Ezra Pound's Subject Matter and the Poetic Avant-Garde

C.M. Foltz[1]

ABSTRACT

This paper explores Ezra Pound's poetics in light of certain American avant-garde poetic schools who claim literary inheritance from him. Specifically, critics in the 1970s to 1990s attempted to redefine Pound's ars poetica strictly in political terms without acknowledging numerous essays in which he remained apolitical with respect to poetry. In addition to this, Pound's conception of poetic meter and other theoretical bases are explored. Some of these include Pound's belief that subject matter is the source of poetic form, and that authorial intention is intimately related to how cultures promote values and a literary tradition. Though Pound is named as a predecessor of American avant-garde-ism, this paper explores how these connections are more tenuous than previously accepted by the academy.

Recounting the day he met Ezra Pound, Hugh Kenner said in an interview with Harvey Blume (1998) that "I suddenly knew that I was in the presence of the center of Modernism," and William Carlos Williams (1978) states in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* that "[b]efore meeting Ezra Pound is like B.C. and A.D." (p. 5). Now, several decades after Pound's death, his influence over the proverbial landscape of American poetry is undeniable, and proponents of the poetic avant-garde in the late 1970s to 1990s posited that Pound's influence over American poetic form is dominant because of its subversive, political nature. This paper questions these assumptions and attempts to offer another reading of Pound's poetics that is apolitical, though Pound's place as the dominant figure in American poetry of

---

[1] University of Texas, Dallas, United States, Email: cmfoltz@utdallas.edu.

the late twentieth century is reinforced. Methodologically, a comparative approach between pre-cursor Language Poetry and New Formalism theorists is examined as a case example of this divergence.

During the post-World War II period, American literary critics characterized Pound's poetics within a political framework influenced by the disintegration of Structuralism and the rise of social constructionism. Pound was understood as our canonical, literary predecessor, *the contemporary of our grandchildren* as Marjorie Perloff (1985, p. 211) posits, but the belief that Pound's poetic theory was derivative of his political beliefs has led to several misunderstandings about his poetics. One major theme during this time was whether contemporary poetic theory would embrace representationalism and if the dictum for *direct treatment of the thing*, so prevalent in Pound's Imagism, would continue serving as a theoretical basis for which poets could conceptualize contemporary poetic forms. Further debate about the feasibility of representational poetics was germane to the time given the disruptive events earlier in the century (world wars, socio-political unrest, etc.). This question continues to influence a stream of avant-garde poets whose work embraces both political and non-representational subject matter since the late 1970s. In addition, a plethora of academics and literary critics still hold to this disjointing view between Pound's concept of representation and subject matter.

An influential essay dealing with this was Marjorie Perloff's "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era" which formalized this growing debate. She juxtaposes twentieth-century American poetry as being either in Wallace Stevens's or Pound's poetic camp, and Perloff argues that Pound's legacy is the most influential due to its political and non-conformist nature. At the heart of this quarrel lies Perloff's claim that Pound and Stevens approach poetry from two antithetical theories about form. She writes that:

> [f]or Stevens, 'Form has no significance except in relation to the reality that is being revealed'; for Pound, form *is* that reality. From this faith in form as itself expressive of the poet's view of identity and culture comes Pound's conviction, stated later in 'A Retrospect,' that 'no good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old' (1985, p. 497).

Those who agree with Perloff undoubtedly accept the premise of the argument; that is, Pound's statement to *make it new* subverts the anti-avant-garde and promotes oppositional forms of poetry where *form is that reality* outside of concern for subject matter or authorial intention. Perloff claims that Pound's poetry is political in nature, less historically centered, more dialectical. Continuing this topic in *The Dance of the Intellect*, Perloff (1985) affirms that Pound's poetry and critical writings constitute a focus on form rather than content or subject matter. She writes:

> [t]he how, for Poundians, thus becomes more interesting than the what: if poetry teaches us how to talk to ourselves, it is not because it provides us with a vision of Reality but because its processes imitate the processes of the external world as we have come to know it (p. 22).

Perloff claims that Pound embraces a social constructionist paradigm, and she sees Pound's poetics as semantically intra-textual. She writes that Pound's language functions as the reality around which he organizes poetic thought, including socio-political realities.

However, Perloff's view of Pound deviates from his stated perspective on the matter, and this derivation has propagated numerous revisionist Poundian perspectives among scholars. Many of these perspectives, although congruous with certain oppositional and avant-garde poetic movements, are eventually antithetical to Pound's stated construction of art formulated in his essays at the beginning to mid-twentieth century. Pound's poetic continuity and view of culture is grounded in a firm belief that language logocratically upholds society, and this belief is the defining source of his poetics, a historical and modern poetic system. Notwithstanding, Pound's approach to the avant-garde is structurally and contextually social; to Pound, a view of individual art outside of social context is deleterious.

