

“Time and Space in Eliot’s and Pound’s Modernist Conceptions of History”¹

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At the turn of the century, philosophical speculation questioned the very nature of historical knowledge. In opposition to the prevailing positivist assumptions, the philosophical theories of Bradley, Dilthey, Croce, Bergson, Ortega, Burkhardt or Collingwood divested historic truth of pretensions of scientific objectivity. Directly, or indirectly, their theories were to have a bearing on Pound and Eliot’s modernist poetics of history. Eroded by the relativism and solipsism inherent in romantic aesthetics, the premises of nineteenth-century historicism were foundering. For all its claims to scientific objectivity, it became evident that positivist historicism could not extricate itself from the interpreter’s own historicity and contemporary prejudications. In *Presuppositions of Critical History* (1874), Bradley argued: “the past varies with the present, and can never do otherwise because it is always the present on which it rests” (32).

In the new hermeneutic, historical re-construction was envisaged as a process of aesthetic intuition during which the interpreter borrowed the tools of the visionary artist in order to resurrect the “lived experience” of a particular time that was no longer there. Thus, historical inquiry like the poetic quest was a kind of existential encounter across time, grounded, as Longenbach persuasively remarks, in the rediscovery of a present “I in the Thou” of the past (16).

The aim of this paper is to analyze the way in which Pound’s and Eliot’s Modernist poetics assume the task of what Longenbach calls the “existential” historian (32) who

¹ I am indebted to Walter Baumann for his generous feedback, assistance and support. The following abbreviations are used in this paper: ABC—Pound, *ABC Reading*; CEP—*Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*; CPP—*The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*; GB—Pound, *A Memoir of Gaudier Brzeska*; GK—Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*; LE—*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*; SE—Eliot, *Selected Essays*; SR—Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*.

endeavors in Bradley's words "to breathe the life of the present into the death of the past" (*Presuppositions* 32). I will argue that stylistically, this approach of time does away with the temporal dimension inherent in a literary text and privileges instead spatiality, which is a characteristic feature of the figurative arts.

In *Laokoon* (1766), a study of aesthetic perception Lessing defined plastic arts as spatial since the visible aspects of objects, form and color, are presented as juxtaposed in an instant of time; and poetry as temporal, since it is composed of sounds and words that unfold sequentially in time. Modernist poetry more than any other poetic movement increases the spatiality of the poetic word and brings it closer to the technique and principles of abstract art.

The new epic rests on the collage-like technique, Pound's "ideogrammic method", which explores the pictorial possibilities of language. Eliot's version of the Poundian "ply over ply" (C 4/15) technique, is the mythical method, which together with his theory of impersonality and "the objective correlative" contributes to the space-logic of modern poetry.

Early on in his career, Eliot warned that the historical sense was not a form of "archaeological reconstruction" (SE 13). While Pound commended Frobenius's historical understanding whose "archeology", "is not retrospective, it is immediate" (GK 57). The German ethnologist and archeologist believed that every culture has a shape, an essence, a soul, formed by its own ideas at a given time in history, which he called *paideuma*. Pound's *paideuma* (cultural instinct, active culture), draws on this energetic "tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period" (GK 57).

Eliot's historical sense rests on Bradley's sense of experience as an originally unified whole and presents certain similarities to Jung's notion of the unconscious with its blend of individual psychological history and mythic time. Eliot conceived tradition in philosophically idealistic terms as a universal unifying reality "a living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written" (SE 17). He referred to the existence of an

“unconscious community” cutting across ages “between the true artists of any time” (SE 24).

Eliot’s saw the past as a living integrative part of the present involving “a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (SE 14). Along the same lines, Pound had affirmed in *The Spirit of Romance*: “All ages are contemporaneous” (SR 6). “The past,” Eliot was to write later in “Dry Salvages,” “has another pattern and ceases to be a mere sequence / Or even development” (CPP 132). No longer based on patterns of linear progress, history was a palimpsest in which the layers of time were laden with the voices of the dead. The real structure of history amounted to “a pattern of timeless moments” (“Little Gidding”, CPP 144). Along the same lines, Pound argued: “we do NOT know the past in chronological sequence . . . but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time“ (GK 60).

