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FROM “ACCELERATED GRIMACE” TO CATASTROPHE:
ETHICS OF AESTHETICS
IN EZRA POUND’S *HUGH SELWYN MAUBERLEY*¹

The article proposes to read Ezra Pound’s long poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* with a view to unravelling an ethic that informs the poem. It is demonstrated that the source of the English national intellectual stasis is located in the depreciation of arts and letters in the contemporary world but the consequences of this collapse of literature lead to a genocidal catastrophe, which is shown to also hover about section two of the poem, customarily read as a denunciation of apathy that was rife among Pound’s contemporary poets and artists. The notion of ethics is derived from Pound’s own writings of the period and one of his principal philosophical sources: Confucius.

KEYWORDS: Ezra Pound, Confucius, ethics, modernist poetry

Writing to Wyndham Lewis in 1922, Pound was less generous with advice than he is known to have been, especially with his closest friends and co-workers; however, he did have this counsel: “emigrate. England is under a curse” (Pound 1974: 242). Two years later Pound contacted Lewis with a view to getting him to paint illustrations for Pound’s latest additions to his grandiose epic, the *Cantos*, which had by then reached numbers xiv and xv, the notorious Hell *Cantos*. Pound was quick to explain to Lewis, “You will readily see that the ‘hell’ is a portrait of contemporary England, or at least Eng. as she wuz² when I left her” (Pound 1974: 262). Canto xiv sketches a general portrayal of the capital of the country Pound came to detest:

Above the hell-rot
the great arse-hole,
 broken with piles,
hanging stalactites,
 greasy as sky over Westminster,

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² Throughout the paper Pound’s creative approach to spelling is preserved.

the invisible, many English,
 the place lacking in interest,
 last squalor, utter decrepitude,
 the vice-crusaders, fahrtng through silk,
 waving the Christian symbols[.]

(Pound 1983: 62, 63)

Canto xv opens with an equally vitriolic attack:

The saccharesent, lying in glucose,
 the pompous in cotton wool
 with a stench like the fats of Grasse,
 the great scabrous arse-hole, sh-tting flies,
 rumbling with imperialism,
 ultimate urinal, middan, pisswallow without a cloaca[.]

(Pound 1983: 64)

In 1924, Pound, then living in Paris, which turned out not to be as full of artistic vibrancy as it had been during his brief visits that he had been paying since 1908, had every reason to loathe England. Since he arrived in London in August 1908, declaring to his father: "I've got a fool idea that I'm going to make good in thus bloomin village" (Pound 2010: 128), Pound had restlessly fought to promote what he (generally correctly) regarded as the best poetry, accepting only the highest standards.

When he finally decided that London, which at one point seemed to him an artistic Mecca, was intellectually barren and past redemption, his poetic and more broadly cultural battles could be counted in hundreds. He antagonised a great many writers and artists in London and back in the US, insisting that the only way arts and letters could survive and flourish was by constantly pushing for greater technical mastery. His best-known campaigns were led in support of Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses*, Eliot's work since "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Lewis as both painter and novelist (*Tarr* was particularly important for Pound) as well as the precocious sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, prematurely killed in World War I. But Pound struggled to ensure recognition to the older writers, whose work he considered to have laid ground for his own experiments like Yeats and Ford Maddox Ford (Hueffer). By 1920 it was clear that most of his endeavours, despite his devotion and natural talent as impresario, had run into a dead end, as he had lost his overseas contact with *Poetry* after a long-standing row over publication policy with its editor Harriet Monroe and in England, *The Little Review* and *The Egoist*, two magazines he had trusted would usher in an appreciation of the highest standards in letters, won small acclaim even among the contemporary writers.

