



**EZRA POUND AND WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS'S  
ROMANTIC DILEMMAS  
From Obliteration to Remanence**

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At least two major contradictions inform Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams's respective projections of tradition, which are powerfully evidenced in the ambivalent relations they establish with their immediate predecessors. Whereas both American poets start out advocating a specifically American tradition—to be uncovered or made up—as well as a specifically American form for the poem, they do not seem willing to acknowledge American influences and they direct their readers toward Asia or Europe for poetic sources. Simultaneously they lay emphasis on the need for radical innovation and a break from the modes of Romanticism, which in their essays, they mock at leisure. This has led to the very notion of a Modernist age, indeed opened up by such poets as Pound and Williams, one which, according to Marjorie Perloff in *21<sup>st</sup>-Century Modernism*, is not yet over. One would however be tempted to expand Perloff's outlook and question the idea of a wholly new era to begin in the 1910s, especially as one tries to read through the layers of the Modernist intertext to its poetic claims of didacticism, commitment and intellectual leadership.

Conceiving of innovation only in terms of rupture tends naively to endorse the poets' claims and their sometimes willful concealments: as Modernists and as poets highly aware of their need to respond in new ways to a new world, Pound and Williams both wanted to posit themselves as embodiments of this newness and their works as the actualization in text of the new world's conditions. Furthermore, they insisted on the performative potential of their verbal creations to alter this world and bring order to its chaotic release of new but possibly destructive energies. However, if one were to believe them, both in Pound's "Machine Art" [Ardizzone 58-83] and in Williams's *Paterson*, harnessing these energies, transforming them into valuable goods thanks to machines, was fascinating but counterproductive in terms of individual freedom and collective welfare. The world that two centuries of industrial revolution and one century of Romantic idealism had generated was in their views a progression toward more predation and more exploitation, one that went against the pastoral world they aspired to. But paradoxically, this pastoral world was never to be technologically regressive, not a pre-industrial age, but a sort of agrarian local modernity, one in which the self was not an actor but an agent. In this sense, their

relation to Romanticism is obviously more ambiguous and certainly not the radical opposition to which they officially subscribed: it marks a relative shift from a self posturing and participating to a more dogmatic and imperious self, still posturing but desperately trying to control and dominate rather than belong in his world. After all, what they blame Walt Whitman for, namely his lack of subtlety and the too obvious transfer of his private self to the public sphere, can also be seen as Whitman's deliberate rejection of sophistication and cynicism, a refusal to give in to the lure of illusory impersonality and an idiosyncratic claim for universality.

In this respect, Pound and Williams's rejection, in their Modernist poetics, of Whitman and, with him of Browning or Keats, may appear as an overt rejection of Romanticism, American and otherwise, but it is a mere gesture towards modernity which irredeemably fails to provide a clean break from the stakes of self-definition and the poem as the locus where the self's relation to the world can be expressed. Far from signalling the dawn of a new era, their strategies indeed "make it new," but in a restrictive sense of the term: the new "it" is renovated—not innovated. By reformulating the dictates of Romanticism, both poets indeed create apparently new theories, but these theories are nothing but "pacts," compromises with Romanticism, limbs of the same tree, to take up one of Pound's metaphors for his links to Whitman. In both poets' poetics, Romanticism is remanent, an imprint still legible under the new print, a luminous writing ironically shining through.

### *Pound's Romanticism: a tradition in denegation*

Ezra Pound's attitude to Romanticism is best understood in his ambivalent relationship to Robert Browning: inscribed within the double scope of a renewal of poetic diction, especially in terms of epic and "a poem containing history" [*Make It New* "Date Line," 19] and of a repositioning of poetry in the modern world, Pound's choice of Browning as a figure emblematic of his conception of the poet is symptomatic. Whereas he clearly opposes the formal conventionality of the Victorians, Pound actually appropriates their modes to suit his new purposes. It is thus not innocent that Ford Madox Ford puts them together as great innovators, bridging the gap between the Romantic and the Modernist eras:

Browning and Ezra are the two great major poets of our and the immediately preceding Age. That Ezra reveals. I use the word "major" to designate verse-poets who can hold our attention with their verses during extended periods of time. [...] It is only Browning and Ezra since Bugbear Shakespeare who have been able to make a non-stop flight from, say, Philadelphia to, say, Cathay, revictualling, as it were in the air above Casa Guidi. [Lindberg-Seyersted 103]

