

## Poetry and Rhetoric: Modernism and Beyond

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In Melville's chilly masterpiece "Bartleby the Scrivener", the "pale plaster-of-paris" bust of Cicero that presides over the lawyer's office is a pointed reminder of the final stage of rhetoric's decline in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> The Ciceronian tradition is a mere shadow of its former self (the head alone and not the heart remains) and the legal practice overlooked by the bust is occupied not with feats of forensic artistry but with the purely mechanical business of textual transcription.<sup>2</sup> The ancient rhetor surveys a scene in which the art of speaking does little more than support a deviously self-serving philanthropy, the lawyer pondering whether by befriending Bartleby he "might cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval".<sup>3</sup> At the time Melville writes, classical rhetoric is witnessing its final decline or "reduction", as Gerard Genette calls it, a process begun in the Middle Ages as once crucial parts of the rhetorical curriculum gradually fell into disuse: "next [to be lost was] the balance between the 'parts' (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio*), because the rhetoric of the *trivium*, crushed between grammar and dialectic, soon came to be confined to the study of *elocutio*, the ornaments of discourse, *colores rhetorici*."<sup>4</sup>

Bartleby, with his formulaic disengagement and his previous experience of the Dead Letter Office, is arguably the prophet of literature's failure as an authentic public form and of *its* consequent reduction to empty repetition.<sup>5</sup> Both he and Cicero are described as "pale" and fragile, and when the lawyer confronts him with questions about his past, Bartleby, says the lawyer, "kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero", an object no longer inspiring eloquence but now prompting instead an enigmatic reluctance to speak ("'At present I prefer to give no answer,' he said"). The

“ancient empire” of rhetoric, as Roland Barthes once called it, has become a land of tombs and spectral presences; Melville’s own later foray into the rhetoric of public memory—the poems of *Battle-Pieces* (1866)—would similarly seem to many readers lifeless and marmoreal, witness both to the disaster of the war and to the inadequacy of the stylistic figures through which the nation’s losses might now be remembered and mourned.<sup>6</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century, then, the once rich rhetorical tradition had dwindled to a “mechanical typology of figures of speech”, tricked out with cumbrous Latin labels.<sup>7</sup> More than ever, “rhetoric” denoted not just the practice of deception with which it had long been associated, but an empty formalism that was opposed to the very purpose of imaginative literature. “Rhetoric” would for this reason constitute the pole against which modernism would aggressively define itself. For Ezra Pound, arguably the key mover in this break with the past, Victorianism represented a culture of “the opalescent word, the rhetorical tradition”;<sup>8</sup> in a piece called “A Retrospect” (published in 1918), he called for a “harder and saner” poetry, one freed from the previous century’s “rhetorical din, and luxurious riot”, “austere, direct, free from emotional slither”.<sup>9</sup>

While Pound’s assault on his literary predecessors has seemed tough-minded and generally convincing, we also need to remember that for many Victorian poets, rhetoric was inextricably bound up with the art of poetry. Some twenty years after Melville’s bleak novella, Gerard Manley Hopkins, for example, wrote the following to Robert Bridges:

[Sprung rhythm] is the nearest to the rhythm of prose, that is the native and natural rhythm of speech, the least forced, the most rhetorical and emphatic of all possible rhythms, combining, as it seems to me, opposite and, one wd. have

thought, incompatible excellences, markedness of rhythm—that is rhythm’s self—and naturalness of expression.... My verse is less to be read than heard, as I have told you before; it is oratorical, that is the rhythm is so.<sup>10</sup>

Leaving aside the more idiosyncratic features of Hopkins’s poetics, we may note his association of “the natural rhythm of speech” with “rhetorical” rhythm and his frank aspiration toward poetry as an “oratorical” art. For Hopkins, the very purpose of poetry is rhetorical: “To do [my poem] the Eurydice any kind of justice,” he explains, “you must not slovenly read it with the eyes but with your ears, as if the paper were declaring it at you.”<sup>11</sup> For Hopkins, what is “declared” by the poem is something that exceeds the words on the page; poetry, he says, is “speech wholly or partially repeating some kind of figure which is over and above meaning, at least the grammatical, historical, and logical meaning.”<sup>12</sup> A performative element is vital to Hopkins’s poetic and it is ironic indeed, given that none of his major work was published until after his death, that one of its defining features is its assumption of an audience (one critic observes that “Hopkins’s poetry presupposes, postulates, and demands an addressee, *real* though *virtual*”).<sup>13</sup>

Pound was little interested in Hopkins, and in a rare comment on his work he dismissed it as a mere “technical exercise”.<sup>14</sup> Yet like Hopkins, Pound also discerned a dimension of poetry precisely as being in excess of directly communicable meaning, though when his theorizing took a self-consciously “modern” turn with the poetics of imagism he tended to appeal to the visual as a model for an emotional “pattern” capable of curbing the unfocussed expression of emotion he associated with the backwash of Romanticism.<sup>15</sup> It was here that the term “rhetoric” was constantly invoked as the enemy or the other of modernism. The imagist program, with its call for “direct treatment of the ‘thing’”, verbal economy, and rhythms determined by “the

sequence of the musical phrase”, was underpinned by both the Kantian criticism of rhetoric as “the art of persuasion, i.e., of deceiving by a beautiful show (*ars oratoria*)” and by the assumption that rhetoric trafficked in some sort of supplementary excess<sup>16</sup>:

“The ‘image’,” declared Pound, “is the furthest possible remove from rhetoric.

Rhetoric is the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being.”<sup>17</sup> Rhetoric, then, makes the work of art a kind of confidence trick, a sleight of hand in which one thing appears in the guise of another:

The Renaissance sought a realism and attained it. It rose in a search for precision and declined through rhetoric and rhetorical thinking, through a habit of defining things always “in terms of something else”.<sup>18</sup>

Pound’s concept of rhetoric has, in fact, something in common with what Jacques Derrida has termed the logic of the “supplement”: it *adds* to what had seemed already complete, “dressing up” an originally naked truth, but in so doing it simultaneously *diminishes* its meaning, surrendering originality to mere “habit”.<sup>19</sup> It is in these terms that Pound speaks of “rhetoric, or the use of *cliché* unconsciously, or a mere playing with phrases”.<sup>20</sup>

This hostility to ornamentation has, of course, little of novelty about it: we can trace it as least as far back as the eighteenth-century denunciation of “luxury” and on into Wordsworth’s 1802 Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* with its rejection of “transitory and accidental ornaments” as the means by which a writer, says Wordsworth, “endeavour[s] to excite admiration of himself by arts, the necessity of which must manifestly depend upon the assumed meanness of his subject.”<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth’s way of associating disruptive “accidental ornaments” with the breaking in of an artistic egotism recalls in its turn Aristotle’s advice to trust the speech rather than the speaker: “This kind of persuasion, like the others, should be achieved by what the speaker

says, not by what people think of his character before he begins to speak.”<sup>22</sup> This is, however, an implicitly circular argument that smuggles evidence of the speaker’s character back into the equation by deducing it from the ethical rectitude (or otherwise) of his words.<sup>23</sup> We may take Pound’s belief in “technique as the test of a man’s sincerity”<sup>24</sup> as a way of breaking that rhetorical bond between audience and speaker, and leaving the poetic text, a text now apparently purged of residual voice and presence, as the sole “test” of emotional integrity. Sincerity, then, will be discerned in the writing’s self-sufficiency, in the “irreplaceability” of its constituent elements, and in its eschewal of any dependence on rhetorical figuration to register and inflate authorial “intention”. Eliot wrote in similar vein that rhetoric comprised “any adornment or inflation of speech which is *not done for a particular effect* but for a general impressiveness.”<sup>25</sup>

