

“A Patient Etherised”: Modernism and the Legitimation of Poetry

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Summary

This article examines the social and cultural function of the criticism of T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. To read the criticism of these Modernist poets is to examine the ways in which their poetry is inserted into a specific historical context and to view how poetic discourse interacts with the outside world in a manner that raises questions regarding the supposedly autotelic status of poetry. Criticism becomes for these poets a medium whereby they can speak to their reading public, and influence the reception of their work. This emphasis on the social function of criticism had an impact on the institutionalisation of this discipline as a professional pursuit. As is argued here, criticism also offered the Modernist poet the opportunity to construct narratives of legitimation for poetry inside a frequently hostile public context. For Pound and Eliot, the arguments raised in their criticism regarding ideas such as professionalism, culture, and the relationship between poetry and science were not simply interpretative statements regarding poetry, but were arguments designed to ensure the value and legitimacy of poetry in a period where these ideals were being questioned.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die sosiale en kulturele rol van T.S. Eliot en Ezra Pound se literêre kritiek. Om hulle kritiek te lees is om die dialoog wat ontstaan tussen hul digkuns en die historiese konteks daarvan te ontleed, en om waar te neem hoe hierdie interaksie vrae laat ontstaan aangaande die sogenaamde outonome status van die gedig. Literêre kritiek is vir hierdie digters 'n wyse om hulle gehoor toe te spreek en die resepsie van hul werk te beïnvloed. Hierdie klem op die publieke rol van kritiek het tot gevolg gehad dat die dissipline 'n professionele en institusionele gedaante aangeneem het. Hier word ook geargumenteer dat literêre kritiek vir die digter die geleentheid bied om narratiewe aangaande die legitimititeit van digkuns te konstrueer binne gereeld vyandige kontekste. Pound en Eliot se argumente aangaande sulke verskynsels soos professionalisme, kultuur, en die verhouding tussen die wetenskappe en die digkuns is dan nie net analitiese opmerkings nie, maar ook argumente aangaande die waarde en legitimititeit van digkuns binne 'n historiese periode waarin hierdie ideale bevraagteken word.

1

T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock" presents us with a portrait of a character who cannot make himself heard, whose speech falls on deaf ears. It is a poem about paralysis and impotence. Surrounded by terrifying and tiresome women, Prufrock cannot make himself understood. He fails to connect, verbally or physically. The patient is etherised upon the table. The sirens are silent. And nothing comes of Prufrock's silent reverie. He cannot even imagine a way to begin speaking of "the butt-ends of my days and ways" (Eliot 1963: 5). It is as if all the anxieties of a young poet, who feared that he might not be heard or might have nothing to say, are concentrated in him.

The poem forces us to ask the question: on what and whose authority does Modernist poetry make its claims on the attention of its readership? Many commentators on Modernism are likely to think this question is not worth asking, for the simple reason that, like Kant's idealised aesthetic, the Modernist poem is often treated as if it is autotelic – autonomous, and dependent only upon itself and not on an external authority acting as the arbiter of its value. But it is exactly the problem of legitimacy that haunted Eliot in 1933 when he wrote "I mean that the contemporary poet ... is forced to ask himself such questions as 'what is poetry for'; not merely 'what am I to say?' but rather 'how and to whom am I to say it?'" (Eliot 1933: 30). At stake in these problems are the value of poetry and the legitimacy of the way it speaks to a yet undetermined audience. The function of poetry, its formal techniques and its ideal audience were all problems that demanded a response from the "contemporary poet" if the value and legitimacy of Modern poetry were to be decided. Eliot's remark gathers the problems of an era in which the legitimacy and legitimation of poetry were pressing dilemmas. For it seemed to many of the Modernists that while traditional arguments for the legitimacy of poetry were no longer adequate and had lost much of their force, there still remained a demand for some kind of legitimation of poetry, otherwise poetry would remain, in Eliot's words, "a mug's game" in which "no honest poet can ever feel quite sure of the permanent value of what he has written: he may have wasted his time and messed up his life for nothing" (Eliot 1933: 154). The Modernist effort to establish a different kind of legitimation, for a different kind of poetry, involved difficulties of an especially aggravated kind. It was the task of their criticism to negotiate and alleviate these difficulties, even if they were sometimes the products of exactly this criticism.

2

Writing in 1923, T.S. Eliot turns in “The Function of Criticism” to discourses outside the artist and the poem in search of a measurement whereby the value of poetry and poets can be determined:

We are compelled to admit that there remain certain books, certain essays, certain men, who have been “useful” to us. And our next step is to classify these, and find out whether we establish any principles for deciding what kind of books should be preserved, and what aims and methods of criticism should be followed Those of us who find ourselves supporting what Mr. Murry calls Classicism believe that men cannot get on without giving allegiance to something outside themselves.

(Eliot 1975: 69-70)

Concerned with what makes poetry valid or “useful”, Eliot turns from the poem to domains outside the work. Something from outside must legitimate the poetic work. Eliot does not, however, stop at noting this need for legitimation, he also delineates the discursive space where this connection between the poem and a legitimating authority should occur: the critical work. The poem, he claims, need not show an awareness of its use, and, indeed, is better for showing indifference to “theories of value”; but criticism must “profess an end in view” (Eliot 1975: 69). It is the task of criticism to legitimate the poem through affirming its use or value in the world outside the text.

