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Word on the Street: Reimagining the American Modernist Canon Through Vernacularism

By Danyal Rahman

Advisor: Wendy Graham

Spring 2020



“I was
And I no more exist;
“Here drifted
An Hedonist”
—Pound, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley

Thank you to the Vassar English department for cultivating a lifelong passion for art and literature. Special thanks to Wendy Graham, *la migliore fabbra*, for her guidance and counsel throughout this project and my English career.

Objective

Pound's "Make it New" battle cry perhaps best summarized the experimentalist objectives of Modernist art. Among the 20th-century commotion of automobiles and industry and under the towering shadows of warplanes and newly built skyscrapers, intellectuals sought to reformat their expression to properly tackle the complexities of an emerging modernity. Modernism was intended to symbolize a breakaway from 19th-century realism and bespeak the start of a newly forming cultural identity across many artistic media, including music, painting and literature. Ironically, however, Pound's famous slogan was not new at all. Rather, the ancestry of the phrase is traced to 12th century neo-Confucian writer Chu Hsi (1130-1200). Chu Hsi's writings were translated to French by Guillaume Pauthier in 1858, and eventually read by Pound in his early engagements with Chinese translation and Confucian philosophy in the 1910s (Wilhelm 27). While "Make it New" is undoubtedly a powerful summation of Modernism's audacious practices, this often-overlooked genealogy of the catchphrase raises several questions—how much is Modernism indebted to outside sources? What other influences on the Modernist project are neglected?

Despite Modernism's wide scope of interpretation, history retrospectively isolates it to a movement lasting from 1910-1930, dominated by white men, and scrupulously divided into sub-movements such as Futurism, Surrealism, Dadaism, and every other avant-garde "ism" that Europe had to offer. While Modernism is undoubtedly indebted to both periodization and European influences, I argue that this compartmentalization is unnecessarily exclusive and counterintuitive to the movement's initiative of deconstructing conventional definitions of art. Embedded in Modernism's breakaway from traditionalism was a dissolution of traditional barriers of class, race, and ethnicity in art that is ignored by history and the canon.

The convergence of colloquialism with high-brow art is most distinct in American Modernism, due to the country's rapidly evolving sociopolitical landscape, cultural composition, and melting pot identity. American Modernism signified a breach between Euro-American elite audiences and the proletariat/ethnic classes that were previously barred entry to the intellectual artistic sphere. This is evident particularly in literature, as American writers assimilated vernacular elements such as folk, music, slang, non-white, and non-elite settings, in experimental engagements with the philosophy of language through their writing.

To be perfectly clear, my intention is not to disparage the European influences on American literary Modernism. Rather, through tracking vernacularism, I propose that the American Modernist literary canon is much more diverse than its usual classifications, and strongly borrows from closely periodized literary movements. The category requires a reimagining of the writers and ideologies it encompasses. While the diversified canon I argue for would obviously include a plethora of early 20th-century American writers, I instead elect to focus on Whitman and McKay, so that I may include varied elements of colloquialism from vulgarism to multi-ethnicism. Though not considered Modernists per se, McKay and Whitman's experiments with vernacularism ramify through the quintessential American Modernist poems of Pound, Eliot, and Toomer.

Overview

At the core of each writers' use of the vernacular are deeply nuanced relationships with Euro-American culture, the literary canon, and various philosophies of language. While American Modernism's relationship with vernacularism is easily traceable in the close reading provided later, these in-depth overviews provide a roadmap of the American literary canon's relationship with vernacularism such that the influences on American Modernism are made apparent.

Though I strongly caution against compartmentalization, I've divided the relevant writers into two main groups for the sole purpose of structural clarity. I list McKay and Whitman as "Vernacular-Modernists," as I consider their early experiments with the vernacular to be part of the American Modernist project. Eliot and Pound, though they engage with vernacularism, I label as the as "High-Modernists," as they are the most eminent figures of the American Modernist movement and are commonly attributed to traditional classification of the American Modernist canon. As a testament to Modernism's fluidity, I place Toomer in his own category, because his work traverses the boundaries between the Vernacular Modernist and High-Modernist tendencies.

The Vernacular Modernists – Whitman and McKay

Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

"The Americans are going to be the most fluent and melodious voice people in the world—and the most perfect users of words. Words follow character—nativity, independence, individuality."

—Walt Whitman, *An American Primer*

Towards the end of his life, Whitman was reported to have called *Leaves of Grass*, arguably his crowning achievement as a writer, "only a language experiment" (AP). Placing the comicality of this reduction aside, *Leaves of Grass*' function as a "language experiment" is

nevertheless important, as it signifies Whitman's aim to push the boundaries of what was acceptable in poetry. Whitman particularly does this through his use of the vernacular in the form of folk, multiculturalism, musicality, and, perhaps most of all, through explicit bodily and sexual imagery. The experimental nature of *Leaves of Grass* is found through a whole-hearted embrace of a language that was previously taboo in literature—Whitman even went as far as to sign the first printed edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1885) as “Walt Whitman, an American... / Disorderly, fleshy, and sensual.”¹ Whitman's reasoning for glorifying colloquialism in his poetics is directly related to his sentiment that language and writing should be the primary tools in shaping a distinct American identity that was autonomous with respect to both European culture and literary tradition.

In a voice that echoes that of future Modernists, Whitman frames the need for a new American dialect that is properly fitted to a rapidly evolving modernity, stating “In America, an immense number of new words are needed, to embody the new political facts...stating that all that is to be said in modes that fit the life and experience of the Indianan, the Michigianian, [and] the Vermonter...of the vital equality of women with men...to supply the copious trains of facts, feelings, arguments, and adjectival facts, growing out of all new knowledges” (AP 10) To Whitman, the single most integral element of the American dialect he sought to create was that it was inclusive of all identities. Whitman viewed elitism in language as a means of censorship and erasure to the common man, and consequently used the vernacular to dissolve a predominance in language that was refined around Europeanism, urbanity, and the upper class.²

¹ This quote is found in “Song of Myself.”

² It is important to note that Whitman still held the English in high regard, stating “Never will I allude to the English Language or tongue without exultation...of all that America has received from the past, from the mothers and fathers of laws, arts, letters &c, by far the greatest inheritance is the English Language—so long in growing—so fitted.” (AP 30).