Of course, Dante and Shakespeare cannot go unmentioned in this condensed review of Pound's "How to Read," but what matters most is the hasty dismissing of any real time gap between the two poets through the metaphor of the plane flight: in Ford's view, as well as in Pound's in fact, correspondences are not to be made on the level of chronological development but as lines between luminous points, drawn in space and transcending time. However, to this there also corresponds a mode of

integrating the work of one's predecessors and of erasing the linear unfolding of tradition and the inherently historical nature of any canon. Such a mode appears in Pound's evolution towards a suppression of the references to Browning from the first cantos, only keeping unmarked and unsigned traces of his influence. Perhaps it is because Browning's open conception of the poem as informed by and inscribed in history does not fit Pound's ambition of a poem whose coherence will in turn inform history—"contain it" in the sense of restricting and controlling it.

Browning's historicism is for Pound a way of dealing with the fin-de-siècle aesthetics at the same time by borrowing from it and by rebelling against the "crepuscular spirit" it imposes on modern poetry [*Collected Early Poems* 96]. In Browning, he finds the very contradictions which inform his position towards the rise of industrialization and the threat it puts on the meaningfulness of art: ahead of his time, according to Pound, but in fact in a process that is closely related to the ambivalence of the Romantics' involvement in social and political life, Browning attempts to reconcile the anti-aesthetic necessity of including the non-poetic into the poem, of integrating the ugly and the jarring, and the desire to allow, through poetry, for exaltation and a direct access to the unnamable of beauty. Both attracted and daunted by the tensions between the aesthetic and the historical, Pound glimpses at possible solutions in the choices Browning made. Browning's irony in *Sordello*, his skepticism towards a neo-Christian conception of history as determined and progressive, his relative view of events in terms of discourse rather than facts are all attractive to Pound because they provide for an angle to attack positivism and Romantic despair simultaneously. However, they also work at undermining his personal aspiration to be a poetic genius, a psychopomp, a provider of certainties and laws both in poetry and in life. His early poems, such as "The Return," offer instances of what Mary Ellis Gibson calls an "unstable resistance" [10] to Browning's options, one which integrates at the same time as it warps the consequences of the Browningsque poetics. Pound's canon and his relations to the Romantics is thus not one of opposition but a much more pragmatic attitude, a form of utilitarianism which adapts the object to the purpose at hand, hence lays emphasis on new methods of reading (in *How to Read* or *The Spirit of Romance* for instance) as well as of writing.

In the introduction to the *Selected Letters*, D.D. Paige underlines Pound's very reluctant references to English poetry and his distrust of imitation: warning Iris Barry against the dangers of pastiche, he however makes direct mention of Browning, as if he thought he had copied him and could not shed the habit. "The Hell is that one catches Browning's manners and mannerisms," he declares, assessing a situation which it is too late to alter [27 July 1916, 90]. As in his fascination for Flaubert and "*le mot juste*," Pound is attracted to a pragmatic and realistic approach, which in Browning manages to overcome the apocalyptic sense of decay presiding over Romantic nostalgia and the resulting solipsistic posture of the poet: against didacticism in "Fra Lippo Lippi" and against aesthetic distance in "Pictor Ignotus," Pound's Browning in fact lays the ground for the further contradictions which inform Pound's work after the Vorticist manifesto, especially the *Cantos*. Precariously balancing between the search for beauty and the desire to perform his *paideuma*, constantly trying to find the

beautiful form for his teaching, Pound keeps his poem "In Praise of Old Masters" unpublished: this is where he acknowledges the importance of Browning, but the acknowledgement must remain secret as he puts into practice Browning's definition of the poet as "rag picker" [Gibson 39].

The rag picker poet can be seen as a historiographer, one rewriting the history of literature in particular, through a form of intellectual theft and reconstruction of chronologies and tradition that has to do, at worst, with plagiarism, and, at best, with appropriation. Because of the complexities of the process, the poet does not seem to expect understanding from his reader, and Pound envisions a future for his *Cantos* that resembles the reception of Browning's *Sordello*: the "ragged / backless copy" to be "pick[ed]" from the shelf, in "Famam Librosque Cano" [*Collected Shorter Poems* 14] is but a detour to more valuable fame and more lasting influence, since it leads the discoverer to a reflection on the very form of the poem.

