

“Wastage as never before”: Pound, Williams, and Gendered Turns from Past Poetic Personae

Tom Lewek, 24 May 2016

The first part of this essay’s title, “wastage as never before,” comes from Ezra Pound’s analysis of the First World War and its aftermath in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, published in 1920.

Disillusioned by the “hell” of battle and the “lies” and “liars” that greeted the returning survivors, he couples this statement with “daring as never before” to highlight post-war ambivalence (IV, 184). Wastage draws one way and daring another. Because *Mauberley* explores the creative ambitions and failures of its eponymous subject, however, we can read “wastage as never before” in a different context. “Wastage,” in this reading, represents Mauberley’s own poetic form, and “as never before” exaggerates it; “before” implies temporality and the comparison of one moment to another. The phrase, therefore, becomes a good frame of reference for examining questions of both form and past poetic personae not only in the work of Pound but also in the work his contemporary, William Carlos Williams. Here, the term “past poetic personae” does not suggest strict one-to-one relationships between the authors and their personae. Instead, it suggests that both Pound and Williams use these past poetic personae as foils to other, more present personae who employ forms with little “wastage.” This does not mean that both poets explore these subjects in exactly the same manner. While wasteful form and past poetic personae remain common themes, each writer addresses them in uniquely gendered, specifically masculine ways.

In *Mauberley*, Pound suggests that feminine presence inhibits the realization of a more concise form. The subject’s proximity to women dovetails with his aping of lackluster conventions and failure as a stylist. Only through his expulsion from this feminine literary world can Mauberley begin to break from this past poetic persona and forge a more optimized form.

Meanwhile, in *Spring and All*, Williams constructs and laments a past poetic persona that sought to represent reality with pretty words. Simultaneously, he argues for the energy of a more streamlined form and shears his own verse of needless verbiage and sentiment. The achievement of this form results from an increased attention to the vitality of the imagination, access to which remains entirely masculine throughout the work. For Williams, the ability to marshal the imagination and realize an optimized poetic form becomes a masculine achievement connected to the virility of the male body. Though critics such as Cecelia Tichi have argued that Williams's valorization of the concise, the vital, and the "hard-edged" in poetry emerged out of early twentieth-century discourses on economic efficiency, it also emerges, in the pages of *Spring and All*, from gendered ways of presenting these values. Turning from past to present poetic personae, from wasteful to economical forms, then, relies on the degradation of the feminine for Pound and the elevation of the masculine for Williams—two different but patriarchal views on poetic composition.

*Mauberley* provides a clear example of how Pound conceives of the past poetic persona, maligns wasteful poetic form, and constructs both in gendered, masculine ways. Indeed, the hapless protagonist finds his creative vision hampered by feminine presence:

Beneath the sagging roof  
 The stylist has taken shelter,  
 Unpaid, uncelebrated,  
 At last from the world's welter  
 Nature receives him;

With a placid and uneducated mistress  
 He exercises his talents

And the soil meets his distress. (X, 192)

These stanzas create a constrained setting that underscores the dire situation of the ironically labeled “stylist.” On one end, “the sagging roof” minimizes overhead space and the efficacy of the “shelter” itself; on the other end, the “soil” joins with his downward-oriented distress. By constricting this scene’s space, Pound highlights Mauberley’s own failures to exercise his “talents.” Yet between the sagging roof and the earthy soil there exists “a placid and uneducated mistress,” whose presence suggests poetic failure as much as the setting. Similarly, the reference to “nature” receiving him has a gendered connotation, as it draws on the western artistic convention of associating the natural with the feminine. Even in more bourgeois settings, Mauberly finds himself hampered by feminine presence:

... In the stuffed-satin drawing-room

I await the Lady Valentine’s commands,

...