By 1918, Eliot had outlined in “The Hawthorne Aspect” the doctrine of modernist aesthetics and predicated modernity on an immersion in the past (47-53). Pound was Eliot’s ideal poet in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” who had showed him how to “proceed by acquiring the entire past” (“The Method of Mr. Pound” 1065). Eliot saw Pound’s translations as forms of creative writing that revitalizes a tradition. In translation, the poet became midwife to a past. An eloquent example of this strategy of “calling the past to life” (Eliot, “A Note on Ezra Pound 1918” 5) is Pound’s early poem “Francesca” (1908):

You came in out of the night
 And there were flowers in your hands,
 Now you will come out of a confusion of people,
 Out of a turmoil of speech about you.

I who have seen you amid the primal things
 Was angry when they spoke your name
 In ordinary places.
 I would that the cool waves might flow over my mind,

And that the world should dry as a dead leaf,
 Or as a dandelion seed-pod and be swept away,
 So that I might find you again,
 Alone. (CEP 121)

Pound's evocation of Francesca is a love poem. He recalls Dante's heroine, Francesca da Rimini who was condemned in the second Circle of Hell for having fallen in love with Paolo while reading a book about love (Canto V: 1308-1321). While she emerges out of the night with flowers in her hands, the poet is jealous of the other people who dare speak about her and thus, defile her. He is angry when in their "turmoil of speech" they mention her name and drag her into "ordinary places". He resents the "confusion of people" and wants an intimate encounter with her. He is jealous of everybody who approaches her even in speech. He wishes the world to be swept away "like a dandelion seed-pod" so that he can have her only for and to himself in a solitary and loving encounter in the "cool waves" of his imagination where he might find her again, "alone".

Pound's high method of poetry consisted in "expressing oneself through historical masks" ("The Method of Mr Pound" 1065), which reflected Eliot's own conception of history. His supreme mask was that of Isis. The title of his literary essays, *I Gather the Limbs of Osiris* (1911-2) in which he announced his "new method in scholarship", was a figurative representation of his poetics of history. Like Isis, the goddess who re-assembles the dead strewn limbs of Osiris in order to ensure his resurrection, the poet will have to infuse life into the ruins of the past. The reassembling of the fallen god is a trope for the poet's endeavor to gather "from air a live tradition" (Canto 81/542) in pursuit of the "beauty lost in years" (*The Classic Noh* 27).

The motif of the journey to the dead is central to Pound's oeuvre and to his particular method of "making it new." Odysseus pouring blood for the ghosts in Canto I is the metaphor of Pound's historical reconstruction (Longenbach 17). Just as Odysseus gives life to the ghosts so as to penetrate the mysteries of the past with which to shape his

future, Pound will give voice to the ghosts of the dead that will resonate throughout the Cantos in the space of modernity.

Pound explained that he was writing “to resist the view that Europe and civilization are going to Hell” (Hall 57). *The Cantos* are written in the Romantic belief that by the act of writing history by translating documents, visualizing ghosts, etc., the poet helps build a better culture. By reawakening the voices of the dead he reenacts the essential mystery of a forgotten past needed for the foundation of a new civilization.

Pound defined the epic as “a poem including history” (LE 86) and *The Cantos* narrate “the tale of the tribe” while representing at the same time a “record of personal struggle”. They attest to Pound’s unique form of life-writing and to his ideal and personal involvement with history. His formal provocation is “to build up a circle of reference — taking the modern mind to be the medieval mind with wash after wash of classical culture poured over it since the Renaissance” (Hall 39).

“Make it new” was Pound’s particular way of recovering lost experience and reconstituting it anew for a new age. The past was re-grounded in the sensibility of the present and modified by a modern interpretative consciousness. *The Waste Land* is the poetical illustration of Eliot’s historical sense which, “compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, ... with a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer ... has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” (SE 14). Eliot’s historical sense culminated in an anthropological quest for origins. He contended that the poet “should be aware of the stratifications of history that cover savagery” and reach into the primitive, the unconscious foundations of our psyche (“War-Paint and Feathers” 1919, 1036).

