Machine Poetics:

Pound, Stein and the Modernist Imagination

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation intervenes in the fields of modernist criticism and new media studies to examine an under-appreciated reciprocity between them. I argue that this reciprocity has not yet been adequately incorporated into a critical reckoning of the modernist period, a literary age too often neglected by new media studies as an epoch of “old media” productions. Even if modernist poets did create works largely intended for traditional book-bound channels, the imaginations that produced those works were forged in the combustible mix of new media and technologies that emerged in the early 20th century.

The argument focuses on the poetics of Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, innovative poets who composed some of the most prescient, insightful writings on record about the connections linking technological and poetical developments. Through an examination of these poets’ speculative writings, I argue that their experimental poetic methods emerged from their understanding of the challenges posed by new media and technologies. Among these challenges were new velocities of signification that emerged with the proliferation of the telegraph, new capacities for the storage of information that arrived with the introduction of the phonograph, an altered relationship to language itself with the externalized alphabet of the typewriter, and a new feel for how meaning could be generated through the montage logic of the cinema.

Drawing on a critical perspective derived from Martin Heidegger, pragmatist philosophers, Frankfurt School theorists and new media scholars such as Friedrich Kittler
and Marshall McLuhan, I examine how modernist poetry, when framed as a media event, can help us understand how technological and media shifts influence our conceptions of our own inner and outer domains.
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Introduction

This is a handbook to the poetic imagination, as imagined by Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein. By necessity, I limit my concerns to how Pound’s and Stein’s imaginations mingled with what their peer Wallace Stevens called “the pressure of reality.”¹ For Stevens, the pressure of reality was “the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation.” I have limited this idea even further, down to just one reality, the pressure of new technologies and media on the poetic imagination. But it was not only the din of new technologies and media with which poets had to cope. Telegraphs, cinema, typewriters, radios, industrial factories and motorized transportation: these emerging and proliferating phenomena also altered the poetic mind’s conception of itself, offering material models for its own dimensions and faculties. For Pound and Stein at least, the pressure of a new technological reality did not exclude contemplation, but rather midwifed new powers of contemplation.

Stevens argued that poetry helped people live their lives, for poetry was a violence from within which matched a violence from without. He implicitly addressed the technological bent of this violence from without when he wrote, “It is not only that there are more of us and that we are actually close together. We are close together in every way. We lie in bed and listen to a broadcast from Cairo, and so on. There is no

¹ The Necessary Angel, p. 20.
Lying in bed and listening to Egypt, an activity of contemporary resonance certainly, would have been, in the lifetimes of the poets of this study, literally a world-changing achievement. One would have to alter one’s inner geography in order to correspond to such a radically re-imagined outer one. Both geography are among poetry’s provinces, and are the objects of this study. What this dissertation is not, however, is a study of the history of new technologies and media in the early 20th century. Neither is it a study of how these new technologies and media inflected social relations among varying populations, classes and ethnicities. Rather, I take an extended look at how new technologies and media were incorporated into the modernist poetic imagination, as exemplified by Pound and Stein. In researching and writing these chapters, I have used simple working definitions for my major terms. For technologies, I mean the mass utilization of machines and tools as well as the development of new techniques that always accompanies such mass utilizations. For media, I mean those materials developed to store and convey information. For poetic imagination, I mean the faculties, domains and processes that the poetic mind realizes for itself in the act of creation.

I look to Ezra Pound as my primary test case. A poet equally obsessed with carrying forward traditions and with keeping his ideas and forms on the contemporary cutting edge, Pound was a compelling representative of his aesthetic age. While examining Pound’s complex notions about the relationship between technology and the imagination, I return continually to an obscure essay he wrote in the late 1920s, called “Machine Art,” which remained unpublished in his lifetime. By repeatedly passing

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2 p. 18.
through the technical, poetic, musical, historical and even mythic concerns of this 
prescient and strange essay, my argument’s focus expands and contracts in concentric 
circles, pulling in important contemporaries to Pound, including George Antheil, Luigi 
Russolo, Fernando Pessoa, FT Marinetti, Igor Stravinsky and Andre Breton. And in 
keeping with Pound’s own sense of the felt simultaneity of historical epochs, my research 
also telescopes forward and backward to discuss the oral Greek poets and musical 
Troubadours that served as important models to Pound, as it also touches upon important 
post-Poundian poets, thinkers and artists such as Charles Olson, Stan Brakhage, Norman 
O. Brown, Marshall McLuhan and Jerome Rothenberg.

By employing a Poundian critical method for looking at how Pound situated 
himself (and how he has been continually re-situated by those working in his wake) 
within the creative ferment of an ever-reinvented literary tradition, my dissertation 
indirectly argues for an alternative method for historicizing his work. I aim to present a 
newly accurate way of looking at Pound’s sensibility by integrating new media and 
modernist literary criticism together, to use Pound’s concurrent interest not only in poetry, 
translation and criticism, but also in technology, history, myth, music and visual culture 
as an entry point for apprehending the complex knot of problems his difficult writing 
addressed.

In the first chapter, I demonstrate how Ezra Pound’s musical and technological 
 writings are fundamental for understanding the truly radical nature of his poetic 
sensibility. I situate Pound in his technological and aural context, showing how he took 
aesthetic and intellectual inspiration from machine forms and rhythms. Pound perceived
that these machines reconfigured how time itself might be heard and even felt. He then adapted this insight when attacking the formal and rhythmic laxities of his own era. Concurrent with this concern with temporality, Pound wished to create more generative contexts in which poets and artists could endeavor their work. The ideal precedents he looked back to were numerous—the situation of the poet-musician in ancient Greece, for instance—but he concentrated most of his attention on the medieval period. For Pound, the achievements of the medieval Troubadours were dependent upon their placement at the center of an active aural network.

Many of Pound’s otherwise inexplicable pronouncements and most innovative assertions were employed in this very struggle, to replicate productive historical aural networks in his modern, industrial moment. This struggle was made most explicit in his “Machine Art” essay. I focus in particular on Pound’s ambition to organize the sounds of a working factory into a perpetual modernist soundscape. I pay particular attention to how Pound’s proposal and a similar, earlier text by the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo both offered compensatory corrections to the sense-ratio utilized by technological and discursive networks of the early 20th century. For Pound and Russolo, modern networks privilege the isolated, individual eye over the more inclusive, expansive ear.

I conclude the chapter by explicating the importance of Pound’s auditory emphasis on his notion of writing as a technical endeavor, which I illustrate by reading the contemporary poet David Antin’s failed attempt to improvise what he calls a talk-poem before a group of experimental poets in 1978. I examine how Antin’s inclusive, auditory emphasis was perceived to clash with the innovative ambitions of his audience, a
peculiar phenomenon as both Antin and the Language poets of his audience claimed
Pound as a primary precursor to their own poetics.

In my second chapter, I explore Pound’s views concerning the Romantically
influenced aesthetic norms of his day, and how he employed the technical properties of
the telegraph to counter them. Pound felt that the attentive habits of musical performers
and listeners had been corrupted by a widespread preference for a bombastic, Wagnerian
aesthetic sensibility. Pound believed that modern musicians tended to luxuriate within a
self-enclosed virtuosity, milking each detail until all available expressiveness was drained
from it. Not only did Pound feel that this practice distorted the details of any particular
work, but he also thought that it threatened the overall shapes of the works themselves. I
show how Pound’s exasperation with this musical tendency caused him to look outside
the realm of aesthetics and into the realm of technology, altering his ideas concerning
notation: a musical score should be exactly notated so to redirect the attentions of
musicians and audience members alike.

Ever historical, Pound drew a fascinating parallel between the modern telegraph
and the medieval convention of chivalric love. For Pound, both of these historical
phenomena provided a poetic model: they each externalized a dispersed surface that
could register a cosmic charge. In examining Pound’s conceit, I expand it by looking at
how a number of figures—including André Breton, F.T. Marinetti and Marshall McLuhan
—attributed potentially poetic qualities to the telegraph, especially in regards to how it
could place vast geographies in sudden simultaneity.
Pound joined his insights concerning musical notation and telegraphic simultaneity in his poetic sensibility. This was especially evident in his use of telegraphic details that were arranged in such a way that they directed a reader’s attention towards lines of affinity, influence and change across varying historical periods (as opposed to directing attention to the luxurious, unmoored particulars of his poems). To demonstrate the radical nature of Pound’s sensibility, I introduce the late modernist R.P. Blackmur’s criticism of Pound’s notational strategy. For Blackmur, Pound’s poetry suffered from a lack of direct expressiveness and sensation, merely noting that something had occurred instead of recreating that occurrence for a reader. I show how inevitable Blackmur’s critique was when one considers that Pound was directing our attention not to the particulars of individual occurrences but rather to the connections amongst them. That is, Pound did not want the reader to replicate the musicians of the period and contentedly luxuriate in sentimentally expressive particulars.

In the third chapter, I show how Pound saw an artist’s legitimacy before his audience to be a technical problem the artist needed to solve. In a mechanical age, I argue, the method for confirming one’s legitimacy was through what I call the mastery channel. Through this modernist channel of mastery, precision (as opposed to, say, Romantic inspiration) is the primary signifier of artistic legitimacy. I combine this assertion with Deleuze and Guattari’s insights about the indirect discursiveness of language systems, about how directly reported statements (the nominal content of an utterance) always contain indirect statements that map out the speaker’s assertions of control.
In addition to Pound’s “Machine Art” proposal, the chapter moves through two other primary scenes to examine how the mastery channel and indirect discourse can fuse together. The first such scene concerns Pound’s musical collaborator George Antheil, the subject of Pound’s critical hyperbole and genuine enthusiasm. Raised in industrial New Jersey, the composer and pianist Antheil succeeded in making himself, like Pound, infamous in European aesthetic circles as an exemplar of an exuberant, American brand of avant-gardism. After staging a series of spectacular, and spectacle-driven, European performances, Antheil attempted to return triumphantly to America by performing his most notorious composition, \textit{Ballet Mecanique}, at Carnegie Hall in 1927. Composed for multiple instruments and machines, including player pianos, sirens and airplane propellers, the \textit{Mecanique} has come to be seen as Antheil’s signature compositional triumph. At the Carnegie Hall debut, however, technical difficulties and the critical bemusement at the resulting, unintended spectacle ruined Antheil’s career. Intended as a kind of futuristic symphony, with its rhythms and even instruments borrowed from the realm of industrialism, Antheil’s piece became a disaster when its botched execution implied that its author was an illegitimate artist because of the imprecision of his performance.

The second scene, found in the German critic and scholar Siegfried Kracauer’s \textit{The Salaried Masses}, first published in 1930, documents a scenario in which young female typists, fresh from high school, were trained to replace an older, higher-salaried typist pool. The manager had his students type along with a phonographic record during their training period. Over a period of time, the manager sped up the phonograph by
imperceptible degrees until the typists radically increased their productively and were ready to replace their higher-waged competition. By bringing these two scenes from Antheil and Kracauer into conversation with Pound’s essay, my chapter constructs a framework for understanding how modernist art and industry each cultivated and projected specialized semiotics of legitimacy and control. A discomforting implication that arises: it may very well be that, in an age in which the logic of industry is in mass dilation, it was the anonymous middle-manager and not the visionary poet-musician who was the true modernist maestro.

In the final chapter, the focus shifts to Gertrude Stein’s complex ideas about how the mind may apprehend a proliferation of signs in the modern age. While Pound’s “Machine Art” was focused largely on the production side of the Modernist imagination, there also existed the problem of cultivating a receptive apparatus adequate to the manic proliferation of signs that occurred in the time period. As the wily teacher of the typewriting pool in Siegfried Kracauer’s anecdote demonstrated, productive access to subperceptible, mechanical manipulations could also become a way of accessing control without resorting to mere brute coercion. To understand Modernism, one should understand that Pound’s charge to “make it new” was as applicable to the reception of art as it was to the production of it. Pound would surely be chagrined, however, to have found that, from a contemporary perspective, it is not he but rather his rival Gertrude Stein who has proven to be the most adept reckoner of modernist proliferation.
One: Pound’s ‘Machine Art’: The Discourse of Modernist Sound

Whenever Ezra Pound is evoked, an array of modernist bumper stickers seem to come with him. “Make it new,” the most popular sticker says. In the realm of literary sound bites, Pound also advises us that poetry is “news that stays news” and that “emotion is what endures.” And if confronting The Cantos, we are also reminded that poetry is essentially the “tale of the tribe.” Taken individually, each of these pronouncements is simple enough, but even in taking the above snippets as a constellation, one begins to outline the complexities of Pound’s project. My own interest is in Pound’s connection between innovation (make it new) and social arrangement (tale of the tribe). Pairing these assertions, I see an implicit but very important message, that the tale of the tribe must be constantly remade as new.

Pushing even further, I will argue that, in modernity, even our notion of a “tribe” may have to be remade as new, and that art, in its fullest, most problematic and Poundian visage, will function at the center of that remade tribe. In terms of Pound’s work and thought, this very intertwining of innovation and socio-aesthetic arrangement is what makes his radically distinct and often troubling sensibility so inexhaustible. In the present day, even Pound’s evocation of the term “tribe” as a measure of scale--as opposed to nation, or state, or region--offers a glimmer of immediate interest, as thinkers as diverse
as the comparative sociologist Giovanni Arrighi and the military strategist and digital entrepreneur John Robb posit varying forms of “tribalism” as the inevitable forthcoming consequence of the declining relevance of the nation-state in the wake of globalization.¹

These opening chapters focus on Pound’s technological and musical ambitions of the 1920s, and his effort to reintroduce poetic concerns as very central to everyday culture. In Pound’s view, he was repositioning poetry so it would once again enjoy the auditory and ritualistic centrality it maintained in the eras of the pre-Platonic Greek poets and the medieval troubadours. Most often, such a restorative impulse is the product of pure nostalgia. Pound set himself apart, however, because he attempted his restorative project while also exploiting the formal possibilities of his own techno-social historical epoch.

In order to make sense of the aural-poetic-industrial network Pound attempted, I will look at what I consider to be one of his most important and overlooked works, an essay entitled “Machine Art,” in which the poet considered the dynamic formal possibilities that recent technological developments offered the enterprising artist. In this strange and neglected essay, Pound eventually spells out the means by which he could orchestrate and syncopate the sounds of a factory into a sort of modernist sound sculpture, once again placing the artist at the center of civilization’s most vital and productive engines.

¹ See Arrighi, The Long Twentieth Century, p. 74. For Robb’s assertion of guerilla and terrorist networks and enclaves as replacements of “the social responsibilities of nation-states,” see Brave New War, p. 147-8. For Robb’s thoughts on “resilient communities” as a viable social structure, see his blog Global Guerrillas (subtitled: Networked tribes, systems disruption, and the emerging bazaar of violence. Resilient Communities, decentralized platforms, and self-organizing futures) at http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/globalguerrillas/
I pair Pound’s proposal with a similar, earlier proposal by the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo. I give particular emphasis on how both proposals offered a compensatory correction of the sense-ratio utilized by technological and discursive networks of the early 20th century, networks that over-privileged the isolated, individual eye, leading to questions concerning a connection between Pound’s auditory emphasis and writing as a technological endeavor. Finally, I also read the contemporary poet David Antin’s failed attempt to improvise a Socratic talk-poem before an audience of Language poets in San Francisco in 1978 as a consequence of the tensions inherent within the Poundian push to both “make it new” and to create a “tale of the tribe.”

1. “Machine Art” was written while Ezra Pound lived in exile in Italy in the late 1920s and has only recently found publication. In this essay, Pound addressed the proliferation of machines as the modern mode of production. He regarded this proliferation to be a poetic opportunity, an introduction of new forms; if nothing else, an occasion for crystallizing and revitalizing one’s aesthetic sensibilities. For Pound, a machine’s beauty was localized in “those parts of machines where the energy is most concentrated” [57]. In other words, a machine’s dynamism was what made its modern aesthetic beauty possible. The parts of the machine that did not move, however, did not aesthetically differ from traditional notions of architecture and therefore offered little use in considerations of form. To make it move, then, was to make it new. For Pound, to truly appreciate a

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2 Machine Art & Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years, edited with an introduction by Maria Luisa Ardizzone, Duke UP 1996. Citations of this essay will be noted parenthetically.
machine’s form one would focus upon those parts that were in motion, as well as those that “more immediately hold these mobile parts in their loci” [57].

Because of this dynamic conception of form, Pound believed one could learn more about the plastic arts by studying machines than one could in a museum or gallery, or any other site where conceptions of form had already been sanctified into a pre-arranged stasis. This is why, for Pound, “the aesthetic of machines is still in a healthy state” [58]. He contrasted this, with characteristic delicacy, to the aesthetic of art:

You can show a normal low-brow a spare part and get from him a rational unprejudiced answer as to whether it is a ‘good shape’ or a silly shape, or whether it is in good proportion, or whether it looks scamped and flimsy.

Apart from people who have received special training and a few unusually intelligent humans, it is still nearly impossible to get any such straight and unbiased answer about the shape of a piece of sculpture or the combination of forms in a painting [58].

Pound elaborated: some types of equipment (such as farm machinery) were often uglier than other types, but this was only because such a piece of equipment were actually “not a machine, in the scientist’s sense” but “a lot of little machines hitched together” [58]. If the totality of such a machine was less than appealing, it was because its final arrangement was not as considered as the construction of the individual, working parts. This, for Pound, was the common case for such assemblages. Pound illustrated his claims with photographs, mostly the individual parts of a drill grinder. As individual parts observed in isolation, with their appropriateness for functionality directly observable, they revealed for him the elevated mode of their construction, having “been made by thought over thought; by layer on layer of attention” [59].
Acknowledging that industrial machines were not often appraised as beautiful, Pound identified this common judgment as a kind of societal backlash against both the “boredom” and “vile working conditions” of industrial life. It was not, he thought, a direct aesthetic judgment of the machines themselves, or their formal qualities [69]. In appraising the formal beauty of machines, the key was to “keep one’s different ideas from barging into each other,” to keep separate the formal beauty and social context of a machine. Pound suggested that one focus upon his particularly modern ideal of beauty: “we find a thing beautiful in proportion to its aptitude to a function” [69]. Such a formulation, Pound argued, led logically to another: “the better a machine becomes AS A MACHINE, the better it will be to look at” [69].

In order to be adequately appraised, Pound continued, a machine must be separated “from its circumstance, from the fortuitous bits of metal, etc., that surround it” [69]. For the optimum consideration of form, each machine should be investigated in isolation from both its assemblage and its material surroundings so as to “appeal [. . .] more to the mind than to physical comfort” [70]. And because machine forms must each be conceptualized as a “form in motion,” their consideration brought one to “the brink of considering time and recurrence” [71]. That is, in the industrial, dynamic context that Pound surveys, “[t]he best modern architects are [. . .] almost universally the engineers”: since the forms engineers created had to withstand the objective critique of productive movement and not the gushing prejudices of Romantic sentiment, a new criteria for aesthetics in general had to be constructed [71]. In Pound’s view, just as the most beautifully designed chassis was the most productive one, the most beautiful modern
paintings were those of a Wyndham Lewis or the early Duchamp, paintings which most ably constructed and captured the kinetic energies of the age.

This emphasis on form as an expression of motion also led Pound to the salutary, idiosyncratic leap in his essay, his foray into the acoustics of machinery [70-1]. As opposed to a Futurist or Vorticist impulse to inject aesthetics with the audible dynamism of machines—an impulse Lewis, Marinetti and Pound himself had been pursuing for over a decade by the time “Machine Art” was written—Pound instead proposed a different kind of project: to harmonize and syncopate the sounds within a factory itself. By the end of his essay, Pound will have claimed to have developed a means for arranging the grinds and whirrs of a factory into a dynamic Modernist composition.

Less concerned with personal expression than the perfection of form—form being the privileged means of deriving emotion, and emotion being “that which endures”3—Pound argued that one must isolate the frequencies of industrial noise as pure frequencies, fundamentally indistinguishable from the frequencies of traditional musical instruments. This equivalency was the insight, Pound claimed, that would allow him to configure factory noise into a kind of music:

The idea that a factory, or at least the more highly organized and organizable parts of a factory can be “harmonized” is no sillier in 1927, than the idea that a horseless carriage could move, was in, let us say, 1880. The only reason the engineers have not done it already is because no one had thought of it.

To think of it, and to think it as possible, one had to be, perhaps, sensitive. One had to like and to dislike sound, I mean to like some kinds and arrangements of

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3 Pound’s famous formulation of “emotion is what endures” has its corollary in Gaudier-Brzeska’s “I shall derive my emotions solely from the arrangement of surfaces.”
sound, and to dislike others. One had to be of those for whom “le monde sonore existe,” those for whom the “world of sonority” has an existence.

And one had to think of music as a definite entity in itself; that is to say, as a composition of sound; not merely an expression of something else, let us say the expression of a nightingale, or a melancholy young man with a belly-ache [72].

As the disparaging references to a Keatsian poetic occasion (nightingales, bellyaches) implied, it was not private emotion or the bare materials of a work of art that made it great, but the artist’s vision and sense of form as revealed through his or her decisions:

“[t]he miracle of a Bach sonata is in the knowledge, and the justness of his decision” [73]. Bach’s personal feelings were irrelevant to the music: his sonatas produce emotion via his masterly arrangement of the materials, not via his private aches and grievances. Such a stance was a resolutely Modernist one, and parallels to it can be found throughout the period, as in Igor Stravinsky’s claims that “music expresses itself” and that it should not be expected to represent reality, but rather, “[a] new piece of music is a new reality.”

As Pound argued, the proper site for musical practice was on the plane of frequency, as both rhythm and harmonic progression were “savant demarcations” of frequency. We may understand frequency then as a primary material for Pound, just as the mot juste was his primary signifier of a true poet. Since the sonorous world of a factory, like that of an orchestra, was capable of savant demarcations of frequency, the difference between organizing frequencies for a collection of musical instruments and for a collection of machines was merely quantitative, not qualitative. For a composer to

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4 Expositions and Developments, p.115.
consider a factory as *a priori* an improper arena for aesthetic manipulation would be as misguided as “a cutter of cameos to say that no building could ever be beautiful because buildings are much too big” [73]. The general unpleasantness of factory noises, wrote Pound, derived not from the essential nature of the material itself but from its relative disorganization: “[s]ome screech continues too long; some repeat is irregular in an unpleasant manner” [73].

Pound recognized that this disorganization derived from the needs of production, from the factory’s project itself. But to Pound, these needs merely “constitute[d] part of the technical problem” for the enterprising artist [73]. A harmonic reorganization of the sounds *could* be utilized for “the ease and refreshment of the workers” since the “waste and bad practice” of the disorganized sounds was no different from “bad ventilation” as a poor utilization of resources [74]. This ambitious proposal, Pound’s radical re-organization of sound from inside the heart of industry, pivoted on his notion of the “great bass,” those frequencies “below those which the ear has been accustomed to consider as ‘notes’” [74]. Ultimately, Pound concluded, “there is no reason why the shop noise shouldn’t be used as stimulus and to give swing and ease to modern work, just as the sailor’s chantey or any working song has been used, by lumbermen, or by savages” [81].

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5 Pound would return to this notion of the “great bass” in his *Guide to Kulchur*, published in 1938: “Down below the lowest note synthesized by the ear and ‘heard’ there are slower vibrations. The ratio between these frequencies and those written to be executed by instruments is OBVIOUS in mathematics. The whole question of tempo, and of a main base in all musical structure resides in use of these frequencies. It is unlikely that great composers neglected this basis. I am convinced that it is unwise to wander into musical study without taking count of it,” p. 73.
2. The Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo’s 1913 *The Art of Noises* outlined many of Pound’s later machine art ambitions, several decades before the notion struck Pound himself.  

Russolo also focused on the proliferation of machines as a catalyst for musical innovation, but his interests projected a musical plane that juxtaposes strikingly across the horizontal demarcation—essentially, rhythm—that was Pound’s primary focus:

The Greeks, with their musical theory mathematically determined by Pythagoras, according to which only some consonant intervals were admitted, have limited the domain of music until now and made almost impossible the harmony they were unaware of. In the Middle Ages music did progress through the development and modifications of the Greek tetracord system. But people kept considering sound only in its unfolding through time, a narrow conception so persistent that we still find it in the very complex polyphonies of the Flemish composers. The chord did not yet exist; the development of the different parts was not subordinated to the chord that these parts could produce together; the conception of these parts was not vertical, but merely horizontal.

I would like to highlight Russolo’s notion of verticality. Having pinned the limited domain of proper music on its mathematical roots, Russolo proposed harmony as a possible site of structural instability and/or expansion. There are potential harmonies,

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6 *In The Futurist Moment*, Marjorie Perloff sketches out the immediate influence of Italian Futurists (especially Marinetti, who maintained a steady presence in public and in print) on the younger Pound who was in London in the period preceding WWI: “Pound was right at the center of what we might call the Futurist vortex. However irritating he may have found Marinetti’s posturing, as well as his obsession with ‘automobilism’ and the new technology and the Futurists’ simplistic rejection of tradition, Pound nevertheless absorbed the more specifically aesthetic doctrines of Futurism. The first axiom in the 1909 manifesto is, ‘We intend to sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and fearlessness.’ ‘Vortex. Pound’ begins with the sentence, ‘The vortex is the point of maximum energy,’ a point made even more emphatically in ‘The Serious Artist’ (1913): ‘We might come to believe that the thing that matters in art is a sort of energy, something more or less like electricity or radioactivity, a force transfusing, welding, and unifying’” (173).

7 *The Art of Noise*, p. 4.
Russolo suggested, beyond normative precepts of understanding, but a premature
delineation of proper musical boundaries--its Pythagorean boundaries--limited one’s
access to them. But the structural capacity of the chord, as a unit, was for Russolo the
favored means of expanding the range of sound included in a composition. His aim was
to use the chord as a structuring mechanism by which to compose music that exceeded
sound itself, or at least exceeded the particular definition he gave to proper sound.
Russolo’s ambition was to range out beyond sound and to incorporate *noise* into a
composition, to make tonal combinations beyond those combinations immanent within
what Russolo described as the merely horizontal domains of proper sound. Russolo
identified this vertical expansion as a method for, in Hermann Danuser’s terms,
textualizing his own modernist context, “systemiz[ing] the world of noises for musical
use,” thus establishing the arrangement of sound and noise together as one of the vital
strains of musical modernism.⁸

Machines, in Russolo’s account, through their sheer omni-presence, brought to
people’s attention the aural world of noise that had been there all along but had, up to

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now, mainly existed as a continually humming but uncultivated substratum.\(^9\) The industrial and technological expansions of the 20\(^{th}\) century did not invent noise, he was certain to make clear. Modern developments merely contributed to a context in which noise could no longer be ignored.

For Russolo, \textit{noise} was the aural familiarity of daily life and was inextricable from it; \textit{sound}, however, was otherworldly, “a fantastic world superimposed upon reality, an inviolable and sacred world.”\(^10\) Noise provided a passage away from the “foreknown and foregone sensations” of the pre-cultured world of proper sound: “Music marks time in [a] small circle and vainly tries to create a new variety of tones. We must break at all cost from this restrictive circle of pure sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise-sounds.”\(^11\) By their insistent proliferation, modern technologies allowed the noisy familiarities of dailiness, the very texture of life itself, to become more acutely audible. The closed circle of pure sound, by contrast, was always constructed ahead of time, by the limited notes and tones of its pre-approved, Pythagorean purity. Russolo’s enthusiasm

\(^{9}\) It remains unclear who can most credibly claim pioneer status as regards to the musical potential of noise. The musicologist Carl Engel, when writing on Pound’s \textit{Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony}, credits Pound for the direction of his innovations, even if Engel doesn’t consider Pound to be particularly original: “How much more daring was Dr. Burney, music’s first transcontinental reporter and interviewer, who already in 1770 foresaw a legitimate place in music for noise. It took a century and a half to fulfill his prediction. Let me hastily add that whatever Mr. Pound’s ‘new paths’ may be, they lie not in the direction of mere noise. In fact, he shrinks with ill-concealed disdain from poor, deluded Marinetti and his ‘dead cats in a foghorn’” (“Poet as Prophet,” p. 177). Preceding Russolo, Marinetti, and other Futurists by nearly a century and a half, Charles Burney in \textit{The Present State of Music in France and Italy} writes, “No one will, I believe, at present, deny the necessity of \textit{discord} in the composition of music in parts; it seems to be as much the essence of music, as shade is of painting; not only as it improves and meliorates concord by opposition and comparison, but, still further, as it becomes a necessary stimulus to the attention, which would languish over a succession of pure concords. . . . Now, as discord is allowable, and even necessarily opposed to concord, why may not \textit{noise}, or a seeming jargon, be opposed to fixed sounds and harmonical proportion?” (pp. 159-60).

\(^{10}\) \textit{The Art of Noises}, p. 4.

\(^{11}\) Ibid, p.6.
was for the vertical range of tones, the possibility of new combinations and dissonances that could exceed the limitations of pure sound. (However much his earlier projected anticipated Pound’s later one, it is useful to keep his vertical emphasis in mind when Pound’s focus on the “horizontal” qualities of music--its rhythmic capacities--comes into play.) Russolo wrote:

Let’s walk together through a great modern capital with the ear more attentive than the eye, and we will vary the pleasures of our sensibilities by distinguishing among the gurglings of water, air and gas inside metallic pipes, the rumblings and rattlings of engines breathing with obvious animal spirits, the rising and falling of pistons, the stridency of mechanical saws, the loud jumping of trolleys on their rails, the snapping of whips, the whipping of flags.  

While the above passage may sound a familiarly Futurist note of techno-utopianism, its narrative logic suggests something beyond a simple celebration of machines and technology. Russolo’s description, even as it is mediated by the technological innovations of modernity, is also a glimpse at the sudden possibilities of a mythic connectivity between what are rationally indexed as discrete categories of being. If one were to consent to Russolo’s invitation, one would become audience to an Ovidian universe of tones. The merest stroll, with the modernist Russolian ear functioning as a kind of translated equivalent to the transcendentalist Emersonian eye, could reveal the base elements of the universe (“the gurglings of water, air and gas inside metallic pipes”) in generative congress with the primal underpinnings of production (“the rumblings and rattlings of engines breathing with obvious animal spirits”), as well as the miniature

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12 Ibid. pp. 7-8.
dramas of a newly mechanical world (“the rising and falling of pistons, the stridency of mechanical saws”) cascading upon one another.13

Such a sensual readjustment to sound and noise would create a compensatory hypnosis, an entrance to an alternative, non-modern psychological register. That is, it would be a transition away from the dominance of the visual, itself a kind of hypnosis, and into a new ratio between senses, regaining some privilege for the aural. As Marshall McLuhan wrote, “Psychologists define hypnosis as the filling of the field of attention by one sense only.” This assertion was made in McLuhan’s commentary on a fragment by Pound’s peer and colleague, William Butler Yeats. The fragment was first published in 1928:

Locke sank into a swoon.
The Garden died;
God took the spinning-jenny
Out of his side.14

According to McLuhan, “[t]he Lockean swoon was the hypnotic trance induced by stepping up the visual component in experience until it filled the field of attention.”

Extending McLuhan’s commentary, Norman O. Brown posited that “[t]he garden is polymorphism of the senses, polymorphous perversity, active interplay; and the opposite of polymorphous perversity is the abstraction of the visual, obtained by putting to sleep

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13 Pound also struck a Russolian note in “The City,” where he admonished Thomas Edison for stating that in the future, “the loss of acute hearing will be a benefit rather than a handicap for the city-dweller,” Selected Prose 1909-1965, p. 224.

the rest of the life of the body. The pure knowing subject of modern philosophy, winged cherub without a body, is in a swoon, or dream.”

Though each of Russolo’s pulsations of existence could be distinguished and identified by the aptly tuned ear, they also gathered into a sensually polymorphous, if temporary, whole. In our later analysis, we will note that Russolo’s stance veered away from McLuhan’s and Brown’s in that he perceived a polymorphous perversity in the world of noise itself, or at least he posited the emergent occasion of an excess of sound (noise) as a means of recalibrating the sensual self, a counter to what McLuhan symptomizes as the visual monotony of a Cartesian/Gutenbergian galaxy. “With the instressed concern with one sense only,” McLuhan wrote, in his analysis of Yeats’ fragment, “the mechanical principle of abstraction and repetition emerges into explicit form. Technology is explicitness [. . .]. And explicitness means the spelling out of one thing at a time, one sense at a time, one mental or physical operation at a time.”

What McLuhan and Brown bemoaned was an overriding emphasis on the visual, a hypnotic explicitness that damaged the writing of the afflicted. But, as if anticipating the mid-century compositional advice of the American poet Charles Olson (“by ear, he sd”), Russolo demonstrated an alternative, allowing his acutely sensuous capacity for sound to be his compositional vector. As even his proposed city stroll shows, this veer

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15 *Love’s Body*, p. 121. Brown’s argument here concerns what he considers to be the theatrical nature of a Lockean commonwealth that relies upon representation. Such theatrics are linked to the structure of chorus and hero in Greek tragedy (the chorus gets to watch and comment upon the hero’s travails, as he is their representative). “The spectator whose participation is restricted to seeing, who is passive, is held in passivity by what he sees; he is spellbound or hypnotized.” See chapter on Olson for more on spectatorism.

