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Source: *Journal of Modern Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 5, From Modernism to Post-Modernism (Jul., 1974), pp. 1085-1103

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3830998>

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# The Experimental Lyric in Modern Poetry: Eliot, Pound, Williams

THE WORLD OF LYRIC, I will suggest, is part feeling and part form. Nothing else counts toward its essence. Character or action, description or intellect hold little interest for it except as they become sources of feeling or occasions of form. The lyric poet shapes an intimate response; he is the egoist of art. But he is incoherent unless he finds the graces of egoism. His world, in theory, may spread as wide as the occasions of all feeling. In fact, he has found formal limits convenient.<sup>1</sup>

One common case of such patterning establishes the lyric poem in its most basic form as that large body of writing which can literally be called "song." This is made up of the whole number of poems, closely joined with music, that reaches from Old English to such a late example, say, as "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds." Song joins feeling and form, with music as the indispensable bond.

Another formal possibility grows up when the verse separates somewhat from song to find formal schemes of its own. This mutation I will call the conventional lyric and mean by that the consider-

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<sup>1</sup>For an account of some varying modern theories of lyric poetry, see J. L. Kinneavy, *A Study of Three Contemporary Theories of Lyric Poetry* (Washington, D. C., 1956). The history of English lyric poetry remains largely belletristic in nature, as it is in Felix E. Schelling, *The English Lyric* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913) or more recently in C. Day-Lewis, *English Lyric Poems 1500-1900* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1961). There are numerous discussions of more particular periods and styles in the English lyric. American lyric, as such, has received only small attention. A recent essay is Elder Olsen's preface to *American Lyric Poems* (Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964). For a brief survey of the theory and history of lyrical poetry and a more complete bibliography, see Alex Preminger, Frank J. Warnke, and O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1965).

able bulk of lyric writing which may or may not be connected with music but which, through a kind of analogy with music, accepts formal limits for itself. Here we find all the familiar lyric types that work themselves out in regular stanzaic or line structure. As is the case with music, we must agree that conventionality of poetic form does not, by itself, create lyric since many poems that would have to be classified differently utilize such forms. Literary history, however, urges that we keep in mind the affinity of lyric for conventional form over long periods of time and so allow at least a quasi-lyrical force to such forms.

The romantic ode, to move ahead sharply, was a free-form poem, one in which the poet took the right to make formal judgments without necessary reference to common practice. And, as lyric progressed across the nineteenth century into the work of such innovators as Hopkins in England or Whitman in America, such freedom became very great. The nineteenth century also carried forward the possibility of long lyrical poems, a hybrid that on the analogy of the sonnet sequence may be called the lyric sequence. The extensive spiritual chronology introduced in *The Prelude* moved on from narrative control toward the time freedom of *Song of Myself* or to a less radical but still pronounced slackening of narrative control in half a dozen Victorian lyric sequences, most notably represented by *In Memoriam*. How can the sense of lyric inherent in these patterns be defined? The answer would seem to have lain in the determining power of the objects of imitation, in a tacitly accepted identification of lyric feeling with a transcendent self. For Tennyson there was the self contemplating its own feelings of mutation, or, for Whitman, the heightening of a static self which reflected the poet and unified the whole nature of his experience.

A third sense had, in fact, been found for lyric poetry. Romantic taste would accept a poem as lyric in nature as its author had been guided by personal and ideal possibilities in the intent and execution of his work; the definition of form lay at his option. Still, in a common nineteenth century parlance, the poet would be referred to as a "singer," however far from our original sense of song he may have strayed. In the lyrics of Clough, Morris, or Hardy, or, during the American nineties, in poets like Moody, Robinson, Crane, Santayana, or Trumbull Stickney, there was a turning from the idealism of the romantic lyric to the doom of the idealistic self, often in something Stickney was to call "the fright of time." Here the com-

mon theme was the failure of transcendence. The romantic lyric cried out for replacement or refurbishing, often explicitly.

Romantic lyric had existed by its voicing the assertion of an essential selfhood over and above all accident, and modern poetry has been troubled by the loss of that voice.<sup>2</sup> It has been overwhelmingly lyric in inclination, but it has been colored by an emotional and formal namelessness in which neither feeling nor form could make itself known. It has, most typically, returned to the rudiments of romantic lyric, to personal discoveries of feeling or form, or to the two in conjunction. It has, I shall argue, been experimental, not to any definable end, but as an inescapable act of its own poetic being. Its mode has been one as truly immersed in and merged with experiment as it has often, if simply for convenience, been said to be.