In a 1962 interview, Donald Hall asks Pound about his poetic technique, and he responds, "[o]ne is working on the life vouchsafed, I should think. I don't know about method. The *what* is so much more important than how" (Ezra Pound, p. 22). But what exactly is Pound advocating here, and how does

this measure with Perloff's assertion? Hall, later in the same interview, posits that Pound spent the better part of thirty years focusing on poetic form and less on content or subject matter, to which Pound responds, "I think I've covered that. Technique is the test of sincerity. If a thing isn't worth getting the technique to say, it is of inferior value" (p. 26). To Pound, form extends from subject matter (the *thing*), and poetic form is a secondary concern to him. Pound's stated position is that poets engage novel poetic forms by attaching new meanings to subject matters that were previously dissociative from their cultures.

In c. 1911-1915, Pound writes several essays concerning poetry and the arts, each articulating small sections of his ars poetica. Particularly in "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris," Pound defines artist intent, subject matter, and *luminous detail*. He states, "[…] any given subject belongs to the artist, who must know that subject matter most intimately before he can express it through his particular medium" (Pound, 1975, p. 35). His statement that subject matter belongs to the artist is important, but holistically more important, however, is his declaration that artists must know their particular subject matter intimately before expressing it. Pound believed that subject matter could be expressed through any number of mediums, but this expression does not exist independently from the artist, though the subject matter exists independently. Pound embraces artistic expression as a kind of semantic hyper-charging of art a priori with regard to audience interpretation, a meaning system of intentionality. For Pound, expressing a particular subject matter in a work of art is indistinguishable from the artist's intention.

In 1987, Jerome McGann wrote an article in *Critical Inquiry* entitled "Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes" where he argues that Language Poetry (LP) inherits poetic technique from Pound. He writes, "Pound, Stein, and especially Zukofsky stand behind the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writers. Oppositional politics are a paramount concern, and the work stands in the sharpest relief, stylistically, to the poetry of accommodation" (McGann, Critical Inquiry, p. 626). McGann cites Perloff's *The Dance of the Intellect* and Lee Bartlett's "What is Language Poetry?" that appeared in *Critical Inquiry* during the summer of 1986. McGann believes that Pound's poetics are based on a type of collage method, and he acknowledges that LP is distinctly experimental poetry opposing another group he labels poets of accommodation and traditionalists. He sees Pound's politics and poetry as inseparable from, and oppositional to, the main stream cultures in which they developed. McGann outlines that poetry, even neutral with respect to politics, is poetry of accommodation and anti-avant-garde. He writes, "[t]he 'meanings' sought after in this work are neither ideas which lie behind (prior to) the texts nor residues left over from their operations. Meaning occurs as part of the process of writing – indeed, it is the writing" (1987, p. 636).

The argument here is a simple one. According to McGann, what is considered oppositional, or poetically avant-garde, derives its meaning only as a series of processes among processes; they do not function as artifacts that point to external realities within culture as authorial-intended social critique. This contradicts Pound's view. Pound states that he is:

> more interested in the Arts than in the histories of developments of this and that, for the Arts work on life as history works on the development of civilization and literature. The artist seeks out the luminous detail and presents it. He does not comment (1975, P. 23).

Pound asserts that arts illuminate existing realities, though they possibly are abstract in nature, and work more to change life than to make observations of it. By saying this, he does not claim that poetry is never written about day-to-day life events, as it obviously is, but he makes a deeper, dual distinction. Firstly, he indicates that art influences life, enriching it and changing its contextual meaning. Secondly, the artist is able to understand this deeper language and meaning, which is why he uses luminous detail, rather than commenting on the obvious.

Pound sees poetic meaning inextricably linked with representation and image, whereby agreement of form and words are paramount in establishing and maintaining the cohesion of poetic language that

conveys subject matter. Pound (1975) writes: "[a] word exists when two or more people agree to mean the same thing by it" (p. 34), and collections of words (agreed upon as words) constitute the poetic structures charged with meaning by agreement. For Pound, poetry is a social contract between writer and reader that makes these things concurrently meaningful, a definite construction that allows communication to begin and develop. This is the basis of Pound's luminous detail—words, meanings, and a social accommodation must occur for poetry to be comprehensible and transferable from one person to another.

