

'The Builder's Whim': Pound, Ethics, and the Whimsical Poet

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'The Builder's Whim': Pound, Ethics, and the Whimsical Poet

Abstract: This article considers whimsy as an ethical defence for poetry, focusing on the work of the Ezra Pound. It outlines the New Critical justifications for Pound receiving the Bollingen Prize in 1948, and considers two versions of the whimsical defence with reference to Emerson and Hume. The first section notes how early poems and their reception work through the implications of these defences, with reference to time-wasting and literary production. It goes on to consider the relationship between whimsy and waste more widely in modernist literature, and notes how the notion of will is often linked to violence. It concludes by close-reading the beginning and ending of The Cantos, suggesting how the 'builder's whim' at the centre of the poem can help us rethink the relationship between form and ethics.

Ezra Pound's reputation 'enjoys a state of considerable volatility'¹ notes Mark Byron in the introduction to *The New Ezra Pound Studies* (2019), making a supposed luxury of its unevenness: the recent *Ezra Pound and the Career of Modern Criticism* (2018) asks us to 'misread him in new ways'.² His legacy is unsettled and unsettling. Those who knew him found it no easier to fix their account: Lyndsey Stonebridge's compelling description of H.D.'s *End to Torment*, the poet's 1958 memoir of Pound, notes it cannot find the 'right word' to summon him and his work into being: it must delay, defer, and hedge.³ 'Visits to St Elizabeth's', Elizabeth Bishop's famously reluctant commission on Pound in the asylum, is happier to list and point at a series of nominal relations ('This is the man who')⁴ than describe the prompt for the visits: its world of 'books gone flat' has an anonymous centre. Daniel Swift notes 'it is not possible to be a casual reader of the *Cantos*',⁵ and yet Pound's poetry often professes to be singularly uncommitted ('How do I know?')⁶, shrugs an early villanelle): the gap between Pound's incarceration, the views and broadcasts that precipitated it, and the rag-bag openness of his work yawns wide. Pound makes possible much of modern poetry, yet his legacy makes discussion of him seemingly impossible.

¹ Mark Byron, 'Editor's Introduction', *The New Ezra Pound Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.3.

² Michael Coyle and Roxana Preda, *Ezra Pound and the Career of Modern Criticism* (London: Boydell & Brewer, 2018), p.211.

³ Lyndsey Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1998), p.108.

⁴ Elizabeth Bishop, 'Visits to St. Elizabeth's', *Complete Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1984), p.133.

⁵ Daniel Swift, *The Bughouse: The Poetry, Politics, and Madness of Ezra Pound* (Vintage: London, 2017), p.241.

⁶ Ezra Pound, 'Villanelle: The Psychological Hour', *Poems and Translations* (New York: Library of America, 2003), p.308.

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5 The difficulty of accounting for Pound leads critics and readers to bizarre, sometimes
6 startling positions: the New Critics called on to defend their award of the Bollingen Prize to
7 Pound in 1948 found themselves in an extreme, but perhaps instructive, predicament. Allen
8 Tate, one of the ten judges who voted for him, offered a particularly distinct justification for
9 his choice. Rather than suggesting that Pound's literary brilliance overrode his political
10 views, Tate argued his literary failings undermined them. As Pound was 'incapable of
11 sustained thought in either prose or verse', his 'acute verbal sensibility' was 'at the mercy of
12 random flights of "angelic insight", Icarian self-indulgences of prejudice which are not
13 checked by a total view to which they could be subordinated'.⁷ According to Tate, Pound's
14 anti-Semitism and fascist broadcasts need not be taken seriously because his work - at least
15 formally - was incoherent. In an impossible balancing act, Pound must be worthy of the
16 prize, but not worthy of our contempt. A writer without consistency can be without fixed
17 position: by substituting a 'view' for a 'sensibility', they are always vulnerable to the
18 random, the contradictory, the whimsical. This can read as ex post-facto justification from a
19 poet-critic who finds his apparently objective stance under scrutiny: certainly US legal
20 scholars had noted the treason law didn't not always distinguish between 'the sort of
21 language which may be used without risk of legal punishment and that other sort which
22 may bring one into the shadow of the gallows'.⁸ As a literary commendation, rather than an
23 expedient, it is subject to the same charges modern readers might level of New Criticism
24 itself: it uses the appearance of strict and impartial judgement to dodge moral or ethical
25 questions. Far from being anomalous, Tate's invocation of the writer as beset by 'random'
26 thoughts and ideas has a long cultural history: Timothy Clark notes 'romantic myths',
27 'strange scenes of empowerment' or 'peculiar agencies'⁹ are a recurrent feature of writer's
28 creativity. Yet Tate's insistence on a poet's whimsical work as a high-stakes defence for their
29 ethical position is more unusual. What might be the weight of such a claim, and what does
30 it tell us about the literary culture that produced it? This article will explore the implications
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55 ⁷ Allen Tate, 'Ezra Pound and the Bollingen Prize', *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press,
56 1968), p.510.

57 ⁸ Hayes McKinney, 'Treason Under the Constitution of the United States', *Virginia Law Register*, 3:11,
58 March 1918, p.801.

59 ⁹ Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity* (Manchester:
60 Manchester University Press, 1997), p.9.

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3 of what I call the whimsical defence, both through a reading of Pound's work, and via
4 reference to his modernist contemporaries. I will consider two readings of the whimsical
5 defence, and trace the implications of it through Pound's early poetry, with particular
6 reference to time-wasting and literary production. I will go on to consider the relationship
7 between whimsy and waste more widely in modernist literature, noting how the notion of
8 will is often linked to violence. I will conclude by close-reading the opening of *The Cantos*,
9 suggesting how the builder's whim at the centre of the poem can help us rethink the
10 relationship between form and ethics.
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20 What is a whimsical defence, and how might it relate to other forms of literary excuse? If, as
21 Daniel Albright has argued, modernism tests the limits of 'aesthetic construction'¹⁰ and
22 cultural value, Pound's poetry tests the boundaries of ethical excuses. When literature
23 offends against taste, a writer's best defence is normally the category of literature itself. It is
24 an exceptionalist term which allows the accused to draw on any number of arguments: the
25 possibility of variant readings; the subtle imbrications of tonal shifts; the need to be read *in*
26 *toto*. So it is that scurrilous excerpts submitted to the court in the Lady Chatterley trial make
27 no impression on the jury: a literary work demands to be read in context, and in full.¹¹ The
28 *Ulysses* trial in the US gets into similar difficulties by offering up particular episodes for
29 castigation.¹² A work as polyvocal and dialogic as Joyce's still calls for unity. Even, when, as
30 Rachel Potter has noted, a work sets out to 'violate literary prohibitions',¹³ as in Henry
31 Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, the whole can justify the part. Yet Pound's receipt of the inaugural
32 Bollingen Prize in Poetry was not against taste, but ethics: an anti-Semite broadcasting
33 Fascist propaganda on an Italian radio station was being honoured with a prestigious
34 national award. As Gregory Barnhisel has shown, this was precisely the point: the award
35 was part of a wider strategy by his publisher, New Directions, to rescue Pound's tarnished
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52 ¹⁰ Daniel Albright, *Putting Modernism Together: Literature, Music, and Painting, 1872-1927* (Baltimore:
53 John Hopkins University, 2015), p.5.