16 *Gutenberg Galaxy*, pp. 17-8. For further thoughts on technology and explicitness, see also Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller.”

beyond the projected explicitness of his environment allowed him to apprehend and project something richer. In its narration of his movement through the city soundscape, Russolo’s sentence stands as an auger of what an inclusive aural modality could look like in an early 20th century industrial staging: the cataloguing push of the sentence suggests a link between each entry that exceeds the bounds of the catalogue itself, each comma less a marker separating discrete components than a pivot upon which a preceding entry transforms into the one that follows: “the snapping of whips, the whipping of flags.” Following Russolo’s lead, a writer could invent methods for accessing the polymorphous perversity of his or her surroundings through a new ratio between eye and ear. By willfully activating one’s underutilized sense of hearing, one could bring the texture of life itself into one’s written work.

Pound, however, would argue that music’s diminished terrain—the closed circle of sound that Russolo alluded to—was created by the rhythmic assumptions of composers and musicians, and not by any vertical diminishment of tonal range. Pound’s enthusiasm concerned the horizontal potentialities of a modern aurality that could include innovative compositions and productive machines together. As idiosyncratic as always, Pound linked the rhythmic dynamic of aesthetic organization to distinct historical epochs: “It is not intelligent to ignore the fact that both in Greece and in Provence the poetry attained its highest rhythmic and metrical brilliance at times when the arts of verse and music were most closely knit together, when each thing done by the poet had some definite musical urge or necessity bound up within it.”

For Pound, writing and sound also went hand in hand: at its apex, poetic achievement must be intimately knitted with musical achievement. I will argue therefore that any critical or creative divergence Pound made into music or sound, far from being a mistaken swerving away from his poetics, must instead be read as his unique exploration of a possible poetics. A Poundian poet must be concurrently historian, theorist and artisan, capable of physically applying to a medium his or her understanding of the relation of aesthetics and history, or rather, aesthetics as an expression of history. The aptness of one’s poetic rhythms will pivot on one’s ability to perceive and examine the unstated and therefore always historically modulated feeling for aesthetic time. “I am inclined to think,” Pound wrote, addressing the harmonic slush of his musical contemporaries, “that the horizontal merits faded from music, and from the rhythm of poetry, with the gradual separation of the two arts.”

With modern music and poetry separated into their own realms with their own temporal prejudices, any relation ventured between the two had tended towards the speculative, or even the idealized. Poetry should aspire to the condition of music, the common poetic wisdom posited, but it should not mix itself up with music.

Pound’s stance concerning the interrelation of poetry and music derived from, as his collaborator George Antheil put it, his “mediaeval intelligence.” From early on, Pound took the work of the medieval Troubadours as his base. The flourishes of their elaborate musical and poetic forms across the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in

Occitania, in the southern region of present day France, were an integral aspect of his sensibility. In particular, the Troubadours developed their art across an epoch that included three pivotal media shifts: 1) the transition into the book culture of the end of the thirteenth century, as musical practice moved into relative textual fixity and away from the more fluid, orally-transmitted culture of song; 2) an increased separation of music and poetry as two distinct art forms, each with its own direction of development; 3) a shift in genre definition, with form and structure (and not subject matter) as the dominant defining element.21

From the beginning of his intellectual maturity, Pound expressed an intuition for how aesthetic forms suspended themselves within the tensions between social and technological developments. To better realize the horizontal merits of either music or poetry, preferably both together, the Poundian artist would need to come to a new, necessarily theorized understanding of their relationship in his or her own historical moment. If properly developed, this theorized understanding could then stand forth as analogous to the felt relationship between the two arts at the apexes of Greek and Provencal cultures. That is, a Poundian poet who is open to the deep history of a chosen medium will not simply replicate a Greek masterwork by applying formalized rhythms and tropes to his or her own work. Rather, the Poundian poet will endeavor to retrieve from the present moment the conditions and means by which a contemporary masterwork can similarly come into being and resonance. Pound’s ambition was to delve into the rhythmic guts of both music and poetry, and the new conceptions of temporality and

21 For more on these pivotal shifts, see Elizabeth Aubrey, *Music of the Troubadours*, especially pp. 26-34 and pp. 66-77.
form-in-motion provided by machines was one of his means of doing so. What was once
provided by a culture—a fundamental connection between music and poetry, based on
their coeval rhythmic and structural necessities—must in the modern period be created
anew by the artist her or himself.

Both poetry and music occur in time, of course. Both also always offer the
potential of becoming a significant means of structuring time itself. That is, both poetry
and music may be realized as a patterning that reveals time’s emotive powers. It was
surely a measure of Pound’s disdain for the typical modern musician that he posited a
rhythmic, horizontal achievement as inextricable from strict, written control over
performance.²² In fact, precise notation was a constant for both Pound’s horizontal and
Russolo’s vertical enthusiasms. For both, careful notation was necessary to maximize the
aural effects of one’s making-new of musical practice. This emphasis on notation was not
simply a shared eccentricity, but rather demonstrated their shared insistence upon the
intimacy of script, sound and sensibility.²³ In The Art of Noises, Russolo did not wish to
merely open up the human ear to the pleasures of noise but also to “score and regulate
harmonically and rhythmically these most varied noises.”²⁴

Through this cultivation and notation of noise, Russolo imagined an “expanded
sensibility” that “will gain futurist ears as it already has futurist eyes.”²⁵ He proposed a

²² My second chapter explores at length Pound’s criticisms of modern musical performance.

²³ The non-contradiction between an intensified attention to scriptural nuance and an inclusive aural
modality will be addressed in my third chapter, which focuses on Charles Olson and the role of
technologies in the writing of speaking/listening and its relation to myth.

²⁴ The Art of Noises, p. 9.

²⁵ Ibid. p. 13.
technical and precise means of scoring this noise: “Each noise possesses a pitch, at times even a chord dominating over the whole of these irregular vibrations. The existence of this predominant pitch offers us the technical means of scoring these noises, that is to say to give to a noise a certain variety of pitches without losing the timbre that characterizes and distinguishes it.”26 Russolo’s realization of noise as unregulated frequency and vibration led him to a vertically-directed strategy of scoring noise as an arrangement of chords.27 Potentially, in Russolo’s view, “the engines of our industrial cities will be skillfully tuned so that every factory is turned into an intoxicating orchestra of noises.”28

Implicit in this proposal is a series of aural blueprints for the city’s factories and industrial sectors. Russolo’s project would necessitate highly-detailed spatially-oriented musical scores as complex and exacting as traditional blueprints, but with an additional dimension. These blueprints would also project a musical temporality, a sense of rhythm that does not just unfurl linearly as a progression but that would instead be expressed within a newly complex spatial relation, a relation as perceived through the ears and not solely through the dominant lens of the eye. Tuning the engines of an industrial city would require a new understanding of possible relationships among not only frequency, pitch, and duration, but also of the possibilities of a spatial relationship between sound and rhythm (both understood as frequency), reminiscent of the “Monopoly-board look”

26 Ibid. pp. 9-10.

27 Pound’s take: “Let us say that chords are like colour. They are a complex of sound occurring at a given instant of time, a minimum audible of time, as colour is a complex of light vibrations thrown off by a given spot, or minimum visible, of space or surface” (“Antheil,” 40). That is, a chord for Pound is less a vertical density of sound but rather a minimal unit of time.

of the scores a half-century later by New York school composer Morton Feldman (1926-87). Feldman’s graphic scores were not just implicitly anticipated by Russolo but, as Daniel Albright noted, have their explicit precedent in the work of the Russian composer Arthur Lourié who “much influenced by Italian Futurism, devised some piano pieces, called *Formes en l’air* (1915), notated as a constellation of musical fragments on a white background, so that the pianist has to figure out a strategy for interpreting the spatial configuration as sound and silence.”

As George Antheil put it (and as Pound approvingly quoted him), modernist music could be theorized as “the adventure of time with space, expressed in tone.” Our focus here is not on the difficulty of composing, hearing or performing such adventures, but on the difficulty of notating them. How to write the adventure down, and how to write one’s way into the adventure. More explicitly, we are exploring the relationship between an aural emphasis and a practice of writing. For Pound, Antheil’s rhythmic insights were indistinguishable from his aptitude in notating his own work. “Antheil has not only given his attention to rhythmic precision,” Pound wrote, he had also “noted his rhythms with an exactitude, which we may as well call genius.” In fact, “[t]o grasp the modus of Antheil’s procedure one must remember that the development of

29 “[Time-Canvas],” in *An Anthology of Modernism and Music*, ed. Daniel Albright, p.80. Feldman: “I put sheets of graph paper on the wall; each sheet framed the same time duration and was, in effect, a visual rhythmic structure. What resembled Pollock was my ‘all over’ approach to the time-canvas. Rather than the usual left-to-right passage across the page, the horizontal squares of the graph paper represented the tempo —with each box equal to a preestablished ictus; and the vertical squares were the instrumentation of the composition . . .”

30 Ibid. pp. 80-1.


musical notation has been exceedingly slow.” If one is conversant with one’s Poundian history, one knows that, up to the 14th century, “the written notes were not an exposition of the melody, they were a mnemonic device.”

Such a divorce between script and melody should not suggest that improvisation and open-ended interpretation, as in the work of a Feldman or a John Cage, was the spirit of the ancient and medieval logics of performance. Rather, Pound knew that, in these traditions, located as they were prior to the emergence of the book as the dominant storage-and-retrieval system, different relationships among work, performer and text occurred. The written version of a composition was not the authoritative version but rather a kind of crib note to help trigger the minds, mouths and limbs of the performer. “A man who knew the tune or a man with a very fine ear for musical phrases,” Pound wrote, “could make use” of the written notes, though one would not confuse the written notes for the composition itself.

Such a role for writing would be strikingly discordant with the modern, dominant, authorizing role given to the score, where all legitimacy resides with the text itself. In Pound’s medieval ideal, musicians maintained fidelity to the composition’s tempo and structure in a collective fashion, through techniques of memorization and practice that utilized the musicians’ bodies and techniques as the primary storage and retrieval systems, with the written notation as a supplement. Fundamental to Pound’s musical projects, including the factory orchestration proposed in “Machine Art,” and their direct

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33 “Antheil,” p. 45.
relation to his poetry, was the issue of writing itself in the modernist era. Not just writing as an art, but also as a technology, a storage and retrieval system.

3. Recent scholarly consideration of writing as a technology often does posit it as a storage and retrieval system, as a means by which memory is externalized, or always maintained as already external; a technics. As with any technical system, access to the technology of writing presupposes a set of norms about how that system is maintained. Friedrich Kittler has addressed the importance of modern technologies for what he calls absolute knowledge, a realm of knowing registered at its own plane of persistence:

“Instead of hooking up technologies to people, absolute knowledge can run as an endless loop.”\(^{35}\) That is, writing as a technical endeavor, and writing in particular in which a typewriter or keyboard maintains the linguistic materials as external, is an entrance to a pre-existing array of signs from which the person selects the appropriate sequence; the letters are already out there, in front of the writer.

In this arrangement, one must merely pick and choose from among the options. To illustrate a consequence of this externalization of language, we can consider a recurring popular culture trope, of a mass of chimpanzees and typewriters in a basement, eventually writing Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The implication of this scenario—a masterpiece created entirely by chance, without intention—would not gain traction in a discourse network where the alphabet had *not* been externalized; a hundred chimpanzees

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\(^{35}\) “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,” *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays*, p. 32.
in a room full of sharpened pencils, for instance, might be more likely to recreate the bloodbath at the end of *Hamlet* than accidentally compose the play itself.

In contrast to Pound’s own period, wherein the alphabet began to be externalized, in the Romantic period the alphabet was posited as internal and natural. According to Friedrich Kittler, the pedagogical practices and the writing technologies of both the Romantic and Modernist periods are the essential pivots between these opposing alphabetic orientations.\(^\text{36}\) Without typewriters or keyboards, in the Romantic discursive regime, words were only pushed outward through the speaking mouth and moving hand. This is why Kittler has claimed that “[w]riting can store only writing, no more, no less.”\(^\text{37}\) A key historical project, then, is to read how technologies and systems of writing underwrite what, at any moment, writing may be. Romantic writing and Modernist writing, for instance, each rested on completely differing conceptions of the relationship between a writer and his or her alphabet. Pound contributed to a more explicit understanding of such historical differentiations, as in his utterly Modernist recognition that not only was Antheil’s musical genius inextricable from his notational abilities, but that aesthetic developments in music and poetry, or of both together, could be linked through their particular relationships to writing-as-technology.

Addressing our own contemporary network of digitized discourse, N. Katherine Hayles has offered to delineate its difference from these precedents: “with electronic texts there is a conceptual distinction—and often an actualized one—between storage and

\(^{36}\) see his chapter on “The Mothers Mouth” in *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*.

\(^{37}\) “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,” *Literature, Media, Information Systems: Essays*, p. 36.
delivery vehicles, whereas with print the storage and delivery vehicles are one and the same.” In her work, Hayles has delved into the conceptual and structural importance of a new materiality to the textual experience, as well as the significance that adheres to a written word that is stored as byte and yet is read as a flickering of light. She has contrasted this digital regime with the regime of the book, which has functioned more statically as a vehicle for both storage and presentation. “Although print readers perform sophisticated cognitive operations when they read a book,” Hayles writes, “the printed lines exist as such before the book is opened, read, or understood. An electronic text does not have this kind of prior existence. It does not exist anywhere in the computer, or in the networked system, in the same form it acquires when displayed on screen.”

While a text’s material existence before its readerly access solicits its own critical interest, what I find most striking about Hayles’ argument is her presentation of the use of a text. Specifically, her normative, and very modern, imposition of understanding as the telos of reading. Such an assumption is very much the byproduct of the modern writing regime. The implicit situation in Hayles’ analysis is that of a familiar loop of open-read-understand played in static continuity. Not addressed by Hayles is the possibility of reading not being linked exclusively to a system of perpetual and pre-existing understandings, but rather to political actions, curses, rituals, hallucinations, seductions or collective reveries. In this sense, the limiting pre-arrangement of lines that Hayles has claimed as symptomatic of book culture shouldn’t be pinned on the materiality of the book itself as a storage system.

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38 My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts, p. 101.
In fact, it is Hayles’ own tendency to collapse reading and understanding together as the same thing, regardless of the media involved, that is most constricting. This normative imposition of *understanding* as the inevitable product of reading, what Yeats or Norman O. Brown might call Hayles’ Lockean swoon, has been traced directly to the mechanized discourse that emerged over a century prior to Hayles’ own work. Kittler has linked the technics of modernity to such a limited conception of reading. “Not until the emergence of a technical storage capacity, such as that which shaped the discourse network of 1900,” writes Kittler, “would hallucinatory sensuousness be abandoned to the entertainment industry and serious literature renew its commitment to the ascesis that knows only black letters on white paper.”

To move away from this ascetic regime of understanding (usually colored as a kind of repressive Victorianism) is, in fact, the goal of many of the poets and theorists I am drawn to address in this study. These poets and thinkers have demonstrated a partiality for written poetries that suggest properties most often aligned with an oral practice: hallucinatory sensualities, mythic impulses and occasionally ritualized modes of interaction. That is, they have attempted a poetics (and a technicity) for which Hayles’ open-read-understand loop is ill-equipped.

In his classic study *Preface to Plato*, Eric Havelock reconstructed pre-Platonic Greek culture at the moment before the instantiation of a privileging of *logos* over *muthos*, a moment he aligns with the development of writing as a technical system. That is, prior to this moment, both *logos* and *muthos* had signified as being spoken, from the mouth, with both having equal claim on what could be taken as “the truth.” After this

39 Discourse Networks, p. 117.
moment, however, *logos* would signify as verifiable fact or truth, that which could be written down and verified, while *muthos* would signify as myth, in the sense of a fiction or fancy, or as the poet David Antin has facetiously put it, “the word ‘myth’ is the name given to the lies told by little brown men / to men in white suits with binocular cases.”

In *Mythistory*, the scholar Joseph Mali illustrated how *logos* and *mythos* were separated; like Havelock, he posits a technological difference as the key pivot. Mali accomplished this by contrasting the historiographical approaches of Herodotus and Thucydides. In Herodotus’ historical stance, one did not distinguish between what one now would consider the proper events of history (the facts) and the stories people told about those events (the myths). In fact, Herodotus’ *History* began with “a long recitation of the Homeric myths about the origins of war” and then only eventually addressed human actions and possible causes of conflict. In order to correct Herodotus’ approach, Thucydides “defied this entire oral tradition by deliberately using distinct literal measures.” In Thucydides’ words, “very likely the strictly historical character of [the] narrative may be disappointing to the *ear*” as it was aimed for a reader who “desires to have *before his eyes a true* picture of the events which have happened.” In compiling such a true picture, Thucydides claimed, “I have described nothing but what I either *saw myself*, or learned from others of whom I made the most careful and particular inquiry.”

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40 “what am i doing here?,” *talking at the boundaries*, p. 6.


42 quoted in Mali, p. 2. Italics mine.

43 Ibid.
What these quotes from Thucydides describe is a shift in sense-ratio, from the dominance of an ear-system (mythos, collective) to a dominance of an eye-system (logos, individual). It was a shift from an oral to a written culture, what Karl Popper as well as McLuhan identified as a detribalizing shift, “the breaking apart of the magical world of the ear and the neutral world of the eye, and to the emergence of the detribalized individual from this split.” As McLuhan put it:

Given the phonetic alphabet with its abstraction of meaning from sound and the translation of sound into a visual code, men were at grips with an experience that transformed them. No pictographic or ideogrammic or hieroglyphic mode of writing has the detribalizing power of the phonetic alphabet. No other kind of writing save the phonetic has ever translated man out of the possessive world of total interdependence and interrelation that is the auditory network. From that magical resonating world of simultaneous relations that is the oral and acoustic space there is only one route to the freedom and independence of detribalized man. That route is via the phonetic alphabet [. . .]

For Thucydides and his fellow rationalists, one could detribalize history and put a true picture before a reader’s eyes via technical means, by combining a storage-and-retrieval system of writing with the generation of explicit meanings. One could then connect this loop to a methodology that privileged the independent, objective and empirical individual (over the hallucinatory, subjective collective). In such a system, truth would be found in the loop between what individuals could write down and what individuals could directly see. In such a scenario, vision would be the faculty that linked up to systems of objectivity and truth, while hearing would be the faculty that linked up to the fanciful systems of myth.

44 Gutenberg Galaxy, p. 22.
In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin identified Herodotus as the first storyteller of the Greeks. In Benjamin’s analysis, one of the symptoms of modernity was a diminishment in the value of experience, a loss of the ability to exchange experiences. That is, an inability to tell stories. Anticipating what Bernard Stiegler would later identify as the “genetic drift” in the deepest cultural substrata, Benjamin wrote that one should “imagine the transformation of epic forms occurring in rhythms comparable to those of the change that has come over the earth’s surface in the course of thousands of centuries.” Benjamin tied storytelling to the logics of production of two separate “tribes”: those with knowledge gained from travel, and those with local knowledge. That is, the tribe of the seaman and the tribe of the tiller. Storytelling was intimately wound with an artisan community: work provided not only the means of gaining knowledge but also the occasion for communication and the exchange of experience. This was the context in which counsel and wisdom could persist, with counsel understood as “a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding” and wisdom as “counsel woven into the fabric of real life.”

In the wake of modern changes in production and social arrangement, for Benjamin, the epic side of truth had begun to diminish. In its place there was the exchange of information, its promise of “prompt verifiability,” its capacity to be completely “understandable in itself” and immediately explicit: “no event any longer

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45 see *Technics & Time*, Vol. 1.

46 *Illuminations*, p. 88.

47 *Illuminations*, pp. 84-6.

48 Ibid. p. 86.
comes to us without already being shot through with explanation.” It would therefore be
the nature of information that “an attic fire in the Latin Quarter is more important than a
revolution in Madrid.”49 What occurred with such a shift was a contraction of experience
and relevance and context in modernity. The diminishment of storytelling was the
absenting of “intelligence from afar,” in terms of time and/or geography. One may even
be tempted to identify such a diminishment of meaning as the inevitable endgame of a
discourse network predicated on literal meanings, individual verifiability and a storage-
and-retrieval technology in which the addresser and addressee could be rendered in
isolation. That is, as the inevitable endgame of the technological logic of writing itself.

By focusing on the pre-Platonic Greek poets, bards of the moment prior to the
dominance of writing as a technical system, Havelock provided a clear counter to the
technicity of information exchange Benjamin described. Havelock’s study posited a link
between poetics, myth, sound and an oral technicity. To do so, Havelock elucidated the
complex term mousike, which may seem suggestive of a notion of “music” but is better
understood as a bodily technique utilized in Greek oral culture, “a complicated
convention designed to set up motions and reflexes which would assist the recording and
recalling of significant speech.”50 Such a complicated convention, and its goals of
perpetuating significant speech, relied on specific cultural structures and systems, as well
as a general approach to language and poetry very different from modern literature’s
“ascesis that knows only black letters on white paper,” an ascesis Kittler has claimed

49 Ibid. p. 89.
50 Preface to Plato, p. 151.
underwrote not only the dominant reading and writing practices circa 1900, but also much critical thought that has emerged ever since.

In *Preface to Plato*, Havelock sketched the seven principles of *mousike*: 1) that speech was created physically; 2) that once preserved, significant speech was created the same way; 3) that speech could be preserved only if repeated; 4) that the motions of the mouth were organized so as to ease repetition; 5) that organized motions of the mouth were to be grouped rhythmically; 6) that these rhythms and motions became automatic reflexes; 7) that the body paralleled the mouth’s reflex with ear and limbic reflexes. It would follow, then, that the pre-Platonic oral poet, as the central memory system of a polis—maintaining and updating its cultural stories, genealogies and norms—would weave together previous instantiations of the tribe’s tale with current conditions and transmit that significant speech to his fellow citizens who, entranced by the musical repetitions and rhythmic groupings of the words and lyre, would repeat and conjure the poem-song back to him, thereby setting in motion a collective discourse network that, for Havelock, stood as the interrelation of education, pleasure and experience.\(^{51}\)

To quote Pound again, in the context Havelock elucidated, such poetry attained “its highest rhythmic and metrical brilliance at times when the arts of verse and music were most closely knit together, when each thing done by the poet had some definite musical urge or necessity bound up within it.” The musical urge or necessity to which Pound alluded should also be understood as being concurrently a *social* urge or necessity. The poet-musician relayed the-news-that-stayed-news from a position as, in the event of

\(^{51}\) see the chapter “Psychology of the Poetic Performance.”
the poem, the temporary radial center of a polis or tribe. The poet maintained this positioning by technical means—the rhythmic mastery of both lyre and lyric, as well as memory—thereby making his audience move, entrancing it into a temporary whole. To revise one of Pound’s “Machine Art” pronouncements, the better a poet became as a technician, the better the poem and music would entrance.

In Havelock’s scenario, the ancient poet was very near to a Poundian poetic sensibility: the poet’s private emotions were irrelevant to the art. The essential factor was the formal arrangement of note, word, rhythm and the poem’s connection to the just-unfolding of a continual story that was culture itself. The entrancement of the audience was merely among the technical problems the poet had to solve, just as in Pound’s factory music proposal, the needs of production were among the technical problems the work itself had to address. If the creation of a new music truly was the creation of a new reality, as Stravinsky claimed, the social arrangements a music proposed could be seen as an aspect of that new reality. But the modernist poet-musician was to be distinguished from her or his medieval or ancient counterpart in this way: the poet-musician must be maestro not only of the work itself, but also of the work’s conditions.

Havelock’s *mousike* suggested a completely different technical system from the apparently inevitable open-read-understand loop that Hayles has assumed for any text. With his *mousike*, Havelock introduced a technical system with poetry (and the poet) at its center and with a “readership” of participants involved in its construction and transmission. Such a model has proven a seductive one for post-Poundian poets such as Charles Olson, Jerome Rothenberg, Anne Waldman and others who have likewise
developed a stance interweaving speech, rhythm, collectivity, performance and history as a possible aesthetic whole. The salient question for these poets is whether such a discourse network that the *mousike* convention illustrated—and the social formations that such a convention necessitated—could be made intelligible outside of the geographical, technological and economic situation of the pre-Platonic Greeks.

One of the repeated aims for 20th century poets of the post-Poundian tradition has been to find ways in which the poem could be more than a written artifact and something closer to an event. As Jerome Rothenberg has written, “It seems to me that since the 1950s (in some ways for several decades before), we have been working increasingly with a performance model of the poem, for which the written versions serve as the notation or the score.”52 Elsewhere, Rothenberg has identified the important role Pound has played in making such a poetics possible, as he “maintains a sense of continuum with the ‘pagan’ & the ‘primitive,’ rather than with the genocidal institutions that sought to wipe them out.”53 In total, Pound’s main contributions, according to Rothenberg, were “the collage composition of the *Cantos*, the pivotal breakthroughs in translation, the sense of history as vortex, the transmission of an actual alternative tradition.”54 Delineating both the inclusiveness and the limits of this latter contribution (“the transmission of an actual alternative tradition”), and Pound’s relation to technicity and technology—among the purposes of this dissertation—necessitates further explication, focusing on the

52 *Pre-Faces*, p. 20.
53 Ibid. p. 27.
54 Ibid. p. 27.
intervening impulses that the “Machine Art” essay occasions, impulses that are at once musical, poetic, historical, social and technological.

4. Appropriately enough, considering his own methods, Pound has come to be a figure through whom new genealogies have been continually projected, both forward and backward in time. When Jerome Rothenberg claimed that the written poem should be read as a notation for a performative equivalent, he was discussing competing medialities at the core of a post-Poundian, re-ancient poetics. That is, his claim was not (only) nostalgia for a previous (irretrievable) situation at the height of the poet’s role in Greek culture or other ritual contexts. Rothenberg’s performative claims were also a critique of the assumed norms that existed within the discourse networks of 20th century American culture, norms of what it meant to read and write as well as the limits of such terminologies (reading, writing) in describing the event of the poem. Such a stance towards text—wherein a poem must be completed and/or realized not by a cultivated, swooning intelligence (in what McLuhan or Brown would call a visual hypnosis) but by a full-throated human animal-of-the-collective—was an argument for the appropriate placement of the poem (and the poet) within a polis or tribe.

Rothenberg’s sense of the poem as a score for performance should be read doubly: a poem is a score for a literal embodied performance of the text, but it is also a score for a more holistic performance, a performance of the sense of being such the poem itself projects. That is, the poem can function not only as the score for a past or future (or
perpetually potential) occasion, but also for the social arrangements that would allow poets and other technicians of the sacred (Rothenberg’s term) to perform their important technical work: transmitting and/or modulating and/or inventing the always-unfolding of cultural memory.

The alternative poetic tradition Pound helped transmit into the 20th century was one guided by a desire to advocate and re-invent a world (it may or may not resemble this one) with poetry at its center, as opposed to a world with poetry existing at some imaginary apex or professional margin. Rothenberg’s contemporary and occasional collaborator, David Antin, in his book of poem-talks, Talking at the Boundaries, stated:

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i had suggested that i had always had mixed feelings
about being considered a poet         “if robert lowell is a
poet i dont want to be a poet         if robert frost was a
poet i dont want to be a poet         if socrates was a poet
ill consider it”
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This is likely Antin’s most famous quip, and it is more complicated than it pretends to be. It should be noted that it was not a particular content voiced by a Socrates that caused Antin to consider him as a permissible poetic forebear, but rather his social placement as a vocal interrogator of norms. Antin’s invocation of Socrates (in contrast to culturally sanctioned and recognizably poetic figures such as Frost and Lowell) was a shorthand manner of arguing for interrogation and questioning as belonging at the ritual heart of contemporary culture. By contrast, Antin would argue, Lowell and Frost performed a merely decorative function. For Antin, the desire was for a populace to address:
as a poet i was getting extremely tired of what i considered an unnatu-
ral language act going into a closet so to speak sitting in
front of a typewriter because anything is possible sitting in front of
a typewriter and nothing is necessary a closet is no place to
address anybody.\footnote{Talking at the Boundaries, p. 56; quoted in Bob Perelman, “Speech Effects,” Close Listening, p. 203.}

Here, Antin has identified poetry’s marginalization as a technological issue. This becomes
clear as soon as we contrast Antin’s social placement of the typewriter as a technical
instrument (in the middle of a closet) to the social placement of the lyre and the mousike
conventions Havelock outlined, or even just the social placement of a Socratic
interrogation. In these latter examples, the technical work is performed in the midst of a
collective. As McLuhan would remind us, there is also a contrast here between
technicities that privilege the eye (typewriter) and those that privilege the ear (lyre,
speech).

Martin Heidegger’s thoughts on the ontological dimensions of equipment will
also help explicate Antin’s claims. As Heidegger has explained, equipment always
belongs to other equipment, perpetuating a totality gathered towards goals of
serviceability, conduciveness, usability and manipulability.\footnote{see Being and Time, pp. 97-108.} Such an equipmental totality
exists as the filling-up of what Heidegger called “a room,” not in a “geometrical spatial
sense, but as equipment for residing,” and out of this residing an “arrangement emerges.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 98.}
Therefore, in order to be theorized, equipment should not be understood as existing in the fallacy of what Alfred North Whitehead called “simple location,” where “material can be said to be here in space and here in time, or here in space-time, in a perfectly definite sense which does not require for its explanation any reference to other regions of space-time.”

A technology, like any piece of equipment, is never self-sufficient: it always belongs with other technologies and equipments, and provides a ready-to-use stance for its handler within this mode of being. But to claim that technology is never neutral is not the same as claiming a technological determinism. Technologies do not necessarily determine behavior, but they do seem to prepare the ground for their own perpetuity through the connections made amongst multiple technological systems.

As Gianni Vattimo has argued, the perpetual innovations of modernity construct conditions by which innovation alone is primed to flourish. Such an argument depends upon a technology’s capacity for disappearing within its immediate usefulness, what Heidegger calls its readiness-to-hand, “the kind of Being which equipment possesses.” To grasp a piece of equipment in its immediate usefulness is to not grasp it theoretically. That is, instead of putting a piece of equipment to some individual purpose, users


59 see Vattimo’s thoughts on Arnold Gehlen’s term post-history in the introduction to his The End of Modernity, p. 7.

60 Being and Time, p. 98.

61 A defining danger of modern technological systems, philosophers such as Heidegger and Vattimo warn us, is of technology and equipmentality merging into a single, complete totality.
“dealing with equipment subordinate themselves to the manifold assignment” of the room in which the equipment resides.\(^62\) In this state, the user concerns him or herself with the work for which the equipment was intended, as though trapped within its invisible, already prepared room.

This can be illustrated through reference to another icon of modernism. The true shock of Marcel Duchamp’s submission of a urinal—under the title of “Fountain” and with the pseudonym R. Mutt, for an exhibition in New York in 1917—was the shock of two distinct worlds illuminated in collision: the rooms of art and equipment suddenly revealed by one another. In Duchamp’s advocacy for his pseudonym “R. Mutt’s” sculpture, he wrote:

What were the grounds for refusing Mr Mutt’s fountain: --

1. Some contended it was immoral, vulgar.
2. Others, it was plagiarism, a plain piece of plumbing.

Now Mr Mutt’s fountain is not immoral, that is absurd, no more than a bathtub is immoral. It is a fixture that you see every day in plumbers’ show windows.

Whether Mr Mutt with his own hands made the fountain or not has no importance. He CHOSE it. He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view – created a new thought for that object.

As for plumbing, that is absurd. The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges.\(^63\)

Mutt’s urinal could only be perceived once it was taken out of the room of its useful and significant immediacy. Perhaps Duchamp and Heidegger would agree that when Mutt

\(^62\) *Being and Time*, p. 99.

“created a new thought” for the urinal, he actually created the first thought for it as well, since the urinal had previously resided in a completely untheorized mode of being, one that provided implicit assignments as to proper norms and bounds of hygienic behavior and social arrangement. Concurrently, Mutt’s masterly decision also revealed the untheorized nature of the art exhibition, its own self-perpetuation; its own room had become equally covered over in its implicit assignments, just as the equipmental room of the urinal had been. Like Wallace Stevens’ jar in the woods of Tennessee, Mutt’s urinal centered (retrospectively) the rest of the exhibit around itself. Remarkably, however, the urinal accomplished this rearrangement not through its central placement within the exhibit, but through its refused entry.

Language poet Ron Silliman has identified a contemporary, less celebratory instance of the connections linking equipment, assignment and invisibility:

> The trash containers in the cafeteria of a firm for which I used to work were not freestanding but were set directly into the walls. In the bland, corporate pastels of the room, the containers were almost invisible. Such invisibility is important to a society that feels squeamish about its waste products, even if they are only napkins, styrofoam cups, and plastic spoons. Functionally, each trashcan, lined with a dark nonbiodegradable bag, hid behind a small locked door. The top portion of the door was a hinged panel through which to shove your garbage. On each panel appeared the words THANK YOU.

Who speaks? 64

In the above scenario, it is essential for the room that the trash container’s “thank you” be expressed as casually as possible. As Silliman wrote, “the words thank you simply irrupt

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on a cafeteria wall, proposing an entire conversation—‘put garbage here,’ ‘okay,’ ‘thank you’—through a single element. Even the subject of the sentence (I thank you, we thank you, your coworkers thank you, the bosses thank you, etc.) remains tacit.” It would be a mistake however, as Silliman briefly attempted, to identify the subject speaking its thanks as any embodied individual; as Friedrich Kittler has put it, “writing stores only the fact of its authorization.” To continue in a Heideggerean mode, it is the room itself, with its implied assignments, and not any individual human that says “thank you.”

