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"Blocked. Make a Song out of That": Pound's "E. P. Ode Pour L'Élection de son Sepulchre"

By Peter Quartermain

"Take his own speech, make what you will of it—"
Ezra Pound: Near Perigord

The late 1850's in New York. Thomas Bailey Aldrich, young man from New Hampshire, in his early twenties. Charlie Pfaff’s "resort" and restaurant, at 653 Broadway,¹ where the "Bohemian" crowd hangs out—where, in the summer of 1860, fresh from visiting Emerson, Hawthorne and Lowell in New England, the 23-year-old W. D. Howells was to look into Walt Whitman's "gentle eyes that looked most kindly into mine," and shake his hand.² Pfaff's, where the Saturday Press crowd, Henry Clapp editor, gather in the evenings to exercise their elbows and their wit, drinking the finest wine in New York, and smoking fine tobacco. And Henry Clapp makes this young man his assistant editor when with Edward Howland he founds the Saturday Press, 29 October 1858, two weeks before the young man’s twenty-second birthday, just two months after the young man has published, in the Knickerbocker Magazine, a poem. Just over a year later, the Saturday Press is to print, in its Christmas 1859 issue, Walt Whitman’s "A Child’s Reminiscence" ("Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"). The Saturday Press, Howells was to remark, “really embodied the new literary life of the city.” And, he continued, “it was very nearly as well for one to be accepted by the Press as to be accepted by the Atlantic”³—though you didn’t get paid.

Some twenty-three years later, in February 1881, Aldrich (now 44) succeeds Howells as editor of the Atlantic Monthly, thinks of Whitman’s writing as “neither prose nor verse, and certainly . . . not an improvement on either,” and considers Whitman’s manner “a hollow affectation.”⁴ He is to reign for almost ten years as arbiter of American literary judgment: “for a large portion of the American public,” Frank Luther Mott cautiously reminds us, “whatever the Atlantic printed was literature.”⁵ Aldrich’s poem published in 1858 was called “The Bluebells of New England.” In 1885, during the fifth year of his editorship, Aldrich included it for the sixth time in a collection of
his verse. *The Poems of Thomas Bailey Aldrich*, Household Edition, was deposited in the Copyright Office, Library of Congress, on 4 September 1885, eight weeks to the day before Ezra Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho. The book was reprinted in 1886, 1887, 1890, and 1893, and it was not until 28 October 1897, two days before Pound's twelfth birthday, that a copy of the definitive *Poems*, in two volumes, was deposited in the Copyright Office. "The Bluebells of New England" was at last discarded from the canon. It had been in print for almost forty years:

**The Bluebells Of New England**

The roses are a regal troop,  
And modest folk the daisies;  
But, Bluebells of New England,  
To you I give my praises—  
To you, fair phantoms in the sun,  
Whom merry Spring discovers,  
With bluebirds for your laureates,  
And honey-bees for lovers.  
The south-wind breathes, and lo! you throng  
This rugged land of ours:  
I think the pale blue clouds of May  
Drop down, and turn to flowers!  
By cottage doors along the roads  
You show your winsome faces,  
And, like the spectre lady, haunt  
The lonely woodland places.  

All night your eyes are closed in sleep,  
Kept fresh for day's adorning:  
Such simple faith as yours can see  
God's coming in the morning!  
You lead me by your holiness  
To pleasant ways of duty;  
You set my thoughts to melody,  
You fill me with your beauty.  
Long may the heavens give you rain,  
The sunshine its caresses,  
Long may the woman that I love  
Entwine you in her tresses!
Notable for its vacuousness, the poem is a fair example of the picture-poem or idyll so fashionable in its time—and which Aldrich, champion of the Cult of Beauty in literature to the last, was to produce in one form or another until his death in 1907. And if the task of the poet is to refresh rather than thoughtlessly to adopt a language, then Aldrich—at least here—is no poet, embracing as he does so facilely a traditional form, and having nothing to say. His complaint to E. C. Stedman in 1881 that “new singers are so few! My ear has not caught any new notes since 1860” is but the other side of a coin that Stedman knew well. “Whatever failure such men as you experience,” Stedman had written in 1873, “grows out of the only difficulty in our literary life—want of themes suited to our tastes and aspirations.”

