Ezra Pound as an American Poet:
A Re-examination of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”

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“Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is said to be a farewell to London, but not a farewell to English poetry or a farewell to America, as Pound keeps writing poems in English as an American poet. In this essay, I would like to re-identify Ezra Pound as an American poet, by discussing a number of American features before, and in, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Life and Contacts).”

The following is a quotation from a famous letter of Robert Frost in which he reveals his perplexity at Pound’s review of his book in the magazine Poetry, December 1914. From the viewpoint of Frost, Pound left America “in anger,” and came to London to make a “ridiculous row” about anything trivial with anybody in London; he is an “American refugee,” “an exile for life,” and “disloyal” to the United States:

I fear I am going to suffer a good deal at home by the support of Pound. The harm he does lies in this: he made up his mind in the short time I was friends with him (we quarreled in six weeks) to add me to his party of American literary refugees in London. Nothing could be more unfair, nothing better calculated to make me an exile for life. Another such review as the one in Poetry and I shan’t be admitted at Ellis Island. This is no joke. Since the article
was published I have been insulted and snubbed by two American editors I
counted on as good friends. I don’t repine and I am willing to wait for justice.
But I do want someone to know that I am not a refugee and I am not in anyway
disloyal. My publishing a book in England was as it happened. Several editors
in America had treated me very well ... It was not in anger that I came to Eng-
land ... Pound is trying to drag me into his ridiculous row with everybody over
there .... I would have no pleasure in that part of Pound’s article in Poetry that
represented me as an American literary refugee in London with a grievance
against American editors. (Frost 147-48)

These words show one clear difference between Frost and Pound: Frost cared
about the American editors, as he wanted to go back home, while Pound never
cared about anything but art, beauty, and an intense life. Frost fears rejection, and
he pays attention to what other Americans think of him. It seems that he needs
support from others in order to maintain his self-confidence.

We can say that the difference between Pound and Frost corresponds to the dif-
ference between two American Presidents, Woodrow Wilson and Warren G. Hard-
ing. Wilson was an idealist, spent a lot of energy on foreign affairs, and proposed
the League of Nations, while Harding was conservative with affable manners, and
subscribed to such strategies as “make no enemies” and “America first” (Russell
358f., Harding). Woodrow Wilson led America during World War I and presented
missionary goals to the world, but after the war, Americans preferred to live rather
by themselves, tending to reject both the League of Nations and the treaty of Ver-
sailles, and the United States made a separate peace treaty with Germany. It seems
that Wilson and Harding represent totally different tendencies in America. Pound
was like Wilson, someone who never gave up his mission, though we know that
Pound didn’t like him (Ruthven 131); while Frost was like Harding, who loved
friendship, not quarrelling, and felt comfortable with fellows at home.

We know that the American sense of mission originates from the Puritans, for
they came to North America in order to establish a religiously safe and free coun-
try; that is, their mission was to establish a nation that guarantees freedom and in-
dividual human rights. The following quotation is from John Winthrop’s “A Modell
of Christian Charity”:
For wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee haue undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. (Winthrop)

Pound inherits a sense of mission from the Puritans, though the Puritan’s goal was to set up “a city upon a hill” with Christianity, while Pound’s was to set up a kingdom of beauty with poetry, so to speak. Other writers with a strong sense of mission include Phillip Freneau, who wrote a poem in support of independence; Henry David Thoreau, who opposed the Mexican War; Herman Melville, who nurtured serious questions as to the nature of America as a nation; and Mark Twain, who opposed the Spanish-America War. They were all active in some great American cause, and they supported America as far as it tried to accomplish that cause, while they criticized America, as they feared that America might stray from the great American cause. And Pound is among them.