In 1985, Robert von Hallberg argues in *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980* that Pound is a culturally-minded artist and critic, inclusive of major and minor poets. He writes that Pound is a cultural proponent, neither isolationist nor culturally antagonistic, and this idea develops from the assumption that Pound's view of poetry is part of a cultural history, a connectedness influencing the future and reconciling the past to cultural normativity. Von Hallberg is concerned with creating a canon of poets who shape the culture, a group that helps solidify a national identity. He writes:

> [a] national canon stands as proof that such distinctions can be made so as to command assent: that the nation asks from its writers support for its policies, […] a hold on the past and a claim on the future (von Hallberg, 1985, p. 27).

Recognizing a canon is one aspect of creating cultural lineage, to separate higher forms of poetry from lower, to establish de facto aesthetic norms. In other words, by collecting poets from a specific culture into hierarchies, one is arguing that poetry serves a function beyond individual expression, demonstrating an understanding of poetry as multi-relational to history in different times and connotations—a diachronic view of poetry. A canon diachronically creates a literary tradition, a sense of history and menaing. Pound falls squarely in this camp. He (2005) states in *The Tradition* that literary tradition is,

> a beauty which we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us…[a] return to origins invigorates because it is a return to nature and reason. The man who returns to origins does so because he wishes to behave in the eternally sensible manner…naturally, reasonably, intuitively (p. 266-68).

In Kurt Heinzelman's (2004) essay "'Make It New': The Rise of an Idea," he states that,

> [w]hat Pound equates with the new, though, is not the making of an original work of art *ex nihilo* but the excavating of what had been apprehended before…from a prior act of creation…[t]he primary sense of *innovare* in Latin is 'to renew' or 'to restore' or, more exactly, 'to add something new to,' not 'to create new' (p. 131).

But if Heinzelman is correct, if *make it new* means a renewing of things, a "return to origins" and not simply disregarding previous poetry as archaisms favoring contemporary methods, what can be said of the acceptability of Pound's method today? Marjorie Perloff (1985), in "The Contemporary of Our Grandchildren," writes that Pound's family tree goes through Williams to:

> Black Mountain, the Objectivists, and the Confessional poets…these connections have been made enough and I shall not rehearse…these…well-known cases…[r]ather, I want to take up the larger question: What is it in Pound's oeuvre that has made such a difference in the poetry of the later twentieth century? (Bornstein, p. 196-97).

She further states that certain poetic developments are attributable to Pound:

> [t]here are three areas, I would suggest, in which Pound's legacy has been indisputable: (1) the drive toward precision, particularity, immediacy…(2) the 'break[ing of] the pentameter' in favor of the 'musical' free verse line; and (3) the use of translation as the invention of a desired other…[i]nterestingly, many poets who have praised Pound's music, like Robert Duncan or Allen Ginsberg, do not follow his two cardinal rules: (1) use the end-stopped line as a unit, and (2) avoid conventional iambic rhythm (p. 204).

Pound never actually embraced end-stopping lines, and his drive toward precise language is undeniable, but Perloff's remaining claims should be prefaced by saying, *well that depends*. The breaking of the pentameter or other line lengths, meters, as Pound states himself, is never a matter of dogma, but is necessary to create an environment where poetic language and musicality remains in harmony with subject matter—this point is often missed. Pound (1992) says,

> I think there is a 'fluid' as well as a 'solid' content, that some poems may have form as a tree has form, some as water poured into a vase…[t]hat a vast number of subjects cannot be precisely, and therefore not properly rendered in symmetric forms…I think the artist should master all known forms and systems of metric…no good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old…yet a man feeling the divorce of life and his art may naturally try to resurrect a forgotten mode if he finds in that mode some leaven, or if he sees in it some element lacking in contemporary art which might unite that art again to its sustenance, life (p. 9-12).

For Pound, the key is not taking formal meters and getting rid of them, or simply *favoring* free verse. Instead, the point is to open subject matter to the poet, to allow the subject to dictate whether the content needs a "fluid" or "solid" container to present the poem. To simply take a subject and put it into iambic pentameter or, for that matter, to take a subject and put it into free verse accomplishes nothing. Pound continues,

> I think one should write vers libre only when one 'must', that is to say, when the 'thing' builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres, or more real, more a part of the emotion of the 'thing', more germane, intimate, interpretative than the measure of regular accentual verse; a rhythm which disconnects one with set iambic or set anapaestic (p. 12).

The onus to choose an appropriate form falls on the poet and the poet's interpretation of content. By implication, Pound advocates poetry in set meters unless the "thing" (subject matter) requires that the poet use a non-symmetrical form, a form his own, vers libre. Pound always advocated *le mot juste*, and one could say *les rhythmes justes*. But why all of this precision, and how does one come to grips with Pound the innovator and freer of poetic stuffiness with Pound the objective organizer, the boundary creator?