This view of criticism is not unprecedented. Already for Matthew Arnold, the central hallmark of the “critical spirit” is that it illustrates the connections between the literary work and the world outside. As he writes in “On the Modern Element in Literature”: “everywhere there is connexion ... no single event, no single literature, is adequately comprehended except in its relation to other events, to other literatures” (Arnold 1960-1977, 1: 20-21). This same sense of criticism mediating between an inside and an outside permeates Eliot’s remarks on its function. The history of criticism, Eliot writes, illustrates “a process of readjustment between poetry and the world” (Eliot 1933: 27). Although Eliot criticises Arnold for confusing poetry and ethics, he does not really pass beyond Arnold’s understanding of the mediating function of critical work. Even when poetry is considered autotelic or concerned only with its own inner structure, criticism must force it into a relation with the outside world; some continuity between the text and its outside is insisted upon and illustrated by the act of criticism. In fact, this crossing is one of the major dimensions of the critical gesture; it leads us away from the oblique text, and brings us face to face with the other unknown quantity in literary discourse – the audience for whom the text “is produced” and to whom the critical work is addressed. The function of the critical work is to legitimate the poem to its audience, to lend

it authority by grounding it in a discourse existing outside the work.

What is the legitimation Eliot expected the critical work to provide? Behind it lurks the assumption that the Modernist poem is born illegitimate. The scandal of writing is only alleviated by explanations, causes and reasons, traditions and filial affiliations – however much we might wish with the aesthetes of the 1890s that the aesthetic is its own excuse for being. Without an appeal to an antecedent or extraneous authority, the literary work, much as the bastard child does, arrives unheralded and illegitimate, its very existence made scandalous by the absence of a sanctified origin or cause. What is new must legitimate itself by appealing to what had begun before or already exists; otherwise its existence is outrageous.¹ More narrowly, every act of writing is installed in a specific social and historical context. The forms where this writing will be legitimated are to be found in the place and time of the act. Even moves against or away from this context need to be couched in its terms: it is only through an appeal to what already exists or what has existed before that writing is given authority or legitimated (cf Conroy 1985: 21).

Given these historical and social dimensions, it follows that there are times when legitimation is not an easy matter. These times experience what Jürgen Habermas calls a "*Legitimation Crisis*" (1973), brought about by rifts in society and history which question the connection between a new act and the various discourses that would authorise this event. Modernism, frequently through its own actions, faced such a crisis. A chasm, a rupture, is announced by the Modernist dictum "Make it new!". As Mark C. Taylor correctly remarks, "In the modern epoch, the effort to make it new usually presupposes an erasure of the past" (Taylor 1992: 227). In Modernism, the "contemporary" poet found himself in the uncomfortable position where he could not, or would not, accept the standard wisdom regarding poetic value, techniques, or audience. Rather than providing a comfortable context for the poet's work, these discourses were exactly those which Eliot and Ezra Pound tried to break away from, or, at least, were unable to call upon to justify their poetic practice. By breaking with discourses traditionally called upon to legitimate poetic activity, these poets also drove a wedge between their work and those antecedent voices of authority whereby the poetic work is legitimated in the eyes of the public. Now, it might very well be that Modernism's break with the past is an ironical gesture, as Paul de Man (1971: 162) suggests, which illustrates nothing so much as the impossibility of this task. Even so, this announcement of a break with tradition remains a major component of the discourse of Modernism in one of its permutations, and is responsible for discursive situations where it is no longer easy for, say, Pound, to turn to past models of poetic value to validate his writing.

Perhaps this legitimation crisis is nowhere better observable than in Pound's translations. In 1915, on the title page of *Cathay*, Pound declares that his

poems are translated “FOR THE MOST PART FROM THE CHINESE OF RIHAKU (LI T’AI PO), FROM THE NOTES OF THE LATE ERNEST FENOLLOSA, AND THE DECIPHERINGS OF THE PROFESSORS MORI AND ARIGA” (Pound 1952: 126). This is a parody of legitimation through an appeal to prior authorities. The translations are made from the work of two Japanese professors “deciphering” the notes of a recently deceased American scholar. “Rihaku” is an artefact of this dubious transmission: it is a Japanese transliteration of the name of the Chinese poet Li Po, rendered here in English not from the original Chinese, but from the translation made by Fenollosa from a Japanese translation (cf Smith 1994: 7). Instead of legitimating Pound’s renderings, this declaration points down endless, receding avenues of scholarship linking 1915 to the time of Li Po. There is no question of a direct engagement with the original; it is obscured behind pages of translations in which uncertainties and errors multiply. The plethora of legitimating authorities that Pound lists for his work do not affirm the authority of the translations; instead they unveil the inevitable lack of authority that accompanies Pound’s project.

