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## Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?

Marjorie Perloff

ON 26 October 1955 William Carlos Williams wrote to Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeth's, asking him if he would care to comment on the obituary essay he had just written on Wallace Stevens, then two months dead, for *Poetry* magazine. Pound replied:

. . . as to yr/ pal/ Wally S/. . . it wd/ be highly improper for  
me to have opinions of yr/ opinion of a bloke I haven't read  
and DOUBT like all hell  
that yu will be able to PURR-suade me to venture on  
with such a  
hellUVA lot I don't know and WANT to find out.<sup>1</sup>

If this sounds unnecessarily dismissive, compare it to Stevens's curiously similar response to Pound. In 1947 Theodore Weiss invited Stevens to write something for a special Pound issue of the fledgling *Quarterly Review of Literature*. Stevens replied curtly: "Nothing doing about Pound. I should have to saturate myself with the work and I have not the time."<sup>2</sup>

Time for you and time for me—it seems that neither Pound nor Stevens could allow for it. We, reading these two great Modernists in the late decades of the twentieth century, tend to ignore such mutual distrust, positing that *of course* Pound and Stevens are among the four or five great American poets of the century. Literary historians and anthologists continue to give them roughly equal time, thus following the practice established by the New Criticism in the forties and fifties: Randall Jarrell, R. P. Blackmur, Allen Tate, and such of their followers as William Van O'Connor, Babette Deutsch, and Sr. Bernetta Quinn wrote respectfully—if also quite critically—about both poets.<sup>3</sup> So, for that matter, did the great counter-critic of this period, Yvor Winters.<sup>4</sup> Yet by the late sixties, the very real gap between Pound and Stevens—a gap that perhaps no inclusive definition of Modernism can quite close—had become apparent; the alliance posited by the critics but never by the poets themselves was falling apart. "The Pound Era," Hugh Kenner called the first half of our century, dismissing Stevens

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in 2 of his almost 600 pages as having created “an Edward Lear poetic pushed toward all limits.” Kenner wrote: “The gods have never left us. Nothing we know the mind to have known has ever left us. Quickened by hints, the mind can know it again, and make it new. Romantic Time no longer thickens our sight, time receding, bearing visions away. Our books of cave paintings are the emblems of its abolition, perhaps the Pound Era’s chief theme, and the literary consolidation of that theme stands as the era’s achievement.”<sup>5</sup> *The Pound Era* appeared in 1971; in *A Map of Misreading* (1975), Harold Bloom retorted: “Modernism in literature has not passed; rather, it has been exposed as never having been there. Gossip grows old and becomes myth; myth grows older and becomes dogma. Wyndham Lewis, Eliot and Pound gossiped with one another; the New Criticism aged them into a myth of Modernism; now the antiquarian Hugh Kenner has dogmatized this myth into the Pound Era, a canon of accepted titans. Pretenders to godhood Kenner roughly reduces to their mortality; the grand triumph of Kenner is his judgement that Wallace Stevens represented the culmination of the poetics of Edward Lear.”<sup>6</sup> And in *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (1977), Bloom suggests that it is high time to call the period in question “the Age of Stevens (or shall we say the Stevens Era?).”<sup>7</sup>

This is neither an idle quarrel nor a narrow sectarian war between rival academics (e.g., Bloom, Hillis Miller, Helen Vendler, Frank Kermode in the Stevens camp; Kenner, Donald Davie, Guy Davenport, Christine Brooke-Rose among Poundians) who just happen to have different literary and political allegiances. The split goes deep, and its very existence raises what I take to be central questions about the meaning of Modernism—indeed about the meaning of poetry itself in current literary history and theory.

What prompts those who believe in the Stevens Era to ignore or dismiss Pound? In a recent study of Stevens, Lucy Beckett gives us a neatly reductive version of the anti-Pound myth. The *Cantos*, she argues, are a failure because Pound does not sufficiently resist what Stevens calls “the pressure of reality”: “The fragments of [Pound’s] own experience and of the civilizations, literatures and histories that have caught his attention remain a shifting heap of splinters. . . . Aware of technique only, not of the poet’s responsibility to the disciplined use of language, he is hardly aware at all of the poet’s responsibility in respect of thought. . . . The problems of belief and value in a world without established systems of truth, the search for ‘what will suffice’, the poet’s task envisaged by such as Arnold and Santayana, concern him very little. In this sense he is a most unmodern poet.”<sup>8</sup> A

“modern poet,” it seems, is one who understands his responsibilities to “thought” rather than to “technique,” and “thought” somehow has to do with the examination of “belief and value in a world without established systems of truth.” Accordingly, “the *Cantos*, that colossal attempt to master reality with *persistence of method* rather than with *persistence of thought*, remains the saddest of modern defeats.”<sup>9</sup>

Naively put as is this argument, Lucy Beckett’s assumptions are quite in keeping with, say, Harold Bloom’s repeated insistence that, in Emerson’s words, “it is not meter but a meter-making argument that makes a poem.” And not just any meter-making argument but especially one that entails the search for “what will suffice” in a world “without established systems of truth.” “Pound’s *Cantos*,” writes Geoffrey Hartman, “remain a nostalgic montage without unity, a picaresque of styles.” By contrast, in Stevens “the music left in the wake of the gods’ demise is a great poetry, though limited by its very power to console.”<sup>10</sup> In a similar vein, Helen Vendler concludes her important book on Stevens by praising “the short late poems . . . those liquid lingerings in which the angel of reality transforms, for a moment, the bleak continuo of life’s tragic drone.”<sup>11</sup> And Walton Litz observes: “Unlike Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* . . . Stevens’ final *mundo* is neither eccentric nor private. It is built upon the central reality of our age, the death of the gods and of the great coordinating mythologies, and in their place it offers the austere satisfactions of a ‘self’ dependent on the pure poetry of the physical world, a ‘self’ whose terrifying lack of belief is turned into a source of freedom. The final achievement of Wallace Stevens is a poetry of exclusions and denials which makes a sustaining fiction out of the search for irreducible reality.”<sup>12</sup> Carried one step further, we get this formulation from Harold Bloom: “[Stevens’s] major phase, from 1942 to his death in 1955, gave us a canon of poems themselves more advanced as *interpretation* than our criticism as yet has gotten to be.”<sup>13</sup>

But Poundians have never claimed that their poet is great because his work constitutes an advanced form of “interpretation.” Indeed, *poetry*, not to speak of *modern poetry*, is defined quite differently in discussions of Pound. Let me begin by comparing the ways critics have talked about two famous texts: Stevens’s *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), specifically the Canon Aspirin poems (Pt. III, cantos 5–8), and Pound’s Canto LXXXI (1945), specifically the first ninety-five lines (see Appendix).<sup>14</sup> In confronting the Canon Aspirin with the Padre José Elizondo of the *Pisan Cantos*, we may come to a clearer sense of why the division between Pound and Stevens continues to haunt our own sense of Modernism.

## II

*Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* is often called Stevens's greatest poem. Of Part III, "It Must Give Pleasure," Frank Kermode wrote in 1960: "These two hundred lines of verse seem to me to give continuously a higher delight than anything of comparable length written in this century." And more specifically, "The complex and majestic Canon Aspirin poems . . . raise the temperature of the whole work and justify not only the sober ecstasies of the conclusion but the immense and beautiful claims for poetry made in III. viii: if the poet creates an angel (and he has just done so) is not his joy equal to the angel's?" Kermode now quotes the entire eighth canto ("What am I to believe? . . .") and concludes, "The power of this is great in isolation; in its context, as sequel to the previous poem, it is overwhelming. . . . the whole work exists in a radiant and productive atmosphere, saying the words of the world that are the life of the world."<sup>15</sup>

"The words of the world that are the life of the world"—in his first major study of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* in 1963, Harold Bloom echoes this judgment: "The Supreme Fiction . . . enters the poem in the exhilarating person of the Canon Aspirin, Stevens' finest invention. The Canon is the cure for our current headache of unreality. . . . In his activity the Canon first becomes the angel of reality, then is tempted too far in his benevolent impositions, and finally is surpassed by the poet himself, who discovers an order that his created angel could only impose."<sup>16</sup> The opening of canto 5 ("We drank Meursault, ate lobster Bombay with mango / Chutney") is praised for its "deceptive inconsequence," deceptive because the poem's vision is "fiercely Romantic." Bloom goes on to explain the symbolism of this canto: the Canon's sister stands for "seeing the very thing itself and nothing else"; as such, her limited vision must be transcended, as it is in canto 6, whose "thesis" (Bloom's word) is "the Canon's quest toward an integration of all reality, fact and thought together." Further, "Section VII is the antithesis, presenting the Canon's surrender of his quest to the angelic impatience that imposes rather than discovers order. The synthesis is in Section VIII, which one does not hesitate to call Stevens' finest poem, where the poet's discovery of reality is both given and celebrated" (Borroff, p. 92).

