

# Hard and Soft Modernism

## *Politics as “Theory”*

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In an age of “Theory,” can we still think of literary modernism in terms of exclusionary dualisms? One invitation to do so is the fact that modernism was itself deeply rooted in dualistic and oppositional modes of thinking – the “figure of a defiant speech in excess of the norm is salient in modernism,” declares one critic (Al-Kassim 2010, 12). Yet even Ezra Pound (1968a), originator of many of the pithy antitheses that continue to be ritually invoked in accounts of modernist writing, broached his distinction between “hard” and “soft” forms of writing with uncharacteristic hesitation: “I apologize for using the semetaphorical [sic] terms ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ in this essay, but after puzzling over the matter for some time I can see no other way of setting about it” (285). Then follows the elaboration of the terminology that would be so influential in subsequent readings of modernism (“the word ‘hard,’” notes Hugh Kenner (1988), “was coming into vogue” [131]):

By “hardness” [writes Pound] I mean a quality which is in poetry nearly always a virtue – I can think of no case where it is not. By softness I mean an opposite quality which is not always a fault. Anyone who dislikes these textural terms may lay the blame on Théophile Gautier, who certainly suggests them in *Emaux et Camées*; it is his hardness that I had first in mind. He exhorts us to cut in hard substance, the shell and the Parian. (Ezra Pound 1968a, 285)

As in the earlier manifesto statements for Imagism, Pound associates “hardness” with a constellation of “textural” features that favor “definiteness” of presentation over “abstraction,” and the external “shell” over the “muzziness” of unfettered introspection (Pound 1968a, 3–14). Although “softness” is “not always a fault” – Pound notes that it is “tolerable” in “the good Chaucerian” style – it tends to produce a “swash” of rhetoric that is at odds with the “clear hard” quality that he regards as a



defining quality of the strong lyric tendency in French verse (Gautier versus “Hugo, De Musset & Co”) (286). This “hardness” will constitute the trademark style of the new modernism: the writing of “the next decade or so,” Pound insists, “will be harder and saner . . . . It will be as much like granite as it can be . . .” (12).

It is worth noting the conjunction here of “clarity” and “hardness” since, paradoxically perhaps, it affirms “a hardness which is not of necessity ‘rugged’; as in ‘Past ruin’d Iliion Helen lives’” (286). The line Pound quotes from Walter Savage Landor is, indeed, far from “rugged” or granite-like, exemplifying in its sinuous weaving of /i/ and // sounds a musicality grounded in clearly marked syllabic differentiation rather than in a “muzzy” melisma. This emphasis on differentiation underpins his related arguments for aesthetic autonomy: the “clean,” “hard,” inorganic values of Imagism and Vorticism are the only ones which seem adequately to represent an intelligence which avoids surplus and works by reduction, denying itself the immediate pleasures of the “caressable” and the mimetic (“The caressable,” says Pound, “is always a substitute” [1960, 97]). “Hardness,” by this account, is a stylistic and ethical feature of verse that represents a challenge to poetic convention: “Gautier is intent on being ‘hard’: is intent on conveying a certain verity of feeling, and he ends by being truly poetic. Heredia wants to be poetic *and* hard; the hardness appears to him as a virtue in the poetic” (285). Pound’s own distinction could be clearer here, but he seems to suggest that the particular “hardness” of Heredia’s work is governed by preexisting poetic models – Gautier, chiefly – rather than by a “verity of feeling” that properly precedes the discovery of the “truly poetic.” As a result, Heredia’s poems tend somewhat toward the “frigid,” their “hardness” ultimately a product of stylistic mannerism, while Gautier’s verse, in contrast, cleaves to the supple contour of an original emotion.

At this point in his career, Pound’s influential advocacy of “hardness” over “softness” is expressed in predominantly stylistic terms, and so it would be grasped by subsequent generations of poets who would see the emphasis on precision and economy as a *sine qua non* of any theory of modernist writing.<sup>1</sup> It was hardly surprising, though, that in composing his essay on French poetry Pound had found the use of these terms ineluctable (“I can see no other way of setting about it”) because their transparently gendered inflections already implied political preferences yet to be clearly announced. Indeed, for Pound, the favored “hardness” would soon come to be equated with the political as such, characterizing the emotional tonality and rigor appropriate to the “verities” to be expressed. In the political realm, this “hardness” would connote a directness and a lack of ambiguity easily distinguishable from allegedly decadent forms of “softness”; in Pound’s later writing, as in that of Yeats, Wyndham Lewis, and (perhaps less obviously) Eliot, it would often be colored by a kind of bravado through which certain rhetorical postures – Lewis as “the Enemy,” for example – were adopted in support of claims for artistic authority.<sup>2</sup> When it came to poetic style, however, the clear separation of qualities was somewhat harder to sustain and this perhaps explains Pound’s caveat that “softness . . . is not always a fault.” In the case of *The Cantos*, passages of sustained lyricism were intended to achieve a sculptural “hardness” through visual





clarity and syllabic patterning (“Rhythm is a form cut into TIME, as a design is determined SPACE,” Pound emphasized (1968b, 198) but, as Lewis remarked of a visionary episode in Canto XVII, the verse was to some extent still dependent on “swinburnian stage-properties”, a sure sign of a lingering “softness” (“it is composed upon a series of histrionic pauses, intended to be thrilling and probably beautiful,” Lewis cuttingly concluded [1993, 71]).