54 ¹¹ For a full transcript of the trial, see *The Trial of Lady Chatterley: Regina v. Penguin Book Ltd.* (London:
55 Penguin, 1990) ed. C.H. Rolph.

56 ¹² See the ruling for *United States v. One Book Called "Ulysses"*, 5 F. Supp. 182 – Dist. Court, SD New
57 York (1933), which states the book must be judged in its 'entirety', p.185.

58 ¹³ Rachel Potter, *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment 1900-1940* (Oxford: Oxford
59 University Press, 2013), p.141.
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3 image in the US.¹⁴ The press release announcing the news drew on a familiar aesthetic
4 defence: the committee had made their decision through an 'objective perception of value',
5 and could not admit 'other considerations',¹⁵ such as a writer's political affiliation. Yet in this
6 case, the literary defence would not hold. This was perhaps not surprising, given that four
7 years earlier a national paper had felt able to ask on the front cover of its Christmas issue
8 'Should Ezra Pound be shot?', and Arthur Miller had felt able to answer in the affirmative.¹⁶
9 Tate's case for exoneration echoed that of his lawyer Julien Cornell, who declared Pound not
10 insane enough to be incarcerated in a mental institution, but too infirm to stand trial.¹⁷ The
11 abhorrence of Pound's ideas is tempered by his inability to cogently express them. His work
12 offers only 'anomaly'. The absurdity of his political leanings convinces no-one, and much
13 more contentious, for Tate is the 'formal irresponsibility'¹⁸ of his *Cantos*, their failure to
14 cohere. Pound is apparently too uneven a creator to be sinister. This suggests the whimsical
15 defence runs exactly counter to the literary one: the irregular whole is messy enough to
16 excuse the offensive part. Yet by attempting not to pay a legal price, the whimsical defence
17 must pay an artistic one: in 1993, Vincent Sherry could wonder whether time would
18 'pardon' Pound and Lewis for 'writing well';¹⁹ literary history suggests a greater likelihood
19 that he might be pardoned for writing whimsically. If the category of the literary affords
20 poets one kind of immunity, might whimsy offer yet another and - if so - what might be its
21 terms of address?

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39 My reason for fixing on this term is not accidental. Whimsy is a word with suitably spurious
40 origins, but with particularly resonant contexts for Pound and his reception, as this article
41 will reveal. The *OED* suggests it can be traced back to 'whim-wham' from 1529, meaning 'a
42 fanciful object or trinket', yet its first recorded use by Ben Jonson in the seventeenth century,
43 to mean 'vertigo, or dizziness' made it closer to a humour, an internal bodily substance with
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51 ¹⁴ Gregory Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound* (Boston:
52 University of Massachusetts, 2005).

53 ¹⁵ Library of Congress Release no. 542, 20 Feb. 1949, as printed in Barnhisel (2005), p.120.

54 ¹⁶ *New Masses*, December 25, 1945, cover page.

55 ¹⁷ See Julien Cornell, *The Trial of Ezra Pound: A Documented Account of the Treason Case by the*
56 *Defendant's Lawyer* (London: Faber, 1967), p.54.

57 ¹⁸ Allen Tate, *Essays of Four Decades*, p.511.

58 ¹⁹ Vincent Sherry, *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University
59 Press, 1993), p.7
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3 deleterious effects. This confusion about where whimsy resides make it both external and
4 internal. Its location shifts, just as the poets' work shifts with it: what constitutes a 'fanciful'
5 and unwelcome addition to a work of literature might also prove subjective. In tandem, the
6 blame for what they do or do not write might shift back and forth. To be whimsical is both
7 to be caught by something and to embody it. Are poets in the world or not? These
8 contradictions appealed to Pound. If modernity was characterised, as Alan Marshall puts it,
9 by 'the disintegration of the subjective into the fragmentary intersubjective',²⁰ then a word
10 which could move between the two was valuable. Pound offers the word, like its definition,
11 as his act of slippery artistic differentiation in the 1922 manifesto, 'The Serious Artist':

20 From medicine we learn that man thrives best when duly washed, aired and sunned.
21 From the arts we learn that man is whimsical, that one man differs from another.
22 That men differ among themselves as leaves upon a tree differ. That they do not
23 resemble each other as buttons cut by machine.²¹

24 Pound, like the New Critics that would come to his defence, raises literature to the scientific
25 by making it instrumental, while offering it as a distinct form of knowledge. Yet its utility is
26 double-edged: it is there to teach us that we are various, and to be suspicious of social,
27 ethical, or legal structures that would call us uniform. His use of the word 'whimsical' seems
28 to raise its eyebrows at the serious artistic endeavour of the essay's title: presumably the
29 artist must follow the rest of humankind in being various, not consistent, even once they
30 prove themselves serious. Does literature teach us the lesson that man is whimsical by
31 hauling in a suitably broad catch of human character for us to observe, or by being the
32 product of a whimsical mind? Like the etymology of the word itself, which hovers between
33 locating it as an internal or external force, we are caught between a vision of the world
34 offering diverse, but singular outlooks (our whimsical human condition), or a variety and
35 inconsistency contained within one form (the whimsical workings of one mind).

36 It is the first meaning which plays out most strongly in Pound's essay: while science must
37 work on the basis we are rational, art reminds us otherwise. This version of the whimsical

38 ²⁰ Alan Marshall, *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University
39 Press, 2009), p.88.

40 ²¹ Ezra Pound, 'The Serious Artist', *Literary Essays, Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and
41 Faber, 1954), p.41.

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3 defence comes not from the particular expedient given to the artist, but the wider condition
4 of human existence. David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* offered one
5 of the earliest accounts of this position, albeit regretfully. He laments 'the whimsical
6 condition of mankind, who must act and reason and believe; though they are not able, by
7 their most diligent enquiry, to satisfy themselves concerning the foundation of these
8 operations, or to remove the objections, which may be raised against them'.²² For Hume,
9 whimsy is the gap between our expectation that we are rational agents, and the evidence
10 which often points us to the contrary. In this version of the defence, the artist has no more
11 recourse to its latitude than anyone else, but a clear brief: their purpose is to remind us of the
12 capricious, wayward, and complex state of the world.

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23 A more often rehearsed defence is found in Emerson's 1847 essay 'Self-Reliance', which
24 makes the most famous use of whimsy as defence in American letters. It is this version
25 which Allan Tate calls upon in his defence - the artist as intuitive, spontaneous, exceptional.
26 Emerson suggests that poets must write '*Whim*' on the lintels of their door-posts when
27 'genius' calls them, seeking a temporary absence from domestic or social expectations.²³
28 Here the poet abnegates social responsibility rather than admits to contradiction, but the
29 grounds for doing so are expedient. Emerson's 'whim' is designed to lower expectations, an
30 excuse in lieu of an excuse. Whim is a hurried public alibi which allows the social self to go
31 missing in action, keeping watch while it turns inward for inspiration: every creative
32 endeavour begins with the whimsical mind, and poetry is what it eventually struggles to
33 differentiate itself from. Elsewhere, Emerson notes the true poet has 'nothing whimsical or
34 fantastic in his production', making a clear distinction between how the poet thinks (which
35 might sometimes be whimsical) and what the poet produces (which should never be).
36 Emerson's essay sets the precedent for Allen Tate's excuse: he is making a special claim for
37 the writer to be freed of social responsibility, whether or not the success of their literary
38 endeavour justifies the liberation. To act on a whim is to abandon, however temporarily, the
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56 ²² David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* ed. Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford
57 University Press, 2008), p.117.