I want at present to move toward clarification of this modern experimental lyric by arguing a first point only, that of its commitment to a shadow land of feeling as its proper matter. Important additional questions, both of form and feeling, can only be postponed for now.

The lyric, let us say, becomes experimental first of all as it deals with an uncertainty or, better, with a discontinuity of feeling from both an identifiable self and from any clearly defined occasion. It is such discontinuity that I find to be sketched out for themselves in various ways by three innovating experimentalists, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and William Carlos Williams. The list needs extending. I want, in fact, to urge the inclusiveness of experimentalism as a lyric mode in recent decades, but the point can at least be illustrated from these three.

The experimental poet has accepted the impersonality of his own awareness as one to be satisfied by a Crocean commingling of impression and expression in that mysterious third person entity, the "persona," first given notable play by Ezra Pound. As the poet has moved into the lyric sequence, he has complicated and extended such awareness into a broader region. Meanwhile, the relation of present or of past to him has become broken and puzzling, the spectacle of world or of others denies expectation, and the very affections of self for self

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<sup>2</sup>I follow the interpretation of Romantic imagination most notably outlined by C. M. Bowra in *The Romantic Imagination* (Oxford University Press, 1949) and suggest its mutation into such Victorian lyric sequences as those of Tennyson, Rossetti, or Henley.

are often dimmed by contradiction. The feelings aroused by these broken relationships have made of experimental lyric, long or short, a great exploration of poetry itself as the emotional accommodation of the world and its experience. The poet's sense of his art becomes his sense of all feeling and constitutes a primary sphere. I cannot imagine that these feelings are peculiar to modern times alone, or exclusive in them, but they are as indigenous to experimental lyric in recent history as grace of form and transcendence of accident were to lyric in other epochs.

Such a point of relation was made central by T. S. Eliot in his Harvard doctoral dissertation, published under the title, *Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*.<sup>3</sup> Apart from the important chapter on Eliot and Bradley in Hugh Kenner's book and Richard Wollheim's lengthy essay, "Eliot and F. H. Bradley: An Account" (in *Eliot in Perspective: A Symposium*, edited by Graham Martin in 1970), the treatise on Bradley has been rather neglected in the criticism of Eliot's work, perhaps because its professional philosophical intricacy seems to exclude a merely literary interest. In fact, it has peculiar value to the student of Eliot's poetry since nowhere else did that poet's writing attempt so broad a questioning of the thought, imagination, and feeling with which his early poetry and criticism were to be closely concerned. The study was completed in late 1915 or early 1916, well into the development of Eliot's poetry. It is a closely argued and academically orthodox work written in the wake of later nineteenth century English metaphysics and largely concerned with the effort to hold on to a philosophically idealistic commitment by one or two further turns in the screws supplied to that commitment by the English metaphysician. Its essence lay in some refinement of Bradley's dialectical thinking, itself derived from Hegelian logic. A way of describing this is to suggest that any ideal becomes the more real as it is enlarged to include more of its contraries. Such a view I shall find central to my own arguments about the experimental lyric. At the moment, I am concerned with ways in which Eliot's philosophical study lays together ideas essential to his own lyrical world.

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<sup>3</sup>(Farrar, Straus & Giroux, Inc., 1964). The original title was *Experience and the Objects of Knowledge in the Philosophy of F. H. Bradley*. Annotation and some revision has been supplied by Anne C. Bolgan.

The real and the ideal in Eliot's argument may be rephrased in the terms of his title as "experience" and "knowledge." The "real" (a term that along with "ideal" he would accept only with much qualification) relates to experience, and experience, in turn, is primarily the experience of "feeling." To explain this last word, Eliot cites Bradley's definition from *Appearance and Reality*.

'[Feeling] means for me, first, the general condition before distinctions and relations have been developed, and where as yet neither subject nor objects exists. And it means, in the second place, anything which is present at any stage of mental life, in so far as that is only present and simply is. In this latter sense we may expect that everything actual, no matter what, must be felt; but we do not call it feeling except so far as we take it as failing to be more.'<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps to suggest the drift of his own interpretation of Bradley, Eliot draws briefly from William James.