Aldrich’s poem—like so many at the time—suggests the work of the writer for whom there is no language adequate to his experience—or rather, to state it more precisely, for whom no experience that life has to offer can quite match the expectations and feelings that his language gives him, indeed demands. Gertrude Stein acutely observed to an audience at the University of Chicago in March 1935 that in American writing, words “began to detach themselves from the solidity of anything,” echoing her remark of the year before that the American language exhibits a “lack of connection” with material daily living. Such behaviour is symptomatic of a retreat into form, and what is curious about Aldrich is his early connection with Whitman, on whom he turned his back, for Whitman is (with Emily Dickinson) precisely the American writer of the time who, faced with a language inadequate to register the world as it struck him, forced the language into new uses, worked against the current of fashion. Aldrich’s great error—and that of those round him, whom Willard Thorp calls the “defenders of ideality”—was his failure to see that it was in the language, not in the verse form, that the life of the poem lay. Locating the poem exclusively in traditional forms, such as the quatrains of the “The Bluebells of New England,” he thought in terms of themes to rejuvenate it, to find a new voice.

Thus, three years before he died, when Ezra Pound was eighteen years old, Aldrich was to make the nice discrimination between the quatrain and the epigram: “If your little stanza ends with a snap,” he wrote to Brander Matthews on 19 January 1904, “it becomes an epigram and ceases to be a poem.” This, almost precisely at the time when Henry James, whose whole career as a novelist rests on the thing, apparently not yet discovering it, he had already intuitively sensed that there was a "connection"...
the firm refusal to pigeon-hole our experience and the world, to let things “sit” in definitions, is complaining that Americans make no discriminations at all. There is no nicety in America, says James, as he views “the almost sophisticated dinginess of the present situation.”

The burden of James’s complaint is not so much that Americans have refused to consent to history as that the language has been detached—even in its place names—from the landscape, and transferred instead to the people who dwell in it. The difficulty of equality is that there is no thing to work against, there is no depth. Where in Feudalism James sees the figures of the parson and the squire (of the Church and of the Patron) establish appearances and preserve their importance, what is pitted against the American landscape (and thus what constitutes the American scene) is a uniform, bland, and generalized notion of undifferentiated humanity which, naming places as it does, baldly asserts its centrality and superiority to the scene. “The ugliness,” James wrote, “was the so complete abolition of forms: if, with so little reference to their past, present, or future possibility, they could be said to have been even so much honored as to be abolished.” Forms, manners, appearances: out of the niceties of social (and moral) discrimination do they appear. We should note that “to discriminate” is to place one thing against another, to be a working against. A working against.

Thus do we speak of the work of art. Aldrich, turning to a traditional form—and, moreover, a form which he conceived as unchanging, like a pot—failed the language, the language failed him. He has lost the verb, the sense of form as act; Whitman told Traubel that he thought of his work sometimes as only a language experiment. Yet it would be a mistake to think of Aldrich, when he rejected Whitman for English meters and forms, as thereby allying himself with a decadent tradition or an exhausted poetic diction, for he did much to clear up the dross, the lumber, of mid-nineteenth-century verse; he moved the poem closer to recognizable patterns of speech. It is simply that in Henry James’s terms—and James’s terms are the ones that come more or less to prevail—in a place where there is nothing to work against because there are no forms, the gesture against the void is blind, and the only working that can take place must be in the language. “What ‘form’, “ James asked, “could there be?”