58 ²³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Self-Reliance', *Essays and Lectures* ed. Joel Porte (New York: Public Library
59 of America, 1983), p.262.
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social contract: only poets are afforded this opportunity. This offers them a state of exception, but is less clear on what their civic or social role might be.

These two ways of framing the whimsical defence - while they may afford a comparable leniency to the accused – have distinct implications for the role and responsibility of the artist. In the Humean model, the importance of the artist's work and its contribution to the collective understanding of us as whimsical beings mitigates against any dubious ethical position. They have purpose, but less leeway. In the Emersonian version, it is instead the special status of the artist in society which forgives and absolves. They have freedom, but an unclear function. In the Humean model, the writer is more likely to be held to account for the poems they have written or what they have said; in Emerson's model, it could just as well be for their silence, or their inability to intervene. The first section of the essay will work through the implications of both models with reference to Pound's reception and poetics, before we go on to consider their wider implications in modernist writing.

I. Idle Songs

Pound's early reception was qualified, but set a pattern for Tate's whimsical get-out-clause: it was specious but, apparently, not without precedent. *Personae* (1909) is met with a degree of bafflement. A review in the *Evening Standard* finds itself attracted by lines which are 'almost, but not quite nonsense';²⁴ Rupert Brooke suggests 'a little quiet reasoning is all [Pound] needs'.²⁵ By the time of *Lustra* (1916), Louis Untermeyer is frustrated by Pound's desire to 'exhibit every triviality'.²⁶ These early reviews draw on a longer history of critics frustrated by errant-but-brilliant poets: far from separating their poems from their politics, this particular genre often aligns their formal failings with moral ones. Hazlitt once despaired that William Cobbett's conscience was 'at the mercy of the first provocation he receives, of the first whim he takes in his head [...] his whole system of thinking is deranged by the first object that strikes his fancy or sours his temper.'²⁷ The poet's propensity to attend

²⁴ *Evening Standard and St. James' Gazette* 21 April, 1909, p.5; quoted in *Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. Betsy Erkkila (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.7.

²⁵ Rupert Brooke, *Cambridge Review* 31, 2 December 1909, pp.167; qtd. in *The Contemporary Reviews*, p.14.

²⁶ Louis Untermeyer, 'China, Provence, and Points Adjacent', *Dial* 63, 20 December 1917, 634.

²⁷ William Hazlitt, 'Character of Cobbett', *Selected Writings of William Hazlitt* ed. Duncan Wu (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), vol.6, p.50.

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3 to all things, meeting each with a sharp and discriminate eye, can make for a maddeningly
4 uneven world view.
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7 Pound was routinely mocked in reviews for indulgent poems which struck critics as
8 obscure, overlong, and indulgent: Robert Browning became a totem for a reason. Yet just as
9 often, Pound's early reviews identify the skittish everywhere of his poems only to celebrate
10 them. An extended review of *Lustra* in the *New York Times* declares, with some affection, that
11 Pound's poetic soul is 'restless, wind-blown, future-haunted'. The review quotes his envoi
12 'Commission', where he bids his verse travel to every corner of society, before noting that he
13 'whimsically protests' against his own poetry in 'Further Instructions':
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21 You are very idle, my songs;
22 I fear you will come to a bad end.
23 You stand about the streets. You loiter at the corners and bus-stops.
24 You do next to nothing at all.
25 You do not even express our inner nobility.
26 You will come to a very bad end.²⁸
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34 The reviewer suggests that 'however lightly Mr. Pound may seem to take himself and his
35 profession as a poet',²⁹ the persona is an artful one. The review calls his poetic protest
36 'whimsical' to mean it is fanciful, not to be trusted, affected. Pound half-follows Whitman,
37 bidding his poetry to fare out across the nation, and half-figures it as an adolescent
38 threatened with corruption. It is a strain of whimsy that later extends to John Berryman,
39 Elizabeth Bishop, and John Ashbery; the poetic speaker diminishes their own verse in
40 colloquial defence. The poem's idleness will have consequences that are either dangerous ('a
41 bad end') or dilatory. The closer the poem gets to its own completion, the higher the stakes
42 seem to be, and the threatened demise becomes graver still ('a very bad end'). Yet by
43 identifying poetic song as a loiterer rather than a troubadour, Pound ensures his early verse
44 is more likely to stand charged of inaction or cowardice than conviction. To invoke Emerson,
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58 ²⁸ Ezra Pound, 'Further Instructions', *Lustra* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1918), p.24.

59 ²⁹ 'Ezra Pound: Poet of the State of Idaho', *New York Times Book Review*, 67, 21 July 1918, 326; quoted in
60 *Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews*, p.87.

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3 it 'may be no better than whim at last'. Its tendency to irritate early reviewers also had a
4 habit of endearing them.
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7 This thread of criticism seemingly runs unbroken throughout Pound's career, from the
8 *Canzoni* to the later cantos. The following two reviews, separated by nearly 40 years, show a
9 telling continuity:
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14 . We shut up the book as we might turn away from a shelf of bizarre but not very
15 valuable curios in an old window [...] Mr. Pound decks up and cumpers his Pegasus
16 to such an extent with this jingling and antique saddlery that it is only very rarely we
17 can see the steed for its harness.³⁰
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22 Pound rambles on, without plan or design, about a series of dreary subjects – the bad
23 influence of bankers, gossip, seldom interesting, about men of letters and artists,
24 stray bits of reading, conversations in American all too like actual conversations with
25 Americans, semi-symbolical figures of hostesses and tourists and rich men, who are
26 interesting neither as human beings nor as symbols, and of course political
27 comments of a 'blimpish' kind with a smack of Wall Street. Pound has a great deal to
28 say, but he arranges it into no pattern, assuming perhaps that the stream of his
29 consciousness is some golden stream.³¹
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37 The early unsigned review of the *Canzoni* furnishes Tate with the critical metaphor he used
38 to defend him: Pound's Icarian hubris takes him to places both unplanned and unloved. The
39 curios of his poetry are without value, and his political judgements are similarly
40 unimportant. The second, by Maurice Bowra, charges him with indifference. Pound's formal
41 failure ensures there can be no means of organising his thoughts into a coherent pattern. Yet
42 the two reviews disagree about whether Pound has a great deal to say or nothing at all, and
43 suggest a divide in his own poetry. The early, lyric work, often offers a series of artist
44 personas, and asks us to accept the Emersonian defence: the poet has a unique status which
45 legitimates their pauses, uncertainties, and equivocations. The later *Cantos*, following the
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59 ³⁰ Unsigned Review of 'Canzoni', *Westminster Gazette*, 19 August 1911, 12.