At the beginning then consciousness and its object are one. So far we are in agreement with at least two schools of contemporary philosophy [*n.* And in opposition to Russell and Moore]. We can say with James (*Radical Empiricism*, p. 23) 'The instant field of the present is ... only virtually or potentially either subject or object.' Confining ourselves to this instant field (which we must remember is only an abstraction) we grant that no division can be found between an awareness and that of which it is aware.<sup>5</sup>

At one of its infrequent moments of explicit literary concern, Eliot's book attempts an estimate of the bearing of literature on experience that colors my whole exposition of his work. Art, he suggests, is a provisional reality. In Scott's *Ivanhoe*, which is his example, "The ideal world of the story qualifies reality—in what way, we are ultimately in ignorance—and through this [ideal] world our conception of the character of *Ivanhoe* is attached to reality."<sup>6</sup> Little enough is spelled out here, but enough is presented at least to glimpse the bearing of literary accomplishment on other emotional worlds. Literature serves, as it may become attached to other feeling, to qualify that feeling with its own character. It is such dialectical interplay of experience and knowledge that Eliot builds upon through his whole argument:

The fact that we can think only in terms of things does not compel us to the conclusion that reality consists of things. We have found from the first that the thing is thoroughly relative, that it exists only in a context of

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<sup>4</sup>*Knowledge and Experience*, p. 16.

<sup>5</sup>*Knowledge and Experience*, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup>*Knowledge and Experience*, pp. 37-38.

experience, of experience with which it is continuous. From first to last reality is experience, but experience would not (so far as we know) be possible without attention and the moment of objectivity. We are able to distinguish a growth in clearness of the object, a detachment and independence which it seems to have in greater degree in relation to the higher forms of life: so that we can say, from our point of view, that subject and object emerge from a state of feeling.<sup>7</sup>

There seems little doubt that Eliot's argument, in fact, shapes the world's reality into a condition that can only be lyric in its expression. The poet is no simple subjectivist, however, any more than his poetry is simple subjectivism. The thought, rather, is one that can be adapted to my own suggested sense of form and feeling, but now into the intermodification of the two. In the course of his work, Eliot explains that, in experience, there are no such things as facts given simply.

Facts are not merely found in the world and laid together like bricks, but every fact has in a sense its place prepared for it before it arrives, and without the implication of a system in which it belongs the fact is not a fact at all.<sup>8</sup>

Facts find reality through forms of relation. In a similar reality, feeling is discovered by its own kind of relation.

In really great imaginative work the connections are felt to be bound by as logical necessity as any connections to be found anywhere; the apparent irrelevance is due to the fact that terms are used with more or other than their normal meaning, and to those who do not thoroughly penetrate their significance the relation between the aesthetic expansion and objects expressed is not visible.<sup>9</sup>

In one sense, this is an elaboration of the *Ivanhoe* argument, but something more recondite than the language of that innocent romance must be held in view. I have talked of discontinuous feeling as the special mark of experimental lyric, and this is the effect of the disparity between immediate feeling and relation that Eliot finds in his concept of aesthetic expansion, as such expansion may grow into feeling at the cost of story, thought, action, or other conventional reference in poetry.

It is perhaps epistemology (though I offer this only as a suggestion, and to make clearer the sort of thing that I mean) that has given us the fine arts; for what was at first expression and behaviour may have developed under the complications of self-consciousness, as we became aware of ourselves as reaching aesthetically to the object.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Knowledge and Experience, p. 165.

<sup>8</sup>Knowledge and Experience, p. 60.

<sup>9</sup>Knowledge and Experience, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup>Knowledge and Experience, p. 155.

Hugh Kenner has claimed that we have not yet found out just how to read even *The Waste Land*. I would suggest that this state of affairs results from a persistent misunderstanding of the nature of aesthetic expansion in the poem.

Eliot was a great master in our day of the lyric sequence (his poetry as a whole, in fact, may be said to constitute such a sequence), and the progress of that form into Eliot's use of it may be said to have moved from a shifting but apparent focus of the poetic ego in its poem, the ego of *In Memoriam* for example, to a more Whitman-like shrinking of the ego back into images—a dramatization of feeling in terms of feeling's objects rather than of explicit self. The distinction sounds nebulous, but such a tactic is far from unknown in the history of the lyric. For the renaissance poet, the expression of feeling was commonly the expression of the objects that his order of feeling asserted rather than any clear matter of self expression. This is one consequence of conventional form. Ben Jonson offers a well known example:

Slow, slow, fresh fount, keep time with my salt tears:  
 Yet slower, yet: O faintly gentle springs:  
 List to the heavy part the music bears.  
 Woe weeps out her divisions when she sings,  
 "Droop herbs and flowers  
 Fall grief in showers  
 Our beauties are now ours."  
 O, I could still  
 Like melting snows upon some craggy hill  
 Drop, drop, drop, drop,  
 Since nature's pride is now a withered daffodill."

