

CAM BRIDGE RELITERARY VIEW.

Citation Info

George Reynolds, 'Pound's Letters: Towards a Poetics Including the 'EZpistolary'', *Cambridge Literary Review*, 1/2 (Lent, 2010), pp. 209–228.

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Pound's Letters: Towards a Poetics Including the 'EZpistolary'

CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING PASSAGE from a letter of Ezra Pound to T.S. Eliot, transcribed from a carbon copy held in the Ezra Pound Collection at Yale:

proposed title of the article

Testicles versus Testament
an embalmsamation of the Late Robert's Britches.

all the pseudo rabbits / Rabbit Brooks, Rabbit Britches /
whotter hell / your own hare or a wig sir ???

I spose I can cite the what I once said of Britches?

I managed to dig about 10 lines of Worse Libre out of one of
his leetle bookies. ONCT.¹

I am interested in Pound's letters, how they might be seen as literary works, and how perceptions of a Pound poetic are altered by a reconsideration of the epistolary in his writing. Given that during his busy 1930s Pound allegedly wrote upwards of a thousand letters a year, I use the words "letters" and "epistolary" conditionally. The distinction to make is that between the "epistolary"—relatively 'normal' letters written *to* an unfamiliar or professional audience, and the "EZpistolary"—the typographically exuberant letters written *for* closer acquaintances (intriguingly, as Wyndham Lewis remarks, it is a style that becomes more pro-

1 Reprinted in Marjorie Perloff's *The Dance of the Intellect* (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), p. 86. The letter's occasion is an earlier enquiry from T.S. Eliot as to whether Pound would contribute a piece on Robert Bridges to *The Criterion*.

nounced as Pound gets older).² It would be hard to argue for the literary merit of the ‘epistolary’; when I use the word ‘letters’, therefore, I am referring for the most part to ‘EZpizles’. I have confined myself primarily to Pound’s correspondence with Wyndham Lewis, E.E. Cummings, and William Carlos Williams. This is for a variety of reasons, but mainly because Pound regarded these men as some of his closest friends, and allowed full voice to the “EZpistolary” mode, a style based in wordplay and fragmented expression of elliptical, condensed thought. The editors of *Pound/Lewis*, *Pound/Cummings*, and *Pound/Williams* are sympathetic to this style, and the typographical exuberance that is bound up with it. However, many critics—and some editors—are less willing to consider and/or preserve the literary merits of this mode of writing. After positioning this discussion within these critical contexts, I will chart the ways in which an advance from them might be effected.

WHEN MARJORIE PERLOFF reprints the letter part-quoted above in *The Dance of the Intellect*, she argues that “Pound subverts the conventions of ‘ordinary prose’ and typographical format so as to make the letter itself the artwork.”³ She makes only passing reference to the letter’s original publication. Here is the same passage as it is produced in D.D. Paige’s *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907–1941*:

[...] proposed title of the article: ‘Testicles versus Testament.’
An embalsamation of the Late Robert’s Britches. All the
pseudo-rabbits: Rabbit Brooke, Rabbit Britches. Wotter hell.
Your own hare or a wig, sir???

I spose I can cite what I once said of Britches? I managed
to dig about 10 lines of Worse Libre out of one of his leetle
bookies. Onct.⁴

² W.K. Rose (ed.), *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis* (New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 473.

³ M. Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, p. 86.

⁴ D.D. Paige (ed.), *Letters of Ezra Pound 1907–1941* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), p. 370 (henceforth *Letters*).

Perloff describes Paige's programmatic changes in lineation, orthography, and punctuation merely as "some normalization."⁵ Such a muted response implies that there is only a limited extent to which Perloff is willing to defend her claim that Pound's letter is an "artwork" itself. And yet such an editorial policy would be unconscionable if Paige were editing one of Pound's poems, or a prose "artwork," however much Joyce's 'Penelope' episode might benefit from the odd extra full stop. It should be emphasised quite how widespread such "normalizations" are: Paige breaks the letter into 5 regularly aligned paragraphs (the original has 17, with varying margins). He excises 47 words from the original. Pound uses the solidus (/) to punctuate the letter 12 times; Paige does not reproduce it once. He instead inserts expressive punctuation elsewhere, changing the stress and tone of the letter with exclamation and question marks. Pound does not use italic font at all; Paige rewrites many of Pound's words (originally in block capitals) in italics; he ignores the expressive weight of the remaining ones, returning them to lower-case. All of this pays little regard to the warning that Wyndham Lewis gave Paige as he was compiling his edition: "E.P.'s letters tidied up would no longer be E.P.'s letters. The 'old hickory' flavour is essential. The more 'Waal me deah Wyndamm' you have the better. Change this to 'Well my dear Wyndham,' and it is somebody else speaking—writing."⁶