60 ³¹ C.M. Bowra, 'More Cantos from Ezra Pound', *New Statesman and Nation*, 3 September 1949, 250.

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3 Humean model, challenge us to forego formal judgement of a work: it must be capacious
4 enough to show us the whimsical condition of mankind.
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7 Randal Jarrell, writing on Pound in a survey of American poetry from 1910-1960, noted the
8 attraction for all poets of 'an art-form that will permit' them to 'put all my life, all my
9 thoughts and feelings about the universe, directly into a work of art'.³² Yet in making the
10 form so baggy, would the poem cease to be work of art? The tension between Pound having
11 a great deal to say and saying nothing at all rests on the question of form, a word which, as
12 Angela Leighton notes, has a 'frivolous history', but may yet be where we look for 'ethical
13 purpose or meaning'.³³ The critical reception of Pound as both idle and prone to hubris
14 comes not from a disagreement about how much he produces, but how rigidly it can be
15 woven into coherence. Is the poetry a sign of the poet's fidelity to the chaos they see around
16 them (Hume) or an inattention to form (Emerson)?
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19 In fact, Pound's work is often animated by shifting his reader between these two models.
20 Dante's *Vita Nuova*, the source for Pound's Imagist credo 'words follow things'³⁴ – offered
21 Pound an archetype for a poetry which might try to contain diverse opinions in a rigid form.
22 Dante describes a love that prompted so many conflicting feelings his sonnet had to contain
23 contradictions. The ensuing poem, 'All My Thoughts' captures 'the battle of the conflicting
24 thoughts' (Tutti li miei penser parlan d'Amore; / e hanno in lor sì gran varietate), with love's
25 diverse impulses impossible to gather together in one poem (*Vita Nuova*, XIII 8-9).³⁵ The
26 threat of formal disruption or contradiction is held in check in by form and voice: the
27 'varietate' is balanced by the coherent 'I', confessing its confusion to us. Form mitigates
28 against the chaotic external charge of the subject, while the lyric 'I' permits the poet to hover
29 within and outside their own forms. Pound tries a similar formula for 'Donna me prega', his
30 translation from Guido Calvacanti. He plays on this tension between the love which
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51 ³² Randall Jarrell, 'Five Poets', *Yale Review* 46, Autumn 1956, p.106; qtd. in *The Contemporary Reviews*,
52 p.362.

53 ³³ Angela Leighton, *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism, and the Legacy of a Word* (Oxford: Oxford University
54 Press, 2007), p.22.

55 ³⁴ Trans. 'words follow things', from Dante's *Vita Nuova*, 13.4. For a fuller discussion of how the
56 phrase shaped Dante's understanding of etymology and language, see Albert Russell Ascoli, *Dante
57 and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p.118.

58 ³⁵ See Dante Alighieri, *Dante's 'Vita Nuova': A Translation and an Essay* (Bloomington: Indiana
59 University Press, 1973) trans. Mark Musa, p.22-23.
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3 prompts such a frenzy of thoughts, and its fixedness, with Dante's sonnet in his mind: 'Love
4 doth not move, but draweth all to him; / Nor doth he turn/ for a whim'.³⁶ Yet when Pound
5 returns to the translation for Canto XXXVI, he omits the quoted passage, replacing it with a
6 section showing the moment when the love's 'will / From overplus / Twisteth out of natural
7 measure';³⁷ as the remainder of the canto makes clear, the impossibility of understanding
8 love is transformed in Pound's poem into the difficulty of understanding the writer. We
9 move from an art capturing the confusions of our whimsical existence to an ethical
10 justification for the whims of the poet. Pound garlands the final lines of the poem with a list
11 of renegade thinkers 'not understood' in their own time. What begins as Dante's formal
12 apology for an impulse too mixed to be consistent becomes, in Pound, a fury at being
13 misunderstood.

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24 The 1912 sonnet from *Canzoni* turns in the other direction. It appears to be a poetic
25 exposition of the Emersonian defence, where the writer refuses to apologise for having taken
26 leave of absence from their civic or familial duties, despite having no work of genius to
27 show for it:

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32 If on the tally-board of wasted days
33 They daily write me for proud idleness,
34 Let high Hell summons me, and I confess,
35 No overt act the preferred charge allays.

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42 Yet the speakers' indignation and protest of innocence soon infect the lyric contract with the
43 reader:

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45 To-day I thought – what boots it what I thought?
46 Poppies and gold! Why should I blurt it out?³⁸

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51 The defensive writer is no longer using the lyric 'I' for fear of recrimination, and replaces it
52 with a rage to identify their accuser: 'Who calls me idle?'. Tellingly, John Berryman finds the

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57 ³⁶ Ezra Pound, 'Donna me prega', *Personae: Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 2001),
58 p.257

59 ³⁷ Ezra Pound, 'Canto XXXVI', *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), p.67.

60 ³⁸ Ezra Pound, 'Sonnet', *Poems and Translations* (New York: Library of America, 2003), p.132.

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3 poem at its most acute when it is at its most defensive – he identifies ‘Who calls me idle?’ as
4
5 ‘one of the few good lines of *Canzoni*’, and vital for understanding Pound’s primary
6
7 achievement: making ‘the life of the modern poet’³⁹ and their ‘indecision-decision’⁴⁰ the
8
9 primary subject of poetry. The poem attempts to sketch a longer poetic history for this
10
11 subject: ‘what boots it’ summons the vocational crisis of Milton’s *Lycidas*: ‘Alas! what boots
12
13 it with incessant care / To tend the homely, slighted shepherd’s trade, / And strictly
14
15 meditate the thankless Muse?’⁴¹ How much care is the writer permitted to take over a song
16
17 that is not heard? While the poem takes as its starting point the Emersonian defence of the
18
19 writer, it is animated by the anxiety that the defence may not hold. The chaotic and
20
21 conflicting expectation of the whimsical world are its catalyst.

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23
24 By 1915, Pound’s poems were no longer exploring the dangers of submitting to the artist’s
25
26 whim, with its attendant risk of chalking up days of failure and waste. Instead, his subject
27
28 becomes the way the creative imagination might be imperilled by over-determination:
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31
32 . I had over-prepared the event,
33
34 that much was ominous.
35
36 With middle-ageing care
37
38 I had laid out just the right books.
39
40 I had almost turned down the pages.⁴²

41
42 ‘Villanelle: the Psychological Hour’ is, as many of its critics have noted, is not a villanelle;
43
44 why it is titled as one remains a puzzle.⁴³ To choose a villanelle form for a poem of action
45
46 might be both ‘obvious’ (to sniff out the word haunting the second line) and ‘ominous’: too
47
48 much of it is settled before composition. As Peter Robinson notes in a bravura reading of the
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53 ³⁹ John Berryman, ‘The Poetry of Ezra Pound’, *Freedom of the Poet* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p.56.

54 ⁴⁰ John Berryman, ‘The Poetry of Ezra Pound’, p.56.