Hugh Kenner (1985) sees this pattern and explains, "[t]he whole key to Pound, the basis of his *Cantos*, his music, his economics, and everything else, is this concern for exact definition" (p. 37). Pound (2005) explains in "The Serious Artist" that:

> [t]he arts, literature, poesy, are a science, just as chemistry is a science. Their subject is man, mankind and the individual. […] arts give us a great percentage of the lasting and unassailable data regarding the nature of man, […] of man considered as a thinking and sentient creature (p. 234).

In his view, the arts, poetry in particular, are no less a science than the study of chemistry, physics, or mathematics; in theory and practice, poetry is an art that is definable, quantitative, and cumulative with regard to knowledge. And as a whole, an art's parameters definably exist only when its conventions are consistent; this is where avant-garde artistry can become tenuous with regard to re-creating, or "making new" fundamental concepts of art. Pound argues that art gives us knowledge about the nature of man, the indisputable nature of man, and this assumes a certain adequation of humanity. Establishing the poetic craft as a science, Pound is able to critique different time periods and create the classes of poets he labels as major and minor, a poetic hierarchy with categories of defined characteristics.

Deviating from this view, LP poet and critic Charles Bernstein (1996) writes in "Poetics of the Americas" that poetry is unrestricted by rational ordering systems, progressing, instead, toward non-standard language and meanings. He writes:

> [i]n the poetry of the past two decades, I think we have moved away from the choice of subjective, objective, or even constructive and toward a synthesizing or juxtaposing of these approaches…the modernist period gives way to a dialectical poetry that refuses allegiance to standard English…[p]oetry can be a process of thinking rather than a report of things already settled, an investigation of figuration rather than a picture of something figured out (p. 4).

Here, Bernstein claims several things, commenting that American poetry is moving away from *conventional methods* where poetic language is no longer developed, maintained, or thought of as having standard forms, definitions, or lexicon. His argument incorporates the LP rubric that poetic process supersedes the work itself. With this, he includes the words "subjective," "objective," and "constructive," making the claim that these terms are limiting, reductive, and that poetry, instead, should embrace non-standard speech—the dialectical, the oppositional. He deconstructs the shared nature of words, their relational, homogeneous interconnectivity. Bernstein offers an alternate view of language: words are to be synthesized and juxtaposed, subjectified—poetry needs to show opposition to the political and literary establishment, the conventions.

Given this idea that poetry is more about a self-referential process, more about juxtaposing dialectical points of view than accepting established meanings, there emerges a transmogrified relationship between language and poetry, an incommensurable state between this dialectical poetry and Pound's poetics. Bernstein (1996) continues by defining what he means by standards and "standard English":

> [a] standard is a rallying point for the forward movement of an ideology or group, by means of which a unity is invoked, as for example a flag in battle…[b]ut a standard is also an objective unit of measure and regulator of uniformity, and as such a product of normalization and averaging. Standard American English involves both these senses: it is a sociohistorical construction, embedding class, ethnic, and racial preferences, that serves to build national unity (p. 5).

With Bernstein's example, he equates standard language with accommodation language. However, whichever theory one uses for poetry, the argument can be made that "subjective" or "objective" language always presupposes a standard-language form, and Bernstein seems to overlook this presumption when dealing with subjective and objective meanings. His argument, instead, rests in the inexactitude of subjective or objective meanings, a relational critique only through semantic association. By themselves, the study of associative meaning is academically important, but studying associations can only occur if the words and lines have some meaning that does not change too drastically from one reading to another within a specifically defined time period. In other words, meanings have both synchronic and diachronic values, and this is part of what is missing in Bernstein's assessment. Readings have to be consistent from one stage of research to the next; otherwise, the association is chaotic, indeterminate.

Pound's view of poetry is definitive: language supports society. Concerning this type of dissolution, Pound defines the extent to which an artistic medium can exist before it degrades into a hybrid form, or an alternate medium altogether. He (1979) explains:

> [w]hen their work goes rotten—by that I do not mean when they express indecorous thoughts—but when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot. This is a lesson of history, and a lesson not yet half learned (p. 21).

