predecessors at times overlooked, asserting that "Painting and sculpture make their designs in space; music and poetry make theirs in time" and that in poetry, "It is the succession of sounds that traces an outline on the background of time."<sup>10</sup> Made "in time," the forms of music and poetry cannot depend on the stationary, stable placement afforded to such purely visual arts as painting and sculpture. Moreover, the poets' aspirations ought to be incompatible with such fixed placement. Poetry, as Bunting defines it in *Briggflatts*, must consist of "Flexible, unrepetitive line / to sing, not paint; sing, sing laying the tune on the air" (II, l. 74-76).<sup>11</sup> Of course, air does not provide the support on which palpable objects can rest and that is precisely Bunting's point. For a tune to remain "flexible" and "unrepetitive," it must also resist the very type of permanent stability so prized by a culture favoring written

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<sup>8</sup> Ezra Pound, "The Prose Tradition in Verse," in *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 376.

<sup>9</sup> In "Speaking to the Psalter," for example, Yeats reflects on the public recitation of verse set to music that had become increasingly popular in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. He decries the ways that some recitations "have taught us to fix our attention on the gross effects till we have come to think gesture, and the intonation that copies the accidental surface of life, more important than the rhythm that separates good writing from bad." See *Ideas of Good and Evil*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. IV, *Early Essays*, ed. George Bornstein and Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 2007), 86.

<sup>10</sup> Basil Bunting, "Thumps," in *Basil Bunting on Poetry*, ed. Peter Makin (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 19 (hereafter cited in text as *BBP*).

<sup>11</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, in *CP*, 64.

tradition. By rejecting permanence as a conceptual given for believable and relevant art, Bunting powerfully suggests that poets should strive for precision and meaning not so as to stop the inevitable loss of written evidence, but to work more closely with what remains. Bunting's emphasis on poetry's auditory dimension shifts the goals of modernist poetics from preserving its content unaltered to inventing it for accommodation in a language that will continue to develop in sound long after the headstones and books of its written tradition have crumbled.

Rather than aspiring toward a permanence that grants exemption from the laws of mortality, Bunting wants poetry to embrace its capacity for finding other ways to endure that need not rely solely on the vulnerable medium of paper. He displaces the visual dimension as the primary space in which meaning is apprehended so as to restore greater credence to the auditory than what a highly literature culture typically allows. Instead of an unequivocal championing of the visual and tactile materiality of paper, Bunting offers what Ferdinand de Saussure terms the "psychological imprint" of sound, described as "the impression that it makes in our senses," as a materiality that holds both a greater immediacy and a greater staying power than the materiality on which the visual dimension of a text depends.<sup>12</sup> As a writer whose legacy partakes in and benefits from modernity's premium on written text, Bunting of course does not dismiss the effect of written poetry's visual dimension. Rather, he wants to temper the hyper-awareness of the visual that has produced in modern literary culture a tendency to uphold vision as the only factor that should matter in the interpretation and dissemination of literary texts.

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<sup>12</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 66.

Though Bunting's skepticism of the "paper culture" may seem moot in the digital age, it anticipates the privileging of written over aural communication that persisted in hermeneutics throughout the late twentieth century and beyond. Walter Ong's 1982 study of the transition from orality to literacy pointed out the tendency to favor the written over the oral when, in actuality, "'Reading' a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination."<sup>13</sup> Still, the tendency to dismiss orality in textual analysis has remained a prevailing trend, and one that Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin single out in their 2009 *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*. This groundbreaking compilation of essays begins by contrasting Roman Jakobson's assessment of poetry as "a province where the internal nexus between sound and meaning changes from latent into patent and manifests itself most palpably and intensely" with literary scholarship's relative negligence of sound in poetry.<sup>14</sup> My reading of Bunting situates his emphasis on sound within a body of criticism that calls for a greater acknowledgement of poetry's auditory dimension to reveal what the visual dimension alone cannot. Rather than supplant or ignore the impact of the written text, an increased focus on sound develops, complicates, and ultimately shapes how we interpret written text. Charles Bernstein's introduction to *Close Listening* emphasizes close listening as a practice that "may contradict 'readings' based exclusively on the printed text" and even herald a change in how prosody is practiced.<sup>15</sup> Susan Stewart spells out exactly what is to be gained from greater attention to sound in close reading: the very essence of poetry as a genre. "Poems," she points out, "compel attention to aspects of rhythm, consonance, assonance,

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<sup>13</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Perloff and Craig Dworkin, introduction to *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 1.

<sup>15</sup> Charles Bernstein, *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4.

onomatopoeia, and other forms and patterns of sound to which attention is not necessarily given in the ongoing flow of prose and conversation.”<sup>16</sup> In her essay on translation in Perloff and Dworkin’s collection, Gordana P. Crnković examines how a poem’s sound impacts the reader’s experience in a way that cannot always be duplicated outside of its original language. She analyzing the impact of translation on the two dynamics she describes as the “say more,” in which sound helps develop meaning, and the “goes against,” in which sound conflicts with meaning.<sup>17</sup> More recently, Edward Allen’s reading of Wallace Stevens’ *Harmonium* in context with the rapid development and accessibility of radio technology in the early 1920s emphasizes how sound interacts with the consumption and production of print culture. Specifically, Allen posits that radio’s new vocabulary for describing sound (e.g., as “waves” or “static interference”) encouraged Stevens and others to consider “how [the sound vocabulary of radio] might be witnessed or foreseen in print.”<sup>18</sup> By admonishing the trend of privileging “paper culture” in the mid-twentieth century, Bunting aptly foregrounds the essential ties between sound and meaning that would pique the interests of leading prosody scholars in the twenty-first.

To pay closer attention to sound does not mean to relegate the spoken to abstraction and thereby polarize it from the materiality of ink and paper. Instead, it means to consider how sound manifests through the material, specifically through the corporeal, in ways that make us absorb and process sound differently from written text. While standing apart from the material precariousness of paper, sound nevertheless bears consideration in what

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<sup>16</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 68.

<sup>17</sup> Perloff and Dworkin, 79-80.

<sup>18</sup> Edward Allen, “‘One Long, Unbroken, Constant Sound’: Wireless Thinking Lyric Tinkering in Wallace Stevens’s *Harmonium*,” *Modernism/modernity* 21.4 (November 2014), 931.

Bernstein describes as a “material and materializing dimension.”<sup>19</sup> As Stephen Arata observes in his analysis of rhythm in Victorian poetry, sound has the power to “alter, subtly or dramatically, our material bodies” when a poem is read out loud.<sup>20</sup> By favoring the materiality of the body, a transient form which—unlike paper or headstones—is expected to be so, the aural dimension of poetry affords space to conceive of an endurance freed from the burden of permanence. Stewart’s characterization of human utterance as possessing the inherent paradox of both fixed structure and transience describes how audible poetry endures without fixity. As Stewart explains, “When [human utterances] are reported and repeated in this way, they acquire both fixed form and a capacity to change.”<sup>21</sup> She points out that while poetry shares common ground with the utterance of speech, it stands distinct in that “Speech disappears into the function of its situation,” while “Song, by virtue of its measure, is fixed and repeatable, although it is, like all utterances, subject to transformation.”<sup>22</sup> For Bunting, to strive toward permanence—an idealization that can never be fully actualized—is to overlook the fact that poetry, which “make[s] [its designs] in space,” need not equate meaningful endurance with indelible materiality.

My analysis foregrounds how three of Bunting’s major works privilege the transient materiality of sound by demonstrating how sound not only enhances and interferes with meanings in the visual text, but ultimately shapes the creative process so that the poet’s verse can render authentic and immediate recollections of its subjects that move with time rather than stand against it. Relying on paper to preserve things unchanged and bequeath immortal

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<sup>19</sup> Bernstein, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Arata, “Rhyme, Rhythm, and the Materiality of Poetry,” *Victorian Studies* 53.3 (Spring 2011), 519.

<sup>21</sup> Stewart, 60-61.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.



status, seemed, for Bunting, to downplay and underestimate the audible dimension of poetry that makes an anxiety for permanence not worthwhile. In *Villon*, *Chomei at Toyama*, and *Briggflatts*, Bunting develops an interplay between poetry's auditory and visual dimensions that severs the elision between endurance and permanence and makes a powerful case for literate modern culture to take a renewed interest in the relationship between sound and meaning. *Villon* foregrounds the impoverished truths resulting from reliance on the visual alone, while *Chomei at Toyama* shows how the written and the heard (exemplifying Crnković's analysis of the "say more" and "goes against" dynamics) can both inform and sabotage each other's respective narratives. Answering these poems' striking emphases sound thirty years later, *Briggflatts* showcases sound's importance to poetry's inventive power, yet tempers such importance with a grounding in the limitations of the visual and auditory alike.

Although sound and the aural tradition heavily inform Bunting's technique throughout the entirety of his work, I focus on these three poems because each foregrounds material loss by engaging techniques that rely primarily on sound, and in so doing, suggest the more transient materiality of sound as capable of generating an endurance for poetry that art forms depending solely on visual and tactile dimensions will not yield. These long poems tend to be discussed in isolation, but situating these poems together in productive comparison foregrounds the relationship between Bunting's emphasis on sound and his blunt reminders of material objects' vulnerability. Appropriating fifteenth-century poet and bandit Villon's *Le Testament* into a glimpse of the author's own imprisonment for refusing conscription in World War I, *Villon* parallels the speaker's loss of access to basic material provisions during imprisonment to prominent moments of loss from history and Greco-Roman mythology.

After losing his home and livelihood as a government official to an earthquake followed by famine, the speaker of *Chomei at Toyama* also loses the need to maintain his religious rituals now that no one is watching him. Each poem juxtaposes a sharp focus on the aspiration to create a lasting impression against the inevitability of natural forces (as in *Briggflatts* and *Chomei*) and manmade structures (as in Villon's prison cell) to sabotage these aspirations. Abandoned by the material structures on which they rely, these poems' characters and speakers find in sound the meaning and endurance, albeit transient, that a text's visual and tactile dimensions cannot provide in silence. Rather than offer a religious or metaphysical answer to man's desire for permanence, Bunting posits sound as a means of shifting the question from how poetry can establish permanence to what poetry can do to render its subjects believable and immediate even as one acknowledges losing the material traces of a life lived and written through.

The anxiety that poetry should save, preserve, and recover its subjects unaltered has governed critical approaches to Bunting. Critics have highlighted Bunting's use of sound in *Briggflatts* as a means of preserving both the Northumbrian dialect and the sounds from the natural landscape of his Northern English homeland. Asserting that "The voice of Basil Bunting was not shaped by all these decades of craft to the end that its simulacrum might lie pressed flat on a page," Hugh Kenner identifies the "sounds only a Northern intonation will preserve" in *Briggflatts*.<sup>23</sup> John Peck views the narrator's identification with rats, e.g., "Where rats go go I," as a model for *Briggflatts*' poet, whom Bunting positions as "a kind of sharp-eyed and sharp-eared scavenger," salvaging sounds and techniques from English

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<sup>23</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Sound of Sense" in *Basil Bunting: Man and Poet*, ed. Carroll F. Terrell (Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, 1981), 65; 69 (hereafter cited in text as *BBMP*).

bardic tradition.<sup>24</sup> This emphasis on preservation, however, overlooks an important link between Bunting's favoring of sound's transience and the recurring themes of decay, mortality, and destruction that pervade his other works as well as *Briggflatts*. Reading Bunting's careful attention to sound as a means of preservation or of "scavenging" lost forms misses the insistence throughout his poetry and criticism that preventing all loss is impossible. Furthermore, situating *Briggflatts* as homage to Northumbrian landscape and dialect perpetuates a tendency to read the poem in isolation, thereby neglecting the powerful connections it holds to other poems that urge readers to pay strong attention to the relationship between sound and meaning. Finally, as Bunting's most recent biographer Richard Burton observes, pegging Bunting as "the Northumbrian poet" has had the unintentional effect of ostracizing him from the considerably wider reception his contemporaries have enjoyed.<sup>25</sup> A poetics governed by sound favors the inflection of the local, allowing the local dialect to persist even while institutionalized standardizations in spelling attempt to mute dialectical differences on the page.

The type of endurance that Bunting's poetry offers contrasts starkly with the stable permanence often sought after in the works of his modernist predecessors, and moreover, contributes an essential dimension to my project's analysis of modernist forms in poems with metaphysically charged content. Whether assuming that standards for literary criticism must remain fixed against the passage of time, or assuming that art itself could last forever if made

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<sup>24</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 75; John Peck, "Bardic *Briggflatts*," in *BBMP*, 171.

<sup>25</sup> As Burton points out, even critics who have made crucial contributions to ensuring Bunting's legacy have unintentionally hindered his ability to receive the recognition bestowed on other British poets of his era. He explains that such localized praise as Peter Quartermain's declaration that "Basil Bunting is the most important poet in the North-East of England since Caedmon in the latter seventh century" is "well-intentioned but damaging" since, for example, "Nobody claims that Ted Hughes is the best Yorkshire poet since Alcuin in the latter eighth century. See Richard Burton, *A Strong Song Tows Us: The Life of Basil Bunting* (Oxford: Infinite Ideas, 2013), 9.

to do so, conceiving of permanence as a possibility often led modernists to see poetry—and even language itself—as capable of actualizing the divine. In his poetry and criticism, Pound attributes the loss of precision in language to the fact that language in modernity was no longer treated as having a direct connection to divinity. In Canto LXXIV, his appropriation of Genesis begins, “In the beginning was the Word / the perfect word / Sincerity.”<sup>26</sup> His critical essays persistently attribute the loss of meaning in language to the replacement of Eleusinian fertility rituals with the derivative rituals and symbolic language of Christianity. Yeats, on the other hand, offered symbolism as a means of establishing associations with celestial worlds so vivid that they might, indeed, allow one to “meet the Lord in the Air.”<sup>27</sup> Eliot’s conversion to Christianity extended his ideas for immutable standards of literary taste by linking the maintenance of religious values with the ability to both write and appreciate works of literature that will last throughout time when others are forgotten. Across their often conflicting religious and literary theories, there remains across these high modernists’ works a sense that poetry might just be able to evade the temporal limitations of the physical world and access the infinite—perhaps thereby restoring poetry to the status it held in ancient times as a conveyer of truths inapprehensible to the physical senses.

Rather than using poetry as an escape from the mortal world’s vulnerability, Bunting acknowledges the lost connections to religion and mythology in modernity without assuming that improving poetic expression can bring them back. Although he never directly attacks modernism’s interest in Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian mythologies as he does Eliot’s aspirations toward permanence in the “paper culture,” the appropriations of classical and

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<sup>26</sup> The lines in Canto LXXIV are actually written in Latin: “in principio verbum / paraclete or the verbum perfecta: sinceritas.” See Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (1971; New York: New Directions, 1993), 447.

<sup>27</sup> Yeats, “The Symbolism of Poetry,” in *Collected Works*, 114.

Northumbrian mythology in Bunting's poetry seems to mock the reverence toward various forms of mythology that his modernist predecessors bestowed.<sup>28</sup> The return to a unified mythos that so some high modernist texts adduce as a possible cure for modernity's ailments only further accentuates themes of loss in Bunting's poetry. While Pound upholds such figures as Odysseus and Acoetes as exemplary for their respect of the gods, the protagonist of Bunting's "Attis: Or Something Missing" earns only ridicule and ostracism when he castrates himself to demonstrate devotion to the goddess. In contrast to the influence that Pound's Circe wields in *The Cantos*, Bunting's "The Well of Lycopolis" reduces Venus to an old crone lamenting her lost youth and the power she once held over her male suitors. Whereas Yeats depicts Cuchulain "battling with the bitter tides" at his peak (ll. 4-5), Bunting's mentions of Eric Bloodaxe in *Briggflatts* afford only a glimpse of the Northumbrian conqueror's murder and a potential epitaph that might be composed to encompass the kingdoms he once ruled.<sup>29</sup> Unlike Pound's Canto I that celebrates Odysseus's triumphant return after gaining knowledge from the dead, the "young girls with little tender tits" in *Villon* are mere proof of the inescapable fact "that DEATH is written over all!" (ll. 44-45).<sup>30</sup> While his high modernist predecessors find solace in manmade objects, and in the mythologies that have been preserved across generations and continents, Bunting offers no possible exceptions to the inevitable destruction that claims all indiscriminately. Bunting's appropriations of religious mythos and historical legend remain acutely conscious that the time for these characters and ideologies has long passed. Venus is old, Bloodaxe is dead, and the sound of the stonemason's steady mallet in *Briggflatts* reminds us of the irrevocable

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<sup>28</sup> Bunting, "The Written Record," 10.