Jonson's lines can only be lyric expression in themselves, although, set in the context of the masque for which he wrote them, *Cynthia's Revels*, they are related to the waters of self-love by which the nymph, Echo, sings her dirge for Narcissus while she warns all away from the fatal depths. They find sufficiency, however, in an immediate way by the force of their own poetic objects and form.

The various parts of *The Waste Land* may seem quite a different matter, but I doubt that they are. We cannot escape their most apparent aspect, in any case, the interchange of feeling and object in forms which, in Eliot's poem, have to be absorbed inductively. The "argument" of the poem, whatever that may be, is not of much

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"C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, eds. *Ben Jonson*, IV (Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 50.



greater help in this matter than a consideration of the whole argument of Jonson's play is to the lyrical intensity of his song. Both are reduced to secondary importance by the poet's lyric work in bringing feeling to expression. Jonson provides an ample and developed argument along with a little lyric while Eliot offers ample and developed lyric with a rather hidden argument.

But Eliot is an experimentalist and Jonson is not. Jonson, so far as feeling goes, is all conventionalized grief. Eliot in *The Waste Land* scarcely knows his own feelings nor can he clearly relate them. Form in Jonson is a rich manipulation of conventional line and stanza possibility within a presumably elaborate musical mode. In Eliot, form is something he finally decided upon with the advice of Ezra Pound, and it seems to have had a good deal more to do with speech than with song. Jonson's feeling embalms Narcissus in a kind of mortuary, even Narcissistic, opulence. Eliot's merely agitates itself and is led to crowd an ending in a spirit of panic at the death of ego rather than to seek resolution. But Eliot's reader can immediately feel that agitation is as much to Eliot's work as opulence is to Jonson's. *The Waste Land* as a whole is only little more bound to an objective world by poetic right than is Jonson's song bound to his strictures against Elizabeth's court. *The Waste Land* is far less explicitly historical or dramatic or even mythopoeic than is *Cynthia's Revels*, though some decades have been largely spent in reading the poem as though it should be pushed in some of these directions. The interpretation of the poem I oppose, or at least wish to qualify sharply, is the widely disseminated view that *The Waste Land* is best read as a complaint against the "mythlessness" of contemporary culture and that culture's consequent imaginative and emotional sterility.<sup>12</sup> I do not wish to deny Eliot's obvious and explicit linking of the poem to the grail legend and its treatment in Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance*, but I would suggest that the connection between literature and myth is as far from sufficient to account for *The Waste Land* as a poem as it is from so accounting for Miss Weston's own study. Within Eliot's work the objects of feeling survive without positive continuation beyond themselves. They become songs or speeches from an unwritten play of which the poet, and none other, is the Hamletic author and protagonist.

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<sup>12</sup>A recent and convenient summary of this position will be found in Walter Sutton, "'Maunderley,' *The Waste Land*, and the Problem of Unified Form," *Contemporary Literature*, IX (#1 1968), 15-35.

The whole of Eliot's *Knowledge and Experience* had argued in effect for the relativity of the world as a phenomenon of feeling, and one way of paraphrasing that claim is to assert the nature of lyric. Not subjectivity, in Eliot's own distinction (since there is no opposing objectivity), but, in the lively experimental poem, ceaseless transfer of object and feeling occupied with itself. The poet of such lyric has to experiment to find out what will facilitate this interchange. His predecessor might have a clearer view of formal relations or a clearer sense of feeling. His own accomplishment would be associated with some sense of the bracketing of both by his present poetic instance.

If there were water  
And no rock  
If there were rock  
And also water  
And water  
A spring  
A pool among the rock  
If there were the sound of water only  
Not the cicada  
And the dry grass singing  
But sound of water over rock  
Where the hermit thrush sings in the pine trees  
Drip drop drip drop drop drop drop  
But there is no water.<sup>13</sup>

Jonson's melting snows, and Echo's song, had dropped melodiously and formally through an argument directed against the fountain of self-love. Eliot's longing for water, though it connotes vast drought, has no other aesthetic reference. The feeling of both, however, grows from their own objects of want and need. Though the structures of formal relations differ markedly, both poets explore a mood.

There is much in this view that can give helpful direction to the cloudy but weighty concepts that often characterized Eliot's early criticism. His idea of tradition, I would suggest, was such a lyrical idea, one more obviously related to his own sense of form and feeling, that which dominated his poetry, than to any clear-cut idea of either past or present. In the same essay where he talked most famously about tradition, he also talked about two even less well defined entities, feeling and emotion, that led to what has been called his theory of impersonal poetry.

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<sup>13</sup>*The Waste Land*, II, 345-359.