Lewis’s own art would always be more uncompromisingly “hard” than Pound’s, in part because his commitment to what he called a “philosophy of the Eye” (1987, 97) – “This is another condition of art; *to have no inside*, nothing you cannot *see*” (1990, 300) – was closely bound up with his conception of satire, a mode that requires a “petrification” of the human into the thing-like, an ensemble of grotesque surfaces rather than “classical proportion” (“art,” he writes, “consists . . . in a *mechanising* of the natural” [1987, 129; his emphasis]). Lewis’s repudiation of the natural in favor of the “deadness” of the artwork accordingly values the “hippopotamus’ armored hide” above the “naked pulsing and moving of the soft inside of life.” The satirical attitude, as he defines it, entails an absolute embrace of “hardness,” asserting the artistic necessity of distance and objectivity. Yet it is exactly the seductive appeal of the “soft inside” of life that he detects everywhere in the arts of democratic modernity where “*otherness*, like *opposition*, is reactionary. We are all One Fellow” (1984, 73). Lewis sees the works of his modernist colleagues as variously capitulating to this failure of “opposition,” as trading the “otherness” that should properly define the aesthetic for the “soft” consolations of primitivism, childish innocence, and the self-regarding rituals of democratic identification.

There are, we might note, some significant limits to Lewis’s critique of his fellow modernists, and what he condemns as invertebrate empathy is at times more critical and “external” than he acknowledges: even Gertrude Stein (1946 [1971]), arch-exemplar, for Lewis, of “the child-cult,” believed that “Nobody can enter into anybody else’s mind; so why try? One can only enter into it in a superficial way” (993). Lewis’s critique of Pound’s work, however, strikes a more direct hit, mainly because he traces the lingering “softness” there to a persistently romantic attitude toward history:

*By himself* he would seem to have neither any convictions nor eyes in his head. There is nothing that he intuits well, certainly never originally. Yet when he can get into the skin of somebody else, of power and renown, a Propertius or an Arnaut Daniel, he becomes a lion or a lynx on the spot. This sort of parasitism is with him phenomenal. (1993, 68; his emphases)

Readers weighing this passage might assent to Lewis’s description of Pound’s habitual use of *personae* and textual ventriloquism but would probably also object that these are the very devices that underlay the poet’s innovative handling of translation and textual collage. Generally less noticed is Lewis’s criticism of his friend’s lack of intuition and originality and this goes deep, suggesting a fundamental division that Lewis sees as crucially damaging to Pound’s whole project.<sup>3</sup> The comment in



fact tacitly transposes the “hard”/“soft” distinction to one between what we might call the theoretical and the aesthetic. In this respect, Lewis’s thinking has something in common with that of Mikhail Bakhtin whose unfinished text now translated as *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* was composed several years before *Time and Western Man* (1927).<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin (1993) there describes what he calls “the theoretical world” as one which is “obtained through an essential and fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being” and in its place he proposes a “participative” thinking that is “unindifferent” and “engaged”: “Every thought of mine, along with its content, is an act or deed that I perform – my own individually answerable act or deed [*postupok*]” (9,3). The truth of thought lies in the uniqueness and situatedness of the moment of its performance; hence “It is an unfortunate misunderstanding (a legacy of rationalism) to think that truth [*Pravda*] can only be the truth [*istina*] that is composed of universal moments; that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable or constant in it” (37).<sup>5</sup> The aesthetic world might seem to offer an attractive alternative to theory’s pull toward abstraction, but it, too, proves ultimately inadequate:

... aesthetic being is closer to the actual unity of Being-as-life than the theoretical world is. That is why the temptation of aestheticism is so persuasive. One can live in aesthetic being, and there are those who do so, but they are *other* human beings and not I myself.... But I shall not find *myself* in that life; I shall find only a double of myself, only someone pretending to be me. All I can do in it is play a role, i.e., assume, like a mask, the flesh of another – of someone deceased. (18; his emphases)

Like Lewis, Bakhtin regards aestheticism as evading the whole question of the thinker’s “answerability” which “remains in actual life, for the playing of a role as a whole is an answerable deed performed by *the one playing*, and not the one represented, i.e., the hero” (18; his emphases). This is the import of Lewis’s emphatic “*By himself*” which suggests that the abstraction of “theory” is registered in Pound’s work by the poet’s effective absence from his own thought (for it is never, according to Lewis, truly his own, originating instead in the dead “flesh” of someone else).<sup>6</sup> Through his habitual ventriloquism, Pound “becomes a lion or a lynx on the spot,” and this “parasitically” acquired power substitutes for the authority that should properly accrue from “answerable” thinking.

In this confrontation of Lewis’s thought with Pound’s we see how unstable “hard” and “soft” can be as descriptive and evaluative terms. For Lewis, a “hard,” “non-human outlook” is necessary “to correct our soft conceit” while for Pound the human is, ideally, at one with nature and its rhythms – a “soft” metaphysics, in Lewis’s view, and one that means that the “hard” side of the equation comes to express itself in Pound’s work only through abstractions imported from sources external to it (1987, 99). In this sense, we might say that *The Cantos* would turn out to be (as Lewis’s comment partly predicts) determined by a constellation of “theories” on whose iterable truths – economic, political, philosophical – the poem would increasingly come to depend. Against the pressure of rhetorical and



didactic insistence that accompanied this dependence, the “soft” dimensions of the poem – its imagistic riches, its intoxicating musicality – would, for many readers, prove a saving grace, though whether these were in turn merely evidence of a lingering aestheticism presented for others another pressing question. Pound was himself, it seems, intermittently aware that his practice of juxtaposition might finally reveal mere incommensurability rather than the cross-weave of connection he sought, but his solution to that problem was the traditional one of hierarchical order. This would be the source of a fundamental paradox in *The Cantos*: for while the long poem was structured around lyric “bust thru”s from the demotic turmoil of “history,” in that sense privileging the “soft” moments of lyric epiphany, these were increasingly to be found earning their place through association with the “harder” ideological truths that drove the poem forward (Pound 1971, 210). We may again recall Bakhtin’s notion of “participative” thinking:

Everything that is actually experienced is experienced as something given and as something-yet-to-be-determined, is intonated, has an emotional-volitional tone, and enters into an effective relationship to me within the unity of the ongoing event encompassing us. An emotional-volitional tone is an inalienable moment of the actually performed act, even of the most abstract thought, insofar as I am actually thinking it, i.e., insofar as it is really actualized in Being, becomes a participant in the ongoing event. (1993, 33)

Bakhtin’s way of linking “intonation” to the present tense of a thought taking shape thus opposes any view of thinking that understands its objects as merely “representative of a certain large whole” (1993, 53).