<sup>29</sup> Yeats, "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," in *Collected Poems*, 31.

<sup>30</sup> Bunting, *Villon*, in *CP*, 24.

change that death and decay will bring to all legacies of man no matter how skilled the writer who memorializes them. In Bunting's poetics of sound, such a change of form is not cause to mourn the loss of the original, but a welcome indication that the original can endure throughout the next era, even as its visual presence must, inevitably, fade.

**“Vision is Lies”: Allowing Villon to Speak in Modern English Verse**

Bunting's attention to sound—through a technique that echoes and suggests but never duplicates the effects of more conservative and pre-modernist poetic conventions—restores orality from a primitive and ancillary function to a primary concern in reading and interpretive practices. Centuries after the visual dimension of writing had come to dominate modern scholarship as the most trustworthy source of meaning, Bunting's 1925 *Villon* urges readers to question the ability of sight to reveal complete and uncompromised truth. Forbidden from speaking and confined in isolation, the imprisoned narrator declares that “Vision is lies” and rails against the futility of attempting to subsist on the visual and written alone. The poem's explicit privileging of speech over sight recalls Jacques Derrida's description of the voice as having “a relationship of essential and immediate proximity to the mind,” being the “producer of the first symbols,” whereas written language establishes the conventions made by speech.<sup>31</sup> While Walter Ong's study of the relationship between orality and writing highlights the distrust of written text that persisted in newly literate cultures, Bunting's *Villon* persona argues for maintaining this distrust in favor of greater attunement to what the ear might reveal. He upholds the spoken word as more immediate and thereby more trustworthy than written--not because sound has a greater capacity for permanence than

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<sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing,” in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 11.

writing, but because its transience allows it to be shaped in a manner that accommodates the forms of the past as they shift into the present.

One of Bunting's first critical successes, *Villon* provides a prime example of the way that the sound of verse must embrace changes in form to render authentic and immediate impressions of events. In this poem, Bunting's verse syncretizes Villon's voice with a brief chronicle of his own time in prison for refusing conscription during World War I. As Kenneth Cox has observed, it is extremely difficult to translate Villon's verse accurately from French into English without making the lines sound "heavy, mawkish, or archaic."<sup>32</sup> Bunting's English verse, therefore, does not yield a literal translation of materials culled from Villon's *Le Testament*, but rather must convey its subject in a verse that reflects the most current sounds of English in modernity. The challenge of making this medieval figure present to a readership in another language and century leads to Bunting's use of the sonata structure, the musical form consisting of multiple movements and multiple tempos that Bunting engages as a conceptual framework for both *Villon* and *Briggflatts*. Composed a few decades later, *Briggflatts* has typically been regarded as Bunting's more polished and advanced use of the sonata structure.<sup>33</sup> However, the task of making a medieval poet "speak" to a twentieth-century readership—while working with a different language and in a different register—makes for quite a sophisticated engagement with the multi-dimensional sonata concept. *Villon* is one sonata, yet consists of three sections, each of which fuses references to Villon's

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<sup>32</sup> Kenneth Cox, "A Commentary on Bunting's *Villon*," *Agenda* 16.1 (1978), 21.

<sup>33</sup> William Grim, for example, states that Bunting's choice of the sonata form for *Briggflatts* "results partly from Bunting's dissatisfaction with his previous attempts at this form, and partly from his desire to write a long poem with only one poetic voice appearing at a time." See "Sonata, Sonata Form, and *Briggflatts*" *St. Andrews Review* 36 (1989), 72.

verse and life with Bunting's own time in prison.<sup>34</sup> Although the poem contains very specific references to the treatment Bunting endured as a prisoner, the poem's opening declaration that "He whom we anatomized... / speaks / to us, hatching marrow" (ll. 1; 5-6), announces that just one voice, the dead poet Villon's, will be heard throughout.<sup>35</sup> In order to allow one voice to speak as Villon in the present, Bunting must add the experience of another, more contemporary prisoner: that of his own as a prisoner in twentieth-century England.

Stripped of the sounds of speech afforded to Villon in late medieval France, Bunting must establish, or at least assert, the faith that his sounds in modern English, and sound in general, will prove a reliable conduit. To this end, the speaker explicitly endorses the merits of sound over vision in the second stanza:

My tongue is a curve in the ear. Vision is lies.  
 We saw it so and it was not so,  
 the Emperor with the Golden Hands, the Virgin in blue.  
 (--A blazing parchment,  
 Matthew Paris his kings in blue and gold.)

It was not so,  
 scratched on black by God knows who,  
 by God, by God knows who. (ll. 7-14)<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Bunting describes his choice of the "sonata" form for *Briggflatts* as allowing him to address multiple voices in different movements, rather than having them in "quick, rapid succession" as Zukofsky and Pound have done. See Jonathan Williams, *Descant on Rawthey's Madrigal: Conversations with Basil Bunting* (Gnomon Press, 1968), n.p.

<sup>35</sup> Bunting, *Villon*, 23.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



Blunt, declarative statements provide a side-by-side comparison of vision to sound. Rather than being “truth” as compared to the “lies” of vision, the tongue is a “curve,” calling attention both to the actual shape it must take to form speech, as well as the additional dimension it affords to the flatness of visual text. A prisoner “In the dark in fetters,” Villon has little choice but to rely on sound to discern what happens in his cell and who enters, as did Bunting, who was diagnosed during childhood with poor vision long before he was kept in solitary confinement as a young man (l. 15).<sup>37</sup> However, the speaker reminds us with the reference to the dubious and politically biased writings and sketches of Matthew Paris that even when something is rendered visible without the “curve” of the tongue, it can still be “not so.” Rather, this “curve” can actually enhance the ability to provide truth from a new angle or insight not apparent from vision alone. Emily Dickinson’s “Tell all the Truth / But tell it slant” reverberates in modernist attempts to revise history through the medium of poetry to foreground certain aspects of leaders and events that more mainstream historical scholarship might otherwise obscure.<sup>38</sup> Cox’s analysis of Bunting’s “curve in the ear” posits a more “intimate and involving” experience afforded by sound than by vision because “The hearer takes in the changing sounds of his immediate environment and his speech, being itself sound, moulds itself on the aural intake.”<sup>39</sup>

Opposing the tongue’s “curve” to vision’s “lies” asserts unequivocally that sound’s immediacy holds a greater capacity for truth. The speaker’s blatant dismissal of vision recalls Plato’s assertion in the *Phaedrus* that “writing is inferior to speech... For it is like a picture,

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>38</sup> Emily Dickinson, “1129,” 1868, in *Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1960), 506.

<sup>39</sup> Cox, 22.

which can give no answer to a question” and has “no power of adaptation.” Moreover, because a text must remain silent and cannot answer to questioning, “it is not a legitimate son of knowledge, but a bastard, and when an attack is made upon this bastard neither parent nor anyone else is there to defend it.”<sup>40</sup> Walter Ong has observed that early modern literate cultures also valued the ability of speech to adapt and adjust in the present moment and were therefore reluctant to transfer legal authority from oral to written testimony. Citing M. T. Clanchy’s studies of eleventh- and twelfth-century English legal documents, Ong explains how this newly literate culture valued the additions and nuances that oral testimony could offer to writing: “Witnesses were *prima facie* more credible than texts because they could be challenged and made to defend their statements, whereas texts could not.”<sup>41</sup> By being a “curve in the ear,” the speaker’s tongue can tell a more immediate, more defensible, and thereby perhaps more accurate, version of events than a straight, two-dimensional parchment can provide.

Bunting’s imprisoned speaker strengthens his case for the superiority of speech by following the example of Matthew Paris’s infamous parchments of known origins but dubious content, with the example of a text with content and origins that remain anonymous even as they remain visible. Should the “vision” of a piece of art or text not be preserved carefully, or should the reader not be in the ideal position to see it, it becomes an anonymous work of dubious origins, “scratched on black by God knows who.” That the speaker’s text comes to us in written form is ironic, yet does not compromise the speaker’s (or the poet’s)

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<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Digireads, 2009), *Google Books*, accessed February 18, 2015, <https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=iCIodKfVoAgC&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP1>.

<sup>41</sup> Ong, 96.

debunking of written text as the sole authenticator of truth in isolation from the spoken. Here Bunting demonstrates how written text, although long regarded as the most prominent marker of a civilized culture, becomes no less primitive when robbed of its aural dimension. Lacking the aid of inflection, this “scratched” text cannot be processed through what Bernstein terms “close listening,” which then puts the speaker in the precarious position of not being able to convey meanings completely. Describing text as “scratched” suggests a primitive and animalistic gesture from one who, like the speaker, has no other tools for writing and is perhaps writing from anger and desperation while imprisoned. A single slate was the only medium of communication permitted during Bunting’s time in prison, and then only if the prisoner were of special rank and privilege; all speech was forbidden except for one hour each day. When the slate was filled, the prisoner was compelled to erase it to make additional room for his thoughts.<sup>42</sup> While a scratched text in a prison might communicate the general emotion of the expression, however, that it is “scratched”—perhaps composed hastily and lacking the clarity of text composed in finer strokes—leaves little hope for discerning what, exactly, is there. Furthermore, although a “scratched” text might be more firmly inscribed and less prone to erasure, its potential for indelibility does not compensate for its lack of completion in sound.

The hue of this medium is just as telling as the action it requires; whereas the whiteness of paper provides a pure space for the writer’s dark ink, the prisoner must add white to space that has already been darkened and make pure what has already been sullied. In William Blake’s introduction to *Songs of Innocence*, that the piper must “stain the water

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<sup>42</sup> Tom Pickard, “Sketches from ‘My Voice Locked in: The Lives of Basil Bunting,’” *Chicago Review* 44. 3-4 (1998), 79.

clear” to record his “happy songs / Every child may joy to hear,” suggests the chilling impossibility in the task of rendering a song that makes one forget the stains of the past.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, unlike paper, a slate mandates transience; whatever the writer has left can and must be obliterated, leaving no trace of what has passed. The line that closes this stanza, “by God, by God knows who,” further draws attention to vision alone as an unreliable indicator of truth in a text. “By God” could denote an exasperated exclamation over the scratched marks’ anonymity, or signify that it came from divine inspiration; this colloquialism of speech lends itself to an ambiguity that only the aid of tone can resolve. Whether or not a text’s writer intends to tell “lies” or deliberately obscure meaning, a written form that considers vision as the exclusive means of its reception will always be incapable of telling the honest truth.

Attention to the lines’ sound keeps the speaker honest as well. When he speaks of the death from which no one is immune, the a-b-a-b rhyme scheme that is so familiar to English poetry is rendered less pronounced and predictable due to the moments where Bunting makes subtle adjustments to the rhythm. In this way, “fellmonger Death” can be taken with the gravity its presence merits:

Worn hides that scarcely clothe the soul  
 they are so rotten, old and thin,  
 or firm and soft and warm and full—  
 fellmonger Death gets every skin. (ll. 46-49)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, 1789 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Bunting, *Villon*, 24.

Anthony Suter has observed Bunting's penchant for parodying poets he admires; these lines follow the iambic tetrameter and rhyme scheme of Villon's *Le Testament*.<sup>45</sup> As closely as these lines resemble Villon's, however, Bunting's English makes some important departures from the original. The added punctuation of commas and an em dash command greater pause than what the line would otherwise allow, creating some distance between the rhyme's set-up and its fulfillment. Citing Adela Pinch's "Rhyme's End," Stephen Arata describes the manipulation of time occurring when rhyme is disrupted, noting that because "The effects of rhyme are inseparable from a reader's—or an auditor—sense of duration," we "expect rhyme to come at anticipated intervals." When rhyme fails to arrive at anticipated intervals, Pinch notes, "the effect is to open up or compress time through the manipulation of the duration between rhyming sounds."<sup>46</sup> Time expands in these lines while the reader is prevented from just getting it over with and rushing toward the inevitable conclusion of death. The repeated "and" slows down the meter set from the first two lines, exaggerating the stresses on "firm," "warm," and "full" and creating an ominously steady beat as the verse marches toward the Death that does not discriminate between old and young. Bunting describes Old English, i.e., Anglo Saxon, poetry as having "four thumps to a line," between and around which poets were "free to cram as many less emphatic syllables as they could pronounce without gabbling, or as few as they liked—even none at all."<sup>47</sup> Lack of structure, Bunting surmises, "gives the old verse its liveliness and suppleness," as compared to the consistent alternating between stressed and unstressed syllables that tends to make later English verse "stilted and

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<sup>45</sup> Anthony Suter, "Time and the Literary Past in the Poetry of Basil Bunting," in *Contemporary Literature* 12.4 (Autumn 1971), 513-14.

<sup>46</sup> Pinch, Adela, "Rhyme's End," *Victorian Studies* 53.3 (Spring 2011), 488; qtd. in Arata, 521.

<sup>47</sup> Bunting, "Thumps," in *BBP*.

cramped” unless we can pretend that certain unstressed syllables are really stressed.<sup>48</sup>

Although these lines follow iambic tetrameter fairly closely, the reader is both discouraged from pretending that there are any other necessary stresses besides the first syllable of “ROT-ten” and those on “old” and “thin,” and encouraged to emphasize and linger on the stresses of “firm,” “soft,” “warm,” and “full” in the following line. When “FELL-mon-ger DEATH” arrives, the iambic pace drops out altogether, emphasizing Death’s capability for disruption regardless of how much the previous lines prepare for it. While it “looks” like traditional and predictable iambic meter, the sound of Death’s approach is far more menacing than a strict obedience to iambic convention could accomplish. While documented and accessed in written form, the effect of such pauses and disruptions, as previously cited critics have noted, can be actualized only in sound.

Bunting’s display of what small adjustments can do to a typically rigid verse is made all the more apparent when these kinds of adjustments are omitted. During his own time in prison, Bunting’s refusal to make jute bags in support of the war effort was punished with the conditions *Villon*’s speaker describes.<sup>49</sup> While the speaker is driven mad by the monotonous and brutal conditions of the prison cell, the rhythm highlights the rhyme scheme, making the reader experience such unrelenting monotony as well:

They took away the prison clothes  
and on the frosty nights I froze  
I had a Bible where I read  
that Jesus came to raise the dead—

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<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>49</sup> Pickard, 79.

I kept myself from going mad  
 by singing an old bawdy ballad  
 and birds sang on my windowsill  
 and tortured me till I was ill (II, ll. 13-20)<sup>50</sup>

The em dash after “dead” provides only temporary relief from the ceaselessly meticulous rhyme and meter, and moreover, a relief that provides not comfort but silence: the reader is left alone, either to ponder the possibility of salvation and release after the prison takes its toll, or to scoff at such a preposterous notion among the harsh realities of the cell at present. What does provide an actual reprieve from the speaker’s bleak conditions and the sing-song rhythm that punctuates them is the variation in meter bestowed by the “old bawdy ballad” he sings to stave off madness. The distorted rhyme between “mad” and “ballad” signals a chance at relief as well. Because it is impossible to maintain the steady iambic pace in this line while pronouncing “ballad” properly, the reader must prioritize the conventions of speech and deviate from such meter, if only slightly. Just as the techniques of more archaic English poetic forms provide relief from the stilted metrical technique that had become the norm for modern English up until the twentieth century, the prisoner will find a song which affords some escape from the brutal monotony of his confinement. The intensification of the rhymes with “windowsill,” “till,” and “ill” in the last two lines contrast the birdsong to which the prisoner is forced to listen with the ballad he himself chooses to recall. While choosing the specific convention of the ballad for his song, he can also choose how closely to the form he wants to adhere, just as the poet can choose when to break from the metrical and rhyming precedents established in previous lines. When vision yields only “lies” and the paltry

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<sup>50</sup> Bunting, in *Villon*, 25.

medium of the written word yields only a fraction of what ought to be conveyed, the possibilities afforded by sound can invent a voice that will resonate long after “fellmonger death” has taken the original Villon.