James was echoing Whitman’s remark of 1871 in Democratic
Vistas: “Democratic nations naturally stand more in need of forms than other nations,” and William Carlos Williams would respond in 1919 with *Kora in Hell,* a remarkable series of prose improvisations which reworks Plato’s allegory of the cave: those in the dark must make, blindly, what they can, without light from beyond, or from outside. There is much widdershins movement in the book: explicitly, against the sun; implicitly, when disasters turn to triumphs and gains to losses. The book is a working against, and through the reversals (where descent becomes affirmation, death becomes life, dark light, and so on) comes the final affirmation of the poet’s birth, springtime: the violence of the blood ascendant, the gods visibly present, felt presence, in the ordinary, the everyday, the actual and practical, born—with the poet—in the ground. Williams’s career as poet is a mad dash for language, bouncing hither and yon, appearing undisciplined, but above all care-ful (and care-less, indeed, of the distinction between epigram and poem).

James’s concern for the language was deep and insistent. Thus, in high comic vein (and therefore in high seriousness) he told the graduating class at Bryn Mawr on 8 June 1905 to “know” how to speak. “You don’t speak soundly,” he said, “unless you have discriminated.” And he pointed to a clear and present danger:

All the while we sleep the innumerable aliens are sitting up (they don’t sleep!) to work their will on their new inheritance and prove to us that they are without any finer feeling or more conservative instinct of consideration for it, more fond, unutterable association with it, more hovering, caressing curiosity about it, than they may have on the subject of so many yards of freely figured oilcloth, from the shop, that they are preparing to lay down, for convenience, on the kitchen floor or kitchen staircase... durable, tough, cheap.

The question of our speech. Williams, in *Kora in Hell,* would deny James’s criticism by affirming the distinctions to be found in “alien” speech, in Rutherford, in Paterson, in Newark. In, that is, New Jersey:

That which is heard from the lips of those to whom we are talking in our day’s affairs mingles with what we see in the streets and everywhere about us as it mingles also with our imaginations. By this chemistry is fabricated a language of the day which shifts and reveals its meanings as clouds shift and
turn in the sky. . . . This is the language to which few ears are
tuned so that it is said by poets that few men are ever in their
full senses since they have no way to use their imaginations.
Thus to say that a man has no imagination is to say that he is
blind or deaf. But of old poets would translate this hidden
language into a kind of replica of the speech of the world with
certain distinctions of rhyme and meter. . . . Nowadays the
elements of that language are set down as heard. . . .

(One might note that Williams spoke Spanish at home as a child.
And that he grew up in Rutherford.)

And James would, in turn, insist: “NO! I mean not the theme of
our speech but the sound of it, the way we speak: noise is not
speech. . . . Nothing is commoner,” he told the Bryn Mawr class of
1905,

. . . than to see young people whose utterance can only be
indicated by pronouncing it destitute of any approach to an
emission of the consonant. It thus becomes a mere helpless
slobber of disconnected vowel noises.

And with newspapers, schools, the ever-present vulgar, and the
great mass of the commonplace in mind, he went on:

There are plenty of influences about us that . . . reduce
articulation to an easy and ignoble minimum, and so keep it
as little distinct as possible from the grunting, the squealing,
the barking or the roaring of animals.

American speech is becoming undifferentiated noise, then, warned
James—if it is not so already. The American scene (or more
accurately, the American language, noise) is incompatible with
taste, poetry, and intelligence.

It would be for Pound to give James the lie, in 1919 (the same
year that Williams is writing and publishing Kora in Hell), in five
quatrain. Those quatrains make up the first poem of “Hugh
Selwyn Mauberley,” where speech—for some readers—becomes
noise. Indeed, for some it becomes silence. “Hugh Selwyn
Mauberley” is a remarkably inventive poem, and it, too, is a
working against.

