

Reconsidering Modernism.

Leon Surrrette *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats and the Occult* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 1993).

Demestres Tryphonopoulos *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Ezra Pound's The Cantos* (Waterloo: Wilfid Laurier University Press, 1992)

Every cult doctrine is a failed metaphysic. Like metaphysical theories, cult doctrines offer ontological hypotheses about matter, values and spiritual being. Furthermore, every cult doctrine has a germinal insight and develops this insight more or less systematically—often with an extreme systematicity that reveals the doctrine to be a form of intellectualization and a psychological defense against fragmentation and collapse into chaos—just as every metaphysic, as Stephen Pepper showed in *World Hypotheses*, has a root metaphor that it develops with a systematicity unequaled in any other field except pure mathematics. I think that his insight is useful for distinguishing between those failures of metaphysical thinking that lead to cult doctrine and genuine metaphysical thinking that leads to genuine metaphysics. For cult doctrines are produced by elaborating their core insight narratively, while genuine metaphysics is the result of applying the nuclear insight piecemeal, to problem after problem, resulting in a cluster of explanations that rest on the same basic principles, but vary from domain to domain, and are not related to one another by a simple tale. The difference between cult doctrine and genuine metaphysics reveals yet again the dangers that result from the mind's (culturally induced?) tendency to narrativize explanation.

The perennial attraction that emanationist metaphysics has for wackos of every occult stripe derives from the lure of narrative. For that metaphysics tells a tale of how the cosmos began, what forces gave it its shape, and how the events of the present grew out of past events. It narrativizes ontological differences amongst orders of being into temporal and causal succession. Thus, it depicts the origin of things as a surpassingly beautiful light and the various orders of objects as diffused light admixed with increasing larger proportions of matter. This tale suggests that the task of human beings, fulfilled through gnosis, is to rise through ascending orders of being (each higher level marked by an increase in proportion of light the light to matter) until they re-experience the divine radiance of pure light. Marxist metaphysics, too, has a dramatic and narrative structure that accounts for the similar attraction it has exerted on true believers of a different ilk. Marxist metaphysics derives at least part of its appeal from recounting a variant of the myth of the Fall—the tale Northrop Frye considered the monomyth of Western civilization. It describes how labour lost its integrative and creative dimension, how humans became alienated from nature which is their destined home and from their own being, and how through a violent upheaval in the order of being, the afflicted will recover the nature that suits them, true human nature.

The exception to this rule about the deleterious effect of narrative is the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The nucleus of that philosophy is the connaturality of mind and nature. Hegel develops that nucleus narratively, for he tells the tale of how Mind alienated itself in Nature but, through the course of history, recovers that alienated being by recognizing its identity with Nature. Despite its narrative mode, Hegel's philosophy remained a genuine metaphysic. However, there are overlaps between the doctrines of cultists and those of Hegel that have created no end of mischief; for attracted by the lure of his narrative, cultists have combined the greatness of his dialectical methods with the problems of dramatized narratives and then add to the resulting mixture some deviationist components.

The cult deviations are an unseemly spectacle. At their extreme, they lead to efforts to

convene revenants so as to engage them in discourse, to the narcissistic confusion of the bodily self with the cosmos and the body's energy with the creative Immanent Divine, and to the many ritualized sexual practices that those confusions serve to rationalize. However unseemly they may seem to us, they have been the basis for much of the finest art of the past century and half. Yeats is only the best known example of an adherent who was also a great artist: Baudelaire, Artuaud, Balzac, Huysmanns, Appolinaire are among others, and among more contemporary figures, the filmmakers Maya Deren, Harry Smith, Kenneth Anger and, perhaps, Larry Jordan.

Recently, three splendid new books on literature and art have appeared that show how central a role Theosophical and Gnostic ideas played in formation of modernism in literature and the visual arts. Bart Testa is reviewing one of these books, Ann Davis' fine *The Logic of Ecstasy*, for this magazine. I am reviewing two books that discuss the influence of Theosophical and Gnostic ideas on the founders of literary modernism, Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats.

Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos' *The Celestial Tradition: A Study of Pound's Cantos* uses the myth of *palingenesis* (of transformation through a metamorphizing rebirth), the historical fantasy current in Kensington theosophical circles of his day, that *gnosis* was passed down from antiquity along a line of enlightened individuals and secret sects, and in the belief, which the First and Second World Wars shook so badly, in the imminent arrival of a New Age, the dawning of *paradiso terrestre*, to unfold the overall shape of the *Cantos*.