Moreover, we may say that Pound shares a sense of self-exaggeration with Winthrop; Winthrop believed that “the eyes of all people are upon us,” and Pound believed that the eyes of all poets were upon him. Here we should remember that both the paternal and maternal ancestors of Ezra Pound had sailed from England to New England in the 17th century, which is shown in the following quotation:

In 1632 William Wadsworth, a Puritan refugee and ancestor of Mary Parker Weston, EP’s grandmother, sails from England to Boston on the Lion.
In 1635 Edmund Weston, another Puritan refugee ancestor, sails from England to Duxbury, Mass.
About 1650 John Pound, a Quaker, sails from England to New England. (Moody xiii)

Pound’s ancestors are surely among those who had founded America, and it cannot be denied that Pound is, consciously or not, under the influence of a version of the great American cause and of his ancestors, though his cause is now poetical, not religious.
Whether in a good sense or not, American poets seem unusual from the viewpoints of other countries, because they try to accomplish some poetical mission, like missionaries. Here we can refer especially to Whitman, as he and Pound believe in the arts and literature as the governing power of the people:

View’d, to-day, from a point of view sufficiently over-arching, the problem of humanity all over the civilized world is social and religious, and is to be finally met and treated by literature. The priest departs, the divine literatus comes. Never was anything more wanted than, to-day, and here in the States, the poet of the modern is wanted, or the great literatus of the modern. ... Above all previous lands, a great original literature is surely to become the justification and reliance, (in some respects the sole reliance) of American democracy. (Democratic Vistas)

Pound also insists on the importance of artists as rulers: “We artists who have been so long the despised are about to take over control” (“The New Sculpture,” 68). What Pound really wanted may be a society that would pay respect to artists as unique individuals. Whitman intended to establish a Democratic Kingdom of Literature. The expression sounds self-contradictory, but Whitman was actually dreaming of a kingdom where literature has authority and governs the people democratically. Whitman still believes in democracy, or the American cause, while expecting a strong leader. For Whitman, Democracy and America are “convertible words” (Democratic Vistas).

On the other hand, Pound’s intention was to establish a kingdom of beauty where the arts prevail not as commodities but in a spiritual sense, and where wise men govern the people, somewhat like Confucius, who dreamed of an ideal political system for China. Accordingly, neither Whitman nor Pound maintained the principle of art for art’s sake; both believed in art for life’s sake. Pound made a comment on Whitman, as he knew he was in the same line with Whitman:

He is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench (= bad smell), but it is America .... He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission.
I honor him for he prophesied me while I can only recognize him as a forebear of whom I ought to be proud. (“What I Feel”)

Here is another example of Pound’s recognition of Whitman in a poem titled “The Pact,” 1916:

It was you that broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root -
Let there be commerce between us. (5-9)

This poem declares that Pound will inherit the mission Whitman tried to accomplish, and the sense of heritage is strengthened as we read the following quotation from Emerson about “the tree of the poet”:

Nature never became a toy to a wise spirit. The flowers, the animals, the mountains, reflected the wisdom of his best hour, as much as they had delighted the simplicity of his childhood.
When we speak of nature in this manner, we have a distinct but most poetical sense in the mind. We mean the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects. It is this which distinguishes the stick of timber of the woodcutter, from the tree of the poet. (Emerson)

The crucial difference between Whitman and Pound lies, as the previous quotation suggests, in the issue of democracy. Whitman believes in democracy, but Pound believes that it is a political system that deceives the people; Pound says, “He [the artist] has dabbled in democracy and he is now done with that folly” (“The New Sculpture” 68).

Another crucial difference between Whitman and Pound concerns the subject matter of poetry. For Whitman, the American poet should write about Nature in America, about its democracy and its people: “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (“Preface”). For Pound, however,
America has no poetic materials; he rejects America as a source of poetical subjects, and he left for Europe and London. Pound wants to condense his essence into poetry, but he is actually far from sophisticated; as we saw above in Frost’s words, he is always making a “ridiculous row on anything trivial with anybody here in London.”

Pound sees himself as more high-cultured than Whitman: “Mentally I am a Walt Whitman who had learned to wear a collar and a dress shirt (although at times inimical to both)” (“What I Feel”). And the “collar” is a Jamesian collar, as Moody points out: “Pound arrived in London in a stiff white collar which is a sort of collar worn by Henry James in most of his portraits” (68). The “stiff white collar” symbolizes the high culture embodied by Henry James.