### **Searching for Lost Houses: Sound as a Reminder of the Present in *Chomei at Toyama***

Through *Villon*, Bunting develops a persona that demonstrates the skills a poet should have: the ability to recognize the limitations of visual media on which language appears and to use the tongue’s “curve” when visual representation proves at best incomplete if not outright “lies.” The poet’s task is not to defy death or to evade the physical circumstances vulnerable to death’s grasp, but to provide an alternative means of experiencing what death has taken. For Bunting’s speaker, based on the writer Kama-no-Chomei whose account of twelfth-century Kyoto’s infamous earthquake and fire provides the source text for *Chomei at Toyama*,<sup>51</sup> an alternative to the physical and the visible never becomes a viable option—even when the physical structures that once held his society together no longer exist. Although not imprisoned, Bunting’s persona in *Chomei* is rendered in a similar situation to the persona of *Villon* and the young Bunting when natural disaster forces him to contend with limited means in isolated and impoverished circumstances: “I am out of place in the capital / people take me for a beggar” (ll. 307-308).<sup>52</sup> He, however, still attempts to hold on to the physical structures that have been taken away even as he claims to have “renounced the world.”<sup>53</sup> In *Chomei at Toyama*, Bunting demonstrates how poetry can use sound to reveal facets of information that the persona would rather not admit. Although the poet shares the speaker’s interest in conveying Kyoto’s former grandeur and the type of life that was once led there, his keen

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<sup>51</sup> In his notes to *Chomei at Toyama*, Bunting states that he worked from the version of Chomei’s work that had been translated into Italian by Professor Muccioli. See *Notes*, in *CP*, 225.

<sup>52</sup> Bunting, *Chomei at Toyama*, in *CP*, 91.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.



attention to sound allows the speaker's yearning to endure without compromising the irrevocable change that has befallen his character's beloved city.

While the speaker would rather we absorb the grandeur of this once prosperous city, the lines insist on foreshadowing the devastation to come. The poem begins by alternating between enthusiastic, rapid exclamations and significantly slower, more reserved declarations. Elizabeth Arnold has noted the "great lyric energy" generated in the polysyllabic endings of such lines as "Swirl sleeping in the waterfall!" and "lofty city Kyoto / wealthy without antiquities!" (ll. 1; 5-6) only to be brought down by "In the city where I was known / the young men stare at me. / A few faces I know remain" (ll. 11-13).<sup>54</sup> She attributes such contrasts to the fact that Bunting has made a poem out of what was originally written as prose and desires to respect the source document. Such lines as "I have been noting events forty years" and "Men are fools to invest in real estate," Arnold argues, serve to "anchor" the poem and prevent it from descending into "vapid musicality."<sup>55</sup> I would argue, however, that the addition of more prose-like statements preceding and following lines significantly dominated by rhythm and sound was a deliberate choice on Bunting's part not only to respect the original and anchor the music, but also to provide a dimension to Chomei's character that might not have been as apparent in the source text. The rapidly varying rhythms suggest Bunting's sense of Chomei's inability to reconcile his admiration for what Kyoto once was with what it has become. In his note to *Chomei at Toyama* in *Complete Poems*, Bunting makes a point of expressing doubts as to the sincerity of Chomei's sudden conversion to

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Arnold, "The Rhythm of the Actual in Bunting's *Chomei at Toyama*," *Chicago Review* (December 2009), 23.

Buddhism, which he saw as more motivated by the promise of political accolades than by an acquisition of faith.<sup>56</sup> The speaker makes statements throughout the poem about his having settled into his current situation of poverty and isolation such as “Toyama, snug in the creepers!”<sup>57</sup> His pointed depictions of the destruction that led him to the place, however, belie his insistence on nonchalance.

Although Bunting’s Chomei claims to have accepted his new position, his account of the fire suggests an irrevocable attachment not only to the memory of Kyoto’s destruction, but of the social structure in place beforehand:

On the twentyseventh May eleven hundred  
 and seventyseven, eight p.m., fire broke out  
 at the corner of Tomi and Higuchi streets.  
 In a night  
 palace, ministries, university, parliament  
 were destroyed. As the wind veered  
 flames spread out in the shape of an open fan.  
 Tongues torn by gusts stretched and leapt.  
 In the sky clouds of cinders lit red with the blaze. (ll. 20-28)<sup>58</sup>

By writing out the date instead of using numerals, Bunting foregrounds the polysyllables that speed up the first two lines to arrive suddenly at the time of the fire. The silence preceding the fire’s destruction affords a brief pause by which to process what has just occurred and

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<sup>56</sup> Bunting writes, “[Chomei] applied for a fat job in a Shinto temple, was turned down, and next day announced his conversion to Buddhism...I cannot take his Buddhism solemnly considering the manner of his conversion, the nature of his anthology, and his whole urbane, skeptical, and ironical temper. If this annoys anybody I cannot help it.” See *Notes*, in *CP*, 225.

<sup>57</sup> Bunting, *Chomei at Toyama*, 85.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

also foreshadows the total obliteration to come. That the slant-rhymed “ministries” and “university” are adjacent to each other emphasizes the non-discriminatory aspect of the fire’s damage; these buildings serve different purposes to man, but are exactly the same in their vulnerability to the wrath of nature’s elements. This juxtaposition so clearly marks these structures’ identical fate that the “were destroyed” of the next line becomes almost superfluous. The spondaic and alliterative “tongues torn” sets off a line in which only the preposition and conjunction are un-stressed, rendering the catastrophe as something that cannot be contained by the unofficial yet established rules of poetic convention. Nevertheless, Bunting’s Chomei takes care to preserve the social strata for which the fire’s blaze has so little regard:

Some choked, some burned, some barely escaped.

Sixteen great officials lost houses and  
 very many poor. A third of the city burned;  
 several thousands died; and of beasts,  
 limitless numbers.

Men are fools to invest in real estate. (ll. 29-34)<sup>59</sup>

Although Bunting’s persona starts with the non-descriptive “some,” he cannot sustain the reality that the fire has reduced everyone to the same state of wretchedness. He gives the exact number of “great officials” who lost houses, notes vaguely the “very many poor,” and then separates the poor slightly above the deaths of the “limitless beasts” that cannot even be estimated. The tension between the social order that the speaker wishes to retain and the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 84.

fire's complete obliteration of this order is further emphasized in the placement of stresses. In the first line, the accent falls on the fire's actions rather than on the "some" whose lives such actions took. Landing prominently on "bare" to foreshadow the lost houses of the second line adds ambivalence to the way that the second syllable of "escaped" is given the same ominous stress as the deaths that preceded it. Escaping from choking and burning does not guarantee a fate superior to those lost to the flames. When the speaker begins listing those who were lost to the fire, however, the stress is placed on the amounts that begin each line: *sixteen*, *very many*, *several thousands*, and *limitless*. The reader hears the speaker's desperation to restore Kyoto as it once was, with the possibility to distinguish between the wealthy and the poor, and between man and beast, butting up against the harsh reality that in the aftermath of the fire, all are reduced to "some"—be they dead or alive. Whether Bunting's Chomei really believes "Men are fools to invest in real estate" is therefore put into question; the houses may be lost, but not the ability of language to preserve what these houses represent.

The narration of events that continue to destroy Kyoto, from the famine caused by the fire to the earthquake that wrecked the barely-recovered city just a few years later, continues to suggest a pre-occupation with the houses in which men can no longer place their trust. Moments of Bunting's more prose-like syntax place the speaker as one of the "fools" invested in real estate even when it has been long proven unreliable. Describing "two fruitless autumns" consisting of such dire circumstances as "Jewels / sold for a handful of rice. Dead / stank on the curb," the speaker recalls, "That winter my fuel was the walls of my own house" (ll. 84-86; 89).<sup>60</sup> Having been mentored by Pound and his instruction to use "no word that does not contribute to the presentation," Bunting's decision to maintain a more

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

prose-like structure—and thereby keeping “was” and “own”—suggests a more deliberate move than a desire to keep the prose intent of the original intact.<sup>61</sup> Because the sense could be maintained if “was” and “own” were omitted, their presence is significant. The extraneous “was” not only creates a physical barrier between the fuel and the walls, but a conceptual one as well: to say that “my fuel *was* the walls” makes the walls a key descriptive of the fuel’s essence. Subsequently, the “own” both foregrounds the speaker’s incredulity at his house being turned to fuel and hints at a possibly more sinister aspect of his character: he is upset not just that a house’s walls are needed for fuel, but that this house belongs to him, a once-respected official. Should Bunting have edited the line and omitted “was” and “own” for greater poetic effect, the speaker’s anxiety to maintain his house and the status it represents would not be nearly as apparent. This more prose-like syntax appears a few stanzas later in the speaker’s declaration that “This is the unstable world and / we in it unstable and our houses” (ll. 120-21).<sup>62</sup> Although the phrase “and our houses” is intended to accompany the unstable “we,” its awkward placement suggests a reluctance to consider the houses in the same category of instability as the lives of the people who live in them. Moreover, the syntax of “and our houses” belies the period’s ultimate mark of closure by encouraging the anticipation of a new clause, one that could describe the houses in a manner that at least distinguishes, if not excludes, them from the other unstable aspects of the world. By switching into a style that more closely resembles prose rather than poetry, Bunting not only prevents the poem from becoming what Arnold calls “vapid musicality,” but also prevents the reader from becoming too convinced by the speaker’s seeming attitude of renunciation.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Pound, “A Retrospect,” in *Literary Essays*, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Bunting, *Chomei at Toyama*, 86.

<sup>63</sup> Arnold, 26.

Juxtaposing the message of acceptance that the speaker seeks to convey against the very audible awkwardness of its deliverance, Bunting's Chomei renders sound as the "curve in the ear" that, as in *Villon*, adds information that is crucial to our understanding of the speaker's situation.

Removed from Kyoto and the prestige he once held there, the speaker persists in attempting to restore the type of civilized lifestyle he once enjoyed. Although he moves into what he calls "a lodging and not a dwelling," his meticulous description renders it a place that bears the markers of a more civilized and permanent situation, as portrayed in the following lines:

I have shelved my books above the window,  
 lute and mandolin near at hand,  
 piled bracken and a little straw for bedding,  
 a smooth desk where the light falls, stove for bramblewood. (ll. 178-181)<sup>64</sup>

With a lute and mandolin, instruments meant to be played for an audience, the speaker sets up his quarters for greater anticipation of a reliable and respectable public life than what a "lodging" in remote Toyama actually affords. Furthermore, the slant rhyme between "lodging" and "dwelling" in English emphasizes the speaker's refusal to relinquish hope that his lodging may become something of greater permanence and stability. He not only keeps the instruments that have now become excessive luxuries, but continues to play them when no one is there to listen. In the following section, Bunting makes a radical departure from what we would expect of a poet who values an affinity between poetry and music:

Be limber, my fingers, I am going to play *Autumn Wind*

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<sup>64</sup> Bunting, *Chomei at Toyama*, 88.

to the pines, I am going to play *Hastening Brook*  
 to the water. I am no player  
 but there's nobody listening,  
 I do it for my own amusement. (ll. 210-214)<sup>65</sup>

Other than the announcement of the songs he will play, nothing in these lines suggest any sort of music happening. When read aloud, the lack of a consistent rhythm is enhanced by the multiple enjambments interrupting the completion of a line's phrase, as well as the punctuation that hinders the pacing within the first three lines. Rather, these lines foreground the disconnect between what the speaker says and what he does; he is not playing—at least not well enough to convince us that the pines and the water provide a sufficient audience. Instead of observing and listening for what nature might offer, the speaker sees the trees and water only as a potential basis to re-create the social conventions once prized in Kyoto. Bereft of the social structure on which he had long relied, the speaker finds it unnecessary to behave as he did when his life afforded a constant guarantee of somebody “listening.” What Bunting demonstrates, however, is the way that poetry can legitimize this guarantee. In lines that defy readers' expectations both of general poetic affect and uniquely modernist aesthetics, Bunting demonstrates that it is possible several centuries later for the speaker to have the audience he craves and moreover, that this audience will be able hear shades of meaning that conflict with the impression that the publicly pious speaker strives to convey. Although the speaker does not give up the charade until the use of “clacked” in the poem's final lines with the statement:

I do not enjoy being poor,

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 89.

I've a passionate nature.

My tongue

clacked a few prayers (ll. 320-323)<sup>66</sup>

his desperation to regain the comforts of his old life is heard much earlier.

### **When “Pens Are Too Light,” but “Rocks Happen by Chance”: The Poet’s Sound in Limited Mediums**

Bunting, while contrasting the impermanence of material possessions with the attitudes of his peers in his assessment of the “paper” culture, also knows that he cannot dismiss the value of a written record altogether. His supplements of poetic sounds to Chomei’s prose would not have been possible without the paper on which Chomei’s journals had been saved. Moreover, the sparse materials that exist to document Bunting’s own Northumbrian heritage indicates that paper, while it cannot promise permanence, does matter for allowing stories to continue. No journal written by Eric Bloodaxe, the eleventh-century Northumbrian king whose scant history Bunting features in part I of *Briggflatts*, exists to give any verifiable or detailed accounts from which the poet can work to craft his own rendition. In *Briggflatts*, Bloodaxe’s legend and the task of bringing it to life punctuates the description of the tasks of the stonemason to whom Bunting was apprenticed. Although the speaker declares “Pens are too light / Take a chisel to write,” the work of stonemasonry faces its own limitations and affords no guarantee of permanence. The mason must strive to render a comprehensive, effective, and lasting monument to Bloodaxe and his legacy using not only limited historical documentation but also a medium that can become just as vulnerable as paper and is often resistant to the work with which the mason sets it. William Wooten has

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 92.



characterized Bunting's approach to the work of *Briggflatts*' mason as inspired not only by the Epicurean philosophy of Lucretius who wished to foreground "even stones being overpowered by time" but also by his Northern English predecessor Wordsworth's thoughts on the composing of an epitaph—a serious endeavor since "the inscription which it bears is intended to be permanent, and for universal perusal."<sup>67</sup> However, a state of flux between the aspiration toward permanence and its impossibility does not fully account for the mason's blunt awareness of mortality in the cycles of nature that his work allows him to witness closely year round. The mason, whose work outdoors surrounds him of reminders that living and non-living objects alike will all succumb to the ravages of time, does not propose that his carvings serve as immutable structures; he fully acknowledges that "Name and date / split in soft slate / a few months obliterate."<sup>68</sup> Nevertheless, he cannot ignore the demands of his job that he aspire to do so. Through sharp attention to the details of sound in his poetic verse, Bunting the poet renders an enduring transience as an alternative to the mason's lofty yet unattainable goal of permanence, developing a verse that recalls without the anxiety to replace.

That sound's transience offers an important enhancement of the written text's visual and tactile dimensions, however, does not place it above critique. My readings of *Briggflatts* focus primarily on part I, specifically the opening scene of the bull dancing to the "madrigal" of the river Rawthey and the speaker's later attempt to render an accurate and memorable headstone inscription for Bloodaxe, to highlight how the sounds of Bunting's verse

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<sup>67</sup> See Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things* (III, 306–311), trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (London: Sphere, 1969), 175, qtd. in William Wooten, "Basil Bunting: Uneasy Mason" in *The Journal of the English Association* 51 (Autumn 2002), 235. The next excerpt is taken from William Wordsworth, 'Essays upon Epitaphs', pp. 332–337 in *Selected Prose*, ed. J.O. Hayden (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1988), 334–335, qtd. in Wooten, 239.

<sup>68</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 62.

supplement the limitations of written text while also foregrounding sound's own limitations. Stewart's explanation of sound's imaginative capability helps to situate my analysis of the speaker's attempt to render authentic and immediate representations of subjects long gone. She observes: "Because we cannot reconstitute these auditory conditions of the poem's production, our recalling will always have a dimension of imagination. Such remembering in fact requires neither auditory prompting nor the presence of a text at all."<sup>69</sup> Neither bull nor king have left behind text to aid the poet's attempt at remembrance, yet Bunting's imaginative sound renders a "song" for these subjects that endures in our ears. Moreover, the memory of sound, as Brunella Antomarini observes, may form a more authentic and lasting impression than a subject's visual dimension, since "It is those actions emerging through sounds, less permanent and inevitable than vision, that create an organic memory of the initial event."<sup>70</sup> While establishing a compelling and enduring memory, the sounds of *Briggflatts* also draw attention to their own circumscriptions and the ways that sound, contrary to the insistence of Bunting's persona Villon, does not always compensate for all of vision's shortcomings. Through the mason's work in *Briggflatts*, Bunting highlights the challenges that artists face to invent their subjects within the limitations of a physical medium. While Bunting's poetic sounds supplement and enhance the mason's invention of Bloodaxe, they also foreground the limits of both the mason's stone and the poet's sound, thereby ensuring that neither becomes oversimplified and reduced to the idealism of a culture that equates written record with permanence and immutability.

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<sup>69</sup> Stewart, 69.

<sup>70</sup> Brunella Antomarini, "The Acoustical Prehistory of Poetry," trans. Susan Stewart, *New Literary History* (2004), 358.