And lost mid-page  
Such age  
As his pardons the habit,  
He analyses form and thought to see  
How I 'scaped immortality. [*Collected Shorter Poems* 15]

Of course, what is most important here is the intrinsic link established between "form" and "thought," a process, which establishes the ideological aim of Pound's poetry and the necessity of a radial mode of reading for his poetry, constantly moving back and forth from text to contexts. Now, this way of reading is not something Pound invents, but rather something he lifts from Browning, for whom the poem is not just transparent lyric but also the *locus* for thematized experiments on reader reception, based on metaleptic references to the transmission of meaning and a wide use of referentiality. What Browning brings to Pound—and one has to understand that he is not the sole Romantic to enforce these poetic methods—is the possibility to go beyond intertextuality, beyond literary translation or imitation, towards an insertion of heterogeneous materials into the poem. This poetic mode conflates with Pound's definition of the artist, such as can be found in *ABC of Reading*: the great inventor so praised in his criticism for bringing up a response or rather a "riposte" to contemporary poetic conformity turns out to be nothing more than a follower, admittedly in Pound's case also an intensifier, of long-preexisting methods. It is a poet's posture which Browning himself describes in his essay on Shelley, something common to many poets who claimed the status of innovators and as such had to define the limits between ancillary imitation and seminal influence.

This tension is at work both in the suppression of any clear reference to Browning from the Browningsque passages of the *Cantos* and in the ambivalent homage one finds in the early poem from *A Lume Spento*, "Mesmerism." There, Browning appears as an "old mesmerizer," at the same time a "Master" and a "head-cold long-tonsilled Calliope," "mad as a hatter" [*Collected Shorter Poems* 13]: the coincidence of compliment with insult conveys Pound's reluctance and attraction, his struggle against being possessed and his urge to possess. The very notion of mesmerism, much in fashion with the Romantics, is a quote from Browning, which also

reformulates the relationship between the two poets in terms of agonistic fascination. The imprint Browning leaves on Pound is one reminiscent of the gold cast in wax in *The Ring and the Book*: as the gold is molded, the wax melts and leaves no trace of its primordial existence—except in the resulting object of the process, its inverted image, but its image nonetheless. As Browning’s long poems inform Pound’s conception of the epic and his project in the *Cantos*, they melt away but leave the central questionings, which the *Cantos* will over and over again try to solve and “make cohere” [CXVI 810]: the issue of poetic authority, the modern forms of the epic, the part to be played by history in a poem supposed to “contain” it. Whereas the wax was still visible in the early poems, it progressively vanishes through the successive versions of the first cantos: Browning as Pound’s declared psychopomp, his personal Virgil or Sordello, is to be replaced by a vaguer entity, a compound of all possible guides for the poet, ranging from Confucius to Mussolini.

And you had a background,  
 Watched “the soul,” Sordello’s soul,  
 And saw it lap up life, and swell and burst—  
 “Into the empyrean?”  
 So you worked out new form, the meditative,  
 Semi-dramatic, semi-epic story.  
 And we will say: What’s left for me to do?  
 Whom shall I conjure up; who’s my Sordello,  
 My pre-Daun Chaucer, pre-Boccaccio,  
 As you have done pre-Dante? [“Three Cantos”]

As is shown by Ronald Bush in *The Genesis of Ezra Pound’s Cantos*, the revisions from “Three Cantos” to *A Draft of XVI Cantos* progressively move away from Browning’s overt discussions of tradition and poetic authority, blurring the binary opposition he made between the poet as narrator and the poet as historian: up to a certain point, Pound thus achieves his own synthesis of both notions which will lead to the figure of the poet as interpreter of history and as dogmatic prescriptive agent.

Hang/Damn it all, Robert Browning, there can be but the one  
 “Sordello,” [...]   
 You had up ghost, or / and my method comes closer?  
 I know your Sordello wasn’t this and that,  
 I have sought the real man.  
 And with no better fortune  
 Had out my Guido and my Daniel  
 Knew what they spoke, set forth their content  
 As you set forth Sordello’s?  
 No? You’d stay, or say you’d stay, hidden.  
 Gave us “Sordello,” make a wild romantic.