Paige reproduces much of Pound's unique orthography, but removes other expressive elements of his "EZpistolary" voice "tidying up" Pound's letters. Referring in his foreword to Pound's punctuation, spelling, and emphases, he acknowledges that "these are anything but normal," confessing that he was torn between producing a book that would be "intolerable to read," and one that "missed some of Pound's epistolary savour." In compromise, the solidus is replaced by "more normal marks of punctuation," and "plays on spelling have been thinned out [...] only when they have come so thickly as to retard the reader." He wants an edition that "can be read consecutively with as little eye fatigue as possible."⁷

5 M. Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, p. 87.

6 W.K. Rose (ed.), *The Letters of Wyndham Lewis*, pp. 466–67.

7 *Letters*, p. 28.

My interest in the uniqueness of Pound's letters is not related to their nostalgic value as a record, of the formative years of modernism. Marjorie Perloff has already shown the extent to which the letters, inasmuch as they employ the same stylistic devices as parts of *The Cantos*, can be seen as "on the same continuum" as Pound's more obviously "poetic" writing.⁸ This is an intriguing comparison, but ultimately it leaves unexplored the issue of how an acceptance of the model of Pound's texts on a continuum helps a critical analysis of them: how, effectively, a familiarity with the strategies of the letters permits more nuanced understanding of the poems. Unlike Paige, I would contend that *how* Pound says is as important as *what* he says—and that the effect his prose has on the reader's eyes is central to its effect.

THERE HAS BEEN SURPRISINGLY LITTLE critical work on the letters.⁹ Possibly, this is because critics do not know what to do with them, even if they do acknowledge their uniqueness and proximity to Pound's texts more comfortably labelled 'poetic': Hugh Witemeyer, editor of *Pound/Williams*, acknowledges that "as in the poems, spacing provides an important expressive dimension," yet he does not pursue this comparison.¹⁰ This ties in to the problem of classification:

Yaas som lively itemz
& crizism deaf-eated by lack of page numberz
2, 100 ft. = thaz v. interestin' page.
but dont prove there aint no water no where. =
Troubled by wot Dante calls 'muliebria" in some patches of
soft.

8 M. Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect*, p. 80.

9 I have been unable to locate a single book-length work. The only substantial essays (as opposed to book reviews) I have discovered are Perloff's in *The Dance of the Intellect* and Timothy Materer's 'Doppelgänger: Ezra Pound in His Letters,' *Paideuma* 11 (Fall 1982), 241-56.

10 H. Witemeyer (ed.), *Pound/Williams: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1996), p. xii.

the two parts of this note are separate – not sposed to form a unity.

Part 2

recallin' the details of the event

& my erronius impression @ t time

I wd send my best to yr. mother, if I weren't afraid that it is too late.

My father died 2 years or more ago.¹¹

Critics are generally reluctant to entertain the notion of this prose/poetry division when faced with passages like this. They are happy to refer to Pound's "familiar style [...] a flow of colloquial narrative and slang, abbreviated to the point of unintelligibility, dense with allusions, making ingenious use of the resources of the typewriter keyboard."¹² Yet they rarely pursue the implications of the fact that this sort of statement could apply equally well to *The Cantos*. Many writers have celebrated Pound's ambitious incorporation of prose texts into the *The Cantos* "without privileging either medium;" few are willing to entertain the notion that this process of osmosis might be reversed: that Pound's prose might incorporate and even be structured by some of the logic of verse.¹³

One critic who locates her work on Pound on the porous generic boundaries between his texts is Marjorie Perloff. But she is so determined to find a term that defines what the letters *are* that she only reluctantly examines what they *do*. She raids Northrop Frye and Marinetti: her term "Poundspeech" denotes a discourse simultaneously composed of the "jagged lines, abrupt collage cuts and startling juxtapositions" of Futurism's *parole in libertà*,¹⁴ and of the "ellipsis, tmesis, echolalia" that

11 Pound to Williams, December 13, 1949, *ibid.*, pp. 264–65.

12 Bernard Bergonzi, 'Review of Pound/Lewis,' *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 83, No. 2 (April, 1988), 433–35, see p. 434.