By the time Pound was propagandizing for imagism, much of this anti-rhetorical argument was already quite familiar, with similar-sounding statements having already issued from a variety of different quarters. Herbert Spencer, for example, in his crudely instrumental *Philosophy of Style* (1852) had expanded on the need “to express an idea in the smallest number of words” and to focus writing on the particular and concrete: “we do not think in generals but in particulars”, he wrote, and “the succession [in the arrangement of sentences] should be from the less specific to the more specific --- from the abstract to the concrete.”<sup>26</sup> Spencer reminds us of the extended tradition lying behind such literary protocols when he quotes Hugh Blair’s classic *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres* (1783): “every needless part of a sentence ‘interrupts the description and clogs the image’” (3), a turn of phrase that cannot but make us hear Pound’s much later warning that abstraction “dulls the image.”<sup>27</sup> *Brevitas* and *claritas* are Spencer’s watchwords, and well in advance of

Pound's speculations he is keen to claim poetry's potential economy of statement as an ideal of communicational precision.<sup>28</sup>

While Pound might well have warmed to Spencer's no-nonsense view that "the aim must be to convey the greatest quality of thoughts with the smallest quantity of words" (00), Walter Pater's more subtly nuanced expression of some similar ideas probably had a more direct effect on his thinking. In the key essay "Style" (1888), Pater had defined "ornament" as "what is in itself non-essential" and as "removable decoration", turning (like Pound after him) to prose models (Flaubert, Stendhal) for examples of what he called "composition[s] utterly unadorned".<sup>29</sup> The task of the writer, then, says Pater, "consist[s] in the removal of surplusage", much as Michelangelo works on "the rough-hewn block of stone" to release the form already lodged there (16), an old fantasy that would flourish again in Pound's *Cantos*. The continuity in thinking between Pater and Pound looks clear, then, but Pater, we should note, is not quite as ready as Pound to attribute the effect of "surplusage" simply to verbal inflation:

...while half the world is using figure unconsciously, [the lover of words] will be fully aware not only of all that latent figurative texture in speech, but of the vague, lazy, half-formed personification—a rhetoric, depressing, and worse than nothing because it has no really rhetorical motive—which plays so large a part there...." (17)

Pater may seem to be about to lambaste "rhetoric" in true modernist fashion, but his criticism is actually levelled at "dead" figures of speech ("half-formed personification", and so on), figures that are unmotivated by what he regards as genuine rhetorical purpose.

The distinction is important, for while Pater's aesthetic contains many features soon to be met with in a modernist poetics—his emphasis on the focusing power of the visual image, for example, and his appeal to the sculptural analogy—his concept of “style” remains closely intertwined with a concept of “rhetoric”; in fact, the project of aesthetic criticism is rhetorical in its very origins. In “Style”, for example, Pater meditates on

how difficult [it is] to define the point where, from time to time, argument which, if it is to be worth anything at all, must consist of facts or groups of facts, becomes a pleading—a theorem no longer, but essentially an appeal to the reader to catch the writer's spirit, to think with him, if one can or will. . . .(4-5)

Pater had already considered the matter of rhetoric in much more detail in *Marius the Epicurean* (1885),<sup>30</sup> and the discussion of “fact” in the “Style” essay exhibits a clearly developed sense of an affective relation between writer and reader. Poetry and rhetoric would actually part company not in Pater's work but in that of his disciple Arthur Symons. In his influential *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899), Symons would unashamedly appropriate the cadenced contours of Pater's style (“Our only chance, in this world, of a complete happiness...<sup>31</sup>) while at the same time celebrating that introverted turn that Pater had chafed against in his “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance* (“the whole scope of observation is dwarfed into the narrow chamber of the individual mind”). Symons adapts Pater's aestheticism as the basis for a much more direct denigration of all forms of “rhetoric”, observing that the Symbolist Movement “is all an attempt to spiritualise literature, to evade the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority.”<sup>32</sup>

This in turn would be the “bondage” of which Pound would so often complain, echoing as he does the anti-rhetorical stance of some of his fellow modernists: Yeats, for example, with his much quoted dictum that “We make out of the quarrel with others, rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves, poetry”,<sup>33</sup> and Wallace Stevens claiming that “The nobility of rhetoric is, of course, a lifeless nobility”.<sup>34</sup> Those two poets’ dislike of “rhetoric” did not, however, mean that they were able to write a defiantly non-rhetorical poetry; in fact, as Charles Altieri has observed, “we see that despite their abiding hatred of ‘rhetoric’ their poetry frequently turns to the figure of the orator as a figure for the powers of idealization they project for their imaginative labors.”<sup>35</sup>

This way of challenging rhetoric by pitting its own figurative manoeuvres against its parallel claims for truth and identification would affect one major line of poetic endeavour in the twentieth century and beyond. In some cases—Eliot’s *Four Quartets* provides a major example—the poem’s claim rests on a testing of different rhetorics, seeking “The word neither diffident nor ostentatious” that might express poetry’s aspiration to a genuinely spiritual language.<sup>36</sup> Then again, poets writing with a more clearly political intent might appropriate traditional literary rhetoric for polemical ends: Claude McKay’s early sonnets, with their frequent use of Shakespearean motifs, are a case in point.<sup>37</sup> Such practices, which tended to expose rather than to conceal the workings of rhetoric, could also be managed with a deliberately lighter touch. Altieri observes of W. H. Auden, for example, that he “shows how rhetoric can become so self-conscious and visibly playful that it can bear even our imaginary investments with a lightness that simply forecloses any effort at ‘sincere’ identification.”<sup>38</sup> In our own time, this way with rhetoric has become the hallmark of John Ashbery’s style: as Altieri also notes, Ashbery “thinks that the most



serious danger in poetry is not that it will be too rhetorical but that it will not insist enough on the rhetorical theater it establishes.”<sup>39</sup> Ashbery’s habit—early and late—has been to bracket rhetorical objectives and to revel in forms of periphrasis that defer and often undermine a propositional outcome. Frequently, the urgency of rhetorical address is precisely a measure of meaning’s failure:

Yes, friends, these clouds pulled along on invisible ropes  
Are, as you have guessed, merely stage machinery,  
And the funny thing is it knows we know  
About it and still wants us to go on believing  
In what it so unskilfully imitates, and wants  
To be loved not for that but for itself. . .  
    . . .so we may know  
We too are somehow impossible, formed of so many  
    Different things,  
Too many to make sense to anybody.<sup>40</sup>