II

Nineteen hundred and seventy-nine marks the sixtieth anniversary
of the poem’s composition, and as a familiar work it should need
little explication. Anyone seeking one need turn only to the
footnotes in almost any college textbook of verse. I shall in what follows, however, now and then need to rehearse familiar ground. Here is the text of the first poem of the sequence (for that poem only is my concern here), as established by John Espey:¹⁴

E. P. Ode Pour L'Élection de son Sepulchre

For three years, out of key with his time
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain "the sublime"
In the old sense. Wrong from the start—

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born
In a half savage country, out of date;
Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;
Capaneus; trout for factitious bait;

"Ἰδμεν γαρ Τοι πάνθ', ὄο ενι Τροιν
Caught in the unstopped ear;
Giving the rocks small lee-way
The chopped seas held him, therefore, that year.

His true Penelope was Flaubert,
He fished by obstinate isles;
Observed the elegance of Circe's hair
Rather than the mottoes on sun-dials.

Unaffected by "the march of events,"
He passed from men's memory in l'an trentuniesme
De son eage; the case presents
No adjunct to the Muses' diadem.

Not without reason the poem has acquired a reputation for complexity if not obscurity, what with its puns, its allusions, its rhymes, out of one language into another, its shifts of literary reference from one culture into another, its vocabulary, its syntax. That complexity is a complexity of surface, and what makes for greater difficulty is the multiplicity of voices—just how does the poem sound? Who is the speaker? Is it Pound himself? Some clubby London literary pundit? This is the central question. What attitude are we to take toward the "he" of the poem—Mauberley,
persumably (I shall, at any rate, refer to him by that name)? It is equivocal, to say the least. For there is much to admire in maintaining "the sublime," or in trying to (the cult of beauty was still alive and kicking in 1919, on both sides of the Atlantic), and, in that attempt, to fish by obstinate isles is to show tenacity and dedication if nothing else: Mauberley draws our sympathy. And in so far as he does, of course, then the speaker sounds patronizing, and in his condescension invites us (unsuccessfully) to sneer. Yet there is much to reject, if not exactly to sneer at, in Mauberley's behaviour—the absurdity of wringing lilies from the acorn, for example, or the remoteness from "the march of events"; the factitiousness of the bait set for the trout (and who or what, we may wonder, is the trout?). The last line of the poem is justly celebrated for the ambiguity of adjunct, which in law means an addition, or a person joined to another in duty or service. Yet in logic it means a non-essential attribute, and the double negative ("no adjunct") becomes a disguised compliment.

All this of course is familiar stuff, and we might in passing note the possibility of disguise in the language of the poem. The problems arise because the surface of the poem is so extraordinarily complex, and we do not know how to voice it; we do not know what it sounds like. Yet under that complexity something very simple is being said: the poem treats of bankruptcy, the sense of bankruptcy experienced, sensed; the frustration. The poet, aesthete perhaps, is himself bankrupt; society is bankrupt; there is no way at the present time in which it is possible to be a poet, without, at any rate, writing what Basil Bunting calls "Overdrafts." Viewed one way, the poem is a sum of the individual life, the poet’s; viewed another, a representative value, a summing up—and a summoning up—of the culture in which the poet is; the miscellaneousness of that culture, the lack of direction, the lack of stability or focus in that culture, too amorphous as it is to be worked against; for the artist a lack of idiom, of a form in which that idiom can express itself—a world uncongenial to the artist, and an artist uncongenial to the world, save in fragments, perhaps. And the reader of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly" is part of that culture, that world.

The poem works by exploiting that fact. The reader figures in the poem (and, as I write this, I think of Henry James, in whose novels both the writer and the reader figure so largely). The poem does not work through logic; as it progresses, there is no attempt to reason it out, to persuade through appeals to involved argument.
The base of the poem's rhetoric lies elsewhere. At the same time—and this is surprising after Imagism—nothing in the poem is based directly on sensation. It is not a series of clear visual perceptions, it is not a sharp evocation of objects, of things, there is no single clear *image* in the poem. Instead, the poem is primarily an evocation of attitudes. The feeling—not the tone, which has to do with the voice, but the feeling—seems something we recognize readily, that poet and reader have agreed upon ahead of time, almost—so that, once the feeling has been established, we can devote our attention (both poet and reader) to the subtle complexities of the surface.