The paradox in this address to Browning and its criticism of the Sordello *persona* the Romantic poet has created is that Pound seems to differentiate Browning’s processes of impersonation from his own work on Dante or the troubadours. Yet what he outlines in this unpublished passage is indeed the similarities between Browning’s and his method, one that is based on the re-narrativization and at times counterfeiting of historical events and characters. Intermingled with his and Eliot’s theory of impersonality,

Pound's response to Browning is one of rhetorical artifice rather than radical change: personal pronouns are to be avoided at all costs, but this does not preclude in the least the emergence of a *persona*, and the poet's involvement with this *persona*.

The conflict between Pound and Browning does not actually arise from the glaring differences that would, in Pound's wishes, distinguish them from each other and assert the later poet's innovative status. Rather it comes from the disturbing similarities and Pound's difficulties in resolving them or erasing them. "Mesmerized," Pound realizes how much lies in common between Browning's protean narrative voice and infinitely jarring focal entities and his own heterogeneous cantos, with their juxtaposed quotations, wild associations and unnerving plurilingualism. What Pound sees in Browning as a possible lack of coherence he fears to find duplicated in his own poem: he does not consider Browning's fragmented voices and specialized idioms as wholly successful, but does not see how to avoid them in his own attempt at conveying the diversity of the modern world. Obliterating the Browningsque narrative *persona* from the first cantos fails to exorcize the Romantic's inclusive diction and Pound acknowledges it, only temporarily, as he composes these poems—a confession soon to be denegated in which *Sordello* is Pound's formal model and Browning his Dantean Virgil:

Well you'll be my Virgil, for you had the form,  
Ex nihil, nihil fit. Must I make new form,  
Ere I can set my crotchet and my wit  
To take the whole catch of my fantasy?  
Or say I've done it, must I still turn back,  
Send for the baggage that my scouting party  
Couldn't bring up, until they found the land open;  
Use your by-phrases? ["Three Cantos" Folders 3103-3105]

At the same time fascinated and disturbed by Browning's formal decisions, Pound tries to find fault with his subjective tack on history, but his criticism could also ironically bear on his own idiosyncratic readings of facts and his vision of history as a constellation of "luminous details." The need to erase the Browningsque trace from the Poundian modern poem thus becomes more urgent, as it is a means, however desultory, of silencing the accusations of either historical incoherency or ideological bias—at least momentarily. When Pound advocates impersonality, through Imagism's deceptively subject-free visuals and later through the esoteric implications of Vorticism's channeling of universal energies, he is trying to rid his poetics of the Romantic self, all too present and active in Browning's questionings of authority and historical truth. However, the didactic project at the roots of the *Cantos* as well as their dogmatic ideological stance drag the poem back to the issues of inscription of the self in the poem and of the self's pathetic fallacies informing Romanticism. These issues find new formulations, but not necessarily radical solutions, in Pound's poetics, in the same way as one can read their perverse return in Williams's treatment of the Keatsian heritage.

*Williams's "wanderer": a Keatsian hero*

Published for the first time in *The Egoist* in 1914, "The Wanderer" finds in the journal's title the possible start for its reading: the poem sends back to Williams's first poetic attempts in the Keatsian manner, but contrary to them does not follow their rather simplistic imitative mode. It in fact tries to sort out the ambiguities of the Romantic heritage. Although the poem has been read as the sign of Williams's emancipation from the Romantic influence and his initial foray into Modernist aesthetics and problematics, the poem is not, in spite of James Breslin's interpretations, radically "anti-Romantic" [*An American Artist* 20-24]: his quest for an assessment of the given of modernity and his aspiration to a non-nostalgic rooting of self in the present do not suffice to sustain an evaluation of the poem in terms of clear opposition to the Romantic past, unless one thinks of a stylized version of Romanticism, sentimentalized and reduced to the vagaries of a whining self. Similarly, the way Joseph Riddel defines the hero of the poem as "one deprived of all hope of self-transcendence, or even of an identity apart from place, of a self apart from the field it walks, and takes intimate measure of, or designs" [63] resembles rather than differs from the definition one could make of the Romantic hero, especially as he thinks of himself as a poet. Paradoxically, this poet is both defining and defined by the place he inhabits; he feels the possibility of transcendence and its existential impossibilities, and creates out of this dramatic tension. The 1914 Williams emerges less as his dreamed inventor of a new literature for America than as the transmitter and adaptor of a form of Romanticism to the ruthlessness of the American landscape. Though also sending back the reader to the American literary tradition (notably Whitman in the Manhattan setting of the poem), the poem mainly experiments on the potential usefulness of Keats's *Hyperion* fragments for a reading of modernity, thus participating in Williams's general project of constituting a "usable past." The poetic implications of Williams's poem and the status of his hero as a poet compose a fundamentally Romantic vision—one that is to be found again in *Paterson*, the long poem that emerged from the fusion of the creed of "The Wanderer" and the aesthetics of objectivism.