If that way with rhetoric typifies one main line of development in American poetry after modernism, another might be seen to originate with imagism and with Pound’s development of its poetics after his exposure to Ernest Fenollosa’s essay on the Chinese Written Character in 1913. As is well-known, Fenollosa advanced the proposition that the Chinese language was inherently disposed toward imaginative dynamism and a “natural” syntactic order. Fenollosa seems to have mistaken the ideogram for a simple pictogram, and in the process he arguably overemphasised the function of active verbs in Chinese writing.<sup>41</sup> The Chinese written character thus came to represent what he called “vivid shorthand picture[s] of actions or processes”.<sup>42</sup> The rightness or wrongness of this interpretation—mainly wrongness, it has been thought—is not, however, especially important to my argument here (Fenollosa himself stressed that his “concern is poetry, not language” [43]). For what was crucial to Pound was the directness and verbal dynamism Fenollosa attributed to the Chinese language; the essay, said Pound, dealt ultimately with “Style, that is to say, limpidity,

as opposed to rhetoric” (44). “Limpidity”, the thing clearly seen, that is, rather than “dressed up” in the grandiloquent garb of rhetoric. Ideograms seemed to dispense with the Western dependence on the copula; where we would say “the tree is green”, the Chinese, according to Fenollosa, would render this as “the tree greens itself” (49), active verb thus replacing passive. Where Western languages deal with abstractions, with “concepts drawn out of things by a sifting process” (47), the ideogram is said to follow “the actual and entangled lines of forces as they pulse through things” (47). Here we encounter not “bloodless adjectival abstraction” but “concrete” verbs (52). In fact, in contrast to what Fenollosa calls, in a fortuitous echo of Melville’s bust of Cicero, the West’s dependence on “the dead white plaster of the copula” (59), the ideogram seems to preserve *things* rather than to develop *concepts* from them—so the character for “east”, for example, seems to show quite literally “the sun entangled in the branches of a tree” (60). Such characters gesture toward natural relations rather than conceptual ones. Fenollosa thus explains that “two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental relation between them” (46).

It’s not hard to see how Fenollosa’s essay could be readily recruited to support Pound’s campaign against rhetoric. Yet it’s here that we can also begin to gauge the consequences of the denigration of the rhetorical tradition which, for all its excesses, had always assumed the social locatedness of verbal expression. Take one of Fenollosa’s prize exhibits, three ideograms making up the sentence “Farmer pound[s] rice”, a sentence in which no word can be designated “ornamental” and where the transmission of “force” is unimpeded by any hint of “rhetoric”. Yet while both Fenollosa and Pound look to Chinese as a language that pictographically preserves the sensuous particular, this sentence actually draws what “force” it has from its generic simplicity rather than from its capacity to bring “language close to *things*”, as

Fenollosa claims.<sup>43</sup> “Farmer pound[s] rice”: as soon as we add even minimal rhetorical colouring to this sentence we begin to enter a world of social relations that Fenollosa’s emphasis on “nature” effectively suppresses.<sup>44</sup> To stress the first word of the sentence, “*Farmer pounds rice*”, suggests not only that farmers always do this, but also that *only* farmers do it (pounding rice is the task of the rural poor). Again, “Farmer *pounds* rice” indicates the degree of manual labour involved in this process, while “Farmer pounds *rice*” might suggest that this is the only food-crop available to the lower orders.<sup>45</sup> Stripped of any such emphasis, however, the sentence in question reminds us of the abstractness of Pound’s early sense of “China” as a culture possessing unchanging, universal qualities (even though Pound wrote to John Quinn in 1916 that “China is the coming nation!”, neither then nor later did he display any real interest in China as a contemporary nation).<sup>46</sup>

While this idealized version of “China” was common at the time, in another respect Fenollosa’s and Pound’s theory of the ideogram also broke with a fundamental Western view of the Chinese writing system as a major obstacle to modern thinking; as Christopher Bush observes, with Fenollosa’s essay, what had so frequently been castigated as “an emblem of cultural stagnation” has here become “a model of literary modernity.”<sup>47</sup> At the same time, though, it is precisely the assumed capacity of the ideogram to impede the rationalizing tendencies of modern thinking that makes it so important to Fenollosa and Pound. *The Chinese Written Character* thus finds in the ideogram a means of resisting the customary movement of Western thought as it ascends from things to concepts. Says Fenollosa, “At the basis of the pyramid lie *things*, but stunned, as it were. . . . We take a concept of lower attenuation, such as ‘cherry’; we see that it is contained under one higher, such as ‘redness’” (56).

It may be helpful to consider these familiar modernist arguments in relation to a later and differently inflected criticism of Western thought. I have in mind T. W. Adorno's attack on "identity thinking", which interestingly shadows the Fenollosa/Pound critique but with some revealing differences. J. M. Bernstein summarises Adorno's view as follows:

Rationalized reason produces a compulsion to identify, a compulsion to make (practically) or to construe (theoretically) each sensuous particular to be the token of some context-independent, immaterial type: exchange value, scientific law, law of reason, a priori procedure. One expression of this process is the duality between art and science.<sup>48</sup>

Pound shares this hostility to identity thinking: in his essay on Guido Cavalcanti, for example, he rejects any "attempt to unify different things, however small the difference."<sup>49</sup> *The Chinese Written Character*, as we have seen, is similarly critical of hypotaxis, finding in the ideogram a model of writing that is valued precisely because it is context-*dependent* and "material" (though, as already noted, "material" insofar as it is natural rather than social). The divergence of science from the arts is also a key issue here: Fenollosa declares that "Poetry agrees with science and not with logic" (57) and this preference is fully endorsed by Pound, for whom "science" also deals in the currency of empirical "facts", while "logic" is understood as the means by which sensuous particulars are subordinated to "immaterial types".<sup>50</sup> Pound and Adorno both, in their different ways, want to tip the balance against "rationalized reason" or "logic" and toward a material context that resists subordination of the particular to some general "type". Yet they also differ in one crucial respect, which is that for Adorno the affective properties that provide this resistance are defined as . . . "rhetoric". Adorno acknowledges that rhetoric "is incessantly corrupted by persuasive

purposes” (so much again he shares with Pound), but he goes on to observe that without such purposes “the thought act would no longer have a practical relation”.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno insists that what is needed to save us from “rationalized reason” is “a critical rescue of the rhetorical element, a mutual approximation of thing and expression, to the point where the difference fades.”<sup>52</sup> Since Plato, Adorno argues, philosophers have tried to forget the dependence of thought on language, hence the centuries-old denigration of rhetoric that Pound inherits.

Now we can begin to see the problem, or rather, perhaps, the manoeuvre that differentiates Poundian modernism from Adornian dialectics: for it is not that Pound wishes to outlaw the expressive and performative features that Adorno calls “rhetoric”—Pound is, after all, pre-eminently a poet of sound, rhythm, echo, phrasal parallelism, and so on, all devices used, of course, to persuade. What is notable, though, is that he will not define these features as “rhetorical” because to do so would be to concede the priority of some sort of obligation to an audience, that “appeal to the reader to catch the writer’s spirit, to think with him” of which we have heard Pater speak. Pound, in contrast, derides “that infamous remark of Whitman’s about poets needing an audience”, thus underlining his assumption that the literary avant-garde comes into being only by disavowing such rhetorical dependencies.<sup>53</sup> Yet this, of course, is only half the story, for along with Pound’s clear commitment to avant-gardism he was also increasingly certain that (as he put it in a 1922 letter) “It’s all rubbish to pretend that art isn’t didactic.”<sup>54</sup> But how create a didactic poetry with no rhetorical features? This conundrum Pound would solve in a time-honoured, if not essentially modernist way, by transferring the affective properties of language that Adorno designated as “rhetorical” to an ideal of poetic musicality. While the more

demotic sections of *The Cantos* would assemble the “facts”, the patently musical or “melopoeic” sequences would engage the reader at the affective level.