The Canon's choice between reality and imagination in canto 6 is, according to Bloom, "heroic," because he ultimately refuses to "reject either order":

He had to choose. But it was not a choice  
Between excluding things. It was not a choice  
Between, but of. He chose to include the things

That in each other are included, the whole,  
The complicate, the amassing harmony.

[Notes, Pt. III, canto 6]

This choice, says Bloom, is “Wordsworthian rather than Blakean, for it insists that the context of fact or nature can be harmonized with the more exuberant context of the poet’s apocalyptic desires.” Thus after the “extraordinary emotional progression” that leads the poet to the desperation of canto 7 (“It is possible, possible, possible. It must / Be possible”), Stevens “gives us his ultimate poem, the supreme achievement of post-Romanticism and the culmination of Coleridgean and Blakean poetic theory.” The angel poem (canto 8) surpasses the *Prelude* in its courage “to cross into this desperately triumphant poetic humanism” (Borroff, p. 94).

When Bloom returns to *Notes* more than a decade later in his *Poems of Our Climate*, he reads the poem according to the revisionary ratios and the theory of crossings he has formulated in the interim, but his response to it remains essentially unchanged; indeed, he now goes further in relating the Canon Aspirin to “a high Romantic fallen angel, a morning star,” and argues that “the name ‘Aspirin’ probably plays upon the archaic meaning of ‘aspires,’ the *anders-streben* of Pater’s ‘*All art constantly aspires toward the condition of music*,’ or the upward-rising of Blake’s ‘On what wings dare he aspire.’” Further, “‘Aspire’ goes back to the Latin for ‘breaking upon, desiring, favoring,’ and . . . we can translate ‘the Canon Aspirin’ as the self-defining, self-describing human desire for a beyond, even if that beyond turns out to be an abyss” (p. 205).

Whether or not we agree with Bloom’s interpretation of the Canon Aspirin poems is, I think, less important than what that interpretation tells us about Bloom’s central assumptions about poetry. We might note, to begin with, that Bloom’s value judgments—his use, for example, of such adjectives as “exhilarating,” “moving,” “strenuously heroic,” “supreme,” “splendid,” and “extraordinarily emotional”—refer always to what the poet is saying rather than to how he says it. The poem’s sound structure, for example, is treated as a mere irrelevancy, as is the syntax of Stevens’s cantos and even, to a large extent, their diction. Would it matter, say, if we substituted “poor” or “paler” for “pauvred” in Part V, canto 6? If “closelier” in line 12 of the same canto became “closer”? What is the effect of repeating “paint” three times in the lines, “The way a painter of pauvred colors paints. / But still she painted them”? Such questions are never raised because they have no real bearing on what Bloom takes to be the only question a Great Questioner should ask, namely, what is it that Stevens tells us in

this poem? In the Coda to *Poems of Our Climate*, he says: “Why do we read one poet rather than another? We believe the lies we want to believe because they help us to survive. Similarly, we read (reread) the poems that keep our discourse with ourselves going. Strong poems strengthen us by teaching us *how to talk to ourselves*, rather than how to talk to others” (p. 387; italics are Bloom’s). Which is to say that the greatness of Stevens’s poetry is a function of the “desperately triumphant . . . humanism” that Bloom believes in. *Notes* teaches us “how to talk to ourselves,” provided that we happen to share its sense of strenuous quest for the “Supreme Fiction.”

There are two corollaries. First, Stevens’s poetic truth is a “late plural of Romantic tradition”—a condition assumed to be the only proper one for modern poets. To call *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* Wordsworthian or Blakean or Keatsian is equivalent to calling the poem Good or True or Beautiful. Secondly, in its belatedness, *Notes* paradoxically betters Blake and Wordsworth and the Keats of *The Fall of Hyperion*, for it “cultivates the highly anti-apocalyptic virtue of patience.”<sup>17</sup> We might restate Bloom’s doctrine and its corollaries in the language of *Notes*: (1) It must be Romantic. (2) It must question Romantic premises. (3) It must be Visionary Humanist.

When we turn from Bloom’s reading of Stevens to the powerful ones of, say, Hillis Miller or Helen Vendler, we find that, despite a number of conflicting interpretations (Vendler regards Part III, canto 7 of *Notes* as more pessimistic than does Bloom, referring to the “repetitive, accumulative and hysterical affirmations [that] mount in a crescendo conveying the fear which is their origin”),<sup>18</sup> the central assumptions remain essentially the same. When Miller traces Stevens’s gradual evolution from metaphysical dualism and “representational thinking” to the recognition of the late poems that “man’s spiritual height and depth are available here and now or nowhere,” he is reading Stevens along Bloomian lines, although he is much less inclined than Bloom to attribute value to Stevens’s particular truths.<sup>19</sup> Again, although Helen Vendler does pay close attention to the linguistic and syntactic strategies of *Notes*, her emphasis, like Bloom’s, is on the poem’s final refusal “to resolve theoretical difficulties,” its “strenuous exploration of every possible escape from . . . self-pity and its literary forms—nostalgia and elegy.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in a recent essay on Stevens, Vendler has made her personal predilection for his particular vision quite clear:

Many of Stevens’ poems—read from one angle, most of the best poems—spring from catastrophic disappointment, bitter solitude, or personal sadness. It is understandable that Stevens, a man of chilling reticence, should illustrate his suffering in its largest possible terms. That practice does not obscure the

nature of the suffering, which concerns the collapse of early hopeful fantasies of love, companionship, success, and self-transformation. As self and beloved alike become, with greater or lesser velocity, the final dwarfs of themselves, and as social awareness diminishes dreams of self-transcendence, the poet sees dream, hope, love, and trust—those activities of the most august imagination—crippled, contradicted, dissolved, called into question, embittered. This history is the history of every intelligent and receptive human creature as the illimitable claims on existence made by each one of us are checked, baffled, frustrated, and reproved.<sup>21</sup>

What begins as loving description of the poetry, drawing upon Stevens's own vocabulary of final dwarfs and the august imagination, abruptly shifts, in the final sentence, to a statement of moral truth not everyone would endorse. For *is* Stevens's "history," however accurately Vendler describes it, synonymous with "the history of every intelligent and receptive human creature"? And, more important, is a given poet's *oeuvre* better for conveying such a history?

I am persuaded that those who regard Stevens as the great poet of the twentieth century would say yes to both questions. Indeed, in adopting such an Arnoldian, which is to say an essentially Romantic, view of poetry, they are, after all, merely giving tacit assent to Stevens's own definition of poetry as "an unofficial view of being."<sup>22</sup> In "The Figure of Youth as a Virile Poet," Stevens observes: "In philosophy we attempt to approach truth through the reason. Obviously this is a statement of convenience. If we say that in poetry we attempt to approach truth through the imagination, this, too, is a statement of convenience. We must conceive of poetry as at least the equal of philosophy" (*NA*, p. 41). Despite the modest disclaimers with which he couches this familiar Romantic distinction, Stevens obviously means it. "The poet's role," he suggests, "is to help people to live their lives" (*NA*, p. 28); "he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it" (*NA*, p. 31). As such, the poet is obviously set apart from all others: "There is a life apart from politics. It is this life that the youth as virile poet lives, in a kind of radiant and productive atmosphere" (*NA*, p. 57). And, most tellingly, "Poetry is a part of the structure of reality" (*NA*, p. 81).

These are aphorisms to which Pound would have taken strong exception, opposed as he was to the belief that "there is a life apart from politics," a special "radiant and productive atmosphere" in which the "youth as virile poet" can retreat when he longs to have a final soliloquy with his interior paramour. Poetry must, on the contrary, relate to the whole of a man's life in the real world, which is not to say that it is "a part of the structure of reality." For how could it be, given



that "the medium of poetry" is not thoughts but "WORDS"?<sup>23</sup> Or so Pound construed it.

"The poet," says Stevens, "is the priest of the invisible."<sup>24</sup> It follows that certain discriminations must be made. In "The Relation of Poetry to Painting," we read: "Let me divide modern poetry into two classes, one that is modern in respect to what it says, the other that is modern in respect to form. . . . The first kind is interested in form but it accepts a banality of form as incidental to its language. Its justification is that in expressing thought or feeling in poetry the purpose of the poet must be to subordinate the mode of expression, that while the value of the poem as a poem depends on expression, it depends primarily on what is expressed" (NA, p. 168). In the second class we find, says Stevens, too many poems "in which the exploitation of form involves nothing more than the use of small letters for capitals, eccentric line-endings, too little or too much punctuation and similar aberrations. These have nothing to do with being alive. They have nothing to do with the conflict between the poet and that of which his poems are made." And, in casting about for an example, Stevens refers to "the division, say, between Valéry and Apollinaire" (NA, pp. 168–69).