The foreboding element of this “speaking” trash container was certainly not the particular experience of one’s isolated interaction with its authority. Being thanked by a disembodied authority for one’s consent to efficiently discard one’s trash is assuredly not a traumatic event. One should refuse, however, the fallacy of simple location in order to grasp how this particular piece of equipment has made more explicit the assignments equipment and technology can posit within a social room. Therefore, the put-trash-here-okay-thank-you conversation itself is not the only phenomenon to be theorized, as we must also critically grasp the other conversations and behaviors and modes of being that the readiness and ease of the can’s implicit conversation has elided. The trash container’s “thank you” does not determine one’s behavior in this particular instance. Rather, it is simply one piece of equipment that links with a multitude of equipments in such a way as to create a room in which one’s behaviors (and their consequences and interrelations) remain imperceptible and untheorized. Heidegger’s contemporary explicator, Hubert Dreyfus, has succinctly illustrated this phenomenon:

65 Ibid., p. 361.
To use an example from later Heidegger, our culture has entered a phase in which we deal with things as “standing reserve.” This means in part that we treat them as resources to be used efficiently and then disposed of when no longer needed. A Styrofoam cup is a perfect example. When we want a hot or cold drink it does its job, and when we are through with it, we simply throw it away. How different is a delicate Japanese teacup, preserved from generation to generation for its beauty and its social meaning.\footnote{\textit{Being-in-the-World}, pp. 17-18.}

In Dreyfus’ example, the teacup exists and is utilized within an unfolding story of familial persistence and custom. In contrast, the Styrofoam cup persists in the unfolding story of the standing reserve. Dreyfus does not argue that the teacup is more adequately theorized than the Styrofoam cup, but rather that it persists within a distinctly separate technicity. In this way, either cup can function as an indexical sign by which one can read the room in which it persists. One theorizes the cup to perceive a larger state of affairs. Ideally, as in Dreyfus’ example, one also theorizes the cup so to perceive a state of affairs in which it \textit{does not} link up as well. As Fredric Jameson has reminded us, one of the dangers of globalization is the mass dilation of consumer capitalism, and its logic of the standing reserve; such a dilation would be the loss of alternative traditions or logics.\footnote{see Jameson’s essay “The End of Temporality” in \textit{Critical Inquiry} 29.4, Summer 2003.}

For David Antin, the situation of the contemporary poet—at the typewriter, in a closet—was an indexical sign for the contemporary state of poetry. In his poem-talks, Antin has often explored the issue of cultivating an audience to address, implicitly framing it as a technical issue. Antin’s strategy was to invent a departure, but not from the typewriter itself. Rather, Antin departed from a normative utilization of the typewriter,
away from its solitary (ontological) room. To compose at the typewriter, Antin has implied, one must evacuate one’s self from any shared, social context and enter the room a poet’s equipment has prepared for itself: in Antin’s terms, a closet.

In protest of this state of affairs, Antin did not, however, absolutely abandon modern technologies, or even the typewriter itself. Rejecting the false choice between either a simplistic embrace or rejection of modern technologies, Antin instead created a specific use of the typewriter, linking it to his poetic project, a pursuit he modeled on the Socratic vocal interventions of an era with very different socio-technological arrangements (an aural instead of a written focus). Instead of composing at the typewriter, in its closet, Antin began to compose his talks, or talk-poems, in specific social contexts, live and in front of an audience. Antin recorded his performances on a tape-recorder and then transcribed them on his typewriter, “with more or less modification,” into the versions published in his multiple volumes of the last thirty-five years. By radically re-imagining the scene of composition, seizing it as a shared, aural event, Antin also altered the sense-ratio involved. By linking the typewriter, through the tape recorder, with a collective social setting, Antin constructed a discourse network in which aurality regained some of its ancient privilege, moving him closer to Socrates than to Frost or Lowell or to the seemingly more radical Language poets that emerged at the same time.

Antin’s move into his talk-poems in the early 1970s occurred in the same period in which what is known as Language writing began to emerge. Antin attempted one of his poem-talk compositions at Bob Perelman’s Talk Series in San Francisco in 1978. This was in the midst of Language writing’s insurgent stage, in the same talk series that also
hosted the first presentations of foundational critical texts of the Language movement, including Ron Silliman’s “The New Sentence” and Lyn Hejinian’s “The Rejection of Closure.” Many of the writers associated with Language writing and its early mimeographed publications such as \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E \) (1978-81; edited by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews) and \( T\text{his} \) (1971-82; first three issues edited by Barrett Watten and Robert Grenier, remaining issues edited by Watten) associated their practice with post-structuralist texts by Derrida, Foucault and Barthes, an association that has greatly aided their eventual academic embrace as the pre-eminent exemplars, or symptoms, of an innovative, post-modern poetic. Derrida’s critique of the mystical aura of presence was particularly recurrent in the critical pronouncements of the Language writers at this time, as was his related critique of the cultural norms by which speech was considered to be unmediated and natural—the medium of authentic presencing—while writing was irrationally relegated to a secondary status.

As Derrida stated in “Differance,” the written word always stands behind the occasion of speech and is inextricable from it, an assertion the Language writers took to heart. By contrast, Donald Allen’s immensely influential and widely circulated \textit{The New American Poetry} anthology of 1960 had led off with the breath-based poetry of Charles Olson, as it also included work by Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan and other poets for whom breath and speech were the essential foundations of poetic practice, most notably expressed in Olson’s “Projective Verse” essay (“breath allows \textit{all} the speech-force of language back in”\(^\text{68} \)), also included in Allen’s anthology. This is what allows a Language

\(^{68} \textit{Collected Prose}, \text{ p. 244.}\)
writer such as Silliman to retrospectively identify Robert Grenier’s succinct declaration of “I HATE SPEECH” in the first issue of This in 1971 as a catalyst for the entire Language movement. The poetical-historical context of Grenier’s statement, and of this first issue of the magazine he and Watten co-edited, has been made clear in Silliman’s later description of its contents:

[. . .] a photograph of the desk of Charles Olson at the time of his death by Elsa Dorfman, followed by two other portraits she did of Olson & prose accounts accompanying each, one of which functionally is a description of his funeral.

And then Grenier’s critical pieces. First a major review of Creeley’s first volume of essays, A Quick Graph [. . .]

At the end of this piece is a photo, uncredited, of Pound & Olga Rudge looking out of a window in Rapallo. As if to say, this is the end of the Old World. On the next page is Grenier’s “On Speech,” with its claim “I HATE SPEECH.” Again, at the end comes an illustration, this apparently an image taken from a book, or more likely, an old postcard, of an entirely empty train station (La Gare Maritime in Brussels). The symbolism could not be more explicit.  

As a poet and critic, Antin certainly stood as a contrast to the Language writing program. As Bob Perelman—noted Language poet, critic, and the host of Antin’s aborted poem-talk of 1978—would later write, “Antin calls talk natural: it is ‘natural language in its natural setting’; temporally separated writing is ‘an unnatural language act.’ But speech does not exist in a pure state of nature: issues of property and prestige frame and occupy the phrasal pulse of the talk pieces.”  

In this statement, Perelman shows himself to not only be spectacularly ungenerous, but also simply incorrect. Antin clearly did not posit a


70 “Speech Effects,” Close Listening, p. 204.
“pure state of nature” as the natural setting for talk (which would be, apparently, someone talking to plants and rocks) but rather stated that the “natural setting” of language is within a collective space, with language employed as a social tool, doing social work and attending to social relations: outside of a closet. In Antin’s statement, the use of “natural” should be taken as implying a structural affinity between social and natural realms; a contemporary poet-critic making similar claims to Antin’s might use a term like social ecology to signify the same thought.

Regardless of the infelicity or apparent opacity of Antin’s use of the term “natural,” Perelman has opened up a means for grasping the complexities behind the seeming simplicity of Antin’s claims. But it is rather the limits of Perelman’s own conception of a speech/writing binary end up that explicates these complexities, much more effectively than do his modest critical insights. Referring to Antin’s famous denunciation of Frost and Lowell in favor of Socrates, Perelman has written, “It is not pure speech that is doing this, however, but situated speech.” Perelman continued, “With his talk poems, Antin is proposing a reconfiguration of the literary field; the quoted sentence announces and recognizes it, and thus is nearly as important as the subsequent talk-poems. It is more than a real-time phrase uttered to a real-time audience; it is a social-literary act.”71

The first binary Perelman has presented here is one between “pure speech” and “situated speech.” This supposed antinomy depends upon Perelman translating Antin’s provocative claim of talk as “natural language in its natural setting” as a specimen of un-

71 Ibid. p. 205.
situated “pure speech.”” Perelman criticizes Antin, who in his books has composed an introduction to each talk-poem that informs the reader of the institutional setting and occasion for each and every composition, was somehow unaware that he was talking before an audience, an not in some pure, prelapsarian setting. In fact, Antin’s entire project has been based on his conviction that poets should reconfigure for their works a discursive network by which they could regain an audience to address. For Antin, the natural setting of language is social, and his ambition has been to compose his works in a collective setting, with an audience, in a shared experience of time. The complexity of this momentum behind Antin’s use of the term “natural” has been completely evacuated by Perelman, who substitutes his own “pure speech” as its replacement and then moves on with his critique. By doing so, Perelman has essentially shrugged off Antin’s overarching ambition, to move his writing out of a closet and into a social setting.

The second binary Perelman has constructed is between “pure speech” and “a social-literary act.” In this second formulation, “pure speech,” in Perelman’s rendering of Antin, is “a real-time phrase uttered to a real-time audience.” Clearly there is an internal contradictions in Perelman’s utilizations of his protean term “pure speech”: at first it means an un-situated utterance, but it now means a situated utterance. But more importantly, Perelman has here implied a distinction between talk (real-time phrase/real-time audience) and a social-literary act. In Perelman’s critique, Antin was misguided in his ambitions for talk because he behaved as if talk could be a social-literary act. Yet this was precisely Antin’s project, to bring the composition of a social-literary act (or, a poem) out of a closeted isolation and into a social arena. And even when Antin does not
succeed in explicitly reconciling or synthesizing these separated modes—talk on one hand, poem on the other—his profoundly imagined methodology has allowed him to explore their complex relation. Antin’s ambition has been to re-introduce talk, and its shared social setting, to poetic production.

A 20th century poet, unlike the pre-Platonic Greek poet or the medieval troubadour, entered her or his social room ill-equipped, as it were, for such a performance. Here is Perelman’s summary of Antin’s attempted talk in San Francisco in 1978:

His talk, “Figures of Speech and Figures of Thought,” began by developing different themes: classical Greek notions of metaphor, harmony, and negotiation; a long story about a coed who became anorexic; and a consideration of metaphor—anorexia as athleticism? anorexia as disease? But this cluster of themes was ultimately overshadowed by the verbal choreography between Antin and the audience. He never finished the anorexic’s story as he and the audience became embroiled in a discussion about the talk form and the usefulness or impropriety of audience participation; and in fact the talk was never transcribed.\(^72\)

Near the end of this performance, before its dissolution into a crowded discussion and debate, a specific exchange occurred between David Antin and Ron Silliman, an exchange that demonstrated how difficult it would be to utilize new technologies in order to endeavor a writing practice that could inhere itself to, as McLuhan put it, “the possessive world of total interdependence and interrelation that is the auditory network.”

Antin, as the purveyor of his own brand of Socratic talk-poetry, and Silliman, as one of the more visible poets and theorists of the Language movement, both placed

\(^72\) Ibid. p. 206.
themselves as inheritors of a modernist, post-Poundian poetic practice. Yet their supreme divergence from one another at this moment, and the apparently complete incompatibility of their approaches, illuminates the complexity at the heart of Pound’s own attempts to utilize new technologies in order to retrieve from his own earlier moment the ancient arrangements that had once made poetry so potent and essential. In Perelman’s summary:

Antin and Silliman had a long dialog about the form of the talk, with Silliman, in a comment that in hindsight anticipated the clash to come, suggesting that Antin was not interested in innovation and was perhaps courting catastrophe to move forward. Antin replied that the formal catastrophe in the arts of discourse had occurred near the end of the eighteenth century when a fixed sense of the group being addressed disappeared.73

Here, one sees Silliman has grabbed the “make it new” Poundian banner (it is a poetic catastrophe to not be interested in innovation), while Antin has grabbed the “tale of the tribe” one (the catastrophe is the absenting of a group for the poet to address). In taking these two salutary Poundian pronouncements so deeply to heart, both poets found themselves, at their later date, dissolving into an incoherence of the imagination that only a return to a prior moment could even begin to explain.

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73 Ibid. p. 206.

The remedy for machines is not pastoral retrogression.

Ezra Pound, “The City”

Although William Carlos Williams most famously called a poem a machine made out of words, it is Pound who was perhaps the most persuasive spokesman for the relationship of poetry and technology in the modernist period, especially when imagining the poetic work involved in registering otherwise imperceptible historical currents:

There is nothing illegitimate or contemptible in wanting to devise, contrive (rather than invent) an efficient tool kit. No man can carry an automobile factory on his back. A great many ‘scholars’ are as helpless as isolated mechanics wd. be were each possessed of some spare part, screw, die, lever, cog, of a huge machine.

We can picture Pound’s overall project as an imaginative distribution of his particularly historical sensibility, similar to how one might consider a productive factory to be the distribution of a particularly efficient sensibility. For Pound, the production and maintenance of a workable history—like the productive needs of the factory in his “Machine Art” proposal—is a technical problem. Among the poet’s projects is the contrivance of a tool kit, and a repertoire of technical skills, sufficient to the enormity of

2 Guide to Kulchur, p. 70.
the historical task. Pound’s metaphor, between historical and mechanical work, only made explicit the persistently technical nature of his historical project. The import I place on his obscure “Machine Art” essay derives from its status as an ideogram of the technical basis of Pound’s radical sensibility. The essay is a snapshot of the musical, aural and technological currents that run through his more disseminated poetic and cultural works.

Pound felt that both music and poetry, in their grandest hours, were inextricable from one another. He looked to the Greeks and Troubadours for this notion, for these were the historical epochs in which “poetry attained its highest rhythmic and metrical brilliance.” This was because poetry always wove itself together with music, so that “each thing done by the poet had some definite musical urge or necessity bound up within it.”

As I have argued, Pound was not simply saying that poetry and music should be performed together, or that poetry should aspire to some elevated musical condition, but that in their perfection, poetry and music will address one another’s formal needs. Peering through this concept, we can also see how Pound’s aural emphasis guided his practice of writing. “There are different techniques in poetry,” Pound wrote, “men write to be read, or spoken, or declaimed, or rhapsodized; and quite differently to be sung . . . Words written in the first manners are spoiled by added music; it is superfluous; it swells out their unity into confusion.”

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4 “Notes for Performers,” Ezra Pound and Music, p. 271.
Among the conceits of these chapters is the notion that we can gain a better perspective on the writing practices of Pound and other innovative modernists if we analyze those practices with the same kind of aural and technological attentiveness that these modernists themselves possessed. In this chapter, I explore Pound’s views concerning the musical norms of his day. Pound felt that the attentive habits of musical performers and listeners had been corrupted by a widespread preference for what he considered a bombastic, “Wagnerian” aesthetic sensibility. Pound believed that modern musicians tended to luxuriate within a self-enclosed virtuosity, milking each detail until all available expressiveness was drained from it. This practice not only distorted the details of any particular work, it also threatened the overall shape of the works themselves. I show how Pound’s exasperation with this musical tendency (itself symptomatic of a larger cultural drift) directly influenced his ideas concerning notation: a musical score should be exactly notated so to redirect the attentions of musicians and audience members alike. Pound adapted this notational insight to his poetic sensibility, an adaptation that was especially evident in his use of luminous details that were arranged such that they direct a reader’s attention towards lines of affinity, influence and change across varying historical periods.

To demonstrate the importance of aural and technical matters to Pound’s approach, I examine the peculiar connection Pound drew between the modern wireless telegraph and the medieval convention of chivalric love. For Pound, both of these historical phenomena provided a poetic model: they each externalized a dispersed surface that could register a cosmic charge. I extend Pound’s conceit by looking at how a number
of figures—including André Breton, F.T. Marinetti and Marshall McLuhan—attributed potentially poetic qualities to the telegraph, especially in regards to how it could place vast geographies in sudden simultaneity. Unexpectedly, this new technology was seen by some as the reintroduction of a technical system that could support a mythic worldview. Finally, to demonstrate the radical nature of Pound’s sensibility, I introduce R.P. Blackmur’s criticism of Pound’s notational poetic strategies. For Blackmur, Pound’s poetry suffered from a lack of direct expressiveness and sensation: Pound merely noted that something has occurred instead of recreating that occurrence for a reader. I show how inevitable Blackmur’s critique was when one considers that Pound directed a reader’s attention not to the particulars of individual occurrences but rather to the connections among them. That is, even when writing to be sung, Pound did not want the reader to replicate the musicians of the period and contentedly luxuriate in sentimentally expressive particulars. Rather, we wanted his readers to constellate his precisely notated particulars together into a nuanced historical sensibility.

1. In 1927, the year in which he first began writing his “Machine Art” essay, Ezra Pound also wrote:

To Igor Strawinsky we owe the revelation: ‘No, you will not find any musical geniuses to execute this music. It would be better for the composer to write down what he wants the performer to play.’

Strawinsky’s merit lies very largely in taking hard bits of rhythm, and noting them with great care. Antheil continues this; and these two composers mark a definite break with the ‘atmospheric’ school; they both write horizontal music; but
horizontal music has been written before; the Arabs have used it for a long time; the troubadours used it . . .

Pound has written about the purpose of notation in medieval music and his belief that a composition’s written notes once functioned solely as a mnemonic device, a mere trigger: they were not to be confused with the composition itself. Pound’s medieval view is a sharp contrast with the modernist situation he outlined above, in which a composer must notate the work with great effort, dexterity and even genius, thereby explicitly defining the precise rhythms of the composition. This emphatic written effort on the composer’s part was aimed at minimizing the conventionalized laxities of modern performance. Such exacting notation—by marking with great care exactly how a work is to be performed, and by consecrating the written authority of the score—kept the music in the musicians’ hands but took it out of their grasp, so to speak. This was exactly the intention: a modern musician, for Pound, was simply a bureaucrat holding an instrument.

Absented from their own tradition and displaced so as to not have a feel for a composition’s formal qualities (which for Pound was always directly connected to its emotive potency), a modern musician’s embodied simple location became the sole field of sensation for his or her performance. A musician’s bodily self-absorption should be curtailed, according to Pound: “[n]othing but the main form of a work will resist the vicissitudes and calamities of presentation. For your detail you are at the mercy of the executant, and the executant is at the mercy of his endocrines; your melody is at any

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6 This generalization stands in contrast to certain exceptions, such as Pound’s admiration of Antheil’s dexterity at the piano, or his admiration for Olga Rudge’s abilities on the violin.
gland’s mercy, but your main structure defies even an orchestra or an operatic soprano.”

In this view, the modern musician (like the modern listener) had been stripped—by larger historical currents—of the capacity to feel the relationship between a work’s details and its entire structure. Instead, for these musicians, each detail existed in a perpetual state of private, luxurious isolation.

And even if the overall shape of a work did survive a modern performance, the details would be distorted by the logic of performance. Because of these distorted details, any possible relationship between whole and part ended up being corrupted by the particularized over-emphases of the performance: each moment falling away to be replaced by another, as though each moment were its own separate, completed field of attention. For Pound, this practice rendered inert the finer elements of a work’s construction, as well as any unique emotive power it would have otherwise expressed, by way of its formal qualities. Pound was not alone in such a prognosis:

If the moments of sensual pleasure in the idea, the voice, the instrument are made into fetishes and torn away from any functions which could give them meaning, they meet a response equally isolated, equally far from the meaning of the whole, and equally determined by success in the blind and irrational emotions which form the relationship to music into which those with no relationship enter . . . Where they

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7 “Varia,” Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony, p. 129. Igor Stravinsky, acknowledge by both Pound and George Antheil as the supreme (if eventually, for Antheil, flaccidly pseudo-classical) modernist composer, strikes a similar stance in regards to the limits to be placed on the music’s “executant” in his “The Performance of Music” lecture collected in The Poetics of Music, the published volume of the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures he delivered at Harvard College in 1939-40: “Conductors, singers, pianists, all virtuosos should know or recall that the first condition that must be fulfilled by anyone who aspires to the imposing title of interpreter, is that he be first of all a flawless executant. The secret of perfection lies above all in his consciousness of the law imposed upon him by the work he is performing. And here we are back at the great principle of submission that we have so often invoked in the course of our lessons” (p. 127).
react at all, it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony or to a bikini.⁸

Here, Theodore Adorno has also criticized the decontextualizing effect of fetishising isolated moments or aspects of a work, wherein the perception of larger forms and movements have been absented by the momentary pleasures of the unmoored instant, which always exists in simple location. It would not matter if one was reacting to Beethoven or a bikini because the larger structures and shapes that could provide a meaningful context for these forms went unperceived.

In this view, since modern musicians exhibited a tendency to fetishise the sensual pleasures of a composition, largely to the detriment of its formal integrities, even the most brilliant and careful notation ended up being useless if the work itself relied too directly upon sensory dynamics for expression or a surfeit of expressive details for effect. In other words, a Modernist composer had to alter not only how he notated a work but also how he approached its larger forms and minutest features. The expressive detail, said Pound, always suffered from its vulnerability to the peccadilloes derived from any performing individual’s (or group’s) peculiar embodiment: a particularly lyrical melody

rendered inert by the pianist’s literal constipation, perhaps, or more likely a rhythmically disciplined passage flattened out by a conductor’s unexplored conception of lyricism and tempo (e.g., an expected register of wistfulness is signified by a slowing down of a tempo, or a mood of excitement is facilitated by merely speeding the tempo back up again). In the performance, if each moment existed in apparent isolation from every other moment of the work, these clichéd tempos would then come to stand as signifiers of predetermined emotions. In this way, aesthetic feeling itself was flattened out—no longer derived from its unique relationship of part to part, or parts to whole, a composition’s emotional qualities were pre-arranged by the preconceptions of the performers, conductor and audience. Because they always unfolded in the same manner, it would always be the same excitement, the same wistfulness, regardless of the composition itself.

Pound’s disdain for the musical consequences of a moment-by-moment embodiment could easily be read as a simple embrace of a modernist asceticism, the distrust of a feminized, vulnerable body, or of plain embodiment itself. Brought into the context of Pound’s unique sensibility and aesthetic development, however, his perspective on bodily performance will open up more fully. In his earliest extended prose work, *The Spirit of Romance*—a product of his graduate research, first published in 1910

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9 Literal and figurative constipation is a recurring trope for Pound’s cohort George Antheil, who takes it to be an image of a pointless and stalled virtuosity. In his brief piece on Pound, “Why a Poet Quit the Muses,” Antheil takes a swing at the recent developments of two modernist titans: “The last gallery of Picasso shows that he is more and more upon the sheerly virtuous path, and his present ‘arty’ Twiddledum counterpart, Stravinsky, makes a dull brown portrait of his wife in the new piano concerto a few months afterwards. Constipation reigns. Twiddledee bows (Mr. Picasso); Twiddledum bows (Mr. Stravinsky).” He also generalizes: “Every art epoch after a certain time of working out its fundamental phenomena becomes constipated . . .” (*Ezra Pound and Music*, p. 514). In Antheil’s autobiography, *Bad Boy of Music*, which unfolds with a grandly self-mythologizing spirit, the function of glands and bodily processes is often at the forefront of Antheil’s presentation of a musical situation. Antheil’s insistence on the bodily and glandular aspects of music—however peculiar or untheorized it may now appear to be—is often an effective means of rendering most palpably his notion of music as an entity that has both temporal and spatial dimensions.
—Pound viewed the body as a nexus, a mythic crossroad where the cosmic and the sexual intersect.

Pound’s particular insights concerning the cosmos-body nexus illuminate some of his more renowned innovations. First, his view of the cosmic:

Let us consider the body as pure mechanism. Our kinship to the ox we have constantly thrust upon us; but beneath this is our kinship to the vital universe, to the tree and the living rock, and, because this is less obvious—and possibly more interesting—we forget it.

We have about us the universe of fluid force, and below us the germinal universe of wood alive, of stone alive.¹⁰

And then his view of the sexual:

It is an ancient hypothesis that the little cosmos ‘corresponds’ to the greater, that man has in him both ‘sun’ and ‘moon.’ From this I should say that there are at least two paths—I do not say that they lead to the same place—the one ascetic, the other for want of a better term ‘chivalric.’ In the first the monk or whoever he may be, develops, at infinite trouble and expense, the secondary pole within himself, produces his charged surface which registers the beauties, celestial or otherwise, by ‘contemplation.’ In the second, which I must say seems more in accord with ‘mens sana in corpore sano’ [“a sound mind in a sound body”] the charged surface is produced between the predominant natural poles of two human mechanisms. Sex is, that is to say, of a double function and purpose, reproductive and educational; or, as we see in the realm of fluid force, one sort of vibration produces at different intensities, heat and light.¹¹

These excerpts from *The Spirit of Romance*, Pound’s brilliant and monotonous study of Dante, Villon, and the troubadours, were located within an extended, changeling concept

¹⁰ “Psychology and Troubadours,” *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 92. In the preface to the book, Pound asserts that "Art is a fluid moving above or over the minds of men," p. 5. Elsewhere, in one of Pound’s most notorious projects, his “Translator’s Note” to his version of Remy de Gourmont’s *The Natural Philosophy of Love* (1922), he asserts that a man’s brain may in fact be a reservoir of seminal fluid, and like his view of chivalric love itself, “the power of the spermatozoide is precisely the power of exteriorizing a form,” p. 207.

¹¹ “Psychology and Troubadours,” *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 94.
of consciousness and technicity. Pound posited two kinds of consciousness, the first centered upon “what the Greek psychologists called the phantastikon,” and the second being, in contrast, “germinal.”

For those in possession of the first type of consciousness, which I will refer to as a fantastic consciousness,¹² “[t]heir minds are . . . circumvolved about them like soap-bubbles reflecting sundry patches of the macrocosmos.” Pound linked this self-supplying, fantastic consciousness to the development of a human-centric cosmology, wherein “[m]an is concerned with man and forgets the whole and the flowing.”¹³ For those of a germinal consciousness, however, “[t]heir thoughts are in them as the thought of the tree is in the seed, or in the grass, or the grain, or the blossom”—these generative minds, for Pound, “are the more poetic, and they affect mind about them, and transmute it as the seed the earth.”¹⁴

We can view the fantastic consciousness as one that will isolate itself in asceticism—it has developed a world within itself, internalizing its charge by powers of contemplation. The germinal consciousness will also generates a charge, but instead of relying upon a contemplative self-reliance, its charge will be gained by its placement in what Pound called a chivalric setting: an external context of precise social codifications and a courtly concept of love. Pound claimed this latter, germinal charge to be a more

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¹² See Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism, P. Th. M. G. Liebregts, p. 45

¹³ “Psychology and Troubadours,” The Spirit of Romance, p. 93.

poetic source of energy.\textsuperscript{15} Poetry should be, in Pound’s view, continually charged by its active engagement with external forms and flows. It should \textit{not} follow the path of the fantastical consciousness, for it would slacken with that sort of passive, internal charge.

The poetic consequences of Pound’s views on consciousness and technicity were not imperceptible in his own era. Upon the release of one of the earliest installments of \textit{The Cantos}, Dudley Fitts deftly employed Pound’s own framework to discuss the poet’s difficult work:

Good poetry, as Mr. Pound has pointed out, is always an assertion. It may be affirmative assertion (assent), or negative assertion (dissent), but it is always assertion. . . . Bad poetry is the poetry of inertia, or of complaint, or of evasion; confronted by the hateful, it denies the existence of the hateful, or it deplores the hateful, or it disregards the hateful and concentrates on something more agreeable. In any case, it denies reality; it ‘does nothing’; whereas good poetry is always the poetry of action.\textsuperscript{16}

Such a view of good and bad poetry as the poetry of action and inertia, respectively, was an extension of, or more exactly a variation on, Pound’s distinction between two types of consciousness. Faced with “the hateful,” a fantastic consciousness will retract from it, and contemplate its own separate world with the hateful suspended in a kind of wishful exile. The more protean germinal consciousness, however, would actively grapple with the hateful and risk its own identity by taking on its properties. I would not merely internalize the conflict, but rather engage its forms and flows.

\textsuperscript{15} This charge could also be called Orphic, in recognition of its potential for affecting and transmuting all of mind around it, evocative of the mythic powers of Orpheus himself, who entranced not only humans but also the vegetable and animal life with his poetic prowess.

This is a contrast both of aesthetic sensibilities and of technicities. For Pound, there was a sensibility that derived its powers from a supposed self-sufficiency (the ascetic/fantastic consciousness, existing in passive contemplation) and there was a sensibility charged by its engagement with a larger context (the chivalric/germinal consciousness, existing in socially-modulated and sexually-potent activity). Vitally, each sensibility was reliant upon certain technologies and techniques. A technology, however, did not necessarily determine a certain type of consciousness. Rather, the consciousness depended on the arrangements that were constructed through the use of that technology, and what traditions and practices to which that technology was linked.

An alternately appealing and frustrating feature of Pound’s historical framework is how it can lead us to numerous counterintuitive associations. Normally, we would expect an ascetic sensibility to be associated with a refusal of the physical particulars of a work. Viewed through Pound’s framework, however, an infatuation with the momentary sensual properties of a piece of music would be, in the age of modernism, what actually corresponded most closely to what he labeled as an ascetic, fantastic consciousness in medieval culture. In Pound’s formulation, a properly poetic body—understood in its most potently germinal capacity—was defined by the wider currents it was able to perceive, generate and receive, not by its self-enveloped indulgence in details.

In the medieval ideal of Pound’s initial study, a body best generated and received its dynamism by entering the larger social structure he identified as chivalric. The chivalric social structure generated its charge between external, and highly codified, masculine and feminine poles. It was not the pleasures of the fantastic consciousness that
Pound derided so much as it was the self-exile of that consciousness from the social field, and its static interiorization of a macrocosmos. Pound’s diatribes concerning modern norms of performance, his emphases on careful notation and his otherwise bewildering pronouncements concerning glands and bodily functions can all be traced back to these medieval visions, and will likely be illegible as anything other than Pound’s private idiosyncrasy without this historical framework.

Of course, the difficulty for Pound in his own time was to find an appropriate equivalent to his preferred chivalric situation in the midst of mass industry. But instead of proposing a simple replication of medieval chivalric customs or codes or gender roles in 20th century culture, Pound translated the dynamism of that culture into a technological trope, illustrating a contemporary manifestation of those earlier arrangements:

1st, the common electric machine, the glass disc and rotary brushes; 2nd, the wireless telegraph receiver. In the first we generate a current, or if you like, split up a static condition of things and produce a tension... In the telegraph we have a charged surface—produced in a cognate manner—attracting to it, or registering movements in the invisible aether.17

As Pound framed it, both the fantastic and germinal consciousness could find their expression not in monks or chivalric customs, but in new technologies. The distinction Pound made was not between a current technology and some purer ideal located in the past (or future), but between the differing arrangements new technologies could occasion. Pound’s first figure—the machine that ran on an internalized current—corresponded to his conception of an ascetic, monkish, fantastic consciousness: a self-contained stasis was

17 “Psychology and Troubadours,” The Spirit of Romance, p. 93.
split into a self-contained tension, creating a current that animated the machine but remained within it. The second figure—the telegraph, which linked itself to a charged surface—corresponded to Pound’s conception of the chivalric, germinal consciousness: instead of internalizing an individually dynamic tension, it gathered itself to an external dynamism, “registering movements in the invisible aether.”

The parallels Pound has sketched over these labyrinthine passages reward close attention. He has presented, for instance, the ecstatic monk as the genealogical anticipant of the internally-dynamic modern machine (and by extension, the modern musician), a fantastic creature that created inside itself a small cosmos that granted it energy; this small, internalized charge, or cosmos, was one that had been prepared for the machine (or monk, or musician) by the machine’s embedded context, but the machine was unable to adequately perceive or influence that context. If the medieval monk was the ancestor of the modern machine, we may expect the chivalric knight, or the courtly troubadour, to have been the anticipant of the modern telegraph. But for Pound, it was the chivalric code itself (and not the knight or maiden) that gathered and registered the larger flows of energy in such a way as to have been the telegraph of medieval culture:

Did this ‘chivalric love,’ this exotic, take on mediumistic properties? Stimulated by the color or quality of emotion, did that ‘color’ take on forms interpretive of divine order? Did it lead to an ‘exteriorization of the sensibility,’ and interpretation of the cosmos by feeling?  

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18 “Psychology and Troubadours,” The Spirit of Romance, p. 94.
We can perceive here perhaps the most important distinction between Pound’s fantastic and germinal consciousnesses. The fantastic consciousness, as in the persona of the monk, reconstructed a cosmos inside itself: it was an isolated, internalized consciousness, engaging itself in a fable of self-sufficiency. The germinal consciousness, as in the persona of the custom of chivalric love, resided in an externalized sensibility consisting of multiple participants. Analyzing this complex framework, it appears that a properly germinal, poetic consciousness would also be, to some degree, distributed across not only multiple participants, but also across the codes, institutions and even the technicities those participants employed.

To stage these distinctions, we can picture an ascetic monk writing poems, internalizing not only his surrounding cosmos, but also his addressees and readers, in poem after poem. We can also note how a technology of writing supports not only this particular practice but also its worldview, one that centers the poet in, or as, an imagined universe. Through its perceived origin in an apparently internalized worldview, we might be compelled to call the sensibility expressed in these poems as being the personal sensibility of an individual poet.

We can also picture a different poet, a courtly troubadour, composing or most likely adapting a poem-song, addressed to a specific lady, and performing it before a specific court. The poet has overtly gathered himself to the charged flows maintained through the masculine and feminine poles of the courtly love convention, and also to the conventions connecting poet, maiden and audience, and to how these varying dynamics may or may not relate to the current political and economic concerns of the court, and its
history. Because of the more externalized nature of the aural network the troubadour worked in, it should be easier for us to recognize the sensibility expressed in this poet’s work as being more than that poet’s personal property. In the case of the Troubadours, the sensibility expressed by a poem may in fact be most ably theorized as a productive of the creative interplay between the multiple participants of its conventions.

