

# Critic as Scientist

The modernist poetics of Ezra Pound

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Ian F. A. Bell

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*For Lionel Kelly*

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# Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1 Poet as geometer	
<i>Prose under pressure</i>	5
<i>Against explanation</i>	16
<i>The art of the practical: a conservation of energy</i>	27
2 The seriousness of the artist	
<i>A writer's freedom</i>	43
<i>Cosmopolitan diagnoses</i>	52
<i>The art of the practical: workmanship</i>	65
<i>The little magazines</i>	79
<i>Lessons in looking</i>	86
3 Correspondences: modes of idealist science	
<i>Dry things</i>	95
<i>Intelligent seeing</i>	103
<i>Strange sympathies</i>	113
<i>Nature is always self-similar</i>	129
4 The vortex: shapes ancient and modern	
<i>Talk of the gods</i>	136
<i>Macrocosmic forms</i>	144
<i>Microcosmic forms</i>	159

5 Tradition and race-memory	
<i>Puck is not dead</i>	171
<i>Design and the permanence of type</i>	179
<i>A relative spirit</i>	190
<i>The art of creation</i>	197
6 Towards a conclusion: the endless sentence	
<i>Chemistry of the soul</i>	207
<i>Physics of thought</i>	216
<i>Fields of action</i>	230
<i>A language of objects</i>	239
Notes	248
Name index	298

# Introduction

I hadn't in 1910 made a language, I don't mean a language to use, but even a language to think in.

'The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters', proclaimed Pound in 1934, 'is the method of contemporary biologists'.<sup>1</sup> This ambition, written 'in an age of science and of abundance', had been true of the entire critical burden of his London years between 1910 and 1920. The purpose of the present exercise is to explicate this ambition: to demonstrate the relationship between Pound's use of scientific analogy and the more familiar areas of his critical concerns, and to argue that his efforts to create a poetics informed by the disciplines of science were the characteristic gestures of his modernity. It was a science-based terminology that gave Pound's literary criticism its characteristic tone, a tone that in turn owed its allegiance to particular American manners of literary debate.

Pound's critical vocabulary was a deliberately public gesture during a specific period in literary history: it was a distinct verbal exercise, a means of announcing his modernity in response to the current conditions of the artist and of offering a programme to sharpen up careless and inadequate discussions of letters. Pound was impelled towards this vocabulary by the ruptures everywhere apparent in matters of cultural responsibility, in the artist's increasingly awkward relationship to his audience and to his function within the wider issues of his society. His search for a means of healing these ruptures found its most significant resource in analogies from science. It was here that Pound also sought answers for his more immediate problems as a writer, which he first announced in 1910 as a need for 'a literary scholarship which will



## 2 Critic as Scientist

weigh Theocritus and Mr Yeats with one balance'. This reflects his permanent belief that 'All ages are contemporaneous' – a historicism in which 'the real time is independent of the apparent' and where 'many dead men are our grandchildren's contemporaries, while many of our contemporaries have been already gathered into Abraham's bosom, or some more fitting receptacle.'<sup>2</sup> And Pound's historicism was fundamentally a matter of terminology: 'The history of literary criticism is largely the history of a vain struggle to find a terminology which will define something.'<sup>3</sup>

My discussion is confined to Pound's London years because this was the period during which his major battles were conducted,<sup>4</sup> battles, essentially, to cultivate an appropriate vocabulary for the modernist enterprise. Pound wrote retrospectively in 1929: 'I hadn't in 1910 made a language, I don't mean a language to use, but even a language to think in.'<sup>5</sup> The problem of vocabulary was in many ways a result of the radical shifts in perspective experienced by the turn of the century, most succinctly summarized in Arthur Symonds's description of the demands implicit in the reaction against mechanistic materialism by symbolist literature, 'a literature in which the visible world is no longer a reality and the unseen world no longer a dream'.<sup>6</sup> The epistemological gap inherent in such a viewpoint was a problem that Pound sought to resolve through the discourses of science, through the new materialism they offered as a means of access to the interstitiality of the corporeal and the non-corporeal that was the habitation of the modernist writer.

The relationship between Pound's critical writings and science has not gone unnoticed in the commentaries, principally in the work of Noel Stock,<sup>7</sup> Max Nänny<sup>8</sup> and Hugh Kenner,<sup>9</sup> but, in the nature of my proposals, these are all felt to be, in varying degrees, unsatisfactory, mainly because they engage themselves with so little of the science that was actually available to Pound's campaign. Their reluctance is not in fact surprising: with the late exception of the Swiss-born naturalist, Louis Agassiz, there is little direct evidence of Pound's reading in the sciences. Such an absence is clearly problematical for a certain kind of critical commentary: I should make it clear that the present work is not concerned with 'sources' as such but with bodies of material that would unavoidably have informed Pound's thought, that were available to him in a variety of accessible ways and that cannot be ignored in any

explication of the complicated series of analogies through which he chose to articulate the modernity of his poetics. His linguistic strategies are ultimately meaningless without a cognizance of the levels of discourse to which they properly belong.

