

# APOCALYPSE

MODERN STRATEGY AND

# AND

POSTMODERN TACTICS IN

# AFTER

POUND, WILLIAMS, AND ZUKOFSKY

BRUCE COMENS

APOCALYPSE  
AND AFTER  
*Modern Strategy  
and Postmodern Tactics in  
Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky*

Bruce Comens

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# Abbreviations

## *Pound*

ALS	<i>A Lume Spento and Other Early Poems</i>
America	<i>America, Roosevelt and the Causes of the Present War</i>
C	<i>The Cantos of Ezra Pound</i>
CEP	<i>Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound</i>
Confucius	<i>Confucius: The Unwobbling Pivot, The Great Digest, The Analects</i>
GB	<i>Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir</i>
GK	<i>Guide to Kulchur</i>
JM	<i>Jefferson and/or Mussolini: L'idea statale: Fascism As I Have Seen It</i>
LE	<i>Literary Essays of Ezra Pound</i>
P	<i>Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound</i>
PD	<i>Pavannes and Divagations</i>
PJ	<i>Pound/Joyce: The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce, with Pound's Essays on Joyce</i>
Poems	<i>Poems 1918–1921</i>
Radio	<i>"Ezra Pound Speaking": Radio Speeches of World War II</i>
SC	<i>Selected Cantos</i>
SL	<i>Selected Letters, 1907–1941</i>
SP	<i>Selected Prose: 1909–1965</i>
SR	<i>The Spirit of Romance</i>
T	<i>Translations</i>
VA	<i>Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts</i>

## *Williams*

A	<i>The Autobiography</i>
CP <sub>1</sub>	<i>The Collected Poems: Volume I: 1909–1939</i>
CP <sub>2</sub>	<i>The Collected Poems: Volume II: 1939–1962</i>
EK	<i>The Embodiment of Knowledge</i>



<i>I</i>	<i>Imaginations</i>
<i>IAG</i>	<i>In the American Grain</i>
<i>IWWP</i>	<i>I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Paterson</i>
<i>PB</i>	<i>Pictures from Brueghel</i>
<i>RI</i>	<i>A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists</i>
<i>SE</i>	<i>Selected Essays</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>The Selected Letters of Williams Carlos Williams</i>

### *Zukofsky*

<i>A9</i>	<i>First Half of "A"-9</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Bottom: On Shakespeare</i>
<i>CF</i>	<i>Collected Fiction</i>
<i>CSP</i>	<i>Complete Short Poetry</i>
<i>P</i>	<i>Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays</i>
<i>PZ</i>	<i>Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>A Test of Poetry</i>

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# 1

## From Modern Strategy to Postmodern Tactics

One, two, three. Time, time!

—*Cymbeline*, II, ii, 51

“THE BOMB,” wrote William Carlos Williams, “has entered our lives” (*PB* 168). That deceptively simple statement conveniently focuses my central concerns and primary dilemma in what follows. For the Bomb—the capital does signify, as I will shortly explain—both exerts a considerable influence on our lives and provokes a tremendous fascination, providing occasion for dramatic pronouncements and grandiose gestures, and inviting apocalyptic thought with an ease that makes the millennial almost commonplace. The period after Hiroshima saw a resurgence of enthusiasm for eschatological visions that continues to the present, a resurgence the more remarkable in that it is now a readily accepted, almost typical response.<sup>1</sup> Whether we are swayed by overtly apocalyptic rhetoric or quietly concede that total nuclear war has become “the absolute referent, the horizon and the condition of all the others,” such responses, however significant, can be dangerous (Derrida “No Apocalypse” 28). They can all too easily dwarf, blot out, “our lives,” in discourse as on earth.