The following is the famous list of “the items of high civilization” which James regards as necessary for literature, yet America lacks. He laments Hawthorne’s plight in America, and he himself left America for London to continue to write:

The negative side of the spectacle on which Hawthorne looked out, in his contemplative saunterings and reveries, might, indeed, with a little ingenuity, be made almost ludicrous; one might enumerate the items of high civilization, as it exists in other countries, which are absent from the texture of American life, until it should become a wonder to know what was left. No State, in the European sense of the word, and indeed barely a specific national name. No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country-houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no great Universities nor public schools — no Oxford, nor Eton, nor Harrow; no literature, no novels, no museums, no pictures, no political society, no sporting class — no Epsom nor Ascot! (James 34-35)

Pound also found no items of high civilization in America. For him, America was “a half-savage country” (“Mauberley” I, 6). He cannot think that America is poetic, or that America offers any lofty subjects for poetry: as he believes in the culture of ancient Greece and Rome, the Romance languages, and old Chinese poems.
Pound also appreciates Henry James: “there was emotional greatness in Henry James’ hatred of tyranny” (Literary Essays 297-98). Different from James, however, Pound was a poet, and he maintained an American dream with the theme of beauty.

Pound felt that he did not have the choice of returning to American poetry, as it had no rich tradition. Only Whitman could be considered part his poetic ancestry, but for Pound, Whitman is out of consideration, as he does not belong a high culture. How could Pound find a dependable poetic tradition? The history of poetry gives him many hints, many good examples of what to write, or how to write. He intends to join the long tradition of poetry. In other words, we may rather that say Pound was lost in tradition. Pound is to be original in the peculiar sense of seeking no originality: Pound’s quotations and allusions to other poets are unique.

The following is from the last lines of “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” in which Pound declares that Propertius was one of the great poets in the tradition of love poems. It suggests that Pound himself wishes just such a place in the history of poetry:

Of Lesbia, known above Helen;
And in the dyed pages of Calvus,
Calvus mourning Quintilia,
And but now Gallus had sung of Lycoris.
Fair, fairest Lycoris —
The waters of Styx poured over the wound:
And now Propertius of Cynthia, taking his stand among these. (XII, 69-75)

The most important theme in Pound’s poetics is beauty: “The love of beauty, he [Pound] wrote elsewhere, when it is a great passion, burns away ‘our meaner qualities, our lesser selves,’ leaving the soul ‘nothing save as a channel for truth, or beauty’” (Moody 41). Moody’s comments may imply that Edgar Allan Poe was a precursor of Pound in regard to the theme of beauty in American poetry, though Poe’s beauty seems queer, eccentric, and supernatural.

Now I will focus on “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts” (Personae).
“Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” puzzles readers with its complicated logic, but to criticize a blind society and frivolous artists is a theme expressed through mentions, suggestions, and allusions of literary, poetical, and/or mythical words, phrases, and images quoted from many cultures. “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” really stands up as a kind of storage house of poetic memories: Latin memory (“Nemesianus,” “pro domo,” ...), French memory (“Pierre Ronsard,” “Flaubert,” ...), Greek memory (“Odysseus,” “Penelope,” ...), Christian memory (“Christ,” “St. Luke,” “wafer,” ...), and of course English memory (“Caliban,” “Waller,” ...). But can we find American memory, or American reference? I believe that “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” has a stock of American memory as he re-identified himself as an American poet in, and after, the Great War; first, because American poetry is a major stream of English poetry in which Pound is set in and to which he never says farewell; second, because he declared, “I made a pact with you—Walt Whitman”; and finally, because we know that Pound said that “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is “an attempt to condense the James novel.”

The first question about “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”: why does it have two parts? The first part has thirteen poems, and the second part “Mauberley (1920)” has five poems. Is the second part a commentary on and an extension of the first part? We know that both parts share the same themes and many of the same keywords. The themes include a failed poet, the cheapness of the age, disregard for the high arts in the contemporary age, and the obsession with making money. Both parts also share keywords: “three years,” “sea,” “Flaubert,” “the age,” “Greece,” “reveries,” “gaze,” “Beauty,” “Venus,” and “eye(s).” Yet the two parts should be considered as different works, for different speakers narrate them from different viewpoints. However, it seems difficult to decide who is narrating each poem. Critics have different opinions as to who the speakers are, and what the objects or targets in each poem are. For example, Espey says:

This reading ... moves from Pound (Ode - V) through Pound’s and Mauberley’s contacts (Yeux Glauques - XII) to the disappearance of Pound (Envoi), and the independent emergence of Mauberley (Mauberley - III), with Pound acting now, at least on the surface, only as a tolerant observer, and concludes with Mauberley’s single poem (Medallion). (16)
On the other hand, Moody points out:

... as the title-page of the first edition stated, the whole work is “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” by E.P.’.” There are then these four factors in play: (1) E.P. as the declared author of the work; (2) Mauberley, as E.P.’s fictive author; (3) the fictive E.P. as represented by Mauberley; (4) the modern milieu or mind out of which both fictive characters come. That makes the poem a rather complex set of interacting discriminations, much like Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or his treatment of Stephen Daedalus in *Ulysses*. (378)

What we can safely say is that such differences among critics hint at the various possibilities of narrators. The poems in Part I are mostly sharp criticism of the age, and the last one, “Envoi,” is a return to the tradition of love poems. The poems in Part II seem to be criticism aimed at the poet Mauberley, and they are visually successful poems or Imagist poems, which have no ethical viewpoint. All of the poems are of course written by Ezra Pound, but they are most likely poems that Pound will no longer compose.

Now I will discuss references to America and/or American literature in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.” The thirteen poems of “E.P. Ode pour l’Election de son Sepulchre” make several references to America and its literary memory. It seems that “a half savage country” (I, 6) refers to America. The line “He passed from men’s memory in l’an trentuniesme” (I, 18) is usually said to be an allusion to the first line of “Le Testament” by François Villon (Ruthven 129, Brooker 192, Froula 183). But if the point is the reference to the age of a poet, it also suggests an allusion to the first Chapter of “Song of Myself” in which Walt Whitman refers to the age when he began as a poet: “I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,/ Hoping to cease not till death” (9-10). “Attic grace” (II, 4) may correspond to Edgar Allan Poe’s “To Helen” in aspiring for ancient Greece: “Thy Naiad airs have brought me home/ To the glory that was Greece,/ And the grandeur that was Rome” (8-10). The word “alabaster” (II, 11) surely reminds readers of the famous poem of Emily Dickinson, “Safe in their alabaster chambers,” though it is possible that Pound may not have read her poems. The word “porcelain” in “Mauberley (1920)” (III, 5) also seems to allude to Dickinson.
The following seems to be a criticism of quasi-arts as commodities and the age’s ignorance of real beauty:

The tea-rose tea-gown, etc.
Supplants the mousseline of Cos,
The pianola “replaces”
Sappho’s barbitos. (III, 1-4)

We cannot say that the “pianola,” or the player piano, was invented in America, but surely it was mass produced in America and sold there. “το καλόν” should be beauty itself, but it is a brand name for perfume. The Tokalon, a perfume company of New York City & Paris France, originally a British “To-Kalon” established before 1900, opened a large branch in Syracuse, NY in 1910 to sell the vintage perfume “tokalon” (Hummel):

We see το καλόν
Decreed in the market place
...........  ...........
We have the press for wafer;
Franchise for circumcision. (III, 15-20)

As the poet criticizes the contemporary market place which regards beauty as merely a commodity, the phrase “the press for wafer,” which has puzzled many critics, may be interpreted this way: “the press” is a machine to mould and produce “wafers,” and it implies that even religion is subject to the American way of mass production, just like the automobiles made by Ford. The next phrase “Franchise for circumcision” also refers to the American way of selling under the franchise to monopolize “circumcision.” “Faun’s flesh is not to us” (III, 49) suggests that the modern age disregards real beauty, which may correspond with a paragraph in Hawthorne’s *Marble Faun*, a novel set in Rome:

The young man laughed, and threw himself into the position in which the statue has been standing for two or three thousand years. In truth, allowing
for the difference of costume, and if a lion’s skin could have been substituted for his modern talma, and a rustic pipe for his stick, Donatello might have figured perfectly as the marble Faun, miraculously softened into flesh and blood. (*The Marble Faun*)

Pound’s context suggests that physical, organic, and human senses are lost in the American marketplace. They are all inhuman and lack substantial sense. Americans may no longer have the chance to feel “flesh and blood,” even in the arts. Actually that’s what the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke was concerned about in a letter dated November 13, 1925:

> Even for our grandparents a “house,” a “well,” a familiar tower, their very clothes, their coat: were infinitely more, infinitely more intimate; almost everything a vessel in which they found the human and added to the store of the human. Now, from America, empty indifferent things are pouring across, sham things, dummy life ... A house, in the American sense, an American apple or a grapevine over there, has nothing in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into which went the hopes and reflections of our forefathers... Live things, things lived and conscient of us, are running out and can no longer be replaced. We are perhaps the last still to have known such things.  