The effect of a work of art upon the person who enjoys it is an experience different from any experience not of art. It may be formed out of one emotion, or may be a combination of several: and various feelings, inherent for the most part in particular words or phrases or images may be added to compose the final result.<sup>14</sup>

After a few lines, he concludes:

The business of the poet is not to find new emotions but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all.<sup>15</sup>

However impersonal such a poetry might be, it remained lyrical as surely as Jonson's lines because it could only be satisfied with feelings resolved, for the moment, into a form constituted by its objects. We can recognize the strange sounding severance of "feeling" from "emotion" as parallel to Eliot's argument in *Knowledge and Experience* and as a cause of discontinuity. Emotion is the stuff of poetry as broad experience is the stuff of all possible sentience, and feeling is the poet's awareness of emotion as it opens itself to expressible form. Feeling may or may not cohere with its emotion or with other causes, depending on the objects into which it dialectically resolves itself. It may be the occasion for a poetry to be defined within the limits of feeling and its objects alone. Such "sensibility," as Eliot came more frequently to call feeling, figures as poetic limit in his earlier thought because it was a limit of experience itself. Romantic efforts at forcing thought or emotion to transcend sensibility, and become ideal, would result, of course, in "dissociation."

The web is no doubt a tangled one. I have argued, however, in what I hope will be a consistent direction. In Eliot's poetry we are faced with a lyric obsession that approaches solipsism ("The Hollow Men," among other texts, very nearly achieves it), but Eliot would wish to avoid solipsism as, he argued, his idealistic logic would avoid it in the case of knowledge. Most briefly, feeling ceases to be wholly immediate; it gathers, so to speak, around objects firm enough to be apprehended somewhat in their own right. The images of the poem maintain an attention to themselves within the web of feeling. In brief, some sort of "objective correlative" is achieved. The wide or often careless use of this formula in modern critical discourse is a valuable testimony to our common awareness of an experimental form otherwise impossible. As the renaissance

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<sup>14</sup>"Tradition and the Individual Talent," *Selected Essays* (Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup>*Selected Essays*, p. 10

lyricist rose above solipsistic feeling through adherence to common poetic convention, or the romantic through the transcendence of feeling into the larger wholes of possible, common ideals, the experimentalist had to compel feeling by the images and the shape of his poem and so force some degree of association. He would achieve a here and now objectivity capable, literally, of bringing feeling to terms, but only to its own terms. Though the recent unrevised text of *The Waste Land* demands consideration of a number of critical questions touching the poem, none of them seems clearer than the degree to which Eliot's original work rooted itself in the intimate detail of his life in 1920 and 1921 (and to some degree in earlier periods) and the equal degree to which his and Pound's alterations eliminated much of the more direct subjectivity of the poem in favor of their joint feeling for a no more than cryptic self-expression.

There is a good deal of this direction of thinking in the dispersed and variegated critical writing of Ezra Pound: by no means a perfect consonance with Eliot—with sometimes sharply opposed views—but still a rooted idea of “poetry” in general as being the power of discontinuous feeling exerting a strong push toward its own formal expression. Time prevents extended discussion of the matter, but a gesture in its direction may be made by reference to Pound's 1919 comment on Guido Cavalcanti. Pound's subject was the relation of Tuscan lyric to English, and he was of a mind both to praise and to fault English renaissance practice in such comparison. The praise is for what he took to be an essence of all lyric, the entity he called *melopoeia*, to emphasize the importance of music, or more generally of musicality, to the total lyric effect. The fault, however, was for the frequent English failure to achieve more than *melopoeia*. Lyric, Pound thought, should find its primary being in sound; it should possess what he called “cantabile.” But lyric is not only such singability. It must get beyond that attainment which, alone, would limit lyric possibility. In Swinburne, Pound noted, “The word-selecting, word-castigating faculty was nearly absent.”

As Pound saw it, the greatness of the Italian lyric was to extend language up to the intimation and distinction of feeling in what Thomas H. Jackson has recently called “the poetic moment”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Chapter 1, *The Early Poetry of Ezra Pound* (Harvard University Press, 1968).

wherein the poem finds itself in a particularizing of its emotional ambience. As for Pound:

... by taking these Italian sonnets, which are not metrically the equivalent of the English sonnet; by sacrificing, or losing, or simply not feeling and understanding their cogency, their sobriety; and by seeking simply that far from quickly or so easily-as-it-looks attainable thing, the perfect melody, careless of exactitude of ideas, or careless as to which profound and fundamental idea you, at that moment, utter, perhaps in precise enough phrases; by cutting away the apparently non-functioning phrases (whose appearance deceives), you find yourself in the English *seicento* song books.