In these speculative sketches, both the monk’s and the troubadour’s poetic imaginations are equally grounded in specific technologies. The monkish poet utilizes writing as the storage-and-retrieval system that maintains his poetic environment, while the troubadour poet enters an aural system that maintains his connection to the dynamics of the court and the norms of his tradition. These poetic technologies are not exclusive from one another, of course; the monkish poet may hum a melody that becomes the basis of his poem, or he may speak the poem to a peer, or he may have found the seed of his poem in an overheard comment. Similarly, the troubadour poet may write down the lyrics on paper, or as Pound suggests, sketch out the tune for a kind of crib note. However compelling the particular artistic processes these imaginary poets engage in may or may not be, it is worth identifying how the poets connect their poetries with differing networks, how the technological foundations, aesthetic traditions and historical conditions of these networks may place pressures upon each other, and how these factors can become the subperceptible conditions in which poetic imaginations and sensibilities persist.

It is in view of these concerns the great Portuguese modernist poet Fernando Pessoa can stand forth in a media-focused critical paradigm as a most intriguing test case.
of the historical limits and imaginative capacities of writing as a poetic technology. From the perspective of Pound’s delineations, Pessoa can be glimpsed as a singular fusion of both the fantastic and the germinal consciousnesses. Almost completely unpublished and unread in his own lifetime, he truly resembled the fictional monkish poet who internalized his own cosmos. “I asked for very little from life,” he wrote in *The Book of Disquiet*, “and even this little was denied me.”¹⁹ In his own words, he pursued a “life of aesthetic quietism, to prevent the insults and humiliations of life and the living from getting any closer than a loathsome periphery of my sensibility, outside the walls of my conscious soul.”²⁰ But instead of solitarily expressing the details of this internalized self, Pessoa instead famously created scores of heteronyms in his work, with each heteronym a particular author who produced poems, letters and critical prose with a distinct personality, perspective and even, it seems at times, ontology.²¹

From one side of our mouths, we can say that Pessoa’s project was symptomatic of the fallen status of poetry in an early 20th century discourse network reliant on writing as its primary communicative technology, a symptom of the kind of separation and asceticism that a McLuhan or Kittler or David Antin would attribute to this network (“Sadly I write in my quiet room, alone as I have always been, alone as I will always

¹⁹ p. 16.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 267.

²¹ We can link up the hermitic Pessoa and the socially promiscuous Pound by considering the alternative identity and even sensibility Pound constructed so to endeavor the majority of his musical criticism. In Pound’s words, “‘William Atheling’ wrote fortnightly in the *New Age* from 1917-1920; he sympathized with Arnold Dolmetsch’ opinions, he might very well have thought that music ended with Bach. He existed in order that I might study the actual sounds produced by performing musicians. He wrote in the hope of making it possible or easier for the best performers to do their best work in public rather than their worst or their middling” (*Ezra Pound and Music*, p. 266).
be”). We can mourn Pessoa’s isolation and exile from the institutions and networks that may have granted him not only the audience that a great troubadour or Homeric bard enjoyed, but also the charged external currents that Pound identified as the most generative context for an actively poetic, germinal mind. From the other side of our mouths, however, we can not only praise the quality of the written poetry Pessoa left behind, but also the epic intellectual and imaginative project of creating *in his work itself* that very generative context he himself was denied. “I gave birth to my infinite being,” he wrote, “but I had to wrench myself out of me with forceps.”

That is, the magnificence of Pessoa was not simply that he could imagine multiple authors writing very different poems—and that these poems were so often compelling, beautiful and strange—but that he could create, inside his own writing, a *discursive network* amongst these heteronyms that generated, out of thin air, and through his heteronyms alone, the external poles that Pound deemed necessary for supporting and charging truly poetic activity. Pessoa not only wrote great poems; he also created, in his writing, the conditions by which great poetry could be written. And he employed for this task writing’s own technological genius for storing and maintaining its own sense of reality.

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22 Ibid. p. 16.

23 Ibid. p. 23.
Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of Pound’s historical sensibility is his tendency to identify unexpected affinities across widely divergent historical and cultural contexts. His ultra-modernist exhortation to “make it new,” for instance, he famously derived from markings found on the bathtub of a T’ang Dynasty emperor. Likewise, in his discussion of chivalric love and an “exteriorization of the sensibility” in medieval culture, Pound not only delineated between two potentially different kinds of poetic consciousnesses but he also seized upon a recurring vision for 20th century poets: the instrument of cosmic interpretation. In Pound’s study, chivalric love—as it is the condition guiding the practices of its varying participants—was itself a device for interpreting the cosmos by feeling, registering a divine order within a code that was maintained by a largely aural technicity. In addition to the cosmic instrument being a social order or code, or a specific technology (as in Jack Spicer’s image in the 1950s of the poet as a kind of radio, a conduit for messages broadcast from Mars), it could also be some gifted individual, a medium who accessed—like a telegraph operator with a sporadic connection to the beyond—cosmic messages and images on the behalf of the poet, as when William Butler Yeats utilized his young wife George as a spiritual-medium to produce *A Vision* (1925) and the poems that followed.

In each of these cases, however, there was a similar positioning of the poet between the source and the text of the poem, a positioning linking these scenarios to Pound’s notion of a germinal consciousness. In each instance, the poet was not a monkish creature generating and then expunging an internal world by contemplative and

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imaginative labor but stood rather as a kind of technician, experimenting with methods for reading and accurately transcribing larger movements. Even in my sketchy, fragmented genealogy linking together chivalric codes, spiritual mediums and the radio and telegraph in familial resemblance—each a kind of instrument of cosmic interpretation—we can see how the emergence of a new technology like the telegraph can make visible poetic tendencies that were already present in a culture but largely imperceptible prior to that technology’s emergence as a material embodiment of that particular tendency.25

That is, we can understand the telegraph as a platform for poetic speculation. In some cases, the speculation appears to be especially prescient concerning our current digital epoch. For surrealist Andre Breton, in an essay translated by Eugene Jolas and published in Jolas’ great modernist journal transition, the arrival of the telegraph signaled nothing less than a rearrangement of consciousness itself: “The expression ‘wireless’ has found its place too recently in our vocabulary, has had too rapid a career for much of the dream of our epoch not to go along with it, for it not to afford me one of those very rare and specifically new orientations of the mind.”26 For Breton, telegraphic communication, in its novelty and temporary strangeness, not only introduced new habits of language use but also allowed a momentary perspective on how signs—and to echo Charles Sanders Peirce, the mind itself is a sign among signs—typically associated and clustered. In their

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25 This, in fact, is one of the ways that new media criticism may prove to be extremely useful for analyzing 20th century literatures; not only may such criticism speak to the technologies and media that conditioned literature production, but its emphasis on digital networks and alternative models of authorship and readership may also provide us a framework for a more productive reading of experimental literary texts that refused assumed 20th century literary norms.

26 “Introduction to the Discourse on the Dearth of Reality” transition 5, August 1927.
normative employment, Breton claimed, words function as tethers, binding us to a limited view of the real:

Words are likely to group themselves according to individual affinities, which generally have the effect of making them re-create the world each instant upon its old model. Everything goes on, then, as though a concrete reality existed outside the individual . . .

Breton was concerned with the barriers that had been normalized in language use. In the inherited model Breton presented, there was a “concrete reality” that existed outside an individual as there was also a more diaphanous reality inside that individual. Normative modern thought, in its positing of an external reality as an objective reality, a reality measured not by humans but by technologies (the time-clock, the measuring stick), also managed to posit, in the same gesture, a correspondingly unreal internal reality—a perspective, or mind—that, because it could not be explicitly verified by an instrument or rendered into literal significance, was instantly suspicious, even illegitimate.

So we can note on one hand that an accumulation of mechanical processes laid the ground for an inner/outer duality, wherein an external reality was deemed stable and real because it could be mined for data while an inner reality that refused such informational status began to seem increasingly unreal. On the other hand, we can also note how a new technology like the telegraph, by the very novelty of its dynamic, could seem to embody processes that would otherwise be conceived as internal, thereby legitimizing those processes, making them legible.
I am thinking here along the lines of the experimental filmmaker Stan Brakhage’s observation that “every machine people invent is nothing more than an extension of their innards,” an outlook that must be partnered with an acknowledgement that one’s “innards” also come to be re-realized through the invention of new media and machines. The introduction of the telegraph prepared the ground for a realization of human capacities and faculties that were there all along but were left largely unrecognizable for their lack of an external equivalent. But once an external equivalent to inner potentialities became instantiated, as in the case of the telegraph, the solid barrier between inner and outer realities also became, for a moment, less stable.

For Norman O. Brown, “The soul (self) we call our own is an illusion . . . the ego is a bit of the outside world swallowed, introjected; or rather a bit of the outside world that we insist on pretending we have swallowed.” To perceive that psychological or cognitive processes cannot be quarantined as always internal would be to destabilize the boundary between inner and outer realities. As Brown put it, “[t]o give up boundaries is to give up the reality-principle . . . a false boundary drawn between inside and outside; subject and object; real and imaginary; physical and mental.” Echoing Pound’s fantastic/germinal consciousness construct, and anticipating the later work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Brown labeled this blurring of supposed inner and outer realities as schizophrenic: “Schizophrenics are suffering from the truth” (159). Moving away from “the Lockean and Cartesian notion of human experience as consisting of

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27 Love’s Body, p. 144.

28 Ibid. 149-50.
mental events, inside the mind, and distinct from external, material reality” (153), Brown posited a position uncannily similar to Pound’s germinal construct, a position that was also anticipatory of contemporary precepts of distributive cognition:

Schizophrenic thought is “adualistic”; lack of ego-boundaries makes it impossible to set limits to the process of identification with the environment. The schizophrenic world is one of mystical participation; an “indescribable extension of inner sense”; “uncanny feelings of reference”; occult psychosomatic influences and powers; currents of electricity, or sexual attraction—action at a distance.29

Juxtaposing this adualistic perspective to the Cartesian or Lockean boundary, that single vision of reality separating the inner and the outer, Brown identified such a limited cognitive positioning as one that tended towards literal interpretation, a pursuit of real meanings and “[s]elf-evident truths of natural reason” that “shine all the time and require no breakthrough, no break in time.”30 For Brown, this mode of interpretation was a defining characteristic of the “modern historical consciousness,” one that aimed “to establish for historical events a single simple, solid, and constant meaning—what really happened,” and that such an imposed constancy has “become the motor of the Ph.D. factory, mechanical literalism in action.”31 Entertaining Brown’s skepticism concerning the mechanisms underpinning academia, and Breton’s appraisal of how language habits “re-create the world each instant upon its old model,” we may also interrogate how discursive and technological networks prepare the ground for the continuation of such

29 Ibid. p. 159.
30 Ibid. p. 217.
31 Love’s Body, p. 198.
interpretive practices, wherein the processes of mind are limited by our assumption that they are individual, internal and unreal.

We may also maintain some skepticism concerning the current academic enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity if the subjectivity or consciousness that has been projected as discipline-crossing maintains a static model of mind in its pursuit of literal meanings, those “packaged commodities for passive consumers.” Often in academia, it is as though we are projecting the supposedly interdisciplinary consciousness as some fantastical entity, one that grazes disparate fields of research and critique without ever having its own processes and mechanisms troubled by those fields. In many academic pursuits, it seems that the processes and mechanisms of inquiry remain safely interior and untouched, while each field of analysis retains its status as concrete and perpetually external.

In protest of such literalness, Brown suggested an alternative mechanism for the generation of meaning:

Meaning is a continuous creation, out of nothing and returning to nothingness. If it is not evanescent it is not alive. Everything is symbolic, is transitory; is unstable. The consolidation of meaning makes idols; established meanings have turned to stone. Cf. Bachelard, *La Poetique de l’espace*, 67.

Meaning is not in things but in between; in the iridescence, the interplay; in the interconnections; at the intersections, at the crossroads. Meaning is transitional as it is transitory; in the puns or bridges, the correspondence. Cf. Richard, *Mallarme*, 551. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision*, 118.  

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32 Ibid. p. 246.

33 *Love’s Body*, p. 247. I have maintained Brown’s unique method of footnoting individual paragraphs in his text.
If we entertain the consequences McLuhan and others attributed to the transition from an oral to a written culture, we can also see a protest against a perceived immutability of writing as a technology as a guiding force behind Brown’s and Breton’s assertions. For Breton, the establishment of wireless communication introduced new linguistic affinities and models for correspondence, disrupting the normative, largely imperceptible written tendency to “re-create the world each instant upon its old model.” In the modernist period, this new wireless technology also introduced an adjacent perplexity in general. Breton saw this perplexity as a temporary opening, a momentary gap in normalcy wherein select portions of a culture’s funded experience—for Richard Rorty, “those beliefs which are not at the moment being challenged, because they present no problems and no one has bothered to think of alternatives to them”34—had the potential to be challenged, or even transformed, as the culture attempted to incorporate the new media into its characteristic practices.

Breton also noted how a plane of mass agreement in signification could be expressed in a mass coordination of movement and action. “Things said over and over again today meet a solid barrier,” wrote Breton. “They have riveted us to this vulgar universe. It is from them we have acquired this taste for money, these constraining fears, this feeling for the native land, this horror of our destiny.”35 As opposed to a strict Taylorization of communication, in Breton’s view telegraphic communication introduced a new patterning within signification, opening up a new logic for how language could

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34 Consequences of Pragmatism, p. 13.
communicate across previously cleft regions of geography and experience. France and America, for instance, could be brought into a communicative simultaneity inconceivable prior to the telegraph’s arrival. This is not to say that the new technology determined a new view of reality, but rather that the acceptance and use of this new technology introduced a moment wherein the normative bounds of what was permissible under the sign of reality was revised.

It was also an opportunity to perceive the unstated assumptions that accompanied the use of media in general. This perception could occur, for instance, in the struggle to translate the norms and practices of a familiar medium into the context of a new one. Marshall McLuhan took up a similar theme:

[H]ow do we become aware of the effects of alphabet or print or telegraph in shaping our behaviour? For it is absurd and ignoble to be shaped by such means. Knowledge does not extend but restrict the areas of determinism. And the influence of unexamined assumptions derived from technology leads quite unnecessarily to maximal determinism in human life. Emancipation from that trap is the goal of all education.36

I would argue that it is advisable to not read Breton and McLuhan as advocates of some technological entry into a terminal state of liberation. Cultures certainly appear to congeal themselves back into familiarity for their participants, and it is difficult to imagine some perfected technology determining a perpetual state of defamiliarization. And though McLuhan has often been critiqued as a theorist of technological determinism, throughout his work—and even in the above quotation—he often identified the determination of

behavior by technology as an *unnecessary* occurrence. The emancipation he proposed was not the utilization of some ideal technology of the past or future, as if each medium could be a distinct locale of residence. Rather, McLuhan outlined a creative perspective by which an individual, or even a culture, could perceive and translate the norms of technologies that both compete and coordinate amongst one another. As McLuhan wrote,

> The main advantage in translation is the creative effort it fosters, as Ezra Pound spent his life in telling and illustrating. And culture that is engaged in translating itself from one radical mode such as the auditory, into another mode like the visual, is bound to be in a creative ferment, as was classical Greece or the Renaissance. But our own time is an even more massive instance of such ferment, and just because of such “translation.”

The widespread use of the wireless telegraph, and the practices it fostered, was not only the introduction of a new medium but also an occasion for translating telegraphic effects and properties back into the written practices of the Gutenberg galaxy. The new technology also suggested alternative models for human faculties, new maps for the domains of those faculties, and new models and measures for human interaction. This is why N. Katherine Hayles’ proposed media-specific analysis, if focused exclusively on the *instantiation* of a work in a specific media, covers over much of the subterranean ferment that accompanies the introduction of new media and technologies, missing the deepest, most interesting twists of the media story.  

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37 *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, p. 72.

In telegraphic practice, for instance, language could suddenly be seen as capable of spanning disparate geographies instantaneously, producing effects of collective simultaneity that McLuhan identified as affinitive to a mythic mind. Through Breton, we can read how the concept of wireless communication was one of multiple modern phenomena that necessitated a surrealist sensibility, one that could yoke together and make simultaneous the realms of dreams and wakefulness, the present, future and past all together: “It perhaps remains only for us to hurl upon the ruins of the ancient world the foundations of our new terrestrial paradise.” However exaggerated this notion of a terrestrial paradise may have been, it is important to see it was not simply how language was instantiated in a medium like telegraphic communication that influenced a surrealist poetic practice, but that the technology itself provided a model for poetic use. That is, the dynamic of the telegraph was brought into the domain of plain, book-bound writing, to delirious (in the case of the Surrealists) effect.

In the case of the ancient world and the new terrestrial paradise of Breton’s statement, normative linear assumptions concerning the past and present are very much destabilized when the past and present are brought into telegraphic simultaneity. Instead of a linear progression, Breton’s statement projected the ancient world and his present one as engaged in a creative reciprocity, communicating in novel instantaneity, like France and the United States suddenly being able to communicate through the immediacy of the telegraph. As Jerome Rothenberg has put it, this surrealist ability to “hold or

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39 “Introduction to the Discourse of the Dearth of Reality.”
incorporate diverse chronologies simultaneously (‘non-linearly,’ if you want to use McLuhan)” produced what Rothenberg called an experimental condition.

Rothenberg attributes this experimental condition not only to modern, Western, technologically-saturated societies but to tribal and/or ancient societies as well. This experimental condition of non-linearity has marked these earlier aural networks “not [as] antiquarian but, as I understand the term, essentially ‘modern.’”40 I would argue that the correspondence Rothenberg has posited here should prompt us to reevaluate the motivations normally attributed to the widespread modernist interest in tribal and “primitive” (Rothenberg: “Primitive means complex”) art. That is, we should entertain the possibility that, for many modernists, an interest in tribal art was primarily a technical interest, founded on their curiosity about how artworks could function in cultures supported by technological systems that allowed a similar feeling for time, or being itself, as the modern feeling.

It may now be easier to imagine why new technologies have been hailed by certain poets and thinkers for their capacity to renew ancient linguistic properties—such as the sensation of a mythic connectivity—which had been rendered obsolete, it seemed, by the proliferation of the technical system of writing. Again, McLuhan illustrated how such a restorative process might occur:

Paradoxically, it was not through the book but through the development of the mass press, especially the telegraph press, that poets found the artistic keys to the world of simultaneity, or of modern myth. It was in the format of the daily press that Rimbaud and Mallarme discovered the means of rendering the interplay of all the

40 Pre-Faces, pp. 26-7.
functions of what Coleridge called the “esemplastic” imagination. For the popular press offers no single vision, no point of view, but a mosaic of the postures of the collective consciousness, as Mallarme proclaimed. Yet these modes of collective or tribal consciousness proliferating in the telegraphic (simultaneous) press, remain uncongenial and opaque to the bookmen locked in “single vision and Newton’s sleep.”

For McLuhan, the telegraph suggested properties of collective simultaneity that were previously thought to be the exclusive domain of oral, tribal cultures. Significantly, this recognition did not prompt Rimbaud or Mallarme to abandon writing poetry and to undertake work in a telegraphic or oral medium. If we were to follow Hayles’ train of thought, Rimbaud’s and Mallarme’s decision to still work in the outmoded format of the book would seem like a symptom of their nostalgia. But if we shrug off Hayles’ paradigm, we can instead see how Rimbaud and Mallarme creatively translated the effects they perceived in a new medium (the telegraph) back into their “old” medium (the written poem). Instead of a linear progression from oral to written to telegraphic communication, with each new medium absorbing and replacing the prior one, McLuhan has presented Rimbaud and Mallarme undertaking a much richer, more complicated practice. In their creative acts of perception and expression, the poets used the emergence of telegraphic communication as a way to mediate between oral and written practices, constructing a potentially rich and perplexing simultaneity between these modes. They identified an affinity between the collective subject suggested by both oral and telegraphic modes of communication, and then endeavored to translate the mythic, unifying imaginative properties of these media back into their writing.

So far, in this quick outlining of the telegraph as a model for modernist literary production, I have focused on properties of simultaneity and collectivity poets and thinkers perceived in this new technology, as well as the telegraph’s modeling of a technical means to cosmic interpretation. My emphasis has been on how the telegraph functioned as a poetic model. Poets could look to this technology whenever they framed themselves as primarily technicians, as precision-minded artists who notated and arranged otherwise imperceptible forms in the cultural ether. It seems inevitable, therefore, that a poet such as Pound would touch upon the telegraph repeatedly as a poetic model.

But I have yet to address the literary influence of how words themselves were instantiated in the telegraphic medium, the focus suggested by Hayles’ influential critical paradigm. Perhaps the most famous example along these lines has been FT Marinetti’s embrace of a “telegraphic lyricism” in his proposed Futurist practice, the construction of an aesthetic sensibility that prioritized the speed of exchange. Such a sensibility, for Marinetti, also unleashed a corresponding emphasis on the future and a “horror of anything old or well known.” For Marinetti, the poetic significance of the telegraph was that it imposed on reporters and correspondents the need for rapidity and brevity in their reports, replicating “the relationships that the poet and his audiences have had over many centuries.” But although the relationship between poet and audience was one with centuries of precedent, what Marinetti suggested was “a swift lyricism, brutal and

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43 “Destruction of Syntax,” p. 123
immediate, a lyricism which to all our predecessors would have seemed antipoetical, a telegraphic lyricism that bears not the slightest hint of books but, as much as possible, the taste of life.”

This taste of life was to be accomplished through a condensation of images, an assertion of unexplained associations between those images and an employment of synaesthetic properties of language, emphasizing the tactile experience of signs over their literal meanings and connotations.

But even in Marinetti’s explicitly telegraphic poetics, we can see how the introduction of the telegraph served as a platform for an active poetic reconsideration, and not just of how a text could be instantiated. For Marinetti, the telegraph suggested not only a new poetic style but also of a basis for a fundamental reconsideration of the function of poetry itself. It was not an additive to a uni-directional practice of book-bound writing but rather an interjection of perplexity and possibility that influenced poetic production in an omni-directional manner. Mine is far from a thorough literary history of the telegraph, of course—see Timothy C. Campbell’s recent *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi* for a rigorously theorized and carefully detailed consideration of the general topic of the telegraph and its influence on modernist literary production. Rather, I am staging various readings of the importance of wireless writing in literary production as a counterpoint to Hayles’ influential proposal concerning the analysis of digital textuality, a proposal that I do not feel adequately addresses the most interesting media interactions of the Modernist period.

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If one were to narrow one’s focus to the instantiation of language in telegraphic communication, and its corresponding material properties, and then extend that analysis to the replication of those telegraphic properties in literary works—this is my interpretation of Hayles’ proposed media-specific analysis paradigm—one would likely end up focusing only on Marinetti’s most explicit application of telegraphic properties in his work, limiting the critical scope to those texts that “looked” or “sounded” telegraphic. Perhaps one would undergo a search for writers who made creative use of actual telegrams, as one might also illustrate one’s thesis by analyzing how telegraphic mechanisms were represented in modernist texts, both through new typographical effects and in works that showed the telegraph at work.

Utilizing such a paradigm, however, one would surely miss the influence of the telegraph on the poetic imagination itself, as briefly touched upon in the above practices of Mallarme, Rimbaud, Breton and Pound. In the media specific analysis paradigm, as it currently stands, these writers would be exiled as old media artists, trapped within the same “somnolence” that Hayles has claimed “five hundred years of print” have lulled literary studies into.45 In over-privileging the presentation of works over the logics of production and perspective that inform them, our application of Hayles’ media-specific analysis to telegraphic writing would construct a skewed vision of not only the literary practices of the time, but also a limited notion of the potencies telegraphic communication itself offered the culture at large.

45 “The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis,” p. 68.
While Hayles has acknowledged, via Bolter and Grusin’s *Remediation*, that “media constantly engage in a recursive dynamic of imitating each other, incorporating aspects of competing media into themselves while simultaneously flaunting the advantages that their own forms of mediation offer,” her analysis appears to be largely page and/or screen bound. Hayles has focused on how digital works replicate bookish features like bookmarks and paperclips, or how books produced in the digital age replicate hyper-textual links or the visual layout of web pages. Among the essential concerns Hayles’ proposed model has not addressed are: shifts in the perceived purposes of literary texts; how those texts have endeavored an author’s emotive, imaginative and intellectual legitimacy; the emphases on particular human senses (such as sight or hearing) and faculties (like imagination or memory) a text has projected for its participants; the processes of meaning-making a text has undertaken; the ideal reader or “reader” projected by a text;\(^\text{46}\) the social arrangements a text ends contesting, projecting, revising, confusing or confirming.

3. We can return to Pound in our exploration of how new technologies and media may condition literary production, even as those literary productions become indexical signs by which we read the promises and threats that accompany the introduction of such media and technologies. Pound’s telegraph—and the unique medieval genealogy he

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\(^{46}\) As in the cases of Havelock’s *mousike* convention or more performative and ritualistic texts, contemporary notions of readership do not adequately address the kinds of participation summoned by a work.
posited for its interpretive capacity—was a provocative and historically rich model for the modern artist, whom Pound famously referred to as the “antennae of the race.” In Pound’s figure of the poet-as-registrant, we can see a contradictory image: the famously megalomaniac Pound as a proponent for a poetics that placed the poet not as a self-contained world but rather as the temporary nexus where other networks could mingle.

Adopting Pound’s notions, one can gauge the fantastic or germinal tendencies of an entity by noting how that entity directs his, her or its attention. “It is as though Pound never had illusion, was born without an ear of his own, was, instead, an extraordinary ear of an era,” Charles Olson wrote, focusing on Pound’s aural capacities, “and did the listening for a whole time, the sharpest sort of listening, from Dante down.”47 We can contrast the epochal listening Olson posited here—where Pound did not have an ear of his own but rather performed “the listening for a whole time”—to a more private approach, one that would focus on the momentary sensual pleasures of a work, as in the cartoonish audience member Pound sketched in “Machine Art.” As Pound imagined a modern concert, he complained that the “fat lady in the box in front of one is jumping up and down on her seat saying: ‘It’s so exciting, it’s so exciting, so exciting, it’s . . .’ and the rest is lost in a storm of jeers, cheers, etc.”48

Setting aside for now the ghastly gendering of the image (which simply exaggerated Adorno’s gendered distinction between the majestic Beethoven and the trivial bikini), we can note that it is neither the woman’s approval or disapproval that


48 “Machine Art,” p. 79.
Pound has parodied here—this fat lady “likes” the work—but rather how she resided within her powers of attention, and where that attention was directed. Pound felt that the modern virtuoso musician and conductor similarly resided within an isolated sensuousness; they were not grand organizers of forms but mere maestros of musical rhetoric, possessors of a miniaturized, frivolous virtuosity that existed only on the note-by-note plane its supposed virtue typically deformed:

The sin against the spirit of the work always begins with a sin against its letter and leads to the endless follies which an ever-flourishing literature in the worst taste does its best to sanction. Thus it follows that a crescendo, as well known, is always accompanied by a speeding up of movement, while a slowing down never fails to accompany a diminuendo. The superfluous is refined upon; a piano, piano pianissimo is delicately sought after; great pride is taken in perfecting useless nuances — a concern that usually goes hand in hand with inaccurate rhythm . . . These are just so many practices dear to superficial minds forever avid for, and satisfied with, an immediate and facile success that flatters the vanity of the person who obtains it and perverts the taste of those who applaud it.49

In this Poundian attack on the facile successes of modern performance, Igor Stravinsky framed one of the difficulties for the modernist musical sensibility. For any composer who took rhythm as a realm of exploration, the logistical difficulty in expressing that exploration was formidable: any performance was reliant upon modern conductors and performers, those very individuals who spontaneously ramped up every crescendo into bombast.

For Pound and Stravinsky, modern musicians performed as if the rhythms of a new work had been decided upon prior even to its composition. The unacknowledged

rhythmic agreement between the typical modern performer and the typical modern audience member was one that controlled expectations about the proper contours, proportions and tempos of a performance. The paradoxical situation for a modernist composer like Stravinsky or Antheil was that their rhythmic explorations and innovations—defining features of their aesthetic sensibilities—were those aspects most likely to be normalized by the modern musician’s pursuit of a superficially successful performance.

Pound maintained, however, that the main structure itself could still be expressed, in spite of the note-by-note mediation of the actual performers. To express that structure, however, a composer would need to not only notate carefully but also re-theorize his or her fundamental orientation concerning composition. Pound explained this notion by distinguishing between sensibilities. In what Pound called the Wagnerian approach,

you confuse the spectator by smacking as many of his senses as possible at every possible moment, this prevents his noting anything with unusual lucidity, but you may fluster or excite him to the point of making him receptive; i.e., you may slip over an emotion, or you may sell him a rubber doll.  

A Vorticist sensibility, however, which had been “approved by [Constantin] Brancusi, [Wyndham] Lewis,” zeroed in on the apperception of form. As much as it was an escape from the uncertainties of modern performance, a turn to the totality of form was also for Pound a turn to the most ambitious plane of aesthetic design: “We had also said that the organization of form is a much more active and energetic occupation than copying the play of light on a haystack; and, elsewhere, that there is in music a fault corresponding to

50 “George Antheil,” Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony, p. 38.
the fault of verbosity in writing.” 51 This faulty verbosity was essentially a weakness for a sentimental musical rhetoric, a reliance on verbose norms whereby one’s design would be contained by the cultured immediacies of the occasion. This would result in the continual isolation of the aesthetic crowd within its unexamined, moment-by-moment existence, the musical equivalent in Pound’s time of a painter meekly rendering the play of light upon a nostalgically pastoral haystack, ignoring the social-industrial upheavals and innovations of his or her own era.

It is necessary to emphasize here that the pastoral and industrial were not posited as simply differing subject matters; more crucially, they each promote conditions for differing modes of perception. Following Pound’s lead, modernists could still legitimately concern themselves with a haystack but they would necessarily have to perceive that object differently than it had been by prior generations who perceived it under differing conditions. For a ready example of how a pastoral image could still be rendered through a modernist sensibility, we can consider Pound’s most famous poem, “In a Station of the Metro”:

The apparition of these faces in a crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

These petals have not been presented in their imagistic, isolated splendor (Pound is not “copying the play of light” upon the petals), but have rather been transmuted (via cinematic juxtaposition) into the ghostly image of a crowd of faces inside an underground railway station. These two realms—the pastoral and the industrial—have been suspended

by the poem in a complex formal relation, where corresponding images (petals and faces, for instance) are not only juxtaposed as different and similar (in a familiar metaphoric logic, the petals are fully petals as they are also faces, and vice versa) but have also been presented as the features of a single fused image. That is, it is not just two separate but identical images that the poem presents but also the shape of an underlying affinity between those two images. Pound’s poem is fully modernist when we consider that it is the relationship between these two images that is the true subject matter of the poem.

One can of course imagine how Pound’s strawman poet or artist would render the petals (or faces) of his famous poem. Instead of locating emotion in the jettying affinities that join the spent petals and the subterranean faces together as a single aesthetic thought, Pound’s typical poet or artist would become infatuated with the expressive details of a single face or petal, paying no attention to possible formal correspondences located outside that particular object’s normative milieu. As a poet focused on formal relation, Pound considered himself handicapped by the previous epoch’s conditioning of the aesthetic faculties of his potential audience. The connections Pound made across varying strata of history and experience would be largely imperceptible to a reader who (like the modern musician) had been trained to focus only on the luxurious details of isolated specimens of aesthetic enjoyment, or on the play of light upon those specimens.

In the world of music, the tendency to a Wagnerian practice also conditioned the musicians and conductors, prompting them to emphasize the immediately sensational potential of a work at the expense of its total form. The critical attack against such a
bombastic expressiveness and its effect on the perception of a totality found its most
exact voicing through Adorno:

Every detail [. . .] gets its true weight only by its relation to the whole, as revealed
finally by the symphonic process. Structurally, one hears the first bar of a
Beethoven symphonic movement only at the very moment when one hears the last
bar. Romanticism failed to produce symphonic works of this exacting character
because the increase in importance of the expressive detail as against the whole,
rendered impossible the determination of every moment by the totality.52

In his poetry, Pound seized upon details not as instances of Wagnerian expressiveness but
as flashes of larger, otherwise imperceptible wholes; in his view, these details are less
expressive than luminous. In Hugh Kenner’s exquisite gloss, “Luminous Details are the
transcendentals in an array of facts: not merely ‘significant’ nor ‘symptomatic’ in the
manner of most facts, but capable of giving one ‘a sudden insight into circumjacent
conditions, into their causes, their effects, into sequence, and law.” Continuing, Kenner
has informed us that these luminous details “are ‘patterned integrities’ which transferred
out of their context of origin retain their power to enlighten us. They have this power
because, as men came to understand early in the 20th Century, all realities whatever are
patterned energies. If mass is energy (Einstein), then all matter exemplifies
knottings . . .”53 In a Poundian formulation, the luminous detail directs attention to the
patterned energies of life, while the luxurious, Wagnerian detail, however, would simply
impede such attentiveness.

52 “The Radio Symphony,” Essays on Music, p. 255. A note: I have yet to fully theorize Pound’s possible
role as a mediating figure between the sensibilities of Stravinsky and his great critical tormentor Adorno.