I would not for one moment argue that Pound is writing with James, Aldrich, or Whitman specifically in mind; they are not even specific elements in the complex surface play. They are simply figures in what I can only call a drama, the drama of the poem's fortune and how it is read; they characterize features of the poem's surface, and serve to identify the theatre, the American side of the Atlantic, in which the poem is staged. Shakespeare, in *his* plays, stages the language by performing it: when Polonius asks Hamlet if he will walk "out of the air," Hamlet counters with the question "into my grave?" only, later in the play, to leap into one; such enacting of the language serves as index of Hamlet's condition, serves as index of the drama, is the drama. Similarly Lear, whose "out, varlet, from my sight" is followed by his blindness. In so far as the reader is part of the culture "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" sums up (and one of the risks the poem takes is that he *must* be a part of that culture, and know so), the reader is drawn into the theatre of the poem, and the poem itself is a staging of the language—though where Shakespeare's language is enacted in the drama on a playhouse stage, Pound's is staged in rhetoric, in the playhouse of the reader's consciousness.

I emphasize theatre, drama, and stage because the poem so emphatically asserts the primacy of the spoken word. We can, admittedly, be tempted to take the opening stanza in a "literary" way, and read it silently in that fruity sort of mental voice we seem to reserve for "Poetry"—it is, after all, a quatrains (shades of Aldrich!); the poem is after all titled "Ode," and the form is regular enough in its line-lengths, scansion, and rhymes, thus to disarm us. It is impossible, however, to read *beyond* that stanza and take the poem as anything but speech, and the first stanza's run-on lines, breaks, and variety of caesura (notice its absence in the second line
and its central position in the fourth) all subtly prepare us, in the voicing of the poem, for the otherwise startling shift, at the beginning of the second stanza where, “No, hardly,” the speaker interrupts himself.

In The Spirit of Romance, published in 1910, Pound had asserted that “all fine poetry . . . can be well judged only when heard spoken, or sung to its own measure.”¹⁵ I have already remarked on the difficulty of locating precisely the identity of the speaker or the tone of his voice—this is part of the poem’s staged rhetoric—and as we read on we find more and more interruptions to the flow of language, the speech-signals get shorter and shorter, and more cryptic (the second stanza has four semi-colons, for instance; one “phrase” is only one word long). The cryptic nature of the utterance, as it progresses, is a function of the stoppages, the blockages, that the poem is about. Mauberley, we learn, fished by “obstinate” isles; things catch (ironically?) in an unstopped ear (perhaps it is in the nature of utterance, or of our attention to it, that it catch, halt, stop the easy flow of sound); much of the language, as we hear it, puns such blockage: seas-seize, for example, or bait-bate. The poem, in a form apparently regular to the eye, to the ear goes along in fits and starts.

And the major blockage is what catches in the unstopped ear: line nine. Some readers, when they see this line, cannot even identify the alphabet it is written in; others, though they vaguely recognise it as Greek, are like most readers in 1979 and no doubt in 1919 or 1920, unable to pronounce it at all. In the classroom, when I ask students to read the poem aloud, they balk at this line. Some of them simply give up—which means they are blocked completely—one of the considerable risks the poem takes (though any poem, I need hardly add, runs the risk of not being read, or of being abandoned half-way). Others, when they reach the Greek, do one of two things: either they simply keep silent for what they think is the space of a line, and then read on, or they make some sort of a noise. The noise might be a more-or-less conventional tum-te-tum sort of thing to count out the rhyme, or it might be what James called the grunting of animals, simply to fill the gap. Silence, then, or counting, or noise—and only the counters, the tum-te-tum people, manage to keep the rhythm of the poem going.

First and foremost, then, the line affords a major disturbance in the poem’s sound-pattern: a series of intelligible sounds (speech) is
reduced to silence or to mere noise—and it is that, for most readers, which catches in the unstopped ear: undifferentiation, meaninglessness, a disruption of rhythm and a voicing of the incomprehensible. And the situation is not much changed for those speakers of English who can read the Greek alphabet but do not know the language. They make a noise something like this:

Idmen gar toy panth, hoss any Troy-ay
which rhymes with "way."