Prior to introducing the mason and his craft, Bunting sets the scene of the mason's work to make clear that this is not a poem in which death will be conquered or evaded through art. This is not a Poundian canto and the mason is no Odysseus giving lifeblood to allow ghosts to speak from the underworld as though still alive. Instead, the mason is immersed in the world of the living, surrounded by the rural landscape that constantly reminds one of death's expected and natural toll. While I agree with Donald Davie's assertion that it is a mistake to read *Briggflatts* as an allegory in which all events and objects must stand in for a general statement about the "life" embodied in the bull featured and the "death" embodied in the mason, it is impossible to ignore the poem's constant attention to the cyclic nature of the relationship between life and death, and the mason's place in this cycle of attempting to make man's legacies endure long after they are gone.<sup>71</sup> Even though the bold-font declaration in Bunting's "They Say Etna," "Man is not an end product, / Maggot asserts," give maggots the final say, the mason must work to ensure that the maggot's "end product" is not all that remains.<sup>72</sup> To accept the maggot's decree would mean to accept the state of despair presented in the first lines of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, to see lilacs and think only of the dead men in the ground below. What distinguishes the presentation of such despair in *Briggflatts* is that the poem mourns this irrevocable alteration in form while simultaneously demonstrating that poetry itself depends on constant alterations if it is to yield any hope that the natural world will be remembered as more than the rot it will inevitably become.

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<sup>71</sup> Davie responds particularly to Michael Schmidt's attempt to read *Briggflatts* under the assumption that every object in the poem bears a symbolic significance on the themes of life and death. See "One Way to Misread *Briggflatts*," in *BBMP*, 163.

<sup>72</sup> Bunting, "They Say Etna," in *CP*, 180.

Spring, long used as a literary trope to signify triumph over death, becomes *Briggflatts*' most prominent reminder of the death that is to come. The first stanza both immerses the reader into the liveliness of spring as conveyed in the bull's call and prance, and foreshadows a time in which this liveliness will cease:

Brag, sweet tenor bull  
 descant on Rawthey's madrigal,  
 each pebble its part  
 for the fells' late spring  
 Dance tiptoe, bull,  
 black against may.  
 Ridiculous and lovely  
 chase hurdling shadows  
 morning into noon.  
 May on the bull's hide  
 and through the dale  
 furrows fill with may,  
 paving the slowworm's way. (ll. 1-13)<sup>73</sup>

As Hugh Kenner has noted, there is perhaps no other time in the English language when the four words "Brag sweet tenor bull" have ever occurred together in that exact combination—yet they do work together seamlessly to set the stanza's jaunty pace and to remind us that just as the tenor voice of the bull is meant to be heard aloud, so is the poem.<sup>74</sup> The deft

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<sup>73</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 59.

<sup>74</sup> Hugh Kenner, "The Sound of Sense," in *BBMP*, 64.

combination of mono- and polysyllabic words in each line prompts a swift meter yet resists any sense of predictability as to what type of meter to expect from one line to the next. Lest we continue reading at the same fast pace called for by “chase hurdling shadows / morning into noon,” we will be slowed down abruptly, tripping over the sudden slowness of “May on the bull’s hide,” just as a dancing bull preoccupied with his self-importance would trip over an unforeseen obstacle. Rhyming nearly but not exactly with the “madrigal” of the river Rawthey, the bull makes a song that complements that of nature, being a descant, but is also distinct from this song. The bull adds to the season of late spring what the poet adds to a particular era and culture, both enhancing what is already present while providing an inimitable sound of his own. Moreover, this sound will re-occur next season, if not from the mouth of this particular bull. That “may” signifies both a month of late spring, which will occur again next year, and a particular kind of flower, which will appear again even though these particular blossoms will die, suggests an answer to the slowworm that will inevitably take part in ending the lives that peak in the spring. When “furrows fill with may / paving the slowworm’s way” brings the stanza’s speed to a crawl, foreshadowing the end of the bull’s song and its season, its rhyme with the repeated “may” reminds the reader of the season that both dies and occurs again—albeit with a new bull and new flowers. In conveying the liveliness of the bull, the poet serves a function similar to that which nature provides through the cycle of the seasons: it cannot bring the bull back to life, but it quite vividly invents the sounds that the bull once made, even though the actual bull is no longer alive.

The sound structures in this section of *Briggflatts* achieve their effectiveness—a surprising effectiveness, as Kenner and other critics have noted—by juxtaposing our expectations of cycles in the natural world against those of poetic verse conventions in the

literary. “Sounds,” Stewart points out, “are never heard outside an expectation of meaning, and sounds in nature will be framed for human listeners by human expectations.”<sup>75</sup> That we expect the bull to be lithe during the peak month of spring constitutes a key piece of what creates the relationship between sound and meaning in the poem. This dependence on expectation for effect, Stewart argues, distinguishes the aural dimension of poetry from that of music.<sup>76</sup> While the bull’s utterance can be compared to a “descant” and the river’s flow to a “madrigal” that “traces an outline on the background of time” like a musical composition, human expectations always help to modify and direct this outline. In developing a form that can both accept and resist the inevitable surrender to death, Bunting renders a verse that meets our expectations for how natural cycles work through very unexpected combinations of words and phrasings. For nature and for poetry, there is no way such life can be accomplished without an alteration of form; Bunting could not achieve the same effect of the bull’s song without altering the conventions of syntax and meter that once governed English prose and poetry, just as spring could not thrive with an ageing bull or dead flowers.

Here, both the bull and the poet set the precedent of invention rather than replication that will govern the approach of the mason as well. When the mason is first introduced while “tim[ing] his mallet to a lark’s twitter,” it is less to imitate the light sounds of the bird with a heavy mallet on stone than to synchronize his work with the timing by which the lark lives (ll. 14-15).<sup>77</sup> By timing his mallet to a creature that will die once spring has passed and “drops to nest in sodden trash,” the mason aligns his work to an acceptance of death’s place

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<sup>75</sup> Stewart, 79.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 77-78.

<sup>77</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 59.

in the natural cycle and in his craft (l. 47).<sup>78</sup> His work does not stop death but moves with it—and with the change of form that death necessitates. The mason seeks not to preserve men exactly as they were in life, but to invent them in a form that will persist for generations.

Knowing that change is required, in poetic and in natural forms alike, makes the change neither less problematic nor a guarantor of success—at least for the type of artistic success that Eliot and Pound define by permanence. While poetry's auditory dimension allows it to enter and adapt to the changing times, the adaptability of sound also has its limits. The tense atmosphere that punctuates the mason's work also demonstrates the perils of emphasizing sound too much for a precise depiction of the moment at hand:

Decay thrusts the blade,  
 wheat stands in excrement  
 trembling. Rawthey trembles.  
 Tongue stumbles, ears err  
 for fear of spring.  
 Rub the stone with sand,  
 wet sandstone rending  
 roughness away. Fingers  
 ache on the rubbing stone.  
 The mason says: Rocks  
 happen by chance. (ll. 27-37)<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 59.

Through a technique guided by sound, Bunting imitates the confusion and misunderstandings that accompany the fear of death and decay certain to befall the future. However, he also demonstrates the perils of leaning on sound alone for a precise depiction of the moment at hand. The direct syntax and consistent rhythm of the first two lines contrasts sharply with what follows; it is easier to observe and accept the surrounding decay than it is to anticipate the death that will follow at the end of spring. The slant rhyme of “Rawthey trembles / Tongue stumbles” highlights the vulnerability and loss of control for both man and nature. “Tremble” and “stumble” both denote involuntary movements, reflecting the care the reader must take to distinguish these words as well as “ears” and “err.” Whereas the ability to hear provided an antidote for the “lies” of vision in *Villon*, the “ear” is now rendered no more a reliable vehicle of perception than the eye. Bunting’s “ears err” both nods and reacts to Pound’s description of Homer in *The Cantos* as having an “ear, ear for the sea surge” that made him able to capture the Greeks’ journeys in spite of being “blind as a bat.”<sup>80</sup> While Pound draws on the mimetic quality of “ear” to imitate the sound of a steady but laborious journey being made—perhaps the sound of oars dropping into the water or waves crashing into the shore at regular intervals—Bunting warns that mimetic art can also divert attention from what is being conveyed by leading the reader to mistake shared sound for shared meaning. Although trembles and stumbles can relate to one another, and placing them together emphasizes certain nuances of meaning and connotation in each word, they are still two distinct words, as are ears and err. Moreover, that “fear” rhymes with ear and slightly with “err” is no coincidence: the “fear of spring” and of the subsequent death it necessitates hinders the ability to be present to the details of the current moment.

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<sup>80</sup> Pound, Canto II, in *Cantos*, 6.



This technique of foregrounding potentially meaningful connections in sound between words that share no etymology exemplifies the balance that high modernists sought to strike between the appropriate use of previously established verse conventions and the need to depart from such conventions when the subject demands it.<sup>81</sup> Both sound and vision will be “lies” if it is assumed that one alone presents a superior version of the events at hand. For the mason, a choice of whether to employ a certain technique, of whether the carved stone will afford the best memorial to honor the deceased, is not possible. His work can only be done with a particular technique, and, as the next part of this stanza indicates, this technique that is not easily executed; one must “Rub the stone with sand / wet sandstone rending / roughness away.” While the lines provide a matter-of-fact statement of what *should* happen in the process of rubbing the stone, the roughness of the diction and syntax suggest that this process takes more time and care than can be expressed in three short lines. Stone first follows sand, and then sand follows stone, inviting a sort of tongue-twister if the reader does not move slowly enough to observe sand and stone in their correct placements as the process progresses across the lines. The alliteration of “rending / roughness” works with the phrase’s enjambment to convey the labor of a task that is both difficult and tedious; not only is “rending roughness” an inherently slow phrase, but the pause between the words on the page prevents quick pronunciation. “Fingers,” the stanza’s first indication of any human contact with this task, introduces a striking contrast to the rough sand and stone, a contrast on which the enjambment preceding “ache” forces us to pause—and to perhaps wince at the thought of fingers doing this unrelenting work with such rough material as stone. While the

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<sup>81</sup> T. S. Eliot’s “Reflections on *Vers Libre*,” for example, points out that a verse which is free of previously established structures of rhyme and meter not necessarily the most innovative or well-executed. See *Selected Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975), 31-35.

mason works tirelessly to shape it, the stone's properties remain resistant, and even hostile, to human intervention. By making the sounds in each line work against what would otherwise be a basic description of the mason's process, Bunting foregrounds the ways that a poem privileging sound can reveal what the basic narrative of an event might not.

The sounds of these lines reveal something about the general frustration experienced by all craftsmen working within the confines of a set medium. Placed before "stone," the modifier "rubbing" in the phrase "ache on the rubbing stone" places agency on the stone rather than on the mason; this placement suggests that the materials themselves, as opposed to the efforts of labor or design, dictate the quality of the headstone inscription. Such phrasings as "rubbing stone" that are common for materials essential to certain crafts and trades (drawing boards, drafting tables, etc.) remind us that the form and substance of the materials used contribute just as much to the capabilities and limitations of a piece of art as the artist's ability to conceptualize and execute a certain design. The properties of the stone proscribe the mason's craft, just as their own respective mediums limit the work of other craftsmen and artists—and the major challenge of the craft lies in being able to work within these limiting circumstances to make something moving and meaningful.

Even when able to rely on sound, poetry's medium of language is no less limited than arts dependent on more tactile forms. While Bunting and other modernists situated their projects' contributions by making connections and comparisons between poetry and other art forms, they also realized that poetry could not render purely ekphrastic appropriations of the structural and conceptual principles that guided other arts. He observes that while both poetry and music began with sounds intended to imitate the movements of dancers for religious ceremonies, music continues to add imitative sounds, "at first with percussive instruments,

and then with others, including the human voice singing,” whereas poetry becomes more deliberately shaped, since “as soon as it is conscious of itself it organizes those noises into articulate words and sentences.”<sup>82</sup> Much like the “squat pen” opposed to the spade in Seamus Heaney’s “Digging,” the lines depict both poet and mason working within the confines of the materials allotted, yet the reader is made aware of the deliberate and distinct types of work that each entails.<sup>83</sup>

Knowing the properties of each medium, however, allows both mason and poet to take action accordingly, shaping but also permitting the unforeseen contributions of the medium itself. While the mason’s statement that “Rocks / happen by chance” puts the efficacy of the mason’s task into question, it also suggests a possibility for a productive ambiguity with which the mason can work. It is significant that rocks rather than stones appear in later lines that reference Bloodaxe’s murder: “By such rocks / Men killed Bloodaxe.” Rocks and stone each bear a distinctive connotation and relationship to culture. Stones, not rocks, are placed at gravesites, set into jewelry, and made into the monuments that Pound so loves. Pound’s Canto XVII does not put forward the marble “rocks” of Venice as exemplary reminders of what a civilization that values great art can create. Bloodaxe was killed not by the stones that take such care to shape, but by the rocks that happen without the efforts of man and that show no signs of man’s attempts at cultural posterity. Rather, these rocks make a contribution all their own to an understanding of history and to the narratives that the mason and other artists work so tirelessly to shape. By slowing down “By such rocks” with monosyllables to emphasize each word, Bunting stresses that even though the

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<sup>82</sup> Bunting, “Thumps,” in *BBP*, 19.

<sup>83</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Digging,” in *Death of a Naturalist* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1966), *Poetry Foundation*, poetryfoundation.org, accessed 17 February 2015, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/177017>.

particular rocks are neither known to nor shaped by man, their identity remains just as important as the stone which the mason takes pains to carve. The lines are at once very specific at very vague: while the precise rocks are unknown, the “such” seems particularly pointed and specific. They are worth pointing out even if they can only yield a comparison toward the actual rocks that were part of this moment in Northumbrian history. Happening “by chance,” these rocks are not stones that can be shaped, or monuments waiting to be invented at man’s will, but materials that contribute to Bloodaxe’s legacy in their own right. The mason must leave room for the possibility that more is there than what can be recorded on a headstone. Seeking to give his Northumbrian heritage the same prestige that the Southron’s legendary kings and conquerors have enjoyed over time, Bunting offers the unshaped rocks to serve a function similar to Yeats’s rose asked to “come near” while the poet recalls the major figures of Irish mythos. While Yeats’s narrator bids “Leave me still,” lest the rose cause him to forget the realities of common life, Bunting’s does not push the unpredictable, uncivilized rocks away from the mason’s deliberately crafted stone.<sup>84</sup>

Although the rocks do not tell the whole story of Bloodaxe’s murder, they do offer something that neither mason nor poet can conceive. In order to render a believable, enduring account of Bloodaxe, the chance of nature must be reconciled with the deliberate shaping in the sound structures of the modern English language.

Whether in stone or on paper, using language to shape legacy presents its own limitations, even and especially when a wealth of possible expressions exist. As Bunting reminds us throughout *Briggflatts*, the materials that comprise both the paper of poetry and the stone of memorials make each simultaneously suitable and inadequate to the task of

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<sup>84</sup> W. B. Yeats, “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” in *The Rose*, 1893, *Collected Poems*, 31.

rendering lasting expression. Seeking a pithy epitaph for Bloodaxe, the narrator becomes frustrated over the limits of the small space that stone allots:

Brief words are hard to find,  
 shapes to carve and discard:  
 Bloodaxe, king of York,  
 king of Dublin, king of Orkney.  
 Take no notice of tears;  
 letter the stone to stand  
 over love laid aside lest  
 insufferable happiness impede  
 flight to Stainmore,  
 to trace  
 lark, mallet  
 becks, flocks  
 and axe knocks (ll. 131-143)<sup>85</sup>

Although “Brief words are hard to find,” a shortage of words does not seem to be the real problem with working in stone; after all, the first line as well as several others throughout the stanza contain only monosyllabic words. What really perplexes the mason is having to select only a few words to convey his subject. The shared “ar” of “carve” and “discard” emphasizes the essentiality of both techniques to the creative process of poet and the mason alike; the carved shape that remains on the stone is a direct result of the discarded shape that has been removed. In poetry, the ability to edit produces the final product and allows for a short poem

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 62.

to convey a situation just as powerfully as a longer narrative in prose. For Bunting and his peers, the ability to be selective in expression was of the utmost importance. The phrase “dichten = condensare,” which Bunting appropriated from a German-Italian dictionary and Pound made famous, renders the skill of condensation at the heart of the very definition of a poet’s task.<sup>86</sup> As Pound describes it, “‘Dichten’ is the German verb corresponding to the noun ‘Dichtung’ meaning poetry, and the lexicographer has rendered it by the Italian verb meaning ‘to condense.’”<sup>87</sup> An attentiveness to sound can ensure that such condensing need not hinder the poet’s ability to be comprehensive and complete. While “love” might be “laid aside” and deemed unfit for the written epitaph, the alliterative l’s and open vowels of “over love laid aside lest” permits love to resound. In the rhyming of “becks,” “flocks,” and “knocks” one might also hear “rocks” in the form of what John Shoptaw has described as a “crypt word”: “something encoded” that is “neither wholly in nor out of the poem.”<sup>88</sup> In this way, “knocks” might refer not only to the sounds of the axe, but to the “knocks,” or marks, left on the rocks as well—knocks that might prove revelatory in terms of evidence for an account of Bloodaxe’s life. Not required to make its design in space, sound can bring out details that the mason’s limited space has forced him to discard, thereby allowing for a more comprehensive invention of Bloodaxe’s legacy.

