TABOO: THE ACTUAL MODERNIST AESTHETIC, MADE REAL

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Notre Dame in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Christopher David Chapman

Stephen Fredman, Director

Graduate Program in English
Notre Dame, Indiana
July 2011
TABOO: THE ACTUAL MODERNIST AESTHETIC, MADE REAL

Abstract
by
Christopher David Chapman

This study traces an important part of a major theoretical development (if not the theoretical development) in contemporary Critical Theory by offering a brief discussion of those theorists and one exemplary poet who have inaugurated our ongoing curiosity about modernist allegory. Critics such as Robert Hullot-Kentor, Susan Buck-Morss, and Jerome McGann have already demonstrated at length the impact of modernist concepts of allegory on our reception of contemporary Theory and Poetics. My purpose here is not to repeat their arguments about the meaning of Walter Benjamin and T.W. Adorno’s definitions of allegory, nor to make the case that Ezra Pound knowingly developed his own poetic according to their program. Rather, I wish to offer a discussion and presentation of the theory of allegory which demonstrates its origins in the profound interest in natural history that held modernism in its nascent grip. Meanwhile, even here, the relationship between allegory and modernism cannot be exhausted through discovering its origins in this formative philosophical climate. This is due to the fact that natural history was an absorptive and expansive term that allowed for refinement without reduction as it came to signal entire processes of cultural, linguistic, and aesthetic
practice. At their centre, though, are a set of concerns that obsessively interested
Benjamin, Pound and Adorno – the relationships that obtain between names, titles, fate,
and taboo. Allegory is Benjamin’s name for the sum of the processes that produce natural
history. When fate allegorically critiques titles it demonstrates that history is not a linear
triumphal process, but the realization that nature, too, expresses itself as history.
Likewise, when names allegorically critique taboo, they demonstrate that history is
constructed by nature. Adorno retains these concerns and offers a different understanding
of natural history, leaving allegory’s dialectical process intact, but pointed towards a new
construal of the relationships that obtain between its terms. Allegory, hence, became the
open-ended theory through which modernist art works are still being construed. This is to
say that Benjamin, Adorno, and Pound are symptoms of those pervasive anxieties that
were produced from the loss of what once were teleological understandings about the
demarcation between nature and history. Hidden here is the loss of transcendental
concepts that once made thinking about nature and history moot, secure in their
teleological separation. Transcendental explanations had the capacity, through taboo,
allegory, and language, to make their distinction explicable and manifest. Modernity asks
us to lose that which teleological explanations have always been willing to lose, as if it
were obviousness itself, the guaranteed distinction between nature and history.
Nathan
CONTENTS

PREFACE ........................................................................................................................................ iv

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................................................................................... vii

CHAPTER ONE: TABOO: THE ACTUAL MODERNIST AESTHETIC, MADE REAL .......................................................... 1

CHAPTER TWO: LONG SERIES OF TRANSLATIONS: THE “UR-CANTOS” CRITICAL ANTIQUARIANISM ................................................................................................. 44

CHAPTER THREE: LONG SERIES OF TRANSLATIONS: ANTIQUARIAN-CRITICISM IN “HOMAGE TO SEXTUS PROPERTIUS” ...................................................................................... 69

CHAPTER FOUR: DE-PERSONALIZATION AND E.P.’S FICTIONAL CREATIVITY IN “HUGH SELWYN MAUBERLEY” ........................................................................................................ 97

CHAPTER FIVE: “DO YOU WANT ANY MORE OF THIS ARCHAIC INFORMATION ON FOLKS, UP TO 1745?”: RETHINKING EZRA POUND’S ITALIAN RENAISSANCE AS DE-PERSONALIZED POETIC PRACTICE .................................................................................... 123


WORKS CITED ......................................................................................................................................... 180
This dissertation recovers a lost theory of language created by Walter Benjamin, which served as a substrate for his well-received notions about culture and dialectical materialism. The first chapter explains this theory and its origins in Benjamin’s thoughts about “natural history.” In subsequent chapters I apply this theory to one exemplary modernist poet, Ezra Pound. Because Benjamin’s theory, as it relates to the processual relationship that exists between names, titles, and that which he considers to be “taboo,” has a much wider application, in its unique premises, for the study of modernist literature, Pound’s work reveals itself to be especially apt for just this application. Explaining how Pound’s work exemplifies this theory requires looking at it through the lenses of a variety of methodologies and disentangling it from one of the primary tropes of its ongoing reception – the flight into “impersonality.”

In chapters two and three I connect Benjamin’s theory of language to the two long poems Pound collects under the volume of his poetry titled *Quia Pauper Amavi*. In chapter two I organize a reading of Pound’s so called “Ur-Cantos” through an interrogation of their publication history, applying the methods and concerns related to the field of “genetic” studies, for what it can tell us about his progress towards creating a de-personalized poetry, a pre-requisite in Benjamin’s estimation of modernist literary expression, that, according to Benjamin could reveal natural history. In sum, natural history is the name of those processes whereby names become titles, taboo’s
objectification, while titles are allegorically critiqued and made to reveal the names that they wrongly privatize, demonstrating their natural element as fate’s avatar in time.

The third chapter approaches Benjamin’s theory by developing Pound’s attempt to represent that which has been rendered taboo by institutional receptions of Sextus Propertius’s elegies. *Quia Pauper Amavi* refers directly to an “antique” mode of reception that helped Pound to discover a forgotten element within Propertius’s work concerning his relationship with his pre-Roman precursors. Pound felt that this inheritance had been forgotten by contemporary scholarship. In the moment that Pound translated Propertius, he was being institutionally remembered for his position among the fledgling instigators of the Roman elegiac tradition. Ovid, the last and transitional figure in the Roman tradition (and the author of the *Ars Amatoria*, in which the half-line “quia pauper amavi” appears), was supposed to have been the “sexual cynic” in distinction to Propertius’s displays of sincerity. In these two chapters I connect Pound’s poetry to the consanguineous avatars of Benjamin’s linguistic theory that he describes in *The Arcades Project* as Collectors and Allegorists, understanding their identities as being species of one common antiquarian spirit. This is done so that it is possible to demonstrate the way in which Pound’s poetic disposition aligns itself with Benjamin’s advocacy of de-personalized expression in the pursuit of the allegorical critique of taboo. What becomes apparent in the “Ur-Cantos,” and his critique by translation, “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” is the way in which de-personalized expression places a particular emphasis on the history of interpretation, as these poems carefully consider the subject of anachronism within literary works. De-personalization asks that we read the fictitious author of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” “E.P.,” in just this way.

v
The fourth chapter considers the merits of Benjamin’s argument about taboo against recent theories of impersonality more broadly, as they apply to the way Pound was sending up the effete dispositions of late nineteenth century biography through the fictionally creative author of “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.” Less a reading of “Mauberley” itself than of those theories of impersonality that reduce Pound’s work to the brackish peck of his own ego, this chapter refines Max Saunders’ theory of “allobiography.” Saunders provides a fruitful way to consider the work-immanent procedure of de-personalization, refining the way we might imagine its formal deployment in modernist texts.