53 The Pound Era, pp. 152-3.
Because Pound refused the immediately expressive detail, he solicited a persistent strain of criticism that has continued to shadow Pound’s work, especially in those critiques in which his poetry has been accused of an elevated superficiality. The influential late modernist critic R.P. Blackmur, one of the most insightful interrogators of Pound’s work, criticized the poet’s reliance on “the anecdotal method.” By this, Blackmur referenced Pound’s tendency to notate related occurrences across millennia, and to associate his “particles” in “indefinable but necessary association” instead of syllogistic logic, instead of narrative, and instead of plot. He leaves in disuse devices which would by their traditional force have ensured the strong and valuable effect of parade, of things coming one after another in an order more or less predictable by the reader’s aroused expectation, and has chosen rather to depend on the device of a single method—the method of free ideogrammatic association.

For Blackmur, Pound over-relied on the condensed, telegraphic anecdote. Because he merely noted that something occurred (as opposed to attempting to capture and express the felt experience of an occurrence), and because he tended toward “deliberate disconnectedness, this art of a thing continually alluding to itself, continually breaking off short,” Blackmur regarded Pound’s *The Cantos* as an unsuccessfully expressive, uncongealed aesthetic whole. Indeed, there is little in Pound’s epic that suggests a process of events following one another in a linear or dramatically adhesive manner. Returning to Pound’s original source for his ideogrammatic method, Ernest Fenollosa’s *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, written, in Pound’s words, “some time before

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54 “Masks of Ezra Pound,” *Form and Value in Modern Poetry*, p. 96.


56 “Masks of Ezra Pound,” p. 96.
[Fenollosa’s] death in 1908,”57 one is reminded of the insights that informed Pound’s poetic methodology:

A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things . . . 58

Criticizing Pound’s celebrated longer poem *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (1920), Blackmur contrasted it with what he considered a superior work, Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919). “We know that this Homage is a portrait not a photograph,” Blackmur wrote, “the voice a new recital not a dictaphone record.”59 Though Blackmur relied on an easy binary in which more time-tested techniques of expression (a painted portrait, a performed recital) were assuredly finer channels for art than newer technologies (a photograph, a dictaphone record), he was not simply a technological reactionary. Blackmur’s overarching thesis was that Pound succeeded as a superior, elegant craftsman. Even though this elegance was a consistent trait across his body of work, for Blackmur the success or failure of Pound’s poetry ultimately depended upon the quality of his sources. Perhaps the most commonplace opinion concerning Pound, that his greatest achievements were not the poems but the translations, has rested upon such an assertion, that when supplying his own material, Pound was a lesser artist.

57 *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed. Pound, p. 3
58 *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, p. 10.
59 “Masks of Ezra Pound,” p. 90.
In Blackmur’s view, even in his most personal poems, “Pound behaves as if he were translating; as if there were, somewhere, an original to which [the poem] must conform.”

For Blackmur, *Homage to Sextus Propertius* was superior to *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* not because of its superior craftsmanship (they were equally superb in this respect) but because the object to which the *Homage* corresponded (Propertius’ elegies) was both more emotionally available and was constructed of sturdier human substance. By contrast, for Blackmur *Mauberly* faltered because it was based upon Pound’s own experiences. The original on which the poem was based—Pound’s experience of the aesthetic climate in London, and his eventual withdrawal—remained inaccessible, even within the poem. This lack of access was of supreme significance for Blackmur, as Pound’s method did not allow him to recreate his experiences for the reader. Rather, the poem simply alluded to experiences (along with corresponding experiences in the cultural past): “Nothing is based on sensation, very little on direct feeling or vision, and the emotion is conventional, agreed upon, or given beforehand. What Mr. Pound does is to support his theme with the buttress of allusion.”

Blackmur’s appraisals, by their very exactness, illustrated Pound’s purposeful divergence from aesthetic norms of his time. In his critique, Blackmur kept form and content as separate aesthetic categories, privileging content as the source of emotion. Though Pound was nearly always formally impeccable in Blackmur’s view, the fluctuations in the quality of his content determined the ultimate success of his poems.

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60 “Masks of Ezra Pound,” p. 85.

61 “Masks of Ezra Pound,” p. 85.
Pound, of course, operated with a differing sensibility: he asserted form itself as the primary conductor of emotion. Blackmur even accused Pound of the same flaw that Pound and Russolo identified in modern musical performance, that in his poems, “the emotion is conventional, agreed upon, or given beforehand.” Blackmur identified the captured experience itself as the source of emotion, and his frustration arose from Pound’s tendency to simply note—like a telegraphic correspondent or stenographer—that experiences occurred, without recreating those experiences. But because Pound identified the formal patterning of his material as the source of poetic emotion, it was not the experiences themselves that were designed to provoke emotion but rather the aesthetic and inventive manner by which the poem connected those experiences.

If one accept music or poetry as their own realities, then the power of the work should not reside within its re-dramatization of an experience based on an outside reality, but rather within the patterns and rhythms of its own unfolding. Blackmur, however, asserted that the unavailability of Pound’s sources restricted a reader’s capacity for measuring the justness of his aesthetic decisions; without access to the reality outside of the text, “the poem flows into the medium and is lost in it, like water in sand.”

Blackmur’s elegant phrasing here tells us precisely where his sensibility and Pound’s diverged. Blackmur’s image of self-dissolution and flow, which the critic intends as a critique, we might assume to also be, from Pound’s own views, a kind of flattery, as when

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Hugh Kenner picks up a similar image to capture the power of a Poundian vortex which is “not the water but a patterned energy made visible by the water.”

Blackmur’s dissatisfaction with Pound’s emotional content appeared to be inevitable. Blackmur identified sensation and direct vision as the sources of emotion. Viewed through Pound’s historical-technological framework, Blackmur relied upon unstated biases he inherited from the Romantic era: a privileging of subject matter and the luxurious detail over form and rhythm for expressing emotion, as well as a positing of a private, as opposed to an epochal, attentiveness as the proper measuring of such emotion. Such emotions, we might state with Poundian exaggeration, will be reduced to only what a particular individual believes he or she sees and feels at a certain instant, regardless whether she or he is encountering Beethoven or a bikini, regardless of his or her placement within trajectories linking the present to the past and the future. It would be a poetics of simple location.

Pound thought of the poet as an antennae. Eager to neither rely on a Wagnerian rhetoric nor to prop up “particularized instance[s] of a plot, myth, attitude, or convention” as a method for formal unity, Pound instead attempted to interpret the cosmos by a formal feeling, so to register movements in an otherwise invisible ether. His anecdotal method was put to this use, notating as precisely as possible larger movements of history, which were revealed through specific details. “The history of a culture,” Pound wrote, “is the history of ideas going into action.” The anecdotes then, in their ideogrammatic

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63 The Pound Era, p. 146.

64 “Masks of Ezra Pound,” p. 85.

65 Guide to Kulchur, p. 44.
arrangement—in Pound’s poetry, such anecdotes stood forth as “the meeting points, of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots”—revealed this history of ideas, formally placed in a kind of suspended simultaneity, demonstrating how these ideas have gone into action.

Blackmur critiqued Pound for not enacting poetic devices that produced “the strong and valuable effect of parade, of things coming one after another in an order more or less predictable by the reader’s aroused expectation.” For Pound, however, it was precisely this expected linearity within textbook histories that had to be contested. “We do NOT know the past in chronological sequence,” he wrote. “It may be convenient to lay it out anesthetized on the table with dates pasted on here and there, but what we know we know by ripples and spirals eddying out from us and from our own time.”

Pound’s intention was clear, to “write history by tracing ideas, exposing the growth of a concept.” In order to trace these concepts, Pound staged a simultaneity of details, each acquiring its own weight through its relation to a totality the poem alone could perceive. Pound’s difficult poetic style, focused not on expressive particulars but on the connections formalized between luminous details, as his proposed solution to a knot of very specific historical, technical and aesthetic problems. The originality of Pound’s style may have derived as much from his ability to perceive those problems as from the innovative aesthetic strategies he developed as their possible solution.

66 Guide to Kulchur, p. 60.
67 Guide to Kulchur, p. 60.
Three:  
Pound’s ‘Machine Art,’ Part Three:  
The Mastery Channel

1. Ezra Pound’s most vigorously expressed his intuitions regarding time and technology when he promoted the work of the young “bad boy of music,” George Antheil (born in 1900 in New Jersey) and Antheil’s radically mechanical and rhythmic music, especially his notorious Ballet Mécanique (1924). Pound saw Antheil’s work as the forceful push of the Vorticist aesthetic into the terrain of musical composition. Like kindred souls Wyndham Lewis, Constantin Brancusi and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Antheil’s aesthetic aimed at focusing the mind on a given definition of form, or rhythm, so intensely that it becomes not only more aware of that given form, but more sensitive to all other forms, rhythms, defined planes, or masses.

It is a scaling of eye-balls, a castigating or purging of aural cortices; a sharpening of verbal apperceptions. It is by no means an emollient.¹

For Daniel Albright, the Modernist formal precision Pound attributed to Antheil was “a kind of scalpel, delicately teasing the perceptual nerves out of the usual matrix of fat and grease and into an acute tingle.”² Among Pound’s significant contributions to any discussion of modernist technophilia was his tendency to frame the aesthetic exploration of mechanical qualities (such as Antheil’s use of mechanical rhythms) as something more than a glorification of technology as technology. In a Poundian rhetoric, machines and

¹ “George Antheil,” Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony, p. 44-5.
machinic qualities allow an artist to conjure a more precise and therefore more dynamic
form. Whatever their attitudes towards technology at large, Pound and Antheil in their art
and thought were experimenting with a new attentiveness to (in their terms) horizontality
(rhythm) and verticality (tone). In Pound’s view, Antheil used mechanical rhythms in
order to address an aesthetic problem, one that he inherited from the Romantics: a
slackened feel for time. For those of us looking back to the Modernist moment to explore
the pressures new technologies placed on the poetic imagination, instead of discussing
the Vorticist aesthetic as an attempt to merely keep up with technological innovation, it
would be more accurate to discuss it as the creative interplay of material innovation and
aesthetic tradition. We should read Pound’s and Antheil’s pronouncements with an eye to
how technology and art each come to be transformed when one enters the other’s
normative domain.

In Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi, Timothy C. Campbell has considered
the same “purging of aural cortices” passage from Pound that Albright highlight.
Campbell noted the modernist discourse networks that linked the emergent technologies
of the typewriter and telegraph. “One will find no better summary of a wireless aesthetic
than this,” Campbell writes, describing the “efficacious, inscribed sound” that Pound
perceived in Antheil as “one that punishes aural cortices, causing pain sufficient enough
to be classified as nonemollient.”3 Both Albright and Campbell rightly read Pound’s
statement as emerging from a complex technological perspective, grounded in the
material conditions of his time. But both critics’ foregrounding of the physical sensations

3 Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi, p. 161.
within Pound’s pronouncement—their focus was solely on the embodied phenomenon that Pound described—only distorts Pound’s attempt to explain the processes by which Antheil’s aesthetic might rearrange the attentions of an audience.

Looking at Pound’s statement with a perspective respecting Pound and Antheil’s own preoccupation with form, we can see that the discomfort arising from an Antheilian composition was not the purpose of the music, but rather a byproduct of the reorientation process the Vorticists attempted, instigating their audience to become “more sensitive to all other forms, rhythms, defined planes, or masses” through the intervention of formal patternings so exacting and precise that they caused disorientation, even discomfort. But we should not frame that discomfort as the aesthetic point being made. For Pound, the appeal of machines resided in the exactness and repeatability of their movement, just as the formal beauty of machines derived from their purposive fashioning of movement. And returning to Pound’s “Machine Art” essay, it should be noted that Pound’s stated ambition was in fact to relieve factory workers of the aural discomfort that accompanied the unregulated and disorganized confusion of machine sounds. By formally arranging and harmonizing these noises, Pound was promising to deliver “swing and ease” to the laborers/musicians/audience-members of his proposed factory.

As his writings on music show, Pound was relentlessly attentive to time itself as an under-theorized artistic material. Time and succession offered the serious artist a means for manipulating both rhythm and harmony. For Pound, the emergence of mechanical, industrial rhythms—inside a factory, for instance, or on the corner of a street undergoing repair—was celebratory precisely because it was the introduction of a new,
more exacting feel for time. The precise repetitions and movements of machines revealed hidden qualities within time itself, freeing up a plane of attention that Pound believed the swelling, manneristic ebbs and flows of Romantic music had covered over. The emerging aesthetic forms and mechanisms of machines, with their horizontal precisions, diverged productively from the musical practices of Pound’s immediate forebears. To Pound, these forebears “rotted their melodies by trying to find schemes which ‘harmonize’ according to a concept of ‘harmony’ in which the tendency to lifelessness was inherent.”

For Pound, the normative temporal assumptions endemic to the Romantic age encouraged modern composers and performers alike to rely upon an atrophied attention to time and rhythm, to “make music like steam ascending from a morass.”

Writing in 1925, Antheil showed how well his perspective congealed with Pound’s:

[. . .] the stuff of which music is made is not sound-vibration, but TIME. So it is not a question of new chords one may be inventing, or new musical resources one may be trying to glorify by a more elegant harmony (such as jazz!) but what new projections one is making into musical space, and one’s own musical strength in the tightness of the abstractions you may or may not succeed in making.

Antheil’s great intellectual act, viewed through Pound, was similar to Luigi Russolo’s great insight in The Art of Noises in 1913: a recognition that the sonorous world of machines could be something more than mere noise or novelty. Machines were not an exception or opposition to music, but rather the privileged contemporary embodiment of Time itself, the proper material of music. Antheil’s work was a revelation for Pound, not


5 “Abstraction and Time in Music,” quoted in Linda Whitesitt’s The Life and Music of George Antheil 1900-1959, p. 68.
only because of his music’s dynamic qualities but also for how that dynamism
illuminated the sterile rhythmic sameness that normative compositional and performative
practices assumed prior to Antheil’s intervention.

But if Antheil’s *Ballet Mécanique* implicitly challenged the unstated agreements
among composers, performers and listeners regarding the acceptable proportions,
durations and ranges of sound that could be collected under the sign of *music*, its
theatrical novelty and Futurist-esque title have since distracted critics from a proper
critical apprehension of the rhythmic focus of the work. This has been an unfortunate
development, since rhythm and exactness were not only the basis of Antheil’s
achievement, but also of his very scandal. In one recent account, Carol J. Oja writes:

*Ballet Mécanique* was a percussive extravaganza that glorified technology by using
actual machines, mechanical instruments, and principles of mechanical
construction. It combined the various approaches taken by visual artists to the
machine, fusing realistic technical rendering (in Antheil’s case, simulating the
sounds of machines) with fanciful reinterpretation (using technology as inspiration
for compositional experiments) and ready-mades (presenting machines as musical
instruments).  

The purpose of Oja’s critical reappraisal is to contest Antheil’s categorization as a
neglected composer of modernist novelty. Oja aims to recuperate Antheil’s reputation.
But the difficulty, and surprising theoretical subtlety, of Antheil’s project has escaped
even Oja’s recent, generously-minded summary. For Oja, Antheil’s examination of
machines and machinic elements was a *glorification* of technology, and the temporal
innovations of his work were a sequence of varying flights of fancy (that is, not works of

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imagination, the major creative faculty post-Coleridge). Antheil deserves our attention, Oja implies, because he was among the first modernists to transfer the machinic obsessions of visual artists to the world of sound. Such an assertion bypasses the very basis of Antheil’s achievement, one that he made quite explicit: an unprecedented attentiveness and scaling of time. Oja’s critical framing of Ballet Mécanique introduces it as a notable, but only because typical, document of modernist excesses and enthusiasms, leaving it instantly familiar even to those who have never experienced it.

If Oja presents a work one wouldn’t even need to listen to in order to hear—quarantining Antheil’s work and thought to a wacky Modernist epoch the rest of us have apparently, and quite soberly, outgrown—she has also merely extended a narrative that both Pound and Antheil themselves initiated. In this narrative, perpetual scandal is Antheil’s primary calling card. While Antheil’s rhythmic innovation and his outraged reception were inseparable within the scandalous story that Pound and Antheil initially forged, the rhythmic achievements and insights underwriting the scandal have since slipped away from the narrative, leaving only the spectacle. Writing in the early 1930s, a decade after Antheil’s debut, Pound himself began to slough off the rhythmic focus of Antheil’s stunning ascent, emphasizing the theatrical toughness of the young American composer and pianist who briefly terrorized Europe. Having risen up from “an atmosphere of ‘gangsters,’” wrote Pound, Antheil was “the ‘tough guy,’ the police hoodlum” of intercontinental notoriety, a hoodlum who would later claim in his
autobiography that he had to place a loaded pistol on his piano at each performance just to keep his enraged audience at bay. For Pound, Antheil was the “Cagney of music.”

The theatricality of Antheil’s performances surely called forth an equivalent theatricality from his audiences. The Antheil legend is full of anecdotes about violent protests and enthusiastic defenses occurring just moments after the start of a performance. In one anecdote, Ezra Pound himself races up and down the seats of a concert hall smacking jeering audience members, trying to pummel them into submission. Focusing on their Parisian heyday, in his own writing Pound recalled an Antheil premiere at which the French composer and modernist tastemaker “Eric Satie sat next to me applauding, nobody knows why: conviction, a desire to test the audience’s reactions, capacity to enjoy anything, pleasure in making the audience or ‘les Six’ angry? Who knows.” In such anecdotes, Antheil comes across as some kind of avant-gardist Typhoid Mary, infecting all who came near him, so that everyone in aural proximity also turned into an aesthetic provocateur, extending the Modernist spectacle without any particular perspective concerning the purpose the unleashed chaos. Everybody cheering and jeering, but nobody knowing why.

But for other of Antheil’s contemporaries, less fixated on scandal, his most notable works, including but not limited to the \textit{Ballet}, were not regarded as mere technological glorifications or thoughtless provocations. And these contemporaries did

\footnote{7 “The Violinist Olga Rudge,” \textit{Ezra Pound and Music}, p. 344.}

not appear to view, as Oja does, Antheil’s compositional experiments as being the products of, to use Stravinsky’s striking definition of fancy, “a predetermined will to abandon one’s self to caprice.”

For William Carlos Williams, Antheil briefly succeeded in taking “this hated thing life and rigged himself into power over it by his music.”

Though Antheil had been charged with merely replicating the noise of modern urban life, when Williams “actually came upon noise in reality” after attending an Antheil concert, Williams wrote that he “found that [he] had gone up over it.”

One reaction in particular provides great insight into the attentive precision that was the foundation of the larger spectacle of Antheil. As Pound put it, Antheil was interested in machine rhythms because they made music’s most important material—time itself—reveal itself again as something new. On the occasion of the Paris debut of his early works Airplane Sonata and Mechanism on October 4th, 1923, the very piano recital Pound would express later confusion about, unable to find a motive for the vehemently enthusiastic response of Eric Satie, we see in Hugh Ford’s telling an illuminating and immediate reaction by the great Satie to the unique qualities of Antheil’s early work:

A few bars of the Airplane Sonata brought the audience to its feet, howling, whistling, yelling, and acting more riotously than the most unruly crowds in Vienna or Budapest. Eric Satie broke into violent clapping and yelling. [Darius] Milhaud

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9 “Composition of Music,” Poetics of Music, p. 54. Other respondents to Antheil include James Joyce, William Carlos Williams . .

10 The Life and Music of George Antheil, p. 40.
Satie’s reaction, we can see, was not the mindless reaction Pound perceived, but is actually a rather startling and useful insight for those of us who might wish to encounter Antheil’s as something other than a representative specimen of current prejudices about Modernism. It was not the extravagance, novelty or technological glory of Antheil’s piece that prompted Satie’s immediate reaction but, surprisingly enough, its precision. Satie’s exclamation suggests the existence of something extra in Antheil’s performance, a something extra that has been left out of the pre-familiar accounts of his spectacularly contentious performances, concerts that now seem notable only for their (typical for the time) brashness and novelty. Satie responded, however, to Antheil’s precision, supporting the notion that, as Pound put it elsewhere, “[t]he fulcrums of revolution in art are very small.”

How did Satie derive a sense of precision in Antheil’s performance? This was in fact Antheil’s Paris debut, so the precision could not have been the pedantic precision of a musician successfully replicating a familiar, recorded or popular version of a known work, nor could it even have been an example of Stravinsky’s suggested practice of the

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11 Hugh Ford, *Four Lives in Paris*, p. 23. Antheil also recounts this episode in his autobiography, *Bad Boy of Music*, pp. 132-34. Satie’s enthusiasm for Antheil was apparently not reciprocated. “Erik Satie and his latest and most important victim and follower, Igor Strawinsky,” Antheil wrote, dismissing not only Satie but Antheil’s long-time hero Stravinsky in a single breath, “to say nothing of Les Six and the younger Ecole; all come to nothing whatsoever; their musical significance is nil and we do not know whither to turn for the moment; the impotence of the musical situation is superb” (“Why a Poet Quit the Muses,” *Ezra Pound and Music*, p. 514).

12 In Antheil’s *Bad Boy of Music*, the chapter concerning *Ballet Mécanique* is titled “The Music of Precision.”

precise and faithful executant submitting his or her will to the law of the written work. No recorded or popular version of the piece was in circulation to allow the first sense of precision and Satie did not have access to the score. Instead, the precision that Satie exhorted was the precision of Antheil, a notably athletic concert pianist, expertly navigating a new rhythmic sensibility. Antheil’s sensibility relied upon a new degree of exactness, quite mercilessly redirecting the listener’s attentions to the primacy of time and rhythm. It was a newly precise, nearly molecular, rendering of time itself.

Antheil’s sensibility of music as rhythm was so precise that listeners encountered time itself as unbearably different, even riotous. Satie’s appraisal of the precision within the maelstrom highlighted how Antheil’s formal manipulation of subperceptible qualities underwrote the spectacle of the performance, a reminder that the felt explosiveness of the concert was founded on Antheil’s re-imagining of a fundamental element of his medium. “Time, not tonality,” wrote Antheil, “will be considered the canvas of music.” ¹⁴ This attention, by its sudden forcefulness in Antheil’s case, also made an implicit argument that such attentiveness had been absent from other works and performances. For his contemporary enthusiasts, Antheil’s arrival both fulfilled and made legible the lack that they were unaware they were waiting for him to repair. I would argue that a pairing of precision with spectacle, made visible through Satie’s immediate reaction, is a better model for interpreting the significance of Antheil’s Ballet than the model of brash novelty and technological worship that critics such as Carol J. Oja have forwarded.

The precision model may also help us travel deeper into the troubled heart of Pound’s own poetics. The riotous reception in Paris to Ballet Mécanique in 1924, a year after his recital was heralded by Satie, was, like the similar reaction to Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring in 1913, a performance of spectacle by an audience primed for scandal, surely. But through Satie’s pairing of precision and spectacle, we can also understand it as a sudden conflict of sensibilities: the encroachment of the rhythms of modernity (arranged by Antheil) into a social aural space (the concert hall) that incumbent norms had cultivated in such a manner that its audience was severely ill-prepared to hear Antheil’s new rhythms as anything else but an outrage.

The riotous reaction to Antheil was also a collective reaction to the betrayal of an unacknowledged, and therefore deeply felt, agreement between performers and audience members concerning the memorial purpose of the concert hall. Such a venue, the concert hall, was not just a sanctuary set aside from modern social conditions, and not just a theater of privilege, but also a venue for a collective performance of cultural memory. The concert hall was a venue that allowed the mechanisms of modern social life and all their attendant clatters and whirrs to be more bearable, simply because they could be temporarily escaped. Stepping into a concert hall, one stepped out of the perpetual immediacies of the industrial present and into a differing, more memorial logic of time. In an era of unceasing innovation and novelty, the concert hall, like the museum, was not just an institution of cultural prestige; it also existed as a kind of portal, a capsule in which traces of prior modes of life could be deposited, a place where rituals and rhythms of nostalgia could be enacted. If the modern city dweller no longer lived at a pastoral
pace or in bucolic rhythms, a sanctioned venue such as the concert hall offered a space where that dweller could gather with others around representative sounds of an imagined pastoral life, providing a salve for that city dweller, establishing a connection, however idealized, to an imagined past.

The threat of an Antheil in this context would be clear. His compositions threatened to replace the cultivated rhythms of cultural memory with a newer sound founded not on the cyclic rhythms and scalings of nature, as in Vivaldi or even Stravinsky, but on the rhythmic, amnesiac logic of machines. It would be as though a soothing aural link to the past had been unceremoniously snipped. An Antheil performance in a concert hall was the aural equivalent to replacing all the relics of prior ages in an art museum with Duchamp readymades, Man Ray rayograms and sketches of chocolate grinders. Rage occurred inside the concert hall during the modernist period not only because of the radical nature of the music itself, but also because of the hall’s specific role as a portal to the aural past, a role which relied on the maintenance of inherited performative and compositional norms. Confronted with Antheil’s new rhythms, the audience’s rage was that of a crowd faced with a blocked exit.\textsuperscript{15}

If this was the case, then why did the concert hall rioting eventually slacken and cease after its Modernist peak? It was not as though audiences would no longer be confronted with alienating, unfamiliar aural arrangements. The history of material innovation may offer a reason: perhaps the maintenance of cultural memory simply came to be outsourced, away from the concert hall and into the emergent technology of the

\textsuperscript{15} Of course, alternative (or additional) speculative scenarios are available as well: perhaps the aesthetic possibility of rioting was the draw to the concert hall for some.
phonograph. With the prevalence of relatively stable storage devices like the phonograph and the media that have come in its wake, the concert hall itself has largely been evacuated of its primacy as a venue for cultural memory. Why fight it out over a symphonic performance when one can listen to one’s preferred composers—and their soothing temporal projections and residues—by fleeing to one’s home? In the phonograph, we can see the beginning of a specific technological dream: material innovation remembering for us the past it had come to displace.

2. Pound leaves unanswered in “Machine Art” a lingering question concerning the dynamic between a modernist artist and that artist’s audience, especially when precision has been posited as pivotal to an audience’s response to a work. Pound claimed that “the music must lead its own life; must have its own separate existence apart from the audience; how utterly useless it is to try to mix up audience and performance.” Ever generous, Pound would grant an audience member the right to be saturated within his or her own immediate emotional reaction to a piece of music, but he would not consider such behavior to have any fundamental connection to the work itself:

Music in a concert-hall must rely on itself and the perfection of its execution; it is, as it were, under glass. It exists on the other side of the footlights, apart from the audience. With apologies to the language, the audience are spectators, they watch a thing of which they are not part, and that thing must be complete in itself. They may be moved by the contemplation of its beauty, they are not moved—or at least can be

16 “Notes for Performers” Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony, pp. 76-77
moved only in an inferior and irrelevant way—by being merged into the action of
the stage.\footnote{17 \textit{``Notes for Performers''} \textit{Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony}, p. 76.}

A critical puzzle: how to read Pound’s deliberate push of the audience out of a
composer’s operational perspective alongside his equally strong assertions in “Machine
Art” that posit the “swing and ease” of workers as an important byproduct of his
orchestrated factory, a connection I have traced back to the technical necessities of the
Troubadours and the Homeric poets (as sketched in Eric Havelock’s \textit{mousike} convention)
to rhythmically entrance their audience, an entrancement that was necessary for the
transmission and perpetuation of an aural poetics. Pound excluded the audience from the
compositional field inside a concert hall, though the audience was an apparently essential
factor in his factory proposal.

Also notable in Pound’s marginalization of the concert hall audience was his
imposition of \textit{contemplation} as the faculty for musical consideration. For Pound,
contemplating the music’s beauty was the appropriate stance for encountering a work that
“must be complete in itself.” By contrast, an audience that attempted to merge with the
actions of the performance ended up being moved in “an inferior and irrelevant way.”
Such an emphasis on the contemplative faculty \textit{is} consistent with Pound’s critique of an
immediately sensational Wagnerian sensibility, which in Pound’s view merely smacked
and overwhelmed the listener with gobs of music, but such contemplation also evokes the
monkish, fantastical consciousness that Pound criticized in \textit{The Spirit of Romance}, a
consciousness that “develops, at infinite trouble and expense . . . [a] charged surface
which registers the beauties, celestial or otherwise, by ‘contemplation,’” a consciousness he set in contrast to the more preferable, more productive germinal consciousness.

This seemingly contradictory stance regarding contemplation is not terribly interesting as a specimen of internal incoherence in Pound’s musical thought. Artists shift their concepts and stances, certainly, depending on their whims and context. And confusion and incoherence are not necessarily artistic crimes, either. Surely, they have also produced their masterpieces. But Pound’s seeming contradiction between the distant contemplation appropriate to the concert hall and the rhythmic investments appropriate to the factory does become more interesting when it helps us understand his views concerning authority and control.

In Pound’s world, the artist was the active, germinal manipulator of external formal properties, while the audience member was a passive recipient of those properties, which he or she may internalize as a contemplative figure. Perhaps the difference between the factory and the concert hall was that the audience and performers of the factory (the workers) were always already controlled by the demands of their labor, while the audience and performers of the concert hall were controlled by contemporary norms and expectations, resulting in the slackened feel for time and the tendency to gratuitous embellishment chastised by Pound, Antheil and Stravinsky, among others. If control over the performers could be achieved by placing emphasis on the authority of the written score (as in Stravinsky’s desire for his musicians to be the mere executants of his score or in Antheil’s genius for exact notation), a means for control over the audience had yet to be developed. Perhaps Pound not only wanted to transform the factory into a kind of
concert hall, but also the concert hall into a kind of factory, employing similar mechanisms for control.

Dreams of artistic control even seeped into scenes of modernist spectacle. Antheil, like his hero Stravinsky, was continually frustrated by the performance of his compositions, never quite satisfied with how his works were interpreted or performed. It seemed that maybe even the human body itself was not up Antheil’s own ideals (we might recall Pound’s various pronouncements concerning the vulnerability of a composer’s work to the glands of that work’s performers). This helps explain why Antheil wrote works specifically for the player piano, as did Stravinsky. By doing so, the composers could do away with the disruptive middle term of the embodied performer and therefore have a more precise performance of their scores, accomplished by inscribing their work directly upon the instrument itself. It was a means of achieving total control over performance. “Technically, Mr. Antheil has discovered the Pleyela,” Pound wrote, concerning Antheil’s compositions for one of the more popular player pianos, “and freed it from ignominy; it is now an instrument, not the piano’s poor ape.” Instead of using the player piano to replicate the sensation of a human-played piano, Antheil’s compositions exploited unrealized potentialities hidden within the player-piano by writing works for it that were beyond the capacity of human performance in terms of rapidity and quantity of notes.

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18 Antheil sounds uncannily prescient when he appears to predict the arrival of synthesizers as an alternative to an embodied orchestra: “I believe that soon there will be electrical machines which can automatically reproduce every sound wave, and which will not only replace the old orchestra, but create every sound on earth the ear is capable of hearing. Until then we should preoccupy ourselves with mechanical instruments more and more.” “Music Tomorrow,” transition 10, 1928.

Up to the question of control, I would argue that Pound’s and Antheil’s thoughts have enjoyed an unexpected, if distant, congruity with some of Deleuze and Guattari’s theories concerning assemblage, the linkage of productive machines and the creative capacities of an externalized, dispersed sense of being. In Beethoven, according to Deleuze and Guattari, “variation begins to free itself and becomes identified with creation” and “music itself becomes a superlinear system, a rhizome instead of a tree, and enters the service of a virtual cosmic continuum of which even holes, silences, ruptures, and breaks are a part.” Such a cosmic continuum was precisely the sense of flow and flux that adhered to Pound’s vision of an artistic, germinal consciousness.

But any tenuous Deleuze & Guattari/Pound congruity breaks down completely once the logics of signification and control are considered. Identifying this breaking point should help us recognize some essential, discomforting assumptions underlying Pound’s otherwise illuminating thoughts concerning the connections linking Modernist auralities, machines and control. In the “Nov 20, 1923: Postulates of Linguistics” entry of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari discussed a channel of communication that a reading strategy dependent upon literal meanings--as Norman O. Brown put it, “the motor of the Ph.D. factory, mechanical literalism in action”--cannot apprehend. For Deleuze and Guattari, inside a classroom, instead of merely communicating information concerning mathematics and grammar, a teacher primarily functions as an “education machine” whose purpose is to ensign prior social orders on the students through the

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20 *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 95.
employment of order-words. The power and sway of these order-words are amplified by their very indirectness: they are not explicitly spoken or heard, but rather felt. In emitting its order-words, an education machine—in the example given in “Postulates of Linguistics,” this machine is an ordinary, flesh-and-blood teacher—“imposes upon the child semiotic coordinates.”

In the process of conveying informational content, the education machine also inscribes on the receiving child a map concerning the hierarchies and flows of authority. And even as the informational content alters, the semiotic coordinates remain. The map is the constant, primary lesson that is learned. Rather than the enrichment of the students through education—the ostensible occasion of this procedure—what is constructed is “an abominable faculty consisting in emitting, receiving, and transmitting order-words. Language is made not to be believed but to be obeyed, and to compel obedience.”

What occurs is a kind of epistemological contraband; tucked within each successful transmission and reception of educational content—it could be dates, names, grammar, penmanship, etc.—is the true lesson, “this is how to obey.”