Or, we might say, the division between Stevens himself and Pound, a poet more than fond of "eccentric line-endings," "too little punctuation," and "similar aberrations," a poet in many ways similar to Apollinaire and certainly unlike a late Symboliste like Valéry. Stevens applies the same distinction between matter and manner to himself and Williams in a letter of 1946 to José Rodríguez Feo: "I have not read Paterson. I have the greatest respect for [Williams], although there is the constant difficulty that he is more interested in the way of saying things than in what he has to say. The fact remains that we are always fundamentally interested in what a writer has to say. When we are sure of that, we pay attention to the way in which he says it, not often before."<sup>25</sup> Hugh Kenner, who cites this passage in his chapter on Stevens and Williams in *A Homemade World*, comments laconically: "This is one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in literary history."<sup>26</sup>

If so, it is a misunderstanding that Stevens scholars from Robert Buttel to Adelaide Kirby Morris have been eager to perpetrate.<sup>27</sup> A concordance of Stevens criticism, if there were such a thing, would probably show that the following words had a very high incidence: *being, consciousness, fiction, reality, self, truth*. These are, of course, Stevens's own words, and the poet's advocates have adopted them quite naturally. But it does not follow that they have some sort of absolute value as nodes of critical discourse. Certainly they are not the words we meet in discussions of the *Cantos*.

## III

One of the most interesting treatments of Canto LXXXI is that of D. S. Carne-Ross, who submits the Canto's first twelve lines to a patient analysis, in dialogue with the students in his Pound seminar. The discussion makes three main points: (1) the seemingly random elements in the Canto do have necessary connections: thus line 12, "and Dolores said, 'Come pan, niño,' eat bread me lad," relates back to the divine marriage of sky and earth in line 1, "Zeus lies in Ceres' bosom," the eating of bread (cereal) being for Pound not just symbolic as in the Christian sacrament but a *real* part of the Eleusinian mystery; (2) such connections are curiously elusive just because Pound "leaves it to us to put the elements together with the force of a personal discovery"; and (3) it is incorrect to assume, as does one student in the class, that "Pound makes this Elizondo say" such and such, for: "We are to suppose that Padre Elizondo really did say this. He is a real man who on two occasions said something to Pound in his own Castilian Spanish. It is a cardinal principle of the poem that the materials it presents must be presented exactly as they are or were. A man's actual words, and as far as possible even the sound of his words, must be reported, the date, location, etc. must be given. As Pound sees it, this is part of the *evidence*."<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the stress is always on what Pound called "constatation of fact," however disjunctively those "facts" are structured in a given Canto. Indeed, as Carne-Ross concludes:

What is difficult about Pound's poetry is its "simplicity" . . . the whole reverberating dimension of inwardness is missing. There is no murmurous echo chamber where deeps supposedly answer to deeps. Not merely does the thing, in Pound's best verse, not point beyond itself: *it doesn't point to us*. The green tip that pushes through the earth in spring does not stand for or symbolize man's power of spiritual renewal. . . . Pound's whole effort is *not* to be polysemous but to give back to the literal first level its full significance, its old significance. . . . That green thrust is itself the divine event, the fruit of the marriage at Eleusis. Persephone is in that thrusting tip, and if man matters it is because he too has a share in that same power, he too is a part of the seasonal, sacred life of nature. But only a part.<sup>29</sup>

A similar emphasis on what Carne-Ross calls "Pound's offense against the great principle of inwardness, of internalisation that has put us at the center of things and laid waste the visible world" is to be found in the criticism of Guy Davenport, Donald Davie, and Hugh Kenner. Davenport, like Carne-Ross a classical scholar, argues that, unlike nineteenth-century poets "who put everything against the scale

of time and discovered that all behavior within time's monolinear progress was evolutionary. . . . It was Pound's determination . . . to treat what had become a world of ghosts as a world eternally present." The first line of Canto LXXXI is, accordingly, meant quite literally: "The myth of Persephone is here and now, in civilization's rhythm of inevitable decay and conscious renewal."<sup>30</sup> Donald Davie, commenting on the "wasp" passage in the neighboring Canto LXXXIII, makes a related case: "At no point does the wasp become a symbol for something in Pound's predicament, or for his ethical and other programs, or for his personality. The wasp retains its otherness, as an independent form of life. . . . Pound's repeated assertion that the paradisaic is *real*, out there in the real world, is a conscious challenge to the whole symbolist aesthetic."<sup>31</sup> And Hugh Kenner refers repeatedly to what he calls Pound's "move out of Symbolism":<sup>32</sup> "In shifting his interest . . . from the articulation of personae to the observation of epiphanic events, Pound was participating in the major intellectual *peripeteia* of the past eighty years, the desertion of the windowless monadic world of pigeonholed 'subjects' for a lively explorer's interest in particulars, that one can grasp simultaneously, as from a moving ship, the relative and the continuous."<sup>33</sup>

Which is to say that Padre José Elizondo (whose wise words about the difference between "catolihismo" and "ReliHion" and about the probable demise of "los reyes" pick up key motifs from earlier Cantos) cannot be translated into something else in the sense that Harold Bloom speaks of "translat[ing] the Canon Aspirin as the self-defining, self-describing human desire for a beyond, even if that beyond turns out to be an abyss." As Stevens himself sums up the difference, "The bare image and the image as symbol are the contrast" (*OP*, p. 161). For Stevens, as for Stevensian critics, "Poetry as an imaginative thing consists of more than lies on the surface" (*OP*, p. 161). Poundians, on the other hand, are reluctant to generalize about *poetry*; rather, they want to show how *modern* poetry gives renewed attention precisely to what "lies on the surface."

The first step in dealing with that surface is, of course, to track down Pound's endlessly teasing allusions. Why does "Taishan" appear in line 2 of Canto LXXXI? Because the high peak seen from his prison cell at Pisa reminds the poet of the sacred mountain of China, the home of the Great Emperor.<sup>34</sup> And where does the Mount Taishan motif reappear? Some sixty lines later, when "Benin" (the friendly Black soldier whose face reminds Pound of a Benin bronze) supplies him with a "table ex packing box," a gift "light as the branch of Kuanon." Kuanon is the daughter of the Emperor, the Chinese goddess of mercy. To make connections between these references is

to discover, not a cluster of possible meanings as in the case of the Canon Aspirin and his sister, but rather the way the *structure* of Pound's long poem works.

"The Structuring of Pound's *Cantos*," M. L. Rosenthal calls a recent essay that describes the "intimate, fragmented, self-analytical, open and emotionally volatile structure" of Pound's poetic sequence.<sup>35</sup> Again, the "open form" of the *Cantos*—form as a "means of discovery—for poet and reader alike"—is the subject of Eva Hesse's remarkable analysis: "In using the objective realities of other human, vegetable or mineral existences . . . the poet has developed the three main technical devices of the *Cantos*: persona, ideogram, metamorphosis. In turn, these represent the othernesses of persons or of natural and supernatural things in order to stake out the boundaries of the poet's own being within the 'manifest universe.'"<sup>36</sup> The disjunctive presentation of "factual atoms" is, Hesse suggests, itself a way of saying something about human life: specifically, that, in keeping with the doctrine of such medieval mystics as Richard St. Victor, the soul cannot be its own object; "it cannot 'delight in itself' (Canto XC) but only in its functions or its objects" (p. 26). If the mind can assume the shape of all things, and if "things are really their functions," then, says Hesse citing Fenollosa, "'All processes in nature are interrelated; and thus there could be no complete sentence . . . save one which it would take all time to pronounce.' So much for the closed form" (p. 47). In the "vast process of becoming" (Frobenius's phrase) which the *Cantos* unfold before our eyes, "Syntax yields to parataxis. . . . Pound juxtapos[es] concrete particulars that he considers meaningful in the conviction that they will speak for themselves" (p. 48).

The exploration of the Poundian parataxis is at the center of Kenner's *Pound Era*. For Kenner, Pound is to be seen as the inventor of a new language. Of the *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, he writes: "Something has happened; the tone of time has vanished, and aerial perspective. There is no 'point of view' that will relate these idioms: neither a modern voice . . . nor an ancient one. . . . In transparent overlay, two times have become as one, and we are meant to be equally aware of both dictions (and yet they seem the same diction). The words lie flat like the forms on a Cubist surface. The archaizing sensibility of James' time and Beardsley's has simply dissolved" (p. 29). This, Stevensians might complain, is to focus on the "persistence of method" rather than on "persistence of thought." But Kenner's assumption, like Eva Hesse's, is that the formal structure of a work—in this case, the Cubist surface upon which items are arranged in "transparent overlay"—is itself meaningful. "Language," says Kenner, "creates its characteristic force fields. A whole quality of apprehension

inheres in its sounds and its little idioms” (p. 120). Or again: “Pound’s structures, like Jefferson’s plough, were meant to be useful: to be validated therefore not by his opinions but by the unarguable existence of what exists. No more than Zukofsky, then, does he expatiate, in many passages that tend to set annotators scribbling. Rather, he constellates Luminous Details, naming them, as again and again in the *Cantos* he names the signed column. For the column exists” (p. 325). The constellation of “luminous details” depends, as Kenner explains it, upon the Vortex as “self-interfering pattern” (p. 145) as well as on Fenollosa’s concept of the ideogram as the mimesis of vital process (p. 289). The resultant “subject rhymes” create a “polyphony, not of simultaneous elements which are impossible in poetry, but of something chiming from something we remember earlier” (p. 370). Such “chiming” has been explored by a number of other commentators. George Kearns, for example, shows how the Ceres-Dolores (cereal-bread) motif, already discussed, reappears in such unlikely places in Canto LXXXI as in the passing reference to the formality of French “baker and concierge,” the cryptic “Some cook, some do not cook” (an allusion to the Ezra-Mary-Olga triangle), and the image of the poet’s father in his backyard: “My ole man went on hoein’ corn.”<sup>37</sup>