(*Letters 374-75*)

It seems that Pound prophesizes the coming market capitalism that will bring down everything, even sublime things, reducing them to price tags that indicate their supposed value.

Who is “a knave or an eunuch” in the following passage?

> All men, in law, are equals.  
> Free of Pisistratus,  
> We choose a knave or an eunuch  
> To rule over us.  

(III, 21-24)

“A knave or an eunuch” could be Osmond, Isabel’s husband, in *Portrait of a Lady,*
or Woodrow Wilson (Ruthven 131), and perhaps even Theodore Roosevelt, for
the latter is occasionally mentioned in Pound’s letters to his father. I believe that
he is may be the “chief of police” in “Homage to Sextus Propertius” (XII, 31). The
word “usury” is crucial in Pound’s poetics: “usury age-old and age-thick/ and liars
in public places” (IV, 18-19) cause war and make profits from war, while young
talented artists die in the battles. It is interesting to remember John Winthrop’s
words on lending money:

Quest. What rule must we observe in forgiving?
Ans. Whether thou didst lend by way of commerce or in mercy, if he hath
nothing to pay thee, must forgive, (except in cause where thou hast a surety
or a lawfull pleadge) Deut. 15. 2. Every seaventh yeare the Creditor was to
quitt that which he lent to his brother if he were poore as appears ver. 8. Save
when there shall be no poore with thee. In all these and like cases, Christ was
a generall rule, Math. 7. 22. Whatsoever ye would that men should doe to you,
doe yee the same to them allsoe. (Winthrop)

Winthrop insisted, through a bit of complicated logic, or under some unspecified
conditions, that not only the interest but even the capital itself should be dispensed
with. He says, “Every seventh year the creditor was to quit that which he lent to
his brother if he were poor.” We could say that Pound shares the original American
philosophy of money, as he hates the idea of usury.

The American sense of mission for a poet is clearly pronounced in the following
quoted from “Mauberley (1920)”: 

The glow of porcelain
Brought no reforming sense
To his perception
Of the social inconsequence.

..........       ........
He made no immediate application
Of this to relation of the state
To the individual, ....... (III, 5-15)
Positively speaking from the viewpoint of Pound, the imagery in poems should bring some “reforming sense,” and poets should make some “immediate application” as to the “relation of the state to the individual.”

Why Did Pound leave London? I believe that there are at least two reasons. First, Pound’s impatience to reach a goal may have caused conflicts on every occasion. Moody describes this tendency as “American drive”: “Pound’s combining a love of beauty with American drive would later perplex his English Hosts” (Moody 69). Second, almost all the people seemed a mass of dolts to Pound, especially those who speak English may have irritated Pound. The poem, “To Whistler, American,” written in 1912, directly refers to the American people, but looking back from now, the words “that mass of dolts” may allude to all people: “You and Abe Lincoln from that mass of dolts/ Show us there’s chance at least of winning through” (18-19). After 1920, Pound was to think more about what America is and what he has to do with America. Especially in Cantos, he chose American history as one of its important themes. The following is from “From CXV,” which, written in his last years, surely refers to American literature:

And of man seeking good,
    doing evil.
In meiner Heimat
    where the dead walked
    and the living were made of cardboard. (17-21)

The phrase “the dead walked” reminds us of Jones Very’s sonnet, “The Dead,” and the phrase “the living were made of cardboard” seems to allude to famous words of Ahab in Chapter 36, Moby-Dick:

I SEE them crowd on crowd they walk the earth
Dry, leafless trees no Autumn wind laid bare; (1-2)

“Hark ye yet again- the little lower layer. All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event- in the living act, the undoubted deed-
there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its
features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike though
the mask! (Melville)

And “meiner Heimat” refers to America. Poetically speaking, Ezra Pound came
from America, and he never wished to return to America, nor join in the tradi-
tion of American poetry in a narrow sense. Still those references discussed here
strongly suggest that he continued to be an American poet throughout his career.

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