*The Cantos* – and particularly its late sequences, *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones* – exemplifies both modes: extended incantatory passages present the vision “Taking form now, / the rilievi, / the curled stone at the marge / Faunus, sirene, the stone taking form in the air . . .,” the language dominated by participles and deictics and by an allusive echoing of items from earlier Cantos; complementing this mode are “harder,” more expository passages where Pound is working up his source material, often moving passages from his notebooks directly into the text (1996, 627–628). We have already noted the instability of the “hard”/“soft” dichotomy, but in the case of *The Cantos* this antithetical pairing undergoes a fundamental reversal: as the political framing of the poem comes more sharply into focus, so “hardness” begins to attach itself to apparently incontestable ideological “verities,” while “softness” connotes a mythic, pre-political world where “musical” values hold sway. Take, for example, the difference between two passages, the first from Canto CVII where Pound is drawing on the *Institutes* of the English jurist Edward Coke:

Each wench to a pillar  
     “as do the Serjeants at lawe”  
 To use grain for food only;  
     build no more houses in London  
 de heretico comburendo



Bacon for, Coke opposing.  
 In a white sheet in the Savoy  
 500 marks, be imprisoned  
 Sir Henry (1628) Martin gave sentence. (1996, 781)

The lines nod to the prostitutes plying their trade in the Inns of Court (“Each wench to a pillar”), noting Coke’s opposition to the burning of heretics (“de heretico comburendo”), and so on. But the writing is increasingly turning in on itself, and almost literally so, as Pound habitually inverts the propositional logic of his broken phrases. Note the lines beginning “In a white sheet in the Savoy . . .”: this is classic late Pound, unsettling the reader by beginning at the end of the story, folding back bit by bit, but never quite getting to the heart of the matter. Here, for example, we can see – but not until two lines later – that Sir Henry Martin sentenced someone to wear a white sheet in the Savoy, but for some reason Pound won’t tell us that this is Frances, Coke’s legendarily beautiful daughter, who, as punishment for adultery, was ordered to walk barefoot in a white sheet from Paul’s Cross to the Savoy church in the Strand (Bowen 1957, 457–458). Compare now the lines that close the same Canto:

So that Dante’s view is quite natural;  
 this light  
     as a river  
 in Kung; in Ocellus, Coke, Agassiz  
     ṛēĩ, the flowing  
     this persistent awareness  
 Three Ninas from Gaudier  
     Their mania is a lusting for farness  
     Blind to the olive leaf,  
         not seeing the oak’s veins  
     Wheat was in bread in the old days  
         (1.46 after mid-night)  
     Alan Upward’s seal showed Sitalkas.  
     Coin was in Ambracia;  
 The caelator’s son, named Pythagora. (1996, 782–783)

Here Pound evokes again the Dantescan clarity celebrated at the opening of Canto CVII and this is now associated not with the narcotic movements of the earlier “underwave” sequence (781) but with a more purposive “flowing.” Coke is placed alongside Kung, the mystic Ocellus, and the scientist Louis Agassiz, and here the “persistent awareness” opposes any “lusting for farness” or transcendence, directing attention to natural detail, to the quality of bread and the god of wheat, Sitalkas, and finally to an ancient coinage apparently touched by the mystical, the Pythagorean (783). These last lines render the sought-after “awareness” as a core wisdom of *The Cantos* in its disclosure of the spiritual in the quotidian. Elliptical this passage may be, but it clearly reaffirms a commitment to accurate perception that Pound finds equally active in Coke’s exposition of the common law and in the clarity of vision that remains attentive to the veins in the oak leaf.



More could be said about these closing lines, mainly, I think, because we are dealing here with a poetics of allusion and not simply with direct reference to a source, as in most of Pound's dealings with the text of the *Institutes*. What complicates matters at this late stage in the poem is that he seems to have become increasingly conflicted about that referential move, on the one hand wanting the reader to follow his trail back to Coke's text, while on the other investing in a dream of his own poem's self-sufficiency, in its capacity to serve as indeed "a portable substitute for the British Museum" (1968a, 16).<sup>7</sup> Does this explain why the pull of Pound's text toward a prior one is increasingly fraught with contradiction, as he at once belabors his readers to go back to the source and at the same time deliberately obstructs their passage to it? Envisaged as a "substitute," *The Cantos* exemplifies a logic of supplementarity according to which the source text is at once valued as origin *and* seen as somehow lacking, as requiring the Poundian text aesthetically to complete it.<sup>8</sup> That may explain the way in which quotation and citation seem to honor their original even as, arguably, they *dishonor* it by their deformation and decontextualization of its constituent elements. That doubleness seems to haunt the movement of reference here, the backward turn demanded of the reader finding almost parodic expression in the fondness for inversion already noticed in the "white sheet in the Savoy" lines. At the same time, though, as we can see from the final lines of Canto CVII, when Pound's lines allude rather than simply refer, the poem acquires a forward-moving, propulsive energy that can connect and extend thoughts and images previously established in the poem. As William Irwin (2001) notes in one of the rare technical discussions of allusion, the device "is reference that is indirect in requiring more than the mere substitution of a referent" (288). This "more" that takes us beyond the backward movement of reference, with its locked binary of text and source, is, I would suggest, prosodic, a rhythm of allusive thinking which gathers up its materials into new and independent wholes. This, perhaps, is the authentic "supplement" to Pound's various sources, something that, by the nature of the case, they themselves generally lack; and it is precisely what struck William Carlos Williams (1969), whose fine grasp of Pound's early prosody reminds us poignantly of what struggles to survive in Canto CVII:

... the material is so molded that it is changed in *kind* from other statement. It is a *sort* beyond measure.