Pound’s constellation of “luminous details” is related by Herbert Schneidau to the poet’s peculiar “contempt for equivalence-structures, and for selection, contrasted with the favor shown to the ‘drive’ of poetry, which one can only interpret as the combination principle, the surge of one word to the next.” And Schneidau reminds us that Pound disliked even that most basic of equivalence structures—rhyme. His preference for the metonymic over the metaphoric function, his belief that “the cherry tree is *all that it does*,” is, Schneidau suggests, “a revolutionary break-away from metaphoric habits in composing poems.” And he notes: “The work does not ‘imitate’ or describe or make a point about something external . . . although its references to the outside world may be diverse and interesting and even crucial. . . . Rather, it would seem the work is more nearly the product of wanting to say things *in a certain demanding way*.”<sup>38</sup>

Note Schneidau’s emphasis here on the *how* rather than the *what* of poetic discourse. For such key words in Stevens criticism as *imagination*, *consciousness*, *being*, and *self*, Poundians would substitute terms like *precision*, *particularity*, *image*, *technique*, *structure*, *invention*. Again, such value tags as *Keatsian*, *Wordsworthian*, or *Emersonian*, ubiquitous in Stevens criticism, find their counterpart in the Pound annals in such adjectives as *Confucian*, *Homeric*, or *Provençal* on the one hand; in *experimental*, *avant-garde*, and, especially, *new* on the other. To unite

these two sets of terms is, of course, to MAKE IT NEW. Pound critics, that is to say, are just as likely as are the Stevensians to adopt the vocabulary of their master.

The close relationship of Pound's terminology to that of his critics becomes apparent no matter what critical text of Pound's we choose to look at. Take "A Retrospect" of 1918. The three Imagist principles—"1. Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective. 2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation. 3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of a metronome"<sup>39</sup>—reappear, whether directly or indirectly, in all the studies of Pound that praise his concreteness and particularity, his precision and radical condensation. Again, in raising the question of rhythm versus meter, Pound prompted critics like Davie and Kenner to analyze his verse forms; indeed, some of the best essays written on Pound are those that deal with his prosodic innovations.<sup>40</sup> This is in marked contrast to Stevens studies: even Helen Vendler, who writes so discerningly of Stevens's verbal and syntactic ambiguities, pleads ignorance when it comes to prosody: "Since criticism has yet to find a way of making notes on cadence, rhythms, and sounds both reliable and readable, I resort to only occasional remarks on these subjects."<sup>41</sup>

On the second page of "A Retrospect," Pound gives us his famous definition of the image as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (*LE*, p. 4). Not poetry as Stevens's "unofficial view of Being" or "Supreme Fiction" but poetry as a way of getting the job done: "Good writers are those who keep the language efficient," or "Dichten = condensare" (*ABC*, pp. 32, 36). Again, when we compare such typical Pound prescriptions as "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something" (*LE*, p. 4) or "Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose" (*LE*, p. 5) to such Stevens aphorisms as "The thing said must be the poem not the language used in saying it" (*OP*, p. 165) or "Poetry and *materia poetica* are interchangeable terms" (*OP*, p. 159), the gulf between the two poetics is seen to be wide. For Stevens, "Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed" (*OP*, p. 237); for Pound, form *is* that reality. From this faith in form as itself expressive of the poet's view of identity and culture comes Pound's conviction, stated later in "A Retrospect," that "no good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old" (*LE*, p. 11).

Here Pound seems to be anticipating current semiotic theory, which regards the transformation, indeed often the disappearance, of particular genres and conventions as aspects of the inevitable literary change that occurs when the codifications that govern their produc-

tion break down.<sup>42</sup> Thus Christine Brooke-Rose studies the *Cantos* as a new genre, the poem “as a spiral, whirling with events, which are reiterated at new levels, juxtaposed to new elements and made new,”<sup>43</sup> just as Hugh Kenner examines Pound’s departure from earlier modes of translation in his chapter on the Cathay poems called “The Invention of China.” *Modernism*, in this context, means rupture—not, of course, with the distant past which must be reassimilated, but with all that has become established and conventional in the art of one’s own time. “Literature,” declared Pound in a famous aphorism that Stevens could hardly have endorsed, given its capitulation to what he regarded as “the pressure of reality,” “is news that STAYS news” (*ABC*, p. 29).

#### IV

If Poundians take MAKE IT NEW! as their watchword, one might say, without being at all facetious, that those who regard Stevens as the great poet of our time admire his ability to MAKE IT OLD. What matters, to Harold Bloom and Hillis Miller as to Frank Kermode and Helen Vendler, is Stevens’s restatement, in chastened, qualified, and ironic form, of the Romantic position, his Emersonian (for Bloom) or Coleridgean (for Kermode) or Keatsian (for Vendler) ethos. Stevens carries on the Symbolist tradition, whereas Pound’s Imagism and Vorticism constitute, in Donald Davie’s words, “a radical alternative to it.”<sup>44</sup> For Stevens, poetry is “an unofficial view of Being”; for Pound, it is, so to speak, an official view of becoming: the “VORTEX [is] a radiant node or cluster . . . from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”<sup>45</sup> Some interesting corollaries follow.

##### *The Norm of Lyric versus the Norm of “Encyclopedic Poem”*

In her recent *Lyric Time*, Sharon Cameron distinguishes lyric from narrative and drama as follows: “Unlike the drama, whose province is conflict, and unlike the novel or narrative, which connects isolated moments of time to create a story multiply peopled and framed by a social context, the lyric voice is solitary and generally speaks out of a single moment in time. . . . its propensity [is] to interiorize as ambiguity or outright contradiction those conflicts that other mimetic forms conspicuously exteriorize and then allocate to discrete characters who enact them in the manifest pull of opposite points of view.”<sup>46</sup> According to this distinction, even a long sequence like *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* is a lyric poem: a solitary voice speaks out of a single moment in time, interiorizing as ambiguity conflicts that would, in

fiction or drama, be allocated to discrete characters. In the Canon Aspirin poems, for example, there are slight gestures toward narrative: "We drank Meursault, ate lobster Bombay with mango / Chutney. Then the Canon Aspirin declaimed / Of his sister," and so on. But of course the Canon's sister has no life of her own, any more than do Nanzia Nunzio or the maiden from Catawba. "Characters," when they do appear in a lyric sequence like *Notes*, serve as projections of particular personal fantasies. Thus the Canon Aspirin represents a certain reckless element in the poet's personality: his urge is to move on "ascending wings" into the "orbits' outer stars." As one who "imposes orders as he thinks of them, / As the fox and snake do," the Canon must finally be surpassed by the poet himself, who comes to see that "to impose is not / To discover." Yet Stevens knows that he can never separate the "angel in his cloud / Serenely gazing at the violent abyss" from himself; indeed, in canto 8 he wonders: "Is it he or is it I that experience this?"

Not surprisingly, then, Sharon Cameron's chapter on modern poetry in *Lyric Time* makes much of Stevens. Pound's name, on the other hand, does not even appear in her index, and for good reason. For a text like Canto LXXXI does not fit into Cameron's generic framework: it is both "narrative" and "lyric," with, for that matter, bits of "drama" interspersed. Indeed, it is not particularly helpful to define the *Cantos* as a "lyric-plus" or "epic-minus" genre, for surely, as Northrop Frye says, "The paradoxical technique of the poetry which is encyclopaedic and yet discontinuous, the technique of *The Waste Land* and of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, is, like its direct opposite in Wordsworth, a technical innovation heralding a new mode."<sup>47</sup> That new mode has been called, quite rightly I think, *collage*—the juxtaposition without explicit syntactic connection of disparate items<sup>48</sup>—in this case, references to Greek mythology, the conversation of Padre Elizondo, the image of "George Santayana arriving in the port of Boston," and so on. It is interesting to note that despite the temporality inherent in any verbal structure, Pound's way of relating word groups is essentially spatial. The words of John Adams, for example, could precede those of Andre Spiré instead of following them with no appreciable difference, or again, it would be possible to interlard a passage from, say, Canto LXXIX somewhere between the references to Possum and the Credit Agricole without altering the basic movement or momentum of his discontinuous encyclopedic form. In his challenging new book, *The Tale of the Tribe*, Michael Bernstein puts it this way: "The seemingly unobtrusive moment in Canto VIII [the first Malatesta Canto] when the first series of historical letters is introduced into the *Cantos* and the personality of Sigismundo is shown by