The fifth chapter, and the final reading of Pound’s work, considers the social effects on poetic production that de-personalized poetry makes available by recounting the story of Pound’s co-creation of *A Draft of XXX Cantos* with his collaborator, Nancy Cunard. The final chapter returns to the question of Benjamin’s theory by engaging with T.W. Adorno’s deployment of natural history. There I reconsider Benjamin’s theory more broadly for what it does to our reception of the figure of modernist allegory in its relationship to de-personalization. Allegory, as Benjamin configures it, can no longer be thought of as an appropriative totalization. Modernist allegory serves to render reality in the “creative” names that natural history provides and that taboo would render invisible in its titled disguises.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge all those who have made this study possible. I especially wish to thank Stephen Fredman, Gerald Bruns, and Romana Huk for their consideration and patience.
CHAPTER ONE:

TABOO: THE ACTUAL MODERNIST AESTHETIC, MADE REAL

What modernism understood taboo to be has been forgotten. Past theories came to a premature clarification about this subject once its reference was quarantined to the effect of the unconscious, revealed in fragments through processes that allow it to confront the mythical and imaginary aspects of subject-forming ideology. Here, the work of Walter Benjamin is of critical importance. It was he who made the case for a modern theory of aesthetic language that left us, unlike Freud, with no perfect mystery about the substance, form, and content of taboo. This introductory chapter seeks to make clear that Benjamin’s linguistic system confronts the structural arbitrariness of bourgeois linguistics in a move that both posits and explains its origin in theological interpretations of sacred language. Benjaminian expression depends upon the thought that there is a deeper structure to language than the convention and iteration of transcendentally ratified signifiers. This deeper structure, motivated by the substance of what it is that is really taboo, produces what I want to call his two word (names and titles) theory of language. That, that two word structure serves to accommodate both the arbitrariness of the structuralist sign and its logocentric other, needs the contextual element of taboo to be correctly adjudicated for what it makes available to our apprehension of aesthetic modernism:

The collector actualizes the latent archaic representations of property. These representations may in fact be connected with
Taboo, as the following remark indicates: “It…is…certain that taboo is the primitive form of property. At first emotively and ‘sincerely,’ then as a legal process, declaring something taboo would have constituted a title. To appropriate to oneself an object is to render it sacred and redoubtable to others; it is to make it ‘participate’ in oneself.” N. Guterman, and H. Lefebvre, La Conscience mystifiée (Paris, 1936) (Arcades 228)

Taboo, under this definition, is the process where names become appropriated as or by titles. This seemingly capricious definition is justified for Benjamin who considers that things and their predicating properties are knowable only through a processual understanding of language that is aimed at uncovering and unfolding the presumption of sovereign self-participation that titles denote and thusly make “taboo.” “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” makes just this point.² For Benjamin the process by which a thing can be made taboo by a title is consanguineous with his sense in which certain other words become harbingers of our fate. That is, if titles are one kind of word that man speaks, and in so speaking is able to make something taboo, then the other word that man speaks is that which belongs to the category of names, and in so speaking man becomes the harbinger of his own fate. In short, “the theory of proper names is the theory of the frontier between finite and infinite language. Of all beings, man is the only one who names his own kind, as he is the only one whom God did not name…A man’s name is his fate” (69). The relationship between fate and taboo within the aesthetic practice of modernist expression – having its origins in the baroque trauerspiel – is the implied subject matter of much of The Arcades Project, connecting it most immediately to Benjamin’s early study of that genre. The two processes – making something taboo by giving it a title and discovering the fate of man and things in their proper names – are connected in what Benjamin understands to be “natural history.” The interrelationship of
these two processes is so deeply entwined that it is necessary to describe them collectively. The two processes, in fact, are related but pursue antithetical ends, one pointed towards the privacy of the title, the other pointed towards emptying that privacy of its autotelic, individual, authority.

Taboo, then, requires knowing more about Benjamin’s theory of language and his understanding of fate. It requires thinking about language as a force capable of possessing and acquiring things. It is the role and significance of possession in Benjamin’s thoughts about language that necessitates searching in texts beyond that predictable source, “On Language as Such,” reliable and important though it is. In many ways that essay’s thesis proves something of a red-herring, inasmuch as it is concerned to broaden a definition of language into something of a logical absurdity: “[W]e cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything. An existence entirely without relationship to language is an idea; but this idea can bear no fruit even within that realm of Ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God” (62). In order to understand Benjamin’s thoughts about language and the connection he makes between names, titles, and possession, and how the processes that may obtain between them might invoke fatal interruptions into “ideas” concerning both nature and history, it is crucial to include alongside “On Language,” the early screed, “Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy,” as well as the magisterial Origin of German Tragic Drama.

Imagining being able to read Benjamin profitably for this theory of language, it is necessary to see the entwinement that exists between that theory and those other avenues of thought he dedicates to pursuing dialectical and imagistic understandings of culture. This entwinement is overwhelming, as rhapsodic images of enlivened inanimate objects
remind us too hastily only of Benjamin’s mystical Adamite essentialisms (e.g. identities of words and things), which excuses, too early, the effort to interpret his cultural thought as anything other than his own eisegetical wish to instantiate a hermeneutic process of profane illumination, a hermeneutic that mixes mysticism with an attention to the oddness of inherited cultural artifacts. This avenue of thought about Benjamin’s putative subjectivism overlooks the substrate of his linguistic theory that actually makes the hermeneutic procedure of his linguistic theory possible. That is, conjugating theories of historical materialism against the scope and perspective that a thing’s aura imparts upon an event obviates the way the conjugation of thing and aura depends upon this underlying theory of language. Benjamin’s characterizations of culture in terms of monads, dialectical images, the now-time, are governed by the question of how to ethically remember the past, understanding that this, this ethically redeemed past, is historic only in the sense that it does not belong within any conventional narrative of cause and effect, within any aesthetic object that requires decoding, within any language that takes its own arbitrariness for granted. Benjamin’s struggle to redeem history by recovering what it is that has been discarded, or forgotten, highlights understanding the tension produced between stories about rational progress and Messianic eschatology grounded in adversarial dispositions towards the use and purpose of language writ large. That is, for Benjamin, there will be no second coming of Christ to separate the elect from those embroiled by sin in those end days forecast by religions-of-the-book. Benjamin announces in his infamous thesis about the angel of history, as it is represented in Klee’s painting “Angelus Novus,” that language makes both history and nature manifest. What we forget is what awaits us.⁴
The origin of Benjamin’s late thoughts about culture and its millenarian-apocalyptic conclusion can be traced back to his early thought about language, truth, and knowledge, found in his study of the German baroque trauerspiel (mourning-play) - *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (*OGT*). For example, Benjamin’s introduction takes a linguistic turn in its pursuit of apprehending and critiquing the ontological Platonic verities that constructed classical tragedy, and provides an important precursor to the desperate tragedy of *Angelus Novus.*

The idea is something linguistic, it is that element of the symbolic in the essence of any word. In empirical perception, in which words have become fragmented, they possess, in addition to their more or less hidden, symbolic aspect, an obvious, profane meaning. It is the task of the philosopher to restore, by representation, the primacy of the symbolic character of the word, in which the idea is given self-consciousness, and that is the opposite of all outwardly-directed communication. Since philosophy may not presume to speak in the tones of revelation, this can only be achieved by recalling in memory the primordial form of perception. Platonic anamnesis is not far removed from this kind of remembering; except that here it is not a question of the actualization of images in visual terms; but rather, in philosophical contemplation, the idea is released from the heart of reality as the word, reclaiming its name-giving rights. (*OGT* 37)

Here Benjamin is describing the linguistic nature of Platonic ideas in a manner that makes them amenable to his argument that the right activity of philosophy is naming, just as the Angel correctly assesses man’s delirious narratives of progress as the continuing story of alienation and suppuration from that which would be truly redemptive – to use words as *names* in a better fidelity with the obvious and profane “heart of reality.” Adam is Benjamin’s first philosopher, because, for him, “ideas are displayed, without intention, in the act of naming,” which placed the onus on later generations to try to recall the moment of the first names’ release to Adam’s contemplation: “They have to
be renewed in philosophical contemplation. In this renewal the primordial mode of
apprehending words is restored” (OGT 37).