The measure is an inevitability, an unavoidable accessory after the fact. If one move, if one run, if one seizes up a material – it cannot avoid having a measure, it cannot avoid a movement which clings to it – as the movement of a horse becomes a part of the rider also –

That is the way Pound's verse impresses me and why he can include pieces of prose and have them still part of a *poem*. It is incorporated in a movement of the intelligence which is special, beyond usual thought and action –<sup>9</sup> (108; his emphases)



Williams emphasizes here the way in which a certain “measure” of thinking allows a whole range of disparate materials (“pieces of prose”) to be caught up into the rhythmic articulation of the poem. What is “theoretical,” in Bakhtin’s sense – the product of “a fundamental abstraction from the fact of my unique being” (1993, 9) – is transformed into poetry by what Pound (1968a) had much earlier described as an “absolute rhythm”: “A man’s rhythm must be interpretative, it will be, therefore, in the end, his own, uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” (9). Perhaps, then, poetry in its confrontation with politics must of necessity prove “soft” and allusive in the sense outlined above; at least its constituent elements must be more than just metonymic references to what Bakhtin calls dismissively “a certain large whole,” offering instead an alternative language to that of the “hard” discourse of pedagogical and political power. Pound, it appears, both saw and did not see this, finding himself in the late reaches of his long poem caught in an oscillation between a “soft” hermetic language protective of the essential “mysteries” and an ostentatiously “hard” and self-consciously non-poetic one that tended to reproduce the violence and coerciveness of the social injustices he meant to attack (“that slobbering bugger Jim First / bitched our heritage,” “In 33 years Noll cut down Charlie,” etc. [1996, 777]).

The problem posed by *The Cantos* and by Pound’s career generally would leave its mark on the work of younger modernist poets. As if by direct reaction, it would become almost an article of faith for them that the thought articulated in a poem should have no antecedent occasion. George Oppen (1990): “there must be no possible impression of a statement having been *put* into verse” (104; his emphasis); Robert Duncan (Duncan and Levertov 2004): “the material of a poem is not brought into it but native to it. Any material gives rise to a poem when you start ‘making’ in the material, seeking its inherent creative form” (545); Louis Zukofsky (1931): “Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and of directing them along a line of melody” (273). Each of these declarations comes with a slightly different inflection, but each in its way seeks to distinguish poetry from what we might call the moment of “theory,” associating this last with “disembodied” thinking and with, in a word, the political.

The tension that has gathered in the later phase of modernism around the political entailments of poetry or its necessary freedom from them can be focused in a vivid exchange of letters between Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov. Beginning in the mid-50s, it is a voluminous and largely affectionate correspondence, each poet discovering in the other a generous and like-minded interlocutor. With the intensification of the Vietnam War, however, the two writers found their work compelled in very different directions. Both, of course, were objectors to the war, but while, in Duncan’s view, the “hardness” of Levertov’s response issued in mere stridency of tone and empty moralizing, Duncan himself, in the words of one critic, “treats historical actualities as the evolution of myth . . . on the other, he writes the historical as an *incarnation* of eternal forms” (Nichols 2010, 120; see also Perloff 1998). For Duncan, Levertov’s work gives up on “poetry’s potential to create new meaning by insisting on the urgency of the historical here and now” (135).



Potentiality is placed over against actuality:<sup>10</sup> once again, the argument is not about a particular stance toward the war but rather (as Duncan sets the terms of debate) about a conception of poetry; so he writes to her in March 1972:

... I was attempting to define your not believing in the primary meaning of the art of the poem itself, but more and more thinking of the poem as communication of meanings whose primacy was posited outside the art, in "Life" or social realities, causes that had clear and urgent priorities. (701)

Through the twists and turns of this increasingly troubled exchange, Duncan insists on his distinction between "the idea of the poem as revelation, as primary knowledge of the truth of things – and of the poem as a vehicle for personal, social, political or religious convictions" (687). As with Pound's "hard"/"soft" distinction, there is a sexual politics behind this argument: rather absurdly casting Levertov as the savage goddess Kali "whirling her necklace of skulls" in a 1971 poem called "Santa Cruz Propositions" (in Duncan 1984), Duncan began to read works like her "Life at War" and "Tenebrae" not as primarily responses to the conflict in Vietnam "but in relation to the deep underlying consciousness of the woman as a victim in war with the Man" (Duncan and Levertov 667). Already offended by this high-handed "psychoanalytic" reading of her work, Levertov was even more shocked by Duncan's remarks in an interview published three years later (Mersmann 1974, 94) describing her attitude to the war as governed by "her own sadism, and masochism" ("the poem is not a protest though she thinks she's protesting"). Levertov concluded that "our friendship [is] twice broken, deeply betrayed" (711).