13 See, e.g., Michael A. Bernstein's *The Tale of the Tribe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 40.

14 M. Perloff, *The Futurist Moment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 171, 184.

create “an energetic associative rhythm neither that of standard written English nor of actual conversation.”¹⁵ Her description of “abrupt noun phrases” and “terse breath units,” like Frye’s depiction of an associative, speech-driven mode of writing whose prosodic “unit is a short phrase of irregular length and primitive syntax,” are useful terms for part of what occurs in the passage above.¹⁶ But to what end can we put this new precision?

Perloff uses such terms to demonstrate the continuity between Pound’s texts, forcefully relineating and scanning critical prose in *The Futurist Moment* to make it look like poetry (an inversion of Paige’s form of editing, which makes the poetic prosaic, yet no less violent).¹⁷ However, she overlooks the distinguishing feature of the letters: that as well as being like *The Cantos*, they are also, on several important levels, wholly *unlike* them. As Roger Lewis recognises, “[t]he official receptacle for his thought is the portmanteau poem, *The Cantos*: a rambling, associative structure” that, as Pound told Donald Hall, “wouldn’t exclude something merely because it didn’t fit.” Plainly, however, some things simply did not fit, and this is what makes Pound’s correspondence “the unofficial version of *The Cantos*,” the poetry’s Other, a neglected text all but ignored by critics and full of material abjected from the poems to ensure their cohesiveness.¹⁸ The letters and poetry run parallel and often cross paths, but remaining aware of their distinctive features can only create a more subtle reading of them once they are reincorporated back into each other to form a coherent Pound poetic.

15 M. Perloff, *Dance of the Intellect*, p. 78.

16 M. Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, pp. 184, 183; N Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 24. Frye can be of further use to taxonomists: his description (p. 83) of the attributes of “free prose,” “where quotations, references, allusions, titles of books, Latin tags, short sharp phrases, long lists and catalogues, are all swept up in one vast exuberant associative wave” effectively summarises the technique of much of *The Cantos*.

17 M. Perloff, *Futurist Moment*, p. 180.

18 Roger Lewis, ‘Review of Pound/Lewis,’ *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 58, No. 4 (December 1985) 607–614, see p. 607.

THE LETTERS, for example, are full of the sort of autobiography that occurs only rarely in Pound's poems. (To illustrate the parallels between these forms of writing, it would be interesting to create a psychoanalytic reading of what Pound does with this previously abjected material in *The Pisan Cantos*.) In addition to being of historical interest, this autobiography moves into the realm of literature in its distinct manner of writing the self. As is the case with Pound's 'Radio Rome' speeches, which were typewritten before being read out, the link in the letters between writing and speaking is a complex one. If, however, the radio speeches represent a bizarre and unpopular attempt to harangue listeners about economics and politics below the surface of a range of voices—commentators highlight the range of accents in which the speeches were “performed”—the letters represent a less dogmatic attempt to constitute voice textually.¹⁹ Indeed, it is in Pound's efforts to create a textual “old hickory” voice that the striking linguistic surface of the letters is constituted: Pound's habit of playful reinscription demonstrates the importance of voice to the way in which words are written and then read and heard: “is an economic one” becomes “izza kneeconomic one” in a shift of phonemes; Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* becomes “MURDER in the Cafedrawl,” suggesting the memorable nature of the sensationalist “cawkney voices” that so clearly impressed themselves on Pound when he heard the play broadcast on the radio; the *Pound Newsletter* becomes “the Ez/ Snooze Letter.”²⁰ As he does in *The Cantos*, Pound in the letters takes great enjoyment in modulating voice and sound, mimicking accents (“he hrites a vunny english vrom sVVizzerlandt”), simulating linguistic confusion (Gaudier-Brzeska becomes “Gaudier Brzzxxqzzk”), and creating jokes based on the incongruity between what is written and the different ways it can sound (“on brook?line: wot is a stoic? | Answer: a stoic iz deh boid what brings de

19 See, for example, Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988) pp. 588–89; Charles Norman, *The Case of Ezra Pound* (New York: Funk & Wagnall's, 1968), p. 5.