Poetry, her border of ideas,

The edge, uncertain, but a means of blending

With other strata

Where the lower and the higher have ending; (XII, 193-194)

Lacking control and conviction, the passive protagonist sits in the effete “stuffed-satin drawing-room,” awaiting “commands” from a dull woman. In fact, the Lady Valentine—a doubly feminized name that combines the gendered “Lady” with the sentimentally romantic “Valentine”—does not really understand poetry but uses it, socially, to blend with other classes. Once again, Pound implies that Mauberley’s proximity to women either highlights his creative shortcomings or can only thwart his creative ambitions. Even when he grants his subject some praise, Pound modifies it by referencing some feminized shortcomings. For example, in “The

Age Demanded,” he describes some of Mauberley’s more promising work as “A Minoan undulation, / Seen, we admit, amid ambrosial circumstances” (199). In other words, there exists a more masculine, Bronze Age quality to the composition but more fragrant “circumstances” surround it. “Ambrosial,” in this context, does not suggest the divine as much as it does the affected, the feminized, and that which stands in opposition to the hard-edged “Minoan.”

Mauberley’s proximity to the feminine, combined with other explanations for his failures (e.g. the aping of an overwrought Victorian style, the triumph of middlebrow culture), leads to a messy, incomprehensible style. As Pound summarizes it:

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

Nothing, in short, but maudlin confession (“The Age Demanded,” 200)

While these lines continue to malign the ineffectual Mauberley (the passage begins with “incapable” and the criticism flows from there), they also posit the foundations of a more optimized poetic form. “Emendation” suggests an editorial eye, “conservation” an awareness of past artistic models, “august attraction or concentration” a reverence for writing. More interesting, however, are “refinement of medium” and “elimination of superfluities,” which imply that optimized poetic form must shed itself of unnecessary waste. That Pound sets these ideals on the same line, emphasizing each by placing a caesura between them, articulates their importance in this work’s construction and presentation of a waste-free poetic form—something, in other words, opposed to wasteful, and overly feminine, “maudlin confession.” In the lines that follow, he returns to this theme by describing Mauberley’s work as “Ultimate affronts / to

human redundancies” (“The Age Demanded,” 200). In this context, “affronts” indicates not an attack on “human redundancies” but an inability to eliminate them. He remains a wasteful poet, and, for Pound, waste remains antithetical to optimized poetic form.

Yet *Mauberley* often intimates that its subject does have some innate ability to work in this form. Even as Pound criticizes Mauberley, he implies that some seeds of creative accomplishment might exist within him. Consider, for example, the following stanzas from “Mauberley 1920,” the second part of the work:

“His true Penelope  
Was Flaubert”  
And his tool  
The engraver’s.

Firmness,  
Not the full smile,  
His art, but an art  
In profile; (I, 196)

With Penelope, Pound alludes to Odysseus’s wife faithfully awaiting his return to Ithaca after the Trojan War. With Flaubert, meanwhile, he references the nineteenth-century author known for his concept of *le mot juste* or “the right word.” By joining the two, Pound orients Mauberley’s poetic travels towards a precise use of language. At the moment, however, half measures define his work. “Firmness” and “art” exist, but only in qualified terms. Pound’s own concise construction of these lines—no line uses more than five words—highlights the optimized form that Mauberley might achieve. Similarly, his use of conjunction and punctuation grants them a hard staccato rhythm that accentuates their concision. Only in “Medallion,” the final piece in

*Mauberley*, after his “exclusion from the world of letters,” does Pound’s subject begin to approach this form (“The Age Demanded,” 200). Here, a “sleek head emerges” as do a “basket work of braids” of “metal or intractable amber” and a “suave bounding-line” (“Medallion,” 202). These gestures suggest a potential turn from the past poetic persona defined by “maudlin confession” to a new persona capable of streamlining his art through knowledgeable use of artistic materials (the “metal” or “amber” quoted above). That this turn occurs away from both Mauberley’s “uneducated mistress” and Lady Valentine in her plush drawing room implies, again, that Pound regards feminine presence as a potential pitfall in the achievement of an optimized poetic form.