As corrective, it is useful to recall that in her last work, written in 1946, Gertrude Stein professed complete indifference, beginning “they asked me what I thought of the atomic bomb. I said I had not been able to take any interest” (*Reflection* 161). Titled “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb,” the piece in fact exemplifies and in a sense justifies Stein’s refusal to engage in strenuous, “serious” reflections—a refusal begun by the title’s insistence on *literal* reflections, both visual (“-on”, “on”; “-om-”, “-om-”) and, with suitable nursery-rhyme accent, aural (“reflection on”—“atomic bomb”). That insistence on childish play continues in the syntax and diction of this brief work, culminating in the seemingly outrageous deliberate naivety of the final sentence, “this is a nice story.” But we should not mistake this sophisticated naivety for ig-

norance; nor should we simply dismiss Stein's quite sophisticated response to the Bomb.

Indeed, Stein's interest also lies in "our lives," in the particularity of diverse human practices. If, she says, the Bomb is "really as destructive as all that," there will be no one to take interest, or to take interest in. And if it is not "all that" destructive, then it is not much different from other deadly technologies, "just one of the things that concern the people inventing it or the people starting it off." Those involved may take interest, may find it useful to their own ends, but the rest of us, uninvolved, "have to just live along like always." In sum, "machines are only interesting in being invented or in what they do, so why be interested." We live "our lives" between the invention and, we hope, the use. Stein next attempts to generalize her feelings—"really way down that is the way everybody feels about it"—but the reiterated denials of the remainder of the paragraph seem excessive, overly protesting: "They think they are interested about the atomic bomb but they really are not not any more than I am. Really not. They may be a little scared, I am not so scared, there is so much to be scared of so what is the use of bothering to be scared, and if you are not scared the atomic bomb is not interesting." If we see in this passage a childlike denial of an uncomfortably intrusive reality, we do no more than recognize a consciously used technique. Gertrude Stein is "not so scared," which admits that she *is* scared. But why, then, does she counsel us to "just live along like always"?

The answer to that question finally depends on a fuller understanding of the bomb and its relation to culture. For the moment, however, it will suffice to note that Stein's indifference, her playful but determined insistence on the priority of human interests and human practices, constitutes a defense against the Bomb. If we are alert to and intent on human interests—and that repeated word acquires extra resonance when considered in relation to the newly important "American interests" of 1946—the Bomb will not be of interest and therefore will not be used. Stein does not deploy the rhetoric of argument—the events of the preceding years, culminating in August 1945, had shown only too well what that rhetoric can bring. Instead, Stein's insistence on human practice in the face of a strategy that culminates in the Bomb is reflected in her own textual practice: she takes advantage of whatever opportunity presents itself to engage in playful, disruptive tactics. As we have seen, the title provides one such opportunity; note too how the final sentence undercuts the argument she begins to develop in the final paragraph: "Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense. They listen so much that they forget to be natural. This is a nice story." Argument, clearly, is

not “natural”; instead of producing a “nice story” it leads to steadily more powerful means of winning—an escalation that leads, finally, to the Bomb.

“Defense” and “attack,” then, as I have used them above, need to be dissociated from the notion of distinct “places”—geographical or rhetorical—which one defends or from which one attacks. From such a place one implements a strategy designed to take over an opposing place, but, without hope of ever possessing a distinct place, one can only use tactical interventions to prevent total domination. Since this distinction goes well beyond the singularities of Stein’s work, to provide, as I will argue, a focus for the shift from modernism to postmodernism, it is worth considering in some detail.