juxtaposing his prose instruction concerning a painter he wishes to engage with a lyric poem he writes for Isotta degli Atti without privileging either medium, represents one of the decisive turning-points in modern poetics, opening for verse the capacity to include domains of experience long since considered alien territory."<sup>49</sup> *Without privileging either medium*—this is the distinctive feature of “canto structure” as Pound devises it. Despite its great lyric coda, Canto LXXXI is not essentially a lyric poem; its collage surface bears the traces of any number of diverse genres: epic, romance, satire, tall tale, travelogue, song, and so forth. By contrast, Stevens’s lyric poems, ambiguous as their meanings may be, exhibit what the Romantics and New Critics called organic form. Thus Kermode can say quite rightly that in *Notes* “there is . . . a genuine beginning and end, an early candour and a late plural. . . . A good deal of the doctrine is contained in the opening poems; and in the final part the fables are used to achieve a deliberate intensity of feeling. The complex and majestic Canon Aspirin poems . . . justify not only the sober ecstasies of the conclusion but the immense and beautiful claims for poetry made in III.viii.” And he quotes the whole canto “What am I to believe?”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Helen Vendler writes of the final “Fat girl” canto, “In the suavity of the last five lines, the poet is already, even before the stability to come, in control of his images . . . and the final civilized calling-by-name will take place not under a tree but framed in crystal in a gilded street, as the green primitive is at last seen for what it is—a beginning leading to the crystal, not an end in itself.”<sup>51</sup>

Which is to say that there *is* closure in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, however much the ending speaks to us of new beginnings. What Vendler calls the “massively solid structure” of the lyric sequence has little in common with the serial mode of the *Cantos*, a form which is, in Kenner’s words, “a gestalt of what it can assimilate,”<sup>52</sup> or, as I have put it elsewhere, a running transformer, constantly ingesting incoming unprocessed data.<sup>53</sup> Stevens’s rage for order, his need to make analogies (“It is only *au pays de la métaphore qu’on est poète*”—*OP*, p. 179), is at odds with Pound’s deployment of metonymic linkages, his creation of Cubist surfaces or aerial maps where images jostle one another.

Accordingly, when critics complain, as does Frank Kermode, of the ultimate incoherence of the *Cantos*, what they really mean is that Pound violates the norms of the lyric, specifically the Romantic lyric. In cutting out the discursive base of the Romantic ode, Kermode argues, a base still present in Yeats and revived by Stevens, whose “solution to the image-and-discourse problem is to make the problem itself the subject of the poems,” Pound creates a vast ideogram that

has “no intellectual content whatever.”<sup>54</sup> Conversely, when Donald Davie calls Stevens’s “Le Monocle de Mon Oncle” a “strikingly old-fashioned poem,” his argument is that “Stevens’ poem, like an ode by Keats, is still *discursive*; it moves from point to point, always forward from first to last. Lose the thread, and you may go back and look for it.” Such discursiveness, Davie suggests, goes hand in hand with Stevens’s “metrical conservatism”: “‘To break the pentameter,’ said Pound, ‘that was the first heave.’ Stevens has never made the break.” And he concludes: “If I am right in thinking that a Keatsian allegiance is the clue to Stevens, then his metres are accounted for—his conservatism in this department is part and parcel with his conservatism in structure and in rhetoric. . . . His novelty is all on the surface.”<sup>55</sup> Which is to say that for Davie the ratio of meter to meter-making argument first put forward by Emerson is exactly reversed.

*The Loss of History and The Mythology of Self versus History and Mythology as Other*

“Life,” remarks Stevens in one of the *Adagia*, “is an affair of people not of places. But for me life is an affair of places and that is the trouble” (*OP*, p. 158). The absence of others in Stevens’s poetry has been remarked upon by many critics, most notably by Hugh Kenner, who writes:

You will search Stevens’ canon in vain for human actions with agents good and bad. . . . There is a great deal of language in these poems with no one speaking it except the grave impersonal voice of poetry, and there is little variety of feeling. . . . That grave equable voice, as dispassionate as *things*, weaves its whimsical monologue: Crispin and Mrs. Pappadopoulos and Mrs. Alfred Uruguay and other improbable folk are nodes in the monologue. . . . The Stevens world is empty of people. This is because he is in the Wordsworth line, a Nature poet, confronting an emptied Nature, but a Nature without Presences, no longer speaking.<sup>56</sup>

The same point is made, but with less hostility, by Denis Donoghue, one of the few participants in the Modernist debate who has written sympathetically of both Stevens and Pound, although he clearly prefers the former.<sup>57</sup> In *Connoisseurs of Chaos*, Donoghue uses “The Idea of Order at Key West” as exhibit and argues that for the Stevens of this poem, “There is no authority but the poet himself, no structures of belief but the structures he makes for his own appeasement. The poet’s own act of faith is: I believe in the inventions of my own productive imagination.” “Where there is nothing, you put yourself and your inventions, thereby raising desires and appeasing them. Life becomes a rhetorical situation in which you are your own audience. History becomes mythology. . . . There are some poets whose con-

consciousness is historical. For these, tradition is a great drama of people and institutions, conflicts of values in their full temporal idiom. . . . But for Stevens the past is not only dead but deadly.”<sup>58</sup> “Poets whose consciousness is historical,” for whom “tradition is a great drama of people and institutions”—here, of course, is Pound, though Donoghue does not mention him in this context. His main text is Stevens’s discussion, in *The Necessary Angel*, of the futility of paying visits to historic shrines—in this case the old Zeller house in Tulpehocken, Pennsylvania, once inhabited by Lutheran refugees. “The vast mausoleum of human memory,” Stevens comments, “is emptier than one had supposed. . . . there could not be any effective diversion from the reality that time and experience had created here, the desolation that penetrated one like something final” (*NA*, p. 101). By contrast, an exhibition of illustrated books from foreign countries, inspected shortly after the Tulpehocken visit, excites the poet’s imagination: “[It was] as if the barren reality that I had just experienced had suddenly taken color, become alive” (*NA*, p. 102). Donoghue remarks: “This is Stevens in one of his most revealing aspects: he will entertain reality only when it has been refracted through the idiom of art, when the artist has certified it by giving it the seal of his own authority. This is the ‘mythology of self’ that replaces history” (p. 194).

The mythology of self, the faith in the autonomy of the redemptive imagination, depends upon the ruthless elimination of the past, whether that past is that of the whole culture or merely one’s own. Surely Stevens is the least “confessional” of poets. As Marie Borroff puts it: “Our veneration for the past is the object of Stevens’ constant and endlessly resourceful attack. It is labelled ‘history,’ ‘doctrine,’ ‘definitions,’ ‘the rotted names’; it is a garbage dump, a junk shop, a theatre beaten in by a tempest in which the audience continues to sit; it is the second-rate statuary on savings banks, the equestrian statues in public squares, the vested interests of the academies and the museums. To rid one’s mind of it is ‘freedom,’ a redeeming ‘ignorance,’ ‘salvation,’ ‘health.’ ”<sup>59</sup>

But the paradox is that Stevens’s denial of the past as not only dead but deadly goes hand in hand with an inability to escape it. However much he may dislike the “barren reality” of old country houses, his literary and philosophical roots are, as everyone has remarked, squarely in the Romantic tradition. Pound’s case is precisely the opposite. I quote again from Denis Donoghue, this time from his comments at the Commemorative Pound Symposium held at Queens College, Belfast, in 1973: “In Canto 54 . . . Pound writes: ‘history is a

school book for princes'. . . this is the central concern of the entire *Cantos*. . . they are designed as a primer, a school-book for an ideal prince. . . They are an attempt not to impose one man's will upon a reading of time but to enter into such intimate liaison with fact, with time, with history, with the luminous details which history offers, that the result is a rhythm, a profound sense of life which surely constitutes meaning." Donoghue now goes on to contrast Pound's respect for the given, for the form of the object, to Yeats's symbolist transformation of objects, and concludes: "Pound's . . . acknowledgement of history, his acknowledgement of other minds, his recognition that there have been other times and other places . . . isn't this what all the quotations, all the allusions to other cultures are doing in *The Cantos*? Are they not saying: there have been other times, other places, other people, other attempts to find significance and value in human life? I take these allusions in the *Cantos* partly as gestures toward different civilizations, but more fundamentally as Pound's assertion that we have not invented meaning."<sup>60</sup> *That we have not invented meaning*—here is the opposite pole from Stevens's strenuous effort to reimagine what he calls the First Idea. As opposed to the solitary and central consciousness of an expanded self in *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, we find in Canto LXXXI a galaxy of time frames that coexist: John Adams speaking to "his volatile friend Mr. Jefferson ('You the one, I the few')" exists on the same plane as George Santayana "arriving in the port of Boston" and with Basil Bunting telling tales of the village fiestas in the Canaries. *Dove sta memoria*: the prisoner in the cage at Pisa ("hot winds from the marshes/and death chill from the mountains") is *there*, as recording center ("thank Benin for this table ex packing box"), but he refuses to make distinctions between his present and the events, whether from the near or the mythological past, that impinge upon his consciousness. Stevens's "vast mausoleum of human memory" thus gives way to a shallow screen upon which any number of actions can unfold. Time, in other words, becomes space.