As the two poets' relationship unravels through these letters we begin to see with increasing clarity that two very different conceptions of poetry and poetic language are at issue. Levertov (1992) dissociates herself from the "field" poetics of Duncan, Creeley, and Olson – "Form is never more than the REVELATION (not extension) of content," she argues (Duncan and Levertov, 680) – and imagines instead that as "the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there come to him the first words of the poem: the words which are to be his way in to the poem, if there is to be a poem" (Levertov 1992, 68–9).<sup>11</sup> This moment of contemplative mediation is absent from Duncan's sense of the poem's origin: "we do not say something by means of the poem but the poem itself is the immediacy of the saying" (668), and while he frequently returns to Pound's dictum that "Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" (1968b, 36), this "charge" involves something quite different from the semantic "condensation" Pound had sought, signaling for Duncan the possibility of "rhythmic and tonal seizure": "In that charge there are meanings we are not prepared for. Language so charged is not simple, it is multiphasic. And there is a sinister, a duplicit, possibility in the charge" (Duncan 1985, 126; see also Mackey 2005, 131). Duncan may follow Pound in reading H. D.'s work as "hard" – "Her art, and her sense of the passionate, demanded figures of feeling, exactness, that was not soft and compliant but hard and resistant" (Duncan 2011, 51) – but what





also especially impressed him was something Pound did not or chose not to see: in Mackey's words, "her openness to and her giving in to feelings that might be criticized as uncalled for, inappropriate, excessive" (2005, 10). H. D.'s work, then, might not be stylistically "soft," but its particular "hardness" expresses an emotional release that was quite at odds with the restraint Pound valued; in Duncan's words, "Language suddenly runs loose, out of bounds, and so does knowledge" (Duncan 1985, 128).

In contrast, Levertov's war poetry is seen by Duncan as shackled to the very language it should displace: there is, he says, "something wrong to my sense of life in urging the conscience to take up arms against the war" (608) and his letters repeatedly argue against any tendency to make "war against war" (661). This was the cause of his later dissatisfaction with his own long poem "Essay At War" – "Give over trying to win thru the poem," he admonished himself (565) – though parts of that work did indeed argue for a deliberate taking of distance from a "war-like" language:

The war is a mineral perfection, clear,  
unambiguous evil    within which  
our delite, our life,    is the flaw,  
the contradiction? (Duncan 1968, 23)

Like fine marble, war is "perfect," as is the language deployed in its name, a language that operates to settle all contradictions "unambiguously" (elsewhere Duncan quotes from Levertov's "Staying Alive" a statement by an American general that "In order to save the village it was necessary to destroy it" [Duncan and Levertov 2004, 664]). The false "perfection" Duncan considers in the poem may recall Roland Barthes's account of the tautological closure that is the temptation of all political speech:

In the Stalinist world, in which *definition*, that is to say the separation between Good and Evil, becomes the sole content of all language, there are no more words without values attached to them, so that finally the function of writing is to cut out one stage of a process: there is no more lapse of time between naming and judging, and the closed character of language is perfected, since in the last analysis it is a value which is given as explanation of another value. (Barthes 1968, 24; his emphasis)

This language has no place for what Duncan's poem calls "our life," and it is, of course, precisely that life and the "delite" we may take in it that threaten to produce a fundamental "flaw" or fissure in the otherwise "unambiguous" logic of war.<sup>12</sup> Here as elsewhere Duncan's anachronistic spelling registers the pathos of historical distance, but as the poem's declarative mode shifts abruptly into an interrogative one, so the tone of the lines rises unexpectedly from elegy to defiance.

For all this, Duncan's posture may strike us, perhaps, as damagingly abstract and aloof, and as Michael Davidson has recently put it, the poet's "tendency to mythologize the war seems, by current standards, inadequate" (2011, 175).<sup>13</sup> On the



other hand, that maneuver is deliberate and underwritten by a conviction that “The poet’s role is not to oppose evil, but to imagine it” (Duncan and Levertov 2004, 669). It is in the language of such imagining that Duncan sees the way beyond both the circularity of the state’s war-speak and the “political stance” of Levertov’s war poems (“These, Denny, are empty and vain slogans because those who use them are destitute of any imagination of or feeling of what such greed, racism or imperialism is like” [Duncan and Levertov 669]). Duncan’s charge of mere sloganizing hardly represents the whole truth about Levertov’s sometimes moving and galvanizing war poetry, but once again it gestures toward what he regards as a damaging division between “theory” and the purpose of poetry.

That criticism can be heard again in George Oppen’s letters to Levertov where he takes particular exception to a poem in *The Jacob’s Ladder* (1961), “During the Eichmann Trial,” which includes the lines “we are members // One of another.” Oppen remarks: “I think too that we are members of each other: – I believe that; . . . or would like to . . . but what a poem it would be in which one saw and tasted that!” (1990, 81). Like Duncan, Oppen regrets the loss of the sensory immediacy that characterized much of Levertov’s earlier work. He has particular praise for her poem “Matins” in his 1962 essay “The Mind’s Own Place” (2003, 176), but it is there that he also castigates what he sees as her new way of making the poem a vehicle for political statement: “the poet’s business,” he declares, “is not to use verse as an advanced form of rhetoric, nor to give to political statements the aura of eternal truth” (2003, 182). The criticism is similar to Duncan’s; indeed, when Levertov showed him Oppen’s letter, Duncan commented: “I’m as leery of approved social, political, religious sentiments as ever Oppen might be” (Duncan and Levertov 2004, 404). Yet while they share a wariness of poetry as a vehicle for political belief, Duncan and Oppen disagree as to how the poet should then react to the problematic divergence between poetry and social commitment. Duncan cleaves to a “mystical pacifism” (1985, 115) that resists the closure of a damaged political language by according the poet a bardic “power” far in excess of mere moralism; Oppen, interestingly, takes a quite opposite path, seeking, as he puts it in “Song, the Winds of Downhill,” a poetry “impoverished // of tone of pose that common / wealth of parlance” (2008, 220). This is a poetry “which may be sung / may well be sung,” but its expression of what he calls in another poem “The lyric valuables” (2008, 50) is won by a kind of literary asceticism. Indeed, the stripped-down style of Oppen’s late work, with its eschewal of punctuation and visual imagery, constitutes, perhaps, a kind of “poor” poetry (by analogy with Jerzy Grotowski’s “Poor Theatre”) where all signs of a conventional literariness must be expunged. Oppen is not, of course, the only artist to take the path of deliberate verbal “impoverishment”: we think, for example, of Paul Celan, or of Samuel Beckett who reserved special praise for the painter Bram van Velde as “the first whose painting is bereft, rid if you prefer, of *occasion* in every shape and form, ideal as well as material, and the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act” (2006, 561; his emphasis). Beckett’s “occasion” is Oppen’s “pose”: in each case we are dealing with what Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit have defined in their account of *The Arts*