It is vital that the inscription occur indirectly. As long as the nominal content advertises itself as acceptable and enriching, the underlying order word can be successfully transmitted and received. According to Deleuze and Guattari, one should not read the employment of a language as a means of direct expression or communication but rather as an “indirect discourse.” Language maps and reifies pre-existent social and political orders, and is utilized by the education machine to maintain those orders. As

22 Ibid. p. 76.
Deleuze and Guattari put it, “[i]ndirect discourse is the presence of a reported statement within the reporting statement, the presence of an order-word within the word.” This is how networks and signs condition one another, as it is also how communication can occur in a subperceptibly systemic manner, beyond any discussion of intent. The thought of J.L. Austin and those working in his wake has given us an array of tools for analyzing the performative aspect of a discourse, though I would argue that Deleuze and Guattari, in their “Postulates of Linguistics,” take us even further into the logic of discursiveness, explicating how networks and signs prime the conditions by which indirect performances—performances that go beyond the expression of literal content—can even occur in the first place. In the following extended excerpt from Deleuze and Guattari, I have italicized the passages most salient to this notion:

The hard part is to specify the status and scope of the order-word. It is not a question of the origin of language, since the order-word is only a language-function, a function coextensive with language. *If language always seems to presuppose itself, if we cannot assign it a nonlinguistic point of departure, it is because language does not operate between something seen (or felt) and something said, but always goes from saying to saying.* We believe that narrative consists not in communicating what one has seen but in transmitting what one has heard, what someone else said to you. Hearsay. It does not even suffice to invoke a vision distorted by passion. The “first” language, or rather the first determination of language, is not the trope or metaphor but *indirect discourse.* The importance some have accorded metaphor and metonymy proves disastrous for the study of language. Metaphors and metonymies are merely effects; they are part of language only when they presuppose indirect discourse. There are many passions in a passion, all manner of voices in a voice, murmurings, speaking in tongues: that is why *all discourse is indirect, and the translative movement proper to language is that of indirect discourse.* [The French linguist Émile] Benveniste denies that the bee has language, even though it has an organic coding process and *even uses tropes.* It has no language because it can communicate what it has seen but not transmit what has been communicated to it. A bee that has seen a food source can communicate the message to bees that did not see it, but a bee that has not seen it cannot transmit the
message to others that did not see it. Language is not content to go from a first party to a second party, from one who has seen to one who has not, but necessarily goes from a second party to a third party, neither of whom has seen. It is in this sense that language is the transmission of the word as order-word, not the communication of a sign as information. Language is a map, not a tracing.\footnote{Ibid. pp. 76-7.}

Language not only relies on representation, does not merely convey information. Rather, it makes its own system of reference and meaning, going “from saying to saying” without a “nonlinguistic point of departure,” referring always to its presupposed self. In order to sufficiently navigate discourse, one should not just decode parcels of information nor interpret the intent of some oblique representation, but one should also, and primarily, discover the order-word within a given word because those order-words are the semiotic coordinates mapping out the social world being linguistically expressed, as well as the appropriate actions and hierarchies assumed by that linguistic world. Even though words do express information, some nonlinguistic point of reference, one should not become so enamored with the contours of either that information or expression that one misses the underlying order-words ratifying social hierarchies and arrangements. Forever humble, a language act will present itself as performing a simple tracing: “in 1942, Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” or “get out the vote.” This is simply a diversionary humility, one that allows order-words to perform their covert business, the indirect construction and communication of their maps: “we will be looking at the colonization of the Americas from a heroic, European perspective” or “let us ensure that the political occurs only within state-sanctioned parameters.”
It is therefore worth highlighting Deleuze and Guattari’s distinction between a language (used by humans) and a code (used by bees). This distinction relies on a language’s capacity for being perpetuated even when an original signified is absented. While humans can communicate about a food source none of the actors have perceived, bees cannot. A language, however, will act as if it were a code, as though it were merely conveying literal information, refusing to tip its users to how it is also orienting their attention. It is worth revisiting Andre Breton’s statement in “Introduction to the Discourse on the Dearth of Reality”: “Words are likely to group themselves according to individual affinities,” wrote Breton, “which generally have the effect of making them re-create the world each instant upon its old model.” The world that is re-created is not some pre-linguistic, objective material reality, but the world of language, the social world of relation and hierarchy. The material and the content are in constant, immediate flux, but the indirect mapping is much slower to change, since it refers not to a reality outside of language but always back on itself and its own stance regarding such reality-making.

In analyzing the domain of the education-machine in “Postulates of Linguistics,” we can consider how a teacher can express words that, on one level, communicate new information regarding the invention of a new kind of technology--a new kind of music recording device, for instance--but on another level, that teacher is also communicating immemorial order-words that maintain his or her authority and the properly obedient relationship students should maintain to it. So even though the actual information a teacher utilizes is new--information regarding recent developments in the field of sound recording, in this example--through that teacher’s normative procedures and
communicative habits--that is, through the employment of tried-and-true order-words--the education-machine operates recreates its self-privileging world atop whatever new material enters its perspective. New words are spoken, but the familiar ordered words of perspective, authority and control are maintained. In fact, for the order words to be adequately maintained, the education machine will have to continually update itself, else risk being seen as the control mechanism it also always is.

In the extended excerpt quoted above, Deleuze and Guattari explained how a discourse network could coalesce as an order-emitting system. We can think of Ron Silliman’s unvoiced conversation projected by a trash receptacle in a cafeteria, a receptacle that perpetually uttered a preemptive “thank you” to its room and its inhabitants, assuming a pre-understood consent to that room’s arrangements. In this example, the socially polite, environmentally-conscious “thank you” contained unvoiced, indirect order-words, creating a map that the work place’s employees were encouraged to follow: where to go, what to do, how to behave. A logic of indirect control, using a system of directly polite, acceptable statements in order to indirectly control the behavior of that system’s inhabitants and to ensure that the power of the institution would be perpetually, though indirectly, primed for those within its precinct.

As Deleuze and Guattari have told us, the deployment of a word is always also the deployment of an order-word; the utilization of language is in fact more the projection of a social map than it is the “communication of a sign as information.” Any particular semiotic event, therefore, can also be read as an indexical sign of the map it has projected. That is, even though the utterance “thank you” on a trash receptacle maintained
a projected arrangement of signs and behaviors, it also stood forth as an indexical sign—for Peirce, a sign that signifies the state of affairs in which it is embedded—that may allow one to better read that projected arrangement. Once one can recognize not only the nominal content of an utterance or text (“thank you”) but also its order-words (“put that disposable consumable in here without really thinking about why or how you are compelled to do so”), one can also attempt to read the discourse network an utterance or text projects, conjures or revises. In his *The Re-Discovery of America*, published in 1929, Waldo Frank wrote: “We still look on state, church, person as Nouns. Our group must look on state, church, and person as Verbs. Knowledge is a part of action: it is action aware of itself.” To read an institution or authority as a verb, as Frank sagely suggested, we must turn to its linguistic emissions and the order words subsumed within them.

3. The fulcrums of revolution in art are small, according to Pound. Following Deleuze and Guattari’s thoughts on indirect discourse and order-words, we might propose a corresponding assertion for a society maintained less by punishment than control: the fulcrums of power are likewise small. I would argue that both Pound’s proposed factory in “Machine Art” and Antheil’s “Ballet Mecanique,” like the emissions of Deleuze and Guattari’s education-machine, were performances reliant upon the transmission of a shared order-word, directed at the control of the audience. But, in order for that

24 p. 243.
controlling order-word to be successfully transmitted and received, each performance would have to open the same channel for its communication: the performer’s mastery.

Without the display of the mastery channel, a bald assertion of authority would seem an overreach, a struggle. This is perhaps easiest to imagine for the teacher in the role of Deleuze and Guattari’s education machine. If the teacher has demonstrated a noticeable lack of mastery on the subject matter—errors on dates, mispronounced names, misplaced locations, etc.—or if he or she has appeared to be a step or two behind the most recent cultural and technological updates, then the assumed hierarchies and flows of the classroom would begin to come under question, and the teacher’s authority would now have to be asserted through more overt threats of punishment.

Obedience is compelled in a punishment regime through literal threat and example. In a control regime, such obedience can be compelled more indirectly, through distraction, surveillance and misdirection, and by the positing of strictly controlled goals and choices. But in order to assume the authority to distract, survey and misdirect in the classroom (and to not have to resort to more overt measures), the education machine needs to perform an effortless mastery of the material at hand, performing his or her own legitimacy. The mastery channel can be lost, though, in the static of misremembered dates, forgotten names, mispronounced syllables and retrograde points of reference. Whatever the slippage, it is essential that the education-machine not strain after authority but to rather function as though its authority were inevitable. Errors imply effort, making the positioning too visible. That is, for the order-word “obey” to transmit imperceptibly and therefore most effectively, it must not be directly spoken or strained after. The order-
word should just simply be felt through the teacher’s mastery, as when the teacher
effortlessly recalls the correct names and dates and procedures of a lesson *and* as when
that teacher just as effortlessly corrects and gently admonishes the students who get their
facts wrong. It will only help the teacher if he or she also selects the classroom’s goals
and controls the course of the class’s conversations.

For a musical composer founding his radicalism and scandalousness on his
unprecedented preciseness and rhythmic novelty, a mastery channel would also be
desired. On April 10, 1927, after making himself notorious across Europe, Antheil’s
*Ballet Mécanique* had its heavily publicized American debut at Carnegie Hall in New
York City. The concert would also include Antheil’s *A Jazz Symphony*, performed by the
W.C. Handy Orchestra and backdropped by “a gigantic Negro couple dancing the
Charleston, the girl holding an American flag in her left hand, while the man clasped her
ecstatically around the buttocks,” as commissioned by Antheil’s inexperienced concert
manager for the debut, Donald Friede.\(^{25}\) For the *Ballet*, the instrumentation was expanded
for Carnegie Hall to include “ten pianos, one mechanical piano, six xylophones, two bass
drums, a wind machine with a regulation airplane propeller, and siren.”\(^ {26}\) The
commissioned backdrop for the Ballet was “a cyclorama with a futuristic city of
skyscrapers as a background; and in the foreground a series of enormous noise-making
machines: whistles, riveting machines, airplane propellers, spark plugs, excavating
machines; and in the left-hand corner a more-than-life-size figure of a man jumping off a

\(^{25}\) Donald Friede, quoted in Linda Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil*, p. 33.

\(^{26}\) Linda Whitesitt, *The Life and Music of George Antheil*, p. 33.
diving board that seemed to be attached to a curved pipe of the sort generally used in connection with a toilet.” Antheil himself was not pleased with these backdrops, complaining that they were tactless, expensive and “gave an air of complete charlatanism to the whole proceedings,” perhaps by making the inflections of his compositions too visible, too literal and therefore too easily read.

Friede, the concert manager, leaned heavily on the scandalous precedent and persona Antheil had established in Europe. In the concert program, Friede included an article by Lewis Galantiere, anticipating Antheil’s upcoming aural invasion of New York, that appeared in the *New York World*, excerpted below:

> . . . when Antheil’s little figure wound its way through pianos and machinery, and, sitting down, commenced to pump away with the desperation of a Finnish policeman chasing Paavo Nurmi, the audience howled. The riveters commenced to rattle and the wind machine to buzz and wail.

> In a front box, a fat Spaniard raised a huge red umbrella. Three thousand manifestoes fluttered down from the upper galleries, proclaiming that there ought to be a law against such sounds . . . Ezra Pound, his red hair blown and wild, delivered a speech (of which not a word was heard) in which he is said to have characterized the audience as a collection of barbarians and gutter-rats, unfit even to hear such vile and lily-pale music as Beethoven’s.

> Private fights went on all over the house, and still Antheil continued to pump, and change rolls, and pump again. The gentleman from Spain with the red umbrella was weeping copiously on the shoulder of a woman who sat in the next box, herself undecided whether to weep or laugh.

> Three hundred frightened American tourists screamed . . .

> At the height of the uproar it was suddenly discovered that the music had ceased ten minutes earlier, and Antheil was lying in a faint on the stage. The “Ballet Mechanique” was over and the fire department had come in to sweep out the

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27 Friede, quoted in Whitesitt, p. 33.

28 The Life and Music of George Antheil, p. 33.

29 Linda Whitesitt, The Life and Music of George Antheil, p. 31.
Such brilliant hyperbole as Galantiere’s, combined with the lavish backdrop and Antheil’s own provocative statements—“I am the only American born composer,” Antheil wrote in a publicized letter, “who has ever approached even a sensation in any country outside of his own”—amplified expectations for the *Ballet Mécanique*. It also primed assumptions concerning Antheil’s own faculties, as in Galantiere’s excerpt, where he is seen to be as much a disciplined foreman of a factory as an inspired artist. In “Machine Art,” Pound wrote that the “best modern architects are . . . almost universally the engineers; their best form comes from the mathematics of strains, etc.” An audience coming into Carnegie Hall with the rhetoric of Galantiere, Friede and Antheil ringing in their heads, and with the futuristic backdrop and industrial machines before their eyes, would expect to witness not just an evening of music, but a marvel of engineering.

Of course, nothing of the sort occurred, which is why the Carnegie Hall concert has been acknowledged by all parties—then and now—as the ruin of Antheil’s career. In concert manager’s Friede’s account, the opening numbers—a string quartet and a sonata—came across poorly, due to a misplaced house curtain that muffled the sound. When it was time for *A Jazz Symphony*, “when the curtain went up on the orchestra in front of the billowing, buttocksy backdrop of the colossal Charleston, the audience roared with laughter.” The audience did seem receptive to the jazzy piece composed by Antheil and

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30 The Life and Music of George Antheil, p. 32.

performed by the WC Handy Orchestra, however, hailing it with applause just before the intermission, which was to be followed by the ambitious *Ballet Mécanique*. Due to poor planning, though, Friede and his crew “discovered that we had miscalculated the space that would be available to us, and so instead of being able to set the stage discreetly back of the lowered curtain, we had to raise the curtain and work in full view of the highly amused audience . . . word got around in the lobby that there were strange doings to be seen inside, and for the next ten minutes the entire audience sat in its seats.” The bemused audience watched the inexperienced crew move grand pianos around the stage, set up a full-size airplane propeller, electric bells, a fire siren and other gadgetry. Ideally, of course, the curtain would have stayed closed the entire time, so the audience could gasp at the quickly-assembled marvel before their eyes when the curtains finally opened, priming them for the precisely arranged rhythms of Antheil’s masterpiece that would immediately follow. But instead of opening up a mastery channel, the botched intermission made Antheil and his crew appear to be comical figures.

According to Friede, the first few minutes of the Ballet were performed seamlessly, despite the awkwardness of the set change, and the audience was attentive. But when the score called for the propeller to be turned on, “all hell, in a minor way, broke loose.” Immediately, the mastery channel was closed off again and Antheil’s concert tipped definitively into the farce it had been threatening to become all along:

Someone had made a mistake, and instead of having the propeller point into the air, where the breeze it would generate would be dissipated before it reached the back of the house, it now was aimed at a point in the eleventh row of the orchestra. While
it gathered speed nothing happened, but when it reached its full power it was disastrous. People clutched their programs, and women held onto their hats with both hands. Someone in the direct line of the wind tied a handkerchief to his cane and waved it wildly in the air in a sign of surrender.

Soon, the audience’s laughter became, in Friede’s narration, contagious, since the promoters “had spent weeks building up the fact that there had been riots in Paris at the first performance of this number. Now everybody . . . wanted to get into the act.” While the more excitable members of the crowd were gleefully playing at outrage, the more conservative members simply left. The spectacle was not in Antheil’s control.

The percussive close of the piece was to be accompanied by a loud fire siren’s wail. At the Carnegie Hall performance, however, Friede and his crew had “completely forgotten the simple fact that a fire siren does not start making any sound until it has been energetically cranked for almost a full minute,” as they had also not remembered that, once primed, the siren would continue wailing whether its was still being cranked or not. Inevitably, the siren therefore remained silent while the effects man cranked it, not realizing that there would be a minute-long delay. After the rest of the musicians had finished and after a brief moment of befuddled silence by the crowd, “there came the unmistakable sounds of a fire siren gathering speed. Louder and louder it came as the last notes of the Ballet died away” and then as the conductor bowed and Antheil stood from his piano, the siren hit peak volume, and “the wail from the infernal red thing on the stage kept dinning in our ears, drowning out the applause of the audience, covering the sound of the people picking up their coats and hats and leaving the auditorium.”
As Linda Whitesitt has noted in her collection of reactions and headlines from the concert, the American press was savage in its response to the fiasco, offering up headlines such as “Mountain of Noises Out of an Antheil,” “Forty million Frenchmen CAN be wrong!” and “Antheil Concert Results in Commotion, Mixed with Boredom, But No Rioting.” The New York audience had succeeded in refusing Antheil’s assertions of control, whereas the seemingly sophisticated European audiences had proved to be more easily mastered, a point of pride for the American press. “Well, New York certainly showed Paris something last evening!” one of the headlines boasted.32

William Carlos Williams considered the reaction to be “unintelligent,” for the critics “found nowhere in their minds an apposite thing to say musically about the object for criticism.” So focused were they on scandal and reaction that a reader curious about the concert would be “totally blank to a person seeking musical information concerning the event.”33 Perhaps it was too much, however, to expect a critical audience at first bombarded with propaganda regarding the scandalous, riotous nature of Antheil’s industrial-grade music and then faced with a series of technical mishaps once the concert itself occurred to focus on anything other than the spectacle involved. If it is true that Antheil’s musical worth was founded, as I have argued, on his precision and inventiveness regarding the recurring, rhythmic potentialities of his material, and on his singular focus on time as the primary material of music, then it is hard to imagine staging a performance less likely to allow such precision and invention to be felt.

32 The Life and Work of George Antheil, p. 37.
33 The Life and Work of George Antheil, p. 40.
By so blatantly pitching the concert’s worth on its outrageousness, and then by bungling the technical and logistic basics of performance, Antheil and his collaborators created a kind of semiotic chaos. Even though Antheil always had a flair for the theatrical, audience outrage, prior to Carnegie Hall, was always triggered by his athletic, mechanical, adamantly unlyrical piano. The audience’s response, whether positive or negative, pivoted on Antheil’s mastery of his very precise sound. At Carnegie Hall, not only did the incongruous, enormous backdrops and props intensify the visual focus, the perpetual threat and eventual swell of technical catastrophes shifted the focus from Antheil’s musical mastery to his hubris and to his manager’s logistical incompetency. For the New York audience, Antheil was shown to be a fraud, incapable of handling, let alone mastering, his own machines, a total contrast to his European performances that pivoted on his supreme gift for musicianship. With the true bases of his scandalous success—the novel preciseness of his compositions and musicianship, his mercilessly unsentimental exploitation of the rhythmic qualities of music—rendered inaccessible at Carnegie Hall by the emphasis on spectacle and the parade of technical failures, all that was communicated was Antheil’s hubris. Unable to communicate his mastery inside the prestigious music hall, Antheil appeared to be, to use a term applied by multiple parties to the Carnegie Hall fiasco, a charlatan.

Stripped of his expertise and mastery, Antheil was not able to communicate his new feel for time. In “Machine Art,” Pound noted that for his speculative factory—afflicted by disorganized sounds that Pound would need to give shape and order to—any issues regarding production should simply be counted among the “technical problems”
facing the artist. A factory’s productive needs would not be a hindrance to his proposed art, but another problem that could be formalized. By its very spectacular failure, the Carnegie Hall debut of *Ballet Mécanique* proposed a similar notion, that Antheil’s legitimacy before his audience was likewise a technical problem, one that he did not, in this instance, solve.

In his discussion of the acoustics of machinery, Pound referred to a cartoon that appeared shortly after Antheil’s Carnegie Hall concert, which showed a construction site in which one worker tells another that “the asphalt drill was ‘flat,’” a jibe that Pound admitted was “irresistibly funny.” But according to Pound, the difference between his proposed factory orchestration and the street corner construction illustrated in the cartoon was a difference of recurrence. Although there was no regularity to the work performed at a construction site, in a properly Taylorized factory in which each worker attended to a single, repeated function, all of the sound and racket of the factory *could* conceivably be organized, if one could only find the proper plane for formal organization. For Pound, the *great bass* was this formal plane.

In Poundian criticism, the concept of great bass has been deemed among his most puzzling, with R. Murray Schafer devoting an entire section of his edited volume of Pound’s writings on music, *Ezra Pound and Music: the Complete Criticism*, to the concept. As he put it in “Machine Art,” Pound was not concerned with music as the expression of some particular content. In order to imagine an orchestrated factory, “one had to like and to dislike sound,” wrote Pound, “to like some kinds and arrangements of sound, and to dislike others.” Additionally, “one had to think of music as a definite entity
in itself; that is to say, as a composition of sound; not merely an expression of something else.”

Pound was skeptical not only of music as the expression of something non-musical, but also of music’s surface pleasures, which so often became the occasion for pointless exaggerations and indulgences by the musicians playing the notes. As in his ideogrammatic structuring of history and poetry (of history as poetry, and vice versa), Pound asserted the need in music for an appropriate structuring logic, an approach that would not reduce formal elements to fetishised isolated occasions but as precise nodes of a larger form.

This did not mean that Pound did not invest in music’s emotive qualities, however. “I believe in ‘absolute rhythm,’” he wrote, “a rhythm, that is, in poetry which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed.” In order to organize rhythms and formal planes into their most emotionally rich arrangements, Pound asserted that a better, more exact formalism was possible. This formalism was to occur at a lower register, organizing the frequencies of the work, staging harmony as a temporal phenomenon. This formalism relied on what Pound called the great bass. Guy Davenport used this unique notion to explicate the arrangement of action in The Cantos: “The mimesis of action, however, is Great Bass, as Pound calls it. We listen to it to calculate the aptness of the counterpoint, remembering that we are experiencing an epos of ideas released in interlocked phrases each of which is a musical phrase, an image, and as much of a grammatical coherence as the poet can allow.”

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34 “Machine Art,” p. 72.
35 Ezra Pound and Music, p. 469.
36 “Persephone’s Ezra,” The Geography of the Imagination, p. 158.
musical and poetic notions fed into one another, using the great bass to better apprehend
the shapeliness of Pound’s epic, expressed in units both large (“[t]here is a larger
grammar, where entire cantos count as ideograms”) and small (“ideas released in
interlocked phrases each of which is a musical phrase, an image”). Pound arranged the
telescopic and microscopic together, we might say, staging the maximal and minimal
scales of some legislative design, one that an ordinary scale of vision would not be
prepared to assess. If a visionary such as Blake was more likely to intuit the universe via
the perception of a grain of sand than by looking at his dining room or pet, it was because
the sustained attentiveness a grain of sand required moved Blake outside of the ordinary,
pre-prepared, default plane of perception.

A similar effect could occur in the field of aesthetics, where a quality of attention
—“a scaling of eye balls,” as Pound put it—could be generated at quantitative extremes
(we may think of Stein’s grand repetitions here). If Pound’s intuitions concerning the
intersections of music and poetry remain vivid, it is because they did not rest at the
Paterian ideal of raising verse to an elevated, idealized musical register. Instead, Pound’s
music writings were a vast archive of technical suggestions about the fundamental
organizational strategies of art at a cultural moment seemingly overrun with new,
unfamiliar technologies and therefore new and unfamiliar sensations of time. What Pound
theorized through his notion of great bass was a substratum that could be perceived and
manipulated, regardless of the densities of the surface noise:
The term *bass* is used in music to designate the lesser frequencies (low notes), the term *treble*, to designate the higher frequencies. I use the term “*great bass*” to designate the frequencies below those which the ear has been accustomed to consider as “notes.”

In this way, at the level of lower bass, the asphalt drill the cartoonist sarcastically referred to as “flat” was, as Pound put it, actually just “slow.” In Pound’s view, the arrangement of industrial noises into pleasing arrangements “will start with some crank fooling about his machine shop after hours; or some foreman stopping a few presses for three seconds, every eight minutes . . . some experiment that will put a rhythm into the work.” Such a future arrangement would also derive from one’s interest in the sensations coming “either from very loud or very delicate sounds.” As Pound wrote:

> This seems to me perfectly natural, as the middling loud sounds, in middling pitch, strike on parts of the ear already full of association with ordinary things, things from which one’s interest has been exhausted.
> 
> I don’t mean that the best music may not be made, and probably has been and is made in the middle of the register. I am talking of the awakening of interest. This usually starts from an unusual perception or stimulus.

Pound warned about the clusters of associations attached to a middle register of sounds. But as Antheil’s failed performance of *Ballet Mécanique* demonstrated, even music brought to an extreme measure will never be grasped as *pure* sound, attracting as it will its own associative materials that color its reception.

> In his “Machine Art” proposal, Pound did not merely aim to add music to production: his was an attempt to transform production to some degree through music.

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38 “Machine Art,” p. 75.
Pound pushed music and production to “speak” each other. But Pound conceived of the factory as a realm of semiotic purity, a realm extracted from the order-words and flows of the social world, as though he expected the organized planes of sound inside the factory walls to act upon the bodies of the workers without any mediation whatsoever. In this unsocialized space Pound mistakenly assumed, musical forms would have directly affected the hearts and minds of the workers without any apparent mediation by cultural notions.

But sound, like language, also broadcasts indirectly, as it also speaks to the dynamics of power and hierarchy. We may think of the widely circulated bootleg tape of Bob Dylan’s famous concert at Manchester’s Free Trade Hall in the UK in 1966, after Dylan’s (at the time) notorious turn away from the bucolic, collective acoustic strum of his folk music period and towards a wilder, studio-produced electric music. At the end of the concert, just before the closing number (“Like a Rolling Stone”), a member of the angry crowd shouted “Judas!” at Dylan, and you can hear on the tape the rest of the crowd gasp and then laugh and cheer, supporting the charge. Dylan responded angrily—“I don’t believe you,” he screeched, “you’re a liar”--and one senses a sudden shift in power dynamics, as Dylan suddenly stood accused before his audience. It would now be up to him to prove, somehow, that he is not a charlatan, not an Antheilian fraud. On the bootleg, just before the start of a roiling, electric “Like a Rolling Stone,” you can hear Dylan sneer to his band: “Play fucking loud!”

In this command, Dylan was instructing his band to go deeper into the amplification and power of the music, the very basis of his new-found notoriety. In this context, Dylan correctly recognized that loudness would open up his mastery channel,
allowing him to reassert his will over the audience, to re-teach them how to obey his
whims. I only wish that bootleg recordings of Antheil’s *Ballet Mécanique* were likewise
in circulation, and that, upon the audience’s laughter at one of the multiple technical
mishaps that plagued the performance, we could hear George Antheil turn to his array of
machines and re-open his own mastery channel, sneering beneath the jeers, “Play fucking
*precise!*”

4. In *The Salaried Masses*, Siegfried Kracauer took on the guise of “a sociologist of
culture and the quotidian, mapping the *terra incognita* of salaried employees in the last
years of the Weimar Republic.”39 Within his cognitively unfamiliar terrain, Kracauer
illustrated a scene contemporary to – and eerily evocative of – Pound’s proposed factory
project:

> How arduous protracted mechanical activity really is may be deduced indirectly
> from the fact that several firms I know [. . .] confine it to a fraction of the working
day and pay machine staff almost exclusively by means of special allowances. The
> fact that they are so fond of placing girls in charge of machines is due, among other
> things, to the innate dexterity of the young creatures – which natural gift is,
> however, too widely distributed, alas, to warrant a high rate of pay. When the
> middle classes were still in a state of prosperity, many girls who now punch cards
> used to stumble through *etudes* at home on the pianoforte. Music at least has not
> entirely vanished [. . .]. I know of one industrial plant that hires girls straight from
> high school with a salary and lets them be trained at the typewriter by a teacher of
> their own. The wily teacher winds up a gramophone and the pupils have to type in
time with its tunes. When merry military marches ring out, they all march ahead
twice as lightly. The rotation speed of the record is gradually increased, and without

the girls really noticing it they tap faster and faster. In their training years they turn into speed typists – music has wrought the cheaply purchased miracle.40

While echoing some of Pound’s insights concerning the overlay of music and production, this vignette illustrates a very different conception of how music and production may speak through one another. Within the Weimar training room, the semiotics of “music” as a culturally desirable condition was continually foregrounded, often ingeniously, as it spoke very particular order-words within its specific social context.

What once was a domestic amusement in the previous “state of prosperity” – the etudes played on the pianoforte – took on a kind of afterlife as the “merry military marches” that were played as the young women were trained, in order to increase their typing proficiency. Such an afterlife may be read as a cruel parody of a former, more privileged existence, but from the perspective of the typists-in-training, it was likely experienced as a kind of balm, one that eased and even masked the transition they were undergoing, a transition into a more rigidified day-to-day reality; it would serve the same function as familiar music in a concert hall. The management of the industrial plant masked this very transition into a more mechanized reality by maintaining the previous, more privileged state’s world of sonority for its trainees. It was with grim irony that Kracauer wrote that “[m]usic at least has not entirely vanished.”

Kracauer was hinting at the management’s ability to identify and exploit the reported statements of culture and privilege within the reporting statement of music. The management in Kracauer’s narrative successfully grafted a musical nostalgia-machine to

their training-machine, amplifying production at minimal cost. Pound also believed that his fusion of music and production would result in a similar boost, but only because the workers would be *directly addressed* by a more perfectly-formed world of sonority. Not heeding his Deleuze and Guattari, Pound assumed a directness of address and communication in the language of music, as though a perfected aural form would operate directly upon the workers, as though those workers could join seamlessly with his more perfectly arranged industrial sound, without any semiotic interference.

For the “wily teacher” in *The Salaried Masses*, the primary concern was with the rhythm of production, not with the perfection of musical form. If the wily teacher had operated under the same assumptions of Pound, then his typists would have simply trained to a series of sonorous masterpieces, perhaps even Beethoven with his continual and free continuum of variation, allowing the perfectly arranged tempos and harmonies to refresh their energies. Such a strategy *might* have had a muted effectiveness, similar to what Pound intended, with the order-word of *acceptance* being transmitted continually through the gramophone speaker. Such an order-word would tell the typists that their training was acceptable, for at least they still had music. You are in the belly of civilized culture still, such an order-word would say, and not in the bowels of de-humanizing production. This would be like the “normalizing” presence of piped-in muzak in grocery stores, a world of sonority simulating an air of leisure to mask the bared logic of consumption. But such an order-word of acceptance would also imply a kind of satiation contradictory to the management’s desire to see an increase in typing speed in its newly-hired typists.
With a kind of genius, however, the wily teacher not only played merry marching records for his typists, he began increasing the speed of those jaunty military marches in subperceptible intervals. With this simple maneuver, the order-word acceptance was still maintained and indirectly communicated and received. The marches were culturally benign, flattering emissions, and the typists remained within their nostalgic semiotic maps. But, if the reporting semiotic “word” was acceptance, then the reported statement its rhythms expressed was increase production. The subperceptible increase in tempo was masked by its very foregrounding as music: the semiotic reporting word was repeated, but the reported statement was slowly altered over time. This is why the wily teacher utilized his gramophone and its merry marches, and not some other device. A metronome could have likewise established and slowly increased the desired tempo of the typists, but the indirect communication of the clinical metronome would have been less civilized, less acceptable than the marches. A metronome would have communicate the teacher’s intentions too directly, and the typists would have caught on to the training regimen, reading the teacher’s lesson instead of feeling and obeying it. If the metronome’s tempo was increased, it would have been done so more perceptibly since it would not have possessed the same cultural masking as the gramophone marches. The metronome would have too directly communicated the material facts of the typist’s situation to them, causing the order-word of increase production to be more easily read and therefore more easily disobeyed. But because the teacher incrementally increased the tempo of the musical record, the typists heard only the same reassuring indirect discourse throughout
their training—music, culture, acceptance—even as they bodily felt and responded to the subperceptible command to *increase production* all the while.

In a way, Kracauer’s anecdote shows that Pound was correct in thinking that a musically arranged sound could, by its form, guide production. Pound’s only error was in thinking that it could do so directly. It was the wily teacher’s awareness of the social semiotics involved that allowed him to construct an aurally-controlled site of production—a situation wherein the bodies of the audience responded only to the music’s formal properties—that both Pound and Antheil desired for their projects (Pound likewise wanting to introduce musical principles into an industrial factory, Antheil wanting to introduce the precision of industrial rhythms into a music hall). Under the guise of music as a semiotic event, the wily teacher in Kracauer’s anecdote was able to directly address the bodies of his typists with the desired, ever-increasing tempo. An eerie mind-body split seemed to occur: the typists apparently assumed they were engaged in one type of discourse, bearable because it was still cultured, while at the same time, their bodies—and, by Kracauer’s account, this was an imperceptible occurrence—became the instruments of pure production that the industrial plant’s management was wishing to exploit. This transformation allowed the plant to replace its older, higher salaried typists with these younger, cheaper zombie typists.

And what would the managers of Kracauer’s company think of Pound’s factory music proposal? Even if it were logistically feasible, Pound’s construction of a more pleasing world of sonority within a factory would be of little use for increasing production at minimal cost. But perhaps a more wily manager than Pound would have
recognized that they could exploit the complex relations among reported and reporting statements in order to optimize productive efficiency. In this way, Pound’s project could have a hypothetical use if the speculative factory produced a small number of different ‘set pieces,’ a repertoire of rhythmic clusters of highly organized frequencies and tempos. Under the sign of performance or, even better, collaboration, the managers could increase the tempo of production for the factory. That is, in the organization of each separate “musical number” in the factory’s repertoire, different machines would be scripted to perform at their optimal speed. When management would desire a certain area of the factory to produce at an increased speed, the appropriate musical number could be cued: the reporting word would be collaboration, while the reported statement would be increase production. Ideally, the management would focus their spoken discourse around the collaborative and/or performative aspect of the piece, allowing that reporting statement to absorb the participants’ attention so the reported command to increase production could be indirectly heeded. Or, similar to the imperceptible increase of the speed of the phonograph for the typists, management could introduce novelty or change into the sonorous world of the factory, incrementally increasing the tempo of production with each new, novel musical number, each successive musical number being a little faster paced than the prior one. In this particular indirect discourse the reporting semiotic statement would be novelty or change or variety, and the reported command it would contain would be, once again, increase production.