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<sup>86</sup> The phrase appears in Chapter 4 of Pound’s *A B C of Reading* in which Pound discusses the poetry as “the most concentrated form of verbal expression.” He credits Bunting, who, “fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary, found that this idea of poetry as concentration is as old almost as the German language.” See *A B C of Reading* (1934; New York: New Directions, 1960), 36.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>88</sup> Shoptaw developed “crypt word” from poet John Ashbery’s use of the term to describe his changing the word “borders” to “boarders” in his unpublished poem “Games in the Sun.” Ashbery explains, “The original word literally had a marginal existence and isn’t spoken, is perhaps what you might call a ‘crypt word.’” See John Shoptaw, *On the Outside Looking Out: John Ashbery’s Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 6.

Emphasizing the importance of sound in poetry can bring out complexity as well, especially in a figure who has received such sparse historical documentation as Bloodaxe. In “king of York, / king of Dublin, king of Orkney,” Bunting further emphasizes the physical limitations of the written record, especially on a medium with such limited space as stone. The limited space for “shapes to carve” on headstone cannot afford the complex history that Bloodaxe’s name encompasses. None of these epithets would suffice alone, but even if space permitted, all three at once would not do either. What little is known about Bloodaxe’s life suggests that he became “king” of York only after his reputation forced him to flee Norway. The word “king” does not convey his legacy as a conqueror whose violent reign hindered his ability to maintain his sovereignty as much as it at first put him in charge. Moreover, the political and cultural allegiances that each of these place names connotes in modernity adds to the challenge of encapsulating Bloodaxe’s story and heritage in a few words. Each place bears a different and potentially loaded relationship to British history. The inclusion of Dublin, no longer part of England, could put into question the upholding of Bloodaxe as a legendary figure of “British” history. To call him “king” of Orkney may be inaccurate as well, since he only stopped at Orkney briefly before raiding North Britain. Moreover, the Eric of York whom scholars typically identify as the legendary Eric Bloodaxe may not even have existed, only mistakenly conflated with a Swedish king.<sup>89</sup> In addition to the skepticism modern readers bring to a figure on whom little historical documentation exists, post-World War II modernity heralds a different understanding of what it means to be “king.” The

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<sup>89</sup> See Clare Downham, “Eric Bloodaxe-Axed? The Mystery of the Last Scandinavian King of York,” in *Medieval Scandinavia* 14.24 (2004): 51-77. Downham points out that the sources used to identify Erikir of York with Erikir Bloodaxe of Norway were so late (twelfth century and later) that they warrant skepticism as to whether both men were actually the same person, or if sagas over time just merged them into one (51-52).

sounds of this line foreground not only the massive expansion of Bloodaxe's realm that earned him distinction in ancient times, but also the hollowness with which the term "king" rings for an era of British rule in which the king's authority is more ceremonial than actual. By placing the stress on the place names rather than on the repeated king, Bunting emphasizes the places over the title held. This emphasis can have the effect of elevating Bloodaxe's prowess, as someone who was king of all of these different places, or it can diminish the significance of his reign, as someone who once ruled cities that are not large enough to be considered "kingdoms" in the modern world. The softness of "king" contrasted against the stress on the first syllable of each city brings out Bloodaxe's place in the modern organization of the British Isles in a way that the written inscription alone would not. Bloodaxe may have been an English "king" in his own lifetime, but his memory lives on in a world for which that title is less significant than the smaller regions which afford distinct, local identities not necessarily associated with the identity of a particular monarch.

A technique based in an emphasis on sound fosters expansion and complexity, allowing the meaning of Bloodaxe's reign to span centuries even while the mason's stone requires condensation. In his analysis of Bunting's "dichten = condensare," Jim Powell foregrounds the symbiotic relationship between condensation and sound, observing that "in poetry sound and sense are consubstantial, and compression of sense requires corporeal embodiment in the simultaneous melodic condensation of verse."<sup>90</sup> Here, this "compression of sense" is "embodied" in the resounding echo of the stressed "king" while it works against the meaning that "king" holds for a twentieth-century reader having witnessed multiple instances worldwide in which kings were rendered ineffectual if not overthrown completely.

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<sup>90</sup> Jim Powell, "Basil Bunting and Mina Loy," *Chicago Review* 37.1 (Winter 1990), 12.



Bloodaxe's significance to Northumbrian history is difficult to convey for a reader one thousand years later in an age when a king connotes an outmoded conception of what it means to be a rightful and potent leader; nevertheless, Bunting's sound can account for aspects of the past and present that would not fit in the condensed phrasing of the written epitaph.

While the distinction between the crafted stone and the rock happening "by chance" resonates with Pound's glorification of stone in *The Cantos*, acknowledging the possible inadequacy of stone, even when the best efforts are put forth, counteracts Pound's assurance that stone above all else can withstand the ravages of time. The marble so prized in *The Cantos* becomes "White marble stained like a urinal" in Part II of *Briggflatts*.<sup>91</sup> In "Ode 37: On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos," Bunting ends with an exclamation that rejects the aura of permanence Pound projects onto monumental natural and man-made features alike: "There are the Alps, fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble!"<sup>92</sup> Later sections of *Briggflatts* emphasize the paradoxical nature of instilling permanence through a medium no less transient than the person it memorializes. In Part II, the speaker asks, "Who cares to remember a name cut in ice / or be remembered?" and observes that "It looks well on the page, but never / well enough" (ll. 52-53; 93-94).<sup>93</sup> Although "a name cut in ice will fade," the medium of sound, as exemplified by the following passage, leaves an indelible mark:

Wind writes in foam on the sea:

Who sang, sea takes,

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<sup>91</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 65.

<sup>92</sup> Bunting, "Ode 37: On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos," in *CP*, 130.

<sup>93</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 64-65.

Brawn brine, bone grit  
 Fells forget him.  
 Fathoms dull the dale,  
 gulfweed voices ...(ll. 55-60)<sup>94</sup>

Though the wind's medium of foam immediately fades with the arrival of a new wave, the sound is left behind to render, at least for the moment, this image of the sea. The dramatic rise and fall of the stressed syllables of "Who sang, sea takes" captures the rise and fall of the sea's waves, to be followed by a series of plosives that highlight the corporeal experience of attempting to secure oneself amidst the water's tumult. "Bone grit" chillingly references the struggle that preceded the drowning as well as the eventual decay that will result. The sharp sound of "keener" that both identifies the kittiwake bird's role as mourner and imitates its song is silenced with the repeated "fs" of the subsequent lines that emphasize the taken person's erasure from dry land. Plosive "ds" create a somber tone to emphasize the ruthless damage the sea's depths (measured by "Fathoms") has completed. The one "who sang" may be forgotten by the fells, but the story of his death will be remembered by the "gulfweed voices" imitated by the poet's sound.

*Briggflatts* continues to highlight the endurance of sound relative to that of visual imagery. In part IV, a barrage of images leads nowhere:

Can you trace shuttles thrown  
 like drops from a fountain, spray, mist of spiderlines  
 bearing the rainbow, quoits round the draped moon;  
 shuttles like random dust desert whirlwinds hoy at their

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

tormenting sun?

Follow the clue patiently and you will understand nothing. (ll. 35-40)<sup>95</sup>

The repeated “shuttle” highlights just how far the lines remain from any achievement in precision and clarity. A garment’s discernible pattern depends on a shuttle’s precise, directed movement, but these shuttles are thrown so haphazardly as to be compared to fountain drops and desert whirlwinds. Verbs are followed by objects that do not fit their functions; “drops from a fountain” cannot be thrown, spiderlines cannot bear much weight, and a rainbow is composed solely of light and therefore needs no bearing on anything. The “draped moon” mixes the domestic with the celestial in a way that recalls Mina Loy’s frequent juxtapositions of these two registers, suggesting that perhaps poets should be more judicious with the urge to jar the reader’s senses with something new and confusing just because the old is no longer noteworthy. “Hoy” is a sailor’s cry that has no place in the desert, making the answer to the initial question a decided no; it is impossible to “trace” or “follow the clue” to what the shuttles convey when no stable scene has been established. Because the lines pull the focus from one visual image to the next, there is no way to form a cohesive picture of what is actually occurring.

These lines seem a development of a theme Bunting had brought up earlier in 1948, with ode 36: that art’s greatness cannot be surmised by merely following the “clues,” or markers indicating the sign of quality work. Even when its physical attributes can be identified, analyzed, and appreciated, a well-done poem can be moving in ways that elude explanation. The poem begins with an admiring declaration that compares the poem’s impeccable structure to a fine mosaic, with the narrator crying “See! Their verses are laid / as

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 73.

mosaic gold to gold” and making such observations as “there is / no cement seen and no gap” (ll. 1-2; 6-7).<sup>96</sup> On reaching “the impending apse,” however, the poem’s glory can no longer be attributed to verse structure alone and instead there appears:

a glory neither of stone  
 nor metal, neither of words  
 nor verses, but of the light  
 shining upon no substance;  
 a glory not made  
 for which all else was made. (ll. 12-17)<sup>97</sup>

Regardless of how much one knows about what makes a poem’s lines moving, there comes a point at which what it offers defies even the most thorough efforts of descriptive analysis. This “glory” is something not made for our perusal; moreover, it is not “made” by the poet at all, even as it manifests through his work. Although emphasizing poetry’s effect in the present rather than on its capacity for inspiring cultural memory in the future, ode 36 makes a powerful statement about the value of such work as *Briggflatts*’s mason undertakes—even and especially when only a paucity of detail can be preserved in stone. For Bunting, artists play a significant role in the preserving a culture’s memory not because they hold on to details and save clues to be followed for an exact replication, but rather because they work with what little remains to offer something beyond what carefully preserved physical and historical evidence could afford. Through the artist’s invention, a “light” appears that would not be possible to achieve through the strict preservation of physical evidence alone.

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<sup>96</sup> Bunting, 36, in *CP*, 129.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

By prioritizing poetry's roots in sound, Bunting divorces poetry not only from having to bear a standard of unaltered preservation, but from the expectation that knowledge lead to understanding. If this "follow the clue" section from *Briggflatts* were an excerpt from a Pound or Eliot poem, an initial lack of cohesion from these disparate images would not be the problem—rather, it would be the reader's own responsibility for bringing additional knowledge to supply the context by which to interpret the scene. As British poet Charles Tomlinson has observed, Bunting shares such attention to the poem's ability to showcase its content, instead of on any "deeper" meaning that might be gained beyond it, with the driving force behind the objectivist movement spearheaded by such American modernists as William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and Lorine Niedecker.<sup>98</sup> While a palpable distinction between poetry and prose forms a foundational premise of poetic theory in multiple literary eras and traditions, Bunting feared this distinction might be getting lost when readers increasingly turned toward prose-oriented reading practices to solve hermeneutically complex poems. (As my discussion of *The Waste Land's* footnotes in chapter 4 points out, Eliot shared this concern as well.) Responding to the interpretive practices that resulted from the proliferation of highly experimental poetic forms, which unwittingly encouraged readers to engage a certain base of knowledge about the poem's subject to aid interpretation, Bunting exempts poetry from having to convey meaning in the same way that prose must:

Poetry is seeking to make not meaning, but beauty; or if you insist on misusing words, its 'meaning' is of another kind, and lies in the relation to one another of lines and patterns of sound, perhaps harmonious, perhaps contrasting and clashing, which

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<sup>98</sup> See Tomlinson, 145, as well as Lorine Niedecker's "A monster owl": "A monster owl / out on the fence / flew away. What / is it the sign / of? The sign of / an owl." In *New Goose Manuscript, Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 103.

the hearer feels rather than understands; lines of sound drawn in the air which stir deep emotions which have not even a name in prose.<sup>99</sup>

The experience of the poem as it is being heard is all that is relevant. That Bunting describes the effects of poetry with such words as “drawn” in the passage above and “trace,” as in “It is the succession of sounds that traces an outline on the background of time” (qtd. on page 2 from “Thumps”) is significant. *Trace* describes simultaneously what makes poetry both analogous to and radically distinct from other types of literature as well as from other art forms. Used in these lines from *Briggflatts*, “trace” establishes what poetry is not meant to do: it neither supplies a linear, logical movement of thought as would a prose piece nor produces an exact replica as would the tracings of an architect’s draft board. Alternative, more archaic definitions of “trace” as in “to ascertain (the course or line of something)” and “to take one’s course, make one’s way,” however, are quite apt for describing the experience that reading poetry is meant to afford: the reader must “find one’s way” using only what has been provided.<sup>100</sup>

Finally, to trace can also mean “to pace or measure a step in dancing,” making it all the more significant for Bunting’s sound-based aesthetic.<sup>101</sup> Bunting’s sense of tracing, though informed by the measured structure of a musical phrase, requires the ability of both poet and reader to set a course that does not need a prescriptive structure to be defined and clarified in a meaningful and lasting manner. What a poet leaves behind cannot be outlined in solid shape; the poet’s job consists of “laying the tune on the air” (l. 76).<sup>102</sup> Although it takes

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<sup>99</sup> Williams, n.p.

<sup>100</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “trace,” accessed September 12, 2013, [http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/search?searchType=dictionary&q=trace&\\_searchBtn=Search](http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/search?searchType=dictionary&q=trace&_searchBtn=Search).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 64.

its inspiration from the oral tradition by which poetry was first distributed, being “on the air”—the phrase coined to announce the start of radio and then television broadcasts—makes this tune definitively modern and incomparable to anything preceding it. It is of the moment and therefore in need of no anxious preservation in a recognizable visual form. While the rapid establishment of radio and television could and did play a major role in standardizing certain pronunciations at the expense of local dialects, it also exposed those alternative sounds to an exponentially larger audience, just as it has done for Bunting’s own voice reading *Briggflatts* in his Northumbrian dialect. Stewart rightly points out the irrevocable bond between sound and the specificity of voice when she posits, “It is not just sound that we hear; it is the sound of an individual person speaking sounds.”<sup>103</sup>

Having no place more stable than air on which to be laid, speech by its very nature must remain in motion. At the same time, however, poets must also know the risks that accompany constant movement. The losses and obscurities of certain dialects from the English language and elsewhere constitutes one of the most obvious manifestations of speech’s greater capacity for adjustment and adaptability as compared to written text. Commenting on television’s impact on the fading of certain English dialects in an interview with Peter Bell, Bunting was acutely aware of what sounds “on the air” were doing to normalize the sounds of English and make the accent of his beloved Northumbria all but disappear.<sup>104</sup> That orality carries such risk of extreme and irrevocable changes, however, does not make the silence of the written record a sufficient means by itself for the continuation of a culture. As Adam Fox’s study of the interplay between written and oral culture in sixteenth-

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<sup>103</sup> Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*, 109.

<sup>104</sup> Bunting, “On Reading Well,” Interview with Peter Bell, 3 September 1981, *Pennsound*, accessed September 20, 2013, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Bunting.php>.

and seventeenth-century England points out, to lose a dialect that had been available only in oral form means to lose the opportunity to achieve a more complete understanding of a culture. Because “the spoken word, in particular, provides a more immediate and sensitive insight into the mental world of a people than perhaps all other forms of expression,” Fox argues, lost dialects, “suggest alien world views, ways of perceiving and behaving now lost, the ideas and practices they conveyed as redundant as the means by which they were then expressed.”<sup>105</sup> Toward the end of *Briggflatts*’ part V, Bunting describes what happens when the written record alone is favored:

The sheets are gathered and bound,  
the volume indexed and shelved,  
dust on its marbled leaves. (ll. 97-99)<sup>106</sup>

The use of passive voice stresses the inability of purely written work to remain a significant force as time passes. Should poets be too concerned with preserving the past exactly as it was, the work will remain immobile, something to be cared for and placed in a safe but ultimately ineffective position. The sounds of an oral culture, though fleeting, carry at least the possibility of being passed down in active engagement with future generations.