Whitman speaks explicitly on his affinity for “crude language” in his essay, “Slang in America” (1885), as he embraces region-specific neologisms as a means of linguistic enrichment. He extols the Tennessee slang of “barefoot whiskey” for straight liquor, and New York argot such as “sleeve buttons” for cotton balls, remarking that “its [language’s] final decisions are made by the masses, people nearest the concrete, having most to do with actual land and sea.” Quite progressively for his time period, Whitman also lauded the dialects of minority groups, in the form of both indigenous and African-American patois. In his musings on nomenclature, Whitman argues that America should discard European onomastics and instead embrace “aboriginal names.” This opinion was readily reflected in his poems. Whitman refers to Long Island in its Native American dialect as “Paumanok” in his work, “Starting from Paumanok.” Regarding black dialect, Whitman was appreciative of its musical quality, stating that its development would give way to a “native grand opera in America”³ and noted that its rhythmic structure provided a better cadence to speech.⁴

Whitman’s language embraced the colloquial in a fashion that looked beyond culture and region as well. In his initiative to speak as the ideal democratic voice, Whitman recognized the need for his language to include people and themes that were commonly overlooked to the new American society he sought to create. Breaking down socioeconomic barriers, Whitman embraced the slang of the poor and laboring class, stating that “many of the words among fighting men, gamblers, thieves, [and] prostitutes, are powerful words. These words ought to be collected, —the bad words as well as the good.” Whitman’s vernacularism also embraces the corporeal, often through lust and intoxication, stating that “no man can have a great vocation

³ Whitman also held opera in a high regard and adapted operatic form throughout his work. His poem “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” employs both the recitative and the aria.

⁴ Though there is some contention on Whitman’s views on black people and civil rights, he was still vocally anti-slavery, and considered it to be morally abhorrent. Later black authors such as Langston Hughes, June Jordan, and Ralph Ellison all cited Whitman as a vital influence on their work (“Whitman and Race.”)

who has no experience with woman and no woman who has no experience with men...the charm of the voice follows the chaste drench of love” (AP 10). As a man who often found himself bearing the brunt of derogatory accusations regarding his politics, class, and sexuality, Whitman’s staunchly uncensored language was his method of claiming autonomy for himself and those whom he viewed as neglected by the American project.

Claude McKay (1889-1948)

“I desired to achieve something new, something in the spirit and accent of America. Against its might throbbing force, its grand energy and power and bigness, its bitterness burning in my black body, I would raise my voice to make a canticle of my reaction.”

—Claude McKay, *A Long Way Home*

Though McKay’s most prolific years (1910-1930) were concurrent with the American Modernist movement, many literary critics avoid labeling him as a Modernist, and instead isolate him solely as a contributor to the Harlem Renaissance movement. On a surface level, this is an apt classification. Throughout his career, McKay divested himself of the Modernist tendency to break from formal poetic structures and opted to publish a multitude of sonnets despite the protests of his critics, claiming that sonnet form “set his poetry free.” However, to read McKay’s sonnets as traditional, I argue, overlooks both his experimentation in linguistics and his focus around grotesqueries in black experience. Though McKay certainly composed within traditional Western style, his work blurred the lines between canonical European literature and the colloquial themes of both Jamaican patois and African American living.

Early on in his life, McKay was exposed to British literature in the form of Milton, Shakespeare, and the Romantics. Born into Jamaican peasantry, however, he was encouraged to integrate language characteristics of Jamaican vernacular to Western convention. McKay would go on to write and publish two collections of poetry written nearly entirely in Jamaican patois, *Constab Ballads* (1912) and *Songs of Jamaica* (1912). Even though these collections clearly

avored Western regularity in rhythmical and metrical structures, McKay innovated radical modifications to poetic language to the extent that both collections contained additional footnotes to ensure that they were understood by a public, English-speaking audience. McKay blends Western form and structure with a subject matter that explored quotidian struggles of the Jamaican peasantry, such as agriculture, police brutality, and inequalities in socioeconomic hierarchies, in their own native language.

McKay's engagement with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s continued the practice of deconstructing the barrier between canonical Western literature and black experience, particularly through the lens of the New Negro movement. Siding with contemporaries such as Alain Locke, McKay subscribed to the notion that black art should prioritize the realism of black experience, rather than acting solely as a vehicle for collective uplift.⁵ Though shifting away from Jamaican patois, McKay continued to use Western metrical forms to describe the grotesque struggles of African-American life. Sonnets such as "Harlem Shadows" and "The Tropics in New York" harshly engage with the sexual and economic subjugation of African-Americans, while his "violent sonnets" such as "If We Must Die" worked to dispel the fallacy that indignant, combative poetry was inherently unpoetic. McKay's most integral contribution to the Harlem Renaissance movement was in the form of his first novel, *Home to Harlem* (1928), which became the first Harlem Renaissance work to become a nationwide bestseller. The novel's inclusion of drugs, prostitution, violence, homosexuality, and overall hedonism caused the novel to be met with a bifurcated reception among black contemporaries—DuBois, famously remarked that the book left him "nauseated" and that "after the dirtier parts of its filth, I [DuBois] feel distinctly like taking a bath" (Lowney). Despite the inclusion of seemingly vulgar themes, *Home*

⁵ See: Alain Locke's essay *Enter the New Negro*.

to Harlem encapsulated the ideology that McKay shared with the New Negro movement—that though African-American life contained grotesque elements, beauty could still be found in it.

Quite clearly, both Whitman and McKay sought to poeticize facets of American society that they believed to be overlooked, and integrated both multiethnic and proletariat themes with elite literary conventions. Their engagements with the vernacular were commonly rooted in their strong loyalties to American democratism and equality. Whitman's poetry was an overt statement of his unabashed patriotism, as demonstrated when he states, "O Democracy, to serve you ma femme! / For you, for you, I am trilling these songs" in *Leaves of Grass*' "For You O Democracy" (1892). McKay, due to the racism he encountered, had a less positive relationship with America. However, in "America" (1921), he expresses his love for the country, stating, "Although she feeds me bread of bitterness / And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth...I will confess / I love this cultured hell that tests my youth." In the same poem, McKay also foresees social progress in the country's future, stating, "Darkly I gaze into the days ahead, / And see her [America's] might and granite wonders there." The Americanism that Whitman and McKay espouse is the very criteria that critics use to deny them a place in the American Modernist canon. Regarding Eliot and Pound, literary critic Henry Regnery states, "it was part of European, not American, cultural life that they made their contribution to literature." Critics such as Regnery incorrectly attribute the Modernist movement to solely European aesthetes. Such a conception is easily dispelled by tracing the philological parallels between the Vernacular Modernists to those of the High Modernists. Before I continue to do this, however, I first propose that the reason that the likes of Whitman and McKay are distinguished from the High Modernists lies in an overestimation of the effects of European avant-gardism on American Modernist art and literature.

The 1913 Armory Show – The “Start” of American Modernism

“Art is nothing to do with the coat you wear. A top-hat can well hold the Sixtine. A cheap cap could hide the image of Kephren.”

—*Blast Magazine*, Manifesto I

Historians and critics alike cite the 1913 Armory Show, a gallery put on by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors in both New York and Chicago, as the inception of Modernism in America. Even though two thirds of the exhibits were paintings by Americans, the show’s critical acclaim and controversy were attributed to the European works on display, in the form of Fauvist, Cubist, and Expressionist paintings and sculptures.