By "work," Pound means the final expression of a trade; he means the product of laborious study and reflection—craftsmanship of a type worthy to be included, to represent, and to redefine accepted cultural definitions, a renewing. Bernstein, on the other hand, indirectly undermines his own argument by devaluing his method of argumentation—his own language. Framing language as a relative act from

one interpretive group to another annuls a historical, national canon and dismantles uniformity, a range of uniformity. In 2003, Oren Izenberg describes LP as,

> *experimental,* that is, because they treat their poems not as semantic tokens or aesthetic objects but as examples, and it is the curious nature of an example that while there must be enough of them to warrant an inference, in no single one of them is it self-evident what the example is an example of…Language poetry considered under this description is simply not a literary practice, for it does not produce objects that belong to any category of language use. Nor is it…an aesthetic practice, for it is not oriented toward *aisthesis,* or perception…rather, an ontological and ethical practice… creative agency that is the real object of their interest (p. 135–36).

Language functions in societies in a variety of ways, and in Ludwig Wittgenstein's (2001) *Philosophical Investigations*, he explores how language and philosophy interact and attempts to establish a basis for word meanings and utility. He creates a language game in this way:

> think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip marked 'five red apples'. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked 'apples', then he looks up the word 'red' in a table and finds a colour sample opposite it; then he says the series of cardinal numbers—I assume that he knows them by heart—up to the word 'five' and for each number he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer.—It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words—"But how does he know where and how he is to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?" Well, I assume that he 'acts' as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere.—But what is the meaning of the word 'five'? No such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' is used (p. 2).

For Wittgenstein, words have meanings through usage, and though they are obviously diachronic in nature, words change slowly over time; society accepts new definitions so that synchronic meanings are not ahistorical. Words subsume previous meanings of the same word in different times, and Wittgenstein likens language to a city with new and old boroughs, various architectures, but all serving a function so that society can exist harmoniously. Poetry can be seen, in Pound's logocratic terms, as the government of a language city with a common tax system. Bernstein's statement that "a standard is also an objective unit of measure" is slightly misstated. In reality, standards are not static, but dynamic. They are what Wittgenstein would characterize as approximate realities. Unlike Frege, where the definability of a place needs to be exact like the definability of a rectangle having four right angles, Wittgenstein states that there is no definitive way to describe the rectangle's side; that is to say, no way to exactly describe the right side of the rectangle—how would one define the precision of the line: down to the pencil grain, the atom, the proton, the quark, etc.? Instead, the rectangle, like language, is defined within a range of accepted values, but these values, nonetheless, have standard meanings, and these meanings are within a socially defined value range.

In discussing art mediums, Pound believes that they serve society, and society must benefit from the art. Each medium has its own bounded space where it is not in competition with another medium, else a novel medium would emerge. Pound (1975) writes about this:

> [t]he painter sees, or should see, half a hundred hues and varieties, where we see ten; or, granting we are ourselves skilled with the brush, how many hundred colours are there, where language has but a dozen crude names? Even if the poet understands the subtleties of gradation and juxtaposition, his medium refuses to convey them. He can say all his say while he is ignorant of the reality, and knowledge of the reality will not help him to say it better (p. 36).

Pound is defining the role of artists within their particular mediums. At no time does Pound advocate that one type of art cannot be combined with another in creating hybrid mediums, as is the case today with new media, but he does argue that there is a way to express an idea, image, or feeling that best embodies the closest approximation of the thing. When speaking of Imagist poetry, he asserts that one should not use any word that does not convey exactly what one means. However, he would not say this

of other art forms that require a plethora of anecdotal recitation such as contemporary standup comedy. The medium dictates language use or other tool by which information passes on generationally. Poetry happens to be a communication of exactness without losing, what Pound calls "[poetry's] power of vague suggestion" (1975, p. 33). Bernstein's theory of avant-garde poetics appears more contentious to Pound's modern and historical model, and could be applied more liberally to the realm of cultural historiography or to the philosophy of language than to the medium of poetry.

Walter Kalaidjian (1991) attempts several definitions of postmodern poetry and its cultural significance in "Transpersonal Poetics: Language Writing and the Historical Avant-Gardes in Postmodern Culture" published in *American Literary Review*. In this article, Kalaidjian organizes a de facto canon of avant-garde poets that he sees as postmodern and who, more or less, agree with each other's aesthetic. He states:

> [w]itnessed here is a new side of literary modernism—one that we now tend to associate with the distinctive symptoms of postmodern culture: the structural displacements of signified reference by the play of the material signifier, of the univocal 'self' by the wayward agency of the letter, and of a work's unity and closure by textual jouissance…[a]lthough one can identify a common commitment to deconstructing lyricism (p. 325).

Kalaidjian writes about a new side of contemporary literature whereby, in general, postmodern culture defines itself recursively. This cultural identity, according to Kalaidjian, is a displaced identity with a devolution of signified references, specifically deconstructing the lyric. In this same light, Michael Greer (1989) writes:

> [t]hrough a textual labor of differentiation, 'writing' as process confronts 'the written' as code, trace, historically fixed. The focal point in this work is a sense of explicit formal self—reflexivity about the act and function of writing. Not only is a certain theoretical stance implied by 'language poetry,' it is in fact enacted–discursively as well as formally. A central principle might be 'movement—both kinetic and intellectual—an impulse to resist any totalizing or formal closure, a dissatisfaction with any single perspective or frame of reference' (p. 351).