55 ⁴¹ John Milton, ‘Lycidas’, *Complete Shorter Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), ed. John Carey,
56 p.247.

57 ⁴² Ezra Pound, ‘Villanelle: The Psychological Hour’, *Poems and Translations* (New York: Library of
58 America, 2003), p.308

59 ⁴³ See, for example, K.K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound’s Personae: 1926* (Oakland: University of
60 California, 1969), p.242.

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3 poem, the speaker's 'care' suggests both loving attention and caution: the poem marks the
4 point where 'creative engagement may decline into fussy perfectionism'.⁴⁴ Yet this
5 perfectionism does not extend to the form of the poem itself: the 'middle-ageing care' hopes
6 that the poetic gifts of the past might repeat themselves, but the poem stubbornly refuses the
7 repetitions that the form demands. By being too vigilant, the poet finds nothing appears and
8 nothing happens.

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16 Pound notes that villanelles achieve their 'emotional intensity' through a strange double
17 movement: 'the refrains are an emotional fact, which the intellect, in the various gyrations of
18 the poem, tries in vain and in vain to escape'.⁴⁵ Pound's poem does the impossible in
19 escaping the fact of the villanelle, but in loosing itself from the conditions of incarceration, it
20 cannot make a success of freedom. The poem is built like a failed resurrection: its tripartite
21 structure begins with a meeting not kept and a poem unwritten, as the speaker watches
22 'from the window, / the rain, the wandering busses'. The second section is haunted by the
23 imagined words of his friends, mindful that 'they promised again'. The third day brings no
24 renewal of hope, and only the promise of further abandonment. The poem's predicament
25 inverts the earlier sonnet. Rather than forego the whimsical world for the promise of the
26 poet's privacy, it looks to the outside, only left to wonder whether the 'event' its speakers
27 planned for was action, or mere diversion: "But they promised again: / 'To-morrow at tea-
28 time.'" The two whimsical defences of the poet, one atoning for their behaviour in the
29 world, and the other for their absence from it, are not just expedient justifications made in
30 extraordinary circumstances: their ethical back-and-forth create a significant context for
31 reading Pound's form, composition, and action. Yet modernist understandings of art and
32 political conceptions of the will in the period were changing the shape and import of these
33 defences even as Pound worked within them, making the possibility of moving between the
34 two more challenging. In the following section, I will suggest how these contexts complicate
35 the two models, before returning to Pound consider their influence on the formal and ethical
36 challenges of his work.

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58 ⁴⁴ Peter Robinson, *Twentieth-Century Poetry: Selves and Situations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
59 2005), p.24.

60 ⁴⁵ Ezra Pound, 'Lionel Johnson', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p.369.

II. Modernist Wills

The very bad ends imagined in Pound's first collections are prefigured and echoed throughout the period: its apocalyptic tenor welcomes extreme and idiosyncratic thinking. Yet it is also the time of bad means. As Nietzsche writes in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), a godless civilisation in its final phase has as its 'supreme deities' the unholy trinity of 'wit, whim, caprice'.⁴⁶ Whim is suddenly an accusation and warning rather than a set of excuses, as it might have been for Emerson and Hume: we destroy systems but can only put individual inconsistency in its place. This is a charge which echoes through much writing on twentieth-century politics, whether it is George Dangerfield attributing *The Strange Death of Liberal England* in 1912 to the 'Spirit of Whimsy' which 'played, airy, remote and irresponsible' throughout the Commons,⁴⁷ to A. James Gregor's reading of Mussolini's inconstancy as 'his perennial search for "theoretical" legitimacy for what was little more than whimsy'.⁴⁸ The relationship between these two accounts is suggestive: liberalism is killed off accidentally through lack of purpose, unable to explain its sudden crisis in legitimacy, while fascism is a despotic will-to-power that finds ever-more fantastic justifications for its supreme authority. Hume's political nightmare is one where 'every whimsy is consecrated';⁴⁹ European politics in the twentieth century seems to show the terrifying results of his vision.

The role of art in these shifts – or its absence of its role – is often part of the critique. Diagnosing the failures of the German political establishment during the First World War, the philosopher Carl Schmitt attacks Romanticism for leaving politics to 'the shifting whimsy of subjective bourgeois occasionalism'.⁵⁰ These contexts reshape the apparently low-

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, eds. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.55.

⁴⁷ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* [1935] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p.69.

⁴⁸ A. James Gregor, *Italian Fascism and Developmental Dictatorship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p.266.

⁴⁹ David Hume, 'Of Superstition and Enthusiasm', *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects: Moral, Political, and Literary: Part I* (London: A. Millar, 1760), p.127.

⁵⁰ Claudio Minca and Rory Rowan, *On Schmitt and Space* (London: Routledge, 2016), p.13.

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3 stakes Emersonian whimsical defence. The artist's failure to intervene is no longer just
4 domestic or social, but political. In *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought*
5 (2009), Alan Marshall notes Pound's frustration at modernism's political impotence, its
6 'inability to bring about and sustain the conditions for action'. What was the force of its
7 innovation if it didn't create change? Yet he identifies Pound's own failure to distinguish
8 'the category of action, the category of politics, from the two deceptively contiguous
9 categories of violence and art'⁵¹ as part of the problem, too. The work of modernism made
10 them hard to untangle.

11
12 Political interventions by Pound's contemporaries are either judged as the ineffective
13 intervention of an artist, or unethical for their implied violence. Stephen Spender dismisses
14 T.S. Eliot's political views in *The Criterion* as 'inconsistent and sometimes whimsical'; Ian
15 Hamilton summarises the same as 'fairly sinister'.⁵² Their two views seem less contradictory
16 than mindful of different responsibilities. Whimsy, for modernism and its critics, is not only
17 something incidental or unnecessary to the work of art, but now something unethical or
18 irregular. Because the majority of modernist writing (and writing about modernism)
19 announces the importance of the artist and their work, its uneasiness about what the artist
20 might have thought needs a way to distance itself from action which might or might not
21 have happened. Part of the difficulty comes in aligning experiment with either a desire to
22 align or alienate, to change or dismiss.

23
24 Wyndham Lewis lampoons Schopenhauer's notion that the world is the representation of a
25 single Will, of which the individual will is a phenomena. Following Schopenhauer's model,
26 he notes, the collective will 'produces Charlie Chaplin, the League of Nations, wireless,
27 feminism, Rockefeller [...]'.⁵³ Lewis wonders how something with effects so diverse can be
28 claimed as a singular power, deeming it 'nonsensical'. His arbitrary list looks to the vagaries
29 of Western capitalism for its objects, tellingly separating the single Will from anything more
30 violent than the skyscraper. Yet Lewis' parodic collection of apparently disparate

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⁵¹ Alan Marshall, *American Experimental Poetry and Democratic Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.88.

⁵² See Stephen Spender, *T.S. Eliot* (New York: Viking 1976), p.236, and Ian Hamilton, *The Little Magazines: A Study of Six Editors* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1976), p.73.

⁵³ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927), p.312.