Accustomed to Realism in visual art, Americans were largely uninformed of the experimental techniques that were being used by pioneer painters such as Duchamp, Picasso, and Van Gogh. As such, the reception to the show was understandably mixed. Regarding Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, arguably the most controversial piece in the show, critics referred to it as “an explosion a shingle factory,” and comically lambasted it as “*Rude Descending a Staircase*” (Stamburg). In art article titled “A Layman’s View of an Art Exhibition,” even former President Teddy Roosevelt weighed in on the controversy, though he took a more middle-of-the road stance. While Roosevelt applauded the “need of showing to our people in this manner the art forces which of late have been at work in Europe,” he also believed the exhibit to be too experimental in nature, stating that “change may mean death and not life, and retrogression instead of development.” Interestingly, in his criticism, Roosevelt compares the work of Cubists to his “Navajo rug.” While this may seem to be only a belittling quip, this comment insinuates that to some degree, such visual aesthetics were already somewhat familiar to him in America. In fact, American painters of the time such as Marsden Hartley heavily drew

from the very “primitive” Native American aesthetics that Roosevelt uses to deride the Cubists.⁶ Roosevelt’s nescience in this situation is repeated contemporaneously, as historians and critics continue to devalue the experimental efforts of America’s domestic Modernists. While the Armory Show was undoubtedly heavily influential on American art, it also represented a sidelining of the American experimentalists on display.

Prior to the Armory show, American visual artists were already creating nonrepresentational artwork with a style that is typically attributed to the movements showcased in the 1913 exhibit. A prime example of this is in the artistic school promoted by Stieglitz, who is often credited for legitimizing photography as an expressive medium. Fighting against both censorship and traditionalism, Stieglitz galvanized the experimentalism of younger artists by providing them with platforms such as his famous “291” exhibition gallery (Lee Morgan). Take, for example, the works of Arthur Dove. Paintings such as *Cow* (1912) and *Sentimental Music* (1913) apply concepts of merged vantage points and visual abstraction akin to those of the Fauvists and Cubists. Though they occurred slightly after the Armory show, similar styles of abstraction are found in the early charcoal drawings of Georgia O’Keefe, which experimented with atypical color tones and shapes to create nonconcrete visuals.⁷

Unsurprisingly, the concurrent schools of visual and literary art engaged in heavy dialogue. In a similar fashion to the art world, the European avant-gardism illustrated in the Armory Show did, in fact, greatly inform abstraction in literary aesthetics. Regarding the Armory Show, Harriet Monroe, a writer, literary critic, and patron of the likes of Eliot and Pound, claimed in the *Sunday Tribune* that “these radical artists are right. They represent a search for a new beauty” and “a longing for new versions of truth unobserved” (Vitale). However, as in

⁶ See Marsden Hartley’s *Indian Composition* (1914)

⁷ See: O’Keefe’s *Drawing XIII* (1915-1916)

visual art, it would be improper to accredit all of literary American Modernism's experimentalism to European avant-gardism. In fact, much of the quintessential philosophies behind the literary aesthetics of American Modernism were rooted in direct repudiation to the larger schools of European avant-gardism. This is easily traceable through the Vorticist movement. Though the Vorticist movement took place in Britain, Ezra Pound took a pioneer role in the movement's publishing during his expatriation. In the first edition of the Vorticist magazine *Blast* (1914), the Vorticist Manifesto explicitly states, "We do not want to change the appearance of the world, because we are not Naturalists, Impressionists, or Futurists (the latest form of Impressionism), and do not depend on the appearance of the world for our art." While the Vorticist movement was English-focused, Pound's involvement in both the movement's inception and polemics strongly suggest that many of the Vorticist tenets that informed literary Modernism were uniquely American. For example, the Vorticist Manifesto states that "[In Vorticism] the Man in the Street and the Gentleman are equally ignored." Like Whitman and McKay, who sought to beautify the lives and speech of costermongers through poetry, the Vorticist movement aimed to dissolve the barrier between elite circles and the common man and used art and poetry as a tool. At its core, Vorticism intended to establish an artistic movement that shunned traditional forms of elitism in terms of education and class.⁸

Given that Pound had already been exposed to Whitman by the time of his involvement with Vorticism,⁹ it comes as no surprise that many of core Vorticist tenets directly align with the ideals of creating universal inclusivity in art for which the likes of Whitman and McKay were

⁸ The Vorticist Manifesto in *Blast* contains a myriad of other declarations for universal inclusivity. Among other examples are phrases such as "It [*Blast Magazine*] will not appeal to any particular class, but to the fundamental and popular instincts in every class and description of the people, TO THE INDIVIDUAL," and "education (art education and general education) tends to destroy the creative instinct."

⁹ For reference, Pound wrote "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" in 1909. Though this was a year after his expatriation to London, it was still several years before the first issue of *Blast* would be published in 1915.

advocating. While history is often fixated on American Modernism's borrowings from European schools of avant-gardism, the very opposite may be true in certain literary spheres. Though America's artistic and literary exchange with Europe certainly allowed the diffusion of European ideals into American literature, such exchange should be viewed as dialectical, as American ideals were reciprocally sent to Europe. The expatriation of Pound and Eliot should be regarded as an export of the unique experimentalism that American literature was undertaking in the form of vernacularism.

High Modernists

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

"The thesis I defend is: that America has a chance for Renaissance and that certain absurdities in the manners of American action are, after all, things of the surface and not of necessity the symptoms of sterility or even of fatal disease."

—Ezra Pound, *Patria Mia*

As the forefather of the American Modernist movement, Pound's writing was significantly influenced by an objective of elevating the colloquial American lifestyle to the perceived high style of European tradition. Noting the "animal vigor" and unique cultural makeup of the American, Pound exalts New York's architecture in Pennsylvania Station and skyline, stating that "Is it anything but normal that architecture should be the first to answer the summons [of Renaissance]?" (PM 28). Though Pound believed that America was on the brink of a Renaissance in areas such as architecture, his views of American literature and language were significantly less optimistic. Pound was incredibly dissatisfied with all American writers stating that, "Apart from asymptomatic prose, there is no man now living in America whose work is of the slightest interest to any serious artist" (PM 37). Even though Pound sought to legitimize American writing and elevate it to the level of the Europeans, his main criticism of American literary convention was that it was too wedded to form and styles of the past.

Much like the Vernacular Modernists, Pound's relationship with philology was at the forefront of his identity as a writer. Pound believed that Western language is subjective in that it is inherently allusive and indirect, rather than a medium conducive of literal and concrete interpretation. This belief was fortified by Pound's later exploration of Eastern language and Chinese characters. Restating the musings of his essay, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry (1919)," Pound states in a letter to Harriet Monroe, that "written [Western] language ...can consist of signs representing various noises...there is *more or less approximate agreement* that groups of these noises or signs shall *more or less correspond* with some object, action, or condition" (Li). Pound's notion that language should only pertain to "the Direct treatment of the 'thing'"¹⁰ rather than ideas about the subject certainly emerges in his popular works through his intense economy of language. However, it also manifests in Pound's embrace of the vernacular, especially considering that Pound had a lifelong preoccupation with Dante, who wrote extensively to legitimize colloquial Italian to the level of Latin in *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1303).¹¹ Like Dante, Pound strongly believed in the literary value of Classical art and high European aesthetics, while simultaneously believing that such artistic themes could be conveyed in the language of the tribe, rather than European exemplar (Riobo).