The sense of illegitimacy surrounding Modernist poetry does not, however, stop with the dubious authority of Pound’s translations. The depth of the predicament would become clearer if we were to ask: to whom does the poet need to legitimate his work? The answer would follow swiftly: to the reader, specifically the reader who would understand and appreciate the writer’s work. But what kind of audience awaited Eliot and Pound? In many ways, this audience was distant and unformed, if it existed at all. In 1921, it was Edward Arlington Robinson’s *Collected Poems* that picked up the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, and in 1923 the award went to Edna St Vincent Millay’s *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*. Robert Frost won the Pulitzer in 1924; that same year Robinson Jeffer’s *Road Stallion, Tamar, and other Poems* was a popular success. In 1925, twelve-year-old poet Nathalia Crane’s *The Janitor Boy* appeared, and went through twelve printings in less than a year. Robinson won the Pulitzer again in 1925 and 1927. Millay’s verse drama, *The King’s Henchman*, went through twelve printings in 1927. The next year, Stephen Vincent Benét’s verse novel, *John Brown’s Body*, was a popular success. And through it all, the volumes of Millay and Robinson, for critics like Edmund Wilson, marked the heights of poetic achievement. And the outmoded aesthetic represented by poetry collections such as Francis Palgrave’s *Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language* remained the popular currency whereby poetry was judged. The central characteristic of these critical and popular successes is their referential, narratological, and logical clarity,² exactly the element that put them at odds with Modernists such as Eliot and Pound. In terms of popularity and mainstream critical acclaim, the Modernist poets inhabited the margins of the poetic landscape – a situation their later canonical acceptance tends to obscure.

This lack of an audience had economic implications as well. Pound complained frequently of the economic situation of the poet in modern society. After securing a position at Lloyds bank, Eliot, as his wife puts it, "writes better, feels better and happier and has better health when he knows that money (however little) is assured, and coming in regularly" (quoted by Lentricchia 1994: 252). For Pound himself, the role of entrepreneur became an essential part of life. When not promoting his own work and that of those he admired – *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses* – Pound was articulating a view of literature that connected it to capitalism and the marketplace:

The effects of capitalism on arts and letters ... have been: (1) the non-employment of the best artists and writers, (2) the erection of an enormous and horrible bureaucracy of letters, supposed to act as curators, etc., which bureaucracy has almost uninterruptedly sabotaged intellectual life, obscuring the memory of the best work of the past and doing its villainous utmost to impede the work of contemporary creators.

(Pound 1973: 202)

This statement concludes an essay in which Pound extols Mussolini's virtues as a potential patron for the arts, who is aware that quality is a "dimension of national production" (1973: 200). Pound's dalliance with fascism may have been influenced by the difficult economic situation facing the Modernist poet, which, for Pound, was defined by the commodification of art by a "bureaucracy of letters" and by the inability of writers to make a living from their poetry.³

If the poet's economic situation and his lack of an audience created difficulties for Modernist poetry, then this dilemma was worsened by the reluctance of these poets to use traditional vocabularies whereby the value of literature was determined for the reading public and publishing houses. When Pound constructs his vision of hell in "Cantos 14", he leaves a place there for philologists:

usurers squeezing crab-lice, pandars to authority,
pets-de-loup, sitting on piles of stone books,
obscuring the text with philology.

(Pound 1970 14: 63)

For Pound, philology preserves only the dead words of authors; it does not demonstrate that these "stony books" still illuminate the present.⁴ It is a peculiarity of Modernism that its writers, often recipients of some form of higher education, should deny their connection with previous forms of literary criticism with the same vehemence Eliot and Pound reject their American heritage. It is not surprising that in "The Perfect Critic", Eliot is more

concerned with rejecting what seemed to him to be aberrant forms of criticism, than with outlining the measures of critical perfection. His resistance to an impressionist criticism (“an expression of the emotion” (Eliot 1975: 58)) forms only one part of his polemic against contemporary trends in criticism; along the way he also finds reason to dismiss “technical criticism” and the work of philosophical and historical critics, leaving room only for a criticism devoted to the “development of sensibility” (Eliot 1975: 58). Eliot’s critical stance is a variant of his notion of the “disassociation of sensibility” as outlined in “The Metaphysical Poets” – only a criticism that unifies and structures perceptions according to the sensibilities of a fully rounded critic deserves to pass as literary criticism. The rest is to be left in the dustbins of history. But Eliot’s diatribe against the ways in which literature was talked about goes deeper than a simple rejection of specific forms of criticism. In his dissertation on F.H. Bradley, Eliot takes up a position that can only be described as an attempt to cast doubt on the legitimacy of any theoretical stance. As he writes: “The immediately given is the bag of gold at the end of the rainbow. Knowledge is invariably a matter of degree: you cannot put your finger upon even the simplest datum and say ‘this we know’” (Eliot 1964: 141). All is guesswork, approximations. In the face of such a stance, any critical vocabulary is illegitimate: an aberrant performance of knowing and naming lacking the necessary grounds to justify its claims. If criticism were to be the locus of poetic legitimation, then it first has to answer questions regarding its own legitimacy. Any critical language called upon to legitimate the poem was either going to have to be a new critical discourse or the critic was going to be forced to operate in an ironical manner, to use a language of whose illegitimacy he was fully aware.

In this tangle of dilemmas and difficulties, we can see the shape of the legitimation crisis that the Modernist poet encountered. While the possibility of an antecedent authority or tradition that could bestow value on the work was being questioned by a growing rift between the work of the poet and the legacy of the past, the possibility of establishing the value of the work by appealing to a large audience or literary institutions was receding. The audience for the Modernist work was a vague thing, and the “bureaucracy” of literature was acclaiming works radically out of step with the aesthetic of Modernism. In fact, these institutions, which at least could have given the Modernist work the aura of legitimation that comes with popular and institutional successes, were partially responsible for the difficult economic situation facing the Modernist poet. Finally, the poem itself could not function as the basis for claims regarding its legitimacy. This concern was defined as falling outside the province of poetry, whose autotelic nature, real or unreal, many poets insisted upon. Faced with this situation, of which I can give only a rough outline here, it becomes a fair question to ask how the poetry of Modernism gained the

acceptance and legitimacy associated with it today. Even if Modernist poets cultivated their poetry as an autonomous construct, they also, in the words of Frank Lentricchia, "worked mightily to make their poetry and themselves, as figures of the poet, important, influential, and ... *powerful*" (Lentricchia 1994: 252-253). A large part of this work was to occur in the criticism of the time, and it is to this narrative that I now turn.