What catches in the ear is something that simply does not all belong in the language of the poem, unless a fairly extended silence can be thought of as part of this or indeed any poem's normal apparatus. But this is a loaded silence, for this pause involves the active suppression, by the reader, of the putative sound he knows he is supposed to make or hear. The world that has been established by a discourse which we do understand (at least in some sort of lexical sense) has suddenly given way to a world which we do not understand at all: an aural glimpse, caught in the unstopped ear. And whose ear is it but Mauberley's? Mauberley, caught up in—or at least attracted by—a world incomprehensible to the rest of us. What was it Williams was writing in *Kora in Hell*? "This is the language to which few ears are tuned... Thus to say that a man has no imagination is to say nearly that he is blind or deaf." And the stanza tells us, the chopped seas held him "therefore."

If the speaker is critical of Mauberley, the criticism is double-edged, and the attitude Pound wants us to take is still unclear. It may be that we do not like people to be in worlds incomprehensible to the rest of us, for perhaps they have something we don't, and perhaps what they have is better than what we have: a kind of xenophobia, in which we are forced (for the line is silent, or gibberish: "It's all Greek to me," they used to say) to be satisfied with what we've got, stay where we are. The line pushes us into a sense of our inadequacies, perhaps, so that, even in—especially in!—our clubby London literary pundit voice, we feel like lashing out at Mauberley. Of course we might instead envy and admire him, and thus find the voice of the poem warm and sympathetic, supporting Mauberley, viewing his position in society with compassionate admiration. In any case, whether these reflections run through our minds or no—and in so far as he so reflects, the reader is entering into dialogue with the poem—the line of Greek, for the non-Greek reader, is frustrating, and the frustration is itself
part of the poem's major theme, is utterly essential to the poem's dynamic. The poem invites us to take sides and at the same time makes it impossible for us to do so.

But Greek is, after all, Greek, and the line does have meaning. If we read the footnotes in our college text we discover that it is from line 189 of Book XII of the Odyssey. It is part of the song the sirens sang to Odysseus, and it means

For we know all things that are in Troy.

Even if we know this, however, the stanza remains difficult to read aloud. This is partly because of the consonant clusters in line two (stopped ear) and line three (small lee), which slow the voice down, but mainly because of the fourth line, and the effect lines two and three have on the stressing of

The chopped seas held him, therefore, that year.

"Chopped seas" repeats the cluster of line two, and the pause that occurred there between the d of stopped and the e of ear (lest we sound "stop dear") is here extended further, to include the final s of seas and the h of held. This is a very slow line indeed, as well as an extra-long one, and all this difficulty—these are quantitative meters, like Greek—force the sound of the poem into the center of our attention. The difficulty with "therefore," coming as it does after all those consonant clusters, is that we want to stress the "fore," making the word into "therefor," and this encourages the word to resolve itself into two, "there" and "for," so that we are tempted indeed, though our eye tells us otherwise, to hear the line say

The chopped seas held him there for that year.

The eye thus works against the ear in a sort of conversation partly because the word "therefore" is itself so curiously delayed in the syntax of the line. "The chopped seas therefore held him" comes much more easily and much less ambiguously off the tongue. To get the emphases straight, you have to break the line up, make it even choppier. "Therefore" is held in suspension in the line, imitating one might almost say Mauberley's position, and we are forced to recognize the crucial function of the Greek, whether we understand it or not.

The polysyllables in this poem tend to resolve into their constituent parts, and if we read "the chopped seas held him there for that year" (and the demands of the rhythm are such that we have deliberately to resist that reading—which is to say, then, that
such a reading is encouraged, brought to mind) we begin to
wonder, held him there for what? or why hold him there for a
year? and the answer of course is the Greek, the classical Greek of
the sirens' song, holding Mauberley/Odysseus back from what he
wants to do. The silence, if we have no Greek, holds him back.