20 See B. Ahearn, *Pound/Cummings: The Correspondence of Ezra Pound and E.E. Cummings* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press), p. 50; David M. Gordon (ed.), *Ezra Pound and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), p. 53; *Pound/Williams*, p. 296.

baby”).²¹ Such an interplay between what is read aloud and what is seen on the page is especially characteristic of Pound’s correspondence with Williams, and in fact ‘play’ is a concept that informs these letters on a variety of levels: from early amorous play in discussions about female acquaintances, to play-fighting, to wordplay. First and foremost, though, is the connotation of ‘play’ as an inherently social activity, among friends: what is remarkable about Pound’s inscription of the “old hickory” voice is that it assumes a willingness among its audience to cooperate in its linguistic *jeux d’esprit*, to engage with (and in) them and respond to them. Whether we figure them as sophisticated language games or in Barthesian terms as “writerly” *texts de jouissance*, the letters move beyond the conventions of the epistolary, with its *telos* of a straightforward act of communication to a waiting reader. The authorial voice here is not simply a written or spoken voice, but crucially and simultaneously a spoken *and* written voice. The “absolute rhythm” of Pound’s letters, their “uncounterfeiting, uncounterfeitable” form of expression, which gives them their signature, is to be found in this interplay between speaking and writing, and inscribing the spoken: the reader discovers Pound “speaking-writing,” in Lewis’s phrase.²²

IN HIS STUDY OF POUND’S RADIO SPEECHES, Timothy C. Campbell argues for the primacy of technologies of textual and aural inscription as part of Pound’s composition process. He privileges recordings of the broadcasts over their transcripts, since “typewriting cannot provide the real components of voice.”²³ Whilst this is true, typewriting can in

21 T. Materer (ed.), *Pound/Lewis: The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), pp. 288, 251; *Pound/Cummings*, p. 293. Because Pound uses the solidus (/) as an expressive form of punctuation, I will use the vertical bar (|) to indicate line-breaks in the letters.

22 On the ‘signature’ as an idea contained within Pound’s concept of ‘absolute rhythm’, see Peter Nicholls, *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics, and Writing* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 12.

23 Timothy C. Campbell, *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), p. 163.

fact create a far more expressive mode of utterance. Pound, who wrote almost all his letters on the typewriter, seizes this opportunity with relish, using typography to denote not only aural, phonetic emphasis when words are read aloud, but also to create a visual, equally expressive form of language. In this material and visual discourse, nouns become reinscribed as ideogrammic word-pictures (a capital letter unfurls in the middle of “flower” to give “flowYer”),²⁴ and through punning and emphasis, words are examined for added expressive potential:

You might send the poEms via me/ as I
shd/ like in nanny case to see ‘em.

Seems to me the PyRAMid Press of Paris
might do the poEMS unXpurg’d.

I will havva try, when I get the lot. IF that
meats wiff yr/ Kumradly pleasure a nap-
proval.

Mrs A/R/O also expresses pleasure that
you shd/ be in th pyper.

wot I mean IZ thet the mill/ieu
iz favourabl.²⁵

In this open linguistic field, “in any case” becomes “in nanny case,” suggesting the care that Pound is taking over the young E.E. Cummings’ career; the capitalisation of “A” and “M” creates a series of small visible ‘pyramids’ in the middle of their signifier; the capital “X” in the middle of “unXpurg’d” suggests a literal cross-ing out, as well as occupying the space that the initial letter “e” would occupy in a less self-expurgating word. “Milieu” is broken down etymologically in an almost Joycean fashion: a line placed through its middle explores its original meaning in French (“middle”) and its possible etymological composition from a

²⁴ *Pound/Williams*, p. 314.

²⁵ *Pound/Cummings*, p. 52.

word for “middle” (the OED suggests Latin, *medius*) and the French for “place” (*lieu*).²⁶ Perloff would doubtless also focus on the poetic rhythmic patterning of the passage; how Pound’s emphatic typography and abbreviation draws our attention to “m” sounds that proliferate throughout; how the “Pyramid Press of Paris” never existed and that Pound chose to rename the Obelisk Press so as to obtain the added rhythmic emphasis of alliteration. It does not in the final analysis much matter whether the passage quoted is poetry or prose; far more significant is the use Pound makes of his typewriter to organize it verbally.

D.D. Paige did not include this letter in his selection, but his editorial “normalizations” would have removed much of its expressive strategies: we would no longer “encounter the page both as configuration and as discourse.”²⁷ The material significance of a word like “PyRAMid” would be wholly lost if it were returned to its usual form. This sort of visual, physical language suggests a way into Pound’s text shows how Pound actively *wanted* such physicality, for language spoken in the letter’s textual voice to become an instantly comprehensible object: “*res non verba*” in the words of Canto LXXXII (545).²⁸

This is a preoccupation that spreads across his work: in his account of a radio broadcast (“excellent delivery last night. Voice absolutely clear and every word ‘visible’”), and in the critical prose which stresses the textual presence of work he admires, its “manifestly *inscribed*” materiality “THERE ON THE PAGE.”²⁹ The emphasis at the end of the thirtieth Canto on printing presses and means of textual production—“cutters of letters,” “printers,” “a die cutter for Greek fonts and Hebrew” (xxx,

26 For an analysis of the possible connections and differences between Pound’s letters and Joyce’s *Work in Progress*, see M. Perloff, *Dance of the Intellect*, pp. 83–85.