This wariness of feminine presence in *Mauberley* echoes, in many respects, Pound’s own musings on gender roles and their relationship to poetics. While these musings do not represent this presence as wholly detrimental, they do delineate clear roles for women in a patriarchal system of poetics. As Helen Dennis has argued in *Ezra Pound in Context*, the poet regarded women either as potential muses or as guardians of culture (401, 406). Neither the “uneducated mistress” nor the Lady Valentine live up to these limited, and limiting, feminine roles. The former cannot become a muse because she remains connected with a dilapidated, earthy setting; she cannot become a guardian because she remains uneducated. The latter cannot become a muse or a guardian because she really does not understand poetry. Dennis summarizes Pound’s postscript to a translation of Rémy de Gourmont’s *Natural Philosophy of Love* to underscore these conceptions of gender: “He argues that artistic genius is intimately connected with biological masculinity, whereas woman’s role as conservator of culture is connected with her reproductive functions” (406). In other words, women have a place in the creative sphere but it remains an inferior one. Pound, furthermore, naturalizes this schema through his use of biological language and metaphor to argue that men produce whereas women only reproduce.

Therefore, to realize “artistic genius”—or, in the case of *Mauberry*, an optimized poetic form—one must operate in a masculine sphere. This seems, ultimately, like patriarchy mapped onto poetics.

Pound’s gendered explorations of personae and form are not unique in modernist poetry, however. Williams touches upon the same topics in *Spring and All*. Unlike Pound, though, Williams does not malign the past poetic persona so much as he laments him. The opening pages of the text both establish this trope and align this persona with wasteful poetic form:

Crude symbolism is to associate emotions with natural phenomena such as anger with lightning, flowers with love it goes further and associates certain textures with

Such work is empty...Everything that I have done in the past — except those parts which may be called excellent — by chance, have that quality about them.

It is typified by the use of the word << like >> or that << evocation >> of the << image >> which served us for a time. Its abuse is apparent. (20)<sup>1</sup>

By connecting inferior technique, “crude symbolism,” with past work, “everything I have done in the past,” Williams introduces the past poetic persona as an unrefined and unenlightened writer. He then censures the associated bad poetic form through typographic specificity. Using double angle brackets to separate “<< like >>” from the surrounding words suggests that *Spring and All*, an attempt at optimized poetic form, does not include such superfluities. Similarly, fetishized concepts like “<< evocation >>” and the “<< image >>” should have no place here. This typographic specificity—and, in this example, separation—is not arbitrary. As Michael Davidson has claimed, the new print technologies of the early twentieth century allowed modernist poets “to indicate exactly what values of spacing and word placement they intended...Free verse had gained a new and important technical ally in completing its

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<sup>1</sup> I have reproduced Williams’s typographic marks as accurately as possible, hence the double angle brackets in this passage.

revolution” (13-14). Williams, in other words, made sure that his typography refined his message. The construction of the passage itself, meanwhile, with the admission of less-than-quality form in the middle paragraph, sandwiched between two criticisms of wasteful methods, intensifies the failure of the past poetic persona.

Williams returns to this theme throughout *Spring and All*, highlighting the extent of the past poetic persona’s use of wasteful form. As he elaborates in a later passage,

I think often of my earlier work and what it has cost me not to have been clear. I acknowledge I have moved chaotically about refusing or rejecting most things, seldom accepting values or acknowledging anything.

...My whole life has been spent (so far) in seeking to place a value upon experience and the objects of experience that would satisfy my sense of inclusiveness without redundancy (42)

Again, Williams delves into the past to lament this persona’s shortcomings, and he builds in additional criticisms. Now not only do “crude symbolism” and the superfluous use of “<< like >>” define his work, but so do a lack of clarity and a sense of chaos. At this point, however, Williams begins to turn from criticism alone to criticism coupled with the presentation of poetic ideals. So, though he still laments this earlier work, he also claims “inclusiveness without redundancy” as a model for better poetry. Ultimately, Williams aims to value “experience and the objects of experience” with maximum economy.