Pound's engagement with American colloquial is found in his correspondence with a variety of writers within his literary circle by mail, in which he demonstrates no apprehension in mocking various English-speaking accents through phonic approximation. Some examples of this are as follows:

To James Joyce (Gaelic):

'Achy darlint, do not but lend me yours,

¹⁰ Pound's notion of the "Direct treatment of the thing" is taken from his his essay "A Retrospect," which is part of a much longer meditation on the philosophy of poetry from *Pavannes at Divisions* (1918).

¹¹ Notably, Dante's famous epic, *The Divine Comedy*, is written in Italian rather than Latin.

Oi left moine widthem rebl boors,
'whom you seefearin wather-cures
On tdothor side of the Liffey

To James Loughlin (Northeastern United States):

Also, 'f I gitta choinulist's ticket, lemme know what cheap hotelz iz in N.Y. where you don't git
bumped off by gunmen.

Offense aside, these phonic caricatures indicate a fascination with pronunciations and musicality found in regional slang and the language of colloquial groups such as immigrants and costermonger urbanites. Like Whitman and McKay, Pound was also interested in African-American dialect as well, as seen in his correspondence with T.S. Eliot. Bizarrely, their letters often transgressed the cultured norms expected of writers of their stature—they mutually wrote one another in the style of the Uncle Remus tales that were popular during their youth. Referring to himself as “Brer Rabbit” and Eliot as “Old Possum,” Pound took pleasure in writing poems within this “improper dialect”, as demonstrated in “Song Fer The Muses’ Garden”:

Ez Po and the Possum
Have picked all the blossom
Let all the others
Run back to their mothers
Fer a boye's bes' friend iz hiz Oedipus,
A boy's best friend is his Oedipus

While Pound's use of regional and African-American dialect is distasteful in most cases, it nonetheless provides evidence of Pound's early fascination with informal modes of speech and patois that is reminiscent of the Vernacular Modernists. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Pound wrote extensively about Whitman, vacillating from essay to essay over his quality as a writer. Pound is critical towards Whitman on the basis that he believed Whitman to be vastly removed from extant literary bodies, stating, “Whitman was not an artist, but a reflex, the first honest reflex, in an age of papier maché letters [1860-1880]” (PM 38) due to the fact that he is “entirely free from the renaissance humanist ideal of the complete man or from Greek idealism.” Despite believing

Whitman to be intellectually removed from literature, however, Pound states in “What I Feel about Walt Whitman” (1909) that, “He [Whitman] *is* America...He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplished his mission.” Though he found Whitman to be anti-literary, Pound is explicit in that he was indebted to Whitman’s objective of using vernacularism to construct a unique American dialect, stating, “Whitman is to my fatherland what Dante is to Italy.” Pound sought to further refine Whitman’s American language and took this mantle upon himself, stating “His message is my message. We will see that men hear it.”

T.S. Eliot (1888-1965)

“I’d say that my poetry has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything written in my generation of England...in its sources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America.”

—T.S. Eliot, *The Paris Review: The Art of Poetry No.1*

Because history often remembers him for his high-brow sophistication, Eliot, a self-identified “classicist in literature,” may seem to be a poet far removed from elements of American vernacular and colloquial speech. However, Eliot often dubiously admitted a nuanced relationship to his American upbringing in statements such as, “it [my poetry]...wouldn’t be what it is if I’d been born in England and it wouldn’t be what it is if I’d stayed in America” (*The Art of Poetry No. 1*). The vagueness of Eliot’s admissions is best parsed through an examination of his most acclaimed essay, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), in which Eliot situates the role of *European* literary tradition against his unique interpretations of the role of the writer in modernity. Echoing the musings of Pound, Eliot is explicit in his opinion that the contemporary writer must be placed in relation to the canon while simultaneously advocating that the canon should not act as a constricting force, stating, “Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than of those of its creative genius.” While

Eliot was Eurocentric in his appreciation of the canon, such statements indicate that he, like Pound, viewed the conventional practices of Euro-American art to be an impediment to creative genius. Eliot's unpublished works and personal writings demonstrate the degree to which he strove to dissolve high literary convention was more extreme than his popular works suggest.

In order to express his discontent with elitist literary spheres throughout his life, Eliot often resorted to blatant offense and vulgarity. Take for example, this verse from a little-known Eliot poem, "The Triumph of Bullshit"¹² (1915) that was rejected for publication in *Blast* by Wyndham Lewis:

Ladies, on whom my attentions have waited
If you consider my merits are small
Etiolated, alembicated,
Orotund, tasteless, fantastical,
Monotonous, crotchety, constipated,
Impotent galamatias
Affected, possibly imitated,
For Christ's sake stick it up your ass

("The Triumph of Bullshit," 1-8)

While he was certainly an established academic himself, instances such as "The Triumph of Bullshit" demonstrate that Eliot held a strong contempt for exclusion brought about by erudition. Eliot's overuse of words such as "monotonous," "crotchety," and "imitated" also demonstrate his disavowal of literary traits that he thought to be archaic. Regarding the poem's rejection, Eliot wrote to Pound, "his [Wyndham Lewis] puritanical principles seem to bar my way into Publicity" (Johnson 16). Though the poem never saw publication during Eliot's lifetime,¹³ similar (though less ribald) sentiments towards literary elitism were expressed in

¹² Interestingly, this was the first time in written history that the word "Bullshit" was used (OED).

¹³ This poem, as well as other early manuscripts and unpublished works were put into public circulation 3 years after Eliot's death (1968) with *Inventions of the March Hare*

Eliot's more renowned works produced later in his life such as in *Four Quartets* (1941), where Eliot sarcastically jabs at academia by calling scholars "eminent men of letters" and "chairmen of many committees."

Eliot's works actively fought back against the exclusionary culture of Western literature in more crude ways as well. Though Eliot's renowned works such as "Portrait of a Lady" (1915) and "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915) revolve around high society and cultural refinement, Eliot derided imperious European norms in his personal writings through vulgarity and pornotropic themes. Eliot's correspondence with writers within his literary circle reveals writings that centered around whoredom and rape, as follows:

Unpublished Fragments from *Suite Clownesque*:

There was a jolly tinker came across the sea
With his four and twenty inches hanging to his knee

...

O mother dear mother I thought that I was able
But he ripped up my belly from my cunt to my navel.