Death has become melodious, sorrow is as serious as the nightingales, tombstones are shelves for the reception of rose leaves. And there is, quite often, a Mozartian perfection of melody, a wisdom, almost perhaps an ultimate wisdom, deplorably lacking in guts. My phrase is, shall we say, vulgar.<sup>17</sup>

However vulgar, Pound's phrase was a useful one. He might have appended to it, as a more seemly paraphrase of "guts," his definition of Vorticist poetry. "In a poem of this sort one is trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective."<sup>18</sup> He preferred to speak of Eliot's "intelligence" rather than his "intellect" because "There is no intelligence without emotion."<sup>19</sup>

On one occasion Pound gave especially valuable testimony to his sense of emotion in poetry, and of a direction for its employment that would dissociate it from any necessary thematic or personal relation, by declaring the root of the art to be "emotional value," a phrase that, like so much in Eliot, would equate the poem with the relation of feeling to its own discovery and expression.

Poetry is the statement of overwhelming emotional values; all the rest is an affair of cuisine, of art.

*On n'émeut que par la clarté.* Stendhal is right in that clause. He was right in his argument for prose, but Poetry also aims at giving a feeling precisely evaluated.

As does Eliot, Pound makes feeling the reality of lyric, the poetic absolute.

Good art is expression of emotional values which do not give way to the intellect. Bad art is merely an assertion of the emotion which intellect, common sense, knocks into a cocked hat.

Finally, he moves from such an experimentalist rooting of poetry in

<sup>17</sup>"Cavalcanti," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, T. S. Eliot, ed. (New Directions, 1968), p. 197.

<sup>18</sup>"Vorticism," *Gaudier-Brzeska 1916* (New Directions, 1960), p. 103.

<sup>19</sup>"T. S. Eliot," *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 420.

emotion which is made sufficient to itself to the more familiar line of argument suggested by his redefinition of "the better tradition."

The better tradition of English:

'Seafarer,' lines in the 'Wanderer,' parts of Layaman [sic], Chaucer, Gavin Douglas, Golding, Marlowe (translations as well as original work), William Shakespeare (as certain other critics have noted), Ballads and Elizabethan songs (rigorously selected), Wyatt, Donne, Waller, Herrick, later a few catches of Dorset and Rochester, Crabbe, Landon (selected and sifted).<sup>20</sup>

Pound's own lyric writing, as reflected in *The Cantos*, was only occasionally to approach the refinement and luminosity of feeling he admired in the Tuscans. His most frequent failure, like Eliot's or like any experimentalist's, was emotional solipsism. Nevertheless, *The Cantos* have a poetic life, and I suggest that that life is in the shifting range of their lyric sequence. Architectonically, they approach that interesting non-form distinguished by Northrop Frye as the "anatomy," identified by him elsewhere in English writing in Burton, Swift, Peacock, and Sterne, and as finding classical precedent in Petronius or Apuleius. The anatomy is a mode, as these names imply, that leans heavily on the writer's ability to command vagary. This suggests a likeness to lyric sequence. Frye links the anatomy, or Menippean satire, chiefly with narrative. Otherwise his description suits *The Cantos* admirably.

The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior.<sup>21</sup>

And later:

At its most concentrated the Menippean satire presents us with a vision of the world in terms of a single intellectual pattern. The intellectual structure built up from the story makes for violent dislocation in the customary logic of narrative, though the appearance of carelessness that results reflects only the carelessness of the reader or his tendency to judge by a novel-centered conception of fiction.<sup>22</sup>

If, in place of narrative, we put the untiring and wide-weaving voice of *The Cantos*, we have the containing element of Pound's lyricism. Once again, form is composed of the interchange of object and feeling in the poet's awareness and is called ideogram. We are

<sup>20</sup>"Breviora," *The Little Review*, V (#6 1918), 23.

<sup>21</sup>*The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 309.

<sup>22</sup>*Anatomy of Criticism*, p. 309.

pushed constantly, not toward impossible literary absolutes shaped up out of presumed symbol or mythopoesis, but toward the kaleidoscope of response such interchange demands. We do, indeed, grow tired. But until that moment comes, we are kept interested in sorting out the complexity aroused in our own feelings.