What we need to determine, though, as we read the poem, is— I
must repeat—the voice in which the poem speaks. But knowing the
Greek, even, is no help, for “to know all things that are in Troy” is
just as equivocal an accomplishment as silence. Is Mauberley being
held back because he wants to know all things that are in Troy, or
because he too knows all things that are in Troy and how nice it
would be to keep going over a familiar world again and again? A
kind of stasis. Either way, it’s holding him back from some other
purpose. And there is of course a very real temptation simply to
follow the sirens’ song, that is, to leave this world completely and
get into some other world, the world enacted in line nine. “I don’t
like Russia,” one student said to me, faced with reading the poem
aloud, and refusing. But the poem is not all Greek (though perhaps
for some readers it once seemed so) and it does, after the
extraordinary second sentence of the poem, which spans more than
two stanzas, revert to almost conventional and regular form: each
of the last two quatrains is one sentence long. And the poem, in its
return to the world of the English/American language, even when it
slips into Villon’s French, is readily voiceable, for it is all in the
Roman alphabet. We return, then, with a very real sense of relief,
to the English of the rest of the poem, to a recognizable world, and
even to a recognizable voice, the voice that says, so satisfied with
itself, “The case presents/No adjunct to the Muses’ diadem.” It is
identical (if we hear it one way), in its pompous tone, its finality of
judgment, to the voice of the opening lines—the lines before “No,
hardly.”

But by now we have discovered, in this poem, how the words
break down into their syllables as they are voiced, and we hear
“hard-ly”—the consonants themselves are stoppages of breath—a
slight shift of pacing, perhaps, but one which forces upon us
recognition of the blocks, the stoppages, the silences, that the
poem, that Mauberley himself, that the reader, and the poet, have
gone through. “Blocked,” wrote William Carlos Williams in
Paterson, stanza II. “(Make a song out of that: concretely).” 16 One
groans at the pun. And that is the way this poem works: the
punster knows we will groan, hears it ahead of time, builds it in, as part of the joke.

III

“To know all things.” It is an old temptation, a kind of Romantic encyclopedism. Whitman has this stanza in his *Eidólons* (1876):

Of every human life
(The units gather’d, posted, not a thought, emotion, deed left out,)
The whole or large or small summ’d, added up,
In its eidólon.

All things. The totality, the sum. Leaves of grass, perhaps. But why this hunger for totality? Is it because, if only we would get all the evidence in, then at least we could have a complete sense of it, understand the world? That is, we could then, finally, understand because *we* could make sense of *it*? Or is it because, all the evidence in, *it* would make sense? Either way, there is an underlying assumption about the unity of the cosmos, the singleness of it; and that assumption (what, after all, is “evidence”? in turn proposes that there can be a single understanding, a single vision of things (and there is something almost mechanistic in the notion that addition might be enough). Towards the end of his life, in “Canto CXVI,” Pound wrote:

I cannot make it cohere.

and then

It coheres all right

even if my notes do not cohere.

The single vision cannot hold; in its singleness it is too simple, and it is static.

The arrogance of the encyclopedia is the vanity of the dictionary: it seeks to contain the world under a single schema, and thus bring order, stability, and predictability into our lives, along with a sense of clarity, all expressed in a single voice. The reasonable view of things proposes that coherence can be found through a single frame of reference, which sees things only one way (“reasonably”). It presumes, then, a single voice and a single viewpoint, which can be held in something thought of as a single consciousness. The song the sirens sing might indeed tempt Mauberley in this way, for this is indeed one way to “know.” But it is only one; such singleness of
understanding comes to the *stopped* ear ("my ear has not caught any new note since 1860"), while the unstopped ear hears many things.