Tryphonopoulos is undoubtedly correct. In a letter to his father, written in 1927, and unaccountably ignored by scholars who often believe poets are simply too stupid to know what they're doing, Pound explains that general form of the *Cantos* as has three movements:

- 1) Live man goes down into the world of the Dead. [Is it so very hard to understand that Pound's allusions are really a way of engaging with his precursors? Yet even this simple point most learned commentators overlook.]
- 2) The "repeat in history" [That Pound reveals that the same pattern repeats again and again ought to be clear, but most professors seem to miss it.]
- 3) The "magic moment" or moment of metamorphosis, bust through from the quotidian into "divine or permanent world."

Even from the force of its description, we recognize that Pound's great interest was in capturing the third moment, and it is this aspect of the *Cantos* that Tryphonopoulos, with good reason, stresses.

The orthodoxy, following Eliot on the topic, teaches that what Pound said is unimportant and only how he said it has of aesthetic relevance. This idea was usually conveyed along with Eliot's remark about Pound having the finest musical ear of any living English poet. This view still survives, as one can discover by reading the "Disseminations" chapter in George Kearns' volume on the *Cantos* in Oxford's Landmarks of World Literature series. Tryphonopoulos findings make it impossible to deny that Pound was presenting a worked-out system of ideas and, what is more important, he shows us that the "how" of his writing is inextricably linked with the "what." Tryphonopoulos shows that Pound wanted the "how" of the *Cantos*, that is, the effects of its language, to convey the substance of his thought (its "what") by offering, and establishing, the radical suggestion that Pound wanted the *Cantos* to induce the experience of initiation into the mysteries, not to describe the beliefs of the Theosophists (or any other Occult sect.) The *Cantos* is, as he says it is, "a text designed to produce initiates as it is for initiates." He manages to show that simple statement of beliefs is not what the *Cantos* is after, and to do this without slipping into the excesses of Kathryn V. Lindberg's *Reading Pound Reading: Modernism after Nietzsche*.

And, as radical as the proposal is, it has a significant antecedent for, as Michael McClure's fine new book of essays and interviews, *Lighting the Corners*, reveals, Robert

Duncan, a poet and scholar in occult matters, also suggested that the *Cantos* were like a seance, and that Pound was calling up voices “from the spirit box.” As a principle for reading the *Cantos* (and I believe other modernist works, through Tryphonopoulos makes no such claim), Tryphonopoulos’ proposal is an important advance in Pound scholarship. I hope at least a few will fathom the full measure of its significance.

I think Tryphonopoulos is right to claim that only a gnostic reading of the *Cantos* can reveal “the full *Eidos*” they strive to bring to presence. Any other reading presents only the exoteric significance of an esoteric work. By close reading, most brilliantly of Cantos XC and XCI, Tryphonopoulos shows just how far a literal reading of the work, informed by an understanding of gnostic principles, can take us. *The Celestial Tradition* is an important contribution to Pound scholarship that should go far in dismantling prevailing misconceptions of Pound’s methods. If there is justice, it will play an important role in recasting Pound scholarship.

People regularly complain of the impenetrability of Pound’s writing. A quibble I have with Tryphonopoulos’ fine work is that he, too, overestimates the difficulty of the *Cantos*. I quibble with him on this matter for a couple of reasons. First, I do not find “their cryptic allusions or their polymorphous, heterogeneous surface” at all obscurantist, or designed to withhold the mysteries from any but those who fail succumb to the poem’s magic, which work almost without effort on the readers part. I think the *Cantos* embodies a type of thinking. Provided you have some acquaintance with gnostic and neo-platonic ideas (even minimal acquaintance suffices), if you let the work effect you and allow it to induce that way of thinking, the poem’s polymorphous, heterogeneous surface —its leaps and its recollections— all seem completely natural, and to work on us in ways of which we are not conscious. Second, I think Tryphonopoulos’ overestimation of the *Cantos*’ difficulty results from underestimating the importance of his own proposal, viz., that Pound is attempting to invoke the experience of the mysteries, not to describe a set of beliefs. For one thing, as Tryphonopoulos himself shows, we can take the *Cantos* pretty much at their word, as his own splendidly literal readings of Cantos XC and XCI show. The insightfulness of his own literal readings does much to discredit Tryphonopoulos’ remarks about the difficulty of the *Cantos*. Furthermore, I think that if one opens oneself up to them, the *Cantos* seem not at all difficult, but endlessly rich. The best way to deal with the *Cantos* is to read them, reread a few times and then reread them at periodic intervals. The language itself does the rest—and what it does is wondrous. If people have trouble with it, I think it is simply because they are too smug, lazy, [mis]educated, biased or insufficiently motivated to give over a few dozen weekends out of a lifetime to read the greatest achievement in the English language of this century. Well, so much for them! There are enough strong readers like Surrrette and Tryphonopoulos that one need not worry one’s head about the rest—they’ll do just fine in the universities, getting promotions by denouncing Pound’s political views and doing their best to ensure that nobody who reads Pound strongly could ever find employment in those sink-holes of political correctness.