There is thus an order of mystery attaching itself to my own procedure, close, perhaps, to that mystery I shall show was inherited by Pound himself from transcendentalist epistemologies. This mystery of origin became for Pound in one sense a means of sloughing off the cumbersome burdens of encyclopedic data in favour of retaining their pattern, their organic synthesis; in this sense we can clearly determine his totalitarian impulse (in its parallel contexts of anthropology and politics). In a practical sense, as a means of getting about, this mystery is inevitable as part of the assumptions we have to make in accounting for a writer's relationship to his culture, a relationship that rarely manifests itself in the flattened shapes of notated sources. In any case, as Pound himself observed in an essay in 1911, 'the best of knowledge is "in the air"',<sup>10</sup> and in a letter of the same year he wryly remarked: 'Out of the 25 people who are variously supposed to have formed my mind, (acc. critics diversi), I have counted about 9 poets unknown to me, 7 whom I had only read casually':

I think that the 'influences' in a man's work which matter are usually pretty well concealed. They are the forces that strike at the thought tone and into the meaning . . . strike the entrails not the complexion, or strike the complexion thru' the entrails and not as cosmetic.<sup>11</sup>

Here is a solid piece of advice to his subsequent commentators.

Since the present work seeks not only to locate the scientific provenance of Pound's major items of vocabulary but also to establish the *forma mentis* of his modernity, it concentrates on those aspects of Pound's poetics that are familiar: his analogies from geometry and electromagnetism, his campaign for the seriousness of the artist, his conceptions of the 'vortex' and of 'tradition'. It hopes not only to offer new readings, but to extend the contexts in which discussions of his poetics have tended to reside, by refocusing the issues of science that Pound's modernism incorporates and by suggesting the transcendentalist ideology to which, in Pound's use, they belong. The state of current critical accounts of Pound requires a shift in the perspectives through which he is usually seen; these

#### 4 Critic as Scientist

have too often been confined by the figures and debates that Pound himself announced, by the unquestioning appropriation of Pound's own vocabulary, with the inevitable result of cutting Pound off from the wider motives and issues of literary culture.

# 1 Poet as geometer

The live man in a modern city feels this sort of thing or perceives it as the savage perceives in the forest.

(Olson)

## Prose under pressure

Stephen Dedalus found his mind 'fascinated and jaded' by the 'spectrelike symbols of force and velocity' he transcribed during a lecture on applied physics, formulae that manifested themselves in the professor's somnolent exposition of F. W. Martino's platinoid. Stephen's education in naming things, in determining the meanings and effects of words, led him later to a famous speculation on the radiance of the scholastic *quidditas*, where the spiritual state of its harmony and luminosity required the explication not so much of Shelley's Neoplatonism as of the physiology suggested by a different branch of applied physics, Galvani's electrical interventions in the cardiac system of the frog. This 'enchantment of the heart', during the nebulous period of the day, and, indeed, of language itself, demonstrated how 'the word was made flesh'. Yet Stephen's villanelle, the fleshment of his theoretical 'enchantment', had to negotiate the impediments of everyday living, the remnants of the previous night's supper, the search for pencil and one remaining cigarette, before its 'small neat letters' could appear on a 'rough cardboard surface'.<sup>1</sup> It was not easy to talk of 'Art' in the modern world; things spiritual, even with the sanction of scientific metaphor, had still to enjoy a somewhat awkward relationship with things material. Henry Adams used such metaphor to describe the difficult entry into modernity and emphasized the special reality of the 'manikin' on which the process of education was draped:

The young man himself, the subject of education, is a certain form of energy; the object to be gained is economy of his force; the training is partly the clearing away of obstacles, partly the direct application of effort. Once acquired, the tools and models may be thrown away. The manikin, therefore, has the same value as any other geometrical figure of three or more dimensions, which is used for the study of relation. For that purpose it cannot be spared; it is the only measure of motion, of proportion, of human condition; it must have the air of reality; must be taken for real; must be treated as though it had life.<sup>2</sup>