The Waste Land like *The Cantos* sets up correspondences, analogies and equivalences between different cultures belonging to various time periods. The poems establish links between different sets of beliefs that lie at the foundations of “the mind of Europe”, a

mind that “abandons nothing en route” (SE 16), conceived as a repository for the individual and the collective memory.

And precisely this extra-temporal conception of time makes *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* spatial poems. The interpenetration of past and present is the Bergsonian *durée*. Time is no longer objective, it does not consist of causal progressions, its clear-cut boundaries are dissolved and their differences wiped out in favor of a reality that seems extra-temporal. Thus past and present are apprehended spatially in a timeless unity. As Joseph Frank aptly remarks *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos* are like Mallarmé’s *Coup de dés*, hybrid pictographic poems in which linear stories are dissolved and in which synchronic relations prevail over diachronic ones. They dislocate the temporality of language.

Pound argued that the modern epic would have to have “a form that would not exclude something merely because it didn’t fit” (Hall 38). It simultaneously expressed the modernist yearning for universality and the modern consciousness of fragmentation. Its new polyphonic structure presented a texture of discontinuities, open endings, and disruption of linear sequences.

In his 1912 imagist manifesto, Pound defined the image as “that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (LE 4). The image led to the vortex “a radiant node or a cluster [...] from which, and through which, and into which images are constantly rushing” (GB 92). The image is not a pictorial representation of a reality, but composes a spatial complex of disparate ideas and emotions, that went counter ordinary discourse and mimetic representations, and which is represented spatially in a moment of time. Pound said the image had to confer a “sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits [...] a sense of sudden growth” (LE 4). The image no longer unfolds in time as a succession of words, but takes on the attributes characteristic to plastic arts whose visible aspects have a spatial dimension and are perceived in an instant of time. It presents no longer a naturalistic

photography of the real, but a lens through which to look at reality and reconstruct it anew: “the image is the word beyond formulated language” (“Vorticism”, GB 94-106).

Pound’s ideogrammic method operates spatially by juxtaposing different images and consists of using “abbreviated pictures As pictures” (ABC 21). The vortex is rooted in the Chinese ideogram which “does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things” (ABC 21).

Pound explains in *The ABC of Reading*, that “red” in a Chinese ideogram is embodied by a set of images: “rose, iron rust, cherry, flamingo” (22), thus the abstract concept is anchored in concrete elements and immediate experience. The ideogram synthesizes identity in difference, and reconciles conceptual unity with sensory multiplicity.

Akin to the principle of the ideogram that holds together disparate elements, is Eliot’s conception of the poet’s mind which “form[s] new wholes” out of equally disparate elements when he “falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have nothing to do with each other” (SE 287).

Pound made the ideogram the structuring principle of *The Cantos*: a typical example of which can be found at the beginning of Canto IV:

Palace in smoky light,
Troy but a heap of smouldering boundary stones,
ANAXIFORMINGES! Aurunculeia!
Hear me. Cadmus of Golden Prows! (4/13)

This is not very different from *The Waste Land*’s discontinuous syntax in which words lose their prescribed, predictive relations. I have chosen the last lines of *The Waste Land*, but I could have chosen any other passage, since coherent sequences are maintained only in small chunks of verse, in the same way in which any other passage of the *Cantos* forms a different ideogram:

I sat upon the shore
 Fishing, with the arid plain behind me
 Shall I at least set my lands in order?
London Bridge is falling down falling down falling down
Poi s'ascose nel foco che gli affina
Quando fiam uti chelidon—O swallow swallow
Le Prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie
 These fragments I have shored against my ruins
 Why then Ile fit you. Hieronymo's mad againe.
 Datta. Dayadhvam. Damyata.
 Shantih shantih shantih (CPP 50)

Word groups lose their logical coherence, they follow one another disconnectedly, with no casual meaning or sense of sequence. The new aesthetic of the fragmentary is part of the cognitive process itself. And meaning is attained only when the poem is grasped in its unity as a whole.

The Cantos like *The Waste Land* is a poem of “fragments shored against ruins”. Pound repeats Eliot’s line twice in his *Cantos*. The discontinuous, open-ended nature of the collage is an invitation to constant interpretations on behalf of reader which become integral to the meaning and compositional structure of the text.