By early 1920 Pound had also got well into the *Cantos* but already at its early stage the long poem met with mixed reviews even among the poet's closest circle. After the publication of "Three Cantos," Eliot argued a little hesitantly that "We

will leave it [‘Three Cantos’] as a test: when anyone has studied Mr. Pound’s poems in chronological order, [...] he is prepared for the Cantos – but not till then” (Eliot 1991: 182). As he came across as more and more hermetic (in this sense his development paralleled that of Joyce, of whose “work in progress” ironically enough Pound disapproved, considering it “circumambient peripherization” [Read 1967: 228]), Pound became impatient with his contemporaries like D. H. Lawrence, Richard Aldington and even H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), while his dislike for Amy Lowell, once a fellow imagiste, and all who gathered about her anthologies of imagist poetry (which Pound violently disowned) steadily deepened. He told Alice Corbin Henderson, associate editor of *Poetry* and herself a poet, “I am a bit fed up with various sub-contemporaries, some have caused me more personal annoyance than seems worth my personal while to put up with, and others have bored me, not *coram* in person <but> by the arid expanse of their <printed> flaccidities” (Pound 1993: 199). On a wider scale, Pound deplored not only the artistic production but also the general state of English culture and economy that failed to support the arts; in “Pastiche. The Regional,” a series of articles published between June and November 1919 in *The New Age*, he claimed “My intentional caveat is against the [...] paucity of references, against being governed by men with minds only one storey deep” (Pound 1919b: 432). This failure of England (and implicitly of the US) was epitomised in Canto xxxviii, which outlined the erosion of European (a broader crisis in which England played a prominent part) monetary policy that resulted in obsession with profit, even should it be deprived of parity in labour (if not necessarily in gold); what this brought about was on the one hand the fact that “the power to purchase can never / (under the present system) catch up with / prices at large” (Pound 1983: 190) and on the other the transformation of all production solely into capital so that even “guns are merchandise” (Pound 1983: 191). These were the central problems with free-market capitalism, which forgot of arts and focused only on profit-making, as a result contributing to decomposition, as Pound told Ford in 1933, adding that Canto xxxviii “IS THE STATE of ENGLISH MIND in 1919. MIND in England of the post war epoch” (Pound 1982: 134).

In late 1920, being offered to become foreign correspondent for the *Dial*, Pound decided it was a welcome opportunity to quit London altogether, which he did in December of that year. Before leaving London, by now abhorrent, Pound composed his last long poem before devoting himself fully to the *Cantos*, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, which in a note to the 1926 edition of *Personae* (though not reproduced between the 1949 and 1958 *Selected Poems*) he called “so distinctly a farewell to London” (Nadel 2007: 59). The poem comprises eighteen lyrics, divided into two sections “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts)” and “Mauberley (1920),” that detail and denounce the literary life of London in the second decade of the xx century, featuring numerous speakers besides the eponymous Mauberley. Indeed, part of the critical endeavour has been to establish how Mauberley, the character E.P. and Pound himself are related. Hugh Kenner was among the first to argue

for a radical disjunction between Mauberley and Pound the man (Kenner 1951: 166), following Pound's own opinion from a 1922 letter to Felix E. Schelling: "Of course, I'm no more Mauberley than Eliot is Prufrock" (Pound 1974: 248); more immediately after the completion of the poem, Pound made the point more explicitly, writing to Ford, "While 'Homage to S. Propertius,' Seafarer, Exile's Letter, and Mauberley are all 'me' on one sense; my personality is certainly a great slag heap of stuff which has to be excluded from each of this (sic) crystalizations" (Pound 1982: 42). Despite these assertions, critics like Donald Davie maintain that there is a striking degree of similarity between Mauberley and Pound (Davie 1964: 154-56). More recently the poem has come to be read as a matrix of Pound's perception of the contemporary moment as well as a stylistically new departure that would pave the way for the *Cantos* (Coyle 2006: 433-39). What is frequently missed in the readings of the poem is its underlying ethical agenda that is rooted in Pound's retrospective account of the birth of vorticism in *A Memoir of Gaudier-Brzeska* as well as in Confucius whose work, most likely in French translations, Pound had been reading since late 1915 (though he knew of Confucius even before he came to Europe). In what follows *Mauberley* is explored with a view to unravelling an ethic that informs the poem; it is suggested that the source of the English national stasis and its possible complete future demise is located in the depreciation of arts and letters in the contemporary world.