What, in the sensibility of this journeying, Odyssean lyricist, is to be felt in his encounters with order, disorder, succession, and innovation in history or even about great poets with potentially comic accents? About romantically lyric lines full of farcical possibilities? Experience presses and feeling struggles to keep up. I select one of the less resonant passages from Canto LXXX to stress as clearly as possible the encounter with feelings upon which, even so, it depends. Pound thinks first about Mussolini and then about Yeats.

the problem after any revolution is what to do with  
your gunmen  
as old Billyum found out in Oireland  
in the Senate, Bedad! or before then  
Your gunmen thread on moi dreams  
O woman shapely as a swan  
Your gunmen tread on my dreams  
Whoi didn't he (Padraic Colum)  
Keep on writing poetry at that voltage?  
"Whenever you get hold of one of their banknotes  
(i.e., an Ulster note) burrrn it"  
said one of the senators  
planning the conquest of Ulster  
This he said in the Oirish senate  
showing a fine grasp of . . .  
of possibly nothing  
If a man don't occasionally sit in a senate  
how can he pierce the darrk mind of a  
senator?<sup>23</sup>

The feeling of this passage, it may be, is something nearer that of a vaudeville song than the more subtle if also more ponderous range we associate with Eliot, but it is no less the power that shapes the reader's response, that stands in front of and interprets all else in the lyric. The points where *The Cantos* are least satisfactory, I would suggest, will often be those where the feeling is least clearly evoked, where the bones of argument or allusion stick through in a disordered jumble. Like any experimentalist, Pound searches feeling as he goes along, calling up the objects of his poetry to speak thus on its behalf. But the

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<sup>23</sup>"The Pisan Cantos," *The Cantos* (1-95) (New Directions, 1956), p. 74.

flat detail of memory or of history, even in the poet's highly personal sense of it, can too easily overcome any lyric possibility:

Said Herr Krupp (1842); guns are a merchandise  
 I approach them from the industrial end  
 I approach them from the technical side,  
 1847 orders from Paris and Egypt ...  
     orders from the Crimea  
 Order of Pietro il Grande,  
     and a command in the Legion of Honour ...  
 500 to St. Petersburg and 300 to Napoleon Barbiche from Creusot<sup>24</sup>

The drift of Pound's anti-usury argument is clear enough here, and he does make a pun. But, without developing itself very satisfactorily, it is the argument that moves to the forefront only to break the web of feeling that the poem at its best depends on.

*The Cantos*, in the other direction, have their lyric set-pieces, but this is to say that some parts of the poem seem more conventionally or romantically lyrical than others. Artemis' complaint against pity in XXX, the translation of Cavalcanti's "Donna me prega" in XXXVI, the "Tudor is gone and every rose" in LXXX, or "Pull down thy vanity" in LXXXI are not sudden breaks in an otherwise alien texture. The experimentalist method of object-feeling relation is constant. Consequently, as we move toward the end of the sequence, in Canto XCIII, we need not think we are being fobbed off with a sentimental rush of feeling. The objects in this section are as personally selected as those in the passage we have just seen and more nearly approach a total lyric breadth, as Pound would have it, of melody, image, and feeling.

Ysolt, Ydonne,  
                     have compassion  
 Picarda,  
                     compassion  
 By the wing'd head  
     by the cadeuceus  
                     compassion  
 The black panther lies under his rose-tree  
 J'ai eu pitié des autres  
     Pas assez! Pas assez!  
 For me nothing. But that the child  
     Walk in peace in her basilica,  
 The light there almost solid.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>24</sup>"Eleven New Cantos," *The Cantos*, p. 41.

<sup>25</sup>"Section: Rock-Drill 85-95 de los Cantares," *The Cantos*, p. 88.



Here the feeling is pitched high, but it retains its distinctive character by raising up its objects in a configuration created by their own assemblage (using litany in part, the very rhetoric of assemblage) and expressive of a release discontinuous from any reference other than those objects. The whole is a kind of hymn to the shaping matter out of which the experimental lyricist, as Ezra Pound, must effect his response.

For one more case, commonly presumed to be different from Pound and antagonistic to Eliot, I turn to William Carlos Williams' *Paterson*. Let the differences be as manifest as they will, a deeply rooted common quality remains. *Paterson*, too, mines uncertainty of feeling as the very ground, the potential, of its poetry. Like *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, it addresses a nominal subject only to turn away from its subject to involve itself with the open, discontinuous feelings to which the subject of *Paterson* has given rise. In their sharply pointed conflicts of opinion, Pound and Williams often returned to this very point, and Williams epitomized his sense of the difference in two lines of the poem:

- P. Your interest is in the bloody loam but what  
I'm after is the finished product.
- I. Leadership passes into empire; empire begets in-  
solence; insolence brings ruin.<sup>26</sup>