Colombo verses:

Colombo and his merry men
They set sail from Genoa
Queen Isabella was aboard
That famous Spanish whore

(Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917)

While these vulgar writings were shared amongst Eliot's contemporaries such as Pound, Joyce, and Aiken, they never reached the spotlight that was afforded to his paramount works such as "The Wasteland" and "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock." However, Eliot made some efforts to get his "bawdy" poems published. Pound aided Eliot in assembling his vulgar poems in a single collection deemed *Chançons ithyphallique* only to have the collection was rejected for publication by Lewis and other publishers various times over Eliot's career (Johnson, 16).

Interestingly, early facsimiles of Eliot's *The Waste Land* demonstrate that similar themes of vulgarity almost made it into Eliot's paramount works. Take, for example, the unpublished "Fresca" section of "The Wasteland".

The white-armed Fresca blinks, and yawns, and gapes,
Aroused from dreams of love and pleasant rapes.

...
Odours, confectioned by the cunning French,
Disguise the good old heart female stench.

(Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917)

The section's eventual removal came at the cautioning of both Eliot's wife Vivienne and Pound, the latter of which was more disgusted by Eliot's use of rhyming couplets than the vulgar elements. While history and academia often view Eliot as the exemplar of erudite refinement, this façade was likely molded by strict censorship by editors, publishers, and often Eliot himself.

Quite clearly, the desire to break down traditional barriers and include colloquialism in new literary projects was a constant among the Vernacular Modernist and High Modernist writers. However, it could be argued that the reason for which the Vernacular Modernists and the High Modernists are canonically different lies in the motives behind their respective uses of vernacularism. As established, McKay and Whitman used vernacularism as a means of democratic commentary. The racist politics of Eliot and Pound certainly do not directly align with democracy. Rather, the vernacularism in Eliot and Pound was arguably more intent on dissolving rigidity in European artistic spheres. Critic Howard J. Booth touches upon dilemma briefly, stating "We can make a concomitant point about [particularly Non-Western] writing from the first half of the twentieth century. Important texts exist from the period that are *not* best served by looking at them through the lens of Western modernism." I concede that this is at least somewhat true. Whitman should not be ignored in the context of the American Renaissance and

Transcendentalist period with which he is usually classed. His engagement with the vernacular directly answered the call of his contemporaries such as Emerson to reform church, state, and society to create an inclusive, more utopian America. The same is easily said for McKay. As a paramount writer of the Harlem Renaissance and New Negro movement, the sociopolitical and artistic importance McKay's poeticization of black American life should not be removed from the context of his Harlem Renaissance contemporaries. That said, Booth's assertion fails to consider that certain writers may act as intersections between canonical classifications. The implication that a writer cannot meaningfully belong to two separate literary movements discounts the fact that certain literary movements overlapped in both objective and periodization. The work of Jean Toomer serves as an instance in which Harlem Renaissance ideals of democratism intersect with the High Modernist objective of dissolving elitism and traditionalism in literary tradition.

Transitional Modernism

Jean Toomer (1894-1967)

"O, be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are,' say the Negroes. 'Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, don't amuse us too seriously. We will pay you,' say the whites. Both would have told Jean Toomer not to write *Cane*."

—Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" (1926)

Toomer was significantly less prolific in both criticism and poetry than both the Vernacular Modernists and High Modernists. This is largely because throughout his later life, Toomer was torn among many different existential philosophies such that all his writings in his late were nearly exclusively Quaker aphorisms. Fortunately, however, *Cane* (1923), his magnum opus, is dynamic enough to subvert canonical genre classifications on its own. The text is

inherently wedded to the unstable position of early 20th -century America with a focus on the uncertain metamorphosis of African-American cultural identity in the face of urbanization and the Great Migration. The transitional nature of the text is easily seen through its structure, which Toomer likens to a circle that grows in aesthetic complexity. The novel's transitional nature also comes through its spatial displacement—its first section takes place in the South, the second section in the North, and its third section relocates a Northern black in the South. As a text with both the transformation and loss of the African-American experience at its core, critics have drastic disagreements regarding the role of black identity in *Cane*. Houston A. Baker asserts that *Cane* shows how “a folk culture containing its own resonant harmonies, communal values...and fruitful proximity to the ancestral soil offers a starting point for the journey to black art,” while Rudolph P. Byrd proposes that black identity in *Cane* is solely a means of pushing back against narrow interpretations in artistic aesthetics. In fact, Byrd goes as far as to suggest that *Cane* perhaps should not be read as part of the African American artistic tradition at all (Kodat). Such debate calls *Cane*'s placement in both the Harlem Renaissance and American Modernist movements into question.

I argue, however, that the placement of black identity through vernacularism in *Cane* properly belongs to both movements. Like the writings of McKay and his Harlem Renaissance and New Negro contemporaries, *Cane* poeticizes the grotesque facets of the African-American experience. However, black vernacularism also serves as a method to push against constricting artistic customs in a similar project to the likes of Pound and Eliot. The multiple ways to interpret black vernacularism in *Cane* testify to the text being an example of how literary practices between movements are often intersectional.

Like the works of McKay and his New Negro contemporaries who aimed to be racial “purely for the sake of art,” *Cane* negotiates the position of black American identity without propagandist motives of collective uplift. Rather, *Cane* aims to poeticize the grotesqueries of the black experience. This is particularly central to the first section of the text. Taking place in the South, *Cane*’s first section is fixated on themes of economic hardship and violence, but also beautifies this adversity through black folk and spiritual. A prime example of this is in *Cane*’s first entry, “Karintha,” in which the character Karintha is sexually objectified at a young age, prostitutes herself, and gives birth to child in the forest. Through the course of the story’s events, Toomer interjects black vernacularism in the form of several spiritual songs such as the following:

Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon,
O can’t you see it, O can’t you see it,
Her skin is like dusk on the eastern horizon
...When the sun goes down.
Goes down...

The focus on the character’s dusk skin being lost in the sunset loosely alludes to Karintha’s loss of agency at the hands of her objectification, while the naturalistic elements of dusk, sunsets, and horizons link this suffering to the Southern landscape and its gruesome history of anti-black racism and slavery. However, Toomer juxtaposes this hardship with beauty through the musicality and rhythm of the spiritual. Like African-American blues, the spirituals in “Karintha” demonstrate a dissonance between pain and beauty. Even though black spirituals are commonly inspired by slave songs and subjugation, Toomer found them to be integral parts of African American identity, writing, “I realized with deep regret, that the spirituals, meeting ridicule, would be certain to die out...The folk spirit was walking in to die on the modern desert...Its death was so tragic...and this was the feeling I put into *Cane*. *Cane* was a swansong”

(Turner). “Karintha,” among other entries in *Cane* such as “Reapers” and “Blood Burning Moon,” demonstrates that African-American art can create beauty while simultaneously documenting horror—a motif commonly expressed in Harlem Renaissance literature. Langston Hughes wrote of similar practices of “laughing to keep from crying,” while McKay poeticized the struggles of economic and sociopolitical subjugation in his Harlem Renaissance sonnets. In *Cane*’s engagement with black cultural themes, Toomer effectively espouses and perpetuates Harlem Renaissance ideals.