The social identification of the "self" with self-reflexivity and the resistance of any single frame of reference permeate avant-garde twenty-first century American poetics. This alienation from the totalizing or univocal voice comes across as mishandled and misunderstood, commonly taken as a way to disown previous poetic forms in favor of only "new" forms, but Pound (2005) says plainly in *The Tradition* that "[t]hus as always, one wave of one of these traditions has caught and overflowed an earlier wave receding" (p. 267). Pound explains that prior movements, modes of art, always recede and new forms come, but the new movements always depend on the previous ones; a univocal or totalizing nature exists from the society's point of view, not from the individual artist's vantage point. Disconnecting oneself from one's tradition can have the unwelcomed effect of the dissolution of reference and meaning. With respect to poetry, Pound says that *slushy and inexact* terminology leads to an application where transmission of word to object is incomprehensible. This confusion with referrer and referent is the process where the whole machine "goes to pot." Bruce Comens (1995) writes of this misunderstanding when he says:

> [f]or Pound, the primary function of language is communication—[…] wherein so many words would stand for, could be exchanged for, an equal number of things. Pound's ideal language would involve a seamless connection between a specific, definite content, its ideogramatic coding, and the reader's recognition of that when he says content and subsequent action (p. 139).

But Pound knew that no "ideal" language exists, which is why poetry needed to be exact, as close to the thing, as close to the bone, as possible.

In the summer of 1986, Lee Bartlett wrote an article entitled "What is Language Poetry?" where he tries to unify and codify aspects of LP that seemed non-referential in nature to avoid looming theoretical issues. He attempts to graft LP into a Pound legacy by writing:

> [t]he poet, in other words, must enter into a 'multi-discourse' (Bernstein) which interweaves 'politics, autobiography, fiction, philosophy, common sense, song, etc.,' and engages in a Poundian 'layering' wherein experience of reading carries equal weight with experience in the physical world (p. 750).

Bartlett refers to Pound's collage technique and parataxis spoken of by Perloff. Admittedly stated in the same article by Bartlett, some prominent LP poets, such as Michael Palmer, began to distance themselves in this period from avant-garde, non-referential aesthetics, although Bartlett states that he still considers Palmer a member of LP. This type of distancing by Palmer and others was a reaction to growing postmodern criticism against certain avant-garde movements as ahistorical.

In autumn 1987, Alan Shapiro wrote an essay entitled "The New Formalism" where he observed "rekindled interests" by younger poets in formal verse. Shapiro, however, is wary that poetry could revert into archaic forms. He states, "the new formalists, in rejecting the sins of their experimental fathers may end up merely repeating the sins of their New Critical grandfathers, resuscitating the stodgy, over refined conventions of the 'fifties poem'" (p. 201). Shapiro compares the rejection of New Critical poetry by avant-garde poets to a possible rejection of avant-gardism by New Formalism (NF). Of course, NF maintains some aspects of referential, cultural, and historical qualities generally consistent with Pound, but Pound's view would not include a form-for-form's sake aesthetic that some NF poets promote. Shapiro expresses his view of formal poetics:

> [a]s I mentioned in the beginning of this essay, in the sixties and seventies one often heard the argument that meter and rhyme are emotionally and psychologically repressive, and that a preference for closed forms goes hand in hand with a preference for closed, authoritarian societies. To Robert Bly, for instance, metrical composition reflected a 'nostalgia for jails' (p. 211–12).

This categorization of traditional forms as "closed, authoritarian" and "repressive" originates from an over-politicization of poetics and is less concerned with describing experience, the "life vouchsafed" as Pound put it. Pound did not advocate strict metrical poetry, but he did not reject meter either. He (1979) says in two places that "I think progress lies rather in an attempt to approximate classical quantitative metres (NOT to copy them) than in a carelessness regarding such things" (p. 13), and Pound advocated using metrical forms to return to a closeness to life based in harmony with a culture's literary tradition (p. 10).