Here again the *Cantos* defy Romantic paradigms. As Guy Davenport observes: "The placing of events in time is a romantic act; the *tremendum* is in the distance. There are no dates in the myths; from when to when did Heracles stride the earth? In a century obsessed with time, with archeological dating, with the psychological recovery of time (Proust, Freud), Pound has written as if time were unreal, has, in fact, treated it as if it were space. . . . In Pound's spatial sense of time the past is here, now; its invisibility is our blindness, not its absence."<sup>61</sup> Stevens, we might say, tries to obliterate time by rejecting history and myth (even the Christian myth) and equating conscious-

ness with vision, which is the imagination's sanctity. Pound takes the opposite line: he treats all times and epochs as potential sources of wisdom to be tapped; "consciousness," in this case, is no more than the selection and synthesis of the input—a synthesis that, as critics often complain, often remains partial.<sup>62</sup> Stevens rejects the past as deadly but paradoxically dwells in it; Pound plays the role of historian but paradoxically treats the past as if it were here and now.

A similar opposition may be found in the poets' sense of geography. "For me," says Stevens, "life is an affair of places," but Stevens's locales, whether called Pascagoula or Montrachet-le-Jardin or Ceylon, are always shadow worlds, symbolic embodiments of the poet's creation of "so many selves, so many sensuous worlds" (*CP*, p. 326). Pound's geography is, by contrast, characterized by a painstaking exactitude. In an essay called "The *Cantos*: Towards a Pedestrian Reading," Donald Davie demonstrates that the best guide to such poems as "Provincia Deserta" and "Near Perigord" is a Carte Michelin No. 75; indeed, "the first requirement for a study of Pound is a set of maps (preferably ½ inch to the mile) of at any rate certain regions of France, Italy and England."<sup>63</sup> No one, to my knowledge, has made a similar case for, say, "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"; no city map could tell us much about the ghostly contours of what Stevens calls "These houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate/Appearances of what appearances" (*CP*, p. 465). Poetry, for Stevens, must finally resist "the vulgate of experience," the pressure of reality. And presumably Michelin maps would merely add to that pressure.

## V

Let me now return to my original questions: What do we mean when we talk of Modernism in poetry? And, more important, what are our present norms for the "great poem"?

To posit that ours is, in Harold Bloom's words, the Age of Stevens is to believe that, as he puts it, "Modernism in literature has not passed; rather it has been exposed as never having been there." The best twentieth-century poetry, in other words, carries on the great tradition of Romantic visionary humanism, a tradition Anglo-American to its roots, with a slight influx of French Symbolisme to add piquancy. Such poetry takes the lyric paradigm for granted; it answers to the demand for organic unity and symbolic structure, avoiding all contact with the language of ordinary prose and therefore with the prose discourses of the novel and of historical writing. Despite this emphasis on the poem as a special kind of discourse, as sacred text whose

language is inherently different from, say, such texts as Stevens's own letters and diaries,<sup>64</sup> the Stevens text subordinates such traditional lyric features as meter and qualitative sound repetition to the articulation of complex and ambiguous meanings. In keeping with the Romantic model, the "I" of Stevens is a Solitary Singer; his voice, even at its most whimsical or ironic, is never less than serious about the truths for which it searches; the tone is meditative and subdued; the addressee is always the poet himself. For Stevens, "Poetry and *materia poetica* are interchangeable terms," and so the emphasis, both of the poet and of his critics, is on the creation of the Supreme Fiction, the poet's evolving consciousness as it comes to terms with what Bloom calls the "three crossings" central to the Romantic "crisis-poem"—the loss of the creative gift (am I still a poet?), the loss of love (am I still capable of loving another beside myself?), and the loss of life itself (am I capable of resisting the death instinct?).<sup>65</sup> These are "crossings" that, according to Bloom as well as to Helen Vendler and other Stevensians, all intelligent and receptive human creatures experience. In this sense, poetry clearly *matters*; it teaches us "how to talk to ourselves."

Poundians, of course, also believe that poetry *matters*, but in a very different sense. They regard Modernism less as a continuation of Romanticism than as a very real rupture with it. "Keatsian," an honorific word for Bloom or Kermode or Hartman or Vendler, is, as we have seen in the case of Davie's essay on Stevens, a derogatory term. Instead—and perhaps curiously—we meet in Pound criticism such words as "Augustan" and "Enlightenment." Thus Kenner compares Pound's Confucian sense of history, with its "reconciliation of a loving feeling for detail with a search for eternal, archetypal situations," to that of the Augustans,<sup>66</sup> and Davie argues that Pound's America is "the America of the Founding Fathers, Jefferson and John Adams . . . specifically an Enlightenment product, a transplanting to American soil of the noblest values of that French eighteenth century which had also as a matter of historical record first introduced Europe to the experience of Confucian and pre-Confucian China."<sup>67</sup>

The point, in any case, is to bypass Romanticism, to get back to something *prior* in time even as one is MAKING IT NEW. Surely it is no coincidence that Pound scholars have so often been classicists—D. S. Carne-Ross, J. P. Sullivan, Guy Davenport—or trained in medieval studies like Eva Hesse and Christine Brooke-Rose, or in Augustan literature like Davie and Kenner in their different ways.<sup>68</sup> For all these critics, the Pound Era is the era when the norms of the Romantic crisis poem as of the Symbolist lyric were exploded, when poetry found that it could once again incorporate the seemingly alien discourses of prose without losing its identity. It is curious, in this

regard, to compare Pound's prose to that of Stevens. From *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916) to *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) and beyond, Pound's critical prose is closely allied to his poetry by its structural properties: collage, fragmentation, parataxis. Again, the letters of the later years adopt all the stylistic oddities of the *Cantos*: phonetic spelling, the insertion of foreign phrases, documentary evidence, puns and other jokes, the juxtaposition of disjunctive images. The Romantic and Symbolist distinction between literary and ordinary language is thus blurred: the rule is that anything goes as long as the poet knows, in Charles Olson's words, how to "keep it moving," how to make the poem an energy discharge, a field of action. The *how*, for Poundians, thus becomes more interesting than the *what*: if poetry teaches us how to talk to ourselves, it is not because it provides us with a vision of Reality but because its processes imitate the processes of the external world as we have come to know it.

The Pound critics do not, then, equate poetry with lyric; rather, they return to the Aristotelian definition of *poiesis* as *mimesis praxeos*, the imitation of an action. The eclectic nature of the *Cantos*, their capacity to assimilate all kinds of material and to incorporate many voices, makes more sense when we read Pound's text against, say, the *Satyricon* or *Le Neveu de Rameau* than when Pound's "poem including history" is compared to *The Prelude* or *Song of Myself*. Again, with respect to Pound's contemporaries, the *Cantos* are closer to the poetry of Apollinaire or the Merz pictures of Kurt Schwitters than they are to the poetry of Yeats or Frost or even Eliot. Yeats, we remember, was convinced that Pound had not got "all the wine into the bowl."<sup>69</sup>

Read synchronically, against the backdrop of the avant-garde arts of Europe in the period *entre deux guerres*, Pound's structures seem quintessentially modern. Read diachronically, against the paradigm of the Anglo-American lyric from Blake to Emerson to Emily Dickinson, Pound will seem, as he did to Stevens, "an eccentric person." A "Last Romantic" and a "First Modern"—William Carlos Williams, who was able to appreciate Stevens's "discipline" even as he admired Pound's experimentation and invention,<sup>70</sup> bridged the gap between the two by finding a third party to vilify. That party was, of course, T. S. Eliot, a bloke whose work both Pound and Stevens had been reading since its inception. But then no one today, whether we look to critics like Bloom or Kenner or Vendler or to poets like John Ashbery or James Merrill or Adrienne Rich or Allen Ginsberg, seems eager to call the first half of the twentieth century the Eliot Era. And thereby hangs another tale—a tale whose telling will help us to work out the puzzle which is Modernism.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

## NOTES

1 Pound to Williams, 27 October 1955. Previously unpublished letter by Ezra Pound, Copyright © 1982 by the Trustees of the Ezra Pound Literary Property Trust. Reprinted by permission of the Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. The obituary essay appeared in *Poetry*, 87, No. 4 (January 1956), 234–39.

2 *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York, 1966), p. 565.

3 For an evenhanded account that is representative of the literary histories of the period, see David Perkins, *A History of Modern Poetry (from the 1890s to the High Modernist Mode)* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976). In this first of a projected two volumes, Perkins naturally gives Pound more space than he does Stevens, the volume ending with the early twenties, when Stevens's first book of poems, *Harmonium*, appeared. Even so, it is clear that Perkins takes Stevens to be one of the major figures.