The term “melopoeia” is one of three announced in Pound’s 1931 pamphlet *How to Read*: there we have logopoiea, “the dance of the intellect among words,” phanopoeia, the “casting of images upon the visual imagination,” and finally melopoeia, wherein, Pound, says, “the words are charged, *over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property*, which directs the bearing or trend of that meaning.”<sup>55</sup> We might recall Hopkins’s talk of poetry as the repetition of “some kind of figure which is over and above meaning, at least the grammatical, historical, and logical meaning.” But where Hopkins sees this affective surplus as the momentum behind the poet’s direct oratorical address to the reader, Pound goes on to note that melopoeia amounts to “a force tending often to lull, or distract the reader from the exact sense of the language. It is poetry on the borders of music, and music is perhaps the bridge between consciousness and the unthinking sentient or even insentient universe.”<sup>56</sup> The last sentence of this passage works hard to conceal the fact that this ostensibly un-Poundian poetics of “lull[ing]” and “distract[ing] the reader from the exact sense of the language” is thoroughly rhetorical in purpose, though it produces a rhetoric whose suasive powers derive from a deliberate bracketing out of social densities.

As we move through Pound’s *Cantos*, in fact, we are increasingly aware of the didactic weight borne by its lyrical sequences. Pound will still inveigh against “rhetoric” but he is quite ready to affirm the pedagogical purpose of his poem. It’s curious that in the 1938 *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound roundly denounced Plato’s tendency to “prose rhapsody” as a kind of illegitimate “inebriety” or intoxication, for many passages in the later *Cantos* have precisely this quality, marking themselves off from

the more demotic and prosaic parts of the poem that deal with “facts” by their seductive musicality.<sup>57</sup> This fusion of music and rhetoric is actually what Plato was arguing *against* in *The Republic*, so runs Eric Havelock’s argument in his *Preface to Plato*. Plato’s dismissal of the poets from the Republic is to be understood, Havelock suggests, in terms of a rejection of the old, oral culture based on sound, rhythm, repetition, and association. Plato was attempting nothing less, says Havelock, than the complete reconfiguration of the old paideia, with its dependence on acoustic patterning as a mnemonic and pedagogical device; in its place he put the “idea” or “form” which transcended the oral world of repetition and outlawed the sensual pleasure it brought to the business of instruction. In the Homeric culture, as Havelock put it, listeners had to submit “to the paideutic spell. You allowed yourself to become ‘musical’ in the functional sense of the Greek term.”<sup>58</sup> From the vantage point of a society acquiring the skills of literacy, such “musicality” amounted, of course, to little more than an enchantment we would call indoctrination; hence Plato’s condemnation of that kind of “rhetoric”.

I want to suggest that this particular fusion of rhetoric and musicality in *The Cantos* has made that poem a sort of watershed for younger American poets. From the troubled reception of *The Pisan Cantos* onward, the association of lyric beauty with didacticism has triggered various forms of poetic reaction.<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Bishop, for example, wrote to Robert Lowell on the appearance of Pound’s *Thrones*: “How is THRONES? I refused to buy ROCKDRILL [sic]. Pound criticism is wildly confused, don’t you think, but I agree with D[udley] Fitts that poetry is *not* to be drilled into you, nor is music, and that’s one of P[ound]’s—oh well—I’ll skip it.”<sup>60</sup> It’s a shame that Bishop breaks off there, but her point is clear enough, that in *The Cantos* poetic “music” is somehow making an undue rhetorical claim. Other poets—Robert Duncan,

for example—valued and sought to perpetuate Pound’s visionary music but only by separating it out from the politics that underwrite it.<sup>61</sup> Others, like Objectivist George Oppen, recoiled from what he regarded as Pound’s lofty aestheticism. “A hypnotic art,” Oppen called it, “a dithyrambic art protected by its special vocabulary etc. – It produces such a destitute world, such a destroyed world when that music stops.”<sup>62</sup> For Oppen, the great rhythmic set pieces of *The Cantos* are beautiful, but in a *negative* way, a paean of praise to art rather than an affirmation of being in the world. Indeed, in his own late poems, Oppen might be seen to take his revenge on the ascending rhythms of the visionary sequences of the late *Cantos*, with their rich musicality and signature end-stopped lines. It’s almost as if Oppen wants to disfigure the poetic line by subjecting it to a kind of internal rupture. One poem demonstrates this at both thematic and prosodic levels. In “Song, the Winds of Downhill”, Oppen defines the diction to which his poem lays claim as “impoverished // of tone of pose that common / wealth // of parlance”.<sup>63</sup> “Tone” is not, in fact, effaced and survives in the regular iambic patterning of this line, but it is fractured and counter-stressed by the poem’s lineation and by the heavily marked caesura that would become a distinctive feature of Oppen’s later work.<sup>64</sup> “Rhetorical”, he observes in his notes, “it means a flowing speech, it means a deluge of speech”, and in another passage he defines his objective as “To slow down, that is, to isolate the words. Clatter, chatter is extreme rapidity of the words...”.<sup>65</sup> Smoothness, rhetoric, these are routes to an illusory success in fluency and certainty. Ironically, the anti-rhetorical Pound is now viewed as himself a source of damaging rhetorical effects.

We find the same suspicion of “flowing speech” in the work of Susan Howe who programmatically rejects what she calls the “fluent language of fanaticism” for one that enlists the alleged inchoateness of women’s speech as precisely a strength



rather than a weakness.<sup>66</sup> “This tradition that I hope I am part of,” writes Howe, “has involved a breaking of boundaries of all sorts. It involves a fracturing of discourse, a stammering even. Interruption and hesitation used as a force. A recognition that there is an other voice, an attempt to hear and speak it. It’s this brokenness that interests me.”<sup>67</sup> Much is contained for Howe in that idea of hesitation, a word, as she notes, “from the Latin meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty in speaking.”<sup>68</sup> None of which is to suggest that Howe’s characteristic viscosity is a bar to musicality—indeed, she can at times seem more Pre-Raphaelite even than Pound—but that sonic and rhythmic features are typically assigned to an “other voice” that in its “brokenness” and incompleteness can enchant but not, in the usual sense, persuade. To this end, Howe’s intricate patterns of echo and repetition constantly insist on the evanescence of meaning:

I have love come veiling  
 Lyrist some veil come lure  
 echo remnant sentence spar  
 never never form wherefor  
 Wait some recognition you  
 Lyric over us love unclothe  
 Never forever whoso move<sup>69</sup>

The characteristic injunction to “Wait some recognition” is coupled with a sense of phantasmal presence and dispersal, as Howe weaves together a complex mesh of /o/ and /v/ sounds that creates a shimmering uncertainty around “never” and “for(ever),” so that, for example, we hear “whosoever” even though we do not actually read it.

Howe is perhaps unusual among contemporary poets in her continuing fascination with such prosodic effects. More generally, it seems, poets are suspicious

of the temptations of their medium; in face of Pound's refusal to surrender the musical sublime they can be seen cultivating instead a poetry of limitation, of the demotic, even, perhaps, of the bathetic (the New York school, and especially the poems of James Schuyler provide powerful examples<sup>70</sup>). Even when the influence of a modernist precursor is welcomed as benign and productive, its appropriation tends to require a censoring out of qualities I have been defining here as "musical" ones.