In this act of naming and re-naming, Benjamin advances a two word theory of
language, silently at work behind that beguiling and eccentric quote about taboo and title,
mentioned above, from “The Collector” section of The Arcades Project. The first is a
word that exists as an original name, released from reality through philosophical
contemplation. This unintentional Adamite word is lost. It requires redemption through
ensuing acts of philosophical anamnesis. It is Benjamin’s concern to understand the
mechanism through which that Ur-name occurred by arguing for the virtual play between
nature and history that was the object of original philosophical contemplation.

Benjamin’s Origin of German Tragic Drama is, in some basic way, a treatise for an
environmental linguistics; words are formed out of natural conflicts that are captured in
historical time. Before discussing the second word, it is worth mentioning that it is
through this lens of how natural forces become manifest in names/aesthetic language that
Benjamin discusses the practices of baroque and modernist expression:

Glory was sought in devising figurative words rather than
figurative speeches, as if linguistic creation were the immediate
concern of poetic verbal invention. Baroque translators delighted
in the most arbitrary coinings such as are encountered among
contemporaries, especially in the form of archaisms, in which it is
believed one can reassure oneself of the wellsprings of linguistic
life. Such arbitrariness is always the sign of a production in which
a formed expression of real content can scarcely be extracted from
the conflict of the forces which have been unleashed. In this state
of disruption the present age reflects certain aspects of the spiritual
constitution of the baroque, even down to the details of its artistic
practice. (OGT 55)

These thoughts about language and their allusion to natural “wells,” “springs,” and
“forces” begin to articulate the way in which aesthetic modernism takes as its
foundational task the clarification of that which has been made taboo on the level of the introduction of a disruptive word, rather than through broad and general architectonic forms of speech and narrative.

The first word, in the two word theory, then, is the figurative word or archaism that is used as a mnemonic for redeeming the primordial natural word, originally released to Adam in his philosophical contemplation of reality’s heart as a thing’s name. The self-conscious coining of archaism and the devising of figurative words and verbal inventions is designed to help express the name for the real content of a natural conflict that can “scarcely be extracted” otherwise. This thought, that names are naturally occurring, intention-less/unintended objects, is anathema under bourgeois theories of language that think only of arbitrarily rendered, purposefully intended, conventions of repetition. “On Language as Such” argues precisely this when it takes aim at the “intrinsically false understanding” that we associate with the structural concept of the Sign (64). This theory holds that language is strictly transactional, allowing us to use words as tokens by which we signal our intention to communicate. Instead, Benjamin will hold that words are used to communicate the entire mental being of man immanently; we communicate in words, as they already express an intention when they are used as names. Similarly things also communicate; likewise their powers for rendering themselves known by language appear, wrongly, arbitrary. “Arbitrariness,” Benjamin argues, is just “the sign of a production,” spurred by the intentionless expression of real force.

As far as the second word in Benjamin’s theory is concerned, because it differs so greatly from the way theorists usually use it, and to explicate more fully what Benjamin means by its being “intrinsically false,” I am replacing the word “Sign” in this study with
the word “Title.” I do this out of respect for Benjamin’s latent Marxist critique of structuralism’s transactional bias, and for the presence of the word title within that quotation he presents in the *Arcades Project* concerning the nature of taboo. That quotation delivers most economically the connection in Benjamin’s thinking between the manner in which words can be manipulated when they are used as titles to create a taboo over natural historical expression. Natural history, Benjamin argues, is best expressed in the form of names rendered under the philosophical contemplation of reality. The anamnesis of natural history that is brokered by this kind of language must, I argue, contend with historical spiritual constitutions that become preoccupied with protecting the unapproachable privacies that are signaled by the belief that names immediately bequeath title and possession. It is this making of things into subjects of title and possession that defines taboo for Benjamin, and underwrites the greater intention of his project – to let truth critique systems that allow man to acquire and *possess* knowledge.7 The aesthetic language of modernist expression, as it follows its origins in the trauerspiel, is the best medium through which to launch the philosophical reflection that evinces criticism of the taboo making properties of the title.

Indeed, Richard Wolin has made the point that Benjamin’s theories about culture defer to the presence of Benjamin’s philosophical belief in objective truth. This truth cannot be discursively rendered, but captured only through the hermeneutic work of recovering the provenance of a discrete citation. A “dialectical image,” one of Benjamin’s many translations of his linguistic theory, is first a textual practice before it becomes a way of performing cultural criticism. Benjamin’s pursuit of truth in the way things become separated from their context means that dialectical images are to forego
the presence of leading commentary: “Truth was not a subjective additive, but something objective, lying dormant in things themselves. Truth was to emerge from an unmediated juxtaposition of material elements, insofar as it was something unobtainable through strictly discursive means” (“Benjamin’s Passagenwerk” 213). Modernism, on this view, is the practice of creating a storehouse for all those counter-discursive techniques of juxtaposition and disruption that allow this truth to emerge, as in a compendium of snapshots or citations. Wolin goes on to say that the truth that modernism discovers is atavistically romantic and suspicious of the medium through which it constellates its “material elements.” I would argue instead that, putting suspicions of language aside, it is possible to discern in modernist aesthetic practices that intend to write against or try to reveal that which is taboo a reorientation in historical thought about the nature of existence. Benjamin’s Adamite theories appear naïve only when they discount the complicated essence of natural history – that which Benjamin believes to have been made taboo – which these theories would name. For Benjamin, the play and conflict of natural forces that unintentionally give things names is not in itself a merely recoverable ontological fact. It is in itself a construct, or virtuality. Taboo, then, is the way a system of knowledge obscures and takes possession of truth as if its authenticity were the result of its embeddedness within a system of knowledge. It is in just this sense that the “poetic imagery” of modernism is designed to fulfill its practitioners’ latent nostalgia for “a past ur-historical stage of species life where nature was viewed fraternally” (Wolin 214). For Benjamin, nature has a history. Modernist aesthetics demonstrate and express this history by confronting the places
where fate – the agent of nature’s unintentional naming as well as its directionless force in time – is absconded by the mythical thinking that preserves and enforces title.

The remainder of this introductory chapter explains Benjamin’s understanding of the aesthetics and philosophy I associate with the act of concealment that guarantees taboo’s possessiveness, and how this privative tendency can be ameliorated and revealed through attentiveness to the relationship that obtains between names and titles. To conclude, I unpack the substance that this kind of attention reveals – natural history. The next four chapters apply a consideration of the aesthetics that this kind of focused unseating of taboo eventuates through readings of a selection of Ezra Pound’s poetry, alongside those critics/theorists who approach Pound’s poetry with a set of concerns that can help expose greater implications of his poetic discovery of the relationship that obtains between names and titles, that which he would come to understand and theorize as *logopoeia*, for Benjamin’s theory of language.

In many ways Pound’s work has been done a literal disservice. Quite often, our reading of his work ignores the obvious and careful interest he had in playing with names and titles. The first two Pound chapters provide a plain-sense reading of the way titles and names influence one another. These chapters observe the patterns of reflection that obtain between the title of Pound’s 1919 volume of poetry, *Quia Pauper Amavi*, and the two long poems it collects, the so called Ur-Cantos (“Three Cantos”) and the “*Homage to Sextus Propertius*”. The argument of these two chapters is meant to develop a critical awareness of the way in which these poems exemplify the poetic condition of *de-personalization*, that, as we shall shortly see, Benjamin believed to be an intrinsic
disposition to rendering an aesthetic language that provides a reflective philosophical critique for taboo forming titles.