Among Pound’s most cherished notions was one he took from Leo Frobenius, the great anthropologist’s notion of a paideuma: “the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas
of any period.”

Pound privileged *paideuma* over a similar term like *zeitgeist* because it more deftly addressed “the gristly roots of ideas that are in action” while *zeitgeist* more properly concerned “the atmospheres, the tints of mental air.”

If the *zeitgeist* is always the perceptible sonorous mental air of a period, then that period’s *paideuma* is that period’s imperceptible lower bass, the slower frequency that organizes the whole. This lower level, properly formalized, could become a mastery channel though which a Poundian cultural hero could change society without touching it, by perceiving and mastering the forms of its lower, more fundamental register. But it is with a Kracaueran grim irony that we should acknowledge that, in hindsight, the Poundian master of forms of this chapter is not the brilliant, unruly bad boy of music Antheil, nor the visionary, era-defining Pound, but rather the anonymous and wily teacher of Kracauer’s account, the bureaucratic maestro.

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41 *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 57.

42 Ibid. p. 58.
1. In an early instance of what has become a necessarily continual defense of Stein, the American poet Mina Loy wrote, in 1923: “Modernism is a prophet crying in the wilderness of stabilized culture that humanity is wasting its aesthetic time.”¹ The question, in an era of Darwinian and/or industrial and/or cinematic time, of the possible permutations of temporality and its ramifications for aesthetic practice, is very much in the foreground of numerous sympathetic responses to Stein in her own lifetime, even if it is rarely formulated in as artful or sophisticated terms as Loy’s: “This was when Bergson was in the air, and his beads of Time strung on the continuous flux of Being, seemed to have found a literary conclusion in the austere verity of Gertrude Stein’s theme—‘Being’ as the absolute occupation.”²

Another, if less-expertly artful, contemporary advocate was Mabel Dodge, patron and friend of Picasso, DH Lawrence and others, as well as the subject of one of Stein’s most famous portraits. In an early writing on Stein, “Speculations, or Post-Impressionism in Prose,” written in 1913, Dodge produced her own portrait, of Stein as an artist who “suspends her selective faculty, waiting for the word or group of words that will perfectly

¹ “Communications: Gertrude Stein (Continued),” The Critical Response to Gertrude Stein, p. 185.
interpret her meaning, to rise from her sub-consciousness to the surface of her mind.” It is then, after the words have risen to the surface of usage in correspondence to an already constructed meaning, that Stein will “bring her reason to bear upon them, examining, weighing and gauging their ability to express her meaning. It is a working proof of the Bergson theory of intuition. She does not go after words—she waits and lets them come to her, and they do.” Such generative, intuitive vitality, when “directed into a conscious expression,” is presented by Dodge as a definition of a modern artistic genius’s process in/of time.3

Countering these strong advocacies are surpassingly vitriolic contemporary critiques and attacks, including Michael Gold’s diagnosis of Stein as alternately hoax artist, “literary idiot,” and symptom of the insanity and boredom of a leisure class, as well as the behaviorist BF Skinner’s subdued opinion that Stein’s more opaque works, such as Tender Buttons, are the products of “a second personality successfully split off from Miss Stein’s conscious self” that contain only the briefest “conscious flashes.”4 These early critiques of Stein as being, at turns, both pathological subject and cynical hoax artist, both purposefully random deviation from the aesthetic assumptions of her historical moment and an unconscious symptom of that moment, establish shades of critique that have followed the figure of Stein as she has passed from unread literary celebrity to best-selling sensation to cult figure to canonical modernist, forming a specter of dissent that Steinian advocates continually answer to, whether directly or indirectly. As Steven

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3 Ibid. pp. 152-3.

4 “Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot” and “Has Gertrude Stein a Secret?” Ibid, pp. 202-211.
Meyer, in his major book on Stein’s radical empiricism (the terminology is taken from her mentor, William James), writes in addressing Skinner’s analysis, much of the critique of Stein’s writing quietly refuses to consider that writing as “the significant construction of art” and rather treats it as the behavior of a strange and singular subject.\(^5\)

A survey of contemporary critical writing on Stein suggests a quiet persistence in the behaviorist frames and terms of critique, even with a century of critical response to her work. An especially troubling contemporary portrait of Stein seems to be accumulating itself in the academic pages of *Modernism/Modernity*, where recent articles by Robert Chodat and Lisi Schoenbach address Stein’s science and Stein’s pragmatism, respectively. Chodat in particular revives the simplest caricature of Stein as solipsistic producer of unrelenting randomness:

> Are Stein’s portraits no better than a linguistic random-number generator? Stein of course spent a long time in crafting her texts, sometimes months. What, then, could she have been doing all that time if her texts are simply akin to an infant’s rambling mutterings? And what reason is there for us, in turn, to continue reading her texts at all?\(^6\)

For Chodat, these are not mere rhetorical questions: as if there were no other available approach to Stein than an ahistorical consideration of her apparent strangeness as compared to “our” “ordinary” ways of comprehending “speakers” of English (these are the critical terms he chooses to utilize in approaching her written literary texts), Chodat earnestly pursues the “infant’s rambling mutterings” line of questioning; in a gesture of

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5 *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*, p. 224.

apparent generosity, though, he is “unwilling to dismiss her altogether as idiotic,” even if, as he states in the parenthetical aside that immediately follows, “dismissing her, we should always remember, is an option for which many intelligent readers have opted.”

For Chodat, Stein is of interest exclusively as a negating figure, as her strange novelty and “failure to make sense” are both mere cognitive irritants, of interest to the degree that they inspire self-reflection of one’s own reading practices. “When confronted with novel stimuli, whether of speech or behavior,” Chodat writes, quietly refusing to regard Stein’s writings as aesthetic productions and framing them rather, in the tradition of Skinner, as behavioral symptoms, “our starting point is always our own previous experiences in making sense of persons, our own previous intentional ascriptions.”

Despite a significant canon of criticism concerning Stein’s aesthetic achievement, as well as her continual status as patron saint of artistic precision and vitality for her Modernist contemporaries such as Loy and Hemingway, post-Modern poets Robert Creeley, Jackson Mac Low and Robert Duncan, contemporary Language poets Lyn Hejinian and Charles Bernstein, the avant-garde filmmaker Stan Brakhage, among many others, Chodat concludes:

[. . .] the continual effort demanded of us in dealing with Stein is ultimately her great interest, and the reason she is so central to any account of modern literature. Her words are so in need of interpretation that we are eventually forced, as I have been here, to make explicit at least some of our ordinary strategies for making sense. Stein’s obscurities put our ordinary practices—our descriptions of the world, of each other—into sharper relief than they are normally allowed. This is not a “scientific” process; there is little that is law-like in the kinds of sense-making

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7 p. 603
8 pp. 597-8.
activities that Stein’s texts demand. But that is not to their detriment. In their cryptic way, Stein’s texts do all that any literary text can: they force us to make ourselves explicit [. . .]9

Stein’s inscrutable solipsism, Chodat argues, has value for the way it generates a corresponding critical solipsism, however normalized. A more historicized and less-patronizing portrait of Stein appears in Schoenbach’s essay, which investigates her pragmatic modernism as a demonstration of the impulse to incorporate modern shock into modern habit.10 Similar to Stein’s contemporary advocates Loy and Dodge, questions of temporality are central to Schoenbach’s conception of Stein:

Even Stein’s most radically experimental works famously achieve their difficulty through repetitions. Her readers face not shocks per se but habit made visible through sheer exaggeration. Rhythms and repetitions are far more important in Stein than are pronouncements; her vision of literature is expressed more through a logic of duration than it is through such world-altering Poundian cries as “Make it new!”11

Even as Schoenbach makes a significant contribution to a historicized view of Stein’s practice and self-conception within an artistic and intellectual lineage that would claim diverse figures such as Proust, William and Henry James, Bergson, and Walter Benjamin as representatives12, she also posits the very contemporary assertion that “history

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9 p. 603, emphasis Chodat’s.

10 The aesthetics of which is aligned with Peter Burger’s identification of the avant-garde impulse to dissolve the distinction between daily life and the production of art: Futurism and Dada are, then, significant permutations of this “shock” aesthetic.


12 Joan Richardson, in her recent A Natural History of Pragmatism, places Stein in a somewhat similar, though exclusively American, lineage initiated by Jonathan Edwards and Ralph Waldo Emerson and passing through the Jameses to Wallace Stevens and Stein.
determines style,” an overarching position that subtly transforms Stein’s oft-repeated and profoundly self-aware statement concerning the contours of artistic autonomy—that “any one is of one’s period”\textsuperscript{13}—into a overly-deterministic credo that quells possible discussion of both Stein’s self-awareness and her relative autonomy, a move that threatens to quarantine Stein’s writings as the mere documents of predetermined behavior (predetermined by her unconscious self and/or historical period) and not as the purposive aesthetic productions of a significant, if difficult, writer. If Stein is, as I believe, a great writer, it is not because she merely makes habit visible (though Schoenbach \emph{does} argue convincingly that this is the case) but rather because in the process of making modern habit, thought, perception and feeling both visible and legible, she fashions them into compelling works of art. Such a critical position is an aim to reaffirm Stein’s status as, in Loy’s words:

\begin{quote}
Curie of the laboratory of vocabulary.\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{13} “Portraits and Repetition,” \emph{Lectures in America}, p. 177. When Stein speaks of her historical period being “undoubtedly the period of the cinema and series production” and that “each of us in our own way are bound to express what the world in which we are living is doing,” it is to establish such a self-positioning as the point of departure for her endlessly inventive approach to portraiture, one that takes time seriously: portraits that are not externalized spatial descriptions or comparisons, but rather portraits that negotiate traditional notions of inner and outer durations of being and time. Stein states that both the figure in a portrait and the portraitist know “that the things he [the figure to be portrayed] does have been done by others like him that the things he says have been said by others like him.” But, even within this knowledge, there is the question of duration, the notion that “there is no repetition in hearing and saying the things he hears and says \textit{when} he is hearing and saying them,” [emphasis mine] and that if a portrait that accounts for duration is possible, “there is then in so doing neither memory or repetition no matter how often that which he says and hears is heard and said.”

\textsuperscript{14} “Communications: Gertrude Stein,” p. 178.
2. As perhaps fitting for a writer whose popular profile is of a seemingly paradoxical nature — charismatic, larger-than-life personality + producer of strange, supposedly unreadable texts + cohort of Picasso, Cezanne and the Lost Generation (and possibly the coiner of that label) + source of famous one liners — Gertrude Stein’s most popular works are likely her extended self-portraits: *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) and *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1937). A third extended self-portrait is composed in her *Lectures in America*, published in 1935 and consisting of six lectures Stein gave the previous year in her tour of America after an absence of thirty years, a tour that successfully capitalized on the unexpected popular success of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Wendy Steiner writes in the introduction to *Lectures in America*, “Stein was greeted by such large enthusiastic audiences throughout this tour that Bennett Cerf of Random House offered to print *Lectures* and a new book of hers each year.”

Surely among her finest works, *Lectures in America* stages a series of meditations on subjects Stein saw as central to an understanding of her work: a brief history of English and American literature, and the question of serving either God or Mammon in one’s writing (“What Is English Literature”); the relation between one’s medium and one’s nominal content, framed in a discussion of paintings (“Pictures”); intersections of time and drama, and the differences between an excitement of action and an excitement of emotion (“Plays”); the evolution of identity in which “in continuous repeating, to their minutest variation,” a person, over a slow duration, “comes to be clearer to some one.”

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15 “A rose is a rose is a rose”; on her native Oakland: “There is no there there”; to Ernest Hemingway: “Remarks are not literature”; on Ezra Pound: “Found him to be the village explainer. Very useful if you happen to be a village; if not, not.”

and the corresponding aesthetic challenge to “make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out” (“The Gradual Making of The Making of Americans”); the question of whether what is referred to as repetition is better regarded to be, when considered in its temporal unfolding, insistence, in addition to the intimate relation between genius and intensity, and the difficulty of creating a portrait of a singular subject without resorting to resemblance (resemblance necessarily being a portrait of a two and not a one) (“Portraits and Repetition”); and finally, distinctions between poetry and prose as seen through syntax and punctuation (“Poetry and Grammar”).

Before passing through the content of some of these lectures in a dual approach to Stein’s intertwining conceptions of time and aesthetics, a sketching of the models of self-development and self-organization available to her as a possible inheritance will be of use. As has been long-noted, and definitively explored by Steven Meyer in Irresistible Dictation, Stein’s years at Radcliffe/Harvard as prized student of both William James and Hugo Munsterberg, and her experience as a medical student at Johns Hopkins, are of profound importance in considering Stein’s conception of herself as creative subject. Specifically, it is of interest to look at Stein in a post-Darwinian atmosphere saturated with the theories of William James, John Dewey and Alfred North Whitehead, among others. Dewey, in his brief 1910 essay “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy,” writes of the necessity to rethink the entirety of philosophical practice in the wake of Darwin:

Old ideas give way slowly; for they are more than abstract logical forms and categories. They are habits, predispositions, deeply engrained attitudes of aversion and preference. Moreover, the conviction persists—though history shows it to be a hallucination—that all the questions that the human mind has asked are questions
that can be answered in terms of the alternatives that the questions themselves present. But in fact intellectual progress usually occurs through sheer abandonment of questions together with both of the alternatives they assume—an abandonment that results from their decreasing vitality and a change of urgent interest. We do not solve them: we get over them.\textsuperscript{17}

For Stein, as a young intellectual forming herself in this environment, not only would new philosophical “forms and conceptions” present themselves to her in the attempt to address a suddenly non-teleological, evolutionary universe, but also present in this environment would be the recognition that such forms and conceptions, however updated and rigorously pursued, would perhaps have the deepest significance as “habits, predispositions, deeply engrained attitudes of aversion and preference”—a significance that a serious artist would also have to address.

As noted by both Loy and Dodge, another monumental Parisian figure, Henri Bergson, was also grappling with new conceptions of time after Darwin; his \textit{Creative Evolution} of 1907, translated into English in 1911 by Arthur Mitchell, was almost precisely contemporaneous with Stein’s \textit{Tender Buttons}. In his extensive study, Bergson pairs, as near-opposites, \textit{intellectualization} and \textit{instinct}: though they share a distant past harmony, both faculties have been evolved to separate purposes, each retaining a trace of the other. For Bergson, intellectualization can best deal with spatial understanding, the conceptual universe of solids and geometry, while instinct best reveals itself in action, within the durations and flowing changes of experience. One of the major ramifications of Darwin’s work, Bergson states, is that it posits a primacy to duration that our well-evolved rationalizing faculties cannot adequately grasp:

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy and Other Essays in Contemporary Thought}, p. 19.
In short, the world the mathematician deals with is a world that dies and is reborn at every instant—the world which Descartes was thinking of when he spoke of continued creation. But, in time thus conceived, how could evolution, which is the very essence of life, ever take place? Evolution implies a real persistence of the past in the present, a duration which is, as it were, a hyphen, a connecting link. [. . .]

Continuity of change, preservation of the past in the present, real duration—the living being seems, then, to share these attributes with consciousness. Can we go further and say that life, like conscious activity, is invention, is unceasing creation?

Bergson seems to be anticipating much of the critical difficulty with apprehending the radical presentations of temporality underwriting Stein and other modernists when he delineates the qualities of intuition, that very Bergsonian faculty conjured by Dodge and others, as being beyond grasp of the pure intellect (and certainly beyond Robert Chodat’s recent meager attempt to “interpret” Stein’s writings).

It should also be noted that even Mabel Dodge’s sympathetic presentation of Stein somewhat muddled Bergson’s more exacting notion of intuition, a faculty that leads one to “the very inwardness of life.” In Creative Evolution, Bergson defined intuition as “instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely,” and that humanity’s aesthetic faculty is living proof of the reality of intuition.19 As opposed to Dodge’s conception, wherein one waits for the correct words to suddenly spring forth to match one’s pre-existing meaning, Bergson presents a self-aware faculty able to disinterestedly enlarge one’s normal faculties of perception.

18 Creative Evolution, pp. 22-23. Emphases Bergson’s.
19 Ibid. pp. 176-77.
The aesthetic work of intuition cannot be accounted for merely by the intentions, materials or objects at hand: the *creative duration* involved in the work is also a fundamental feature of the aesthetic work, and such a duration necessarily introduces a degree of flux. Complimenting Stein’s own complex theories of portraiture, Bergson writes that “no one, not even the artist, could have foreseen exactly what the portrait would be, for to predict it would have been to produce it before it was produced—an absurd hypothesis which is its own refutation.” Implicit in Bergson’s conception of post-Darwinian duration and creation is the necessity of accounting for duration in the apprehension of an aesthetic work, and that a purely intellectualized account, with its inherently atemporal spatialization of its objects of understanding (this very framing of its own understanding as being composed of substantive objects), would not be equal to the task: a purely intellectualized knowledge is shown to be inadequate to not only art, but also any “thing” through which life and duration reveal themselves.

Stein famously opens the first of her *Lectures*, “What Is English Literature,” by stating “One cannot come back too often to the question of what is knowledge and to the answer knowledge is what one knows.” As is often the case with Stein, the surface simplicity of her vocabulary partially deflects, even as it is the vehicle for, the complexity of her statement; embedded in this opening sentence are two of Stein’s major themes: the importance of repetition/insistence/variation (“one cannot come back too often” because each instance of “coming back” is its own insistence), and the situating of knowledge in

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20 Ibid. pp. 6-7.
21 p. 11.
embodied duration (knowledge is “what one knows” and not “what we all know” or “what data-processors, measuring sticks, etc. know”).

In Robert Chodat’s criticism of Stein, he identifies the importance of James’ distinction between a knowledge by acquaintance, which has an immediate ontological component, and a knowledge-about, with its mediation by, and conformity to, shared concepts. Complimenting James’ distinction, crucial to the radical empiricism that had such significant influence for Stein, is Whitehead’s later contrast between materialist and organic mechanisms: that is, between a deterministic view of process centered around (for Whitehead) a reductive materialist causality, and a view of process that posits a continual heterogeneous dynamic containing both pre- and self-determinism. As argued by Joan Richardson, among others, it should be emphasized that both James and Whitehead, like Bergson, take the radical shift initiated by Darwin as a point of departure, with both attempting to develop philosophical and psychological precepts able to address a universe of gradual but constant variation and change, a universe that does not support a view of humanity or culture as the final teleological expression of life: both address a new pluriverse (James’ friend Benjamin Paul Blood’s term) where sheer contingency modulates a totality of relations; a universe in which, perhaps, language is not just socially and historically conditioned but is also an evolutionary tool:

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23 Meyer, pp. 124-5. Whitehead’s influence on Stein is treated at length by Meyer, and recognized by Stein herself when she, in the voice of Alice B. Toklas, acknowledges Whitehead as one of three geniuses Alice had had the pleasure of knowing (the other two being Picasso and Stein herself).
It is important to keep in mind the continuity of successful forms of expression in the evolution of thinking, and more particularly to consider this feature in the context of language as an organic form as well, as natural and necessary to the survival of human beings as the honeycomb to bees, the structure in and by which transformations essential to the life of the community are made. Appetite and sustenance determine the one as much as the other. This realization about language has, of course, begun to emerge with some degree of clarity only recently in the period following Darwin’s contribution.24

For Richardson, Darwin’s continual reshaping of *On the Origin of Species* as well as his own direct statements both demonstrate his belief in the “primacy of pleasure” for the successful construction and expression of new forms; Darwin knew “he had to fashion his language so that it would satisfy the dual requirement of preserving a residual form to ensure continuity with the past while introducing within that form the adaptations mimicking what he had come to understand about the laws of chance and accident operating throughout nature.”25 Richardson states this dual consideration as being *aesthetic* “in the deepest sense of the term;” the deepening importance of the pleasures of the aesthetic would appear to also guide the speculations of James, Whitehead, Stein and others. But for Chodat, refusing any underlying relationship between evolution and aesthetics, James’ and Whitehead’s precepts are merely their attempts to “keep mental life sounding legitimate, to preserve some space that causal description could not fully account for, and thus could not soil.” If we understand James’ and Whitehead’s precepts, Chodat writes, “we can begin to see how Stein could have understood her work as ‘scientific’” even though Stein “did not, it should be clear, have much interest for science

24 Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, p. 6.

25 Ibid.
as it is taught in laboratories; ‘naturally science is not interesting,’ she announces bluntly in *Everybody’s Autobiography.*” 26

Glossing over the decade of traditionally empirical laboratory work Stein put in at both Radcliffe/Harvard and Johns Hopkins, Chodat casually manufactures a narrative where Stein’s stated aversion to science is merely another quirk of her behavior and not what, in all appearances, it actually is: a carefully considered refusal borne of a long immersion in that very conception of science she eventually rejected: a refusal that would have been necessary for the pursuit of a radically empirical knowledge that could address a Darwinian world of variation, contingency and flux, as well as the “habits, predispositions, deeply engrained attitudes” Dewey identified as being interwoven with the normalization of any philosophical stance. As Stein herself made clear, her eventual refusal of “science as it is taught in laboratories” is not the product of a lack of “interest” or, as Chodat subtly frames it, a “drifting away,” but was rather a principled refusal, even if, as she stated in *Lectures in America,* the appeal of “science as it is taught in laboratories” *is* significant:

When I was working with William James I completely learned one thing, that science is continuously busy with the complete description of something, with ultimately the complete description of anything with ultimately the complete description of everything. If this can really be done the complete description of everything then what else is there to do. 27

26 p. 589

For an ambitious writer such as Stein, a field that claims the potential for “the complete
description of everything” would have a tremendous pull. But, as Stein’s working
assumptions at the time of the Lectures – that such a scientific quasi-description is
certainly possible, but: “if it can be done why do it” – make clear, her movement from
The Making of Americans (written 1906-8), a radically extensive attempt to capture the
mechanisms governing the different human types (a knowledge-about book, perhaps, of a
traditionally empirical artistic intent) to the “still life” prose pieces of Tender Buttons
(1914), her compressed portraits-without-resemblance of objects, food and rooms (a
knowledge of acquaintance book, perhaps, of a radically empirical intent), is not a lazy
“drifting away” but a considered movement co-extensive with her refusal of the scientific
drive to “the complete description of everything.”

This shift in Stein’s focus echoes James’ late embrace of a radical empiricism (his
book of essays by that name was published posthumously in 1912), the contours of which
he had already sketched out in his Principles of Psychology (1890), addressing the
difficulties for a linguistically stable subject (such as an “objective” scientific observer)
to register the subtle intricacies of thought, perception and sensation; since “the relations
are numberless, and no existing language is capable of doing justice to all their shades”:

We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quitely as readily as we say a feeling of blue, a feeling of cold. Yet we do not, so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use . . . All dumb or anonymous psychic states have, owing to this error, been coolly suppressed; or, if recognized at all, have been named after the substantive perception they led to, as thoughts “about” this object or “about” that, the stolid word about engulfing all their delicate
idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound. Thus the greater and greater accentuation and isolation of the substantive parts have continually gone on.  

An aesthetic response to the recognition of an unnecessary “accentuation and isolation” of substantive verbal objects in normal language usage, and the incongruity of such verbal objects with an evolutionary conception of intricate relation and change, would be, as Mina Loy aptly phrases it, Stein’s attempt to “tackle an aesthetic analysis of the habits of consciousness in its lair.” There is a relation here between Loy’s advocacy and Schoenbach’s contemporary valorization in Modernism/Modernity of Stein’s work for “its commitment to managing and redirecting the energies of historically specific shock, its awareness of its own institutional embeddedness, and its skepticism about the inherent usefulness of violent disruptions of convention,” but Schoenbach’s presentation of Stein’s pragmatism passes over the deep sense of the aesthetic that Stein, Bergson, and James, following Darwin himself, made central to their practice.

To leave undistinguished the difference between Stein’s writings as the aesthetic presentation of habit and those writings as habit itself is to guide one’s discussion into the behaviorist realm of Stein’s most virulent critics, a virtual encouragement for critics such as Chodat to place on the same critical plane Stein’s “behavior” as represented by her text “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso” and her behavior in his speculative

28 Quoted in Richardson, p. 7. Emphases are James’s.
29 p. 184.
30 p. 256.
imagining of her opening a refrigerator door because “she ‘wants’ some orange juice and ‘thinks’ there is still some left in the container.”

For Chodat, the unpredictable behavior of Stein’s text also dissolves any claims Meyer or Stein may have for its scientific character, especially as Chodat collapses any distinction to be made between “science” and “the formation of general predictive hypotheses,”32 and as the tautology of privileging the formation of such predictive hypotheses because they “better serve prediction in some domain”33 goes unexplored. The implication that can be derived from James, Whitehead et al, that what science claims as an ability to describe the world may actually be science’s ability to describe itself, is what underwrites Meyer’s claims for poetry’s potential to widen the domain of traditional scientific inquiry, especially when one remembers that poetry for Stein, Wordsworth, Goethe and similar poet-scientists (Meyer’s term) is an aesthetic endeavor, speculative and experimental, and not merely socialized behavior frozen in time. Any attempt to rationalize the “behavior” of a Stein (or any other artist exploring the aesthetic potential of the intersections between their chosen medium(s) and their own historical moment) as represented by one of her works, as if a strange display of ill manners, will very likely lead to the kind of “shock” that Chodat says that “we” undergo “when rationalization is a struggle—the Monty Python tobacconist trying to cope with an unwittingly lewd Hungarian visitor, the spouse struggling to understand a mumbling

31 p. 593.
33 Bjorn Ramberg, quoted in Chodat, p. 592.
partner drifting into Alzheimer’s, or, indeed, the reader encountering “If I Told Him” for the first time.”

“Indeed,” the charges of perverse otherness (“an unwittingly lewd Hungarian visitor”) or illness (“a mumbling partner drifting into Alzheimer’s”) that have attended to Stein’s works from the beginning of her career will attach themselves easily to her more experimental works if they are regarded as mere examples of her strange behavior, as occurs in this anonymous review of *Tender Buttons* upon its publication in 1914:

> Have you ever the charade habit? And have you wrestled with Baconian ciphers and cryptograms? 
> If you have ever done any or all of these things you will enjoy *Tender Buttons*. Miss Stein, as she has been seen in Paris, is described as a mountainous lady, wearing a voluminous (necessarily voluminous) monkish robe of brown, roped—where the waist should be—with a cord. On her feet she wears carpet slippers, which may have suggested the bit on “Shoes,” which we have quoted. At least this is how she appeared to my informant who saw her in Paris.

There is a temptation here to work out Schoenbach’s implication that Stein presents the pragmatist groundwork for the incorporating into habit the very shock that both Chodat and her anonymous, contemporary reviewer claims she produces. But if, as Schoenbach writes, for Stein and philosophical pragmatists such as James and Dewey, habit is “never merely a problem to be overcome” or “a failure of imagination” and is rather “the smallest component part into which thought and behavior can be broken down, and through which they are built back up,” it will be necessary to demonstrate how Stein’s aesthetic rendering of habitual repetitions and perceptions is not a failure of artistic

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34 Ibid, p. 593.

imagination and/or understanding but rather a complex and compelling presentation of both.

If Stein, though, merely made modern perception and habit legible to cognition, then we can conjure Kant in calling such work mechanical art, “but if what it intends directly is [to arouse] the feeling of pleasure, then it is called aesthetic art.” In the consideration of Stein’s writings, as I have argued, it is necessary to regard them as intentional aesthetic productions and not instances of her behavior, as her critics and less often her advocates have done. Quite regularly, the idiosyncrasy of her texts are tied to the novelty of her physical appearance and reported behavior, all being manifestations of her unusual “nature;” within this viewpoint, her texts would only be of interest as unmediated documents of said nature, causing a certain dilemma for those who agree with Kant that “A natural beauty is a beautiful thing; artistic beauty is a beautiful presentation of a thing.”

As a writer so continually compared not to other writers but to mountains, hippopotami, etc.—so often framed as a peculiar specimen of nature itself, unfamiliar with normal social behavior: “We are told that when she visits the Louvre and sees a painting she admires more than others, she lies flat on the carpet and, so to speak, prostrates herself to it”—such a unique specimen must surely appear to some as the embodiment of Wittgenstein’s famous maxim that if a lion could speak, we would not

understand it. The corresponding critical assumption would then be that any pleasure we derive from Stein’s writing is a product not of an aesthetic but instead a natural kind of beauty, the odd pleasure of seeing the habit, perception, sensation, etc., of a peculiar specimen, all in its unmediated form.

William James identifies the existence of “a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by,” as well as the difficulty of accounting for the dynamics of such feelings of complex relation through normal language use. The problem with normal language is that it has a tendency to spatialize such relations as separate, substantive parts, a tendency Bergson identified as being contrary the very processes that make up what we call life. Stein, in concert with both, describes her intentions in her portraits, a desire to make a presentation of complex internal dynamics:

I had to find out what it was inside any one, and by any one I mean every one I had to find out inside every one what was in them that was intrinsically exciting and I had to find out not by what they said not by what they did not by how much or how little they resembled any other one but I had to find it out by the intensity of movement that there was inside in any one of them.39

Here, Stein stages her intentions in her early portraits (such as “If I Told Him”) and the massive The Making of Americans; clearly, mere description and the traditional deployment of adjectives and nouns (as tools of resemblance) would not allow her to accomplish her new portraiture. The extreme difficulty of such a project is also addressed in her lecture. “I was also looking,” she writes, “and that could not be entirely left out”:

The trouble with including looking, as I have already told you, was that in regard to human beings looking inevitably carried in its train realizing movements and expression and as such forced me into recognizing resemblances, and so forced remembering and in forcing remembering caused confusion of present with past and future time.\(^{40}\)

In order to pursue her new kind of portraiture and, co-existent with this pursuit, the development of a unique kind of looking, Stein had to shift from addressing moving, sociable *humans* and instead focus upon *objects*. An important poetic-scientific precedent for Stein’s study of objects in pursuit of a new logic of looking can be seen in Goethe’s studies on the morphology of plants. Stein, who as both a connoisseur of 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) century literature and as a student who took a course on the morphology of plants (the field of study Goethe initiated), may have been acquainted with the innovative conception of looking that Goethe proposes in his notes collected in “On Morphology.” Regardless, Goethe’s writings on this subject can illustrate the degree to which intuition, in the self-aware sense Bergson would later theorize, can expand perception to apprehend dynamics of change and variation that, post-Darwin, had become so central to intellectual life in the early 20\(^{th}\) century.

In contrast to a concept-driven approach, the administrators of which, by “proceeding from ideas [. . .] simultaneously express the unity of the whole, and it is almost the obligation of Nature to conform to the ideas,” Goethe models a different approach:

\(^{40}\) Ibid. p. 188. Bergson also identifies the intellect as operating through resemblance: “For the natural function of the intellect is to bind like to like” and therefore, like Hegel’s owl of Minerva, the intellect “does undoubtedly grasp the real moments of real duration after they are past.” *Creative Evolution*, p. 200.
When I see before me something which has already taken shape, inquire about its origin and trace back the process as far as I can follow, I become aware of a series of stages. Naturally, these cannot be observed side by side with the physical eye but must be pictured mentally as a certain ideal whole.

Inclined at first to postulate certain stages, I am finally compelled, since Nature never proceeds by skips and jumps, to regard the sequence of uninterrupted activity as a whole, annulling individual details so as not to destroy the total impression.\footnote{pp. 92-3.}

The implicit, ideal whole Goethe proposes here would necessarily address duration as it contains the trajectory of the object’s development, its components not isolated in a spatial understanding or pre-existing idea, part separate from part, but conceived as an entire \textit{gestalt}. Pursued with Goethe’s complimentary observation that “[a] plant, like every other natural entity, cannot be imagined without an environment,”\footnote{Ibid. p. 95.} one has perhaps a usable sketch for a looking of/in Stein that can begin to approach both Loy’s claim of “‘Being’ as [Stein’s] absolute occupation” and Schoenbach’s claim of her profound awareness of “institutional embeddedness.” Frederick Amrine writes, in “The Metamorphosis of the Scientist,” that “Goethe’s claim that ‘every new object, well contemplated, opens up a new organ of perception within us’ reveals itself to be an extremely condensed version” of his entire scientific approach; troubling the “the formation of general predictive hypotheses” paradigm posited by Chodat, Amrine writes that, in its Goethean conception, “the goal of science is not to end with an abstract
theorem but rather with new capacities that are themselves incitement to ever greater activity and ever enhanced perception."

By focusing her dynamic looking on her own looking-at-objects and not individual persons in *Tender Buttons*, Stein felt she could better combine the multiple capacities she saw as contributing to one’s perception of any thing:

I began again to do portraits but this time it was not portraits of men and women and children, it was portraits of anything and so I made portraits of rooms and food and everything because there I could avoid this difficulty of suggesting remembering more easily while including looking with listening and talking than if I were to describe human beings.

One of the difficulties of apprehending Stein’s portraits, even when they are focused on common domestic objects such as celery, handkerchiefs, petticoats, etc., is her intention to both “make a whole present of something that it had taken a great deal of time to find out” and to also to avoid a “confusion of present with past and future time”; that is, to make an aesthetic presentation of, as Ralph Pred would put it, the onflow of immediacy, a presentation that makes art of its particular qualities and pleasures without relying on techniques of resemblance that render the vital present as mere virtual avatar of pre-understood sensations and images. Such a project implies a radical reinvention of language use, especially as Stein doesn’t assume a quasi-scientific, neutral, silent portraitist but one whose looking also includes listening and talking. Still, if Stein’s way of writing this looking *is* merely singular and incommunicable, then she will circulate as

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43 p. 47

44 “Portraits and Repetition,” p. 188.
a mere curiosity, perhaps the novel irritant that Chodat sketches; and, if it is merely communicable, then it would appear to be a mechanical and not an aesthetic art if, following Kant, we assert that aesthetic art appeals not only to the faculty of understanding but also to the imagination.