27 Jerome J. McGann, *Towards a Literature of Knowledge* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989), p. 106.

28 All references to *The Cantos* are to the 1996 New Directions edition. References are to the Canto and page number, and will appear in the text.

29 E. Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), first published 1934, p. 185; T.S. Eliot, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960, repr. 1963), p. 208.

148)—indicates the importance of the “madeness” of writing to Pound’s presentation of it. If Pound’s early poems, as Maud Ellmann claims, “sing of singing, write of writing,” then these texts write of having been written.³⁰

In Pound’s conception of it such material weight is inextricable from successful communication.³¹ Indeed, in a letter included by Paige in his selection, which undermines his policy of removing Pound’s contractions to avoid “eye fatigue,” Pound claims that it is his trademark abbreviations that “save eye effort,” and that all the typographical exuberances of his text are designed to facilitate the reader’s task.³² As Suzanne Raitt has demonstrated, a rhetoric of efficient communication was commonplace in the early twentieth century, and indeed formed part of a wider “culture in which efficiency, economy, and the elimination of waste were increasingly heralded as industrial and social ideals.”³³ The image of Pound as a waste-disposal expert ties in to the editorial surgery he performed to Eliot’s drafts of *The Waste Land*,³⁴ to the speeches of American presidents in Cantos xxxi–xli,³⁵ and to historiography itself in the John Adams Cantos, in which he strove to “rid the record of the detritus of prejudice, cliché, and propaganda.”³⁶ It is also a revealing way of reading Pound’s commitment to a Fascist politics (or even, to borrow a phrase from Perloff, a “poethics”): Maud Ellman notes how “Pound

30 Maud Ellman, *The Poetics of Impersonality: T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987), p. 140.

31 For an examination of the claim that ‘material’ language can aid communication, see Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures and Other Reports from My Life with Autism* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), especially the claim that some very impaired autistic children learn more easily if words are spelled out with plastic letters that they can feel (p. 29). The idea of ‘thinking in pictures’ also sheds light on the communicative strategies of Pound’s ideogrammic method.

32 See Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character*, p. 592, and *Letters*, pp. 417–418.

33 Suzanne Raitt, ‘The Rhetoric of Efficiency in Early Modernism,’ *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (2006), 835–851, see p. 835.

34 See Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998), especially p. 71.

35 See David Trotter, *The Making of the Reader* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 83–103.

36 Carroll F. Terrell, ‘John Adams Speaking: Some Reflections on Technique,’ *Paideuma* Vol. 4 (1975) 533–8, see p. 534.

praises princes who forge roads or cut canals to speed the circulation of commodities and news” in Canto xxii; she provides a persuasive analysis of Pound’s mistrust of print as a stagnating medium perverted by Usury (especially in the Hell Cantos, which figure the modern Inferno as a place of both physical and linguistic stasis).³⁷ Pound’s admiration for Mussolini’s muscular ideology might even be seen as the root cause for his frequent use of emphatic capitals and even his preference for the solidus (/) as a form of punctuation in an attempt to violently rupture such petrification: it is hard not to read of Marinetti’s proto-Fascist “love for the straight line and the tunnel” and not think psychoanalytically of a poetic ideology—part-shared by Pound—of strong, phallic modes of expression, from language to punctuation.³⁸

Even if we choose to ignore scholarship supporting such a link, it is difficult to ignore the wide-ranging implications of a comment in a letter from Pound to Sister Bernetta Quinn: “the Ooze was possible because writers did not keep the language clean.”³⁹ Keeping the language clean and as a viable means of communication is a constant concern in Pound’s writing. It appears in his critical work, from ‘A Few Don’ts By An Imagist,’ to the 1946 ‘Cleaners’ Manifesto’ (“the function of poetry is to debunk by lucidity”).⁴⁰ Others with the same desire are praised in the letters: Pound celebrates C.K. Ogden’s Basic English experiment as an “a/tempt to clean up the brit/ muck.”⁴¹ This concern extends to the late Cantos, which regularly preoccupy themselves with the question of communication: “To communicate and then stop, that is the | law of discourse” (LXXX, 514). Pound is so concerned with such communication that he even begins to offer glosses on his own work:

37 Maud Ellman, *The Poetics of Impersonality*, pp. 170, 180–85.

38 F.T. Marinetti, ‘Destruction of Syntax - Imagination Without Strings - Words-in-Freedom 1913’, in Umbro Apollonio (ed.) *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973) pp. 95–106, see p. 97. Equally, an alternative name for the solidus, the ‘shilling mark’, might suggest its use represents Pound’s obsession with money; likewise (as Ellmann claims) his use of the £-sign instead of an ‘x’ for his crossings-out.

39 Quoted in Maud Ellman, *The Poetics of Impersonality*, p. 185.

40 *Strike* 9 (February 1946), p. 2.

41 *Pound/Cummings*, p. 49.

'ah certainly dew lak dawgs,
ah goin' tuh wash you'
(no, not to the author, to the canine unwilling in question)
(LXXIX, 505)

Pound is attempting to attain the sort of “precise definition” that his heroes—Sigismundo, John Adams—“transmitted” (LXXIV, 445). He claims “better gift can no man make to a nation” that the word “made | perfect” (LXXVI, 474).

POUND’S EXPERIMENTS with expressive punctuation and lineation in the letters are inextricable from his aim to “get it across,” and the technique he employed in his epic to achieve this transmission. It was Perloff who coined the phrase “canto structure” to describe Pound’s awareness of a continuity between his texts.⁴² Pound himself refers to his “ideogrammic method” in relation to his Cantos, and I would argue that the ideogrammic method—whose central purpose is to present one independent item after another “until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader’s mind, onto a part that will register”—in fact informs the structure of all of his work.⁴³

Even when unpunctuated, the sense-units or phrases that constitute Pound’s letters are kept discrete. This is effected typographically by the typewriter, and its ability to create consistent multiple margins and spaces between lines. It is a technology that Charles Olson celebrates in *Projective Verse* for making possible the inscription of miniscule intervals of composition and registration:

42 M. Perloff, *Dance of the Intellect*, p. ix. She quotes a letter from Pound to Joyce in which he explains “My one vol of prose is no more a series of [word removed by editor] vols than my cantos are a series of lyrics... the components need the other components in one piece with them.”

43 E. Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), first published 1938, p. 51.

[...] due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends [...] If he suspends a word or syllable at the end of a line [...] he means that time to pass that it takes the eye—that hair of time suspended—to pick up the next line. If he wishes a pause so light it hardly separates the words, yet does not want a comma—which is an interruption of the meaning rather than the sounding of the line—follow him when he uses a symbol the typewriter has ready to hand: “What does not change / is the will to change.”⁴⁴

This is not quite right. Olson’s image of a “hair of time suspended” describes a moment at which the eye passes from one line to another, but then constitutes it as a part of a solely speech-based (or even breath-based) poetic. Similar conflicts famously dog William Carlos Williams’s attempts to put into writing why he uses the triadic “stepped” line in *Paterson*, and might even be said to affect Pound’s own statement that:

Abbreviations save *eye* effort. Also show speed in mind of original character supposed to be uttering or various colourings and degrees of importance or emphasis attributed by the protagonist of the moment.

All typographic disposition, placings of words *on* the page, is intended to facilitate the reader’s intonation. [...] There is *no intentional* obscurity. There is condensation to maximum attainable. It is impossible to make the deep as quickly comprehensible as the shallow.⁴⁵

The problem with all these interpretations is that they do not stress the link between the visual and the intellectual that I believe is at the root of the “ideogrammic method” (which, after all, is rooted in Chinese word-

44 Charles Olson, *Selected Writings*, edited by Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), pp. 15–26.

45 *Letters*, p. 418.

pictures). This can be demonstrated in a reading of Pound's most famous short poem 'In A Station of the Metro':