Surrrette offers this mildly amusing remark in his introduction to *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats*:

By the time I finished this study, I realized that we could use a cultural history of the period entitled *The Birth of Modernism out of the Spirit of Hegel*, for Hegel is a ghostly presence behind most of the generation of Pound and Eliot. Hegel remains a ghostly presence in *The Birth of Modernism*, only dimly perceived by the author until very late stages. (p. X)

I read this with real delight, not least because professors have been eager to exact as great a toll from me as they can for insisting on the importance of Hegel. I note as well Surrrette’s remarks about the loneliness that results from being “out of step with the scholarly [his word]

community” and am brought to wonder into just what state the “hired-guns” of the professoriat have forced literary criticism.

Surette has an unfortunate tendency of congratulating himself at regular intervals for having reached such novel conclusions. Undoubtedly these periodic moments of self-congratulations are prompted by the feeling of being out of step with one’s colleagues and, if I know anything about academics, by real assaults to one’s self from colleagues and highly placed administrators that violate even the minimum of decency we expect of the cruellest shop floor or rapacious group of jackal businesspersons. But Surette is onto something very important here, and he should just let the joy of discovery be its own reward; after all, those in the business of soul-murder (unfortunately there are many in our academies) will never produce so rich as this book, and he should content himself with that knowledge.

Surette has treated the occult origins of literary modernism with unprecedented seriousness. What others turned their backs on, embarrassed by the silliness of Occultist ideas, Surette pursued. The importance of his discoveries has amply rewarded his diligence. But I do not think there have no earlier writers who had a vague sort of awareness of the importance of hermetic ideas in the founding of modernism. After all, I am probably not alone in making one’s first acquaintance with occult ideas by reading “The Waste Land,” and after reading Eliot’s great poem ran off to gain familiarity not only Plotinus, Iamblichus, Avicenna and Porphyry but even with Paul Brunton, Gurdieff, and M. Blavatsky & Co.

Surette’s avowals of the groundbreaking importance of his work strike me as a tad self-boosting. It has been an open secret for sometime that Pound and Eliot were well-acquainted with Occult ideas. Pound at times was coy about his interest, especially when he trying to escape from under Yeats’ more dramatic theurgical efforts. At other times he made a racket about them, primarily when thought the *Cantos* were in danger of being misunderstood or neglected (and that is pretty telling about the importance that work accorded these ideas.) In one such fit of pique-and-despair, Pound published *Guide to Kulchur*—one of his lesser works, judged by the standard of the intrinsic interest its ideas command. As an indicator of the interests that went into the making of the *Cantos*, however, the book is invaluable. In a chapter entitled “Neo-Platonicks etc.” he writes:

Along side or rather a long way from being alongside of factual study, for 2000 or more years has run the celestial tradition, the caeruleum coelum, the augustum coelum, etc. . . .

There is no doubt what that human beings are subject to emotion and that they attain to very fine, enjoyable and dynamic emotional states, which cause them to emit what to careful chartered accountants may seem intemperate language, as Iamblichus on the fire of the gods, *tou ton theon pyros*, etc, which comes down into a man and produces superior ecstasies . . .

[one mystic state is] ecstatic-beneficent-and-benevolent, contemplation of the divine love, the divine splendour with goodwill toward others. . . . [it] is a dynamism. It has, time and again, driven men to great living, it has given them courage to go on for decades in the face of public stupidity. It is paradisaical, and a reward in itself for seeking naught further . . . [these ellipsis in original] perhaps because a feeling of certitude inheres in the state of feeling itself. The glory of life exists without further proof for this mystic. . . .

What remains, and remains undeniable to and by the most hardened objectivist, is that a great number of men have had certain kinds of emotion and, *magari*, of ecstasy.

They have left indelible records of ideas born of, or conjoined with, this ecstasy.

Se non è vera è ben trovato . . .

Hardly recondite, either in source or articulation, and I do think that he saw its revelation as true.