These two chapters involve themselves in a conversation with another reader of Pound and Benjamin, Jerome McGann, who finds that Pound’s work is determined by its relationship to its present moment. McGann’s estimate of Pound finds itself at odds with the condition of de-personalization that Benjamin theorizes, wherein the past is celebrated for its being dead and disconnected from the present, a concern of Pound’s that these chapters are meant to bring to the fore. In their deployment of the ideas that Benjamin associates with the twin “antiquarianists” (Collectors and Allegorists) theorized in the Arcades Project, these poems from Quia Pauper Amavi exemplify themselves as avatars of de-personalized writing; these chapters demonstrate the way Pound’s poetic practice can be fruitfully measured against Benjamin’s theory of language and its relationship to fate and taboo. Collectors and Allegorists are exemplary figures in Benjamin’s thought. Their mutual interest in the past for its uncanny separation from the present, in its being for all intents and purposes dead, makes them avatars for the kind of modernist expression Benjamin theorizes out of his interest in the language he finds in the baroque German trauerspiel. The fourth chapter concerns itself with demonstrating what is gained by considering Pound’s de-personalized poetic practice over contemporary theories that seek yet to essentialize Pound’s authorship under the general rubric of impersonality.

The fifth chapter gives voice to the positive advantages de-personalized writing affords by showing how the narratological stance of fictional-creativity being solved and set upon in Quia Pauper Amavi allowed Pound to eventually co-create A Draft of XXX
Cantos with Nancy Cunard. The final chapter of this study returns to this first chapter by interrogating the premises of Benjamin’s linguistic theory as they were received, refined, and contested by TW Adorno. This chapter concludes by demonstrating how Benjamin and Adorno’s argument over natural history has silently affected our current understanding of modernist allegory, offering a different inflection into what de-personalized poetry such as Pound’s might have to offer to this concept.

**What does taboo have to do with it?**

Fashionably correct readings of Benjamin’s theory of language castigate its essentialism unfairly. Admittedly, it is difficult to overlook the set of assumptions that allow Benjamin to claim that man’s word “overnames” God’s ur-historical Word. These impoverished understandings of Benjamin’s theory of language fail to encounter what that theory holds as its unstated other in that contest between knowledge and truth that Benjamin describes in the OGT’s introduction. Is there a way of thinking about language that Benjamin found to be disagreeably unethical? Being inexorably exiled from the dignity of being able to speak a pre-lapsarian language grounded in divine intentions seems to be the only possibility. At the same time, necessary exile enforces a condition of freedom from worry about linguistic accuracy. As a final solace, we wonder how we might ever be able to pervert an already fallen and inherently gnomic language?

Benjamin’s essay, “On Language as Such and the Language of Man” states that “The human word is the name of things. Hence, it is no longer conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention.
Language never gives *mere signs*” (69). Benjamin is castigating the bourgeois theory for how it offers the illusion of a name’s arbitrariness. This arbitrariness makes names into potentially private expressions and tokens of positive intentional designation. In that essay, Benjamin describes the way *all* of reality communicates – that it is impossible to think of existence without language. The linguistic essence of man, however, is to communicate in names. Scaffolds of knowledge are then used to approach the truth of God’s names for things, but only when children are named is the creative capacity that God possesses achieved: “By naming each man is guaranteed his creation by God, and in this sense he is himself creative…The proper name is the communion of man with the *creative* word of God” (69).

Benjamin finds in the creative potential of naming children a creative use of language that could baffle the “Angel of History”’s logic of Messianic destruction by providing an alternative to the falsely arbitrary titles he associates with systematic knowledge that produce narratives of progress. With the putative essentialism of Benjamin’s “pre-lapsarian” theory of the name in mind, it is useful to assume that he has no patience with structuralist concepts of the sign. For Benjamin: “the word has no accidental relationship to its object,” even if it can be made, in its allegorical guise, to fit within modern hermeneutic practices that form parity between the meaning of the materiality of the sign’s signifier and its signified by asserting their conventionality; so much for the unmotivated conventional Sign. In what is surely a reduction, it would be possible to assert that Benjamin’s theory of language is analogous to his theories about culture where things – words, events, “material elements” scattered here and there –
come into their meaning through the intentional act of dislocation and re-arrangement of their position within genetically instigated orders.

Benjamin does mention the existence of divine pre-lapsarian names, certainly. Wolin correctly construes their tacit presence to have formed the basis of Benjamin’s residual desire to find and return to “a pre-paradisiac condition of purity and community that had been dissolved amid the ‘fallen’ continuum of history” (212). However, Benjamin can also be found to argue for the existence of another, more mundane, linguistic order. Hasty assertions about Benjamin’s Adamite linguistic theory seriously overlook those aspects of it that, in fact, foreshadow deconstruction and its dislocation of the transcendental signified — as, for example, in Benjamin’s belief that the meanings of the names that man uses develop within the history of their conventional transactions — that allows for the exchange of words for things in a bourgeois semantic economy. Benjamin’s theory of mundane human language, trafficking between the expressive name and the possessive title, does not depend upon the overdetermination of something like différance to inscribe meaning into any systemically rendered form. For Benjamin, a word’s meaning forms itself through an almost delirious, “phantasmagoric,” relationship to the forgotten divine word that it attempts to become but can only render ambiguously as a kind of catachresis. This transitive system allows for pure and divinely motivated Signs to exist in tandem with those that are their mundane, unmotivated, and unmoored shadows. Where God’s word is imbued with the permanence of “divine infinity,” the word that man uses to attain knowledge is finite and subject to historic determination. Benjaminian linguistic theory is far from being a clever latria to a lost pre-lapsarian wholeness; it is post-Adam and pre-Derrida.
Benjamin’s theories imply that the aesthetic language that traffics in these mundane place-holders, deployed by baroque poets as willful “archaisms” and “verbal inventions,” attempt to express what man’s titles render taboo. That which titles render taboo is the realization that natural history, as the formative matter of fate, is organized to produce the separation of man’s will from the destruction that he would avoid and which is promised to him in allegorical images like “The Angel of History.” This conclusion, and the ambivalent relationship that exists between words and things, is implicitly the subject of that section of *The Arcades Project* entitled “The Collector.” There, Benjamin asserts that an Allegorical imagination favors the spectacle of material destruction in its celebration of immaterial, mutable, concepts: “Allegory views existence, as it does art, under the sign of fragmentation and ruin” (330); it dispels “the illusion of totality or of organic wholeness” (331). Baudelaire is an Allegorist precisely because he has no interest in universals but is insatiably drawn towards fate; like the flaneur, he is interested in what turns up on the street, whether a whore, a piece of junk, an object in a window, whatever catches his eye. He differs from the Collector because: “Every intimacy with things is alien to the allegorical intention” (p. 336). The Allegorist collects things for evidence that would assist him in his attempt to augur God’s pure word for what it can tell us about fate. The “ur” word, and the divine order in which it participates, is perpetually under the revision of the Allegorist’s own personal illuminations about its noumenal character. The Allegorist treats each thing under his attention with equipoise because its significance is always guaranteed by an ideal order – but an ideal order that is formed from that virtuality that is natural history, fate’s avatar. It is the failure of things to meet their
meaning in the words he appoints to them that gives the Allegorist his winsome faith in a world beyond the titles that knowledge allows us to possess it through:

As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he’s collected remains a patchwork, which is what things are for allegory from the beginning. On the other hand, the allegorist – for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated – precisely the allegorist can never have enough of things. With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim for each one of them. [H4a,1] (Arcades 211)

Here, the two-word theory Benjamin described in “The Role of Language” is renamed and re-purposed: the pure word is appropriated and takes on the force of a legal judgment over the identity of a thing, offered up for singular possession in the form of a title or keyword in a mutable Allegorical dictionary. It is the Collector’s bane to provide some consonant explanation within and through the world of his or her collection for the underlying reality of the objects that he collects, unaffected by privative titles. By providing a title for what it is he is collecting, the Collector provides for himself the ability to possess and have an object in a tactile manner, inserting it into the physiognomy of his collection by touch. A title suggests that an object might be so possessed. A title forces objects to belong to an esoteric order that can be made available to “initiates” of an allegory aware of its participation within the ruin and patchwork of human knowledge.