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.⁴⁶

Even if we ignore the visually striking 1913 *Poetry* version of this poem (in which large spaces between words suggest an affinity between them and faces, petals, or even train carriages), the link between optical apprehension of lineation and punctuation and subsequent intellectual apprehension is vital to reading the poem. There is no way of reading it aloud that vocalises the semicolon at the end of its first line *as a semicolon*. Yet as Randolph Chilton and Carol Gilbertson have argued, to ignore the punctuation and the line-break is to ignore "the poem's strength." In it, Pound collocates and suspends images that are apprehended nearly simultaneously; in an echo of Pound's metaphor of thought "getting off" the dead and desensitized part of the reader's mind and onto a part that will register, it is only the line break and "the mental leap across the semicolon" that prevents a wholly simultaneous apprehension.⁴⁷ It is this leap that allows the reader to apprehend that which Pound labels "the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective;" it is the effort required in such mental jumping that forces the idea to register and mimics this transformation.⁴⁸ Pound, employing a visual metaphor, describes the various "colourings [...] of importance" that his technique allows, but in restricting them conceptually purely to aural "intonation," he does not fully acknowledge the potency of his technique of "condensation to maximum attainable." It is telling that when Pound abbreviates words in the letters, he uses the solidus rather than the full stop (e.g. "cd/" not "cd.") to punctuate them: it serves an important paratactic function in his imagination, implying a closure that does not have the finality of a

46 E. Pound, *Personeae* (London: Faber, 2001), first published 1968, p. 111.

47 Randolph Chilton and Carol Gilbertson, 'Pound's "Metro Hokku": The Evolution of an Image,' *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Summer 1990), 225-236.

48 E. Pound, 'Vorticism,' *Fortnightly Review*, September 1, 1914, 465-467, see p. 467.

period (and which therefore creates a curiously open paratactic relation to subsequent clauses). It is thus the most appropriate form of punctuation with which to mark a simultaneous link and discontinuity between phrases (that are themselves thoughts), as in:

meant the end of a v.m. era / (British Museum era)

‘we’ll get ‘em all back’ / meaning archaic words (LXXX, 526–7)

or, within the letters:

all the pseudo rabbits / Rabbit Brooks, Rabbit Britches /
whotter hell / your own hare or a wig sir ???

When Pound is not using the solidus, he uses line-breaks:

God Damn & buggar the punctuation

The important thing is
for the 1st time
to
emphasize
the articulation
of the thought.⁴⁹

It is no coincidence that a line-break is commonly denoted with a stroke (/); in Pound’s work, both the line break and the solidus allow the reader to see “the articulation of the thought” as it develops—as for example in:

in
discourse
what matters is
to get it across e poi basta.
(LXXIX, 506)

49 D.M. Gordon (ed.), *Ezra Pound and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, p. 145.

This deluge of quotation serves to illustrate how Pound conceived of a large part of communication as in some way ideogrammic. In the same way that 'In A Station of the Metro' can be reduced a series of half-parallels (faces/petals, crowd/bough), so thoughts here are paralleled across punctuation and line breaks; it is the momentary pause that the apprehension of these typographical effects create that encourages a further scrutiny of the words on either side of them. This is clearest in the way in which Pound's attempts to "get it across" are mimed by the reader's progression across lines through the idea of discourse, getting it across, and then stopping (the period after the Italian for "and then stop"). A similar process works on a more imaginative level, too. Thus, above, "rabbits" runs through a play on its phonetic proximity to "Robert" before (after a moment of unspecified exasperation) being linked intellectually to the "hare" with which Pound's mind forms an association.⁵⁰ In all the examples, the words written out as a simple declarative sentence would not differ vastly on a semantic level, but Pound's insistence that the reader make the leaps to comprehension means that the apprehension of meaning is a more active—and therefore more effective—one, imbued with added colourings of emphasis.

IT IS IN THIS WAY that the letters provide a useful insight into the workings of Pound's poetry. The ideogrammic method, with its leaps and ellipses, increasingly comes to dominate his way of thinking and organising thought, and the punctuation and lineation of the letters draws attention to the especially significant fragments that he juxtaposes poetically. The comments of Dr Stevens, one of the psychologists who observed Pound at St Elizabeth's, are relevant here:

At times his speech is fragmentary, although telegraphic in style, resembling the cryptic letters he writes. In fact, his present style of speech and writing is resembles his poems and

⁵⁰ The subsequent pun may possibly be explained by the photographs of Robert Bridges that show a thick head of hair, even in old age.

other artistic production. He is apparently a true Symbolist, who compresses a large volume of words and concepts into a brief expression.⁵¹