3

At the moment it was most urgent, Eliot stepped forward to explain why the study of literature is a serious and necessary business, why it has important consequences for civilisation, and why it is ultimately his work, that of his contemporaries, and their literary forebears that needed to be studied in this light. The impact of Eliot's criticism of the twenties on students of literature cannot be underestimated. Looking back, F.W. Bateson remarks that "[T]he prose has anticipated the poetry" (Bateson 1977: 12). And F.R. Leavis explains regarding Eliot's criticism that "it made some of us feel that we never read criticism before" (Leavis quoted by Menand 1987: 190). Eliot's criticism provided a legitimation that made literary Modernism and its critics seem to matter.

The search for a critical vocabulary better than impressionistic, technical, or philosophical criticism was a chief concern of Eliot, and, of course, an explicitly announced intention in essays such as "The Perfect Critic". What occurs frequently in these essays, however, is that Eliot only stipulates what he does not want criticism to be – it must not be biography, the celebration of Romantic inspiration and genius, it must not even be moral instruction in the vein of Arnoldian criticism. The confidence with which Eliot discards these options might suggest he has a model of perfect criticism in mind. In fact, instead of offering such a theory, we find in Eliot's essays only an example of the perfect critic: Rémy de Gourmont, who combines in his readings "sensitiveness, erudition, sense of fact and sense of history, and generalizing power" (Eliot 1975: 57), and even he was only an "able amateur" (p. 57). What Eliot does in these essays is to validate indirectly his own literary and critical preferences. Louis Menand notes that Eliot's arguments are not original theoretical propositions. Instead they must be understood as

arguments whose theoretical content is practically zero – as much as to say, I offer these explanations for my aesthetic preferences, but I am not ... ready to claim anything of greater significance for them.

(Menand 1987: 151)

Eliot was aware of these motivations. Looking back in 1961 on his critical work, he admitted in “To Criticize the Critic” that some critics are advocates for the writing they are interpreting (Eliot 1965: 12). From this perspective, it is difficult to read Eliot’s critical work as anything other than an attempt to legitimate, rather than explain, a form of literature and critical sensibility. As Gail McDonald writes:

Pound’s and Eliot’s ... focus was on the creation and appreciation of poetry, especially their own. But the personal and cultural tasks the two poets saw before them were never separable: they wanted to write “better” poetry than that of their immediate predecessors (and to convince others they were doing so); they wanted poets (and themselves personally) to be recognised as serious, hardworking, professional men who made substantive contributions to the real world; they wanted to give poetry a central and vital role in culture, to rescue it from irrelevance.

(McDonald 1993: 61-62)

Eliot and Pound realised that if they were to have any authority as poets, then their poetry, and poetry in general, must be legitimated as a serious activity. There was undoubtedly a self-serving dimension to their desires: here were two young, unknown expatriates trying to break into the capital of literary England, London. Both were well aware that they had to create and manage themselves as poets if they were going to get anywhere. But how did these two young outsiders construct a legitimating narrative for their poetry, a narrative that managed to confirm their status as the exemplary poets of the contemporary age?

In 1915 Pound composed a letter to Eliot’s father, in which he, on Eliot’s behalf, attempted to justify poetry as a career for a young academic:

Apart from all questions of “inspiration” and “star born genius” I should say that the arts, as the sciences, progress by infinitesimal stages, that each inventor does little more than make some slight, but revolutionizing change, alteration in the work of his predecessors Again if a man is doing the fine thing and the rare thing, London is the only place for him to exist. Only here is there a disciplinary body of fine taste

(Pound quoted by Menand 1987: 97-98)

The letter concludes, obviously, with a request for funds that Eliot might require in getting his career under way. Pound’s letter was unsuccessful – Eliot’s father never reconciled himself to his son’s career choice, and it is doubtful that Eliot ever received the \$500 or \$250 that was requested. Despite its failures, Pound’s letter is illuminating regarding the ways in which the Modernist poet legitimated his career. Pound explicitly denies that he is

making his appeal based on a Romantic paradigm of artistic necessity, genius, or originality. These are discarded with an almost contemptuous gesture. Instead, the poet is presented as a working professional, continuing and refining the work of those who went before him. The comparison with science is revealing: Pound is trying to convince Eliot's father that poetry is not dissimilar from any other professional work, and that Eliot is another scientist, an "inventor", who is improving and extending the range of his chosen field. The work of the poet is legitimate exactly because it does not differ from any other professional career: it brings progress to a time-honoured vocation, and comes replete with its own institutions, criteria, and disciplines. Pound is more than willing to usurp the discourse of professionalism in his attempt to justify the writing of poetry to a man, Eliot's father, who in all probability despised Eliot's career exactly because it appeared to be something other than hard, professional work.