It hears, for example, the many voices in the poem. It hears the two (or more) main speakers, each uttering the same syllables, each voicing an attitude different from the other's, toward Mauberley. And in resisting, as I said, "the chopped seas held him there for that year," the unstopped ear then **hears** the voicing it resisted: the reader's ear is unstopped, and even silence comes to hold meaning—in the large scale, in line nine; in the small, between syllables. It does so, because of the multiple voices, the poem virtually conversing with itself, a conversation in which the reader joins, because in it he is addressed. Whitman, too, in his poetry, is at times a garrulous talker who grabs the reader by the buttonhole and won't let go; he is full of rhetorical questions ("Do I contradict myself?") to which the reader nods a perhaps exasperated "Yes" at the very moment that Whitman replies for him ("Very well I contradict myself"), and the poetry proceeds, lively and inexhaustible, by means of this kind of rhetoric, poured into the unstopped ear. A kind of conversation. "The reader will always have his or her part to do," he says in *A Backward Glance*. So too in "Mauberley," though the speech is highly condensed, the syntax almost cryptic, and the voice multiple. "The child born in 1900," Henry Adams wrote in *The Education*, "would then be born into a new world which would not be a unity but a multiple." It is thus essential to the poem that, at its end, we not know what attitude we are expected to take toward Mauberley; it is essential that the central problem of the poem remain unsolved. For the poem demands that we see the world as finally resistant to the single view which, alone, is capable of judgment, and which, in that judgment, demeans the world. There are too many voices, working against each other, as the poem converses with itself, works against itself.

So, as we read, as we hear the poem, individual perceptions come together to compose an environment out of which Pound is writing; an environment of individual and discrete perceptions, rather than a consciousness unified by some single criterion which, coming down from centuries before, bears the name of truth. (One of the voices in the poem, is precisely that voice.) Much of the poem is in fact a catalogue, in which things stand in no clear relationship to one another save contiguity; much of the syntax is paratactic. Hence the only firm thing to hold onto in the poem,
that holds the poem together, is not meaning, but language, the voices, the play in and of language, the conversation taking place in the playhouse of the reader's consciousness. The consciousness, which Henry James's brother William, in an essay published in 1910, defined as

... a field composed at all times of a mass of present sensation, in a cloud of memories, emotions, concepts, etc. . . . . Its form is that of a much-at-once.18

Particulars, then, which "coalesce and are dissolved," according to James, in the much-at-once. But which are not placed one subordinate to another. The single vision may not be able to hold, but the consciousness might, as field.

The poem thus affirms a world that Aldrich rejected when he turned away from Whitman. And while it recognizes that the world is uncongenial to the artist (Henry James at Bryn Mawr speaks of it as "vulgar"), the poem does not seek to change that world, or to bemoan it, or to retreat from it, but to examine it, diagnose it.

In 1947 or so, Pound sent a postcard to a number of American poets. "We must," he enjoined them, "understand what is happening," watch "the duration of syllables."19 We must, that is, pay attention to the world, to what is going on. Not judge it, for to judge is to disengage oneself.

NOTES


2W. D. Howells, Literary Friends and Acquaintance (New York, 1900), p. 70.

3Howells, p. 68.

4Aldrich to E. C. Stedman, 20 November 1880, Greenslet, pp. 138-139.

5Mott, 2:494.

6The poem first appeared in Knickerbocker Magazine, LII (August 1858), 175. For details of the editions of Aldrich's Poems, see J. Blank, Bibliography of American Literature (New Haven, 1955), entry for Aldrich.
7Greenslet, p. 146.
10Greenslet, p. 226.
11Henry James, *The American Scene*, ed. Leon Edel (Bloomington, 1968), p. 25. With the exception of the four quotations from *The Question of Our Speech*, noted below, all of the quotations from James following this are from the first 33 pages of *The American Scene*. Details of James's itinerary are from Edel's notes to this edition.
12*Kora in Hell* was published in 1920, but was partially serialized in the *Little Review* in 1918 and 1919, the years of its composition. The quotation that follows is from *Kora in Hell* (San Francisco, 1957), p. 49. The first half of Erza Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" is dated 1919 in the "Envoi."