This may well be an accurate expression of two differing temperaments, but it is hopelessly misleading as a description of any substantial poetic difference. Pound can be "after the finished product" only in some sense wholly Poundian, as *The Cantos* may be felt to be finished only within the limits of their avowed incompleteness or their author's openly expressed doubts about their central method. Williams' interest is indeed the bloody loam, even as the loam of history is Pound's interest or the loam of emotional intensity was Eliot's. It was Williams' "opacity" that Pound most admired in him. The three poets are all equally in the business of filling out the basic poetic questions of the times: how to feel, how to say? The idealistic and emotional agnosticism of Eliot's *Knowledge and Experience* remains applicable for Williams as it was for Pound despite the total lack of interest that one must imagine either of them expressing in it. Eliot's poetic of discontinuous feeling is rooted in a

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<sup>26</sup>*Paterson* (New Directions), p. 50.

theory peculiar to himself but epitomizes a poetry whose method of assemblage and association he shares with an epoch.

The lyric become feeling experimenting with its objects is the common property. Williams' statement of the point occurs frequently in *Paterson* as the poem immerses itself in a search for "language," most often in forms that must be particularly explained by reference to the equality of the poetic, the truly poetic, with the unfinished and discontinuous. The basic terms are identical with those in *Knowledge and Experience*.

Clearly, they say. Oh, clearly! Clearly?  
What more clear than that of all things  
nothing is so unclear, between man and  
his writing, as to which is the man and  
which the thing and of them both which  
is the more to be valued.<sup>27</sup>

The figure of the dance, which dots Williams' poetry from *Kora in Hell* of 1917 to *Paterson* V of 1958 remains his most durable image for the experimental and the expressive as a kind of essence for his art. The point hardly needs laboring; the poet's own writing is too filled with it. Whether needfully or not, Williams could see less of community between Eliot and himself than of difference, but it would be a failure of critical detachment to imagine that the difference was as decisive as Williams liked to argue, or that what is loosely thought of as "later Modernism" in poetry has somehow moved away from experimental lyric as the latter has sought its own expression.

Williams' elusive sense of the "beautiful thing" in Book III is an excellent example. Far from the simplistic emphasis often given it, one epitomized by Walter Scott Peterson as he makes the whole poem over into a knock-down battle between good primitives and bad Puritans, the "beautiful thing" is a state of feeling sought in a wide range of objects. It is, for example, the spirit that can breathe pentecostal fire into the otherwise dead and mute historical records of the library where the poet searches sources for his poem:

a shriek of fire with  
the upwind, whirling the room away—to reveal  
the awesome sight of a tin roof (1880)  
entire, half a block long, lifted like a  
skirt, held by the fire—to rise at last

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<sup>27</sup>*Paterson*, p. 149.



It was indeed to be the central fact of some decades of poetry. “*La vertue est toute dans l’effort*” Williams was to declare, remembering a gift ash tray a friend had left for him and applying its legend to his own work.<sup>29</sup> For Pound, the matter could be put pompously, as when he likened his aims to those of Remy de Gourmont: “one wants merely to show that one has himself made certain dissociations; as here, between the aesthetic receptivity of tactile and magnetic values of the perception of beauty in these relationships, and the conception of love, passion, emotion as an intellectual instigation.”<sup>30</sup> Or it could be suggested more deftly in his likening himself to Henry James at imaginative work:

We also made ghostly visits, and the stair  
That knew us, found us again on the turn of it,  
Knocking at empty rooms, seeking for buried beauty;  
And the sun-tanned, gracious and well-formed fingers  
Lift no latch of bent bronze, no Empire handle  
Twists for the knocker’s fall; no voice to answer.<sup>31</sup>

And Eliot, from the late vantage afforded by *East Coker*, found trial and experiment to be the root of his own experience with poetry.

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost  
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions  
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.  
For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.<sup>32</sup>

Such feeling for poetic expression was affective and experimental, its own entity, for which the critical neologisms abounding in the prose of all three men was a necessary complement. And the experimental lyric, like any other, has caught only those feelings that were sympathetic to it. They have been numerous in the emotional unreadiness of our times and have given it an answering voice. The experimental lyric has remained the play of object and feeling across each other for the pleasure and enlightenment of any who could value the poet’s trials as reflections of an emotional disjunction between experience and response felt to be the truth of what he had to say: “I’m not sure what to feel.” The poetic itself would be to grope in the dark of emotion’s hopeful or downcast incertitude.

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<sup>29</sup>Paterson, p. 221.

<sup>30</sup>“Remy de Gourmont,” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, p. 343.

<sup>31</sup>“A draft of XXX Cantos,” *The Cantos*, p. 24.

<sup>32</sup>*The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1952), p. 128.