That is, a title makes something taboo. Titles, in their legalistic “primitive form of property,” turn objects into that which is untouchable: “To appropriate to oneself an object is to render it sacred and redoubtable to others; it is to make it ‘participate’ in oneself” (Arcades 207). The Collector, though, is unaffected by this, and does not possess
his objects as pieces of property; better to say that he is possessed by them: “He appears inspired by them and seems to look through them into their distance, like an auger” (207). The task, surely, that lies before an ethical use of poetic language that would give vent to the absconded world of natural historical language would be one where the goal is to prevent the apocalypse from occurring through reminding ourselves of the transitory names of things before they become secreted away by the assumed purity of a legal judgment. Naming ourselves, is, seemingly, the only opportunity we get. How can man name himself, such that he avoids the apocalyptic end that all things tend toward? A proper name is not a sign (a common noun). If a taboo is something that is invoked to describe what is being repressed, then surely that taboo begins to be broken once it is given a name? Questions like these can motivate a reading of Benjamin’s theory of language that reveals, through its eccentric inclusions, a consistent explanation of an aesthetic that attempts to undermine the taboo which entitlement creates and why self-control, in the sense of living-up to one’s name, was deemed by Benjamin, in his prescription that one must attack taboo from the position of de-personalized authority, to be antithetical to avoiding apocalyptic ends.

In fact, the attributes that Benjamin gives to man’s language – that as transmission it moves from its genetic coordinates into the dissipation of its estuary, as information it mimics God’s power to inform things with meaning, as law it induces fate – produce a plethora of disturbing qualifications that complicate the relatively stable two-word division with which he begins and from which he forms the implicate order of the OGT. Here are a few examples of those utterances about the two-word theory that have just such a problematic quality. These quotations are found in “Trauerspiel and Tragedy”,

17
“The Role of Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy”, and “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man.” They are all written in 1916 and are collected in Volume 1 of Benjamin’s *Selected Writings*:

Language never gives mere signs. However, the rejection of bourgeois linguistic theory by mystical linguistic theory likewise rests on a misunderstanding. (69)

Sadness, unlike tragedy, is not a ruling force. It is not the indissoluble law of inescapable orders that prevails in tragedy. It is merely a feeling. What is the metaphysical relation of this feeling to language, to the spoken word? That is the riddle of the mourning play. (59)

This play is ennobled by the distance which everywhere separates image and mirror-image, the signifier and the signified. Thus, the mourning play presents us not with the image of a higher existence but only with one of two mirror-images, and its continuation is not less schematic than itself. The dead become ghosts. The mourning play exhausts artistically the historical idea of repetition. (57)

In the word, creation took place, and God’s linguistic being is the word. All human language is only the reflection of the word in name. The name is no closer to the word than knowledge is to creation. The infinity of all human language always remains limited and analytic in nature, in comparison to the absolutely unlimited and creative infinity of the divine word. (68)

Every speech in the tragedy is tragically decisive. It is the pure word itself that has an immediate tragic force. (59)

How language can fill itself with sadness, how language can express sadness, is the basic question of the mourning play, alongside that other question: How can the feeling of sadness gain entry into the linguistic order of art? (60)

Thus, with the ambiguity of the word, its signifying character, nature falters, and whereas the created world wished only to pour forth in all purity, it was man who bore its crown. This is the significance of the king in the mourning play, and this is the meaning of the Haupt- and Staatsaktion. These plays represent a blocking of nature, as it were an overwhelming damming up of the feelings that suddenly discover a new world in language, the world
of signification, of an impassive historical time; and once again the
king is both man (the end of nature) and also the king (the symbol
and bearer of significance). History becomes equal to signification
in human language: this language is frozen in signification.

There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature
that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the
nature of each one to communicate its mental contents. This use of
the word “language” is in no way metaphorical. (63)

Through the word, man is bound to the language of things. The
human word is the name of things. Hence, it is no longer
conceivable, as the bourgeois view of language maintains, that the
word has an accidental relation to its object, that it is a sign for
things (or knowledge of them) agreed by some convention. (69)

The linguistic being of things is their language; this proposition,
applied to man, means: the linguistic being of man is his language.
Which signifies: man communicates his own mental being in his
language. However, the language of man speaks in words. Man
therefore communicates his own mental being (insofar as it is
communicable) by naming all other things. But do we know any
other languages that name things? It should not be accepted that
we know of no languages other than that of man, for this is untrue.
We only know of no naming language other than that of man; to
identify naming language with language as such is to rob linguistic
theory of its deepest insights. – It is therefore the linguistic being
of man to name things. (64)

Lament, however, is the most undifferentiated, impotent
expression of language. (73)

Clearly, work needs to be done to tie together these various thoughts and
qualifications that Benjamin uses to nuance his linguistic theory. In what follows I offer
one such explanation. A “mystical linguistic theory” would misunderstand words if it
asserts that a word partakes in a thing’s own and secretive essence. “On Language as
Such” makes the argument that things have no words independent of the agents who
name them – Man and God. Man’s word for things is an ambiguous approximation of
God’s genetic “pure word,” revealed to Adam in his contemplation of reality’s heart.

“Pure” naming informs a thing with its divine philosophical import, whereas human names make a thing into an object of man’s knowledge. This difference determines the underlying assumptions about the aesthetic uses of language in those modes that Benjamin is most interested to explore – tragedy and trauerspiel (mourning-play). (While the framing assumption behind Benjamin’s theory of language appears to be a pre-lapsarian Hallowing of the Word, “divinity” is recast in Benjamin’s theory through the special definition he gives to “fate” as the force of nature within his definition of natural history.)

Tragedy, Benjamin argues, is fundamentally an imaginary conversation with God about man’s proper function and how he is permitted to act. Tragedy uses language to weigh evidence in human actions, represented in speech, against God’s present, yet unknowable, order. The tragic use of language depends upon the assumption that human emotions can positively achieve articulation in speech. For Benjamin, tragedy exists only in uttered language. To that end, Benjamin sees a concomitant limit to the dialogic essence of tragedy. Because tragedy relies solely on man’s words for expression, it produces a residual sense of despair. Tragic drama only saddens. This does not happen because of some fundamental mishearing or “complication” with regard to “the heart of reality.” Tragedy produces disappointment and sadness because it reminds one of the worldly constraints that a post-lapsarian approximation of the pure word places upon (dramatic) speech’s ability to encompass and reveal truth. Tragedy has to mimic the pure word in its ontological determination as speech, tout court. This mimicry is felt by the tragic audience as a reminder of its removal from that knowledge of the divine
philosophy that God imparts to things (events are things). In this aesthetic use of language, tragic mimesis reminds us that we do not speak with pre-lapsarian clarity.

The disappointment that this reminder produces, Benjamin argues, leads to an overhaul in the assumptions and purposes of tragic language. It is this overhaul that served to create the trauerspiel. “Haut” and “Staatsaktion” plays (proto-trauerspiel) replace tragic conversation about the “indissoluble law of inescapable orders” with language that orients itself to a mundane confrontation with and apprehension of this world and its things. The trauerspiel’s purpose is to measure the cost of being unable to satisfactorily name and accommodate a full understanding of the world and man’s place within it, unlike tragedy that orients its universe towards determining the justice of an immutable moral order. The irony of the trauerspiel’s presumption that man’s language thwarts understanding nature lies in the permission that it gives to profligate expenditure: “These plays represent a blocking of nature, as it were an overwhelming damming up of the feelings that suddenly discover a new world in language, the world of signification, of an impassive historical time” (“Language in Trauerspiel and Tragedy” 60). Benjamin will explain that the trauerspiel rejects the conversational premises of tragedy such that it might even be imagined to occur in perfect silence. The trauerspiel, he asserts, is conceivable as pantomime where tragedy is not. The “new world” itself, while rendered in language, is not at home there.