COLLAPSED CULTURE OF ACCELERATION

Section one of *Mauberley*, parts i-iii, represents the description proper of London in the latter part of the second decade of the xx century. Whether the speaker is E.P., whom we get to know in the title to the first part ("E.P. Ode Pour L'Élection de son Sepulchre"), or Mauberley himself is immaterial, for the poetic voice may be more usefully characterised as "as a persona to explore the principles and limitations of both [Pound's] own previous work and of the London literary scene in general" (Coyle 2006: 436). The portrait of cultural life of London that is sketched in parts i-iii is built on a broad set of dichotomies. Part i opens by telling us of the nonchalant and misunderstood poet E.P. (an assignation that, following a general critical consensus [see Wilson 2014: 159], will be used throughout to refer to the persona of section one, though not to Pound himself), "For three years, out of key with his time" and "born / In a half savage country, out of date" (Pound 1920: 9), who "strove to resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry; to maintain 'the sublime' / In the old sense" (Pound 1920: 9). No sooner is E.P. introduced than the attention has been switched to the discussion of how he does not fit in "his time." While E.P. favours precision, "His true Penelope was Flaubert" (Pound 1920: 9) with his notion of *le mot juste* that Pound, following Ford, came to associate with good-quality

writing, the cultural milieu is represented as “obstinate isles” where instead of “the elegance of Circe’s hair,” people prefer “mottoes on sun-dials” (Pound 1920: 9). The part ends by stating E.P.’s ultimate failure that casts him into oblivion, “He passed from men’s memory in *l’an trentuniesme / De son eage*” (Pound 1920: 9). Despite the fact that it seems that E.P.’s ideas must also fall by the wayside, part ii trains its eye on the broader panorama of the age and its contrast to the poet’s ideas. Thus the age’s “image / Its accelerated grimace,” “mendacities,” preference for “a mould in plaster / Made with no loss of time” and “A prose kinema” (Pound 1920: 10) are opposed to E.P.’s “Attic grace” (Pound 1920: 10), “the obscure reveries / Of the inward gaze” (Pound 1920: 10), “the classics in paraphrase” and “alabaster / Or the ‘sculpture’ of rhyme” (Pound 1920: 10). Thus the poet sets up an opposition between the age’s increased speed of production and consumption, the former of which Pound later approved of in his *Machine Art* essays (spanning the period between 1927 and 1942). But throughout *Mauberley*, the haste is only tantamount to simplistic pleasures that require no effort on the part of the reader or viewer. As Michael Whitworth observes about part ii, “The acceleration, or the pace of modern life, is the problem, [...] Not only is plaster a less durable form of sculpture, but, once the mould is created, sculptures can be mechanically reproduced” (Whitworth 2010: 24). By contrast, what E.P. promotes is an art that is intellectually demanding and requires devotion of years to be mastered.

In *Gaudier-Brzeska*, a memoir of Pound’s sculptor friend who was killed in action on 5 June 1915, Pound gathers his already published articles, combining them with new pieces to give a meticulous delineation of vorticist ideas that are supplemented by Gaudier’s few surviving notes, articles and letters. In “Affirmations,” an essay which originally ran through February 1915 in *The New Age*, Pound first voices the idea that lies behind parts i-iii of *Mauberley*:

It is the old cry about intellect being inartistic, or about art being “above,” saving the word, “above” intellect. Art comes from intellect stirred by will, impulse, emotion, but art is emphatically not any of these others deprived of intellect, and out frunk on its ‘lone, saying it is the “that which is beyond the intelligence.”

(Pound 1970: 105)

Intellect matters especially when it comes to the selection of material as well as the means whereby to expresses it and the ability to discriminate between appropriate (that is unhackneyed and unclichéé) and inappropriate artistic methods. Being party of the intelligent and educated, “Vorticism refuses to discard any part of the tradition merely because it is a difficult bogey” (Pound 1970: 105). For Pound, vorticist emphasis on intellect and saving what is best in the given art’s tradition was not only an aesthetic principle but also a crucial feature of mankind in general because only when intelligent experimentation is coupled with selective and discriminating approach to tradition, can man hope to fulfil his potential: “We [vorticists] believe that human dignity consists very largely in humanity’s

ability to invent" (Pound 1970: 97). For Pound, it is not the "caressable" popular art (Pound 1970: 97) that marks the upward surge of mankind but the hard and precise expression, permanently re-invented, of the energy inherent in the material, whether it is a poem using images "beyond formulated language" (Pound 1970: 88) or sculpture that "is energy cut into stone, making the stone expressive in its fit and particular manner" (Pound 1970: 110). Pound openly categorises people as intelligent and ignorant, stressing that the latter fear that new art and poetry, as a result deeming it "ugly" (Pound 1970: 109). Following on from that notion, he concludes that

Our community is no longer divided into "bohème" and "bourgeois." We have our segregation amid the men who invent and create, whether it be a discovery of unknown rivers, a solution of engineering, a composition in form, or what you will.