Even as his prose begins to underscore the importance of efficiency in poetic composition, it continues to repeat this disdain for similes and a facile focus on the “pretty.” This repetition is not meaningless, though. In fact, at times, it reveals his gendered approach to explaining the differences between past and present poetic personae:



Writing is not a searching about in the daily experience for apt similes and pretty thoughts and images. I have experienced that to my sorrow. It is not a conscious recording of the day's experiences "freshly and with the appearance of reality" — This sort of thing is seriously to the development of any ability in a man, it fastens him down, makes him a — (49)

Once more, *Spring and All* denigrates the use of the word "like" and the fruitless "searching" for supposedly beautiful "thoughts and images" to render in poetic form. Once more, it contends that writing should not be the mimetic representation of nature (the quotes around "freshly and with the appearance of reality" emphasize both a scorn for and a tiredness with this concept). Once more, Williams connects this type of writing to a past poetic persona when he contends that he has experienced this to his "sorrow." The claim that emphasizes on simile, imagery, and appearance in poetry inhibit "the development of any ability in a man" is not a throwaway opinion here. In fact, the additional claims that bad writing "fastens him down" and "makes him a —," with the em dash implying either an expletive or a general sense of frustration, intensifies this sentiment. As I will argue later, Williams conceives of the relinquishing of the old, wasteful, and potentially emasculating poetic form in favor of the new, optimized poetic form as a masculine achievement.

Before exploring the gendered realization of an optimized poetic form in *Spring and All*, however, it seems worthwhile to understand its nature. While Williams's prose explains his thoughts on poetics in a fairly straightforward, manifesto-like manner, his verse demonstrates these thoughts in action. For example, poem II features the concise and condensed line "petals aslant darkened with mauve" to present not only an image but an economy of language (13). Though Williams connects "petals" with "mauve" here, he does not use simile nor does he evoke the image at great length. Instead, between the two nouns of "petals" and "mauve," this line

features one adjective, one noun, and one preposition. Williams, in other words, distills his language to contain the minimum necessary parts of speech. This economy is not consigned to lines, however. In fact, his stanzas also employ it:

Lights  
 speckle  
 El Greco  
 lakes  
 in renaissance  
 twilight  
 with triphammers (XIII, 56)

Here, Williams sets the minimum necessary parts of speech on individual lines: “Lights” (noun, subject), “speckle” (verb), “El Greco” (proper noun, used as an adjective), “lakes” (noun, direct object), “twilight” (another noun), “in renaissance” and “with triphammers” (prepositional phrases). Each component, then, slots into its own place. Similar to the earlier example, this selection eschews simile and its wasteful reliance on the word “like”—the lakes are not like El Greco paintings speckled in light. It also does not linger on the scene, but continually builds in new aspects of it. This optimized form relies on, in Tichi’s words, “the efficient operation of [the poem’s] integrated components, all designed to work for maximal strength and energy output” (258). The allusion to “triphammers” at the end of this passage even conjures the image of an industrial machine churning out work without waste. Both the line and stanza presented above accord with Williams’s more prosaic thoughts on composition. Adopting a painterly idiom, he emphasizes the importance of things themselves: “Here is a shutter, a bunch of grapes, a sheet of music, a picture of sea and mountains (particularly fine) which the onlooker is not for a moment permitted to witness as an ‘illusion’ ...All drawn with admirable simplicity and excellent design —

all a unity” (34-35). Just like no superfluous language mediates the objects found in his verse, nothing superfluous mediates the objects that comprise this scene. No “illusion” (or overdetermined “evocation of the image”) exists and everything comes together via the complementary values of simplicity and design.