In his great, great book on the founding of modernism, the expatriate Canadian Hugh Kenner reveals he had some inkling of the prevalence of occult ideas at the time, for of Joyce he offers that:

Bloom's creator, who was later to use Vico's cycles, used Mme Blavatsky with rigorous literalness: *Ulysses* plays on Yeats the immense joke of taking his pet doctrines as naively as John Donne took the idea that lovers are martyrs. For the book's premise must be that Bloom really is Ulysses, though he knows it no more than that wily wandering Greek foresaw being reincarnated as a wandering homebody Jew.

Pound's friend and publisher James Laughlin has a section in *Pound As Wuz* with the heading, "*A Light from Eleusis*" in which he discusses Pound's hermetic interests and reminds us that in "Terra Italica" (in *Selected Prose*) Pound wrote, "Eleusis contains the summation of concentration of the wisdoms [of every branch of knowledge.]" Laughlin also reveals there that Pound interpreted Plutarch's description of the Eleusian initiation rites, according to which "a shivering and trembling" candidate experiences a burst of "marvelous light" as referring to an erotic ritual and that the burst of "marvelous light" (dromena) was really the experience of orgasm during these ritualized sexual practices. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, that book that Eliot heralded as influencing a generation, probably shaped Pound's views on matters Eleusian, for it describes the Lesser Eleusian mysteries rites as a form of imitative magic in which men and women copulate in the newly sowed furrows in imitation of their acts of day, of seeding the fields. Frazer also connects these rites to the effort to revive the god who has disappeared or gone into the underworld and so to the notion of metamorphosis (a more general version of the basic idea that Tryphonoupos refers to as *palingenesis*.)

T.S. Eliot wrote in *After Strange Gods: A Primer of Modern Heresy*.

one can hardly read the erudite notes and commentary to his edition of Guido Cavalcanti without suspecting that he finds Guido much more sympathetic than Dante, and on grounds that have little to do with their respective merits as poets: namely, that Guido was very like a heretic, if not a sceptic --as evidenced partly by his possibly having held some pneumatic philosophy and theory of corpuscular action.

Laughlin also confirms that Pound told him what he also stated in various writings, that he believed that the Albigeois had preserved the Eleusian teachings. Pound believed that the Eleusian mystery religion was a dualistic religion—a fact that explains the many references to Manicheanism (and to Manes) in his writings. This belief also allowed Pound to interpret the Albigenian crusade and destruction of the high culture of Provence as an emblematic moment in the history of West, in which an official, hegemonizing religion repressed a mystery cult, in which political ambition masqueraded under a cloak of a religious imperative to destroy dissidents, and in which a more European culture all but finished off the vestigial remains of Mediterranean culture as *langue d'oïl* nearly suppressed *langue d'oc*.

A long line of cognoscenti have remarked on Pound's interest in the Occult, and several have noted how widespread that interest was at the time when modernism was founded. Noel Stock devoted a chapter of *Poet in Exile* to "The Pagan Mystery Religions." There is also the

important, pioneering work of Peter Makin, *Pound and Provence*, that deals extensively with the influence of Provençal religious figures and the *langue d'oc* poets on Pound. Angela Elliott contributed "The Word Comprehensive: Gnostic Light in the *Cantos*." (*Paideuma*, vol. 18) The Toronto critic N.M. Perret does a close reading of Canto CVI (in *Paideuma* vol. 13. No. 3) to bring out the Demeter/rebirth theme (another variant of Tryphonopoulos' *palingensis*). Carol Muske, in the *Field* No. 33, does a very fine job of relating the Aphrodite image in Canto LXXIX—the goddess who was "born of the sea-form" and is "lighter than air under Hesperus"—with the Provençal lady, the agent of enlightenment and often, in troubadour verse, a figure for the sect itself. While Ms. Muske doesn't continue to such an interpretation, I believe that this passage relates to the procession of women bearing candle the Poet sees across Lethe in Canto XXIX in Dante's *Purgatorio* and to the appearance of Beatrice in Canto XXX. This ties in the second half of Canto LXXIX's being a great song for dawn, for in Canto XXX of *Purgatorio*

lo vidi già nel cominciar del giorno
la parte oriental tutta rosata,
e l'altro ciel di bel sereno ombrata

e la faccia del sol nascere ombrata,
sì che per temperanze di vapori
l'occhio la sostenea lunga fiata

The relation draws even tighter when one recalls how popular the aubade was in Provençal verse. Further, the colours red and white that Pound attributes to the rising sun and the lynxes are the colours of Beatrice's veil and dress.