Despite *Cane* being critically appraised by black writers such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, and Nella Larsen, Toomer actively resisted any association with his African-American heritage. Echoing Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Toomer contested that his work was not an expression of his selfhood, but rather a meditation on art, stating in a letter to his editor John McClure, “My concern is solely with art. What am I?” (Kodat). Like Pound and Eliot, Toomer’s *Cane* often united beauty and vernacular subjects in an initiative to prove that colloquial modern America provided worthy inspiration for high art. Take for example, “Her Lips Are Copper Wire,” a poem that occurs in *Cane*’s second section that it set in the urban North:

whisper of yellow globes
gleaming on lamp-posts that sway
like bootleg licker drinkers in the fog

and let your breath be moist against me
like bright beads on yellow globes

telephone the power-house
that the main wires are insulate

(her words play softly up and down
dewy corridors of billboards)

then with your tongue remove the tape
and press your lips to mine
till they are incandescent

While the copper lip-color brings blackness into the poem, African-American identity is more so present through the context of the Great Migration and urbanism. “Her Lips are Copper Wire” centralizes around finding love and poetic inspiration in the context of a new, industrialized modernity. Through the images of copper wire, lamp posts, and the power-house, the sensation of love is likened to electricity and technology—a far cry from the divinity and ethereality usually attributed to love in European poetry. The speaker of the poem also relates his lover’s whispers and breath to both “dewy corridors of billboards,” and “boot licker drinkers in the fog” to demonstrate that intimacy and beauty can be found in the context of labor-class, urban themes and subject matters. Furthermore, the spelling of “licker-drinker” in the poem demonstrates an engagement with colloquial phonic approximation rather than traditional spelling, in a fashion similar to Pound’s letters. Through these various methods in which Toomer employs colloquialism to redefine love poetry, “Her Lips are Copper Wire” is directly related to the High Modernists’ project of finding artistic inspiration in a newly formed modernity by pushing back against the constriction of Euro-American convention.

In many ways, Toomer represented a revolt against binaries. Though Toomer rejected his black heritage, he simultaneously resisted any association with white identity as well, stating, “I am of the human race; I am neither white nor black but an American.” Toomer’s suggestion of Americanism being an alternative to societal binaries is perhaps aptly applied to debates regarding *Cane*’s placement in the Harlem Renaissance and the American Modernist movements. As exhibited, *Cane* has a rightful association with both movements. *Cane*’s status as an intersectional text demonstrates that exclusion within certain literary movements is not only

arbitrary but omits the fact that 20th-century American writers were engaged in both indirect and direct dialogue with several schools of artistic thought at once. Though they were certainly distinctive, Whitman, McKay, Pound, Eliot, and Toomer were universally bound through their shared initiative of using vernacularism to redefine art to fit to create a new, contemporaneous American identity. Rather than frivolously compartmentalizing these authors into several movements, history and academia should focus on their shared objective of creating an American literary identity that discarded the constrictions of European tradition and fought for universal inclusion.

Close Analysis – “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” (1920) by Ezra Pound

Given the Europeanism and refined literary aesthetic usually attributed to the High Modernists, instances of vernacularism are arguably less obvious in the prominent works of Pound and Eliot than those of Whitman and McKay. Critics of Pound and Eliot’s popular works tend to hyper fixate analyses solely through the lens of European and Classical literary references. Despite arguably being less explicit, however, vernacularism plays a primary role in the High Modernist initiative of pushing back against conventionalism in art. Because I believe that colloquial aesthetics are overlooked in the paramount High Modernist works, I choose to focus on Pound’s employment of the vernacular in a case study of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.”

“Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is a pertinent example for this discussion for several reasons. Firstly, several aspects of the main character, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, suggest that he acts an autobiographical insert for Pound himself. In addition to Pound signing first section “E.P. ODE POUR L’ELECTION DE SON SEPULCHRE” (I. I), the mention of Mauberley being removed from the literary sphere in “*l’an trintiesme / De son eage*” (I. I. 18-19) coincides with Pound’s release of *Lustra* (1916), a poetry collection released when Pound was thirty years old that is largely attributed to his decline in public reputation (Kyburz). Secondly, the poem directly acts as a meditation on the importance of artistic and poetic aesthetics in a philistine, post-WWI era. Because “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is a poem about art itself, Pound’s philosophies of language and literature are readily apparent. Overall, the conceits on poetry and the literary canon in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” can aptly be interpreted as the musings of Pound himself. In applying Pound’s philosophy of literature and relationship with philology to my close reading of the poem, I argue that Pound uses various forms vernacularism in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” in line with the Modernist project of repudiating traditional European artistic cultural norms and conventions.

Eroticism and Sexual Vulgarity

Throughout the poem, vernacularism manifests itself through eroticism. Pound¹⁴ repeatedly embraces the corporeal as superior to traditional norms of divinity, specifically through praising Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility, over Christ. Pound states, “Christ follows Dionysus, / Phallic and ambrosial / Made way for macerations; / Caliban casts out Ariel” (I. III. 37-39). Through invoking *The Tempest* to liken Dionysus to Ariel and Caliban to Christ,¹⁵ Pound argues that Christ overtaking Dionysus as a central theological deity is a testament to ugliness

¹⁴ Given the autobiographical nature of the poem, it is fair to assert Pound himself as the speaker of the poem.

¹⁵ In *The Tempest*, Caliban is a bestial, misshapen son of the witch Sycorax. Ariel, the water-fairy, is portrayed to be beautiful and good-hearted.

superseding beauty in the modern age. While Pound likens Ariel's purity to Dionysus, however, Pound does not shy away from the overtly sexual themes that Dionysus represents. Rather, in his suggestion that Dionysus is both "Phallic and ambrosial," Pound embraces traditionally vulgar, sexual connotations of Dionysus over the chaste, self-sacrificing connotations of Christ. This is further demonstrated through Pound's use of the word "macerations" as a double-entendre. While "maceration" is a winemaking technique in which fruits are steeped in liquid to bring rich color and flavor, it can also refer to a process of "wasting or wearing away through fasting" (OED). Especially considering that Pound states "We have the press for wafer" (I. III. 51) in proximity to this section, "maceration" refers to the Christian Eucharist/communion ritual, in which bread and wine are consecrated and consumed as the flesh and blood of Christ, as a remembrance of Christ's suffering.¹⁶ In the dual meaning of "maceration," Pound documents that wine, a symbol of passion through indulgence under Dionysus, becomes a representation of pain and sacrifice in the modern, Christ-worshipping age. Pound's rejection of Christ in favor of Dionysus serves to state that sexuality, intoxication, and indulgence are more beautiful and inspirational than the Euro-Christian model of chastity and self-sacrifice. Especially when considered in the context of Pound's infatuation with Greek art and tradition,¹⁷ Pound asserts that the poetic inspiration of a traditional, Christ-worshipping Europe has run dry.