Achieving this form, Williams suggests in his prose, stems from recognizing the vitality of the imagination. From its opening pages, *Spring and All* valorizes this as the source for clear, efficient, and energized writing: “To refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force — the imagination” (3). In other words, the ability to capture “that eternal moment” without any redundancy or opacity springs from this “single force.” Williams uses similarly lofty language six pages later, claiming that “the imagination...has destroyed and recreated everything afresh in the likeness of that which it was” (9). This confirms the initial valorization of the imagination and then proceeds to deify it by granting it the omnipotence to destroy and recreate all. Yet the pursuit of and drive to harness the imagination in order to realize an optimized poetic form remains masculine throughout the text. See, for example, the following passage that occurs amid all this praise: “But the men are all good swimmers. They take the women on their shoulders and buoyed on by the inspiration of the moment they churn the free seas with their sinewy arms...It is NEW ! Let us go forward !” (19). The ability to make new, to drive forward, the same type of ability ascribed to the imagination, becomes synonymous with athletic virility. Furthermore, the gender division here—men do, women have things done to them—suggests again that creative achievement means masculine achievement.

The verse of *Spring and All* echoes these sentiments when Williams writes, “That is why boxing matches and / Chinese poems are the same” connecting masculinity with imagination (V, 24). The description of the poems here as Chinese only strengthens the association between

masculinity and the achievement of a streamlined poetic form via this imagination. Literary modernists, especially Pound and Williams, drew on the scholarship of Ernest Fenollosa to present Chinese verse as a model for modern poetry. Fenollosa, a nineteenth-century art historian, had argued that Chinese characters evoke “the dynamic force of nature as a result of [their] ideogrammic, morphological, and syntactic organization” (Zong-Qi 172). As his literary executor (Fenollosa died in 1908), Pound popularized this argument by publishing “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” where, Tichi argues, “his exposition of the Chinese...ideograph demonstrated an entirely verbal basis for parts of speech in English” (285). Verbal, in this context, does not refer to language in general but, instead, to the use of verbs in language. For Fenollosa, verbs assume the primary role in language because they convey nature’s action; prepositions and conjunctions, in this linguistic theory, also become verbs (Tichi 285). In this respect, the “Chinese poems” in the quotation above represent a concentration of action without waste—the basis for optimized poetic form. By equating them with boxing matches, Williams not only illustrates the importance of action but also their inherently masculine qualities.

The gendered access to the imagination, its vitality, and its power to drive optimized poetic form continues throughout *Spring and All*. Williams refers to artists, at one point, as synonymous with “men of imagination” (70). Later, he expands on this and writes, “Sometimes I speak of imagination as a force, an electricity or a medium, a place. It is immaterial which : for whether it is the condition of a place or a dynamization its effect is the same...to liberate the man to act in whatever direction his disposition leads” (92). Given earlier associations between imagination and vitality, the use of “man” in these examples does not seem arbitrary, especially when compared to the divergent uses of “men” and “women” in the swimming metaphor above. Though immaterial whether the imagination is a force, medium, or place, its ability “to liberate

the man,” and allow him to realize the creative importance of his own “disposition,” is anything but. This attitude becomes clearer when Williams likens poetic composition to male maturation (Lewek):

The man of imagination who turns to art for release and fulfilment of his baby promises contends with the sky through layers of demoded words and shapes. Demoded, not because the essential vitality which begot them is laid waste — this cannot be so, a young man feels, since he feels it in himself — but because meanings have been lost through laziness or changes in the form of existance [sic] which have let words empty. (19-20)

Yet again, Williams uses “man” when describing access to the imagination and its fruitfulness. At the same time, he uses “baby promises” and “young man feels, since he feels it in himself” to suggest that acknowledging the power of the imagination is like becoming a man. Wrestling back the “essential vitality” of “words and shapes” from their “demoded,” or mediated, states requires a masculine act. Ultimately, the imagination, the vital component that allows for the turn from wasteful imitator (the past poetic persona) to efficient, energetic composer (the present poetic persona), operates in a masculine sphere in *Spring and All*.