By tracing the growing awareness of the hero as a poet, "The Wanderer" draws on the relations between Apollo and Mnemosyne in Keats's *Hyperion* and on the relations between the narrator and Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*: these links are paralleled in the part played by the goddess in guiding the poet in "The Wanderer." Torn by atavistic questions at the beginning of the poem about his part in a world he fails to comprehend, baffled by the gigantism of the tall Manhattan skyscrapers, Williams's narrator desperately wonders: "How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?" [*Collected Earlier Poems* 3]. The question raises the issue of the formal decisions to be made in front of a chaotic modern world—but it fails to question the very position of the poet in front of this world: being "a mirror" is the tell-tale expression of a Williams not so much involved in the Modernist questionings of subjectivity as caught in the illusions of the transparent lyric of an instrumentalized self, the Emersonian "transparent eyeball" as well as the Romantic seer and sayer. This poet needs the mediation of a guide—in Browning, Sordello's fortune-teller; in Keats, his muse; in Pound, Browning; etc. The goddess in "The Wanderer" emerges first as the saving beauty that will help build the vision, but soon becomes

an embodiment of ugliness and the cheap mercantilism of the capitalistic world: whereas the narrator has the hope of finding in her a way of escaping the distress generated by the modern world, he finds himself forced to gaze back on this world and its hideous dehumanization.

There came crowds walking—men as visions  
 With expressionless, animate faces;  
 Empty men with shell-thin bodies  
 Jostling close above the gutter,  
 Hasting—nowhere! [5]

The vision of the ugly and meaningless is indeed an eye-opener for the narrator, who is then able to see his goddess for what she is, a garishly made-up tramp, both threatening and attractive—a vision that is not so far removed from Baudelaire's in *Le Spleen de Paris* or from Browning's in his Venice passages. Even if this goddess does not seem to correspond to a Romantic conception of the poetic muse, the narrator's decision to become her prophet in spite of her repulsive nature is in keeping with the Romantic conception of the poet's role. The goddess' enigmatic silence or deriding comments turn her into an avatar of Eliot's sibyl, but like it maintain the fiction of a message to be deciphered: a mediation through the poet is still possible allowing to step up from human baseness to a transcendent, albeit not necessarily transcending, reality. In the fourth section of the poem, entitled "The Strike," the renewed vision of humanity is indeed once more derogatory and abject: Paterson's silk workers are seen as mechanized beings, whose "flat skulls" could not possibly harbor brains:

The flat skulls with the unkempt black or blond hair,  
 The ugly legs of the young girls, pistons  
 Too powerful for delicacy!  
 The women's wrists, the men's arms red  
 Used to heat and cold, to toss quartered beeves  
 And barrels, and milk-cans, and crates of fruit!  
 Faces all knotted up like burls on oaks,  
 Grasping, fox-snouted, thick-lipped,  
 Sagging breasts and protruding stomachs,  
 Rasping voices, filthy habits with the hands.  
 Nowhere you! Everywhere the electric! [7]

Williams's Romantic paradox then comes to a climax with the end of the poem and the reenacted baptism of the narrator in the polluted waters of a dammed Passaic: clinging apparently to the illusion of the goddess as removed from the modern world, the poet also asserts her as the principle from which this world was born and which finds itself expressed in all of its phenomena. The crystal clarity of the original water is then just a furtive impression to be replaced by the turbid ebb of the river.