I stress this because recognition of Pound's interest in esoteric doctrine, while not nearly so common as knowledge of Yeats', is still an open secret. Furthermore, Eliot used allusions to the secret teachings in some of his writings. Similarly, at the beginning of modernism in painting we had figures such as Kandinsky who was open about his theosophical interests. All one need to need to know to generate an understanding of the role of that Occult ideas played in forming modernist theory, in addition to these well-recognized facts, is the importance that Occult ideas had between the turn of the century and the beginning of the First War—something R. C. Grogin's *The Bergsonian Controversy in France* (from the University of Calgary Press) presents quite well. (Even Edmund Wilson's stress on the Symbolist legacy to the modernists in his much read *Axel's Castle* probably provides enough information to allow one to get on with it.) How on earth or even in the greater heavens thinkers could have come up with the cartoon of modernism they did—the cartoon that Surrette knocks down --is beyond me. I'm left with nasty feelings that it was high time somebody got down to writing this book and of relief Surrette has provided it at last, but also exasperation (that has nothing to do with Surrette, of course—and he makes it clear he has paid a high price for not accepting the orthodoxy) that it has taken so long.

This carping aside, Surrette's book does paint a portrait of modernism that is very different from that which ruled the academies from the immediate postwar years until to the seventies (after which the fact that modernism did nothing to advance the causes of the minorities among made it completely irrelevant.) The suggestions that Pound took great interest in occult metaphysical ideas, that they form the bone-and-marrow of his writing and that the strength of his work cannot be assessed until we have come to terms with the relation between its exorbitantly original form and its content figure among the oldest and tradition-steeped heresies in Pound scholarship. But it is wonderful to now have a book that pulls together what until now have been only fragmentary speculations, to support those speculation with thorough scholarship, and to show, at long last, that was condemned as heresy is really the simple truth. It is also very good to realize that the adherents of modernism were no more open than the

current proponents of multiculturalism and of PC causes generally.

Something for which all sympathetic readers of Pound will be grateful for is that they now take Pound literally. When Pound says he sat penniless on the Dogana's steps and saw "Gods float in the azure air," I think he means that he sat on the Dongana's steps and saw gods float in the azure air. I think that when he says that while he was held in the cage at the U.S. Army D.T.C. and found that "a new subtlety of eyes entered my tent" he means that a new subtlety of eyes (i.e., eyes of different order of being and softer than the gaze of his captors) came into his tent, that a kindly eye saw him. Pound's poetry I think is poetry of appearances, capturing exactly what is given to consciousness, as it is given to consciousness. The common method for interpreting Pound, I fear, is to read the *Cantos* as a record of struggle with the signifier and of the effort to destabilize the seemingly natural relation between signifier and signified. Lest any readers think that here, or a few paragraphs above, I am too crabby about professors, here are some remarks from a digest on how to read Pound's poetry for its political importance:

At stake in modernism, once again, is the definition of subject position. All the tactics . . . can be understood as working towards a single end - to foreground the signifier over the signified, to acknowledge that the reader is position as subject of enunciation producing the enounced of the poem . . .

Misconceptions about the nature of the ideogram have obscured what is surely its main significance as a model for poetry. The written character of Chinese is a radical demonstration that a means of representation is integral to thought. It evidences precisely the 'mechanical' feature of discourse and writing which Derrida defines as the 'graphematic.' . . . it is the way that the writing, in virtue of being ideographic rather than phonetic, foregrounds and insists upon the materiality of the signifier . . . [Pound's practice] threatens to decentre the subject by exhibiting its dependency on language.

In default of a coherent enounced [the Canto commented on, though the author also generalizes] does not set up a consistent narrator or represented structure . . . No attempted closure in the syntagmatic chain . . . no speaker coherently represented and no referential effect substantiating this dramatization. . . .

Since closure is not attempted in the syntagmatic chain there is no coherent enounced. Since there is no such enounced, enunciation cannot be subordinated to it.

I find remarks like this incredible (and yet they are more common than anyone could imagine.) Let alone the issue of trying to recuperate anything politically progressive from Pound's poetry—as a political thinker, he was vile and that's all there is to it. Could anyone doubt there is a consistent narrator in the *Cantos*? And how do these remarks jibe with the phonetic dimension of Pound's verse—first with the fact that passages of the *Cantos* are devoted to phonetic transcription but, more importantly, with the extraordinary sense of the arrangement of sound the *Cantos* evince. Critics from Eliot to Donald Davie have commented on Pound's exceptional ear and his attentiveness to the sound properties of verse.