This idea of professionalism forms a consistent thread running through many of the various instances where Pound and Eliot attempt to claim the authority to be considered serious poets. It figures, for example, in Eliot's critique of *The Education of Henry Adams*: "It is not at all that he was an *amateur*... he had gone at the task in a thoroughly professional way" (Eliot quoted by Menand 1987: 101). The superior value Eliot assigns to professionalism over amateurism is clear. The trained professional is the ideal for the man in society. Part of being professional consisted of maintaining rigorous standards. In "Professional, or" Eliot derides the English for their "slackness", their "dodging of standards", and goes on to remark that "professionalism in art is hard work on style with a singleness of purpose" (Eliot quoted by McDonald 1993: 71). The establishment of appropriate criteria, precision, and discipline were all values championed by Pound and Eliot: Pound's doctrine of the image is a transposition of these values into a formal aesthetic: the writer displays precision, discipline and exacting standards by eliminating everything that is unnecessary in a given image. By explicitly taking up a position against "slackness", Pound and Eliot were associating themselves and their work with the values that stand in opposition to this negative category. Moreover, by setting themselves up as the protectors of these standards, they declared themselves as practising professionals. They were already well trained for this role. Their education gave them an advantage over journalists engaging in literary criticism or amateur poets: it furnished them with material for their poetry, and it made them conscious of their place in literary history. But the symbiosis between these poets and the academy went deeper than this, and resulted in the forging of a strong bond between Eliot and Pound, and the academy.

After his failures in finding a teaching post, Pound, in the second decade of the twentieth century, devised plans for a College of Arts in which artists,

scholars, and publishers should be “linked together for some sort of mutual benefit and stimulus” (Pound 1973: 122). Unsurprisingly, it never materialised. This is, however, an instructive moment in Pound’s career. Like the various groupings he would form with artists like Yeats and Eliot, or the larger communities he would create through literary movements – such as Vorticism and Imagism – and manifestoes, this project for a college was a call for a community or fraternity.⁵ It also exemplifies Pound’s insistence on the need for interaction between the arts and the academy, and indicates that the readers Pound (and Eliot) had in mind were to be the products of an education that would provide them with the necessary tools to approach the Modernist text. Pound, at least, knew that if his poetry were to have an audience, this audience had to come from universities and colleges. But Pound and Eliot were also speaking directly to the academy when they insisted on professionalism and standards as the hallmarks of poetry and criticism. Teachers of English were thereby given access to a new vocabulary that provided them with the opportunity to change the way they described their actions, to assimilate the study of literature with that of the sciences, where professionalism and rigorous standards had long been used as discourses of legitimation. Presumably, this identification between the values of the academy and the values expressed by these poets would create an atmosphere in which educators and students would be more open to their work.

The receptivity of literature departments to discourses promoting ideas of professionalism was not entirely the creation of the persuasive power of Eliot’s and Pound’s rhetoric. It arose, in part, from a timely intersection between the concerns of the academy and the concerns of the poets. Burton Bledstein, in *Culture of Professionalism*, suggestively links the rise of higher education to the cult of professionalism:

The institution provided the testing ground for the kind of world an energetic middle class sought to create for itself Careerism, competition, the standardisation of rules and the organisation of hierarchies, the obsession with expansion and growth, professionals seeking recognition and financial rewards for their efforts, administrators in the process of building empires: basically, both the values and the arrangements within universities have changed little since 1900.

(Bledstein 1976: 288-289)

If universities were increasingly becoming domains for the circulation of narratives on professionalism, and economic growth and power, then literary departments occupied an awkward position inside them. Gerald Graff contends that “[c]ollege literature was ... at once a ruling class culture and one that was increasingly ‘dissevered from connexion’ with power and bitterly aware of its

displacement from the centre of things" (Graff 1987: 22). Eliot's and Pound's valorisation of writing poetry and criticism as a professional, instead of an amateur, activity must have seemed, in this climate, where literature departments were losing power because they did not conform to this new economic discourse, as an ideal opportunity to give to literary studies the same aura of professionalism and careerism prevalent elsewhere.

Part of the persuasive power for lecturers and students of this form of criticism was not located, however, in the discourses of professionalism. Much of its prescriptive force arose from its willingness to engage with and re-articulate long familiar ideas, concepts that the poet himself already might have rejected in one way or another. Pound might have called Ralph Waldo Emerson "unpleasant" (Pound 1954: 391); yet, when he remarks that poetry complicates translation, that

the attitude of mind it expresses may pass through a paraphrase ... you can *not* translate it "locally", but having determined the original author's state of mind, you may or may not be able to find a derivative or an equivalent

(Pound 1954: 25)

it is difficult not to see this statement as an echo of Emerson's "The Poet":

[P]oetry was all written before time was, and whenever we are so finely organized that we can penetrate into that region where the air is music, we hear those primal warblings and attempt to write them down, but we lose ever and anon a word or a verse and substitute something of our own, and thus miswrite the poem.