These men stand on one side, and the amorphous and petrified and the copying, stand on the other.

(Pound 1970: 122)

This division would endure in Pound's thought and get its first thorough poetic expression in *Mauberley*.

Part iii of *Mauberley* continues the evocation of the division between the creator poet and the society of swift copyists wearing "The tea-rose tea-gown" (Pound 1920: 11) and playing "the pianola" (Pound 1920: 11). However, the jaded tone of parts i and ii is replaced by bitter defeatism, as E.P. concludes:

All things are a flowing,
Sage Heracleitus says
But a tawdry cheapness
Shall outlast our days.

(Pound 1920: 10)

This classical cry of *O tempora* leads to a moment of mourning of past glory: "What god, man, or hero / Shall I place a tin wreath upon" (Pound 1920: 10). But the poem shifts its perspective in part iv, where instead of further evocations of London's ignorance, E.P. recalls World War I and the toll it took on men of talent. The part re-deploys Horace's call from "Ode III": "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" in order to denounce the War: "Died some, pro patria, / non 'dulce' non 'et decor'" (Pound 1920: 12). His reversal of Horace's line clearly follows Wilfred Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est" but the associations with Owen also reveals a profound ethical charge against the War. Owen bitterly mocks the tales of valour that used to be sung to ennoble war efforts, perhaps the best example being Tennyson's "Charge of the Light Brigade;" in a half-derisive, half-resentful tone Owen says:

If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud

Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues, –
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,
 The old Lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.

(Owen 1963: 55)

Pound never acknowledged the reference. Indeed while the use of images that attempt a direct evocation of objective reality would have won Pound's approval, Owen's traditional metrics and implementation of rhetorical devices would not. However, Owen marks a precedent in the depiction of war and the sentiments connected to it in that he unveils Horace's depiction of war as a lie promulgated by those who did not see the war themselves. Pound takes this idea further:

[Some] walked eye-deep in hell
 believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
 came home, home to a lie,
 home to many deceits,
 home to old lies and new infamy;
 usury age-old and age-thick
 and liars in public places.

(Pound 1920: 12)

Unlike in Owen, where the "Lie" extends only to the argument for going to War, in *Mauberley*, the War is shown as the direct result of "old men's lies" that did not terminate in the trenches.

Moreover, what adds to the catastrophe is the fact that the War claimed not only the ignorant but also the able and intelligent: "Daring as never before, wastage as never before. / Young blood and high blood, / Fair cheeks, and fine bodies" (Pound 1920: 12). It is at this point that the poet begins to refer to actual people and places. The "wastage" represented for Pound the loss of Gaudier but also Ford, who struggled with shell-shock for years; additionally, the War put an end to the vorticism experiment due to the fact that the group (except Pound, Lewis and Gaudier, also Richard Aldington and the sculptor Edward Wadsworth) that concentrated around *BLAST* was scattered and the periodical died after just two issues. Part v of *Mauberley* asserts that the Great War was not only a conflict incited by liars but a direct result of the ignorant age:

There died a myriad,
 And of the best, among them,
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
 For a botched civilization.

(Pound 1920: 12)

As Michael Coyle observes, "Pound's suggestion is not that political leaders betrayed their culture but that deep-set cultural values were themselves responsible

for the war" (2006: 434). It needs to be added that these "deep-set cultural values" are the ones represented in parts i-iii; emphasis on quick and simple satisfaction, ignorance and lack of respect for the gravity of artists' and writers' experiment are no longer reason to breathe a sigh of angry, albeit wistful, resentment, for the collapse of culture and the loss of the best tradition led to further destruction done to the intelligent creators. This is the central moment in section one of *Mauberley* in that that in parts iv and v, Pound identifies what seemed an essentially aesthetic problem of parts i-iii as an ethical and, by inference, political as well as historical concern.