Eliot’s own version of Pound’s “ideogrammic method” was the “mythical method” with which he hoped to establish a “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity”² so as to make “the modern world possible for art”. The mythical method allows for a realistic portrayal of modern history while it operates a quest for the anthropological roots of the modern psyche and a recovery of its archetypal realities. Besides the principle of impersonality and the objective correlative, myth is Eliot’s

² T. S. Eliot, “*Ulysses, Order and Myth*”, *Dial*, LXXV/5 (November 1923), 483; reproduced in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1975, 177.

experimental form with which to counter mimetic naturalism and with which to build a new geometry of interpenetrating, intersubjective elements that shapes the non-discursive, non-linear space of interior life charged with the simultaneities and synchronicities of consciousness.

Eliot like Pound brings together the clash of different cultures and historical time periods by identification of modern characters with mythical, legendary and historical prototypes. History goes beyond its historical limits and dissolves into timelessness. Past and present are apprehended spatially forming a timeless unity in a juxtaposition in which time and sequence disappear. When historical imagination is transformed into myth, the characters, actions and events that took place at a particular time exist only in so far as they reveal their prototypical, ideal, archetypal reality. Thus history exists only if assimilated in a mythical world, striving towards a timeless complex of significance, a tendency analogous to most modernist texts.

As Charles Altieri convincingly argues, Eliot's notion of impersonality and that of the objective correlative helped develop an abstract poetic imaginative space inseparable from contemporary experiments in abstract visual arts (189-209). While the objective correlative unites subjectivity with its objects, impersonality allows for a perspectival embodiment of psychic forces and tensions that undermine the ego's effort to impose a single interpretive strategy onto the flux of reality. By means of this strategy, Eliot rescued art from its mimetic representations and invented a new means of the dramatization of psychic forces and inner conflicts.

Both *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* produce a radical transformation of aesthetic structure which goes against the laws of language, in which temporality, and or narrative sequence disappear. Like nonfigurative plastic arts, modern poetry adopts a space-logic. The syntactical structure dissolves into word groups that seem disconnected and illogical. Meaning does not derive from the logic of language which draws on a causal, consecutive, temporal order and it can be completed only when all the scattered

references and cross references can be grasped comprehensively in relation to one another.

The spatial form of the Pound and Eliot's modern epic arises from the attempt to convey the non-temporary dimension of time. The instances of visionary apprehension, the non-temporary quality of revelatory moments that abound in Eliot and Pound make the text crystallize in spatial formations. Time is no longer an objective and causal progression, but a continuum in which past and present coexist and form a timeless unity. Pound and Eliot's method is similar to that of Proust who in Ramón Fernández's words "gives time the value and characteristics of space ... in affirming that different parts of time reciprocally exclude and remain external to each other" (qtd. Frank 27).

Like Pound and Eliot, Joyce and Proust also pushed the epic in the direction of spatiality. Joyce's *Ulysses* like Pound's *Cantos* draw on a vast number of references and cross references which relate to each other independently of the time sequence of the narrative and which create a meaningful pattern only when they are grasped by the reader as a whole. Grasping the unity means placing an unsurpassable burden on the reader who has to piece together the fragments of the text. This is easy in the 434 lines of *The Waste Land*, but especially difficult in the case of the 824 pages long *Cantos*.

Eliot and Pound's poetics privilege a complex mode of ever-shifting temporal dislocations, narrative and rhetorical discontinuities and unexplained alternations of past and present, reality and myth. Within the framework of these montages, dramatic action loses its linear progression and ceases to compose narrative and chronological sequences (Levenson 201).

Both in *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land* stories have no beginning, no middle and no end. Narrative strategy is supplanted by an allusive strategy of textual suggestiveness that does not advance the narrative thread but creates instead a continuous web of new associations in which past and present coexist in a strange synchronicity that annuls time. Their meaning becomes evident only in juxtapositions that crystallize in an instant of

time. The modern poem with its polyphonic structure, shifting of points of view articulates an increasingly non-naturalistic aesthetic, which resembles abstract art, and translates into poetics of increased spatiality.

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