(Pound 1990: 199)

For both Pound and Emerson, the transmission of poetry down the ages invites mistakes and poor paraphrases. Pound's discourse on translation ultimately owes a debt to Emerson, a debt he never fully acknowledged. The point is, however, that when Pound wrote, these ideas were already in circulation, and his reformulation of them was given credence by the fact that they were already if not accepted, then at least familiar. Louis Menand has discovered a similar rhetorical situation in Eliot's writing on the "objective correlative". He points out that Eliot's definition of this dramatic image in "Hamlet" (1919) simply repeats a popular way of understanding the image during this time. The notion of an external image for emotions appeared, for instance, in an article by Richard Aldington, a Pound protégé, in 1914: "We convey an emotion by presenting the object and circumstance of that object without comment We make the scene convey the emotion" (Aldington quoted by Menand 1987: 135). When Eliot articulated his idea of the "objective correlative", he was repeating a commonplace under a new name. Again, like Pound, the success

of his notion must be partially attributed to the fact that it was already in circulation before being “discovered” by Eliot. Even when they denied that they were doing so, Eliot and Pound were speaking in a language already familiar to the academy.

This association between the poet and the academy was, in a sense, posited as a natural cultural event, based on the most valued of bonds: the social contract. Eliot often describes literary criticism as an activity of the civilised mind; as he states, “A people which ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric” (Eliot 1933: 15). Pound draws a similar distinction between the unappreciative mob and those open to his criticism (Pound 1954: 75). By addressing their writings to an audience already flattered by the terms of the appeal, Pound and Eliot were creating the impression that author and reader were part of the same rarefied social stratum: the society of civilised men, and not the barbaric masses. It is worth recalling here Kenneth Burke’s dictum that “the implanting of an ultimate hierarchy upon social forms is the important thing” (Burke 1969: 191). It is implied that to read Eliot and Pound is to ascend the hierarchy of society, to become more civilised. The same hierarchical logic determined that the essay would become their preferential mode for criticism. Edward Hoagland has commented on the assumptions on which the genre is based:

The essay is a vulnerable form. Rooted in middle-class civility, it presupposes not only that the essayist be demonstrably sane, but that his readers also operate upon a set of widely held assumptions [E]ssays presuppose a certain standard of education in the reader, a world ruled by some sort of order – where government is constitutional, or at least monarchical, perhaps where sex hasn’t wandered too far from its homebase.

(Hoagland quoted in Delany 1996: xv)

The essay presupposes a common bond between the writer and his reader. It presumes a meeting of common minds, coming together without “too much dogmatism, too much vehement argumentation” (Gass 1997: 25). Like a friend, it often does not argue too much; scientific rigour and extensive quotations from sources that are exactly referenced are frequently foreign to it. If there is a too vehement desire to persuade, a lack of community is implied, and the author and the reader are driven apart. It is exactly the impression of community that the genre of the essay creates that made it the privileged medium of criticism for Eliot and Pound. The essay gestures toward a readership that can meet the poet on his own grounds. If the reader assents to this meeting, he or she also consents to the assumption that the writer and reader are part of the same community, thereby granting an implicit authority to the writer’s words.

Although there is an implicit appeal to ideas of culture and civilisation in Pound's and Eliot's writing, neither, however, simply yearned for an older order in which the legitimacy of these ideas was guaranteed. Though drawn to discourses exemplifying ideas of order and tradition, Eliot declares in "The Idea of a Literary Review" that "[w]e must scrupulously guard ourselves against measuring living art and mind by dead laws of order" (Eliot quoted by McDonald 1993: 139). Pound and Eliot insist on the necessity of the literary tradition to be enlivened by and to illuminate the present, and not to be sealed away in "stony books" as, according to Pound, philology had done. They were separating themselves from anything that smacked of nostalgia for an old order. This is why Pound praises Jules Laforgue for making a return to an old order difficult: "Chautauquas, Mrs Eddys, Dr. Dowies, Comstocks, societies for the prevention of all human activities are impossible in the wake of Laforgue" (Pound 1954: 283). Eliot shared Pound's distaste for the fetishising of the past, often equating culture with tradition and novelty. These poets were fascinated by how the past is received in the present, not the past in itself (cf Longenbach 1987). Indeed, literary experimentation is presented frequently as a means of discovery, and as a means of releasing the word and the world from the deadening forces of habit and cliché: "literature and philosophy constantly diverge from this groovedness, constantly throw upon the perceptions new data, new images, which prevent the acceptance of an over facile conclusion" (Pound quoted by McDonald 1993: 85). Poetic experimentation opens the way for the creation of new perspectives that shake the reader's complacency. This is the rhetoric of what Pound calls the revolutionising of the word – the release of language from clichés and the expression of something never enunciated before. This discourse functioned as a legitimation of the far-reaching experiments of these poets. After all, this revolution was essentially posited as a curative for the diseases of complacency and habit. By liberating poetry from these ailments, the poet is also performing a liberation of the reader, and by extension, a cure of the culture of which the reader is part.

On the face of it, it seems that there is little coherence to the various discourses used by the Modernist poets to legitimate their position as poets and the poetry that they wrote. A revolutionary ethos that despises nostalgia, complacency and habit co-exists in their work with valorisations of culture, civilisation, tradition and strict discipline. The desire to "make it new" relies largely on everything that is old. Eliot's concept of tradition can be taken as exemplary of this tension:

The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so

slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new.