Gertrude Stein's style, for example, undoubtedly survives in recent Language poetry but it usually does so in a quite rebarbative form hostile to the seductively sensual "music" which often motivated it in the first place. Here the wheel might be thought to come full circle, for what we currently call Language writing is motivated by a recognition of rhetoric as an inescapable horizon of contemporary poetry. As Charles Bernstein puts it, "poetry is a form of rhetoric, not a form of subjectivity", by which he means that, as fellow poet Bob Perelman observes, "the word 'rhetoric' acknowledges the fact that language is always socially, multiply, situated." Perelman is using the word "rhetoric", he says, in "a Bahktinian sense" to designate "speech genres, writing in a social situation. It's not exactly persuasion," he continues. "What about a rhetoric that reveals its persuasive, identificatory powers to the addressee? And invites the addressee to notice these powers of language to interpellate and to stir up emotion? That's what I'm aiming for: an in-front-of-the-scenes mutually pedagogic rhetoric."<sup>71</sup> In contrast to Poundian pedagogy, the type envisaged here openly acknowledges the designs particular usages of language may have upon us. Much Language writing is thus characterized by those very features that Pound had condemned as "rhetorical": by various kinds of verbal excess, of cliché, redundancy, duplicity, opacity, un-musicality. Here discourse is seen always to involve some sort of "dressing up" in its capacity as a medium of social exchange; Pound's "ideology of

accuracy”, as Perelman calls it, here yields to Bernstein’s fondness for, in his words, “certain kinds of pratfalls...slipping on a banana; or throwing a pie in my own face”.<sup>72</sup> Slipping or slippage neatly defines Bernstein’s own way with rhetoric, as poems typically skid between idioms and registers in a way that recalls familiar verbal formulations even as it seeks to frame them ideologically through crafty distortion. The much-maligned cliché is frequently here the motor of the poem: “There is an emptiness that fills / Our lives”, “Time wounds all heals, spills through / with echoes neither idea nor lair / can jam”, “Poetry is like a swoon, with this difference: / it brings you to your senses”.<sup>73</sup>

Pound had condemned rhetoric for its intention to deceive, and while Language writing rejects much of his legacy, in its own way it too is founded in a sort of hermeneutics of suspicion, albeit suspicion often mitigated by playfulness and humor. In the last and most recent tendency I want to notice here—what is currently called “conceptual writing”—it is not so much “rhetoric” as a practice of deception that is at issue as “rhetoricity” conceived as an all-embracing cultural condition.<sup>74</sup> The term “conceptual writing” is designedly unoriginal, borrowing from 60s and 70s art theory and particularly from statements by Sol LeWitt and Joseph Kosuth.<sup>75</sup> One of the leading practitioners of the form, Kenneth Goldsmith, rewrites LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (first published in 1967 in *Artforum*) by replacing visual art terms with ones relevant to writing:

I will refer to the kind of writing in which I am involved as conceptual writing.

In conceptual writing the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an author uses a conceptual form of writing, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the text. This kind

of writing is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the writer as a craftsman. It is the objective of the author who is concerned with conceptual writing to make her work mentally interesting to the reader, and therefore usually she would want it to become emotionally dry. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the conceptual writer is out to bore the reader. It is only the expectation of an emotional kick, to which one conditioned to Romantic literature is accustomed, that would deter the reader from perceiving this writing.<sup>76</sup>

The absence of “an emotional kick” in this avowedly “uncreative” writing might suggest that Goldsmith is proposing texts with a minimum of rhetorical features. Indeed, the primacy accorded the “concept” effectively seems to play down aspects of writing we would normally think of as “literary” or “poetic”:

Conceptual writing is made to engage the mind of the reader rather than her ear or emotions. The physicality of the work can become a contradiction to its non-emotive intent. Rhyme, meter, texture, and enjambment only emphasize the physical aspects of the work. Anything that calls attention to and interests the reader in this physicality is a deterrent to our understanding of the idea and is used as an expressive device.<sup>77</sup>

This writing, then, is designedly non-expressive, substituting transcription for invention, and the “conceptual” for the aural.<sup>78</sup> In feats of labor that might recall those of Melville’s copyists, Goldsmith has produced book-length transcriptions of “every word I spoke for a week unedited” (*Soliloquy*, 2001), of “every move my body made over the course of a day” (*Fidget*, 2000), of a year’s worth of radio traffic reports (*Traffic*, 2007), and so on; he has even transcribed the whole of one day’s issue of the

*New York Times* (*Day*, 2003) to make “a 900 page book”.<sup>79</sup> Yet while Goldsmith emphasizes “concept” at the expense of text, the works themselves amount to “great chunks” of speech and writing which digitization makes it possible to transport effortlessly from one context and format to another.<sup>80</sup> And because the technique is that of transcription, of “simply retyping existing texts” as Goldsmith candidly describes their “general concept”,<sup>81</sup> the expressive force of rhetoric is absorbed into the repetitive loops of seemingly endless commentary (on the weather, on the traffic flow, on baseball, whatever).

Transcription reveals nothing;<sup>82</sup> as a process it is without the “suspicion” that motivates the Language writer’s play with rhetorical forms. Nor is there any anxiety about eloquence or its false claims on our attention. Describing his transcription of the *New York Times* in *Day*, Goldsmith says:

Everywhere there was a bit of text in the paper, I grabbed it. I made no distinction between editorial and advertising, stock quotes or classified ads. If it could be considered text, I had to have it. Even if there was, say, an ad for a car, I took a magnifying glass and grabbed the text off the license plate.<sup>83</sup>

Speech and text amaze by their sheer volume and are everywhere waiting to be “grabbed”. Here, finally, there is no distrust of rhetoric—Goldsmith is, he says, interested “in quantifying and concretizing the vast amount of ‘nutritionless’ language; I’m also interested in the process itself being equally nutritionless.”<sup>84</sup> Language—generally other people’s language—spills on to the page in huge swathes, transcribed with all its hesitations and phatic markers—“well”, “um”, “like”—but with no real motive other than to provide commentary on a society already awash with it. The linguistic “surplus” that Pound had seen as such a threat to clarity and precision is here precisely what fascinates; and where *Bartleby* had preferred neither to speak nor

to copy, Goldsmith is addicted to both: “I love speech”, he declares in a studied reversal of Language Poetry’s talismanic “I hate speech”,<sup>85</sup> and “There’s nothing I love more than transcription”.<sup>86</sup>