Then she, leaping up with a fierce cry:  
 "Enter, youth, into this bulk!  
 Enter, river, into this young man!"  
 Then the river began to enter my heart,  
 Eddying back cool and limpid  
 Into the crystal beginning of its days.  
 But with the rebound it leaped forward:

Muddy, then black and shrunken  
Till I felt the utter depth of its rottenness  
The vile breath of its degradation  
And dropped down knowing this was me now.  
But she lifted me and the water took a new tide  
Again into the older experiences,  
And so, backward and forward,  
It tortured itself within me  
Until time had been washed finally under,  
And the river had found its level  
And its last motion had ceased  
And I knew all—it became me.  
And I knew this for double certain  
For there, whitely, I saw myself  
Being borne under the water!  
I could have shouted out in my agony  
At the sight of myself departing  
Forever [11-12]

In this crucial final moment of the poem, one can see the ambiguities of Williams's rereading of the Romantic poet as medium and psychopomp: although Breslin sees it as the annihilation of the poet's desire for transcendence in the invasion of the body by the rot of the world [*An American Artist* 21], and although Riddel sees it as the definite relinquishing of the Romantic self in the baptismal act of conversion to the modern [61], the situation is more paradoxical:

The narrator of "The Wanderer" is purged of his yearning of transcendence, but only because he achieves it. He *does* give up his private consciousness or ego, but only because that ego or consciousness has suddenly expanded to the point where it now contains everything within it. [Rapp 13]

In fact, the narrator renounces the Romantic figure of the muse only to appropriate her mediating function: the departing self is the one that made him one individual within the mass of humanity. He exchanges this minor self for one that has been initiated into absolute knowledge, a magnified version of the Romantic poet as genius.

Now the evolution of Williams's narrator strictly parallels the trajectory of Keats's Apollo: in *Hyperion*, the goddess also visits the hero and allows him to access the superior spheres of knowledge and poetic power to which he aspires. Both narrators are eager to experience the apotheosis which the goddess seems to promise them, thus in Keats:

Point me out the way  
To any one particular beauteous star,  
And I will flit into it with my lyre  
And make its silvery splendour pant with bliss. [III 99-102]

The river which penetrates the narrator's body does not invade him but empowers him, fulfilling the desire for power also expressed in Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion*: in the same way as the Keatsian narrator is a pure conscience removed from the thingness of the world and for whom events become real only insofar as he becomes aware of them, Williams's river does

not have power in itself but only as it moves through the narrator's body (as through the Paterson dam) and is turned to the subject's purpose. This idea finds itself expressed in Williams's "Vortex," his response to Gautier and Pound's manifestoes:

By accepting the opportunity that has best satisfied my desire to express my emotions in the environment in which I have happened to be, I have defied my environment and denied it power to control me or [the power] of any accident that has made me write instead of cut stone.

By taking whatever character my environment has presented and turning it to my purpose, I have expressed my independence of it. [*A Recognizable Image* 58]

The question that opened the poem, how to "be a mirror to this modernity," which responded to the Romantic need to account for the world anew in terms of the self, finds itself reformulated at the end of the poem, but in terms that are no less reminiscent of the Romantic thrust toward a universalization of self: not only can the modern world be assessed in terms of the self, but all that the world contains is to be put to the service of this self's designs. Williams's idealism, one which is at the very origins of *Paterson*, emerges as a neo-Romantic integration of methods that are Keatsian in motive and, at times, also in motif. Far from rejecting the Keatsian influence that pushed him to write his first poems, he actually carries out the Romantic self-centeredness that triggers pathetic fallacy: as part of his "environment," the Romantic text is to be "turned to his purpose." The issue of "independence" remains one to be discussed, probably a Williamsian delusion and a token assertion meant to preserve the Modernist fiction of radical innovation. In a manner very similar to Pound's apparent rejection of the Browningsque subtext, Williams deals with Keats's Romanticism in terms of liberation but proceeds in his poetry in terms of appropriation and adaptation. Both these processes remain fairly obvious in the poets' relations to British Romanticism, but they in fact apply on a wider basis to their feigned dismissal of their nineteenth-century heritage.