For a listing and summary of the various essays by the New Critics on Pound and Stevens, see the bibliographical essays by John Espey (on Pound) and Joseph N. Riddel (on Stevens), in *Sixteen Modern American Authors*, ed. Jackson R. Bryer (New York, 1973). Blackmur's essays are especially interesting: see "Masks of Ezra Pound" (1933), "An Adjunct to the Muses' Diadem, A Note on E. P." (1946), "Examples of Wallace Stevens" (1931), and "Wallace Stevens: An Abstraction Blooded" (review of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, 1943), all collected in *Form & Value in Modern Poetry* (New York, 1957).

4 In *Forms of Discovery* (Denver, 1967), Winters criticized Pound's "associational" method but declared that "eccentric for eccentric, I would rather read the Pound of the early *Cantos* than the Spenser of *The Faerie Queene*." As for Stevens, Winters argued (in *Primitivism and Decadence* [New York, 1937] and in *The Anatomy of Nonsense* [Norfolk, Conn., 1943]) that "Sunday Morning" is one of the great poems written in English, but that after "Sunday Morning" Stevens's style declined into obscurantism and the emotional confusions of Romantic irony. See Bryer, pp. 452, 543.

5 *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), pp. 516–17, 554.

6 *A Map of Misreading* (New York, 1975), p. 28.

7 *Wallace Stevens: The Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca and London, 1977), p. 152.

8 Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge, 1974), pp. 62–64.

9 Beckett, p. 64; italics mine.

10 "Toward Literary History," in *Beyond Formalism: Literary Essays 1958–1970* (New Haven and London, 1970), p. 358, and "Spectral Symbolism," in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago and London, 1975), p. 59.

11 *On Extended Wings: Wallace Stevens' Longer Poems* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), p. 314.

12 *Introspective Voyager: The Poetic Development of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1972), p. vi.

13 *Poems of Our Climate*, p. 168.

14 The texts used are *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York, 1954), pp. 401–5, subsequently cited as *CP*, and *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1971), pp. 517–19.

15 *Wallace Stevens* (Edinburgh and London, 1967), pp. 117–19.

16 "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction: A Commentary," in *Wallace Stevens: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Marie Borroff (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1963), p. 19.

17 "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Borroff, p. 19.

18 *On Extended Wings*, p. 197.

19 *Poets of Reality: Six Twentieth-Century Writers* (1965; rpt. New York, 1969), p. 283. Such distrust of thematics has become more marked in Miller's more recent deconstructionist essays on Stevens. See, e.g., "Stevens' *Rock* and Criticism as Cure," *Georgia Review*, 30 (1976), 330–48.



- 20 *On Extended Wings*, p. 205.
- 21 "Apollo's Harsher Songs" (1979), in her *Part of Nature, Part of Us: Modern American Poets* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 41–42.
- 22 *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* (1951; rpt. New York, 1965), p. 40, subsequently cited as *NA*.
- 23 *ABC of Reading* (1934; rpt. New York, 1960), p. 46, subsequently cited as *ABC*.
- 24 *Adagia*, in *Opus Posthumous* (New York, 1957), p. 169, subsequently cited as *OP*.
- 25 *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, p. 544.
- 26 *A Homemade World* (New York, 1975), p. 55.
- 27 In *Wallace Stevens: The Making of Harmonium* (Princeton, 1967), Buttel writes: "Stevens' style arises out of his deeply felt need to discover valid ideas of order in an age of cultural change and confusion." He is the "direct descendant of the Romantic poets in his unceasing exploration of the relationship between the inner, subjective human point of view, and outer, objective reality" (p. x). This line of reasoning is carried on by Adelaide Kirby Morris in *Wallace Stevens: Imagination and Faith* (Princeton, 1974). See also *Wallace Stevens: A Celebration*, ed. Frank Doggett and Robert Buttel (Princeton, 1980), esp. Frank Kermode, "Dwelling Poetically in Connecticut," and Roy Harvey Pearce, "Toward Decreation: Stevens and the Theory of Poetry."
- 28 "The Music of a Lost Dynasty: Pound in the Classroom," *Boston University Journal*, 21 (Winter 1973), 26–27.
- 29 "Music of a Lost Dynasty," pp. 38–39; italics are Carne-Ross's.
- 30 "Persephone's Ezra," in *New Approaches to Ezra Pound*, ed. Eva Hesse (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), pp. 157, 161.
- 31 *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor* (New York, 1964), pp. 176–77, 181.
- 32 See *The Pound Era*, pp. 133, 136.
- 33 *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1951), p. 105.
- 34 See George Kearns, *Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Cantos* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1980), p. 168.
- 35 *Paideuma*, 6, No. 1 (Spring 1977), 3–4.
- 36 Introd., *New Approaches*, p. 23; cf. Albert Cook, "Rhythm and Person in *The Cantos*," in *New Approaches*, pp. 349–64.
- 37 *Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Cantos*, p. 161.
- 38 "Wisdom Past Metaphor: Another View of Pound, Fenollosa, and Objective Verse," *Paideuma*, 5, No. 1 (Spring 1976), 21–22. Cf. Bloom's dismissal of the "Pound-Williams machine made out of words," in "The New Transcendentalism: The Visionary Strain in Merwin, Ashbery, and Ammons," *Figures of Capable Imagination* (New York, 1976), p. 145.
- 39 Ezra Pound, "A Retrospect," in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London, 1954), p. 3, subsequently cited as *LE*.
- 40 See esp. Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*, pp. 41–46, 60–63, and *Pound* (London, 1975), ch. 5, "Rhythm in the Cantos"; D. S. Carne-Ross, "New Metres for Old: A Note on Pound's Metric," *Arion*, 6, No. 2 (Summer 1967), 216–32; James A. Powell, "The Light of Vers Libre," *Paideuma*, 8, No. 1 (Spring 1979), 3–34; Sally M. Gall, "Pound and the Modern Melic Tradition: Towards a Demystification of 'Absolute Rhythm,'" *Paideuma*, 8, No. 1 (Spring 1979), 35–47.
- 41 *On Extended Wings*, pp. 9–10.
- 42 See, e.g., Maria Corti, *An Introduction to Literary Semiotics*, tr. Margherita Bogat and Allen Mandelbaum (Bloomington and London, 1978), pp. 115–43.
- 43 *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* (London, 1971), p. 177.
- 44 Davie, *Pound*, p. 43.
- 45 *Gaudier-Brzeska, A Memoir* (1916; rpt. New York, 1970), p. 92.

- 46 *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore and London, 1979), p. 23.
- 47 *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, 1957), p. 61.
- 48 See esp. David Antin, "Some Questions about Modernism," *Occident*, 8 (Spring 1974), 19–21. Antin writes: "The reason the collage elements are more or less free is that the strategy of collage involves suppression of the ordering signs that would specify the 'stronger logical relations' among the presented elements. By 'stronger logical relations' I mean relations of implication, entailment, negation, subordination and so on" (p. 21).
- 49 *The Tale of the Tribe: Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton and London, 1980), p. 40.
- 50 *Wallace Stevens*, p. 118.
- 51 *On Extended Wings*, pp. 204–5.
- 52 *The Pound Era*, p. 185.
- 53 *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, 1981), p. 197.
- 54 *Romantic Image* (New York, 1957), pp. 153, 136.
- 55 "Essential Gaudiness: The Poems of Wallace Stevens," *The Twentieth Century*, 153 (June 1953), 458–59; rpt. in *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum: Essays of Two Decades*, ed. Barry Alpert (Manchester, 1977), pp. 12–14. Davie's 1977 Postscript is illuminating: "This reads oddly now, because it was addressed to a public that thought 'the modern,' whatever else it was, was 'unromantic.' For many years now on the contrary American critics like Harold Bloom have contended that the (American) 'modern' is continuous with the (American, i.e. Emersonian) 'romantic'; and so they find Stevens much less in need of excuses than for instance Eliot. Accordingly I should now probably be more captious about Stevens than I was when I wrote this" (p. 17).
- 56 *A Homemade World*, pp. 74–75.
- 57 Donoghue has written frequently on Stevens, from "Wallace Stevens and the Abstract," *Studies*, 49 (1960), 389–406, to *The Sovereign Ghost* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976). In the latter, Donoghue expounds a theory of the poetic imagination that draws heavily on Stevens and, behind Stevens, on Coleridge.
- 58 *Connoisseurs of Chaos: Ideas of Order in Modern American Poetry* (New York, 1965), pp. 191, 193–94.
- 59 "Wallace Stevens: The World and the Poet," in *Wallace Stevens: Critical Essays*, ed. Borroff, p. 3.
- 60 Cited by G. Singh in "Ezra Pound: A Commemorative Symposium," *Paideuma*, 3, No. 2 (Fall 1974), 158–61.
- 61 "Persephone's Ezra," pp. 156–57.
- 62 In *The Tale of the Tribe*, Michael A. Bernstein makes a strong case for the difficulty Pound had in reconciling two codes, "the historically analytic and explanatory elements (the 'prose tradition' of the great novels recaptured for verse) and the mythological intuitive insights, the religious revelations of universal truths (traditionally the rightful domain of verse). If either code begins to displace the other, the poem as a whole risks fragmentation or intellectual incoherence" (p. 24). The contrary position is argued very persuasively in Jean-Michel Rabaté's recent Lacanian essay, "Pound's Art of Naming: Between Reference and Reverence," forthcoming in *South Atlantic Quarterly* (1983).
- 63 *The Poet in the Imaginary Museum*, p. 239. The essay first appeared in *Paideuma*, 1, No. 1 (Spring-Summer 1972), 55–62.
- 64 It is illuminating to compare Stevens's letters and diaries to his poems; the former are just as straightforward and expository as the latter are self-reflexive and ambiguous. Moreover, Stevens's endless, patient explications of his poems testify to his consuming interest in interpretation. He wants his reader to understand the meaning *behind* the words on the page.