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Many of the tensions we have seen arising here from different poets’ conceptions of “rhetoric” and their ways of situating their work in relation to it may be focused in an intriguing book published in 1941 by the French critic and philosopher Jean Paulhan. In *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou, La Terreur dans les lettres*, Paulhan defines two main types of thinking about literary expression: the first is “Rhetoric”, the second “Terror”.<sup>87</sup> “Rhetoric” is characterized by an essentially rule-based regard for language and its capacity to express the commonplace; “Terror”, on the other hand, represents a desire to break not just with rules and conventions but with language itself. This second view of literature prioritizes originality and is founded in the belief that “the presence of the commonplace expression betrays servitude and submission at every turn.”<sup>88</sup> What looks like a stark antithesis, however, actually conceals a relation of tricky intimacy, for while the literary terrorist might seem to value thought above the formal constraints of language, “[n]o writer is more preoccupied with words than the one who at every point sets out to get rid of them, to get away from them, or to reinvent them.”<sup>89</sup> As Maurice Blanchot remarks in a penetrating reading of Paulhan’s text, literature’s pursuit of authenticity and originality is an impossible one, given that it is always preempted by rhetoric, with “poetic language” constantly shadowed by the language of the “commonplace” from which it strives constantly to distinguish itself.<sup>90</sup>

In the foregoing pages, “rhetoric” has proved itself, not surprisingly, a multivalent term, encompassing deliberate deception, false fluency, redundancy, and

inflated self-emphasis. As Paulhan's treatise shows, it is a deeply unstable term, with one writer's meat invariably another one's poison. Defined as cliché, commonplace, and unoriginal, though, it becomes a sort of inescapable ground against which literary innovation struggles constantly and "impossibly".<sup>91</sup> Ezra Pound, we recall, had defined "rhetoric" as "the use of cliché unconsciously",<sup>92</sup> thereby perhaps leaving room for his own late invention of a *consciously* commonplace language of ethical injunction derived from Confucianism.<sup>93</sup> Pound, we may safely assume, would not have seen the point of today's "conceptual writing", though in one sense Goldsmith's work with its blunt rejection of originality—"Why use your own words when you can express yourself just as well by using someone else's?"<sup>94</sup>—might be read as a programmatic and perhaps inevitable embrace of a rhetoric which was, for modernism, both a threat and a temptation.

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<sup>1</sup> Melville, *The Piazza Tales and Other Prose Pieces, 1839-1860*, ed. Harrison Hayford et al (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1987), 21.

<sup>2</sup> None of which is meant to suggest that interest in Cicero declined but rather that its focus changed. See Mary Rosner, "Cicero in Nineteenth-Century England and America", *Rhetorica*, 4. 2 (Spring 1988), 166: "when the status of rhetoric and the classical system of education declined, interest in Cicero did not, for the nineteenth century also met him in the broader context of popular histories and biographies." Rosner notes also that "most of these non-academic works questioned the value and sincerity of orators" (171). The silent bust of Cicero may also register the contemporary move from oral practice to written composition (See Rosner, 164).

<sup>3</sup> *The Piazza Tales*, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Genette, “Rhetoric Restrained”, in *Figures of Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 104. As Hayden White observes in “The Suppression of Rhetoric”, in Brenda Dean Schildgen, ed., *The Rhetoric Canon* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1997), 22, “the suppression of rhetoric was a necessary precondition for the separation of literary from other forms of writing.” See also Roland Barthes, “The Old Rhetoric: an aide-memoire”, in *The Semiotic Challenge*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1988), 92 for the claim that Aristotelian rhetoric has come to seem in “stubborn agreement” with “an ideology of the ‘greatest number’, of the majority-as-norm, of current opinion”. The arduous process of copying would gradually be replaced not only by reprographic media but by more clearly functionalist means of inter-office communication--see John Guillory, “The Memo and Modernity”, *Critical Inquiry*, 31 (Autumn 2004), 108-31.

<sup>5</sup> On Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”, see Gilles Deleuze, “Bartleby; or, The Formula”, in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 68-90.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the review in *The Atlantic Monthly*, excerpted in Jay Leyda, ed., *The Melville Log: A Documentary Life of Herman Melville*, 2 vols (New York: Gordian Press, 1969), II, 685: “Is it possible . . . that there has really been a great war, with battles fought by men and bewailed by women? Or is it only that Mr. Melville’s inner consciousness has been perturbed, and filled with the phantasms of enlistments, marches, fights in the air, parenthetic bulletin-boards, and tortured humanity shedding, not words and blood, but words alone?” Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1983) offers perhaps the bleakest view of Melville’s turn toward a kind of “formalism” in his political thinking of his later years.

<sup>7</sup> James Naremore, “The Death and Rebirth of Rhetoric”, <http://archive.sensesofcinema.com/contents/00/5/rhetoric.html>

<sup>8</sup> Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London: Faber, 1968), 371.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Letter of August 21, 1877; quoted in Paul L. Mariani, *A Commentary on the Complete Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1970), 89-90

<sup>11</sup> Letter, quoted in Franco Marucci, *The Fine Delight that Fathers Thought: Rhetoric and Medievalism in Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 25 (the reference is to Hopkins’s poem “The Loss of the *Eurydice*”). Marucci also argues that it is a mistake to understand Hopkins’s rhetoric “as prevalently *expressive* (i.e., an expression of the writer’s emotion) and not also as *impressive* (i.e., provoking the emotion of the listener)” (15). See also *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 267 for the paper entitled “Rhythm and Other Structural Parts of Rhetoric – Verse”. The original working title was “Rhythm and the other structural parts of oratory and poetry—verse--.”

<sup>12</sup> Hopkins, *Journals and Papers*, 289.

<sup>13</sup> Marucci, *The Fine Delight*, 22 (his emphases). See also Robert Von Hallberg, *Lyric Powers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 32 who notes that in Hopkins’ poetry, “Syntactically artful writing not only presses a claim to authority..; it alludes to a distinctive way of constructing authority: namely by negotiation between parties



within the constraints of recognized rules.” My account of Hopkins’s “oratorical” ambitions is not meant to blink the fact that the period also saw a completely antithetical tendency (Von Hallberg terms it “vatic”) that would more directly influence modernist writing and that is announced in John Stuart Mill’s “What is Poetry?” (1833), in Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions*, 2 vols (New York: Haskell House, 1973), I, 70-1: “Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but, if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener.”

<sup>14</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (1938; London: Peter Owen, 1966), 293.

<sup>15</sup> See Pound’s account of his best-known imagist poem “In A Station of the Metro” in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; Hessle, East Yorkshire: The Marvell Press, 1960), 87: “...I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found words, but there came an equation. . .not in speech, but in little splotches of colour. It was just that—a ‘pattern’, or hardly a pattern, if by ‘pattern’ you mean something with a ‘repeat’ in it.”

<sup>16</sup> Pound, “A Retrospect” (1918), *Literary Essays*, 3. This collection of early pieces includes Pound’s famous “A Few Don’ts” (4); Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Press, 1951), 171. As I have noted elsewhere, when Pound speaks of “direct treatment of the ‘thing’”, his scare quotes (a warning so far ignored by all commentators) indicate that he is thinking not of a material object to be visually represented but of the “poetic fact” in which the poem is meant to originate (as in *Literary Essays*, 12: “when the ‘thing’ builds up a rhythm more beautiful than that of set metres”). See my “The Poetics of Modernism”, in Alex Davis and Lee Jenkins, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57

<sup>17</sup> Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 83

<sup>18</sup> Pound, *Gaudier-Brzeska*, 117. Pound is probably thinking of Aristotle’s definition of metaphor in the *Poetics*: “Metaphor is the application of a word that belongs to another thing” (1457b, 7-8).

<sup>19</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 144-5.