Plainly, Dr Stevens does not know his Symbolists from his Imagistes. But his suggestion of a porosity between the boundaries of letters and poems means that, as much as we might read the letters ideogrammically, we might also read the poems as though they were letters. It is thus possible to see more to the recurrence of the three-step line that comes to characterise the later Cantos, especially Canto cxvi. Fred Moramarco focuses on the triadic line that begins it and imagines a motif of “curved motion” (supporting this by drawing curved lines from the middle of one line to the middle of the one below it).⁵² But such spacing has an intellectual as well as mimetic function; Moramarco’s claim that the “bounding surface” of such lines “themselves reflect an energetic, vital movement toward clarity” is problematised by the fact that it is a god, not a “human mind,” whose movement is described. Rather than an exuberant movement towards enlightenment, this Canto provides documentation of Pound’s growing awareness of the situation of his project “to write Paradise” (Notes for cxvii, 822) within a distinctly mortal, uncomprehending milieu. William Merrill Decker notes how “in a crisis even the most traditional epistolarian seeks access to faster modes,”⁵³ and Pound’s preoccupation with “getting it across” becomes the dominant mode of this, the last complete Canto, leading to a reliance on some of the expressive strategies of the letters in an attempt to “make it cohere” (cxvi, 816). The stepped lines mime the intellectual “climbing | before the take-off” into apprehension through the ideogrammic method (cxvi, 816); in reality, though, it is rarely as easy as the step between unspecified “Jules” at the end of one line and Pound’s immediate gloss on the next. Even the long dashes that so perplex at

51 Case notes of Dr Stevens, quoted in Timothy C. Campbell, *Wireless Writing in the Age of Marconi*, p. 126.

52 Fred Moramarco, ‘Concluding an Epic,’ *American Literature*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (November, 1977), 309–326; see p. 310.

53 William Merrill Decker, *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 3–4.

least one reader of this Canto can be seen as a reaching-after the sort of apprehension through punctuation that Pound elsewhere uses to “make it flow thru” (CXVI, 817).⁵⁴

The letters offer a route into Pound’s work that does not demand we subscribe to the idea that they are literary texts: in them, Pound’s ideogrammic mode of linking thought presupposes that it will be the fastest, most efficient way of forging a meaningful connection between two points. As Philip Kuberski notes, Pound’s “method *may* be the shortest path or severest ‘straight-moving,’ but it is also the longest path if the analogy remains unseen.”⁵⁵ Pound’s letters will not help study of *The Cantos* by revealing analogies, packed as they are with compressions of their own. But in their use of expressive punctuation and typography, the letters provide a mode of looking into *The Cantos* that highlights its luminous details and offers alternative readings of them, and Pound’s methods of effecting their apprehension.

Useful as this is, the letters offer more. The attendant heightened (self-)consciousness of the relationship between writer and reader in Pound’s letters, which complicates categorisation of whom Pound is writing/performing *for*, takes the debate beyond the realm of ‘real’ letters and into epistolary fiction (an etymological link also present in Pound’s emphasis on textual fabrication). The endless deferral of fact/fiction and reader/writer that characterises epistolary fiction is seized on by Derrida in *The Post Card*, where he makes the epistolary mode symbolic of the fiction of referential identity. A Derridean reading of the letters—many of which, like Derrida’s *envois*, are unsigned, suggestively exposing questions of ‘signature’—would be a fascinating way of examining some of the elements of the ‘EZpistolary’: Derrida is interested in the materiality of letters; his Poundian interest in the performative aspects of language make his text as much a love letter to *Finnegans Wake* as a collection

54 Walter Baumann, ‘An Examination of Canto 116,’ *Paideuma*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (1983), 199–221, see p. 201.

55 Philip Kuberski, ‘Ego, Scriptor: Pound’s Odyssean Writing,’ *Paideuma*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1985), 31–51, see p. 33.

of anonymous missives; and the “ear-sighted” mode of reading Joycean language games proposed by one critic is only a Poundian reinscription away from the “(n)earsighted” aural/visual mode of close analysis under which the letters expose their expressive strategies.⁵⁶

Studies that position Pound within a postmodern, poststructuralist context do so provisionally, and with a necessary eye on chronology. The provisionality of my title is due partly to this, but mainly to the lack of critical work on the letters. A reading that acknowledges Pound’s playfulness, his awareness of the material text, and his attitude towards utterance and audience in his letters suggests one way in which criticism might recognise the uniqueness of Pound’s “EZpistolary” mode, and further explore its place within his interconnected poetics.

56 See J. Derrida, *The Post Card* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), esp. pp. 21–22, 148, 238. See also Garret Stewart, ‘Lit et Rature: “An Earsighted View”’, *Lit* 1, Nos. 1–2 (December 1989), 1–18.

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