\*

The distinction between strategy and tactics has a long but often rather confused history in military thought. Generally, tactics are subordinate to strategy as strategy is subordinate to policy. As Liddell Hart, the great British theorist and historian of both world wars, paraphrased von Clausewitz, strategy is “the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy” (qtd. in Howard 101). Elsewhere he first distinguishes among three levels of operation, “as tactics is an application of strategy on a lower plane, so strategy is an application on a lower plane of ‘grand strategy,’ ” and then adds that “grand strategy” is itself subservient to “the political objective of the war—the goal defined by fundamental policy” (qtd. in Eccles 45–46). This neat hierarchy of command, with each level implementing the decisions of the higher level, is doubtless a useful military model, though one wonders how accurately it describes actual practice. The assertion that tactics merely implement, or at least should implement, strategy also seems questionable. Even in a traditional battle, specific incidents do not always aim to secure the strategic goal, as we can see even in the origins of Western tradition. The *Iliad*, for instance, has room for many motives beside the conquering or defense of Troy, and even those aims were not entirely subordinate to the restoration or retention of Helen. Sometimes other motives coincide with the strategic object, as Achilles’ revenge against Hector, but at other times they do not: in any case, those diverse motives are precisely what give the poem its human dynamic. In more recent history, the spontaneously organized truce of Christmas 1914, during which the German and allied troops met in No Man’s Land to chat, trade cigarettes, and play football, demonstrates a distinct unconcern with overall strategy—as their commanders immediately realized, expressly forbidding such activity in future (Robbins 38; Fussell 10).

Furthermore, as Liddell Hart’s distinction between “strategy” and “grand

strategy" would indicate, his distinction between strategy and tactics is based on degree. The terms mark relative positions along a continuum rather than a qualitative difference. Although he begins with a similar distinction, Herbert Rosinski soon shifts to another, more fruitful opposition. Strategy, he writes, "is the comprehensive direction of power," while tactics "is its immediate application" (qtd. in Eccles 46). Tactics is subordinate to strategy, but the two have begun to polarize in relation to "comprehensive direction." *Control* thus becomes the key concept in strategy, as Rosinski's subsequent elaboration makes clear: because strategy must take into account "the multitude of possible enemy counteractions . . . it becomes a means of control. *It is this element of control which is the essence of strategy: Control being the element which differentiates true strategic action from a haphazard series of improvisations*" (qtd. in Eccles 46). Here Rosinski seems mindful of the origin of "strategy" in Greek *strategos*, "general," a focus of power and control. Note, though, that his opposition has shifted: he now opposes strategy not to what he calls tactics (the implementation) but to "a haphazard series of improvisations." The judgmental "haphazard" is, I think, ill-chosen. Improvisations may appear haphazard, but only to an observer, someone external and nonparticipant. And they will especially appear haphazard to someone in, or striving for, a position of control, since improvisations are likely to disrupt any overall strategy. From a participant's point of view, however, improvisations are merely opportunistic, events occurring "outside" an overall control, but which are not therefore entirely meaningless or purposeless.

In contrast to traditionally conceived tactics, then, which may be subsumed under strategy as merely a further, more detailed implementation of the will of the *strategos*, I use the term to denote largely improvisational practices that do not adhere to an overall strategy. The practice of such tactics does not constitute an implementation of control through the comprehensive direction of power; nor does it aim to achieve such control. In fact, such practice constitutes, explicitly or implicitly, a reaction against the autocratic, totalitarian implications of strategy. As Rosinski clearly realizes, his conception of strategy is by no means limited to purely military applications: "Thus, strategy in contrast to haphazard action, is that direction of action which aims at the control of a field of activity be it military, social, or even intellectual. It must be comprehensive in order to control every possible counteraction or factor" (qtd. in Eccles 46). Unfortunately, Rosinski does not link this control to totalitarianism (political or discursive), any more than he develops or even fully articulates the opposition between strategy and improvisation. Precisely these concerns, however, are at the center of Michel de Certeau's study of contemporary society, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

As de Certeau theorizes it, the distinction between strategy and tactics has considerable generality. By "strategy" he denotes "the calculus of force-relationships which becomes possible when a subject of will and power (a proprietor, an enterprise, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated from an 'environment.' A strategy assumes a place that can be circumscribed as *proper* (*propre*) and thus serve as the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it (competitors, adversaries, 'clientèles,' 'targets,' or 'objects' of research)" (xix). That is, a strategy is deployed by an external, objective power aiming to control its entire field of operation. So far, de Certeau's chief distinction from Rosinski is in his choice of a more abstract and currently fashionable discourse. As his parentheses suggest, de Certeau applies this model to spheres well beyond the purely military, for, as he says, "political, economic, and scientific rationality has been constructed on this strategic model" (xix). Later he asserts an even higher level of generality: "In sum, strategies are actions which, thanks to the establishment of a place of power (the property of a proper), elaborate theoretical places (systems and totalizing discourses) capable of articulating an ensemble of physical places in which forces are distributed" (38). It is important to note that strategic systems and "totalizing discourses," however remote from the military or political spheres, still articulate and therefore control physical places and actual forces.