of *Impoverishment* as “an art at war with culture,” a pithy phrase that has several possible meanings – it might imply that art exists in opposition to the ensemble of social practices that provides its generative context, but it also suggests that art is at war with art, a proposition that expresses the dissatisfaction the avant-garde has consistently felt with the pretensions of something we may call, by way of distinction, the “merely” aesthetic (1993, 2).

That “merely” points up the problem, of course, namely that the capacity of the arts to effect social change appears thoroughly incommensurable with the entrenched powers of what Oppen calls “an enemy world” (1990, 409 n.25). This is why he insists in “The Mind’s Own Place” that “There are situations which cannot honorably be met by art, and surely no one need fiddle precisely at the moment that the house next door is burning” (2003, 181). It is not just incommensurability that is the issue here, but the fact that to carry on “fiddling” (or making art) while the fire rages is to act *dishonorably* by invoking aesthetic values in a situation in which properly they have no place. At the same time, he continues, “It is possible that a world without art is simply and flatly uninhabitable, and the poet’s business is not to use verse as an advanced form of rhetoric, nor to give to political statements the aura of eternal truth” (182). What Oppen seems to mean is that we cannot do without art and for that reason we must not damage its capacity to make the world habitable by reducing it to a vehicle for “political statements.” “The poet,” Oppen concludes, “speaking as a poet, declares his political non-availability,” a declaration that, in contrast to Duncan’s handling of this question, discovers in a necessary “impoverishment” the means by which to evade a writing caught up in the toils of both the “merely” aesthetic *and* the “merely” political. As is well known, while Oppen was involved in the practical politics of the Left he stopped writing poetry altogether, refusing, as he put it, to write “Marxist poetry” (1990, 277). That decision seemed to him a necessary one because in the radical climate of the period, politics and art were increasingly being drawn into a reciprocal and instrumental relation, art becoming political, of course, but politics in its turn becoming, in a peculiar sense, a kind of “art.” Mary Oppen recalled that “even the vocabulary within the Party was a different vocabulary than I had known” [1978, 153]), and in a poem called “Eclogue,” Oppen alludes to the endless committee meetings in which that particular “vocabulary” was forged – “The men talking / Near the room’s center . . . Pinpointing in the uproar / Of the living room // An assault on the quiet continent” (2008, 39). This “talking” – Heidegger’s *Gerede* or “babble,” which Oppen would frequently invoke – is the “uproar” of what Bakhtin calls “theory.” “There are words that mean nothing,” Oppen declares in the poem called “The Building of the Skyscraper” (2008, 149), and there are also ways of talking and writing that amount to little more than the empty self-legitimation of which Barthes speaks in *Writing Degree Zero*.

That sense of tautological “closure” would become oppressively evident to Oppen in the war-speak of the Vietnam period, a “ferocious mumbling, in public / Of rootless speech” (2008, 173). With “Insanity in high places,” it is not only that political discourse withdraws into seamless circularity, but that the very possibility



of the political disappears, in “A plume of smoke, visible at a distance / In which people burn” (173). As Oppen puts it in “Of Being Numerous,” “They await // War, and the news / Is war // As always”; this perpetual war, sealed into its own self-justifying *mythos*, is the consequence of an ethical impoverishment so colossal that it compels the poet to discover a completely different vocabulary of critique and protest (174). As Duncan concludes:

If our manner of speech has come, as it has, to be so much a cover that for the sake of freedom men are drafted against their will; for the sake of peace, armed men and tanks fight in our streets; and for the sake of the good life, the resources of our land are ruthlessly wasted, and waterways and air polluted, then we need a new manner of speaking. (1985, 119)

For Duncan, this new speech will scrupulously dissociate itself from the language of power and domination, not by some simple swerve into a compensatory aestheticism – though this is an ever-present risk, given the extreme hermeticism of much of his work – but by the revealing of a mythic power in speech itself. Hence this argument against Levertov’s concept of “organic form”:

Where “organic” poetry refers to personal emotions and impressions – the concurrence between organism and his world; the linguistic follows emotions and images that appear in the language itself as a third “world”; true to what is happening in the syntax as another man might be true to what he sees or feels. (Duncan and Levertov 2004, 408)

As Albert Gelpi (2006) has noted, Duncan’s “linguistic gnosticism” – “language as the source and means, the substance and end of the poet’s special knowing” – predicts in some ways the emergence of Language Poetry in the 1980s (186). Poets associated with that tendency have had little time, of course, for the mystical theories that attach to Duncan’s particular “search for a poetry that has not come to a conclusion,” though it might be argued that the new experimental poetry is itself in varying degrees dependent on an absent theoretical ground of which it is, tacitly, the designedly opaque verbal figure or instance (1985, 114).