ETHICS OF ART

For Pound, the War resulted from the "botched civilization" that was based on "old men's lies;" in this sense the failure of the civilisation is caused by dishonesty, a potent notion for a follower of Confucius such as Pound. With time Confucian thought as expressed in *The Great Digest*, *The Unwobbling Pivot* and *The Analects* became a cornerstone of Pound's ethical thought but already in 1920 his knowledge of Confucius was ample, spurred by his reading of Fenollosa's notebooks and his discovery of ideogrammic method. Section one of *Mauberley* seems to particularly be founded on *Ta Hsio: The Great Digest*, which was also the earliest of the Confucian texts that Pound translated. The foundation of political ethics is the top-down approach to ruling, as Tseng's commentary on Confucius's text explains:

The meaning of, "World Order [bringing what is under heaven into equilibrium] is rooted in the good government of one's own state," is this: If those in high place respect the aged, the people will bring filial piety to a high level; if those in high place show deference to their elders, the people will bring their fraternal deference to a high level; if those in high place pity orphans, the people will not do otherwise; it is by this that the great gentlemen have a guide to conduct, a compass and square of the process.

(Pound 1969: 65-67)

The ruler's responsibility is to govern first and foremost by setting a good example and to know how to do so one must "*be at ease in total rectitude*" (Pound 1969: 45, emphasis in original). The notion of rectitude recurs throughout the Confucian texts and suggests the ability to maintain emotional harmony and to always follow the dictates of one's conscience (though the word that is used is "heart"); therefore "A state does not profit by profits. Honesty is the treasure of states" (Pound 1969: 87-89).

Together with this dismissal of monetary gain, Tseng explains that one of the crucial attainments that a man of power can display is his ability to recognise quality, even quality superior to his own, in others and promote them for it:

It is said in the Ch'in Declaration:

If I had but one straight minister who could cut the cackle [ideogram of the ax and the documents of the archives tied up in silk], yes, if without other abilities save simple honesty, a moderate spender but having the magnanimity to recognize talent in others, it would be as if he himself had those talents; and when others had erudition and wisdom he would really like it and love them, not merely talk about it and make a show from the mouth outward but solidly respect them, and be able to stand having talented men about him[.]

(Pound 1969: 75-77)

Successful rule has to be predicated on the ability to recognise the best quality and on having the rectitude to allow those possessed of it to rise to prominence and possibly lead the society. The Confucian paradigm underlies "Pastiche. The Regional," where Pound accepts as inevitable that there will always exist financial elites, formerly it was the aristocracy now it is the capitalists in whose hands money is concentrated; however, he goes on to assert that "as long as an 'aristocracy' or a fortune-acquirer is building, as long as the aristocracy is really setting up fine moulds of life, of art, of architecture; as long as the capitalist is really producing pro bono publico he is unlikely to be disturbed" (Pound 1919a: 336). The elite must embrace its role as leaders of the society but not as feudal powers that be but as Confucian honest rulers who are themselves devoted to continuous development while being quick to recognise and reward genius in others, even should they come from lesser walks of life.

The failure to implement the Confucian premise undergirds the ethical crisis at play in parts i-v of the first section of *Mauberley*. The ideals that E.P. upholds are lost in the age of speedy entertainment but what this dismissal of art and letters results in is not only aesthetic debility but carnage and destruction of the Great War. In this light, the following poems, which return to London in 1920, demand to be read as harbingers of new doom. In "Yeux Glauques," stiff prudence and propriety, represented by Gladstone, morally-upstanding in the narrowest sense because he would not accept experimenters like Rossetti or Burne-Jones, and "Foetid Buchanan" (Pound 1920: 14) who condemned the Pre-Raphaelites as immoral, are shown to stifle progress and the best work of the earlier periods. After the Pre-Raphaelites, the poet focuses on Monsieur Verogg, who is thinly disguised Victor Plarr, a minor member of the 1890s Rhymers Club that at one point included Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson and W. B. Yeats, with Arthur Symons and Oscar Wilde being occasional visitants to the Cheshire Cheese pub, where the Rhymers would hold readings. Verogg comes to represent an earlier version of E.P., as he is also "out of step with the decade, / Detached from his contemporaries, / Neglected by the young" (Pound 1920: 15). Therefore the following poems in this section indicate that the crisis identified in parts i-iii reaches beyond London in 1920, featuring the Pre-Raphaelites and the Rhymers on the one hand and Mr. Nixon on the other. Mr. Nixon is generally agreed to be Arnold Bennett and, as Pound told Ford, "is the only person who need really see red, and go hang himself in the potters field