In the face of these totalizing discourses, this threatening and overwhelming rationality, human practice relies on the tactic, which de Certeau defines as "a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization), nor thus on a borderline distinguishing the other as a visible totality. The place of a tactic belongs to the other. A tactic insinuates itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance" (xix). It is precisely characteristic of improvisation to use materials to hand, materials that likely belong to quite distinct systems. De Certeau does not focus on improvisation, but does stress its concomitant, time: "because it does not have a place, a tactic depends on time. . . . Whatever it wins, it does not keep. It must constantly manipulate events in order to turn them into 'opportunities' " (xix). While strategy privileges space, and stable, spatial relations, tactics "gain validity in relation to the pertinence they lend to time" and fleeting temporal relations (38).

Analogous to the strategy-tactics distinction—in fact, what provides a basis for de Certeau's theorization—is the Saussurean distinction between the abstract, systemic *langue* and the concrete, individual speech acts comprising *parole*. We speak within a larger order that we can never transcend, within a discursive space that we can never, ultimately, possess. At best, so the argument runs, we can deconstruct others' pretensions to such possession. But by



means of *parole*, by means, that is, of the individual, always improvised speech act, we can fleetingly use that order—which is to say, *any* totalizing discourse—to our own human purposes. Any speech act is a tactic, improvising a combination of elements from various systems (various discourses, and beyond those, extralinguistic systems). (This analogy points to the possibility of a “strategy” that is not imposed from an external point, as no one can manipulate or utter *langue*: a strategy without a *strategos*, one that simply occupies, creates the available space.) Like any other tactic, the speech act is opportunistic, characteristically taking advantage of the “chance” devices afforded by the temporality of language: cadence, rhyme, repetition, consonance, assonance—in short, all the devices generally associated with the poetic dimension of language in contrast to the rational, discursive dimension.

Indeed, poetry may be seen in one sense as consisting largely in the use of such playful devices to disrupt (but not replace or eradicate) the hegemony of rational discourse, ultimately the systemic referentiality of language. As we have seen, Stein uses precisely such disruptive devices to prevent “Reflection on the Atomic Bomb” from being entirely dominated by a discursive argument. In a 1946 “Transatlantic Interview,” she explained Cézanne’s importance: “up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea” subordinating all else, whereas “Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing.” While other artists “fell down on it, because the supremacy of one interest overcame them,” Stein would attempt to give each one—person, thing, word—“the same value” (15–16).<sup>2</sup> We may reflect, too, that a *reflection* on some object is ideally performed by an objective observer, an observer having his own place outside the observed system. Like the act of naming (the sign of Adam’s dominion over creation), to reflect on an object is to control and thereby possess it. Stein’s refusal to reflect with proper sobriety, her disruption of her own argument *about* (circling, containing) the Bomb, thus marks a perception—perhaps not fully or even consciously articulated—that to attempt to possess the Bomb is to be possessed by it. For the Bomb culminates all—and any—strategy, including that which seeks to dominate it.

\*

It is time, then, to turn to the Bomb itself, to consider its significance, to discover what meanings it attracts to itself. First a definition: by “the Bomb” I refer to the possible total annihilation of the human race—and therefore the world—in a nuclear Armageddon, as symbolized so powerfully in the mushroom cloud of any one explosion—Los Alamos, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Bikini being the most famous. How probable such annihilation may be, or