<sup>20</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 283. As Jean Paulhan observes in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou, La Terreur dans les lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941); trans. Michael Syrotinski, *The Flowers of Tarbes, or, Terror in Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 80 n.3, “In terms of writing conventions, we should also mention the italics, the quotation marks and the parentheses, which we see proliferate in Romantic writers as soon as rhetoric is invalidated.” Pound’s handling of cliché in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* is a notable modernist example. Paulhan’s account of rhetoric is considered below, 00-00.

<sup>21</sup> Wordsworth, “Preface of 1800, with a Collation of the Enlarged Preface of 1802”, in Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads 1798*, ed., W. J. B. Owen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 168-9 In “Cavalcanti” (*Literary Essays*, 154), Pound distinguishes “ornament” negatively conceived from the “irreplaceable ornament” he associates with Cavalcanti.

<sup>22</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts (New York: Dover, 2004), 7 (1356a).

<sup>23</sup> Noted in Arthur K. Moore, “Lyric Voices and Ethical Proofs”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 23. 4 (Summer 1965), 434.

<sup>24</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> Eliot, "'Rhetoric' and Poetic Drama", in *The Sacred Wood* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921), 77 (italics in original). Eliot's view of "rhetoric" is considerably more nuanced than Pound's, admitting of both "good" and "bad" kinds. In the same essay (72), he suggests that we "avoid the assumption that rhetoric is a vice of manner, and endeavour to find a rhetoric of substance also, which is right because it issues from what it has to express." See also John Gage, *In the Arresting Eye: the Rhetoric of Imagism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 32.

<sup>26</sup> Spencer, *The Philosophy of Style* (1852; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 6, 10, 0. Further references will be given in the text.

<sup>27</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 5

<sup>28</sup> As John Guillory remarks in "The Memo and Modernity", 125: "the evidence for this point is the extreme compression of poetic language, particularly figurative language; but Spencer has confused compression, which might very well tax the reader's attention by producing ambiguity, with a concept of brevity that would seem to resist ambiguity as an impediment to communication." The search for a model of "pure" communication was as persistent as the quest for the "universal characteristic" to which it was, of course, related. Later, Pound would show interest in the Basic English program of Ogden and Richards, but he may also have been aware of the extraordinary attack on Woodrow Wilson's political rhetoric in William Bayard Hale, *The Story of a Style* (New York: B. W. Huebsch Inc., 1920). Hale there lambastes Wilson's "talent for copious eloquence rather than clear thought" (4), associating his excessively "ornamental language" (95) with the economics of conspicuous consumption (106).

<sup>29</sup> Walter Pater, *Appreciations, with an Essay on Style* (1889; London: Macmillan and Co. 1931), 15, 15-16. Further references will be given in the text.

<sup>30</sup> For a commentary, see Susan C. Jarratt, "Walter Pater and the Sophistication of Rhetoric", *College English*, 51. 1 (January 1989), 73-87.

<sup>31</sup> Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899; New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1958), 93. Compare, of course, Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance*: "...our once chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time."

<sup>32</sup> Symons, *The Symbolist Movement*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan, 1959), 331. However, as Pound recalled Yeats saying: "I have spent the whole of my life trying to get rid of rhetoric... I have got rid of one kind of rhetoric and have merely set up another" (Pound, *Make It New* [London: Faber & Faber, 1934], 245). Characteristically and rather missing the point, Pound adds: "Being a serious character, at least along certain lines, he set about getting rid of THAT."

<sup>34</sup> Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Random House, 1951), 35.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Altieri, "Rhetoric and Poetics: How to Use the Inevitable Return of the Repressed", in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 474.

<sup>36</sup> Eliot, *Little Gidding*, in *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 193.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Houston Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1987), 85.

<sup>38</sup> Charles Altieri, *The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 152.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>40</sup> John Ashbery, “The Wrong Kind of Insurance”, *Houseboat Days* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977), 50.

<sup>41</sup> It is worth noting that Fenollosa added the following qualification to his account of the Chinese language: “Such a pictorial method, whether the Chinese exemplified it or not, would be the ideal language of the world” (59).” One customary view has of course been that while some ideograms may have had a pictographic origin, they are nonetheless construed by Chinese readers as conventionalized symbols. For a subtle re-consideration of the graphic nature of the Chinese character that carefully distinguishes between imitative representation and semiotic iconicity, see Haroldo de Campos, “Poetic Function and Ideogram / The Sinological Argument”, trans. Kevin Mundy and Marc Benson, ed., Odile Cisneros, in *Novas: Selected Writings Haroldo de Campos*, ed. and introd. Antonio Sergio Bessa and Odile Cisneros (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 287-311.

<sup>42</sup> Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition*, ed. Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 45. Further references will be given in the text.

<sup>43</sup> See also the following cautionary comment in Simon Jarvis, *Wordsworth’s Philosophic Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29: “The stripping down of poetry, the removal of everything which is adventitious to a description, all this does not in the end leave us with the impossible dead letter, with perfected literalness, but rather forces us right up against that in language which will not be made absolutely literal: the way in which under the steadiest description still sounds a prescription, the way in which a norm, or a value, or a meaning, echoes in what is apparently the most naked and simple ‘is’.”

<sup>44</sup> Compare Fenollosa’s complaint about Western grammar (47): “The sentence according to this definition is not an attribute of nature but an accident of man as a conversational animal.”

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Fenollosa, 52: “‘Farmer’ and ‘rice’ are mere hard terms which define the extremes of the pounding. But in themselves, apart from this sentence-function, they are naturally verbs. The farmer is one who tills the ground, and the rice is a plant which grows in a special way.”

<sup>46</sup> Quoted in *The Chinese Written Character*, 3. On “orientalist” constructions of China, see, for example, Christopher Bush, *Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) and Eric Hayot, *Chinese Dreams: Pound, Brecht, and Tel Quel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004). Haroldo de Campos, “Poetic Function and Ideogram”, 292 proposes that “According to Fenollosa’s reading, ideograms are rooted deep down in history or rather in a quasi-paradisiacal arche-history.”

<sup>47</sup> Bush, *Ideographic Modernism*, 32.

<sup>48</sup> J. M. Bernstein, “Mimetic Rationality and Material Inference: Adorno and Brandom”, *Revue internationale de philosophie*, 227 (2004), 7.

<sup>49</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 185

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Fenollosa’s manuscript note (*Chinese Written Character*, 200n): “Poetry is akin to Modern Science / task of Science is to undermine Logic”.

<sup>51</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 55.

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, 56.

<sup>53</sup> *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 107. The “remark” drew Pound’s attention because it was a running feature of the cover of *Poetry* magazine. Specifically, Pound objected to *Poetry*’s habit of genuflecting to its audience in its concern with “christianizing all poems they print, [and in] their concessions to local pudibundery”.

<sup>54</sup> Pound, *Selected Letters*, 180: “It’s all rubbish to pretend that art isn’t didactic. A revelation is always didactic. Only the aesthetes since 1880 have pretended the contrary, and they aren’t a very sturdy lot.”

<sup>55</sup> Pound, *How to Read*, in *Polite Essays* (1937; rpt. Plainview, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1966), 170 (my emphases).

<sup>56</sup> *ibid* 171-2

<sup>57</sup> Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 222.

<sup>58</sup> Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), 159. See also Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, trans. Gilbert Highet, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), I. 133 on the early Greeks’ “educational conception of poetry” and, II. 222, on Plato’s “criticism of poetry as paideia”.