or throw bombs through my windows" (Pound 1982: 37). Nixon symbolises the lowest motivation behind review-writing which for him is never done "but with the view / Of selling my own works" (Pound 1920: 17) yet what makes him even more reprehensible is his dismissal of poetry: "give up verse, my boy, / There's nothing in it" (Pound 1920: 17). His cold calculation makes him a lowly counterpart to "The stylist," most likely Ford, who endures "Unpaid, uncelebrated" (Pound 1920: 17). Sections xi and xii both indicate the present society's inability to break free of the manacles of old custom, which people no longer understand like the woman in whom "no instinct has survived [...] / Older than those her grandmother / Told her would fit her station" (Pound 1920: 19). Although the satiric tone of these poems does not sound particularly serious, at moments suggesting little more than a sting that E.P. aims at those who have done him harm, the unnerving shadow of the Great War, which is implied to have been triggered by just such ostensible trifles, maintains an air of hovering catastrophe.

The bitterness of this entire section is offset by the concluding poem, "Envoi (1919)." It has been noted that "the poem sounds throughout the suggestion of active passion as earnest against the destruction of Time" (Espey 1955: 98). The ongoing depiction of the triumph of unethical ignorance throughout this section of *Mauberley* yields to an evocation of enduring beauty:

*Tell her that goes
With song upon her lips
But sings not out the song, nor knows
The maker of it, some other mouth,
May be as fair as hers,
Might, in new ages, gain her worshippers,
When our two dusts with Waller's shall be laid,
Siftings on siftings in oblivion,
Till change hath broken down
All things save Beauty alone.*

(Pound 1920: 21)

The poem returns to traditional diction that carries some resemblance to Pound's early lyrics in *Lustra* but with much more vitality than in that volume. The syntax of this one-sentence stanza harks back to the complexity that still manages to sound like natural speech, which was the ambition of the Rhymers, particularly Yeats in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (compare the winding cadence of, for example, "He Tells of the Perfect Beauty") and Symons's poems of *Amoris Victima* (for example "Why?"); at the same time the variable foot and imperfect rhymes add a distinctly Poundian flavour. In this vein, Donald Davie points out that "the voice of the poet seems to be the anonymous voice of the tradition of English song" (Davie 2004: 61). If that is so, then "Envoi" comes as a critical comment on the previous parts. It stresses that after this crass time with its wars and intellectual deadness has passed, "Beauty" is sure to triumph once again. By the capitalised "Beauty"

Pound suggests a return of the ideal that is pronouncedly lacking in the modern world. Therefore the voice of “Envoi” that rings from outside the present moment, as though it carried the verdict of tradition itself, promises another renaissance, when ideals will take precedence over temporary fashions.

MAUBERLEY THE SQUANDERER

The second section of the poem entitled simply “Mauberley (1920)” has generally been agreed to present the words and circumstances of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley himself. Part i of this section summons part i of section one but whereas E.P. seemed honestly devoted to the French prose tradition of Gautier and later Flaubert with his *mot juste*, Mauberley can only say that “His true Penelope / Was Flaubert” in inverted commas. There is a clearly-felt tint of ironic detachment from declarations of part i which ends with a declaration that “Pier Francesca, / Pisanello lacking the skill / to forge Achaia” (Pound 1920: 22). Not even the Renaissance artists could find the strength to restore the ancient proportion, so what chance does the weary Mauberley stand?