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3 contemporary phenomena is not far from the eccentric catalogue of items assembled for
4 demolition in the *Blast* manifesto 13 years earlier: hairdressers, curates, The Pope, aperitifs. If
5 the artist can stake their claim to whimsical creation, why not the collective? F.M. Marinetti's
6 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' (1910) imagines a literature made from 'nouns
7 scattered at random', where writers are encouraged to use the infinitive because 'they adapt
8 themselves elastically to nouns and don't subordinate themselves to the writer's *I* that
9 observes or imagines'.⁵⁴ Yet if no 'I' need be responsible for creation, no-one need take
10 responsibility for destruction.

11
12 Competing aesthetic visions of modernism also tug at the artist's licence to come back with
13 no more than 'mere whim'. One strand of modernism carries a distaste for excess material,
14 or what T.E. Hulme calls 'disgust with the trivial and accidental characteristics of living
15 shapes'; in its place comes 'the searching after an austerity'⁵⁵. Here, art turns away from
16 depicting our whimsical condition to attain focus: the direct treatment of the thing. Yet the
17 disciplining of language into pure form and the elevation of the artist to god ultimately
18 leads to the elaborate, singular and idiosyncratic structures created by modernist writers:
19 their schemas, epic precedents, stylistic parallels, elegiac corridors. In their sharp
20 particularity, these can prompt accusations of eccentricity, too. Lévi-Strauss complained that
21 avant-garde art uses forms which 'have no prior existence on a different level with their own
22 systematic organization': as they cannot be 'elementary forms' they can only ever be
23 'creations of whim, fictitious units, which are put together in parodic combinations.'⁵⁶ These
24 works, highly organised and yet also pastiches of organisation, elevate personal experiment
25 to a behemoth. Even if an artist turns to an established form or structure, their choice is
26 always personal and arbitrary: Lewis notes that *Ulysses* is 'whimsically [...] founded on the
27 framework of classical antiquity – about which its author is very romantic indeed'.⁵⁷

28
29 In a literary moment defined by idiosyncratic system, the eye is drawn to the material
30 suddenly eligible for inclusion. In *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Joyce describes the lodgings of the
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⁵⁴ F.M. Marinetti, 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature' (1910).

⁵⁵ T.E. Hulme, 'A Tory Philosophy' (1912), *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art* [1924], ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge, 1965), p.47.

⁵⁶ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, 1. Tr. J.D. Weightman (London: Cape, 1970), p.21.

⁵⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and the Western Man* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1927), p.115.

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3 semi-autobiographical writer Shem. He lives in a lair full of oddments, excrement, and
4 detritus, accumulating all the inevitable 'wit's waste' of an author. All around him are 'burst
5 loveletters, telltale stories, stickback snaps, doubtful eggshells, bouchers, flints, borers,
6 puffers, amygdaloid almonds, rindless raisins, alphybettyformed verbage [...]'.⁵⁸ The phrase
7 'wit's waste' invokes a historical understanding of whimsy that goes back to the eighteenth
8 century, or what John Dennis called the 'unworthy' objects in *The Grounds of Criticism in*
9 *Poetry* (1704);⁵⁹ the things called up by creation which the artist finds they do not need.
10 Joyce takes pleasure in the superabundance of this writing inventory, but it's also a
11 grotesque, half-designed to repel us. This line of modernist writing creates much of its work
12 from its waste material: anything that doesn't wash up in T.S. Eliot's muddy Thames might
13 tiptoe its way into *The Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939).

14
15
16 Whimsy as cover for violence and the individual will runs haunts many accounts of
17 twentieth-century political writing, and also means it is used less as a term of dismissal than
18 a deterrent. Its collocation with a vocabulary of violence (usually to mask attendant
19 suffering) is a consistent tactic, found, for example, in the Objectivist philosophies of Ayn
20 Rand. Her unshakable belief in the rational will and the rejection of altruism afford her
21 conviction that some 'are ethically entitled to pursue whims (or any atrocities) they desire to
22 pursue' while others are 'ethically obliged to spend their lives in the service of that gang's
23 desires'.⁶⁰ The glossing of 'atrocities' as an alternative to whim, suggests the word's modern
24 shift from the harmless to the horrific. In the face of these shifts, as Douglas Mao notes,
25 defences of art often retreat to 'a defense of art as the mere exercise of a capacity otherwise
26 without purpose'.⁶¹ At the same time, whimsy redoubles its power as a literary charge, as
27 in Laurence Durrell's attack on every 'whim-wham' and 'bagatelle' in Eliot and Joyce's
28 work.⁶² The political, ethical, and formal associations of Tate's whimsical defence, as this
29 context shows, cannot be contained in the aesthetic sphere. The artist stands charged with
30 having too much effect on the world around them, or too little. The political implications of

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⁵⁸ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 2012), p.183.

⁵⁹ John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry*, (London: Lintott, 1704), p.38.

⁶⁰ Ayn Rand, 'The Objectivist Ethics' (1961), *The Virtue of Selfishness* (New York: Signet, 1961), p.33.

⁶¹ Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: 1998, Princeton University Press) p.133.

⁶² Laurence Durrell, letter to Henry Miller, August 1935, quoted in Rachel Potter, *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment 1900-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.138

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3 their work have too great or too rare contact with the public sphere. It is in this thicker
4 context that the Tate's invocation of the whimsical defence can be read. The changed stakes
5 are captured in Yeats' exhausted and exasperated gloss on *The Cantos*, the poem where 'Ezra
6 Pound has made flux his theme'.⁶³ Who could take such a risk?
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10 11 12 13 **III. The Builder's Whim** 14

15
16 Pound's *Cantos*, like the self-defeating forms he explored in *Lustra*, is equal parts
17 renunciation and braggadocio. Its double movement sweeps together the poets, like Yeats,
18 who remain uncomprehending from the outset, with the postwar generation who gradually
19 become agnostic. By the time of the Henry Adams' cantos, LII-LXXI, even Randall Jarrell
20 had abandoned his faith. Having seen Pound as 'one constant thing in this fleeing world', he
21 now finds 'prejudice, whim, idiosyncrasy, have been hypostatized into a universal
22 imperative' and 'these cantos are almost unreadable'.⁶⁴ Jarrell's charge implies that the
23 fleeting, Icarian prejudice that Tate identifies in earlier cantos has hardened into orthodoxy
24 by the 1950s. It also suggests a work where rather than play off the tension between the
25 Emersonian and Humean defences, Pound has decided to make his personal whim the
26 centre of a system. When whim becomes synonymous with prejudice, a personal
27 idiosyncrasy becomes - through force of habit - a way of understanding the world.
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41 As if modifying his collapse of the Emersonian and Humean models of the poet, Pound
42 admits to Ginsberg there is 'a lot of double-talk [...] stupidity and ignorance all the way
43 through' the *Cantos*.⁶⁵ His retrospective account is as scathing on the form as the content,
44 calling it 'a botch' where he 'picked out this and that thing that interested me, and then
45 jumbled them into a bag'.⁶⁶ The bag - a more portable and shapeless version of Dante's
46 capacious sonnet - can carry anything, but is a vessel that hold neither personal nor poetic
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53 ⁶³ W.B. Yeats, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse 1892-1935* (Oxford: Clarendon Press,
54 1936), pp.xxiii.