That is, the trauerspiel is involved with testing the possibilities that exist in human language against the “language” of natural things. The focus of the trauerspiel lies in its wish to understand the truth content of a language other than that which belongs to man, or even man’s imagination of God’s. It is for this reason that the trauerspiel can be
conceived of as a pantomime where tragedy can only imagine itself in an aesthetic medium that serves decision, purity, and the discovery of immutable law – all objects that require encoding in a communicable and transmissive language. This tragic imperative, Benjamin argues, is guaranteed by the tragic hero’s pointed and purposeful descent into silence as he contends with the probity of his seemingly demonic impulses: “Tragic silence, far more than tragic pathos, became the storehouse of an experience of the sublimity of linguistic expression…The tragic is to the demonic what the paradox is to ambiguity” (109 OGT). Trauerspiel, while it does continue to follow the paradoxes of the king’s sovereignty, changes its purpose by trafficking with the inescapable ambiguities of emotion. Trauerspiel does this by understanding that it is not man’s sadness or suffering that needs or can be articulated. The answer to the trauerspiel’s “riddle” lies in its ability to communicate with any “event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature.” The trauerspiel’s apprehension of the fallen post-lapsarian word arrives, Benjamin argues, with the discovery that it is not only man that speaks. A trauerspiel lets nature’s sadness fill language and gain entry into its aesthetic practice. A trauerspiel asks that nature be considered as that which is truly sad and makes the members of its audience so.

Benjamin discovers in his application of the two-word theory to tragedy and trauerspiel that while the creative appropriation of the divine word ends in our disappointment, the trauerspiel’s utilization of man’s word also meets a particular limit. Tragedy effects disappointment in its reminder that human language is inherently ambiguous, “bound,” as it is, “to the language of things.” In fact, tragedy consigns itself to a monological discourse with God. The relationship between taboo and aesthetic language, then, as it is now able to be formulated more precisely, is one where the
linguistic assumptions of the trauerspiel give vent to the emotions of these natural things, appropriated yet misunderstood in man’s language as it attempts tragic/conventional communication. In this way, taboo is the expression of nature’s sadness as it is spurred by man’s attempt to return to names the reality that is removed from them by titles. Benjamin is fond of saying that nature is silent because it mourns and that it mourns because it feels itself to be completely understood. What he doesn’t state are the terms of the paradox that this creates. Nature mourns because it is understood only by God. Nature mourns, that is, because it witnesses man’s failures to do the same. In fact, Benjamin’s theory is neither pre- nor post- lapsarian. It is a theory of natural language that admits that man’s naming power has its origin in the motive that nature provides to us through its original un-motivation.

Man’s language is motivated by its inability to properly appropriate and know nature with the same philosophical fidelity as was once registered in the Adamite name. Aesthetic uses of language, like that found in the trauerspiel, designate that use of language that can only but induce nature to forego its lament over man’s inability to properly articulate its identity. It is this, especially, that exposes the way trauerspiel seeks to exploit and draw upon the resources of the taboo-making function of titles. That which is the most repressed in Benjamin’s theory of language, and its relationship to baroque aesthetic practices, are the words in which nature laments man’s understanding and for which the trauerspiel’s aesthetic habits are meant to be a salve and leaven. “Lament” is “the most undifferentiated, impotent” use of “language,” because it is thwarted by those titles whose condition of existence it is necessary for natural expression to depend upon, if only in that these titles produce a knowingness by nature that it has been falsely
ensnared within post-lapsarian systems of man-made knowledge. Nature’s lament over its being misunderstood when appropriated by titles is another way in which to understand that which Benjamin designates as taboo.

To practice the aesthetics of taboo, then, is to use language that is aimed precisely at allowing nature its opportunity to express its own history in its own language. It can be made to achieve this by providing succor for its lament with an aesthetic practice that is not beholden to transaction, privacy, and legal possession. In that process, especially evident for Benjamin in the trauerspiel, a thing expresses itself in an understandable way once its need to lament has been leavened. In the reflection of the two word world, that lament becomes a word that is rendered against the noisiness of the titles that would induct it into bourgeois language, a language that behaves as a system of entitlement towards defining, rather than a playing with, sadness. Benjamin’s sense of what modernist expression achieves, as it exists in embryo in the trauerspiel’s play with figurative words and invented archaisms, has just this productive aspect. The sense that it is nature that expresses its history in the trauerspiel – in a kind of hieroglyph – achieves the end of showing that “There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents” (“On Language as Such” 62). Benjamin appoints to the appropriative capacity of man’s titles a negative, aesthetic, ability to render itself in depersonalized language. There is a double capture involved, as nature’s lament is at first thwarted by the bourgeois title that turns it into an object within a system of knowledge, and then again as nature’s sadness at being so misunderstood is captured through playing with titles that give back to nature a falsely unitary and total significance. Playing with
sadness allows nature to slough off its lament. It speaks as the other to both nature, as it is misunderstood, and history, as it is represented in a determined way, the victim of natural laws as they are defined by networks of entitled knowledge.

Benjamin would take these early thoughts about language, nature, and the taboo aesthetics that would express, or have expressed, nature’s sadness, and expand them into his dissertation. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* is also an attempt to provide a defense based in historical observation of that linguistic theory. This is because it finds in the Baroque that moment when nature had been most thoroughly repressed by the appropriative aspect of the title: “Of all the profoundly disturbed and divided periods of European history, the baroque is the only one which occurred at a time when the authority of Christianity was unshaken” (*OGT* 79). The effect of this authority gave aesthetic uses of language no actual let. Because man could neither submit to, nor rebel from, the language of Christianity, the trauerspiel emerged as the only legitimate expression of historical change. Real history is expressed in the trauerspiel, Benjamin argues, through its realization that nature mourns under man’s ambiguous words for it. The apotheosis of trauerspiel lies in its a-signifying, gestural, core: “[t]here is no such thing as a tragic pantomime,” Benjamin would note, both in “The Role of Language…,” and then again in *OGT* (59, 118). The things that a trauerspiel presents to its audience are topical, political, and easily suggest their being the result of a minimally submerged, universally recognized, historical fact or spirit.

What else does the trauerspiel reveal, then, about taboo, aesthetic language, and their relationship to nature and history? The answer lies in following Benjamin with his suggestion that knowledge of a thing exists only in its extremes – in this case, those
aspects of his linguistic theory that treat of fate. If fate is produced by the name man
gives to himself, then, as fate, it would seem to be the contradiction of the expression of
natural history. In seeking the quintessential example of the trauerspiel, Benjamin
concurs with Goethe that it occurred in the drama of the Spanish playwright Calderon, for
it was he that was best able to articulate the proper role of fate within natural history.
Instead of conjugating fate as the direct opposite to the aesthetic intention of the
trauerspiel’s articulation of natural history, Benjamin uses fate to demonstrate the
irreducibly dialectical identities of both “natural history” and “fate.” Natural history is
possible because of the grace that fate bequeaths; fate is more than the result of some
ineluctable and divine determination:

Goethe’s deference [to Calderon] is absolutely decisive if we are to acquire insight into
the drama of fate. For fate is not a purely natural occurrence – any more than it is purely historical. Fate,
whatever guise it may wear in a pagan or mythological context, is meaningful only as a category of
natural history in the spirit of the restoration-theology of the Counter-Reformation. It is the
elemental force of nature in historical events, which are not themselves entirely nature, because the light of grace is still reflected in the state of creation. But it is mirrored in the swamp of Adam’s guilt. For the ineluctable chain of causality is not in itself fateful. (OGT 29)