(Eliot 1975: 38-39)

In this famous passage from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”, the literary tradition inherited by the contemporary poet is posited as being “complete”, as subsisting in “an ideal order”. Even so, the contemporary poet must still add the “new (the really new)” to this structure. But how can an order be ideal and complete if it is open to, and demands, new additions to its existing structure? How can such additions be anything but a questioning or disruption of an already existent perfection? Eliot’s rhetoric is forced here to accommodate notions of change and permanence, tradition and renewal, in an effort to reconcile these conflicting ideas. Perhaps these tensions are the result of a poet, lacking a trust in critical and philosophical language, being forced to legitimate his work using exactly this language. The meaning of the legitimation appears, in any case, to be of less importance than its effects: to validate the poem and poet.

Perhaps, however, the missing term in this tension, that would resolve some of its apparent contradictions, is the analogy between the roles of the poet and the scientist Pound offered Eliot’s father, and to which both poets would frequently return. In “The Wisdom of Poetry”, Pound elaborates on this metaphor when he remarks regarding the poet and the scientist that “[n]either has direct contact with many, neither of them is superhuman or arrives at his utility through occult and inexplicable ways” (Pound 1973: 362). Both the poet and the scientist are members of an elite, and go about their tasks in a logical and disciplined manner. This analogy is deepened when Pound observes in “The Serious Artist” that the “arts are a science” and “provide data for ethics” (Pound 1954: 42, 46). Like the discoveries of science, the discoveries of the arts serve a purpose: they add to our knowledge of ethics. Like Pound, Eliot also compares the scientists and the poet and finds them to be similar:

A poet, like a scientist, is contributing toward the organic development of culture: it is just as absurd for him not to know the works of his predecessors ... as it would be for a biologist to be ignorant of Mendel and Devries.

(Eliot quoted by McDonald 1993: 67)

Like science, poetry requires an awareness of its history. By identifying the poet with the scientists, Pound and Eliot claim for the poet that he or she is a trained and disciplined professional, who serves the history and demands of his profession and the larger world outside the privileged space of his discipline.

This identification of the poet with the scientist redefines the role and status

of the poet. The voice from which the poem emanates belongs no longer to the Romantic, but to the Modernist. But the usefulness of this metaphor to persuade the public of the legitimacy of poetry extends further than this: it defines the form and function of the poem. The work of Jean-François Lyotard on different forms of legitimation is useful for our understanding of the effects of the analogy. He identifies, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, two competing narratives of legitimation – the disinterested and speculative pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and the use of science in the advancement of a culture or people (Lyotard 1984: 31-37) – that both seek to grant authority to the project of science. It is striking to what extent these are exactly the narratives Pound and Eliot wanted to claim simultaneously for their poetry. On the one hand, poetry plays a positive role in the dynamics of a particular culture. It is both an educator and a mechanism whereby the literary tradition is perpetuated. But, on the other, it is also grounded in the narrative of progress for its own sake – the experimentation and renewal that Pound and Eliot demanded. In this scientific view of progress, there is no need to posit a break or rift between the past and the present. The new discoveries of the poets are analogous to new discoveries in science: they take place through an adherence to rules laid down long before the arrival of the contemporary poet. Each new discovery is a form of progress maintaining its essential continuity with the tradition of its discipline. This narrative of scientific progress resolves then the contradiction between the search for the new and an adherence to tradition. The old provides the foundation for further discoveries; and, in turn, the new discoveries of the poet are assimilated into the tradition on which they base themselves, thereby becoming the grounds for future experiments. This is a view of progress and renewal from which all traces of violence have been eradicated.⁶ But these progressions are also endowed with a pedagogical or “*Bildung*-effect”, as Humboldt claimed for the role of “disinterested pursuit of learning” (Lyotard 1984: 32) in the “spiritual and moral training of the nation” (Humboldt quoted by Lyotard 1984: 32). In Eliot’s and Pound’s pedagogy, each new word affects the reader by stripping away his or her complacency and reliance on old orders of value and judgement. Through its refusal of nostalgia, the poem brings the present home to the readers, educating them fully in the nature of the contemporary world. Through this discourse, the value of the poem is determined; it is grounded in a narrative of progress and experimentation, on the one hand, and, on the other, on the potential of the poem to contribute to culture. If the narrative of experimentation identifies the method whereby the poem brings about renewal, then this promise of renewal provides the poet’s experiments with a function. Together these narratives legitimate the poem by establishing continuity between its methods and aims. Whatever ambiguities might linger in the poem are subordinated to its larger meaning and purpose: the renewal of culture.

Hovering between the realms of disinterested experimentation and cultural praxis, the manner whereby Modernism legitimates poetry places a burden on the shoulders of its readers. It is in reading that the renewals of the poet must make the transition from a form of progress occurring in literature, to being an intervention into culture. Without a receptive and sympathetic audience, the Modernist discourse would remain filled with tension, or, at the worst, contradictory. Moreover, as Pound declares, “only the specialist can determine whether certain works of art possess certain sorts of precision” (Pound 1954: 48). Modernist poetry aimed itself at the reader who is also a specialist educated enough to understand the poet. This is also one of its seductions: to read the Modernist poem is to step into the elite ring of specialised readers that the Modernist poet demands. As Eliot remarks: “When the poet finds himself in an age in which there is no intellectual aristocracy ... the difficulties of the poet and the necessity of criticism become greater” (Eliot 1933: 13). Eliot might as well have written that the needs for legitimation grow greater. Because, after all, one of the central functions of legitimation is to give authority to a person or group, or, in the case of Pound and Eliot, to create through criticism an elite group of poets or readers. Max Weber, speaking directly on matters relating to the authority of rulers and the state, is clear on this point:

Simple observation shows that in every such situation he who is more favored feels the need to look upon his position as in some way “legitimate” This same need makes itself felt in the relation between positively and negatively privileged groups of human beings. Every highly privileged group develops the myth of its ... superiority.