William James states in a lecture on Bergson, “Many of us are profusely original, in that no man can understand us—violently peculiar ways of looking at things are no great rarity. The rarity is when great peculiarity of vision is allied with great lucidity and unusual command of all the classic expository apparatus.”45 Here, James half-approaches Stein’s dilemma, as her great peculiarity of vision is one that disavows recourse to much of the “classic expository apparatus” of poetry and fiction, especially if that apparatus, as James himself acknowledged, relies so often on a spatial logic that isolates interconnected entities as isolated substantive objects with divisible, separate parts, a logic that mechanizes any organic process: “nature doesn’t make eggs by making first half an egg, then a quarter, then an eighth, etc., and adding them together. She either makes a whole egg at once or none at all, and so of all her other units.” James elaborated on this perception, resonant with Goethe’s ideal whole and anticipating Alfred North Whitehead’s metaphysics, when he stated that “all our sensible experiences [. . .] come to us in drops. Time itself comes in drops.”46

To approach the individual portraits of Tender Buttons as drops of duration that include looking, talking and listening as occasioned by an object may allow one to

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45 “Bergson and His Critique of Intellectualism,” A Pluralistic Universe, p. 228.

46 Ibid. p. 230.
apprehend the peculiar emotional resonance of Stein’s writing, especially if one entertains Stein’s observation that, in the historical epoch in which she was writing, paragraphs were emotional but individual sentences were not. As opposed to previous epochs, when phrases and sentences were the primary units of emotion, Stein asserted in “What Is English Literature” that humanity’s relationship to language had evolved to such a degree that paragraphs, like William James’ large drops, were now the proper unit of intuitive apprehension. “Paragraphs are emotional,” Stein writes, “not because they express an emotion but because they register or limit an emotion.”

Here is one of her portraits from *Tender Buttons*:

*A long dress.*

What is the current that makes machinery, that makes it crackle, what is the current that presents a long line and a necessary waist. What is this current. What is the wind, what is it.
Where is the serene length, it is there and a dark place is not a dark place, only a white and red are black, only a yellow and green are blue, a pink is scarlet, a bow is every color. A line distinguishes it. A line just distinguishes it.

A rather delicate language game is at work here, where the sentences and paragraphs of “A long dress” operate as a register of emotion and thought occasioned by the perception of the announced object; as opposed to bringing a series of similes or descriptions to bear upon the object, “a long dress” is animated by the kinds of looking, talking and listening that, as a kind of conduit, it takes as its current. In the jump from the simplicity of the title to the seemingly odd opening question of currents and machines, there is not merely a

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47 *Lectures in America*, p. 48.
48 *Writings 1903-1932*, p. 318.
startling juxtaposition (the aesthetics of shock); instead, if one keeps in mind that, like Goethe’s plant, “a long dress,” as both a verbal object and as a referent, “cannot be imagined without an environment,” the movement (from dress to the crackle of the current to a “necessary waist” to the persistent question of the wind) of the first two paragraphs of the portrait create a complex image of the dynamism of “a long dress.”

Stein compared her presentational method, after the fact, to the cinema. In “A long dress,” a reader is introduced to both a series of images and a certain duration of looking/talking/listening in which one can, within the aesthetic drops of the two opening paragraphs, apprehend a series of emotional limits of a long dress as object and figure: suggesting at once both a pastoral image of a long dress swaying on a clothesline and an industrial “crackle” of sexuality pulsing through the image. “A long dress” is then suddenly embodied as the presentation of classic beauty, “a long line and a necessary waist,” still imbued with the industrial crackle of a current that both makes machinery and makes a presentation of the beautiful: “What is this current,” Stein asks, re-emphasizing the shared pulse passing through dress, machine and beauty.

The next paragraph offers a variation that is also a return; the jump between “What is this current” and “What is the wind” implies a re-staging of the same question, both of which stage the attempt to make legible the energy passing both through the image of the dress and the figures it makes in one’s imagination: “a long dress” as concurrently a veiling (it covers a body) and an illumination (it outlines a body) of a desire that is framed by both industrial (machinic crackle) and pastoral (clothesline) images, implying that tropes of neither veiling nor illumination, of neither industry nor
the pastoral, are adequate to representing the internal excitement Stein sees as inhabiting
“a long dress” as perceived object, linguistic figuration and as a specific type of energy.
This second paragraph, as a single sentence, is a re-imaging of the first: in a sense it is a
repetition, but in a Steinian sense; that is, not a repetition at all, but an insistence, an
acceleration of urgency: “What is the wind, what is it.”

One result of this energy is that no one-to-one correspondence to “a long dress” is
possible within Stein’s portrait: it overflows any sense of resemblance. This overflow
animates the delicate excitement of the first two paragraphs of “A long dress” even as it
also underwrites the more difficult last paragraph. Here, the length of the dress itself, or
of “A long dress” as a portrait, is no longer crackling with sexual currents but is presented
as rather serene: it is now a point of departure for a series of variations by Stein.
Harnessing, perhaps, the transgressive excitement of “a long dress” as portrayed in the
opening paragraphs, Stein presents a mysterious “there” of apparent paradox, a “there”
that invites verbal figurations which refuse ordinary logic: “a dark place is not a dark
place” and “only a white and red are black,” where “a pink is scarlet” and “a bow is every
color.” Presented in the language of riddles (what is black and white and red/read all
over), this particular paragraph seems to invite a logic of hidden resemblance (the very
stuff of riddles) even as it is Stein’s stated conviction to refuse such a logic. Here, it is
more difficult to argue for the kind of modernist syncopation of understanding and
imagination necessary for a deep aesthetic pleasure, as the paragraph, by using the energy
of the dynamic figure of “a long dress” to launch itself beyond a consideration of that
figure, seems to exceed both faculties; this is in contrast to the opening paragraphs, where
both the imaginative figure of “a long dress” and its discursive environs alternately reveal and conceal each other. But, by taking the paragraph as an entire emotional unit and by pushing the limits of that emotionality, Stein also simultaneously addresses even as she enacts the possible slippage from aesthetic engagement to puzzled apprehension. In the spirit of an intuition that is self-aware and disinterested, how does one negotiate this slippage? “A line distinguishes it,” Stein writes, with seeming tenderness, even as she repeats herself, more precisely and insistently: “A line just distinguishes it.”

In *Creative Evolution*, Bergson also attempted to follow out the ramifications of taking duration as “the very stuff of reality, and consequently to distinguish between the substantial duration of things and time spread out in space.” Bergson desired to articulate “knowledge from within,” which he discusses in conjunction with a Kantian articulation of knowledge, in which knowledge is also presented as “an ever-open roll” and “experience as a push of facts that is for ever going on”:

But, according to Kant, these facts are spread out on one plane as fast as they arise; they are external to each other and external to the mind. Of a knowledge from within, that could grasp them in their springing forth instead of taking them already sprung, that would dig beneath space and spatialized time, there is never any question. Yet it is indeed beneath this plane that our consciousness places us; there flows true duration.\(^{49}\)

It can be said that both Stein and Bergson, in Loy’s phrase, “tackle an aesthetic analysis of the habits of consciousness in its lair,” but with the added ramification that, in a post-

\(^{49}\) p. 361.
Darwinian epoch, both an aesthetic and a philosophical analysis of such continual becoming may well become indistinguishable from one another.

4. Co-existent with this turning away from a purely intellectualized approach is a danger Frank Lentricchia sketches in the opening chapter of *Modernist Quartet* as he summarizes the competing claims of the “Philosophers of Modernism at Harvard, circa 1900”—William James, George Santayana, Josiah Royce—and their influence on the generation of modernist poets that passed through Harvard: Frost, Eliot, Stevens (all central to Lentricchia’s book), E.A. Robinson and Stein. The danger underwriting Lentricchia’s account is that, in the elevating of dynamic percept over static concept, there would be a corresponding isolation and incommunicability, one that Josiah Royce attempted to overcome with his view of interpretation as “a community-making event,” as demonstrated by the notion that, in Lentricchia’s words, “the antithetical traditions of Plato and Bergson” can converse because their discussions concern similar faculties, even if “one faculty and its object of knowledge is the nightmare of the other”:

The object of perception is a datum – etymologically, a gift: a sensuous thing-for-itself, the intuition of a unique temporal event. The object of conception, on the other hand, is a universal, or type, or quality – a static, eternal thing, beyond temporal contingency: ontology’s gift – an eternal form of the real; after Kant, the mind’s gift of deepest structure – an eternal and necessary form of cognition [. . .]

Conception, Royce says, is “sterile,” and perception “intolerably lonesome.” But perception rather than conception is his consistent target because the philosophical tides of modernism appeared to him to be running its favor [. . .] He saw that the ancient quarrel between philosophy and poetry had in effect been resolved, that philosophy and poetry had joined forces, that socially isolating
perception was the ground of agreement, and that imagism and Bergsonism were its key contemporary cultural signs, and he wondered out loud what would become of us if, in cultivating the modern, we ceased to care about what connects us [. . .]

Conception and perception are equally lonely operations for Royce because they take nature as both object and terminus: nature abstracted for its essences by the categories of reason, or nature cherished and preserved in its sensuous, unreasoning particularities. What Royce wants is that kind of cognitive activity whose locus of work is society and whose object is neither type, nor the random sensuous particular, but a mind, especially my neighbor’s mind: an “object” which is a “subject” encountered only through its signifying manifestations.50

Royce’s skepticism concerning “nature cherished and preserved in its sensuous, unreasoning particularities” resonates especially as one considers the knowledge of nature as available to a Goethe and as contrasted to the knowledge of nature available to a Stein or Bergson, let alone to a contemporary subject, who find themselves grappling with these question post-industrialization, and at a later stage of capitalism, at which point, as theorists such as Fredric Jameson have pointed out, differing, non-capitalist conceptions of cultural and economic production would not be accessible to a modernist subject in an industrialized city in any tangible form other than as a kind of faint nostalgia: a logic or spirit of life one might have a knowledge-about but of which one would have very little knowledge of acquaintance.

Modernist intuition then would be of a kind of reversal of tropes: nature as a sterile, intellectualized language of signs about which one has generalized conceptions, and culture as the “natural” environment of lonesome data one immediately knows in acquaintance. The ramification here is that “nature,” as a normalizing trope, will function not as the shared basis of all knowledge (as Royce put it) but as just another registry of

50 Lentricchia, pp. 42-3.
knowledge, a type of knowledge one knows about but in which – except on special, leisurely occasions – one is not immersed. There is the possibility, then, that Goethe’s objects for expansive looking (plants in their natural environment) and Stein’s objects (food and objects in a domestic setting) function similarly for each, in their respective historical moments, in distant correspondence.

Here we can fast-forward to our contemporary moment and another of Robert Chodat’s assertions: to be human means that one has “the capacity to give reasons and justify actions,” a bureaucratic definition of humanity that likely would have struck modernists Stein, James or (without a doubt) Pound as a nightmarish one. If traditional Kantian aesthetics posits a harmony between understanding and imagination as crucial for aesthetic cognition, the post-Darwinian pursuits of Stein may be read in a revision of that aesthetic: instead of a harmony between two eternal faculties, there is instead, to use Joan Richardson’s phrasing, a dynamic of “appetite and sustenance”\(^{51}\) between two evolutionary developed, variable faculties: a rhythm then, and not a pattern, of aesthetic cognition.

Caught between the death throes of the spatialized epoch of traditional pre-Darwinian intellectualization and the birth pangs of a spatialized epoch of hyper-bureaucracy and commodification, Stein is truly “of her period” as her works can be read as the emotionally exciting aesthetic presentation of immediacy and duration at a crucial point of Western history: a point when, even as post-Darwinian philosophy attempted to de-systemize and de-mechanize perceptions of reality that were revealed to be

\(^{51}\) Terms derived from Alfred North Whitehead’s *appetition* and *satisfaction*. 
incongruent with a new archive of evolutionary knowledge, that very natural archive was becoming commodified by the processes of a capitalist system that proliferated through the intellectual faculties that that archive now seemed to imply humanity had evolved for itself to a radical degree. I would argue that all of Pound’s insights into machine aesthetics, and how the velocities and energies of machinic productions came to vitalize the Modernist imagination, must be paired with Stein’s insights concerning Modernist apprehensions of signs: one, the importance of time itself, as duration, to an understanding of internal dynamisms that do not empty themselves into pure representations; and two, the need for a constant reconsideration of the proper emotional, intellectual and imaginative units for comprehension in a period susceptible to a proliferation of new media and new logics of signification.
Conclusion:  Apparitions of the Crowd:
Digital Poetics

1. The conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith posted an entry on the Poetry Foundation’s Harriet Blog in the summer of 2007 that has become a sort of mascot for the contemporary moment, marking what I think of as the most significant shift in poetry and poetics of the last ten years, the drift from a written to a digital poetic environment. In his blog post, Goldsmith notes a lecture he just gave at an MFA program, where one of the students wanted him to “get real” and stop his avant-garde jive talk. This request flabbergasted Goldsmith; no one asks Madonna or Jeff Koons to be real, so why do people expect poets to do so?

Twenty five years after Baudrillard, these poetry students were still prioritizing Romantic notions of authenticity—‘truth’, ‘individuality’ and ‘honesty’—over any other form of expression. My god! Is it a case of naivety, amnesia or just plain ignorance?¹

Reading Goldsmith, one understands that the dominant criterion of contemporary culture, beyond those outdated precepts of authenticity, feeling or influence--or even precision--is the update. To be twenty-five years behind Jean Baudrillard is the aesthetic equivalent of sporting, without irony, a Member’s Only jacket and/or listening to Lionel Ritchie—it is to signify that one has missed numerous updates. Being up-to-date isn’t a

recent phenomenon, of course. We have always had fashion available to us as a mode for embodying a specific sense of the present, of culling to ourselves a profile that both fits the immediate moment and that adapts the materials that prior moments have prepared for us. Intentionally or not, fashion has always broadcast an individual’s sense of time, revealing the updates one has or has not received.

The difference that Goldsmith grasps: the update has become the primary motor of contemporary life itself. In terms of technological systems, there is now the unrelenting underlying anxiety that we will not be able to work or consume or communicate or be entertained effectively unless we are satisfactorily, and perpetually, updated: to lag behind the updates is to become incompatible, imperceptible. Carried to an extreme, we might say that the culture or even the species itself has pinned its hopes for survival on the update; a notion that with the properly accelerated and perfected innovation, life as we know it can continue its infinite expansions and progressions.

In a 2008 dialogue with Dale Smith, published online in Jacket, Goldsmith discussed how his art world training inflected his poetic approach. “What I learned in the art world is that anything goes,” Goldsmith stated. Further, Goldsmith claimed:

The further you can push something, the more it is rewarded: to shoot for anything less in the art world is career suicide. The art that is deemed the most valuable is rarely the most finely-crafted, the most expressive, or the most ‘honest’ works, but rather those which either attempt to do something that’s never been done before or those that synthesize older ideas into something new.²

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In many ways, Goldsmith sounds like an inspirational speaker at a conference of business leaders: risk is rewarded, as is innovation. There is also value in integrating older aesthetic models so to meet present demands. This rhetoric should be familiar to us; it is leadership talk. In his dialogue with Smith, Goldsmith offers some terms for his sense of his own work: “impact,” “audience,” “career,” “radically important,” “historical,” “experimental,” “cutting-edge.” One would not be surprised to see the same terms in the business plan of a digital entrepreneur.

In the last century of art, for Goldsmith, notions of craft, expressiveness and honesty have fled from the mainstream. But, rather embarrassingly, these notions have remained in poetry like out-of-date keepsakes, old Dave Matthews cassettes that are not yet old enough to be recuperated into a retro chic. Part of the poetic awkwardness has to do with the skewed reflection: contemporary systems of production, consumption and circulation can look to the worlds of art and music and film and see their unreal reflection in those worlds. When the logic of the present looks at the world of poetry, Goldsmith proposes, it sees a reflection insisting on its own realness, an insistence that should have slackened eons ago.

Why, Goldsmith wonders, has poetry lagged so far behind in its updates? It’s a good question. Perhaps the medium is the answer. As a primarily individual, written artifact, modern poetry has offered—beyond its most famous pleasures—a compensating value for its practitioners: the intimacy of an implied present other. In his recent book *Becoming Beside Ourselves: The Alphabet, Ghosts, and Distributed Human Being*, Brian Rotman does not discuss poetry directly but he does discuss one of the important conditions of poetry, the varying ghost-effects of the media poetries employ. In tracing
his genealogy of media, what Rotman says is simple enough to be true. To discuss the present, he rewinds to a mode of communication both prior and foundational to speech and writing and later, digital modes: gestural expression. Within gesture, there is usually minimal ghosting, as the addresser and addressee are both present at the site of communication; and if someone points at the moon, the moon is present as well. By having its subjects and objects very present, it is a medium that sets the conditions for an embodied feeling for life and cognition. In speech, the addresser and addressee are likewise present in an embodied sense, though now the moon can be ghosted (made present and absent at once): the object of spoken discourse can be conjured and be turned into an apparition that is signified even in its absence. With speech, it does not have to be night for us to be conversant about the moon.

With the eventual invention of written communication, Rotman informs us, an inconceivable, unintentionally enormous leap occurs: we become the ghost-effect. Because writing can be stored and retrieved with such minimal effort, and with such relative stability, individuals can communicate amongst themselves in absentia. (Likewise, a never-present perspective—a mind, or god or institution—can also communicate an implied presence through writing.)

To paraphrase Jack Spicer, writing is how we undead people talk to one another. Frank O’Hara’s epiphany was that poems could exist between two persons instead of two pages. Fifty years later, Rotman suggests a different love triangle: a written poem exists between two ghosts. To illustrate this idea, we can think of a last will and testament, a letter to or from a deceased family member, or William Carlos Williams’ “This Is Just to Say,” a note left in place of a self. Williams wrote a note to his absent Florence,
apologizing for stealing the plums she had been saving; when Florence read the same note later, she beheld a dispatch from a husband who was not physically beside her. Two ghosts. (This gets to my own sense of the vividness of the note, its poetry: the poem captures the immediacies and distances and small treasons that underwrite a shared domestic life. Every house, the poems implies, is similarly haunted. This written effect is one that could not be generated by any other medium.)

Not only humans can be made present through the intervention of writing, of course. With the mechanization and mass distribution of modern written forms—think of the news article, the bureaucratic memo, the written law—a different ghost-effect is created and put into circulation. The “voice” of these dominant forms is the impersonal, disembodied authority; the voice is not a human voice, but something else, something more insidious, anonymous and omnipresent. No wonder people turned to written poems for intimacy and a sense of the individual. One could store and signify on paper all of the effects and sensations of an immediate, immanent self, however dreamed: a relief from (and within) the official life of written language. Like the mirror Williams himself, in another poem, gyrates nakedly before, the page could be the sanctuary in which one perceives a desired reflection, where one can be for a time the happy lonely genius of a household.

As explored earlier, Ron Silliman once noted how his work cafeteria contained trash containers with the words “Thank You” written on them. “Who speaks?” Silliman wondered. But the logic of writing, as a technology, is that the “speaker” of written words does not have to be present, or even existent, to assert its dominion. The speaker of the thanking words in Silliman’s cafeteria was not a single human, but the working institution
itself, or perhaps the customs or norms assumed by the institution. It was official language speaking itself. Official language was invented with writing; the first street sign announced its presence. Official language’s anonymous authoritative voice has become so prevalent in our culture that we rarely notice it. Very often, it is also the voice that tallies our histories and laws, as it is the voice that literally and figuratively gives us our directions. The voice that told Silliman “thank you” is the same one that says “stop” and “yield” and “ten percent off” with utmost authority and confidence; it never lifts up its veil to reveal itself, never has to get real. The poem of individual presence that Goldsmith mocked in his blog entry, and its authorial affect of Romantic sincerity and authenticity, is simply the flipside of official language. Both are ghostly affects of the written medium. Poetry has had a genius for exploring writing as the site where isolated individuals can carve out and seek the reflections and intimacies they long for, to sketch out a more real self, if just to prop it up for shade.

In Goldsmith’s blog entry after his aggravating MFA talk, he sketched his sense of the poetic present: “Now is the time of possibility we can be everyone and no one at all,” wrote Goldsmith:

With digital fragmentation any notions of authenticity and coherence have long been wiped [out]. When we’re everywhere and nowhere at once—pulling RSS feeds from one server, server-side includes from another, downloading distributed byte-size torrents from hundreds of other shifting identities—such naïve sentiments are even further from what it means to be a contemporary writer. Identity politics no longer have to do with the definition of a coherent self, rather it has to do with the reconstructed distributed, fragmented, multiple and often anonymous selves that we are today. We’re infinitely adaptable and changeable minute-to-minute. Shouldn’t our notions of art expand once again to include these as well?
As this quotation suggests, another shift is occurring, from a written to a digital paradigm. Perhaps, Goldsmith suggests, we are regaining the fluidity of our aural past. Goldsmith’s suggestion—that the technological proliferation of forms will allow us an exit from our limited, Cartesian selves—is a fairly canonically modernist one. As we have seen, Andre Breton thought the introduction of the wireless telegraph was nothing less than a new orientation of mind; with the telegraph, vast geographies could be brought into violent simultaneity, like regions of the conscious and subconscious mind yoked together in a single utterance. It was a new model for feeling and thought.

Likewise, Marshall McLuhan thought the mass press (made possible by the telegraph) allowed for a more mobile, collective subject position that was closer to the mythic mind of ancient aural networks. FT Marinetti loved the velocity of the telegraph, how its rapidity of signification put emphasis on the materiality of signs themselves, giving language the taste of life. Ezra Pound saw the telegraph as being akin to the medieval custom of chivalric love: it externalized a sensibility through which we could read the dynamics of the entire cosmos.

This is the tradition through which Goldsmith speaks, except this position is closer now to the major streams of culture and commerce than it was when modernists roamed the earth. In a sense, Goldsmith’s call is for poets to more consciously internalize and give voice to the complex systems that support them, to harmonize with the voice that says our network browser needs updating and that informs us we are to expect record rains in the next 48 hours; a voice that is as anonymous as it is omnivorous. Who can say Goldsmith is wrong? Look at his portfolio. The Whitney Biennial, University of Pennsylvania, Marjorie Perloff: institutions adore and adopt him. He succeeds by his own
terms. He has made an impact and has cultivated an audience; Goldsmith’s is a career some believe to be radically important, historical in its outlook and yet experimental in its output, pitched right on the cutting-edge of the art. By staying continually updated, Goldsmith—especially in comparison to most other poets—has remained visible, everywhere and nowhere at once.

2. The last ten years have initiated shifts in 1) how poems are read, and 2) how poets internalize and project their selves. The oral poem made a collective self palpable because it was built for collective communication; everyone could pitch into the chant, everyone could hear the chant, everyone was participating in the poem as a shared unit of time. Maybe it was the broadcast of something larger than a single self. The written page, however, has sustained the impression of a ghostly poetic self because the written page is built for your eyes only, for a one-to-one communication (this is just to say).

And it seems this is a digital age. Critics such as Jonathan Sterne have argued that when a new media is introduced, at first it shows how it works by swallowing up the content of older media. In showing off the phonograph, Thomas Edison performed “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” a relic from a prior world of sound. Likewise, in launching the iPad, Steve Jobs demonstrated its prowess by showing how it can midwife a new future for old media relics such as National Public Radio, Time Magazine and The New York Times. Any new media will present itself as the visionary dream of the media that preceded it. Part of the story of the last ten years has been the transference of written poetic archives,

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3 *The Audible Past*, p. 250.
histories, personalities and institutions into the digital realm, causing interesting metamorphoses.

The Language poet Ron Silliman, through his blog, now less resembles a human than an impersonal institution with four or five categories of analysis that can be applied to a bewildering array of objects. Meanwhile, the frighteningly behemoth Poetry Foundation—recipient of an enormous private endowment earlier in the decade—has managed to dress itself up as a mischievous, upstart operation, hosting a crazed, aggravating cast at its Harriet blog, where poets such as Goldsmith, Linh Dinh, Barbara Jane Reyes and Mark Nowak have giddily flushed cherry bombs down the drainpipes of received thought. Sites such as Goldsmith’s irreplaceable Ubu are reinventing a more usable, exciting artistic past, while other sites like HTML Giant proceed as if the literary past extended all the way back to last week.

Unintended differences have begun accumulating, creating texture and habit. Now that most of us have spent over a decade online, we are beginning to see traces of this prolonged immersion in our patterns of communication, expression and understanding. With the digital storage of not only archives of writing, image and sound, but also the storage of digital interactions, I think we are now more intuitively able, for instance, to read indexically. That is, it is getting easier to read texts as the output of systems and not just persons. So if the reference points of Pound’s The Cantos seem impossibly distant to us now, its logic should feel rather intimate; online at least, vast geographies and historical periods often are felt as being contemporary in one’s mind. And if previously radical texts from the 1970s and 80s, like Ron Silliman’s “Sunset Debris” or Lyn
Hejinian’s *My Life*, feel inevitable or obvious now, it is not simply the engines of influence and accommodation at work.

An unrelenting prose block of rapid-fire questions, Silliman’s piece—through its accumulations and dispersals of voice—feels particularly immediate and contemporary, the product of some perfectly defined Google search utilizing the question mark. Like K. Silem Mohammad’s “Does Your Poetry Hold Up?” or Rob Fitterman’s *This Window Makes Me Feel*—superb contemporary instances of search engine writing—“Sunset Debris” shows how language can aggregate its own structures for emotion, thought and power distinct from any individual user’s intent.

In our daily use of search engines and other computational devices, we are developing a sense for how signification develops its own affinities, how words and phrases can collect together through algorithms we are not primed to understand. Going to Google and typing the word “where,” a suggested litany begins:

- where the wild things are
- where is my refund
- where is chuck norris
- where is haiti
- where is santa right now
- where is tiger woods
- where is the love . . .

This suggested Google list of phrases for “where” gives us an available index of “now.” Wouldn’t the Google list have seemed much more incoherent or random ten years ago? It would have looked like experimental poetry. For now, however, much of the online public understands how to read such a list as its own unit, a snapshot or index. Perhaps
many are also unknowingly developing a corresponding sense of how words persist in their own careers, even after initial intentions for them expire.

The poem as a field or archive of disparate utterances is something that the last ten years in particular have prepared us to read and produce. It is not exclusive to our moment, however. Gertrude Stein claimed that sentences were no longer emotional, but that paragraphs were. One needed to revise one’s unit of understanding, Stein’s quip suggested, from the linear sentence to the spatial paragraph. Silliman’s “Sunset Debris” is only really ominous if one reads it linearly, sentence by sentence, with the expectation that each question deserves an answer. With such a reading strategy, each question hangs over your head, demanding a response. If one reads “Sunset Debris” in a Steinian manner however, as its own singular emotional spatial unit, then one floats over the questions, gauging and enjoying the shifts in reference and tone, appreciating its ingenuity and self-propulsion; one judges how the questions and implied answers have been culled, selected and framed, but not how one should reply. Likewise, the list of phrases suggested by Google is only confusing or incoherent if one reads it as the continuous statement of a singular individual and not as the consequence of a multitude of participants interacting with a specific technology.

Dual appraisals suggest themselves here. First, there is the ready notion that contemporary poets should be encouraged to compose even more poems freed from a fixed perspective and to produce their own indexical fields; not only are the cultural and technological conditions ripe for such a poetry, but a potential readership is busy developing cognitive habits that will only make such poems more readily legible.

Secondly, however, is a trailing hunch that digital technologies are always going to be
more proficient in producing such indexical fields, and that they will perpetually out-
Goldsmith Goldsmith, so to speak.

Perhaps the Goldsmith’s most famous poetic work, *Day*, was originally billed as
his re-typing of a single day’s issue of the *New York Times* (September 1, 2001). Margin
to margin, Goldsmith’s long poem discounted any distinction between news reports,
advertisements or captions, presenting itself as a continuous linguistic field. Twenty-five
years ago, Fredric Jameson famously called for a practice of cognitive mapping, for
artists not to take to the streets but to find out where the streets now were. That call still
resounds. Much of the critical praise of projects such as Goldsmith’s *Day* frames these
projects as exactly such maps, tracing out a relationship between the individual (KG) and
a field that threatens to engulf it (a single day’s news, commerce, opinion and inanity).

Upon its publication, part of the initial appeal of *Day* appeared to be the image of
Goldsmith purging himself of his creativity by heroically plowing, week after week,
through a single day’s information, notating its obvious and hidden messages. In a review
of *Day* on his own website, Brian Kim Stefans struck upon this notion, offering Werner
Herzog’s statement that “stamina is as important as sensibility.”4 Perhaps inevitably,
rumors later arose that Goldsmith actually scanned in the entire thing. It would actually
be better if Goldsmith did scan the piece; what could be more contemporary than
outsourcing one’s heroism to a machine? As Goldsmith put it elsewhere, “Soon we will
not have to be bothered minding the machines for they will mind themselves.”

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In the comments section of Brian Kim Stefans’ review of Day, a flurry of statements occurred over a brief two minute interim, apparently generated by some hyper-literate spambot. The final spam spasm reads: “When Batman went home at the end of a night spent fighting crime, he put on a suit and tie and became Bruce Wayne. When Clark Kent saw a news story getting too hot, a phone booth hid his change into Superman. When you're programming, all the variables you juggle around are doing similar tricks as they present one face to you and a totally different one to the machine.” This bit of spam philosophy seemed to be in circulation from 2002 to 2004 in the comments field of various art- and literary-minded websites; it repeated itself rather relentlessly at Stefans’ site in particular. The Janus-faced duality that the spam suggests—the machine and the self see different sides of the same face, holding it in place—dovetails almost too conveniently with Goldsmith’s ideas about the dispersions of digital identities.

The loop between Goldsmith’s scanner—performing his Herculean labors for him—and Stefans’ spambot—uttering multiple specimens of cogent, insightful metacriticism in record time—suggests a cognitive map that resides on a plane placed beyond the capacities of mere humans. It also implies that replicating such mapping in our own poetry will only result in a faint echo of what machines are already doing at a more fevered pitch. Here then is that representative contemporary poetic form, the inclusive linguistic field: a poetic form that is both emergent within, and eclipsed by, our own moment.

As an apparent relief from the prevalent form of the inclusive linguistic field (see the long title poem of my own Complex Sleep for a representative example of this period style), numerous poets in the last decade have instead turned to a more winnowed poetics,
foregrounding a directness and immediacy of utterance. But far from being a relief from the inclusive linguistic field, the direct utterance upon further investigation appears to be that inclusive field’s intimate partner. It is the other poetic form we have been primed to produce. Just as archives and indexes and search engines suggest an expanded forum for language, the text message, tweet and Facebook update also suggest their own linguistic stance, the immediate dispatch. “What are you doing right now?” Explicitly or implicitly, this is the recurring prompt; it is to be answered in a limited number of words, and it is rapidly becoming the contemporary norm for registering one’s existence, of reflecting one’s identity as an instantly graspable data point to eventually be mapped.

In “The Storyteller,” Walter Benjamin analyzed how the conditions for storytelling were evaporating and that stories were being replaced by information as the major mode of exchange. Inherent with an emphasis on information was a corresponding emphasis on the immediate moment. Wrote Benjamin:

> The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. It preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time.  

The vast, inclusive poetic field—think of Silliman’s *The Alphabet*, or a long Flarf poem, or Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* (the inner inclusive field)—constructs itself out of statements that surrender themselves to the moment. One utterance rises to perception in order to make its momentary claims on us and then it fades away, to be replaced by another identically different utterance (the disappearance is the plot).

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Many of the poems culled from search engines and put together with a flarfy insouciance send out kitsch vibes exactly because they are a collages of moments whose moment has passed, or that had never actually arrived in the first place. The only difference between Benjamin’s stance on information—that it does not survive its moment of newness—and the implicit contemporary poetic stance I am spelling out here is that digital storage allows information an always-accessible afterlife, after its moment of newness. Information does not revise itself; it replaces itself. This is part of the power and appeal of the inclusive linguistic field, its promise of an expanded life for what would otherwise be isolated, unmoored utterances. The promise of such an informational afterlife is encoded in Goldsmith’s *Day*, a book wherein text meant to signify for only one day is forced to expend itself like a Benjaminian story and, inevitably, crack open from the pressure.

But such an afterlife also adheres to a poetics of immediate, momentary utterance. That is, the poem as an extended, somewhat uninteresting status update. This is worth tracking, how the proliferation of digital selves (the blog self, the Facebook self, the Twitter self, the comments field self, the Google search self, occasionally even the poetic self) is cutting down, for many poets and readers, any distinction between a poem and a “tweet” or Facebook update, how both come to us as the most immediate update of some disembodied, perpetually updated, history-purged avatar. Hegel said there was no such thing as the immediate, and perhaps there is no *the* immediate but rather different *types* of immediacies; some are prepared for us, some have to be fought for, others can simply be projected. Most are a ghostly apparition of the media and institutions that prepare us to feel ourselves in a handful of directed ways. What are you doing right now?
Bibliography


Biography


At Duke, he was the recipient of the Armstrong Dissertation Fellowship (2011), a John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute Dissertation Working Group Fellowship (2010) and a Summer Research Fellowship (2009). He was also rewarded the Stephen J. Horne Undergraduate Teaching Award (2009) and has served as a visiting poet at Brown University (2010), University of Arkansas (2010) and Bowling Green State University (2006). In 2003, he was the recipient of the 2003 Walt Whitman Award of the Academy of American Poets for his first book of poetry.