At the same time as Bartlett, Dana Gioia (1987), now former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, wrote an article in the *Hudson Review* entitled "Notes on the New Formalism." In this, Gioia claims that contemporary poetry is in a revival toward "rhyme and meter among some young poets creat[ing] an unprecedented situation in American poetry" (p. 1). Continuing, Gioia claims that poetic forms, whether "free" or "formal," are descriptive rather than evaluative of subject matter. Concerning free verse, he states:

> [f]ree verse is a much more modern technique that presupposes the existence of written texts. While it does not abandon the aural imagination—no real poetry can—most free verse plays with the way poetic language is arranged on a page and articulates the visual rhythm of a poem in a way earlier method verse rarely bothered to (p. 2).

To Gioia, free verse is more about visual qualities than rhythm, and he attributes free-verse properties with the beginning of typeset. He claims that free verse is not a historically accepted form for poetry. He adds the following disclaimer about contemporary poetry:

> [a]t that point the real issues presented by American poetry in the eighties will become clearer: the debasement of poetic language; the prolixity of the lyric; the bankruptcy of the confessional

mode; the inability to establish a meaningful aesthetic for new poetic narrative; and the denial of musical texture in the contemporary poem. The revival of traditional forms will be seen then as only one response to this troubling situation (p. 6).

For Pound (1979), there are three criteria of poetic structure: melopoeia (words charged over and above their plain meaning with music), phanopoeia (casting of images on the imagination), and logopoeia (word meaning and habits of usage). Pound's view of these three in free verse is largely contingent on the quality of the work as he states:

[i]ndeed *vers libre has* become as prolix and as verbose as any of the flaccid varieties that preceded it. It has brought faults of its own. The actual language and phrasing is often as bad as that of our elders […] [w]hether or not the phrases followed by the followers are musical must be left to the reader's decision. At times I can find a marked metre in `vers libres', as stale and hackneyed as any pseudo-Swinburnian, at times the writers seem to follow no musical structure whatever. But it is, on the whole, good that the field should be ploughed. Perhaps a few good poems have come from the new method, and if so it is justified (p. 3).

Pound did not strictly espouse formal verse or free verse; in fact, he reasons that both are valid for specific content, but he does observe that most free verse is sloppy, and Pound justifies the convention if "a few good poems" have come from the method. Pound's embrace of free verse is not unequivocal, and he frames this in the same way that T.S. Eliot does. He writes, "Eliot has said the thing very well when he said, 'No *vers* is *libre*' for the man who wants to do a good job'" (p. 12). A tradition that includes many subjects requires different forms—Pound wanted works of art to exist in a culturally "ploughed" environment, a kind of hard work that will enrich the sum and not just parts. He continues by establishing ground rules for aspiring poets:

[l]et the neophyte know assonance and alliteration, rhyme immediate and delayed, simple and polyphonic, as a musician would expect to know harmony and counterpoint and all the minutiae of his craft,

and he moves next to supplement his views,

[d]on't be 'viewy'—leave that to the writers of pretty little philosophic essays. Don't be descriptive; remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a deal more about it (p. 6).

Pound assumes that poets will understand and use fundamental meters or forms when appropriate, and these *minutiae* are the basis for writing free verse. He realizes that writing poetry is the work of a lifetime which is why he wrote "The Serious Artist" explaining the correlation of art to culture. He discusses formal poem qualities when he says:

[d]on't chop your stuff into separate *iambs*. Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause. In short, behave as a musician, a good musician, when dealing with that phase of your art which has exact parallels in music. […] Naturally, your rhythmic structure should not destroy the shape of your words, or their natural sound, or their meaning (p. 6).

Pound organizes poetic prosody into musical terms; the sound and meaning is strongly associated to create beauty in the work, a rhythm that is unique to the person. He identifies contexts for why one should not chop lines into iambs or end-stop every line, but these are stated in the context of developing an artist's writing skills. Throughout Pound's critical essays, he clearly accepts both fluid and solid forms, and free verse can be seen as Pound's musically asymmetric form used with fluid, mercurial subject matter. Pound's pragmatic view of poetic theory unifies the traditional and the modern, in the true sense of *innovare*.

To completely conclude a topic, such as this, is not possible, but it is clear that Pound's writings set many events into motion that otherwise could still be dormant. His treatment of subject matter and form as contemporary poetic concerns has been indisputably influential. Although most of the poetic avant-garde of the latter twentieth century identified Pound's poetics as strictly political, Pound's own writing contextualizes precisely the opposite—poetry works on the culture to affect change, not to simply be self-referential, and this is done by the artist in apolitical means.