Part ii emphasises the stark contrast between the active E.P., who propagates ideas, trying to speak sense into people, and Mauberley. While E.P. “For three years, out of key with his time / [...] strove to resuscitate the dead art / Of poetry,” Mauberley meanwhile “drank ambrosia,” declaring that “All passes, ANANGKE prevails” (Pound 1920: 23). Mauberley, however, does not embody the qualities of the age that E.P. found particularly despicable, like quick and shallow entertainment, yet he is guilty of another trespass against Confucian ethics. In “The Age Demanded,” Mauberley, unlike the hectically active E.P., is revealed to have become apathetic; he survives not by struggling with fate but by succumbing to “ANANGKE.” As a result, “the artist’s urge” dies in him, leaving “him delighted with the imaginary / Audition of the phantasmal sea-surge” (Pound 1920: 26). Introverted and “maudlin,” Mauberley is

Incapable of the least utterance or composition,
Emendation, conservation of the “better tradition,”
Refinement of medium, elimination of superfluities,
August attraction or concentration.

(Pound 1920: 10)

Mauberley is therefore neither able to fully submit to the age, which he only regards dispassionately, nor ready to try to overcome it like E.P. Mauberley’s passivity results in his squandering what talent he has:

The glow of porcelain
Brought no reforming sense
To his perception
Of the social inconsequence.

Thus, if her colour
 Came against his gaze,
 Tempered as if
 It were through a perfect glaze

He made no immediate application
 Of this to relation of the state
 To the individual [...].

(Pound 1920: 25)

Mauberley can perceive "the glow of porcelain," perhaps its "Beauty alone," but despite its appeal, he will not use his skills in order to transfer the ideal before his eyes to words of a vibrant poem, which would embody the ideal and so present it to the people.

For Confucius, and this aspect meant a lot to Pound, "Self discipline is rooted in rectification of the heart," so that the mind can keep clear of wild emotions in order to attain precision (Pound 1969: 51). This precision applies on the one hand to the understanding of words, which should exactly reflect the idea and thus lead to true wisdom. But precision is also the ability to maintain harmony between heaven and earth or spiritual and fleshly pursuits, which characterises "the man of breed and probity" (Pound 1969: 127-29). Thus Confucian ethics understood as pursuit of balance, harmony and above all precision can be associated with one of the defining ideas of vorticism that Pound took from Fenollosa's essay; poetic images, what Fenollosa calls metaphors, "follow objective lines of relations in nature herself (Fenollosa 2005: 107), thus "the poet selects for juxtaposition those words whose overtones blend into a delicate and lucid harmony" (Fenollosa 2005: 111). This lies at the foundation of the vorticist (as well as imagist, in its original sense) idea of "primary pigment," which is the inherent material of any given art: "the author must use his image because he sees it or feels it, *not* because he thinks he can use it to back up some creed or some system of ethics or economy" (Pound 1970: 86, emphasis in original). It is the fact that an image is used not to fit in a system of ethics that makes it perfectly ethical in Confucian sense. The image, as the best expression of an idea, employs the just words; the right image is therefore ethical in being honestly chosen for its quality and no ulterior reason. In "How to Read," Pound drew a direct connection between the image and the society: "[a work of literature] maintains the precision and clarity of thought, not merely for the benefit of a few dilettantes and 'lovers of literature,' but maintains the health of thought outside literary circles and in non-literary existence, in general individual and communal life" (Pound 1968: 22). In view of this ethical understanding of literature, Mauberley's apathy turns him into vermin on a par with Mr. Nixon. Mauberley's final remark, from which he distances himself with a shade of irony: "I was / And I no more exist; / Here drifted / An Hedonist" (Pound 1920: 27), becomes a motto of ethical failure.