#### *Walt Whitman: the secret instigator*

Dealing with the Romantic past in American poetry proves much more difficult for the two poets because they want to construct their poetic *personae* as "inventors" and not followers—a distinction which is key to Pound's *ABC of Reading* [39-40] and to some passages of Williams's *Paterson* [II 50]. This is one of the reasons why Walt Whitman cannot actually be objectified and just mildly denied his importance: as the major predecessor, as the first who indeed broke the iambic pattern in America, as the glorious creator of long poems and of poems dealing with the self's position in his world, Whitman is the obvious source—and as such the least advertised. In Ezra Pound's writings, he scarcely appears, often to be dismissed for his failures to achieve impersonality and his "abominable versification" [unpublished manuscript, college folder, Beinecke Library]. Apart from rare

anecdotal mentions in the *Cantos* (he is named twice in “Canto LXXX” and partially quoted in “Canto LXXXII”), Whitman in fact only explicitly commands two texts that Pound deemed worth publishing: a very derogatory passage in *ABC of Reading* entitled “Whitman” [192] and an early poem from *Lustra*, “A Pact”:

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman—  
I have detested you long enough,  
I come to you as a grown child  
Who has had a pig-headed father;  
I am old enough now to make friends.  
It was you that broke the new wood,  
Now is a time for carving.  
We have one sap and one root—  
Let there be commerce between us. [*Collected Shorter Poems* 89]

Of course, the poem is an insult disguised as a homage, a rejection made to sound like poetic recognition. However, it is also a projection into the poetic future, placed under the sign of a dialogue between the Romantic and the Modernist, which corresponds to a refining of the older poet’s methods, not to a radical change. As early as *Lustra*, Pound acknowledges the impossibility for him to remake the past and for Modernism to appear on a literary *tabula rasa*. In the later cantos, which are proof of this protracted “commerce” between the two works, Whitman is indeed to intervene, at a time of reconsideration and reassertion of the pre-World-War-II choices. As Hugh Kenner points out, the quotes are truncated, the poet’s name is kept untold, and the Poundian version of Whitman’s poem is like “a structural X-ray” of the original [487]. What is striking in this metaphor is that it underlines how what Pound keeps is not so much the flesh or content of Whitman’s poem as the bones or form—precisely what he criticized and found deficient. Pound in fact meets Whitman exactly where he apparently did not want him to be: breaking the boundaries of the poetic, struggling for communication and risking hermeticism, failing in a desperate quest for “*le mot juste*” to reform poetic language and integrate “the spoken tongue.” Pound’s criticism of Whitman ironically anticipates what can be said of the *Cantos*, and which, for today’s reader, summarizes their strengths and shortcomings:

Whitman’s faults are superficial, he does convey an image of his time, he has written *histoire morale*, as Montaigne wrote the history of his epoch. You can learn more of nineteenth-century America from Whitman than from any of the writers who either refrained from perceiving, or limited their record to what they had been taught to consider suitable literary expression. The only way to enjoy Whitman thoroughly is to concentrate on his fundamental meaning. If you insist, however, on dissecting his language you will probably find that it is wrong NOT because he broke all of what were considered in his day ‘the rules’ but because he is spasmodically conforming to this, that or the other; sporadically dragging in a bit of ‘regular’ metre, using a bit of literary language, and putting his adjectives where, in the spoken tongue, they are not. [*ABC of Reading* 192]

Pound, in the *Cantos*, does in fact much worse than displacing a few adjectives or using a few metrical bits: he establishes a prosodic mode that

conflates media and warps language to the point of creating a new code. But this is sustained by the desire to lead the reader to a core of meaning, one he thinks he finds in Whitman and which is, in Pound's eyes, the older poet's salvation. In Pound's case, however, this meaning is highly problematic, and the surface proves to be the more fascinating and innovative aspect of his poems, in a way similar to Whitman's breakthrough in meter despite often naive exhibitions of the self. Here the Romantic poet embodies the dilemmas of Romanticism which lead to the Modernists' rejection, among which the unavoidable inscriptions of self in the poem.