What is most important, the wrestle Pound engages with in the *Cantos* does not result from his wanting to show that "a means of representation is integral to thought." It is the result of having noetic experiences that he deemed important and that everyday language cannot convey. Only the language of poetry stands a chance of conveying what was revealed to him, and at times he despaired even of this possibility. It is his despairing conclusion that the noetic experiences cannot be conveyed by words, not even by the language of poetry, that motivated Pound's self-reflexive forms, not some abstract proposition about "a means of representation

[being] integral to thought.”

This is just this sort of claim, that modernism encouraged self-reflexive forms whose only importance is what they reveal about their medium, that Surrette and Tryphonopoulos have discounted. Their work closes the book on such ideas. After Surrette’s exfoliation of the range of interests Pound and other early modernists harboured, it is no longer possible to speak of the founding ideas of modernism in the way that academics have spoken of them up til now. That moment in the history of art has now passed. It is good to be able trace, thanks the Surrette’s work, the genealogy of Greebergian modernism and to locate just where it all went wrong. Surrette’s work also opens new possibilities for reclaiming what is strong in modernism; for we can now see that what postmodernists attacked was simply a cartoon of modernism that has little to do with genuine article.

Furthermore, Surrette is very good on how the early moderns read Dante. Though the importance the early modernists accorded Dante’s work has long been known, Surrette has enabled us to understand the importance that Dante had for them in a new way. We who belong to the generation that regularly read quotations from Dante (translated in English) in the books we read before leaving grade school, and the *Divine Comedy* soon after reaching high school, respond to the name “Dante” as to an institution that was always there and always respected. But it was different for the early English-language modernists. Knowledge of the complete *Divine Comedy* was still recent in their day. The first full translation appeared only in 1802, and Carey’s more widely read 1814. The appearance of Carey’s translation touched off something of a Dante craze that had not subsided when Yeats, Pound and Eliot were young men. These were years in which knowledge of Dante’s work was very fashionable.

That Pound read Dante as conveyer of banished Provençal ideas is clear. He associated Dante with the Provençal poets early in his career, for he tells us that Dante inspired his interest. Pound even suggests that the Provençal poets transmitted the Eleusian gnosis to Dante.

Surrette fails to take up a key issue associated with Pound’s claim, however. Academic orthodoxy claims that in Dante’s time, almost no information on Provençal writing was available, but for a few anthologies to which a Dante could not have had access. Pound’s intuitions on these matters may have the more penetrating, however. Peter Makin in *Provence & Pound* does a fine job of presenting the case that Dante could have known the works of some Provençal poets. It is surprising that Surrette does not really take this up, for by not doing so he makes Pound’s claims seem more eccentric and baseless. Perhaps because he felt under siege, Surrette spends more time than he should have on the history of “who read what when,” to build an irrefutable case, based on cold, hard historical evidence rather than speculative interpretation, for the role Theosophy played in the founding of modernism. He might have spent more time considering how Theosophical interests provide an alternative explanation for more the more prominent features of key modernist works. For example, he could have related the modernists self-reflexive concern with language and their self-consciousness about its limitations to their Theosophical interests—the point I referred to above. For the experience of language’s limitations weighed heavily on Pound

. . . there remains the undiscussable Paradiso. And any reach into it is almost a barrier to literary success.

Sì vid’ io ben piu di mille splendori
Trarsi ver noi, ed in ciascun s’udia
“Ecco chi crescerà li nostr amori.”

There is nothing in the modern critical mechanism to deal with, and I

doubt if there is anything handy in our poetic vocabulary even to translate, the matter of this and the following *Cantos*

Vedeasi l'ombra piena di letizia
Nel flugor chiaro che de lei uscia

Sober minds have agreed that the arcanum is the arcanum. No man can provide his neighbor with a Cook's ticket thereto. . . .

A gain in narrative sense from 1600 to 1900, but the tones that went out of English verse? The truth having been Eleusis? and a modern Eleusis being possible only the wilds of a man's mind. . . .

"I wish" yodeled Lord Bryon "that he wd. explain his explanation." That was in another country and a different connection, but I admit that the foregoing pp. are as obscure as anything in my poetry. I mean or imply that certain colours exist in nature through great painters have striven vainly, and the colour film is not yet perfected. Truth is not untrue'd by reason of our failing to fix it on paper. Certain objects are communicable to a man or woman only "with proper lighting," they are perceptible in our own mind only with proper "lighting" fitfully and by instants.