55 ⁶⁴ Randall Jarrell, 'Poets: Old, New and Aging', *New Republic*, 103, 9 December 1940, 798-800;
56 reprinted in *The Contemporary Reviews*, p.268

57 ⁶⁵ Allen Ginsberg, *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness* (New York: McGraw, 1975).
58 p.26.

59 ⁶⁶ Daniel Cory, 'Ezra Pound: A Memoir', *Encounter* 30, no. 5 (May 1968), 38.
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3 precedent. The impossibility of calling the poem one way or the other is, in part, not just its
4 conflation of disparate histories, but its journey through history. Its composition, from 1915
5 to 1966, takes in a political and personal story that might furnish enough material for a
6 longer epic: two wars, incarceration, treason. Yet the poem's inception is closely connected
7 with the constrained forms Pound was working with in *Lustra*; in the same year Pound
8 writes the villanelle, he is drafting the three cantos which will set the epic in motion. In
9 December 1915, Pound mentions to his father the 'big long endless poem that I am now
10 struggling with' which 'starts off with a barrel full of allusions to "Sordello"'.⁶⁷ The
11 bottomless rag-bag of Pound's poem is, apparently, already over-stuffed: from the outset,
12 the barrel overflows:

23 Hang it all, there can be but the one 'Sordello,'
24 But say I want to, say I take your whole bag of tricks,
25 Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing's an art-form,
26 Your 'Sordello,' and that the 'modern world'
27 Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in;
28 Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery
29 As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the marginal cobbles?
30 I stand before the booth (the speech), but the truth
31 Is inside this discourse: this booth is full of the marrow of wisdom.
32 Give up the intaglio method?
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34 Tower by tower,
35 Red-brown the rounded bases, and the plan
36 Follows the builder's whim;⁶⁸

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50 The poem that initiates the *Cantos* begins by giving up – 'Hang it all' – and then introduces a
51 model, Browning's own doomed epic, which cannot serve as a model – 'there can be but the
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57 ⁶⁷ Ezra Pound to Homer Pound, 18 December 1915, *Ezra Pound to His Parents: Letters 1895-1929* eds.
58 Mary de Rachewiltz and A. David Moody, p.361.

59 ⁶⁸ Ezra Pound, 'Three Cantos of a Poem of Some Length', *Poems and Translations* (New York: Library
60 of America, 2003), p.319.

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3 one "Sordello". This 'decision-indecision', the making and unmaking, continues in the
4 conditional mood of the first sentence. Its first stated desire is subjunctive ('say I want to'),
5 shuffling between a tribute, and act of deference, and a light-fingered looting ('say I take
6 your whole bag of tricks'). It is pitched half-way between the obsequious and the
7 threatening: the 'bag' metaphor shifts throughout the opening lines, so that 'form' becomes
8 both a gatekeeper ('Let in your quirks and tweeks') and an empty vessel ('say that I dump
9 my catch'). The 'rag-bag' is also less careless than it appears; as George Bornstein notes, it is
10 taken from Robert Browning's poem 'Aristophanes' Apology', where the Greek poet ribs
11 Euripides for his whimsical verse: 'why trifle with toys and skits / When he could stuff four
12 ragbags sausage-wise / With sophistry, with bookish odds and ends, / Sokrates, meteors,
13 moonshine [...]'.⁶⁹ The allusion seems to suggest the grand ambition of poem which will
14 look to Humean variety over Emersonian idiosyncrasy.

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27 This contradiction of form is heightened by the speaker's relation to their own utterance,
28 what Vincent Sherry has called the 'inadvertent but primary irony'⁷⁰ of the poem. Pound is
29 not the voice of his poem - he stands at a distance from 'the speech'- yet he resides nowhere
30 else. The only alternative to following Browning's *Sordello* – the 'intaglio method' of
31 engraving his poem onto a pre-existing form – is to make it up as he goes, to follow the
32 'builder's whim'. By aligning 'whim' with 'plan', the poem becomes a formal gamble, a
33 study in immediacy. Yet the whim Pound puts at the centre of his poem is not a way of
34 abandoning literary precedent. His understanding of this notion combines Dante's *directio*
35 *voluntatis* (the direction of the will towards good) with Confucius' notion of the will, 'root
36 volition branching out, the ethical weight [...] present in every phrase'.⁷¹ The ethical strength
37 of *The Cantos* comes not from the fixity of form, but the weight of its whim, the flip and flop
38 of its 'fresh sardines' on the 'marginal cobbles'. This is the same conviction that led Pound to
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56 ⁶⁹ George Bornstein, 'Pound's Parleyings with Robert Browning', *Ezra Pound Among the Poets*
57 (London: University of Chicago, 1985), p.121.

58 ⁷⁰ Vincent Sherry, *The Great War and the Language of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
59 2003), p.123

60 ⁷¹ Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (London: Faber and Faber, 1938), p.279.

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3 state the only effective weapon against the Second World War was 'WILL'.⁷² The violent
4 power of destruction is aligned with the often accidental process of creation.
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9 Throughout his work, Pound explores whether the relationship between the intuitive and
10 the overdetermined is as distant as it might appear; the ethical questions of form are not to
11 be answered by degrees of rigidity. Yet one his most substantial challenges to readers is
12 whether we at our most ethically consistent in the words whose context and order we
13 choose painstakingly, or the words we gather into the rag-bag. In a later essay on occidental
14 religion, he wonders whether 'the tendency to go off half-cocked is of as much ethical
15 weight as the conviction that order should be promoted from where one is; that order
16 should start inside one's own cerebrum, in the *directio voluntatis*?⁷³ The poem puts intention
17 above making or, as Pound has it, the 'measure of civilisation' becomes 'what that age of
18 person really wishes to *do*'.⁷⁴ Yet the intention shifts between the will and the improvised
19 depending on where we choose to start – the speaker stands 'before the booth', but the truth
20 lies only 'in this discourse'. What the builder plans to construct is the first and last means of
21 assessing their achievement, yet the plans are always subject to change.
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35 Pound's excision of the first three cantos - what Eliot called his 'reticent autobiography'⁷⁵ -
36 from later versions of *The Cantos* is telling: it becomes the 'wit's waste' of Joyce's fecund
37 imagining, a means of summoning up and then supplanting *Sordello*. By 1919, Pound noted
38 that Browning's work was often infected with 'unsayable jargon';⁷⁶ there was no saying at
39 the time, but the criticism would be directed at *The Cantos* too.⁷⁷ The 'barrel full' of
40 Browning allusions is reduced to the following lines, which open Canto II in the 1966 edition
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48 ⁷² Ezra Pound to Ronald Duncan, 8 April 1939, Ezra Pound Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities
49 Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

50 ⁷³ Ezra Pound, 'Degrees of Honesty in Occidental Religions', *Selected Prose 1909-1965* ed. William
51 Cookson (London: Faber, 1973), p.66.

52 ⁷⁴ Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p.144.

53 ⁷⁵ T.S. Eliot, 'A Note on Ezra Pound', *To-Day*, 4 Sept 1918, *The Completed Prose of T.S. Eliot: The Critical
54 Edition* eds. Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Suchard, Vol. 1, p.753.