“Medallion,” the poem that is implied to have been penned by Mauberley himself, provides final evidence that damns the hedonist poet. While “Envoi” consciously evoked traditional forms and associations, “Medallion” employs a more radical language; Coyle observes that the language of the first section stands in clear contrast to that of section two, which “is more aggressively and more self-consciously modern” (Coyle 2006: 436). This defies the more classical evaluations of section two in general and “Medallion” in particular as exemplifying inferior quality to section one (see Davie 2004: 64; Nadel 2007: 61); “Medallion,” with its jagged diction and variable feet, is formally closer to the kind of objective effect that Pound wrote about in his earliest statements on imagism. Yet, like with the rest of this section, Mauberley’s near accomplishment condemns him more than if he had no talent at all. “Medallion” shows the poet to be an acute observer, capable of capturing reality in appropriate images; what he lacks, however, is the ability to propel the poem into motion, to make it reflect the vibrancy of nature. Among the poem’s over seventy words there are only three verbs: “utters,” “emerges” and “turn.” Swamped in nouns and compounds, the lyric violates the basic principle of vorticist poetry, which Pound derived from Fenollosa’s insight into Chinese and English: “In translating Chinese, verse especially, we must hold as closely as possible to the concrete force of the original, eschewing adjectives, nouns and intransitive forms wherever we can, and seeking instead strong and individual verbs” (Fenollosa 2005: 105). In Chinese “*thing* and *action* are not formally separated” so that “we can see [...] literally the parts of speech growing up, budding forth one from another” (Fenollosa 2005: 105, emphasis in original). Therefore if the modern poet, according to Pound, should realise that “the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol” (Pound 1968: 5, emphasis in original), then Mauberley violates that rule in his stative “Medallion,” one of whose two intransitively used verbs indicates that “The eyes turn topaz” (Pound 1920: 28): still and lifeless.

CONCLUSION

Section two of *Mauberley* comes to a weary end by suggesting stasis, detachment and lifelessness, all of which would not have seemed particularly unusual as estimation of London in 1920, given numerous poems and novels written to similar effect. One need only remember “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” as well as the Rhymers (Symons’s book of criticism *The Symbolist Movement* won particular plaudits from Eliot) to see that *Mauberley* enters a zone that has in some measure already been delimited. But Pound injects his criticism of the time into the structure of the poem. He stresses that the society has dismissed and cast into oblivion “the better tradition” in favour of mindless and transient entertainment, which has resulted in the War that nearly toppled the functioning of the contemporary European

civilisation. *Mauberley* is built on an ethical assumption that it is incumbent on the new aristocracy to keep creating both intellectual and material goods and to honestly support genius, even if it means surrendering one's authority to a more skilled person. Furthermore, lack of such an ethical stance among the representatives of literary and cultural London is implied to stand behind "the old men's" mendacities and their resultant War. *Mauberley* departs from an aesthetic failure but moves on to unravel its ethical undertones.

The peculiar strength that *Mauberley* possesses seems to be its deeply felt recognition that, as Pound put it later in *ABC of Reading*, "If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays" (Pound 1960: 32). Therefore the ethical dimension of *Mauberley* represents no less than a collapse of the English civilisation that bows to expediency instead of embracing the firmness of tradition. Pound's occasional outrage in the poem may stem from the fact that last time when avant-garde poets were cast asunder, bloodshed on an unheard-of scale ensued. The horror of World War I, which transpires from Pound's occasional references to friends and acquaintances he lost, does not register on *Mauberley* as expressly as it might be expected. After all, the persona of Mauberley may be irksome but only in a way similar to Oscar Wilde's "tired hedonist" Vivian from *The Decay of Lying*. However, the dread that seems to be purged (in a different critical context, one would say "repressed") from *Mauberley* resurfaces elsewhere, in the *Hell Cantos* (xiv and xv); as Robert Casillo summarily observed:

[W]hile Pound invites one to think of Mauberley as [...] incapable of [...] moving intact through the city's 'phantasmagoria,' in the end London terrifies Pound as much, and in the same ways, as it does Mauberley. This is most evident in the phantasmagoric *Hell Cantos*, which disclose the similarity between Pound and his character, and in which Pound flees London and its "impetuous impotent dead."

(Casillo 1985: 63)

It may thus be noted that the ethical crisis, which in *Mauberley* is implicitly posited as standing behind the cultural devaluation of society, continues to simmer in Pound's imagination until the *Hell Cantos* bring a violent release of his pent-up frustration and fear. After all, the age demanding "chiefly a mould in plaster, / Made with no loss of time" in section one is suggested to have led to "the old men's lies" and the Great War. In view of that fact, Mauberley's inability to shake off apathy so that he could use his indubitable poetic talent for continuing the struggles of E.P. seems to indicate that the deadness that mars "Medallion" might result in another catastrophe to civilisation.

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