Though less direct than the mention of Dionysus, a similar invocation of eroticism as a means of repudiating European literary convention takes place as Pound critiques Victorian cultural norms and praises the eroticism of the Pre-Raphaelites and the "Fleshly school." Pound states, "Gladstone was still respected, / When John Ruskin produced / 'Kings Treasuries';

¹⁶ While the Catholic conception of the eucharist believes that the consecration literally transfigures the bread and wine to the body and blood of Christ (transubstantiation), the literalness of this fluctuates amongst different sects of Christianity. Notably, Protestantism believes that the bread and wine are solely symbolic (consubstantiation).

¹⁷ Pound considered himself as a continuation of the lineage of Theocritus and Classical tradition ("What I Feel About Walt Whitman").

Swinburne / And Rossetti still abused” (I. Yeux Glauques. 94-97). Using Gladstone to emphasize the Victorian era’s sociocultural norms,¹⁸ Pound invokes “King’s Treasuries,” a lecture that critiqued British philistinism and ambivalence towards art, by Ruskin, a defender of the Pre-Raphaelite’s use of eroticism .¹⁹ In doing so, Pound advocates that despite nuanced views being brought to art, they were silenced by austere Victorian tradition. This is furthered in the mention of “Foetid Buchanan” (I. Yeux Glauques. 98) and Swinburne and Rossetti’s “abuse.” Swinburne and Rossetti were recognized for their engagement with themes of overt sexuality, lesbianism, and hermaphroditism in their poetry and art.²⁰ In mentioning Robert Buchanan, Pound is referring to his 1871 article in *The Contemporary Review* titled “The Fleshly School of Poetry.” In said article, Buchanan criticizes Swinburne and Rossetti’s use of eroticism in art by calling their work “spasmodic ramifications in the erotic direction” and stating that “[Swinburne and Rossetti] obtrude their lesser identities and parade their idiosyncrasies in the front rank of leading performers.” Pound rejects Buchanan’s priggish musings on sexuality in art in more ways than simply calling him “Foetid.” As Pound states “‘Ah, poor Jenny’s case...’ / Bewildered that a world / Shows no surprise / At her last maquero’s / Adulteries” (I. Yeux. Glauques. 113), Pound uses Rossetti’s character, Jenny, from Rossetti’s poem “Jenny” (1869). In stating that Jenny is not shown sympathy in the modern world because of her sexual promiscuity, Pound demonstrates that the prudish nature of Victorian society not only impedes the British from recognizing experimental art but prevents them from showing passion and empathy on a human level. Through the Victorian figures that Pound mentions in the “Yeux Glauques” section, Pound

¹⁸ William Ewart Gladstone, a well-respected British Prime Minister for four terms interspersed through 1868-1894,

¹⁹ Critics disagree on the role of Ruskin in the poem. Referring to his public feud with James McNeill Whistler, a painter averse to morality and sentimentalism, some critics believe that Ruskin is mentioned as an opponent to the avant-garde movement, especially given that Pound sided with Whistler in the public libel suit. However, Pound still held deep respect for Ruskin’s critiques on Britain’s philistinism and position of art in British society. In Canto 89, Pound writes, “‘What he meant to *us* in those days.’ / said old Image [Selwyn] referring to Ruskin,” demonstrating the respect his literary circle had for Ruskin (Witemeyer).

²⁰ For example, see Swinburne’s poem “Hermaphroditus” (1866) or Rossetti’s *Venus Verticordia* (1868).

argues that though artistic progress was being made through eroticism by likes of Rossetti and Swinburne, the constrictions of tradition prevented those works from gaining the adoration that they truly deserved.

Cross-Ethnicism

Though “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” often oscillates between English, French, Latin, and Greek, such cultures and their respective literary works are easily tracked within European high-tradition and cannot be truly considered to be cross-ethnic. However, as established previously, Pound was fascinated with Orientalist literature and language. While Pound’s studies in Chinese do not make an explicit appearance in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” Pound scatters elements of Persian literature in the poem to demonstrate that poetic and artistic inspiration are found from sources culturally disparate to Europe.

This prominently manifests in Pound’s reference to the English *Rubaiyat* (1859), a Persian-to-English translation of selected works by Omar Khayyam.²¹ Again referring to the time of Victorian austerity, Pound states, “Thin like brook-water, / With a vacant gaze. / The English *Rubaiyat* was still-born in those days” (I. Yeux Glaques. 106-109). Pound’s comparison of the English *Rubaiyat* to a still-born fetus refers to the work’s poor reception prior to its popularization by Dante Rossetti, Ruskin, and other Pre-Raphaelites advocates. The Pre-Raphaelites attraction of the *Rubaiyat* extended not only from the time period’s trend of Orientalism, but also through its embrace of hedonism. Take, for example, one of the more well-known quatrains from the work: “Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend, / Before we too into the Dust descend; Dust into Dust, and under Dust to lie / Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer,

²¹ A *Rubaiyat* is a collection of quatrains (Ruba’i) with an AABA or AAAA rhyme scheme. Interestingly, Pound includes a *Rubaiyat* in Canto LXXX: “Tudor indeed is gone and every rose, / Blood-red, blanch white that in the sunset glows / Cries: “Blood, Blood, Blood!” against the gothic stone / Of England, as the Howard or Boleyn knows.”

and — sans End!” (English *Rubaiyat*, XXIV).²² In Pound’s embrace of the *Rubaiyat*, he juxtaposes the epicureanism of the *Rubaiyat* against the proper, sexless art pushed by Victorian critics such as Buchanan. In using this cross-cultural choice as the ideal, Pound insinuates that the stagnation and philistinism found in his modern world is attributed to faults in European culture.

Another invocation of Persian multi-ethnicism is found in the second part of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” in the epigraph signed by “Caid Ali”:

*“Qu'est ce qu'ils savent de l'amour, et qu'est ce qu'ils peuvent comprendre?
S'ils ne comprennent pas la poésie, si'ils ne sentient pas la musique, qu'est ce qu'ils peuvent
comprendre de cette passion en comparaison avec laquelle la rose est grossière et le parfum des
violettes un tonnerre?”*²³

— CAID ALI

(II. II. Epigraph)

To be clear, this epigraph is original to “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.” Caid Ali, though clearly a reference to Persian/Arabic onomastics, is not an existing Middle-Eastern writer. Using this context, the presence of quotations, and the autobiographical nature of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” I argue that Pound intentionally distances his own identity from this fragment of the poem. In writing as Caid Ali, Pound is attempting to compose within the religious voice of Persian/Sufi poetic forms such as in the *Rubaiyat*.²⁴ This is further seen through parsing the

²² In the preface to Fitzgerald’s 1859 English translation, he maintains that Khayyam’s embrace of hedonism was due to religious skepticism. However, later scholars suggest that such Fitzgerald’s translation misinterprets the complex role of pleasure in relation to God in Sufism (Bierregaard).