If the mourning of nature is to be heard, it must overcome its personification in
guilt. It is precisely the challenge that a philosophically deterministic theory of history
makes to nature that fate, as Benjamin construes it, serves to thwart. Trauerspiels expose
the lie of deterministic history, that “ineluctable chain of causality,” in their
representation of death’s significance as atonement rather than as inevitable punishment.
The best stance from which to write a trauerspiel and confront the falsity of the
personification of natural history in guilt – the aesthetic practice in which “natural
history” overcomes its being ensnared by titles – is that in which the aesthetic object has become depersonalized:

The influence of rational pessimism is less important than the desolation with which the practice of stoicism confronts man. The deadening of the emotions, and the ebbing away of the waves of life which are the source of these emotions in the body, can increase the distance between the self and the surrounding world to the point of alienation from the body. As soon as this symptom of depersonalization was seen as an intense degree of mournfulness, the concept of the pathological state, in which the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us, was set in an incomparably productive context. (OGT 140)

If fate is not the same as the determined, the trauerspiel discovers the mode of modernist expression that lets nature express dismay by “setting [depersonalization] in an incomparably productive context,” that only appears pathological and unnatural. Depersonalizing one’s speech is the economic imperative behind the production of this context. What follows, in conclusion, is an investigation of the way Benjamin understood the substance of that which aesthetically playful titles induce into being – the re-articulated lament of natural history. The re-articulation of natural history in man’s names is Benjamin’s implicit definition of allegory and the subject of this study’s concluding chapter.

**Natural History**

Benjamin first presents the concept of “natural history” in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. He uses it to describe what it is that allegory cites. By focusing on the relationship that Benjamin draws between trauerspiel kings and their possession of moral
decision-making powers, we can demonstrate what was specifically at stake in Benjamin’s first understandings of natural history.

For Benjamin, natural history would refer to events before they are privatized and ordered by kingship’s moral decision-making. This meant, for Benjamin, that the content of natural history was composed of names – words that were communally held and understood to be open to criticism and discussion in the discovery of their meaningful use. Natural history could not be the ordered words of a teleological story of conquest, the characteristic of the chronicles from which trauerspiel playwrights drew their source material. The king’s authorized words, Benjamin would think of as that which belonged to a separate medium from that of the name. Kings spoke with “title.” This is because titles are, when not being used ironically, inherently insular. They hold force for those who appropriate to themselves the power to designate them with meaning and the veneer of continuity. The trauerspiel study, with its sustained interrogation of the formal differences between kings and the dramatis personae, intimated a more general theory of linguistic mediation that underlies how things are thusly made taboo.

Natural history, then, is a history that would be free from the taboo that titles signify. In Arcades we are given the example of just this kind of historiographer in “The Collector.” A Collector is motivated by his will to convert privately held objects into publicly accessible resources, useful for a kind of collective historical understanding that fails to privilege divine hierarchies and definitions of “man.” This leaves open to the Allegorist, the Collector’s antagonist, that which is non-human for his own unique historical recording. What is at stake in the Collector’s conversion of the titles of things back into names is the redemption of the historical changes that these collected objects
could have made possible were they not personalized, privatized, and made untouchable for the collective. The promise of these changes, Benjamin suggests, was perverted by the fears that the sacralizing judgment of a title created. By “actualizing” the archaic representation of a thing, lost in the property-making power of its title, Benjamin is suggesting that the Collector removes real historical details from the realm of their being possessed into the world of things that compose natural history. The lineaments of Benjamin’s thoughts about, and examples of things made taboo, as they develop out of the OGT and are mentioned and thematically explored in Arcades, requires a closer scrutiny of the OGT to be made apparent. The effects of taboo are identifiable in that study’s thematic preoccupation with uncovering those features of the trauerspiel that distinguish between the roles and powers of the ‘dramatis personae’ and the role and power of the hero-king. The hero of the trauerspiel, the beleaguered monarch, was that person who uniquely could take possession of historical events and render them meaningful under the arch of titles, because it was he alone who wielded the power to make things taboo. A natural history would be one that is free from the king’s possession.

The opening chapter of OGT, “Tragedy and Trauerspiel,” is, upon first reading, understandably very confusing. First, among the many reasons for this, is the problematic manner by which Benjamin selects his evidence for claims that are specific to the trauerspiel genre. In many instances he chooses baroque-era studies of “tragedy” for evidence, with the unstated assumption that these studies are in fact mistaken about the title of the genre they take as their subject. Benjamin often blithely assumes that when a study is referring to “tragedy” that it in fact means to refer itself to “trauerspiel.” The difference between the two genres seems to be perfect in Benjamin’s thought, allowing
him to transpose arguments about them when he perceives the naïve category error that his study wishes to sort out. Of that difference between tragedy and trauerspiel, Benjamin writes:

Historical life, as it was conceived at this time, is the trauerspiel’s true content, its true object. In this it is different from tragedy. For the object of the latter is not history, but myth, and the tragic structure of the dramatis personae does not derive from rank – the absolute monarchy – but from the pre-historic epoch of their existence – the past age of heroes. (62)

Benjamin’s observation that the content of trauerspiel and tragedy differ in their substance stems from his reading of the Baroque dramaturgical scholar, Opitz. Opitz adumbrated the fundamental features of the Trauerspiel in “Prosodia Germanica, Oder Buch von Der Deudschen Poeterey” published in Frankfurt, circa 1650. Benjamin tells us to be aware of what only appears to be a cursory description of the trauerspiel’s “past age of heroes,” when Opitz writes that “it deals only with the commands of kings, killings, despair, infanticide and patricide, conflagrations, incest, war and commotion, lamentation, weeping, sighing, and suchlike” (62). These incidents, Benjamin asserts, really are the very substance of the trauerspiel genre. In these incidents lies the material that formed “natural history” for the Baroque. The depiction of princely autonomy at sea in a world of uncertain diplomacy and manipulation is that which makes the sovereign king the main character of the trauerspiel. The tug-of-war to possess the ability to determine the meanings of “weeping, sighing, and suchlike” that occurs between the king and uncertainty’s representatives in the “dramatis personae” is the condition in which the trauerspiel best allows natural history its articulation. Benjamin finds the centrality of this kind of micro-politics in the trauerspiel asserted by another baroque dramaturge, Rist (in
an example of those studies where Benjamin silently overlooks the generic titles of
tragedy and trauerspiel) argued in “Die Aller Edelste Belustigung Kunst-und
Tugendliebender Gemühter (Frankfurt 1666): “[w]hoever will write tragedies must be
excellently well-versed in chronicles and history books, both ancient and modern, he
must know thoroughly the affairs of the world and the state, in which politics truly
consist” (my emphasis 63). Trauerspiel grapples with the incidental details – the sighs
and moans that really govern political action – upon which general histories of cause and
effect rest.

The signal truth, for Benjamin, that the things of history were the substance that
informed the content of the trauerspiel lay in the fact that the trauerspiel had traditionally
been a form reserved solely for princes to write. The Prince’s position, as the only
autonomous social agent that could effect political change, intrigued Benjamin, who had
the temerity to seek in the conditions that underpin particular kinds of aesthetic
production an explanation for why kings felt themselves to be autonomous writers of
history. He did this by using examples of Royal forays into dramatic writing that he
determined were precursors to “trauerspiel-writing.” These included Julius Caesar’s
Oedipus, August’s Achilles and Ajax, and Maecenas’ Prometheus. It was, Benjamin
argued, these princes’ exposure to the mythical elements within the subject matter of the
plays that they were concerned enough to rewrite that contributed to the making of their
own biographies, their own fate, entirely different objects. That is, these writer-princes
become knowable as figures in the bastard-genealogy of trauerspiel that Benjamin
describes because of their enlightened aesthetic apprehension of the mythological falsities
and the “family of heroes” trope upon which kingship rested. Shakespeare’s “Julius
“Caesar” is an obvious case in point. It seemed obvious enough to Benjamin to argue that if Julius Caesar could rewrite the Oedipal myth, basing it in the lived experience of his age, then the substance of Julius Caesar’s own story must have necessarily been different in kind – making it susceptible to Shakespeare’s rendition as trauerspiel. The play of experience and blindness incorporate to the aesthetic education of kings was coupled, in the baroque, by a concomitant change in the cultural expectations that that monarch would use to attend his office.