<sup>59</sup> A case in point is the famous passage in Canto LXXXI, “Pull down thy vanity”, initially read in terms of a supposed “recantation” on Pound’s part, but now increasingly construed as an exhortation to the reader. For a fine account of the prosodic ingenuity of the sequence of which this passage is part, see Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 488-93.

<sup>60</sup> *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 320 (emphasis in original). The reference is to Dudley Fitts, “Music Fit for the Odes”, *The Hound and Horn*, 4. 2 (January-March 1931), 278-89.

<sup>61</sup> See my “Beyond *The Cantos*: Pound and American Poetry”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 146-48.

<sup>62</sup> George Oppen, *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*, ed. Stephen Cope (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>63</sup> George Oppen, *New Collected Poems*, ed. Michael Davidson, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: New Directions, 2008), 000.

<sup>64</sup> For more on the function of the caesura in Oppen’s late work, see my *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 191-2.

<sup>65</sup> George Oppen, unpublished notes, quoted in *ibid.*, 138.

<sup>66</sup> Susan Howe, *Articulation of Sound Forms in Time*, in *Singularities* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press and University Press of New England, 1990), 31.

<sup>67</sup> Susan Howe, “Encloser”, in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed., Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof Books, 1990) 192.

<sup>68</sup> Susan Howe, *My Emily Dickinson* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic, 1985), 21. On the association of a “rhetoric of obscurity” with prophecy in the Biblical tradition, see Herbert Marks, “On Prophetic Stammering”, *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 1 (1987), 1-19.

<sup>69</sup> Susan Howe, *Pierce-Arrow* (1997; New York: New Directions, 1999), 144.

<sup>70</sup> See John Wilkinson, “Jim the Jerk: Bathos and Loveliness in the Poetry of James Schuyler”, in Sara Crangle and Peter Nicholls, ed., *On Bathos: Literature, Music, Art* (London: Continuum Books, 2010), 71-89.

<sup>71</sup> Bernstein et al, “Poetry, Community, Movement: A Conversation”, *diacritics*, 26, 3-4 (Fall/Winter 1996), 199; Peter Nicholls, “A Conversation with Bob Perelman,” *Textual Practice*, 12. 3 (1998), p.537-38 (reprinted with “Coda” in *Jacket*, 39 (2010)).

<sup>72</sup> Quoted in Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 82.

<sup>73</sup> “Stove’s Out”, “You”, “The Kluptzy Girl”, in Charles Bernstein, *All the Whisky in Heaven: Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2010), 72, 73, 84.

<sup>74</sup> See also *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. J. Bender and D. E. Wellbery (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 25: “Our historical thesis leads us to this conclusion: *Modernism is an age not of rhetoric, but of rhetoricality*, the age, that is, of a generalized rhetoric that penetrates to the deepest levels of human experience...Rhetoric is no longer the title of a doctrine or a practice, nor a form of cultural memory; it becomes instead something like the condition of our existence” (emphases in original).

<sup>75</sup> For introductory accounts of conceptual writing, see, for example, Marjorie Perloff, “A Conversation with Kenneth Goldsmith”, *Jacket*, 21 (February 2003), Craig Dworkin, “Introduction” to the *Ubuweb Anthology of Conceptual Poetics*, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009). Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010) has an intriguing chapter-length account of Goldsmith’s *Traffic*.

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing”, *Open Letter*, 12. 7 (Fall 2005), 98.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 101. Place and Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* argue accordingly (15) that “All conceptual writing is allegorical writing.”

<sup>78</sup> So Goldsmith writes that “Literature that is meant for the sensation of the ear primarily would be called aural rather than conceptual. This would include most poetry and certain strains of fiction” (99). LeWitt’s original is as follows: “Art that is meant for the sensation of the eye primarily would be called perceptual rather than conceptual. This would include most optical, kinetic, light, and color art.”

<sup>79</sup> “Being Boring”, 3.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Kenneth Goldsmith, “Being Boring”, 1

([http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith\\_boring.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html)): “The simple act of moving information from one place to another today constitutes a significant act in and of itself...Some of us call this writing.”

<sup>81</sup> Goldsmith, “Being Boring”, 1

<sup>82</sup> See also on “transcription” as deployed in Julianna Spahr’s *LIVE*, Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2005), 324-5: “The transcriber writes down only language that is not his or her own, but language which has already been put forth.... Transcription thus involves a relationship to language that is *inherently* one of belatedness or redundancy. The relationship between transcription and language is also one of labor, and in a form few would describe as intellectually or aesthetically ‘rewarding’” (emphasis in original).

<sup>83</sup> Goldsmith, “Being Boring”, 3

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Compare Michael Fried’s account of Tony Smith’s *Die*, a 6 foot black-painted steel cube: “[It] is *always* of further interest; one never feels that one has come to the end of it; it is inexhaustible. It is inexhaustible, however, not because of any fullness – that is the inexhaustibility of art – but because there is nothing there to exhaust. It is endless the way a road might be: if it were circular, for example.”

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Quoted in J. M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 132.

<sup>85</sup> Poet and artist Robert Grenier used the phrase in the first issue of *This* magazine (1971) which he edited with Barrett Watten.

<sup>86</sup> Goldsmith, "Being Boring", 1.

<sup>87</sup> Jean Paulhan, *Les Fleurs de Tarbes, ou, La Terreur dans les lettres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941); trans. Michael Syrotinski, *The Flowers of Tarbes, or, Terror in Literature* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2006). Paulhan's thought on this subject is further developed in "Rhetoric Rises from Its Ashes" and "Young Lady with Mirrors", in Jean Paulhan, *On Poetry and Politics*, trans. Jennifer Bajorek, Charlotte Mandell, and Eric Trudel (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 44-56 and 57-69.

<sup>88</sup> Paulhan, *The Flowers of Tarbes*, 34.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 76. For a reading that speaks more simply of the "return of rhetoric", see Antoine Compagnon, "L'arrière-garde, de Peguy à Paulhan et Barthes", in William Marx, ed., *Les arrière-gardes au XX siècle: L'autre face de la modernité esthétique* (Paris: PUF, 2004), 98.

<sup>90</sup> Maurice Blanchot, "How is Literature Possible?" (1942), trans. Michael Syrotinski, in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed., Michael Holland (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 49-60. See also Michael Syrotinski, *Defying Gravity: Jean Paulhan's Interventions in Twentieth-Century French Intellectual History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 91 and Leslie Hill, *Blanchot, extreme contemporary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 73.

<sup>91</sup> Michael Syrotinski, "Introduction" to *The Power of Rhetoric, the Rhetoric of Power: Jean Paulhan's Fiction, Criticism, and Editorial Activity*, *Yale French Studies*, 106 (2004), 3 notes that "it is ultimately impossible to determine whether a given word or expression is 'original' or not."

<sup>92</sup> Pound, *Literary Essays*, 283.

<sup>93</sup> The tendency is pronounced in the late sequence *Thrones*, especially where Pound draws on *The Sacred Edict of K'ang Hsi* for examples of proverbial folk wisdom ("There is worship in plowing / and equity in the weeding hoe" [Canto XCIX]).

<sup>94</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, "Introduction to Flarf vs. Conceptual Writing" (2009), <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/whitney-intro.html>.