Rather than fear what might be lost, Bunting proposes an openness to what sound may find in *Briggflatts*’ sixth and final section. Titled “Coda” in keeping with the sonata concept, the start of this final part contrasts with the passive voice in part V above:

A strong song tows  
us, long earsick.

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<sup>105</sup> Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England: 1500-1700* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2000), 51.

<sup>106</sup> Bunting, *Briggflatts*, 78.



Blind, we follow  
 rain slant, spray flick  
 to fields we do not know. (ll. 1-5)<sup>107</sup>

These lines foreground the possibilities that poetry can offer especially when, as with Bloodaxe, a scarcity of physical evidence and historically documented “facts” remains and the poet’s song must move toward areas unknown. The assonance of the long “o” dominates and does indeed “tow” the reader through the first two lines. An action taken to move a vehicle otherwise rendered immobile, *tow* powerfully suggests that a poem’s sound can move even the most “earsick” of audiences who have grown complacent in seeing poetry as a static object on the page. From the *n* and *s* of “Rain slant” to the *k* of flick, a multitude of similar consonants risk being elided in these lines if not properly enunciated, making a good ear imperative for ensuring that the poem is heard with its complete range of sounds and with the mimetic qualities this sound affords. As Bunting emphasized throughout his lectures, whether a verse reads well provides the true test of a poet’s work.<sup>108</sup> Hearing “fields” so closely after “follow” reminds us that listening is just as important as production when creating strong and enduring work. In such close association with field, follow recalls “fallow,” used to describe a field that rests from producing crops in order to regain its fertility for next season. Fields can be “unknown” in the sense of being unfamiliar, but also in terms of the crops they are capable of producing. Perhaps to follow demands a willingness to lie “fallow”—to resist the urge to add more and embellish just so the details of an object or

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>108</sup> In “The Written Record,” for example, Bunting asserts, “it is not easy for the outsider to distinguish the fraud from the poet. But it is a little less difficult when poetry is read aloud. Claptrap soon bores. Threadbare work soon sounds thin and broken backed.” See *TE*, 35.

event will no longer be ambiguous. The legend of Eric Bloodaxe serves as just one of many examples for which neither complete invention from the poet nor total reliance on scarce physical evidence suffices to create a believable and lasting legacy. The poet must know when invention will enhance the object to be conveyed and when it would be best to let the song lead to the unknown, even when the song cannot bring back the matters lost. Taking the pieces from Bloodaxe's rocks and Chomei's journal, the poet's sounds attempt neither to replicate nor restore past lives and events but rather offer a legacy that respects former glories while being honest about the losses that these figures have sustained.

While a poetics based in sound cannot stave off loss completely or guarantee that all facets of a cultural legacy will endure, it does ensure that something, albeit unexpected, will remain. The alliterative phrasing of the next stanza makes a powerful claim on what sound does to salvage what would otherwise be gone:

Night, float us.  
 Offshore wind, shout,  
 ask the sea  
 what's lost, what's left,  
 what horn sunk,  
 what crown adrift. (ll. 6-11).<sup>109</sup>

With a poetics rooted in sound, "what's lost" *is* "what's left"; the similarity of sounds between the two statements is no accident for what Bunting seeks to convey. The sounds of poetry can make immediate the memories of what has been lost to the ravages of time. When physical objects are lost, sound does much to preserve the specifics of cultural memory.

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 79.

Repeated four times in two lines, the speaker's "what" resonates prominently as a reminder of the questions that will still remain even if the horn or crown does wash up on shore; the sight alone of such objects cannot hope to convey the events surrounding them. By striving for the right combination of sounds that would allow the bull's dance and the king's last battle to be heard in the current language, the poet might address the *how* in such moments when the *what* remains inaccessible.

By prioritizing sound in a culture that often seemed immersed in a relentless obsession with paper, Bunting offers a poetics that can honor and learn from the past without risking a nostalgia that might cause the assertions of written texts to go unexamined for the simple reason that they have endured. While poetry entails the same level of deliberate craft as stonework or any other art forms that rely on exclusively visual and physical manifestations, its roots in oral tradition frees it from any pretense of enduring unaltered in its original format. Heard aloud, a few lines of a poem can invent a person and event long gone, as well as call attention to the real change in form that must occur in order for such an endeavor to be effective. In a project that examines what it meant for poetry to be rendered meaningful and credible in an ever-changing century, Bunting's foregrounding of change itself makes a crucial and compelling contribution.

**Conclusion: “(I Know It and Do Not Know It)”: The Potency of Knowledge in the Poetry of Phillip Larkin and Thom Gunn**

Their mind is the mind of death.  
 They know it, and do not know it,  
 and they are like me in that  
 (I know it, and do not know it)  
 and like the flow of people through this bar.

--Thom Gunn, “In Time of Plague”<sup>1</sup>

An excerpt from a collection of poetry written in response to the AIDS crisis, and by a poet prominently associated with the anti-modernist Movement, may seem an odd epigraph for the conclusion of a project that focuses so heavily on high modernism and includes only one poet who lived to witness the onslaught of AIDS. However, in reflecting on what it means to “know” and “not know,” *The Man with Night Sweats* picks up a strong thread that runs through much of the high modernists’ work in my project as well as the work of some major British poets from Bunting onward. Gunn’s reflections on the new ways of knowing, understanding, and living with the approach of death, and the new and often terrifying ways of knowing one’s body as a source of both immense life and egregious mortality, foregrounds the new ways of knowing that interested British poets in the last half of the century, particularly in their efforts to articulate the problems accompanying these new modes of apprehending the otherwise familiar. For the speaker of “In Time of Plague” and other poems throughout this collection, merely *knowing* the potential consequences for

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<sup>1</sup> Thom Gunn, “In Time of Plague,” in *The Man with Night Sweats*, 1992, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1994), 463.

accepting a stranger's used needle does not express the real issue: how to reconcile the polarities of one's identity as someone who "knows better" yet remains somewhat incredulous that such a fleeting and pleasurable action could result in an irrevocable transformation of the body into a source of prolonged and fatal agony. Gunn's later poetry articulates a new relationship to knowledge consisting of a liminal space between knowing and not knowing, and a space with which his modernist predecessors, arguably, never had to contend.

When the five modernists of my previous chapters deal with issues of knowledge, their main concerns lie in its acquisition and application: if the ritual or prayer fails, a lack of knowledge is rarely posited as the scapegoat. Moreover, when knowledge is found lacking, the focus remains, as for Bunting's mason in *Briggflatts*, on how to engage whatever one does obtain, rather than on whether complete knowledge is possible or necessary. Knowledge's attainability is taken for granted in the service of determining if and in what ways knowledge is useful for discerning the metaphysical from the physical, the celestial from the corporeal, and the palpable from the ineffable. Loy's Ova of *Anglo-Mongrels* and Eliot's would-be Catholic convert of *Ash-Wednesday* begin their spiritual educations from a place of knowledge; they know the ritual, iconography, and prayer that is meant to procure access to the divine, and their main task is to shape it so that it becomes their own. Pound's Odysseus knows the ritual he must perform to bring about the *Nekuia*, even if he does not yet understand why; Yeats's early lyric speakers know the rose's importance to the Celtic mythos they seek to manifest, even while they remain aware of its seeming irrelevance to modernity's call for less familiar forms. While Bunting's mason must reconcile the knowledge death's natural processes with the desire to create something lasting, the mason

cannot be said to both “know” and “not know” about the natural cycle of decay; this knowledge remains present throughout the poem. Eliot’s criticism of modernist literary scholarship as mistaking “knowledge for understanding” suggests that knowledge is perhaps a simplistic concern, since its grasp remains within reach of even the most careless of readers.<sup>2</sup>

Gunn and other later British poets distance themselves from their high modernist past not by embodying a greater level of experimentalism (in fact, authors of the Movement thought British modernism had become too experimental and abstract), but by developing a poetics that could encompass the new ways of knowing, and of being, in a world that now demanded unprecedentedly complex relationships to knowledge. For Gunn, having competing states of truth, each coherent within a certain set of principles, makes knowledge a force of contention itself, rather than a step toward a greater state. In Gunn’s *The Man with Night Sweats*, the man who holds his body to stave off pain “As if hands were enough / To hold an avalanche off,” can know and articulate fully the uselessness of such a gesture, yet the simultaneously familiar and foreign nature of his body renders him in the state of “knowing” and “not knowing” that compels him to try (ll. 23-24).<sup>3</sup> He knows his body can heal itself—and has done so before—and also knows that AIDS undermines this knowledge by turning the body into its own enemy and defying twentieth-century medicine’s advances in disease management. Any ability to use knowledge in achieving a higher state becomes stymied when one must first cope with two seemingly equal forms of knowledge, each carrying the weight of empirical evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> See Eliot, “Frontiers of Criticism, cited in Chapter 5, note 21.

<sup>3</sup> Gunn, “The Man with Night Sweats,” in *The Man with Night Sweats, Collected Poems*, 461; hereafter cited in text as *CP*.

Gunn foregrounds, as does Movement poet Philip Larkin, the importance of this state of knowing and not knowing to the development of British poetry in the latter half of the twentieth century. Like the modernists featured in my chapters, these later poets exemplify innovative ways of conceiving a reciprocity between poetic form and belief—as much as in the once-familiar domains of the corporeal and the tangible as the metaphysical and ineffable. These conceptions of belief, however, are implicated with and propelled by new types of exchanges between belief and knowledge that resist binaries between knowledge and understanding, and belief and doubt. Although Larkin and Gunn are associated with the 1950s and 60s Movement, a school largely characterized by a return to traditional English verse lines and a rejection of the more extreme forms of modernist experimentation, their prominent legacies in English poetry make their work with poetic form and belief an essential contribution to my project. By calling into question what it means to “know” certain religious traditions, and to know the place of the corporeal in the metaphysical, these Movement poets examine, problematize, and ultimately revise the reciprocity between poetic form and metaphysical belief in ways that their modernist predecessors inspired yet never could have anticipated.

### **Later Modernism: Finding a New Way to “Make it New”**

Later English poets’ quest to articulate modernity’s new ways of knowing dovetails with the paradigm shift that high modernists had brought to the knowledge of poetry itself as a literary form. John Kinsella, poet and co-editor of the *Vanishing Points* anthology of late and new British and American modernist poems, views the modernists that emerged from the avant-garde as having “worked to challenge a status quo, or to assert their differences in perception” to achieve forms in which “A more just way of expressing, or expression, are

highlighted” (xiv).<sup>4</sup> Inheriting the challenge of the status quo as literary tradition, and writing for a readership in which this challenge is not only expected, but perhaps also taken for granted, these later British poets of the second half of the twentieth century must find new ways of surprising a readership for whom modernism and the avant-garde had become conventions in and of themselves. The lack of rhyme, the abrupt enjambment, the oblique reference to an archaic mythos, might seem, in late modernism, to frustrate meaning and comprehension in a way that was not necessarily appropriate to later twentieth-century British poets, who needed to find their own motivations for innovation. While Eliot identified the ways that modernism was heralding, in its later years, a new form of inattentive readership, one who mistook solving the puzzle for understanding the poem, these later British poets took on the task of developing a poetics that would counter such complacency. It was no longer enough to heed Pound’s call to “make it new”; poets must now revisit what “new” meant in a literary landscape where newness had become a trend to anticipate, dissect, and grasp immediately through a cursory association of modern poetry with abstraction and obtrusion.

For these poets, much of what it means to be “new” has to do with new ways of configuring the metaphysical and its relationship to the lyric. While Gunn and Larkin’s Movement affiliation may have kept them out of *Vanishing Points*, they too fulfill Kinsella’s assessment of modernism as “challeng[ing] us to think about how the lyric works, and whether it is a relevant literary concept in whatever environment /spatiality we experience it in.”<sup>5</sup> Larkin and Gunn share in common with each other, and with the earlier modernists in

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<sup>4</sup> John Kinsella, preface to *Vanishing Points: New Modernist Poems*, ed. Rod Mengham and John Kinsella (Cambridge, UK: Salt Publishing, 2004), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.



my project, an understanding of issues concerning the metaphysical as essential to developing engaging and challenging lyric forms that would complicate hermeneutics for readers who know how to read both a modernist poem and a poem featuring metaphysical subject matter in an increasingly secularized and disenchanted age. Their poems are neither unprecedented nor particularly radical ways of juxtaposing the metaphysical against the corporeal and rational, and their technique is far from the extreme forms of difficulty that are found in modernist poetry. Rather, their perspectives offer a new consciousness of the ways that poetry can hold a central voice in articulating how modernity makes long-held knowledge strange, and why such strangeness ought to merit our undivided attention.

**“There’s Nothing Going On”: Toeing the Line between Credulous Participant and Bemused Bystander in Phillip Larkin’s “Church Going”**

Larkin’s “Church Going,” one of the most prominent pieces of twentieth-century English poetry to question the persistence of organized religion in a society that seems to need it less and less, makes an important contribution to the ongoing conversation about the relationship between poetics and the metaphysical in British poetry. Unlike Loy or Yeats, Larkin has no interest in trying to make tired and ineffectual pieces of religious symbolism and iconography more potent through poetic verse. Larkin, who wonders “will dubious women come / To make their children touch a particular stone,” seems a direct descendent of Loy’s “atheist father” who “presides” while the women perform the inferior and diminutive task of safeguarding the catechism in “Religious Instruction” (ll. 28-29; l. 5).<sup>6</sup> Yet despite his dismissive speculations of those who will persist in visiting these sites, perhaps “some ruin-

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Larkin, “Church Going,” in *The Less Deceived*, 1955, *Selected Poems*, ed. Martin Amis (New York: Faber and Faber, 2011), Kindle edition.

bibber, randy for antique” or “Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff / Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh,” he cannot deny that he, too, finds something about this “serious house on serious earth” worth frequenting—if only to enter when the church is empty and place some useless Irish currency in the collection box (ll. 42-43; 55).<sup>7</sup> The very title itself, “Church Going,” speaks to this ambivalent attraction, the action of “going” at once meaning the action of attending church as well as the church itself “going” out of relevance. This is a new way of knowing one’s place in a religious tradition, of being able to apprehend something of the value in this space of worship even as one “reflect[s] the place was not worth stopping for” (l. 18).<sup>8</sup> Embodying the tension between recognizing tradition’s power and moving past it, the poem’s nine-line stanzas, with rhymes that sometimes suggest but do not quite achieve Spenserian consistency, tug the sounds between maintaining a neat iambic pentameter and adhering to a more colloquial rhythm. Although ready and willing to move beyond the proscriptive and passé attributes of the old, the speaker is not quite finished with the pulls of tradition, religious or poetic—nor does he suggest that he ought to be.

Larkin’s ostentatious displays of more conservative English verse forms, punctuated by interruptions and deviations made all the more noticeable by the lines’ seeming orthodoxies of form, renders his work more akin to Bunting’s strand of later British modernism than scholarship has typically categorized it. Although he did make some pointed criticisms of literary modernism, and expressed an extreme distaste for the direction in which Charlie Parker had taken modern musical composition, Stephen Regan points out that “to suggest that Larkin’s attitude to Modernism was one of unqualified hostility is to miss the

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, n.p.

point that his own practice as a poet frequently embraces the devices associated with Modernist experimentation.”<sup>9</sup> Larkin and the Movement were not opposed to modernism *per se*, but more opposed to dismissing all traditional verse forms in favor of increased abstraction for its own sake: precisely the type of poetic technique that Eliot had cautioned against in “Reflections on *Vers Libre*.”

Facing a state that has not been and could not be accounted for in any of the paradigms put forth by the work of my previous chapters’ poets, who render belief in and apprehension of the metaphysical as possible if not always actualized, Larkin offers a new paradigm that divorces the power of knowledge from a desire for the fulfillment of belief. His positing of knowledge itself as potent apart from any desire that it yield the understanding that improves apprehension, counteracts modernism’s insistence on the subordination of knowledge to the inherently superior process of understanding. In “Church Going,” he develops a relationship between poetics and metaphysical belief—specifically metaphysical belief as channeled through the strictures of organized Christianity—that both builds on and departs from this relationship as rendered by British high modernism. The poem seeks neither a truer nor a more immediate apprehension of the divine, nor a more efficient way of putting pieces of religious knowledge to work. Instead, it pushes toward an awareness of how the consequences of religious knowledge persist, even while any engagement of such knowledge in the service of belief remains out of the question. Knowing, yet neither believing nor yearning for belief, Larkin’s speaker exhibits a curiosity that places him just barely outside yet not entirely beyond an appreciation for the same attractions that

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<sup>9</sup> Stephen Regan, “Philip Larkin: A Late Modern Poet,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 148.

lure the “Christmas addicts” and “dubious women” he disdains. There is nothing to be reconfigured, internalized, or reinvented so that a sustainable and relevant belief can become viable, as there is for Bunting’s *Bloodaxe* and Pound’s *Odysseus*. Rather than speak through a persona, Larkin renders an everyday man who has more in common with his middle-class English readers than with any immortal beings of whom these readers may have read. His refusal to craft a persona that stands apart from himself or from his audience provides a prime example of how, as Stephen Burt has noted, “Movement poets aimed for a level, civil, unpretentiously amicable, if sometimes stern, speech, setting the poems beside (rather than above) imagined readers.”<sup>10</sup> Through the perspective of an undistinguished atheist who understands the church’s attraction completely as devoid of any real significance, yet knows just enough not to be able to distance himself completely, Larkin flips the hierarchy that high modernism had established between knowledge and understanding on its head, enacting a radicalism inspired by the spirit of modernism.