Reading the *Cantos* with an eye to their occult interests reveals that the true reason for Pound's insistence that he wrestled long and hard with language. Pound reveals his struggle with language not primarily in the interests of self-reflexivity or to detach language from the world so as to create an autonomous, freestanding structure. Nor does he do it to reveal the arbitrariness of the relation of the signifier to the signified, nor to destabilize language by exposing that the seemingly natural relation between the signifier and signified is really a cultural construct. He does not do so for any of the reasons that the good professors of our day give. Pound's tortured struggle with language is the result of something that mystics and those given to occult speculation have always complained about, that the mysteries are ineffable. This helps explain, too, Pound's deep interest in the negative theologies of the Pseudo-Areopagite and Scotus Erigena. It also gives a basis for Tryphonopoulos' principle for reading the *Cantos*; for if language cannot state the content of occult teachings, it can perhaps build a form—a sound form --that, if truly experienced, provokes an experience similar to that of insight.

Eliot's similar despair over the language is well-known. Pound expresses despair about language the every mystic (and not simply every modernist) must feel—even anyone who brushes up against the greatness the third, and greatest, book of Dante's *Commedia*, and even more, as I can testify, anyone tries to create a structure correlative to one's experience of *Paradiso*. Surrette might have considered the nature of metaphysical thinking and its relation to language as the basis for commenting on key features of the modernist work. He does not, but prefers to stick the facts of who read what when. Perhaps this is defensible as prolepsis, but I should have preferred some admixture of analysis.

Pound's ideas on knowledge (gnosis), light and mind are so central to his writing that an adequate triangulation of these three points encloses the major concerns of the *Cantos*. Read with an understand of its bounding ideas, the *Cantos* offers an exquisite initiation into the mysteries—coupled with cranky complaint about how a culture devolves when it does not open itself to the mysteries. It does nothing to recuperate Pound's political beliefs (nothing could), but interpreting his cultural criticism in this way does much to make it comprehensible; it also sheds light on those *Cantos* Pound gave over to analyzing the history and effects of usury. Neither Surrette nor Tryphonopoulos deal with Pound's cultural criticism in this vein.

As concerns Pound, one troubling question prevails over all others: How did Pound

move from noble theological ideas to the wacky ideas of the occult? The answer is clear: through narrativizing the metaphysical ideas that were his real interest. It is one thing when a person argues that matter is light energy, that we belong to that light, that the flow of light manifests the divine creative activity. But that does leave one with the hoary, old problem of evil. And it is a short step from that the troubling recognition that innocents do suffer to offering the proposition that reality is bifurcated, composed of good and evil. From there it is a short step to the idea that there is a cosmic struggle between good and evil in which we, too, are engaged. And from there it is a short step to paranoid states, in which one feels the force of evil might prevail, to an identification with the diminished good forces, the messianic sense one must save the world, and from there to visits to Roosevelt to try to stop the slaughter.

Pound took every one of those steps. The *Cantos* figure the division of the world into good and evil. Good was *humanitas*, piety, light, filial feelings, creative energy, the *mysterium, energeia*, fecundity, the Woman (who raises the passive intellect to the level of the active intellect.) He had a harder time with the hylic force: Sometimes he thought it was greed, sometimes the economic system, sometimes usura, sometimes Geryon; and, hideously, sometimes it was the Jews. Whatever is strong the *Cantos* derives from the tradition light metaphysics that undergirds the former. Whatever is weak derives from his dramatizing and narrativizing the clash between good and evil. It is our good fortune that when he managed a conflict free identification with the good forces, he produced some of the most beautiful verse in English this century—enough to make him, I think the most important writer in English of this century.

Surette and Tryphonopoulos, by stressing the mythological aspect of Pound's writings stress the narrativizing aspect of his cult doctrines; that is, they depict the aspects of Pound that are still discernible when we read the *Cantos* through the filter of Frazer. But there is another way of looking at Pound's work (and, I think, at the work of other early modernists) that can more precisely delineate what is great and what is troublesome in their writing. That way would be to read Pound as Surette intimates in his preface to *The Birth of Modernism* that Pound could well be read—through the spirit of Hegel. Why this has not been done baffles me, even though I know (by intimate acquaintance) the resistance—no, the downright hostility—that academics show to Hegelian studies.

In his first important philosophical writing, "The Difference between the Fichtean and Schellingian Systems," Hegel distinguished between reflection and speculation. Reflection arises from the spatio-temporal cognition of objects that seem to occupy an external world. Speculation arises when the mind takes itself as its subject; thus it fuses subject and object.