Whitman is made into a similar, though less hidden, figure in William Carlos Williams's works: he is more frequently mentioned and perhaps less radically denied his importance in the building of an autochthonic American tradition. As the topic of an essay, "America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry," Whitman is transformed by Williams into a kind of antidote to what he sees as a Europeanized form of Modernism in Pound or Eliot. Whitman is one of Williams's "pure products of America," [*Collected Poems* I 217] the first to raise the issue of a specific poetic form for America, one taking into account the country's democratic and individualistic ideals. Williams's disappointment in Whitman thus does lie in the assumed failure to generate a wholly new form, but in the poet's Romantic insistence on the predominance of the self. The gigantic self of Whitman's "Song of Myself" jars, at least apparently with Williams's impulse, in the poem to Elsie, but also in *Paterson*, to be attuned to the outer world, generous to others and "in contact" with all objects. This interpretation, which is Stephen Tapscott's reading of the contrasts between Whitman and Williams, none the less fails to take into account the end of the lineated part of the poem:

No one  
to witness  
and adjust, no one to drive the car [219]

In a wistful aporia, the poem intimates Williams's conception of the poet in terms of witnessing, adaptation, guidance: the Romantic seer and sayer and psychopomp returns to the surface in other words and other forms, but free verse and the insertion of the quotidian into the poem fail to effectively veil the Romantic aspiration. I have shown in *Ezra Pound et William Carlos Williams: pour une poésie américaine* that Williams's image of Whitman is a construct of the mind designed to fit his purpose of founding American literature on experimentation and concreteness [78-80]. The Modernist thus lays much less emphasis on what stands in contradiction with the notion of impersonality as devised by Eliot and Pound, to which he adheres, and with the objectivist theory that pursues it when Eliot and Pound seem to have renounced it.

In "Leaves of Grass" Williams discovered a poet who had defiantly shattered conventional forms in order to release *his* feelings. Williams was thus stirred to affirm the ardent, extravagant side of his own nature—to achieve, in his broken, oppressive world, a version of Whitman's process of continual renewal. [Breslin *PMLA*, 619-21]

More than anything else, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is the opportunity for a return of the self in Williams's poetry, a more assertive and defiant self, but

a self that aspires to transcendence from within the immanent, to universals from the chaos of particulars, and that sees the poet as the individual meant to perform this passage for the rest of humanity. The 1917 frontispiece to *Al Que Quiere* adopts the Whitmanian stance and claims ambitions that turn the poet into the potentially misunderstood genius of Romanticism.

To Whom It May Concern!

This book is a collection of poems by William Carlos Williams. You gentle reader, will probably not like it, because it is brutally powerful and scornfully crude. Fortunately, neither the author nor the publisher care much whether you like it or not. The author has done his work, and if you do read the book you will agree that he doesn't give a damn for your opinion. We have the profound satisfaction of publishing a book in which, we venture, the poets of the future will dig for materials as the poets of today dig in Whitman's "Leaves of Grass."

From this moment on, Williams will use Whitman to promote his form of Modernism, omitting (but not necessarily suppressing) the issue of the self from his poetics. The poems all raise the question of the observer and Williams's objectivism itself dramatizes it by focusing on the poem as object without openly problematizing the poet's position as a subject. But Whitman indeed becomes his Dante, as Browning had become Pound's and as Keats used to be in "The Wanderer."

There is no art of poetry save by grace of other poetry. So Dante to me can only be another way of saying Whitman. Yet without a Whitman there can of course be for me no Dante. Further than that: there is no way for me to talk of Whitman but in terms of my own generation—if haply such a thing may be. ["America, Whitman and the Art of Poetry" 27]

The end of *Paterson* IV is where all the threads come together: a reenactment of the baptismal scene at the end of the Keatsian "Wanderer," it is located in a Whitmanian setting—reasserting the Romantic aspiration from within the Modernist poem.

For all these reasons, one is tempted to see in Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams's Modernist poetics more than reminiscences of Romanticism, a memory of the literary past as past, a recognition, willing or not, of a heritage, the actualization of Romantic projects in diverse forms: in their works, Romanticism would be remanent, something that stays in spite of the paradigms of change and revolution, and inadvertently comes back to the disrupted surface of the poem, or rather, in the case of the Modernist fragmented poem, a deep coherence that paradoxically disrupts by ordering.

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