While the modernist poems in my chapters render knowledge working decisively toward or against a certain metaphysical belief, or a certain expression of belief, “Church Going” posits knowledge that stands apart from and does not contend with belief as a necessity, yet draws him toward religious tradition inexplicably. From the first stanza, he establishes the speaker as having a relationship to religious tradition and affect that clear binaries of belief and doubt could not articulate. Lacking both belief and the desire for belief, he nevertheless knows just enough about the church to feel uneasy with disregarding any sort of reverence entirely:

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Burt, “The Movement and the Mainstream,” in *A Concise Companion to Postwar British and Irish Poetry*, edited by Nigel Alderman and C. D. Blanton (Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 38.

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
 I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
 Another church: matting, seats and stone,  
 And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
 For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
 Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
 And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
 Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off  
 My cycle-clips in awkward reverence. (ll. 1-9)<sup>11</sup>

Immediately, the speaker grapples with his liminal state of knowing and not knowing. While he may not know the precise prayers as Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* speaker does, he knows the difference between "nothing going on" and the presence of a ceremony that he may be interrupting; in other words, he knows just enough to know that he does not belong. His ability to identify this place as "Another church" suggests that he has some familiarity with churches and the objects found there; he knows why the flowers are browned and that Sunday is that day reserved for services. Once inside, he continues moving back and forth between assertions of knowledge and a willful ignorance to indicate his desire to be separated from the states of mind and practices a church signifies. The "little books" he identifies could mean little in the pejorative sense of unimportant, or simply an indication of the typical pocket size of Christian church missals. He can identify which end is "*the* holy end," even if he does not know or does not wish to grant it more significance by calling it the altar, as well as "*the* neat organ" with definitive articles, to indicate something both he and the reader

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<sup>11</sup> Larkin, "Church Going," in *Selected Poems*, n.p.; hereafter cited in text as *SP*.

ought to recognize. While he lets the door “thud shut,” he remains conscious of a “tense, musty, unignorable silence”—a silence that, ironically, is heard through the sounds Larkin has chosen. Larkin’s sounds render the church’s silence an audible presence, palpable enough to disrupt any sense of meter that could be heard in previous lines. Earlier in the stanza, the punctuation and syllabic accents of “Another church: matting, seats, and stone” clash against the strong iambs of “For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff,” to highlight the pull between having inside knowledge of the church’s tradition and wishing to stand apart from and beyond it. Unlike those whom Pound and Eliot criticize for zealously pursuing knowledge as an end in itself, this man harbors no illusions that his knowledge alone makes him belong, or gives him access to the divine. Being “Hatless,” he is well aware that he does not look like others who enter the church and who are able to channel their knowledge into belief in the possibility of apprehension. By maintaining a consciousness of not belonging, without aspiring toward unequivocal belonging or dismissal, Larkin posits a mental state that complicates and blurs the lines other poets in my project draw between those who ascribe to a certain belief (yet may not know how to bring about apprehension) and those who do not.

Remaining in this state, Larkin brings the readers to consider an ambivalence largely unseen in the work of British modernists. Whereas Bunting and Loy at times are ambivalent about the efficacy of certain gestures, they never question the ideals toward which these gestures are meant to lead. Neither completely reverent nor completely disdainful, this speaker instead participates in alternative ways that cannot be articulated as pure irony, mockery, or sincerity, although they contain hints of all three. He removes his cycle clips when entering the church and then, on the way out, he makes a donation—of a worthless Irish sixpence. That the cycle clips’ removal is made in “awkward reverence” highlights the

speaker's ambivalence; in addition to its more familiar usage as "clumsy" yet well-intentioned, "awkward" can also mean "untoward" and "unfavorable" as well as "in the wrong direction," "in a backward direction," and "upside down."<sup>12</sup> The act of removing an accessory from the feet or ankles ("cycle clips" connote both clips that hold up trouser legs and clamps that attach soles to pedals) as opposed to the head is indeed a rather backward and upside down gesture, calling into question whether the speaker intends his action as affront or deference. That men also remove hats as a gesture of respect and propriety when entering non-religious buildings further muddies the reader's ability to comprehend the motivation behind such a gesture. If the speaker did intend it as a gesture that grants the same level of deference to a church as to a post office or department store, the church could be insulted for having no higher cultural relevance than any other public space, yet also perhaps praised for its ability to remain just as much a part of the current culture as secular public spaces. Providing no recourse to certainty in how to interpret the speaker's "awkward reverence," Larkin instead puts forth a sharp focus on how the speaker's knowledge of reverential church behavior butts up against a complete lack of desire for belief in and apprehension of what, if anything, the church's "unignorable silence" proffers. While no clear causality is present, it is apparent that the speaker's knowledge, albeit sparse, has made some kind of contribution to some sort of understanding of the church's "unignorable silence," even if this understanding is partial and not particularly sought after. Rather than brush aside any sort of knowledge that cannot and will not be put to proper use, as Eliot or Pound would do, Larkin instead foregrounds the way that poetics can demonstrate

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<sup>12</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "awkward," accessed 27 February 2015  
<http://www.oed.com.libproxy.unm.edu/view/Entry/13971?redirectedFrom=awkward#eid>

knowledge as having some sort of irrevocable potency that charges places and objects with significance.

By positing ambivalence as a crucial mode of affect for the presence of religious traditions in postwar, largely atheistic society, Larkin complicates and calls into question such modernist criteria as desire, sincerity, and respect as mandatory for engaging with knowledge to lead to understanding. In so doing, he challenges readers to think beyond the question of what poetics can do to make belief a plausible condition, and beyond the Poundian paradigm that makes a clear break between those who respect the ritual and those who do not. Rather, he shifts attention toward finding out what poetry can do to make compelling, interesting, and significant the moments when metaphysical belief and apprehension remain unalterably and unequivocally out of reach.

Larkin's answer to poetry's place in situations where people are indifferent to belief emphasizes the possibility for poetic form to address and complicate religious ritual. Performing a gesture that is more strikingly ambivalent than the cycle clips' removal, but appears to be completely sincere in form, Larkin's speaker provokes thought on the relationship between poetic form and content in a way that resonates with yet expands on modernist experimentations in form and content. On his way out, he states: "I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence, / Reflect the place was not worth stopping for" (ll. 17-18). His signature relinquishes his anonymity as a disinterested passer-by and locates him in a community—not, of course, the community of worshippers to which Eliot's *Ash-Wednesday* speaker aspires, but a group composed of all who share any type of connection to the church, however tenuous or distant from the role of an active believer and worshipper. While removing the cycle clips marks his "awkward reverence" as someone who does not belong,



no observer of this act would be able to recognize anything awkward or ambivalent about it. His knowledge and careful execution of the ritual makes this gesture flawless in form, even while its content ultimately renders it worthless. By demonstrating how form can be manipulated to make content appear more valuable, yet not improve or otherwise alter this value, Larkin challenges modernist emphases on attention to form as the key to providing belief in and access to the metaphysical. One who knows and adheres to the correct form of ritual, Larkin's speaker and his relationship to knowledge cannot fit neatly within the bounds of British modernism's prevailing categorizations of those who fail to apprehend the metaphysical as those who believe but do not execute correct form, and those who neither perform nor believe. For poetry to remain relevant in the twentieth century, poets must challenge modernism's assumption that attending to form always renders content more valuable.

Larkin, however, does suggest some value in poetic form for the continuation of knowledge, and to the strange and inexplicable relationship of knowledge to the metaphysical. While the speaker very much wants to distance himself from those who have completely bought into the religious tradition (literally with their donations as well as figuratively), he identifies another group toward which his diction becomes more neutral: those who are responsible for the retention of the church's form, and who put in place the structures that will stand out long after the building ceases to attract crowds of worshippers. He wonders whether the church has been "Cleaned or restored?" adding "Someone would know: I don't." While he separates himself from those who know about the church's architecture as he does from the "ruin bibbers" and "Christmas addicts," he refrains from any

of the dismissive qualifiers that punctuated his other descriptions of those who persist in using this obsolete structure:

A shape less recognizable each week,  
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
 This place for what it was; one of the crew  
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were? (ll. 37-41)

In the crew, Larkin renders an alternative type of knowledge to that of the speaker's, someone who knows how to make the church endure and stand prominently for believers and non-believers alike, yet does not know enough to achieve a more precise articulation of what, exactly, it would mean "to seek / This place for what it was." The crew member's superiority of knowledge in comparison to the speaker's has nothing to do with a superiority of apprehension, or a superiority of belief in apprehension as a viable possibility; instead, it is simply another means of knowing. Because this means of knowing carries the practical application of making the church's material form endure, the crew's knowledge seems important in a way that neither the speaker's nor the more credulous attendants can rival. When the speaker surmises, "And what remains when disbelief has gone? / Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky," the material structure of the buttress stands when the church's purpose has become so obscure that not even the concept of disbelief can suffice to articulate the affective state of those who no longer frequent it (ll. 35-36). When one does not know the things that were once believed, "disbelief" no longer exists to contest them. By foregrounding the physical form itself as remaining visible and (as the speaker's continuous stopping by suggests) somewhat interesting, Larkin places builders as those who are

responsible for allowing knowledge to persist. Poets, like the crews of churches, work in formal structures that remain somewhat recognizable even when their necessity becomes increasingly obscure. The conventions of formal English verse are audible and visible in Larkin's lines, even while modern conversational inflections make the rhyme schemes and iambs seem stilted and obsolete at times. Returning to a more pronounced use of English verse conventions than was seen in modernism, Larkin does not adopt an anti-modernist stance, but rather asserts that modernism ought not to have the final say on how newness is conceived of and expressed in twentieth-century verse.

"Church Going" depicts a situation in which Pound's "make it new" dictum does not and cannot apply. The old traditions of church and verse do not bow in service to the necessary innovation, but rather stand stubbornly apart from and alongside the new, making no apology for their resistance. While my project abounds with examples of poetry that demonstrates the ineffectualness of old forms in accessing the metaphysical, none of these poems exhibit the complete lack of interest in promoting reform or finding alternatives that "Church Going" does. Exhibiting no obligation to find something more fulfilling in its place, yet being moved to interact on some level with the church's traditional structure, Larkin's speaker heralds a new era in the relationship between poetic form and metaphysical concepts.

Resisting commitment to complete dismissal, acceptance, or reform, "Church Going" insists on the need for new expressions that account for the complexity of attitudes and relationships toward religious structures and other types of frameworks used to access the metaphysical. Larkin articulates a new ontology for the second half of the twentieth century which precludes categorization of knowledge as a means to a loftier and unquestionably more desirable end. Instead of a relentless quest to "make it new," poetry in this new era

must now consider the encounters between old and new that do not yield the transformative powers of appropriation and subsequent relevancy, but a state of ambivalence that calls for expression in forms that are at once more conservative and more radical than the high modernist age ever warranted.

**“The Novelty of Glazed Pink Flesh”: New Apprehensions of Body and Spirit in Thom Gunn’s “Sacred Heart”**

If Larkin refuses to render knowledge impotent in the absence of understanding, Gunn refuses to withhold knowledge simply for the sake of placing understanding as superior. From Saint Martin and Jesus’s mother to Odysseus and Hermes, Gunn’s work both nods to and departs from the high modernist premium on different types of mythos as significant to the continuation and development of British poetry. His departures, however, hold none of Bunting’s cynicism for the relevance of old mythic figures in modern life; rather, his break from the modernist use of Christian and Greco-Roman mythos stems from its unabashed prominence and clarity. The first page of his 1971 collection *Moly* describes exactly what the title denotes: the drug given from Hermes to Odysseus so as to grant immunity from Circe’s spell. The poem “Moly” itself, like many of the poems in Gunn’s earlier and later collections, follows a more or less linear narrative of Odysseus’s overcoming Circe’s spell in a lyric structure, exemplifying the Movement’s resistance to obscurity for its own sake. While his poems from the 1970s and beyond become more experimental in form, they mostly retain the sharp narrative focus of his older works. Throughout *The Man with Night Sweats*, Gunn affords unflinching glimpses of men during and after their last breaths; we do not have to work hard to comprehend the description from “Still Life” of “The tube his mouth enclosed / in an astonished O” as that of a man on life support in a hospital bed. For

Gunn, a crafted de-familiarization serves neither poet nor reader. Whereas Eliot's solution to the misreading of modernist literature was to warn against over-investing in the cryptogram, Gunn's was to remove any hint of a cryptogram or other carefully deliberated obscurity altogether. In his poetry, there is no need to think carefully about the application of knowledge, because knowledge—even when offered freely and generously—remains openly, relentlessly, and aggressively antagonistic toward any hope of understanding, believing, or apprehending the corporeal and metaphysical alike.

Knowledge, because and not in spite of its abundance, fosters new means of understanding without the poet's making any attempt to present it in defamiliarizing or unconventional forms. Depicting the moments before a man's death, followed by the cremation and scattering of ashes, "Words for Some Ash" illustrates the need for a new way of reading poetry that evades the modernist insistence that convention be employed only in the service of precision:

Now you are a bag of ash  
 Scattered on a coastal ridge  
 Where you watch the distant crash  
 Ocean on a broken edge. (ll. 9-12)<sup>13</sup>

Here, knowledge of poetic convention's penchant for the figurative must clash against the knowledge that this is, in fact, a very literal and precise description of what happens to the corporeal "you" after cremation. Pound's advice that young poets "go in fear of abstraction" cannot account for this new perspective on corporeality in the modern world, which can only articulate the precise in what seems the epitome of distancing figurative language. Gunn, like

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<sup>13</sup> Gunn, "Words for Some Ash," in *The Man with Night Sweats, CP*, 472.

Larkin, uses more conservative verse forms than those more typical of British modernism to dismantle the binaries that his modernist predecessors tried to enforce. No border can isolate the abstract from the concrete, the figurative from the literal, and, especially, the corporeal “ash” from the man’s essence, or the metaphysical “you” that endures to be acknowledged while the physical is rendered unrecognizable. Knowing, and even understanding, the processes of death and subsequent cremation, does not help to articulate this concept in a way that makes it any less confusing, or less heartbreaking.

Rather than placing the acquisition of knowledge as a small but necessary step toward a loftier end, as his British modernist predecessors have done, Gunn begins with knowledge itself. His speakers and subjects know exactly what is happening, and, as the speaker of “In the Time of Plague” suggests, often understand the stakes fairly well. In his 1957 poems “Jesus and His Mother” and “St Martin and the Beggar,” the title subjects are also granted a superior level of access to the divine, yet even this state does not render a higher mode of apprehension. Saint Martin simply continues to eat as though nothing happened, seemingly unmoved by the spirit who appeared before him at the tavern to reveal that his giving of half his cloak to a beggar had really, in fact, clothed God.<sup>14</sup> Jesus’s mother knows perfectly well the fate that must befall her son, whom she understands as “more God’s than mine” yet admits “I cannot reach to call you Lord” (l. 1; l. 40).<sup>15</sup> Although his later poems take on increasingly secular, biographical, and contemporary material, Gunn returns to some of these Christian themes in *The Man with Night Sweats*; this time, weaving them into the thoughts of speakers who must come to terms with the gradual, unmitigated demise of those they love

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<sup>14</sup> Gunn, “St Martin and the Beggar,” in *The Sense of Movement*, 1957, *CP*, 67.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, “Jesus and His Mother,” 64-65.

and watch vital bodies transform the join the ranks of the dying and the dead. These speakers and subjects know too well the realities of what is happening, and that any attempts to alleviate pain would be at best a short-lived prolonging of the inevitable. Knowledge alone—of the body and of the religious and secular structures in place to nurse the body—renders a state of simultaneous understanding and chaos.