Overwhelmingly, this entry was to involve not simply transition but translation, a quest for appropriate vocabularies, for a complicated series of alternative terminologies: the major crisis for the artist during the early years of the twentieth century was to be a crisis of discourse. For Pound in particular it was a crisis exacerbated by his nationality, which partly involved, as Wyndham Lewis noted, the awkward problem of combining an indigenous 'toughness' and practicality with the delicacy of the butterfly with which James McNeill Whistler habitually signed his paintings.<sup>3</sup> Pound valued the 'pagan' energy that suggested possibilities for an American *risorgimento* in 1912 but, to adopt his own terms from 'The Condolence' of the following year, he identified the impossibility of his 'fantastikon' within a milieu topographically conditioned against the gathering of 'delicate thoughts':

One knows that they [Americans] are the dominant people and that they are against all delicate things. They will never imagine beautiful plaisaunces. They will never 'sit on a midden and dream stars'. . . . This new metropolitan has his desire sated before it is aroused. Electricity has for him made the seeing of visions superfluous. There is the sham fairyland at Coney Island, and however sordid it is when one is in it, it is marvellous against the night as one approaches or leaves it.

Pound needed to view Coney Island from a distance, just as he was observing America itself from the distance of five years in Europe. He found it difficult during the early years of exile to narrow that distance, to decide what America and its failure of imaginative tractability had to do with 'lyric measures and the nature of

"quantity".<sup>4</sup> Pound realized that the problem was one of translation; in 1907 he wrote of his prose-poem 'Malrin' that 'To give concrete for a symbol, to explain a parable, is for me always a limiting, a restricting.'<sup>5</sup> It was, however, a two-edged problem, since the delicacy of 'beautiful plaisances' required, as Donald Davie has put it, 'the accents of the present century'; exile always carries a double function of alienation: delicacy not only needed to be maintained against a philistine audience but had also to seek expression through a vigorous and precise discourse during what Pound felt to be an era of overwritten preciousness. As the pressures of modernity and of being modern increased after 1910, so too did those of diction: compare, for example, the very beautiful description of New York at night in 1912 ('Squares after squares of flame, set and cut into the ether . . . we have pulled down the stars to our will'), where the present city is seen as a proper expression of the ancient τὸ καλόν, with a poem of an ostentatiously truncated title, 'NY', on the same subject in the same year which crudely stylizes the tensions of diction between 'My city, my beloved, my white! Ah slender' and 'here are a million people surly with traffic'.<sup>6</sup> Whereas the prose, a marvellous exercise of visual perception, strenuously enacts the crisis of diction, the poem offers merely a banal shadow of that crisis; to put it another way, we are presented with differing modes of sincerity. One of Pound's most pervasive claims for sincerity was given in this same year as 'our American keynote' and defined as 'a certain generosity; a certain carelessness, or looseness, if you will; a hatred of the sordid, an ability to forget the part for the sake of the whole, a desire for largeness, a willingness to stand exposed'. This was essentially a testament to his two American predecessors who were most responsible for Pound's aesthetics during his London years, Whitman and Whistler; the phrase to be remembered is the 'willingness to stand exposed' which provides the clue to Pound's admiration for Whistler, in particular, who exhibited the process of education, the openness and the struggle:

Here in brief is the work of a man, born American, with all our forces of confusion within him, who has contrived to keep order in his work, who has attained the highest mastery, and this not by a natural facility, but by constant labour and searching. . . . The man's life struggle was set before one. He had tried all means, he had spared himself nothing, he had struggled in one

direction until he had either achieved or found it inadequate for his expression.<sup>7</sup>

In a little-recognized essay of 1949, Marshall McLuhan has suggested an important resource for Pound's American diction. He distinguishes between the 'Senecal or Jonsonian vigour and precision' of Pound's style and the 'urbane sinuosities' characterizing that of Eliot, locating the roots of Pound's speech in 'the radical individualism of generations of sea-board Yankees . . . the intensity, the shrewdness, and the passion for technical precision'. McLuhan contrasts Pound's 'sharp and alert sentences', their 'evangelical' spirit instigating judgements that are 'vehement and explicit', with the 'gentle rhythms' of Eliot's paragraphs that produce a 'balm for minds which find only distress in the violence of intellectual penetration', that cause 'little perturbation in foolish ears'.<sup>8</sup> To borrow Berryman's phrase, it is the 'crumpled syntax' in Pound that occasions trust. Pound learned from Whitman the importance of a provisory, unfinished quality for writing, and it is this quality that marks the crucial difference from Eliot's 'urbane sinuosities'. This difference asks that we participate in Pound's writing in a manner wholly distinct from that in which we enter the world of Eliot; it distinguishes between Pound's expression and Eliot's manipulation, between the mobility of the reader-text relationship and the autonomy of that relationship, between a potential for flexibility and undisguised enclosure.