For all intents and purposes, Pound's work at the beginning of the twentieth century has made him the quintessential figure for twenty-first century poets who are reimagining representation in poetry. His declaration to make things new created such a vortex of change that it enabled numerous poetic schools to develop and feedback into the literary culture of America. Even now, at the dawn of this new century, we who are products of technology and science, the Internet and globalization are organizing cohesive perspectives and representations of our world. Observing what Pound saw in literature is critical for our time. Michale McIrvin (2000) poignantly states, "[l]ike the moderns and some of the post-moderns, we need to sing, to paint pictures; but neither for its own sake" (p. 96) and evaluating both historical and contemporary poetic forms is where the search begins. Pound (1979) observes:

> '[o]nly emotion endures.' Surely it is better for me to name over the few beautiful poems that still ring in my head than for me to search my flat for back numbers of periodicals and rearrange all that I have said about friendly and hostile writers (p. 14).

This is no less true now than it was then.

References

Bartlett, L. (Summer, 1986). "What is Language Poetry?" *Critical Inquiry*, 12(4), 741-752.

Beach, C. (1992). *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition*. Berkeley, Cal.: University of California Press.

Bernstein, G. (1996). "Poetics of the Americas." *Modernism/Modernity,* 3(3), 1-23.

Bloom, H, ed. (1987). *Ezra Pound*. New York: Chelsea House.

Bornstein, C., ed. (1985). *Ezra Pound among the poets Homer, Ovid, Li Po, Dante, Whitman, Browning, Yeats, Williams, Eliot*. Chicago: University of Chicago.

Coffman, S. R., Jr. (1951). *Imagism: A Chapter for the History of Modern Poetry*. Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press.

Comens, B. (1995). *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky*. Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press.

Dasenbrock, R. W. (1985). *Literary vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis towards the condition of painting*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.

Finch, A. (1993). *The Ghost of Meter: Culture and Prosody in American Free Verse*. Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press.

Gioia, D. (Autumn 1987). "Notes on New Formalism." *Hudson Review,* 40(3), 1-6.

Greer, M. (Winter-Spring, 1989). "Ideology and Theory in Recent Experimental Writing or, the Naming of 'Language Poetry.'" *boundary 2*, 16(2/3), 335-355.

Hesse, E., ed. (1969). *New approaches to Ezra Pound a co-ordinated investigation of Pound's poetry and ideas*. London: Faber.

Heinzelman, K., ed. (2004). *"Make It New" The Rise of Modernism*. Detroit: Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center.

Izenberg, O. (2003). "Language Poetry and Collective Life." *Critical Inquiry*, 30(1), 132-159.

Kalaidijian, W. (Summer, 1991). "Transpersonal Poetics: Language Writing and the Historical Avant-Gardes in Postmodern Culture." *Postmodern Culture*, 3(2), 319-336.

Kenner, H. (1998, November 1) The Grand Tour [Interview by H. Blume]. *Boston Book Review*.

------. (1985). *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, Lincoln, Neb: University of Nebraska Press.

------. (1971). *The Pound Era*. Berkeley, Cal.: The University of California Press.

Longenbach, J. (1987). *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Malkoff, K. (1977). *Escape from the Self: A Study in Contemporary American Poetry and Poetics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Mazzaro, J. (1980). *Postmodern American Poetry*. Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press.

McGann, J. J. (Spring, 1987). "Contemporary Poetry, Alternative Routes." *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (3), 624-647.

McIrvin, M. (2000). "Why Contemporary Poetry Is Not Taught in the Academy." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 54(1), 89-99.

Paige, D. D., ed. (1950). *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound (1907-1941)*. New York: New Directions.

Perloff, M. (1985). *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

------. (1981). *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Pound, E. An Interview [Interview by D. Hall]. (1962, June/July). *Paris Review*, (28), 22-28.

Pound, E. (2005). *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*. New York: Penguin Books.

------. (1992). *EZRA POUND: CONTRIB 1933-1935 (Ezra Pound's Poetry & Prose, 1933-1935)*. Ed. A. Walton Litz and James Longenbach. Comp. Lea Baechler. 9. New York: Garland Science.

------. (1979). *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

------. (1975). *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*. New York: New Directions Pub. Corp.

Redman, T. (1991). *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Shapiro, A. (Autumn, 1987). "The New Formalism." *Critical Inquiry*, 14(1), 200-213.

Singh, G. (1994). *Ezra Pound as Critic*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Spiegelman, W. (1989). *The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Von Hallberg, R. (1985). *American Poetry and Culture, 1945-1980*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Walzer, K. (1998). *The Ghost of Tradition: Expansive Poetry and Postmodernism*. Ashland, Ore.: Story Line Press.

Williams, W. C. (1978). *I Wanted to Write a Poem: the Autobiography of the Works of a Poet*. New York: New Directions.

Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Philosophical Investigations 50th Anniversary Commemorative Edition*. Trans. G. E.M. E. Anscombe. Grand Rapids: Blackwell, Incorporated.