The direction taken by Oppen in his later work is significantly different and points to a way in which poetry might transform the political into something resistant to the abstracting pull of “theory.” The deliberately “impoverished” manner of Oppen’s later poems is “hard,” perhaps, in its refusal of ornamentation and fluent musicality, but this particular “hardness” expresses a fundamental resistance to what Oppen calls “a ruined ethic // Bursting with ourselves” (2008, 98). Pound’s distinction between “hard” and “soft” becomes a kind of irrelevance here, with poetry grasped instead as a means of eliding thinking and being: “Prosody: the pulse of thought, of consciousness, therefore, in Heidegger’s word, of human *Dasein*, human ‘being there’” (Oppen, unpublished note, quoted in Nicholls 2007, 72); as he puts it in “World, World –,” “We want to be here. // The act of being, the act of being / More than oneself” (159). The ontological desire “to be here” – here in the world and in the world of the poem – is underwritten throughout by Oppen’s



near-death experience in the Battle of the Bulge, an experience that places enormous pressure on any idea of “the lyric valuables”:

And war.

More than we felt or saw.  
 There is a simple ego in a lyric,  
 A strange one in war.  
 To a body anything can happen,  
 Like a brick. Too obvious to say.  
 But all horror came from it. (53)

This reduction of self to body and ultimately to mere thing, a brick, underlies the degradation of the political in Oppen’s thinking. In the “half life” of war, he writes in another poem, “We crawled everywhere on the ground without seeing the earth again” (81). This image of debasement strikingly brings to mind Giorgio Agamben’s account of “the radical transformation of politics into the realm of bare life” (1998, 120) and it registers, too, Oppen’s countervailing attempt to translate the prescriptive categories of the political into the qualitative ones of social being.<sup>14</sup> Agamben puts it like this: “There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility or potentiality*” (1993, 43; his emphases). Being-political, then, gestures not to some kind of transcendental relation but to one of immanence that is expressed not in terms of subject and object, of essence and thing, but rather as life and potentiality. “Life” as conceived here exceeds the individual life and compels the poet toward a lyric register that rigorously rejects any unearned sublimity.<sup>15</sup> If this is a “hard” modernism, it is one that is hard on itself, discovering “possibility or potentiality” in the condition of its own formal “impoverishment.”

Oppen’s ambitious attempt to transform the political by poetic means and thereby to rescue it from the condition of “theory” can be seen in the first section of his late serial work “The Book of Job and A Draft of a Poem to Praise the Paths of the Living” (2008, 240–246).<sup>16</sup> The poem is dedicated to Mickey Schwerner, one of three Civil Rights workers murdered by Klan members in Philadelphia, Mississippi in 1964. Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman suffer the fate of Job in their subjection to a meaningless and vindictive force; their murderers, like God in the biblical story, reveal the law in all its arbitrariness and violence. This “force” is at the poem’s enigmatic center and in his late writings Oppen constantly associates it with Blake’s “burning” Tyger, a principle of both creation and wrathful destruction. Force opposes force: the strength of “the half-lit jailwinds” at the beginning of the poem is met by the “morning’s force” that names the three young men, this collision producing a sequence of apocalyptic images punctuated by “hard” caesural breaks. The tone is one of anger, though Oppen scrupulously forgoes the consolations of a rhetorical identification with the victims (“not we / who were beaten”), proposing instead that the sincerity of their actions unleashes a “force”



that somehow illuminates reality and gives purpose to “the paths of the living.” It is the same “force” that in the biblical story finally compels God to answer Job:

there builds there is written  
 a vividness there is rawness  
 like a new sun the flames  
 tremendous the sun  
 itself ourselves ourselves  
 go with us *disorder*

*so great the tumult wave*

*upon wave* this traverse

this desert                   extravagant  
*island of light*               (2008, 241)

The poem as a whole is, as Oppen noted in a letter, “startling in view of the number of quotes,” though these are “Quotes from memory” and he is offhand about sources (“I’d made myself a list of the references, but seem to have lost it”) because his fragmentary borrowings have been fully assimilated or interiorized into the texture of the poem (1990, 264).<sup>17</sup> In his late works, Oppen indicates partial quotation by using italic, though this signaling is not necessarily meant to encourage us to trace their source. If we do detect an echo of another text, Oppen has usually rewritten it or presented it in a teasingly elliptical form.<sup>18</sup> So the lines above seem to recall Kafka’s gnomic parable “The Savages” (“Die Wilden”):

Those savages of whom it is recounted that they have no other longing than to die, or rather, they no longer have even that longing, but death has a longing for them, and they abandon themselves to it, or rather, they do not even abandon themselves, but fall into the sand on the shore and never get up again. Those savages I much resemble, and indeed I have fellow clansmen round about, but *the confusion in these territories is so great, the tumult is like waves rising and falling by day and by night, and the brothers let themselves be borne upon it.* (Kafka 1958, 121; my emphases)

Oppen’s attention may have been drawn to this passage by the translation of Kafka’s “Stammesbrüder” as “clansmen,” and certainly the image of self-abandonment to the deathly “tumult” speaks grimly, if obliquely, to the racism of the Southern “lynch gangs” and the self-hatred it conceals (Kafka’s parable ends with the exclamation: “How people do always carry their own enemy, however powerless he is, within themselves”).<sup>19</sup> And while the “savages” desire only death, “life in all its might would go on just the same.” It is difficult to determine the value attaching to life, “this barrel organ,” in Kafka’s text,<sup>20</sup> but the rising of “a new sun” in Oppen’s lines signals less equivocally that something in the very frame of things – in life itself – will ensure that the poor and the weak exert some equivalent “force” against their oppressors: “the ant / hath her anger and the emmet / his choler.”<sup>21</sup> It is this





anger which blazes out as a “general Vengeance” in this first section of the poem and which is reaffirmed in the final line “*island of light*,” probably an allusion to Hölderlin’s celebration of the island of Patmos where John, author of *Revelation*, was exiled.<sup>22</sup> Apocalyptic revelation haunts these lines, though that which stands ready to be revealed is implicitly nothing more nor less than being itself. What is remarkable about the whole passage is, finally, its avoidance of conventional ways of confronting the political violence that is its subject: it is not, in any simple way, elegiac, nor is it straightforwardly a poem of protest or even complaint. Nor, again, does it express a facile acceptance, that these are just “*the world’s deeds*” (2008, 240).<sup>23</sup> Neither “hard” nor “soft,” in Pound’s sense, the passage offers contradiction in place of antithesis, finding in the “rawness” of political tragedy a “vividness” that transforms a desert into an “*island of light*.” As Oppen put it in a richly enigmatic note, this is, indeed, to discover a poetics of being at “the edge of despair, the edge of the void, a paean of praise to the world” (quoted Nicholls 2007, 192).