²³ Translation: “What do they know of love, and what can they understand of it? If they do not understand poetry, if they do not feel music, what can they understand of this passion compared to which the rose is crude and the perfume of violets a thunder?”

²⁴ Obviously, the epigraph is not written in Persian—this was an impossibility for Pound. Pound was not an experienced Persian translator, and relied on his contemporaries such as Basil Bunting to translate Persian in his later life. It is important to note, however, that Persian poetry often encouraged and cherished various non-Persian

specifics of the epigraph. In stating “S'ils ne comprennent pas la poésie, si'ils ne sentent pas la musique, qu'est ce qu'ils peuvent comprendre de cette passion” the voice of Caid Ali conflates traditional notions of love with artistic inspiration in poetry and music into a single, unified passion. Caid Ali then goes on to ascribe this passion a divinity such that it is more beautiful than earthly, naturalistic objects such as roses and thunder. I argue that this divine passion that Pound's character of Caid Ali creates directly relates to the conceptions of universal love espoused in Persian/Sufi poetic tradition. In the belief that God's love was the reason for the creation of the universe, the Sufi poetic tradition often cites a fusion of divine and corporeal passion as the main source of poetic/religious inspiration (Azdajic). Especially considering that Pound was familiar with Sufism through the *Rubaiyat*, I argue that Pound's choice to write this epigraph as Caid Ali is intended to demonstrate that poetic prowess and divine inspiration is not specific to Europe. Rather, Pound shows that other cultures embrace unyielded passion in poetry in a way that Europe has shunned and stifled through tradition and philistinism.

Urbanism

“Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” fluctuates between urban and natural settings. Pound uses this contrast in settings in order to repudiate European norms of sentimentalizing nature and instead suggests that poetic inspiration exists in urban modes. To explore this contrast, I first examine the various instances of the poem that take place in natural settings. Pound states that “Beneath the sagging roof / the stylist takes shelter, / unpaid, uncelebrated, / At last from the world's welter” (I. X. 170-173). In this situation, Pound relates the artistic decadence of the world to “welter,” a word meaning a “commotion/upheaval/turmoil” that is often used regarding oceans and storms (OED). However, the stylist's attempt to hide from the commotion of the world

dialects such as Arabic, Urdu, and Hindi. As such, Pound's use of French should not discount the Persian connotation this epigraph has.

fails—Pound states, “The haven from sophistications and contentions / Leaks through its thatch; He offers succulent cooking; The door has a creaking latch” (I. X. 178-181) The “welter,” symbolizing the “sophistications and contentions” of the world, is inescapable to the artist, as it leaks into his refuge despite his best attempts to withdraw into nature. In addition to being a poor shelter from the outside world, nature itself fails to commensurate the artistic spirit of the stylist as well. In stating “Nature receives him, / With a placid and uneducated mistress / He exercises his talents / And the soil meets his distress” (I. X. 174-177), Pound states that the stylist’s retreat into nature fails to provide him with an intellectual muse and ultimately leads to a death in distress. A similar theme of nature failing to provide artistic inspiration is seen as Hugh Selwyn Mauberley retreats from the literary sphere and is aloof among “Scattered Moluccas / Not knowing, day to day, / The first day’s end, in the next noon;/ The placid water / Unbroken by the Simoon” (II. IV. 357-361). Through the motif of timelessness, Pound demonstrates that as Mauberley gives in to the natural beauty of “Thick foliage / Placid beneath warm suns” (II. IV. 362-365) and “The grey and rose / Of the juridical / Flamingoes” (I. IV. 367-369), Mauberley becomes complacent as an unaccomplished poet and loses his flow of consciousness. In these sections, Pound intentionally subverts the Euro-Romantic associations of nature in poetry. Romantic writers such as Wordsworth and Coleridge are examples of a European poetic tradition inspired by nature’s sublime beauty that prizes the relationship between the “mind of man” and nature, as reflected in poems such as Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” (1798). In stark contrast to this, however, the characters of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” find nothing in nature but a weak sense of security against the elements of the world. In debasing the rural, pastoral mode that is conducive of poetic revelation in Euro-Romantic art, Pound demonstrates that the traditional European muses are depleted, tasteless, and overused.

Though “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is filled with Pound’s dejection regarding the philistinism and moral decadence of post-WWI art and society, Pound suggests the modern, urban mode as an alternative source of poetic inspiration in stating, “As Anadyomene in the opening / Pages of Reinach...The face oval beneath the glaze, / Bright in its suave bounding-line, as, / Beneath half-watt rays, / The eyes turn topaz” (II. Medallion. 388-397). Pound, in his typical fashion, invokes a Classical reference in Venus as an exemplar of poetic idealism. In noting the topaz color of Venus’ eyes, Pound’s refers to an earlier section of the poem in which “Yeux Glaques” are used as a metaphor for the eternal beauty (I. Yeux Glaques. 102-105). However, Modernity and urbanism are injected into Pound’s image of eternal, Classical beauty through the image of “half-watt rays.” In mentioning electricity, Pound removes the reader from the pastoral, natural setting and instead situates the reader in an industrial, modernized environment. While the dimness of the light reflects Pound’s pessimistic view on the modernity, the shining of Venus’ topaz eyes under the lamplight serves to insinuate that beauty can still be found in the modern, urban world. When placed against his critique of Euro-Romantic pastoralism, the final image of Venus’ eyes in the dim lamplight serves as Pound’s method of stating that the modern era can produce new beauty, and that art should move forward instead of looking back.

Though the poem acts as a scathing critique on the constrictions of European tradition, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is not optimistic about modernity either. The poem constantly refers to the horrors of WWI and the decadence of art and society. However, tracing vernacularism in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” reveals a light of hope in the poem’s dreary lament. While Pound is pessimistic about the failings of the West, the poeticization of the vernacular elements of the poem serve to demonstrate that beauty still exists in the modern world. Echoing the objectives of

Whitman and McKay, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” serves to demonstrate that in order to find inspiration in the world, the artist must broaden his perception of art and look in modes and themes that stray from traditionalism.

Conclusion

All in all, a concrete definition of Modernism must be considered in the sociocultural context of the time period. The dawn of the 20th century marked a time of prototypical reformation that subsequently ramified through politics, technology, economics, and philosophy. Rather than defining Modernism as an arbitrary array of European aesthetic choices, history and the canon should consider Modernism through the experimental initiatives that were sparked by the time period’s radical change. In music, African-American blues was much different than Schoenberg’s twelve tone scale. In painting, the jagged polygons of Cubism were distinct to the abstract forms of Futurism. In literature, Yeats’ Celtic mythos and nationalist aesthetic was unique in comparison to Carlos Williams’ abstract imagism. Yet, these artists are all considered “Modernist” while writers such as Whitman and McKay are excluded, despite having a direct effect on the likes of Pound and Eliot. Tracking Modernism through vernacularism provides a criterion in which history and academia scrutinizes experimentalism rather than discounting valuable artistic contributions to the Modernist project.

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