Although economic movements that stressed efficient industrial operations, like Fordism and Taylorism, did influence this turn from wasteful to optimized form, from past to present poetic persona, critics like Tichi sometimes overstate their case. See this passage from *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* for an example: “He needed Frederick Taylor’s Efficiency Movement, which finally did free Williams from the world of decayed romanticism and show him how the blank page could be a construction site for poems of the gear-and-girder world” (262). By reducing Williams’s formal transformation to his own awareness of the Efficiency Movement, she glosses over the gendered aspects of both the transformation itself and its dramatization in the pages of *Spring and All*. Tichi’s own readings,

meanwhile, hint that such aspects do exist in his poems. For example, her commentary on the poem “Good Night” articulates the poet’s elevation of the masculine when she writes, “the domestic order, achieved through the unacknowledged effort of Williams’s wife, pleases the poet appreciative of manufactured things, the spigot, the drain-board, the rubber sandals. Vanished is the songster’s idealization of the ineffable; in its place we find the assertion of a designed composition” (260). Exalting “designed composition,” in this reading, comes at the expense of acknowledging the woman responsible for it. Tichi gestures to this with the phrase “unacknowledged effort of Williams’s wife” but she centers her discussion, ultimately, on the poet’s love of manufactured objects. Even when exploring his fascination with efficiency and its relation to economy of poetic form, her readings of Williams reveal the centrality of gender in his poetics.

Amelia Jones’s writing on Williams in the larger context of the 1920s New York avant-garde helps here, especially its explication of his unease with the female body of the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. Jones’s *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* seeks to recast von Freytag-Loringhoven as a pivotal modernist figure and, in doing so, she frames her argument with gender in mind, writing that we “we are far too attached to the simplistic notion of the avant-garde as a group of heroic (almost always white male) individuals fighting unequivocally against the evils of capitalism and the dumbed-down values of its mass bourgeois culture” (19). To ignore the role of gender when studying the past poetic persona, the efficient form, and the emphasis on the vitality of the imagination in *Spring and All* would be a mistake. As Jones relates, Williams expressed a palpable and misogynistic unease with the body of von Freytag-Loringhoven. In an article from 1921, he describes her as “an old lady” with broken teeth, syphilis, and “bloodygreen sensations” oozing from her decrepit body (Jones 8). Apart from their cruelty, the most striking aspects of

these descriptions are the ways in which they differ from Williams's discussion of the male body. Compare his representation of the Baroness to his representation of the male body in *Spring and All* where the "sinewy arms" of swimmers and the allusion to boxing matches make it seem synonymous with athletic virility. For Jones, these "codes of normative masculinity" define the work of male avant-gardists, including Williams, and arise, in part, from trepidation with the irrationalism of the female body (9). Combining this reading of Williams with one, like Tichi's, that focuses on contemporaneous discourses of efficiency seems to offer a fuller contextual basis for understanding the ways in which achieving an optimized poetic form via the imagination remains a masculine pursuit.

If Pound seems wary of feminine presence because of his patriarchal conceptions of masculinity and femininity and their relations to poetic composition, then Williams seems wary of the female body because it confronts the male body and its metaphorical import when discussing the achievement of an optimized poetic form. Or, to put simply, the two poets share a drive to forge a masculine poetics even as they operate in divergent ways. For Pound, proximity to the feminine has a stultifying effect on the past poetic persona of Mauberley and inhibits his ability to cultivate glimmers of innate talent into a form that wastes little. In fact, feminine presence encourages the worst superfluities in his work and, ultimately, leads to his expulsion from literary society. Paradoxically, this expulsion, by distancing him from the feminine, allows him to begin to forge the tighter, more efficient form that Pound valorizes in *Mauberley*. For Williams, meanwhile, the past poetic persona seems insufficiently masculine, relying on overused simile and overdetermined imagery that produces wasteful work. In opposition to this, *Spring and All* adopts an efficient form that eliminates needless comparative words (e.g. "like" or "as") and shears lines and stanzas so that they include only the necessary parts of speech. Such form, in turn, results from increased access and attention to the imagination—an attention

that Williams defines as virile and an access that remains exclusively masculine. To turn from past to present poetic personae, from wasteful to wasteless form, in other words, means to turn to the masculine for both poets.



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