In “Sacred Heart,” Gunn focuses on a particular religious icon, the painting of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that is a common fixture of many Catholic homes, hospitals, and prayer cards, as the source of a knowledge that powerfully inflects experience with or without belief. The painting itself displays a disturbingly confusing mixture of sterile sentimentality and graphic rawness: the typical, long-haired Christ figure, whose eyes gaze pitifully upward, points toward a heart that is crowned with thorns and stands out as transparent against the figure’s white-robed chest. Several versions of this painting abound, and present varying degrees of human heart shapes and Valentine’s Day cards; some depict an orange flame, a cross, or both shooting out of the heart’s top. The image becomes the source and focal point for the hallucinations of a dying man, and for the reflections of the speaker himself on how the image fits with the concept of the dying man’s actual failing heart. Gunn’s speaker, like Loy’s persona Ova from *Anglo-Mongrels*, views this iconography as ineffectual for the realities of corporeal life. While Ova has an easier time of dismissing the passivity of “the gentle Jesus” in “Christ’s Regrettable Reticence” for an alternative idea to suit her needs, however, Gunn’s speaker cannot as easily dismiss the Sacred Heart iconography, even while he recognizes how out of touch such imagery is with the realities of the dying man’s life. Although only “A red heart from a cheap religious card / Too smooth, too glossy, too securely cased!”, the heart nevertheless maintains a hold throughout most of

the poem and the imagery of the heart remains to fuse with that of the subject's own failing heart.<sup>16</sup> Gunn's speaker does not display the ambivalence of Larkin's in "Church Going," but he also does not let the cheap card go immediately. Glossy and remote from the realities of actual suffering, the icon nevertheless maintains a hold on the speaker, for whom the Sacred Heart icon, the heart as poetic trope for the ultimate expression of heightened emotion, and the subject's physical heart become fused momentarily. While the defiance of religious narratives that promise a glorious afterlife through suffering is an age-old theme, Gunn's ability to render the Sacred Heart iconography's sappy sentimentality at once both arrestingly compelling and grossly distasteful heralds an unprecedented mode of affect toward religious frameworks in twentieth century English poetry.

Foreshadowing the subject's strange relationship to Christian narratives and iconography, Gunn situates the reader in a liminal space between knowing and not knowing the subject's agonizing state. The poem begins as a dedication to its subject, who, presumably, is no longer able to speak for himself:

For one who watches with too little rest  
 A body rousing fitfully to its pain  
 --The nerves like dull burns where the sheet has pressed

Subsiding to dementia yet again (ll. 1-4)<sup>17</sup>

These lines play on one's familiarity of English poetic convention; the reader can both know and not know how these lines ought to be read. Similarly to lines of Larkin's "Church Going," fairly steady iambs vie for prominence against the dictates of punctuation,

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., "Sacred Heart," in *The Man with Night Sweats*, CP, 473.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 473.



pronunciation, and syntax. A row of unstressed syllables in the first two lines, with “watches with too” and “fitfully to its” speeds up the line and disturbs the semblance of iambic pentameter, as does the addition of the extra syllable of “fitfully,” to emphasize the body’s sudden disturbance in reaction to pain. This marked amount of unstressed syllables culminates in the stanza’s last line, “*Subsiding* to dementia yet *again*,” and generates a subsiding rhythm to match the ailing person’s withdrawal from mental clarity. The pyrrhic spondee of “*burns where*” in a manner that recall’s Yeats’s skill with this metrical foot, emphasizes the speaker’s pain while also allowing the burns to get lost, since “burns where” falls in the middle of the line and not at the beginning or end where a spondaic foot has more prominence. Just as a healthy person could not conceive of something so innocuous as a bed sheet damaging the skin, a reader accustomed to seeing spondees at the ends of English verse lines might find spondaic accents in the middle surprising. That the person is in pain is apparent, but syntax deliberately evades articulation in a way that anyone besides the speaker could know. Gunn’s de-familiarization of the ailing body in a way that distances the subject from all observers recalls Loy’s de-familiarizations of labor pains in “Parturition.” While a bed sheet, typically connotative of comfort and repose, is difficult to conceive of as implicated in pain so severe as to carry the potency of a burn, the simile of nerves to burns is perhaps the most difficult to grasp. A likening of nerves, the body part responsible for registering pain, to burns, the palpable signs of pain itself, flies boldly in the face of high modernist cautions against metaphor as incapable of accuracy. For Gunn’s speaker and subject, only a poetic technique that embraces incongruity can honor the ruthless complexity of the subject’s suffering. The speaker cannot pretend to know the full nature of the man’s pain, and the reader cannot pretend to a grasp of the speaker’s plight in observing him endure

the frighteningly unknown while being unable to alleviate it. In lines that both invite and repel ordinary and familiar apprehensions of the corporeal and the poetic, Gunn challenges the boundaries between the experimental and the conventional, setting up the treatment of Christian iconography to come.

While the speaker cannot formulate a more accessible or fulfilling religious articulation of grief, there remains a potency to this Christian imagery that pervades his projection of the subject's plight. Gunn first introduces the Sacred Heart featured in the poem's title by merging it with the speaker's own "broken" heart, recalling the "broken heart" of the popular and clichéd literary trope:

Now since his death you've lost the wish for sleep,  
 In which you might mislay the wound of feeling:  
 Drugged you drag grief from room to room and weep,  
 Preserving it from closure, from a healing  
 Into the novelty of glazed pink flesh.  
 We hear you stumble vision-ward above,  
 Keeping the edges open, bloody, fresh.

Wound, no—the heart, His Heart, broken with love. (ll. 25-32)<sup>18</sup>

Alliteration and assonance in "Drugged you drag grief from room to room and weep" combine with monosyllables to emphasize the slow, tedious labor that maintaining grief entails. To sleep and rest from the dragging of grief is to invite such dreams as that of the crucifix above, yet also to "mislay," to lose the ability to feel. The risk that artificial

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 474.

sentimentality will prevail should the wound heal looms large. “Glazed” describes the smooth sheen of new skin that grows over a healed wound, as well as the clear shellacking that an artist paints onto a piece for finishing. The word also hints at its more colloquial use, as in when one’s eyes “glaze over” and vision is impaired from lack of attention. For this person, to heal the wound would mean to lose its essence, to make it smoothed over and no longer imbued with the same force that it held before. “Novelty,” with its connotations of both newness and cheap thrills (“novelty” stores typically sell gag jokes or party favors), adds to the sense of loss associated with healing. This association of healing skin’s “glaze” with a cheap type of artifice foreshadows the “red heart from a cheap religious card” to come in the next stanza.

In the next lines, literary cliché, religious sentimentality, and actualized grief merge to manipulate the reader’s expectations of late twentieth century poetry and of religious sentimentalism. Because the reader knows that these tropes do not and are not supposed to work, because both speaker and reader inhabit a world that has long outgrown the allure of Christianity’s narrative of suffering’s redemptive powers and the charm of the heart as a catch-all for the most extreme forms of human emotion, Gunn’s bold engagement of these tropes produces a compelling intrigue. Prior to the dismissal of the Sacred Heart iconography, the poem conveys an ambivalence that prevents unequivocal association of an open wound with the ability to feel. “Keeping the edges broken, bloody, fresh” counters the “glaze” of healing and artifice; however, that the subject is heard to “stumble vision-ward, above” while keeping the wound fresh complicates the rootedness in grief for the corporeal. That the rhyme scheme makes the end words of each line rhyme with its opposite state, *sleep* with *weep* and *healing* with *feeling*, works against the speaker’s conveyance of sleep and

healing as detrimental to the persistence of grief. The slant rhyme between the glaze of new “flesh” on healed skin and the “fresh” wound he keeps “open” and “bloody” renders the healed flesh both apart from and conjoined to the wound it covers. These smaller ambivalences culminate in the line that follows yet is spaced apart from the rest of the stanza, in which the speaker does some “stumbling” of his own while searching for the best words: “Wound, no—the heart, His Heart, broken with love.” The dash suddenly breaks off the train of thought and negates the wound as the best articulation of grief in favor of “the heart.” Vague yet definitive, “the heart” denotes both the subject’s particular heart and the literary abstraction, the “heart” featured in such pithy epigrams as “The heart wants what it wants” or “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” Serial commas provide no help at all in providing a definitive hierarchy, metaphor, or other type of relationship between “the heart” and “His Heart,” rendered in capitalizations to suggest the Heart of Christ. That an associative current runs through both to connect them with “broken with love” is clear; whether and how “broken with love” modifies just the “His Heart” closest to it or both is not. Fused to a religious abstraction and a concrete circumstance of death, the heart becomes simultaneously a sentimental cliché and a precise articulation of the subject’s severe grief for his deceased friend. For many of the dead and dying featured in *The Man with Night Sweats*, the broken heart cliché also carried the potential for a devastating literality, since certain sexual expressions of love could, and did, lead to the breaking down of the heart as a result of AIDS’s havoc on the immune system. A heart “broken with love” that holds ties with the iconography from a religious tradition that inflects the subject’s dreams, and with the prominent history of hearts in emotional symbolism, is at once a perfect and terrible

expression of grief—and moreover, an expression that high modernism’s unequivocal rejection of cliché could never have produced.

Although Gunn ultimately banishes any possibility of ambivalence toward the Sacred Heart as a viable image for grief articulation, the penultimate stanza allows the image’s pull to continue a bit longer. The speaker describes the subject’s experience of both a keen awareness of the “Planes of swept muscle and the barreled bone” that hold the anatomical workings of his heart, and a feeling of “the holy heat” that the speaker identifies as “the heart of hearts transplanted to your own” (ll. 37-39). In a manner that recalls Emily Dickinson’s winter afternoon “slant of light” that “oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes” to give “Heavenly Hurt,” Gunn enlists the aspirate *h* of “holy heat” and “heart of hearts” to convey the religious narrative’s oppressive weight.<sup>19</sup> Even in his mentally and physically deteriorated state, the subject nevertheless triumphs in recognizing the Sacred Heart icon for what it is as ineffectual sentimental fluff that holds no relevance to his actual suffering body:

Yet even as it does your vision alters  
 The hallucination lighted through the skin  
 Begins to deaden (though still bleeding) falters,  
 And hardens to its evident origin  
 --A red heart from a cheap religious card  
 Too smooth, too glossy, too securely cased! (ll. 41-46)<sup>20</sup>

Whereas the image of the speaker’s dead friend on the cross was called a “dream,” this is a hallucination, born not of the sane human action of sleeping but of a strange delirium.

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<sup>19</sup> Emily Dickinson, “There’s a certain Slant of Light,” in *Complete Poems*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1961), 118.

<sup>20</sup> Gunn, “Sacred Heart,” 474.

“Alters” can be read as “changes” and with the spelling of its crypt word, the noun *altars*, which denotes a site of religious worship. His vision, indeed, *alters* and *altars* mortal pain by changing it to fuse with religious iconography. The parenthetical “though still bleeding” that qualifies “Begins to deaden” calls into question whether the subject himself and his own health is faltering along with his vision and suggests, tragically, that the only part of him left is that which dementia has riddled with hallucinations and therefore his faltering religious vision heralds his death. “Harden,” as well, suggests both a mortal danger to arteries and the increasing clarity of the hallucination’s real source in the card. Just when the reader must wonder whether the faltering vision will bring the death of the speaker’s body and mind, the phrase “evident origin” brings the modern, quasi-scientific discourse that ushers in a more realistic and pragmatic approach to the religious iconography before him. The meter of “Too smooth, too glossy, too securely cased!” could be scanned as iambs to showcase the stilted pristineness of the Sacred Heart card, or with stresses on each of the *too*’s for emphasizing the card as ridiculously out of touch with the speaker’s own mental and physical anguish. In shock and in defiance of the religious sentimentality that had invaded his perceptions just moments ago, he remains alive. No hallucinations will overtake him to confuse his actual suffering with the “glossy” depiction of a divine heart: he now fully knows his own body and pain as distinct from the image that attempts to provide an explanatory narrative. Most importantly, he knows his knowledge as just that: pure knowledge, with no recourse understanding. Gunn’s subject and speaker do not achieve understanding not because they are incapable of or unreceptive to this state; rather, understanding evades them because it does not even exist as a conceptual possibility. In this new world, nothing in the metaphysical allows for understanding the suffering of loved ones—not even any re-

imagination of metaphysical frameworks in poetry. Whereas in a high modernist poem, religious iconography falls short of effectiveness only when the poet's technique fails to re-imagine it, the crucifix and Sacred Heart in this poem fail because the ailing body produces a knowledge that vehemently rejects any attempts at a re-imagination that could yield understanding. Any attempt in poetics to rationalize, or to explain, leads only to a hallucinatory state, in which experiences are mistaken for what they are not. Knowledge, in this situation, cannot become subordinate to understanding if the latter state compromises perception.

“Sacred Heart” and other poems in *The Man with Night Sweats* resist full inclusion in British modernism not because of their publication date, relatively conservative verse forms, or even because of Gunn's residence in San Francisco during the latter part of his life, but because they emerge from situations at which art cannot—and should not—talk back. The poem's ending on a moment of the ordinary, with “Stopped in a crouch, you wearily regard / Each drop dilute into the waiting waste,” recalls the ending of Gunn's “St Martin and the Beggar,” in which the saint continues with his meal in silence after an apparition has just informed him that he has assisted Christ (ll. 47-48). This ordinariness belies the hallucinatory fabulousness of the preceding stanzas. The sounds of *wearily*, *waiting*, and *waste* produce a subtle hint of weeping that is neither cathartic nor entirely mimetic; the lines do not reach aggressively toward or above the situation at hand. That the subject's final action is not only exclusively corporeal, but one of the first and most extremely disrupted functions when physical health declines, is significant to a poem that seeks to protect corporeal knowledge from metaphysical understanding. When one's health declines as severely as the subject's has, waste excretion becomes increasingly more labor intensive and, because of its increased

difficulty, often less private than one would otherwise prefer to keep it. Returning to the corporeal in a way that does nothing to escape or re-imagine it, Gunn restores some of the privacy that those in the subject's condition lose in their declining states. By developing a poetics of knowledge that refuses the redemptive powers of understanding—that refuses, even, to manipulate a potential metaphysical tool for understanding into something more effective and accurate to the experience—Gunn restores to the speaker, and to the subject whom he watches and joins in anguish, something of the privacy and normalcy that serious health conditions can destroy.

To attain understanding through poetic verse would discount the ways that knowledge in itself wreaks an intractable havoc all its own. A depiction of the subject that neither sentimentalizes nor rationalizes his plight can afford some of the dignity lost to him and others in poor health who must all too often endure the invasions and co-options of their experiences by those who offer religious cards, well-wishes, and other attempts to make pain more palatable through ideologies that project a metaphysical purpose onto human suffering. The risk that a greater exploration of metaphysical possibility might render his poetry complicit in such blithely palliative attempts is a risk Gunn deems too great.

In resisting any possibility of understanding through the metaphysical even while representations of the metaphysical remain an ever-looming presence, Gunn's "Sacred Heart" posits a form of knowledge similar in type to the knowledge of Larkin's speaker in "Church Going." Both poets render their speakers amateurs in terms of metaphysical knowledge; these ordinary men aspire to no higher realm of expertise in religious tradition or ideology. These amateurs, although they stand no chance of either apprehending the metaphysical or providing a convincing case for dismissing metaphysical possibility entirely,



offer valuable insight that exposes both the appeals and shortcomings of belief as a viable stance. While high modernism often characterizes those who exhibit curiosity without commitment as threats to spiritual and intellectual achievement, these “dilettantes” (as Pound calls those unwilling to abandon common poetic conventions for the sake of pursuing more rigorous technique) provide crucial avenues of perception inaccessible through the states of belief and doubt alone.<sup>21</sup> In answer to Larkin’s “What remains when disbelief has gone,” both poets seem to suggest amateurs—those whose knowledge remains firm yet resists application toward understanding or apprehension—as major voices in the new century to come.

British modernism demonstrated that poetic form could deploy knowledge to apprehend the metaphysical; Gunn and Larkin showcase the ability of knowledge to act on form in powerful and meaningful ways without even belief in apprehension as a prerequisite. Their poems do not offer a basic atheistic perspective that sees no presence of metaphysical meaning, but a more complex state that acknowledges the temptations of metaphysical understanding while knowing full well that such understanding will not be actualized. When knowledge fails to bring understanding in a metaphysical plane, these poets do not attribute this failure to inferior poetics, laxity of language, or lack of respect for artistry—but rather to a world in which knowledge alone is more than enough.

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<sup>21</sup> See Pound’s decrying of the “literary symbol,” in Chapter 1, note 11.

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