65 *Poems of Our Climate*, pp. 375–406.

66 *The Pound Era*, p. 434.

67 *Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*, p. 72.

68 Denis Donoghue, in most respects the proponent of the Stevensian “august imagination,” is also able to find value in that “school-book for Princes,” the *Cantos*. Perhaps—and this is a point to ponder long and hard—the catholicity of taste that allows Donoghue to appreciate both Stevens and Pound represents a critical position less firmly articulated and therefore finally less authoritative than that of a Harold Bloom or a Hugh Kenner.

69 Introd., *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse, 1892–1935*, chosen by W. B. Yeats (1936; rpt. Oxford, 1966), p. xxvi.

70 See Williams, “Wallace Stevens,” *Poetry*, 87, No. 4 (January 1956), 234–39.

## APPENDIX

### Wallace Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* Part III: *It Must Give Pleasure*

v

We drank Meursault, ate Lobster Bombay with mango  
Chutney. Then the Canon Aspirin declaimed  
Of his sister, in what sensible ecstasy  
She lived in her house. She had two daughters, one  
Of four, and one of seven, whom she dressed  
The way a painter of pauvred colors paints.  
But still she painted them appropriate to  
Their poverty, a gray-blue yellowed out  
With ribbon, a rigid statement of them, white,  
With Sunday pearls, her widow's gayety.  
She hid them under simple names. She held  
Them closer to her by rejecting dreams.  
The words they spoke were voices that she heard.  
She looked at them and saw them as they were  
And what she felt fought off the barest phrase.  
The Canon Aspirin, having said these things,  
Reflected, humming an outline of a fugue  
Of praise, a conjugation done by choirs.  
Yet when her children slept, his sister herself  
Demanded of sleep, in the excitements of silence  
Only the unmuddled self of sleep for them.

vi

When at long midnight the Canon came to sleep  
And normal things had yawned themselves away,  
The nothingness was a nakedness, a point,

Beyond which fact could not progress as fact.  
 Thereon the learning of the man conceived  
 Once more night's pale illuminations, gold  
 Beneath, far underneath, the surface of  
 His eye and audible in the mountain of  
 His ear, the very material of his mind.  
 So that he was the ascending wings he saw  
 And moved on them in orbits' outer stars  
 Descending to the children's bed, on which  
 They lay. Forth then with huge pathetic force  
 Straight to the utmost crown of night he flew.  
 The nothingness was a nakedness, a point  
 Beyond which thought could not progress as thought.  
 He had to choose. But it was not a choice  
 Between excluding things. It was not a choice  
 Between, but of. He chose to include the things  
 That in each other are included, the whole,  
 The complicate, the amassing harmony.

vii

He imposes orders as he thinks of them,  
 As the fox and snake do. It is a brave affair.  
 Next he builds capitols and in their corridors,  
 Whiter than wax, sonorous, fame as it is,  
 He establishes statues of reasonable men,  
 Who surpassed the most literate owl, the most erudite  
 Of elephants. But to impose is not  
 To discover. To discover an order as of  
 A season, to discover summer and know it,  
 To discover winter and know it well, to find,  
 Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,  
 Out of nothing to have come on major weather,  
 It is possible, possible, possible. It must  
 Be possible. It must be that in time  
 The real will from its crude compoundings come,  
 Seeming, at first, a beast disgorged, unlike,  
 Warmed by a desperate milk. To find the real,  
 To be stripped of every fiction except one,  
 The fiction of an absolute—Angel,  
 Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear  
 The luminous melody of proper sound.

## viii

What am I to believe? If the angel in his cloud,  
 Serenely gazing at the violent abyss,  
 Plucks on his strings to pluck abysmal glory,  
 Leaps downward through evening's revelations, and  
 On his spreaden wings, needs nothing but deep space,  
 Forgets the gold centre, the golden destiny,  
 Grows warm in the motionless motion of his flight,  
 Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?  
 Are the wings his, the lapis-haunted air?  
 Is it he or is it I that experience this?  
 Is it I then that keep saying there is an hour  
 Filled with expressible bliss, in which I have  
 No need, am happy, forget need's golden hand,  
 Am satisfied without solacing majesty,  
 And if there is an hour there is a day,  
 There is a month, a year, there is a time  
 In which majesty is a mirror of the self:  
 I have not but I am and as I am, I am.  
 These external regions, what do we fill them with  
 Except reflections, the escapades of death,  
 Cinderella fulfilling herself beneath the roof?

## Ezra Pound, Canto LXXXI

Zeus lies in Ceres' bosom  
     Taishan is attended of loves  
                     under Cythera, before sunrise  
 and he said: "Hay aquí mucho catolicismo—(sounded  
                                     *catolithismo*)  
     y muy poco reliHion"  
 and he said: "Yo creo que los reyes desaparecen"  
 (Kings will, I think, disappear)  
 That was Padre José Elizondo  
                                     in 1906 and in 1917  
 or about 1917  
                     and Dolores said: "Come pan, niño," eat bread, me lad  
 Sargent had painted her  
                                     before he descended  
 (i.e. if he descended  
                     but in those days he did thumb sketches,  
 impressions of the Velázquez in the Museo del Prado  
 and books cost a peseta,  
                     brass candlesticks in proportion,

hot wind came from the marshes  
     and death-chill from the mountains.  
 And later Bowers wrote: "but such hatred,  
     I had never conceived such"  
 and the London reds wouldn't show up his friends  
     (i.e. friends of Franco  
 working in London) and in Alcázar  
 forty years gone, they said: go back to the station to eat  
 you can sleep here for a peseta"  
     goat bells tinkled all night  
     and the hostess grinned: *Eso es luto, haw!*  
 mi marido es muerto  
     (it is mourning, my husband is dead)  
 when she gave me paper to write on  
 with a black border half an inch or more deep,  
     say 5/8ths, of the locanda  
 "We call *all* foreigners frenchies"  
 and the egg broke in Cabranes' pocket,  
     thus making history. Basil says  
 they beat drums for three days  
 till all the drumheads were busted  
     (simple village fiesta)  
 and as for his life in the Canaries . . .  
 Possum observed that the local portagoose folk dance  
 was danced by the same dancers in divers localities  
     in political welcome . . .  
 the technique of demonstration  
     Cole studied that (not G. D. H., Horace)  
 "You will find" said old André Spire,  
 that every man on that board (Crédit Agricole)  
 has a brother-in-law  
     "You the one, I the few"  
     said John Adams  
 speaking of fears in the abstract  
     to his volatile friend Mr Jefferson.  
 (To break the pentameter, that was the first heave)  
 or as Jo Bard says: they never speak to each other,  
 if it is baker and concierge visibly  
     it is La Rouchefoucauld and de Maintenon audibly.  
 "Te caverò le budella"  
     "La corata a te"  
 In less than a geological epoch  
     said Henry Mencken  
 "Some cook, some do not cook  
     some things cannot be altered"  
 Ἰμυγέ. . . . ἔ μὸν ποτί δβμα τον ἄνδρα  
 What counts is the cultural level,

thank Benin for this table ex packing box  
 "doan yu tell no one I made it"  
     from a mask fine as any in Frankfurt  
 "It'll get you offn th' groun"  
     Light as the branch of Kuanon  
 And at first disappointed with shoddy  
 the bare ram-shackle quais, but then saw the  
 high buggy wheels  
     and was reconciled,  
 George Santayana arriving in the port of Boston  
 and kept to the end of his life that faint *thethear*  
 of the Spaniard  
     as a grace quasi imperceptible  
 as did Muss the *v* for *u* of Romagna  
 and said the grief was a full act  
     repeated for each new condoleress  
 working up to a climax.  
 and George Horace said he wd/"get Beveridge" (Senator)  
 Beveridge wouldn't talk and he wouldn't write for the papers  
 but George got him by campin' in his hotel  
 and assailin' him at lunch breakfast an' dinner  
     three articles  
 and my ole man went on hoein' corn  
     while George was a-tellin' him,  
 come across a vacant lot  
     where you'd occasionally see a wild rabbit  
 or mebbe only a loose one  
 AOI!  
     a leaf in the current  
                     at my grates no Althea