55 ⁷⁶ Ezra Pound, 'Translators of Greek', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968),
56 p.123.

57 ⁷⁷ See, for example, Dudley Fitts, 'The Tea-Shop Aura', *New Republic* 130, 4 January 1954, 18: '[Pound]
58 fails because he has chosen to invent a no-language, a bric-à-brac archaizing language, largely (in
59 spite of his excellent ear) unsayable'.
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3 of the poem: 'Hang it all, Robert Browning, / there can be but the one "Sordello." / But
4 Sordello, and my Sordello?'.⁷⁸ 'Hang it all' is rehung entirely, moving from self-
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recrimination to address: Pound faces down his literary model, and gives the final word to
his own 'Sordello'. Yet the most notable critical excision comes with the 'I' voice itself. For
James Longenbach, removing the signs of authorial presence become a 'political strategy
designed to make his idiosyncratic interpretations of history and economics seem as
inevitable as nature itself'.⁷⁹ The 'builder's whim' is restored into something more inevitable;
the phrase disappears from later versions of the poem. The organising principle of the poem,
its scaffolding, is removed. Yet in taking it away, Pound does not gainsay the possibility
that his work, or his politics, might be dismissed as whimsical: rather, he lessens the
likelihood of it being a viable excuse.

Pound gives us three possible endings to the poem, including the apologetic envoi which
begins 'I have tried to write Paradise' (CXX), and the series of observations marked 'Notes
for CXVII et seq.' Yet the following fragment, sent to James Laughlin at New Directions in
1966, advertises its ultimate state in the same way that the early canto of the 'builder's
whim' writes the possibility of a beginning, promising lines for the 'ultimate CANTO' or
'whatever I may write / in the interim [24 August 1966]'.⁸⁰ This is the Emersonian whim
again, in perhaps its baldest form. It keeps open the possibility of something unspecified in
the future, but in a literary and personal context which can no longer absolve the poet of
being outside social or political spheres. Hedging its bets about the future ('whatever I may
write'), the fragment enacts the same reversals as the opening, with its tricky pledge to
begin or not begin ('say I want to').

In Pound's 1930 essay, 'How to Write', he describes the composition process in ways that
balance distraction, truth, and clarity against the demands of finality. He calls judgement a
conversation between 'what one sets down on paper' and the 'great deal that one does not
set down', often because 'one thinks that the value of an extra statement is outweighed by its

⁷⁸ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1993), p.6.

⁷⁹ James Longenbach, *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot and the Sense of the Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p.123.

⁸⁰ Ezra Pound, 'Fragment (1966)', *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, p.824.

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3 tendency to distract the reader from something more important'. If whimsy is a tug between
4 saying too much, and refusing to explain yourself, it becomes present in judgement too, an
5 act which Pound suggests may be 'intuitive' or 'made up of a certain number of
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7 formulatable reasons and a certain penumbra of imponderabilia'.⁸¹ In wondering what
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9 determines the writer's final judgement, Pound also begins to tug away at the idea that it
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11 might be final: the combination of 'formulatable reasons' and 'penumbra of imponderabilia'
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13 lead to shadowy conclusions. The challenge of the *Cantos* comes not by Pound - as he does
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15 in earlier work - shifting between the Humean and Emersonian models of whimsy, but by
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17 turning them on their head. Emerson's defence of the writer gives them a leave of absence in
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19 order to create their work. In Pound's revisions of his epic, he presents the work only to
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21 excise himself from it, as if he were the 'wit's waste' waiting to be removed, or freed.
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25 Why did Tate turn to his defence to make the artistic case for Pound? As Slavoj Žižek notes,
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27 by using whimsy as a way to let individuals shift responsibility away from their actions, we
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29 not only dodge the question of their culpability, but our own, the 'other's whim' being a
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31 convenient fantasy which allows us to place the blame at the feet of the other and its
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33 'inscrutable self-will'.⁸² Žižek reminds us that to submit to another's whim is also to submit
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35 to the fantasy of an all-powerful will, even if it is not our own. The fact of Pound is,
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37 famously, impossible to deny: his imaginative legacy was second to the sense of him as an
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39 avoidable object, an alp, famously, in Basil Bunting's fly-leaf tribute. For Robert Creeley, 'the
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41 fact of Ezra Pound and his work is an inescapable fact'.⁸³ Pound is the acknowledged
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43 dictator, and his gift to subsequent writers is akin to a despot's whim that cannot be
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45 overlooked or made the object of appeal. Yet an attention to the whimsical defences that
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47 often attended his work - and his attempt to navigate them in his poetry - might complicate
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49 this model. Throughout literary history, dismissing a writer's views as whimsical has been a
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51 way to deny the power of their writing: when the defence is a legal expedient rather than an
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53 aesthetic judgement, the argument is inverted. The slipperiness of the term whimsy,
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55 ⁸¹ Ezra Pound, 'How to Write' (1930), *Machine Art and Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian*
56 *Years* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), ed. Maria Luisa Ardizzone, p.96, p.102.

57 ⁸² Slavoj Žižek, *For They Know Not What They Do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor* (London: Verso, 2007),
58 p.266.

59 ⁸³ Robert Creeley, 'A Note on Ezra Pound' (1965), *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes & Essays* (San
60 *Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), p.96.*

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3 hovering between the external and the internal, affords the defence limited purchase, but
4 tremendous agility. The power of the claim rests on the assumption that readers could place
5 the blame for their own actions firmly at the feet of the writer's whim. If modernism showed
6 that the artist's will to create could be aligned – rather than opposed – with the ethical will to
7 act, Pound's poetry and its reception shows the potentially destructive power of that elision.
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14 A late, defensive essay by Tate entitled 'To Whom is the Poet Responsible?' reframes the
15 question as 'for *what* is the poet responsible'? Tate pitches his response to the titular question
16 halfway between Oscar Wilde and John Berryman's *Dream Songs*: 'I am sorry to sound
17 frivolous; I confess that the political responsibility of poets bores me.'⁸⁴ Here, Tate performs
18 his own kind of rhetorical frivolity, shifting uncomfortably in his seat as he does so. Yet the
19 critical and cultural context of his defence suggests it entangles ethical and aesthetic
20 questions more than it separates them: by exonerating the poet on one charge, they instead
21 fall prey to another. If their 'random flights' of "angelic insight" free them - momentarily -
22 from artistic responsibility, they also elide them with language of violent will. This essay has
23 shown how the mobility of the whimsical defence made it a useful one for Tate to draw on
24 when defending Pound: it identified a significant ethical concern of his own poetry, drew on
25 a longer literary history of whimsy as a means of dismissal, while drawing a veil over the
26 poet's political status. Yet the changing power and charge of the term in twentieth-century
27 political language meant Tate's attempt to separate Pound's work from his life fell short: for
28 modernists, being whimsical was more a mark of political violence than artistic
29 insignificance.
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59 ⁸⁴ Allen Tate, 'To Whom Is the Poet Responsible?', *Essays of Four Decades* (Chicago: Swallow Press,
60 1968), p.26.