(Weber 1968 3: 953)

Weber stresses the need of each man to consider his position to be legitimate. Importantly, he must also appear legitimate and superior to other people or “negatively privileged groups”. The need for legitimacy speaks then to the way in which the poet sees himself and his work. A poet such as Eliot or Pound, if he wants to think of his work as validated, must think of himself as a professional working inside a valorised tradition. He must think of his work as a cultural praxis that enlivens and ennobles the minds of his readers. But he must also appear so to his audience. He must mould his audience to recognise in him that which he esteems in his work, thereby also introducing them to the “intellectual aristocracy” of which the poet is part. The discourse of legitimation is invariably tied to social rank and hierarchy. It is through this discourse that the poet and his readers are distinguished from “the mob”, and take up a position of superiority. In part, this motive was given urgency by the economic position of the Modernists during the twenties. It springs from a

interested me, and then jumbled them into a bag. But that's not the way to make ... *a work of art*" (Pound quoted by Cory 1968: 38). A similar note of pathos lingers in these lines from the epic: a sense of something lacking in formal and aesthetic terms that would keep Pound's critics occupied (cf Flory 1980; Froula 1984; Stock 1967; Surette 1979) for decades to come. The two series of self-reflexive tropes Pound employs – the antithetical pair of "error" and "light", now shorn of the narratological patterning or dialectical plot they were imbedded in earlier – offer two readings of the work. What might have legitimated the poem, the ideal culmination of the poem in an instant of divine revelation, is maintained in the thought of the poet on his poem. But on it falls the shadow of failure, the sense of "errors", "wrecks" and "madness" that stands as Pound's final judgement. Between these two readings there is only loss. Pound's epic is gathered by him under the critical trope of failure; the discourse that was supposed to have authorised the project crumbles, leaving the poet clutching the broken shards of his vision, which has slipped from his grasp. His despair is that of the writer who is forced to acknowledge that his control over his work is not total, that between his beginning intentions and the completed work a rift is opened by the actual act of writing.⁸ There is no certain guarantee of legitimation. What Pound offers his readers regarding the legitimacy of his poem here, at its very end, might hold true for any attempt to claim legitimacy for the Modernist poem. Once the appeal is made, the outcome is uncertain. Will the authority that has been appealed to endow the work with legitimacy? Once this legitimacy has been bestowed, will it prove real or illusory? Perhaps to pose these questions solely in relation to Modernism and its poetry is to evade a larger possibility and one more threatening to our sense of the value and authority of writing. Jacques Derrida, writing in "Force and Signification", asserts that

[t]o write is not only to know that through writing, through the extremities of style, the best will not necessarily transpire It is also to be incapable of making meaning absolutely precede writing: it is thus to lower meaning while simultaneously elevating inscription.

(Derrida 1978: 10)

Writing, or any sign, has only a tenuous connection to a beginning intention or meaning or, indeed, a narrative of legitimation. Writing, as "inscription", is a fissure; it diverges from what has been intended, drifts off in unforeseen directions, and threatens the author with an unexpected loss of meaning or failure of legitimation. It might transform any writer into another Prufrock.

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Notes

1. See Mark Conroy, in *Modernism and Authority: Strategies of Legitimation in Flaubert and Conrad*, asserts that
[i]n the case of the founding scandal – that of existence itself, or birth – that catastrophe is usually given status, and indeed social identity, through the parents, that is, through the fact of their existence and link to the child.
(Conroy 1985: 9)

In this specific sense, the institution into which a new literary work enters is not that different from the traditional filial paradigm. Edward Said, in *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, similarly claims that the family scene, the “essence and image of which are biological self-perpetuation and unfolding genealogy” (1975: 138), provides metaphors whereby we understand literary creation and legitimation. Finally Paul de Man, in *Allegories of Reading*, states that the “imagery of filiation” fixes the origin of the text and “allows the text to unfold” (1979: 101) – the text is enabled by a consecrated beginning.

2. I am indebted to Samuel Delany’s *Longer Views* (1996) for this judgement and historical information. See pp. 208-209.
3. The discourse in the *Cantos* on “USUS” and “USUARY” is, from this perspective, an encoding of Pound’s concern for his economic context, rather than simply part of the eccentric historical trajectory of the epic.
4. In the 1922 “Paris Letter” Pound sent to the *Dial* he ends with the lament that “[w]e are governed by words, the laws are graven words, and literature is the sole means of keeping these words living and accurate” (Pound 1967: 200).
5. Frank Lentricchia has insisted, in his *Modernist Quartet*, that “the missing term in Modernist thinking ... is community” (1994: 291). Pound’s project suggests that this is not so much an *aporia* in their thinking, as in their social situation.
6. For a very different view of this development, see Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973).
7. Pound’s very first “Canto” offers his English reworking of the Andrea Divus’s 1838 reworking of Homer’s *Odyssey*.
8. As William Gass remarks, “That characters get out of control, that the uncompleted text takes over its completion, was a commonplace long before

E.M. Forster complained of it" (1997: 284).

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