### Notes

- 1 See, for example, Oppen 2003, 175.
- 2 See Nicholls 2012.
- 3 Eliot, of course, famously considered Pound’s unoriginality one of his principal strengths – see Eliot 1928, 10–11.
- 4 It is thought that Bakhtin worked on this text between 1920 and 1924 (Bakhtin 1993, xxiii). The work was not published until 1986. For a brief but helpful account, see Rabaté 2002.
- 5 For a general objection to this conception of the performative, see Derrida 1978, 18: “Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a ‘coded’ or iterable utterance . . . ?”
- 6 Cf. Lewis 1986, 30: “the life of the crowd, of the common or garden man, is exterior. He can live only through others, outside himself.”
- 7 Pound similarly described his plan for *Guide to Kulchur* in an unpublished letter (1937) to Faber and Faber’s Frank Morley: “Wot Ez knows, or a substitute (portable) for the British Museum” (quoted in Paul 2005, 65).
- 8 See Derrida, 1978, 212: “The supplement, which seems to be added as a plenitude to a plenitude, is equally that which compensates for a lack (*qui supplée*).” As Paul 2005, 73 notes, by the late 1930s “Pound rejects his older method of letting quoted text speak for itself.” What then matters increasingly is “Not the document but the significance of the document” (Pound 1966, 220–221).
- 9 Cf. Duncan and Levertov 2004, 163: “he [Pound] does not need poetic ‘touches,’ when the lyric and melodic occurs it is inherent in the statement.”
- 10 Cf. Duncan 1985, 117 on Dante’s concept of the “potential intellect.”
- 11 See also Levertov 1992, 213–214 where she disputes Duncan’s reading of her essay “Notes on Organic Form”: “I mean ‘discoverable’ quite precisely – not ‘that which comes into being only in the work’ but that which, though present in a dim unrecognized or





ungrasped way, is only experienced in any degree of fullness in art's concreteness" (emphases in original). See also Gelpi 2006, 188 noting that Levertov "resolutely maintained Emerson's distinction (in his essay on 'The Poet') between the creative process and the resulting poem: 'the thought and the form are equal in order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form.'"

- 12 See Duncan and Levertov 2004, 661: "men at war against war are hypocrites if they argue that there can be no peaceful ways in a time of war. THERE HAS BEEN NO TIME IN HUMAN HISTORY THAT WAS NOT A TIME OF WAR. And any peaceful ways and deeds of peace have had to be created in the face of the need for war – for war against oppression, for war against injustice, etc."
- 13 Davidson concludes, however: "I find myself in agreement with Duncan on the limits of Levertov's war poetry. Levertov's work of the late 1960s is pious and doctrinaire, often relying on a rhetoric of indignation and anger to deal with impossible contradictions."
- 14 Oren Izenberg has noted this distinction, though his general argument moves in a rather different direction from mine: "A radical poetics . . . is not radical for its political commitments but for its pre-political or ontological commitments" (35).
- 15 See Agamben 1999, 224 on Gilles Deleuze's conception of life as "not belonging to a subject."
- 16 For an extended reading of this important work, see Nicholls 2007, 162–179.
- 17 In some cases, Oppen's unpublished notes provide a revealing context for particular passages. In this case, the references to "rawness," "vividness," and the sun recall an account of reading Heidegger – see Nicholls 2007, 66.
- 18 Compare poet Michael Palmer's account of his own practice: "Occasionally I'll appropriate a source verbatim, but often it will be slightly or radically altered. It becomes altered by the impetus of the poem itself, the demands of the rhythm, the surrounding material, whatever. And so it's not a quotation, exactly. It's a form of citation, but it's layered, covered over" (Palmer 1999, 286).
- 19 The translators ignore the incomplete sentence with which the original concludes: "On this account, on account of this powerless enemy, they are . . ."
- 20 See Anidjar 2003, 155: "No doubt 'The Savages' is a parable in which absolute loss lets nothing, no eternity or law, maintain its transcendence. The impossibility of distinguishing whether eternity is a figure for the player of life or whether it is stowed away in a crowded attic among unused flags and abandoned instruments – or both – indicates that what remains is life itself, 'life in all its might,' which is the only life we have."
- 21 The allusion is, unexpectedly, to a letter from Sir Francis Drake to Queen Elizabeth I: "There is a general Vengeance," Drake says, "which secretly pursueth the doers of wrong and suffereth them not to prosper . . . For as ESOP teacheth, even the fly hath her spleen, and the emmet is not without her choler; and both together many times find means whereby, though the eagle lays her eggs in JUPITER's lap, yet by one way or other, she escapeth not requital of her wrong done [to] the emmet. (Eliot 1910, 133; my emphases)
- 22 See Hölderlin 1994, 501: "O island of light!"
- 23 The phrase may also echo the earlier version of "Patmos" (Hölderlin, 1994, 495): "lightning is explained by / The deeds of the world until now . . ."



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