Hegel interest in this essay lay in showing the shaping role of the mind in all our experience. Many years later, Hegel published an essay in the seemingly paradoxically named field, phenomenology—paradoxical because the "ology" part claims for the study the status of rigorous science, while the "phenomenon" part, the part that stakes out its domain, refers to contingent appearance. How can there be a rigorous science of contingent appearances? Kant had provided the clue: If we can understand the shaping role of consciousness, we can have rigorous knowledge of the nature and limits of phenomena that might appear within it.

To this insight Hegel added another hypothesis, that mind, or better, the *Geist*, the spirit embodied in the collective consciousness of an era, is not static. It undergoes change and so has a history. Out of this came a phenomenology conceived as *Bildungsroman*, a chronicle of the stages of development of Spirit, of how it progressed through various forms and moved steadily towards the light of absolute knowledge and absolute freedom.

In one of the most famous examples from one of his most famous essays, T. S. Eliot asserts:

When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly

amalgamating disparate experience; the ordinary man's experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary. The latter falls in love, or reads Spinoza, and these two experiences have to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking: in the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes.

Another essay, on Remy de Gourmont, saw him coin his most famous phrase, "the dissociation of sensibility" to refer to the loss of integrity in experience.

Eliot uses experiences of the type that the poet has when his or her "mind is perfectly equipped for its work" to define the nature of metaphysical experience—which discovers whole that informs all particulars. In "The Clark Lectures," Eliot defines metaphysical poetry as poetry that attempts to fuse sense with thought. This is a remarkably Hegelian formulation of the nature of art (for Hegel, too, argued that a strong work of art involves a perfect balance between sensuous material and the universal Concept) and, had its Hegelian character been as broadly recognized by men and women of learning as we might have expected, there might be no reason to see Surrutte's thesis as novel. For we might have been spared the silly claim that modernism originated in the attempt to eliminate the Idea from art.

Furthermore, I think that what Eliot means by metaphysical experience is what Hegel meant by speculation, experience that recognizes the shaping influence of the mind. This emerges in his essay on the Metaphysical poets, in which he says they were "engaged in the task of trying to find the verbal equivalent of states of mind and feeling" or, again, that their work presents "a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling." He refers to what thought feels like from inside and to finding ways to convey that movement through words.

Eliot's formulations of these ideas were always a bit abstract. Pound offered brasher, and more sensuously engaging statements of related ideas. In the *ABC of Reading*, Pound states:

Language is a means of communication. To charge language with meaning to the utmost possible degree, we have, as stated, the three chief means:

- I throwing the object (fixed or moving) on the visual imagination.
- II inducing emotional correlations by the sound and rhythm of speech.
- III inducing both of the effects by stimulating the association (intellectual or emotional) that have remained with the receiver's conscious in relation to the actual words of word groups employed.

(phanopeia, melopeia, logopeia)

It is not too far from these precisions to the vague idea that poetry presents the movement of the mind, that aspect of Pound's verse that Allen Ginsberg emphasized. In turning literature towards becoming a chronicle of inner experience, Pound turns verse away from speculation toward reflection (and thereby overcomes the criticism of Dante that Hegel offered in the preface to the *Phenomenology*). Pound's fundamental project, really, was to present the phantastikon, that precarious mental bubble that circumscribed the poet's mind and reflected aspects of the microcosms, becoming ever more real as he recognizes the essential unity of thought and light, and that ideas perdure.

That the phantastikon is what we ordinarily take to be real is the metaphysical proposition that produced the paratactical style. It is the recognition that founded the central distinction of modernist esthetics, between reference and presentation. Furthermore, the identification of the

real with the phantastikon implies that *palengensis* was a transformation not in the status of beings as in the way the initiate perceived. This transformation of perception (I think) provides the grounds for the modernist aesthetic of irony. We can derive all the founding principles of modernism from the secret teaching that reality is phantastikon, a bubble of circumvolving consciousness whose contents have the status of eternal, unchanging ideas or of mind (*nous*), which we can appreciate or not, but must not try to possess. These propositions, as banal and cliched as they are, account for all that is great in the *Cantos*. Along side that there is Pound's conception of history as narrative, his paranoid, conspiratorial notions, his attempt to provide a narrative armature for the decline of the West, his rants, and all the rest. These aspects of the *Cantos* show that one emphasizes *mythos* at one's peril, especially in the time of the written word when the entrancing repetition of sound has less effect. Can we hope for poetry's power to be restored, when we do not read aloud to one another, when many parents put their little ones in front of the tube instead of snuggling up with them and reading to them? How many under the age of twenty are familiar with the spell that the sound of language casts?