McLuhan offers a specific intellectual source for the manner of Pound's prose:

the America which Mr Pound left about 1908 gave him a great deal which he translated into literary perception and activity. It was the technological America . . . the most authentic expression was widely sought and found in the contemplation of mechanical tools and devices, when intellectual energies were bent to discover by precise analysis of vital motion the means of bringing organic processes within the compass of technical means.<sup>9</sup>

It was this 'technological America' that Pound remembered during his vorticist battles, which necessitated a reliance on metaphors and analogies from the practical disciplines of the physical sciences that were explicit in the America suggested by McLuhan. Such metaphors defined above all Pound's insistence on the artist as a 'con-

structive individual', as the creative centre of a new *risorgimento*. Vorticism for Pound announced specific possibilities for the *risorgimento* in that it provided a 'programme', and Pound sought to express his view of such a programme through a model from technology:

We believe that the Renaissance was in part the result of a programme. . . . The use and limitation of force need not bring about mental confusion. An engine is not a confusion merely because it uses the force of steam, and the physical principles of the lever and piston.<sup>10</sup>

The final sentence suggests not only a precise image for an aesthetic idea; crucially, it also implies that modernist critical activity must be programmatic as a public gesture. Hence we have Pound's pithy openness as opposed to what he later called Eliot's 'increasingly guarded abstract statement',<sup>11</sup> and we have Pound as the successor to the 'Yankee' temperament of James McNeill Whistler.

Whistler was, of course, emblematic for Pound as a defender of the avant-garde.<sup>12</sup> Whistler conducted his defence primarily by the Poundian means of a contempt for authority and a castigation of 'taste', the perennial rallying cry of the amateur. Time and again in Whistler we hear the voice that is to become so familiar in Pound; as Pound's demands in 'The Serious Artist' of 1913, for example, were supported by reference to the prerogatives of science and practical craftsmanship (the falsification of 'inaccurate art' being regarded as reprehensible as the falsification of a scientific report), so too were those of Whistler:

An inroad into the laboratory would be looked upon as an intrusion; but before the triumphs of Art, the expounder is at his ease. . . . The people are to be educated upon the broad basis of 'Taste', forsooth, and it matters but little what 'gentleman and scholar' undertake the task. . . . The Observatory at Greenwich under the direction of an Apothecary! The College of Physicians with Tennyson as President! and we know that madness is about. But a school of art with an accomplished *littérateur* [Ruskin] at its head disturbs no-one!<sup>13</sup>

For both Whistler and Pound, analogies from science and technology emphasized the professional and practical qualities they saw as essential for the critic; Whistler argued for the comparability of



the 'unscientific' with the judgement of 'the hand that holds neither brush nor chisel', while Pound, in 1917, complained that the surgically antiseptic instruments of 'clear and clearer realism' were subjected to the censorship of 'the most debased and ignorant classes'.<sup>14</sup>

Pound began to preach Whistler as early as 1907,<sup>15</sup> but it was during the crucial years of 1912–16 that he fully elaborated Whistler's importance for modernism. The text that Pound usually cited to illustrate the contemporary relevance of Whistler was the famous lecture of 1885, 'The Ten O'Clock'. Primarily a defence of the artist's freedom against the intrusions of the professionally ill-equipped, the lecture exhibited little specific scientific analogy, but that analogy was clearly instrumental in its debate. Joseph Pennell, Whistler's friend and biographer, paraphrased the main line of its argument to emphasize the implicit reference to science as a means of underlining the special seriousness of the artist's work:

Art is a science – the science by which the artist picks and chooses and groups the elements contained in Nature . . . art is a science not because painters maintain that it is concerned with the laws of light or chemistry of colours or scientific problems, but because it is exact in its methods and in its results. The artist can leave no more to chance than the chemist or the botanist or the biologist. . . . Because art is a science the critic who is not an artist speaks without authority.<sup>16</sup>

Whistler's advocacy of art as a science in the sense of a specialized craft, which incorporated the ethical dictum that immoral art was equated with untruthful art, and as a serious practical activity – with his accompanying derision of the critic who failed to participate in the first and to recognize the second – established a preoccupation that Pound continually displayed. Pound's poetic tribute of 1912, 'To Whistler, American',<sup>17</sup> registered admiration for an American who offered no compromise to the art world of Europe and who was willing not only to experiment but to exhibit the struggles of experiment. Pound placed himself in the Whistlerian tradition of those who bore 'the brunt of our America' and who (in the most significant of the poem's lines) tried to 'wrench her impulse into art'. The poem suggests Whistler not only as a model for behaviour but also, for the American artist in exile, as a model for reassurance.

Whistler stood at the centre of Pound's vorticist campaigns; a