“The sovereign is the representative of history. He holds the course of history in his hand like a scepter” (OGT 65). A new concept of sovereignty emerged in the seventeenth century, as a king’s power became thinkable as an extension of his being the agent and creator of myth and not its direct and inalienable subject. This new concept descended from juridical discussions about kings in the middle-ages; the focal point was the spectacle of tyrannicide. Murderous usurpers posed the ultimate problem to Baroque political thought. Who had the authority to depose them? The Gallican articles of 1682 changed the Church’s neutrality, arguing that the absolute right of the monarch had been established before their curia and therefore held no sway over its decisions. The Gallican articles produced a reversal in the Church’s concept of kingship. Rather than being the person endowed with autonomous power, the King becomes he who acts in accordance with the needs of the state to avoid unnecessary emergency:

Whereas the modern concept of sovereignty amounts to a supreme executive power on the part of the prince, the baroque concept emerges from a discussion of the prince to avert this. The ruler is designated from the outset as the holder of dictatorial power if war, revolt, or other catastrophes should lead to a state of emergency. (65)
Benjamin asserts blithely that this modern concept of sovereignty began in the Renaissance because of its rich feeling for a life that it wished to protect at all cost. This change in the cultural sentiment surrounding the imperatives that defined a king placed new demands upon them. Kings were expected to guarantee the continuity and welfare of the community in which individual lives could grow. Failure to do so broached the prospect of natural justice to intervene and have them forcibly removed by an ethically ratified usurper.

At the same time, Benjamin notes, anxieties over what might be lost during states of emergency emerged as both life expectancy and life chances grew. With the prospect of a mutable kingship, beholden to a wider principle of communitarian-humanitarian ends, the Baroque Restoration became haunted by general ideas about communal catastrophe. The prospect of an emergency meant facing the truth that total theocratic redemption and eschatology were no longer possible, inasmuch as they were once guaranteed in the figure of a divinely appointed, inalienable, kingship. The remnants of just such a concept of kingship demanded and endorsed an arbitrary tyrannical power that ought to be liberally wielded solely for the king’s self-preservation; under the new moral imperatives of the Gallican Laws, the king’s arbitrary self-protective and self-possessive individualism become atomized and dispersed. The principle of possessive individualism would come to belong to any man who legitimated himself through an apprehension of natural justice. Here Benjamin conjugates the theological/aesthetic ramifications of this democratizing of kingship:

The baroque knows no eschatology; and for that very reason it possesses no mechanism by which all earthly things are gathered together and exalted before being consigned to their end. The hereafter is emptied of everything which contains the slightest
breath of this world, and from it the baroque extracts a profusion of things which customarily escaped the grasp of artistic formulation and, at its high point, brings them violently into the light of day, in order to clear an ultimate heaven enabling it, as a vacuum, one day to destroy the world with catastrophic violence. (66)

The millenarian assumption of catastrophe was exacerbated in the Baroque period by the emptying out of all transcendental, redemptive, impulses that could be thought to form around the identity of the king. This millenarianism underlies all the worldly accents in the trauerspiel, as it was that genre that specifically responded to the real legal catastrophe that occurred under newly justifiable depositions of tyrants. Trauerspiels provide ad hoc theories about how to legitimize states of kingless emergency in a universe that, with the ends of motivated eschatology withered away, no longer posits a reason for any king’s self-interest in maintaining state order. The divine king had, at least, a salvific and self-preservative narrative to enforce his commitment to his own post.

Two sub-genres of trauerspiel emerged to deal with baroque millenarian despair. Plays about good kings brought low were called “martyr” plays. Martyr plays took one half of the Aristotelian definition of tragedy, relying on the production of pity in their audiences for their dramatic effects. On the other hand there were dramas that concerned the tyrant. These bade fear. In the baroque mind, hence, kings were never portrayed as being either a tyrant or a martyr in and of themselves. Trauerspiels present uninflected caricatures of these tendencies, free from redeeming or complicating features that might lead an audience towards the position of empathy necessary for catharsis. Both of these kinds of trauerspiel take the ambivalence of the audience towards the king as their implied content. This disposition produces fear and pity only. Catharsis of these emotions is impossible inasmuch as the trajectory of characterological change has been usurped by
the reality of the dialogic king-hero’s conflicted responses to a potential state of emergency, lacking, as he does, the fullness of character endemic to the new era of unbelief in the divine right of kings that would be the necessary prerequisite to his positing an arbitrary intervention into emergency. Both martyrs and tyrants must seem to be acting for the good of their communities. The mechanisms of identification and transference necessary to catharsis are irrevocably mutilated by the unavoidable hypocrisy this promotes. Autonomy, it was thought, should show itself in the king’s exemplary use of inalienable power. Kings would thereby demonstrate the essential relationship between violence and natural justice: “At the moment when the ruler indulges in the most violent display of power, both history and the higher power, which checks its vicissitudes, are recognized as manifest in him” (70). It was the trauerspiel, Benjamin argues, that would show this violence in the moment of its being thwarted by overwhelming, communal, exigent circumstances.

Trauerspiels frame this natural kingly autonomy by narrating its emergence from within a general economy of kingly insecurity. Kings are displayed in moments of indecisiveness as they wrestle between the contradictory natural demands that self-preservation and the communal good (encoded in the mythical definitions of community and kingship inherited from Classical and Christian myth) place upon them. The trauerspiel’s argument would seem to be that this very indecisiveness is at root the cause of terror and catastrophe. Manuals concerning the martyr-drama did not so much concern themselves with the king’s spiritual torment as with the physical suffering that the king faced under the conflicts between personal and public necessity. Afflicted with the faithlessness of friends and enemies alike, the martyr-drama demonstrates how kingly
magnanimity wins out in dire and painful circumstance. The Passion of Christ was recommended as a model of how to survive the chaos of a potential socially productive tyrannicide, even if the eschatology of redemption was unthinkable, and murder was just murder, foul.

In these details of kingly conflict under changing cultural mores we can now see how the idea of natural history is borrowed from Benjamin’s philosophical introduction for a direct application to the realities of the king’s conflicted and insecure position as the victim of unleashed forces. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* makes the following point:

> The constantly repeated drama of the rise and fall of princes, the steadfastness of unshakable virtue, appeared to the writers less as a manifestation of morality than as the natural aspect of the course of history, essential in its permanence. Any profound fusion of historical moral concepts was almost as unknown to the pre-rationalist west as it had been to antiquity; and as far as the baroque is concerned this is particularly borne out in an intention focused on world-history in the manner of a chronicle. (88)

The painstaking examination of the details of political intrigue chronicled by the trauerspiel showed that the “natural aspect of the course of history” was due in large part to “the corrupt energy of schemers” (88). “Nature” was simply a record of the schemers’ discontent as they sought to usurp the title-making powers of the king. So removed was the everyday man from ideas about virtue and morality that history, as the story of reasonable change, could only be conceived as the possession of the sovereign. Trauerspiel would show that everything else, everything human, everything that belonged to the dramatis personae surrounding the autonomous monarch, is impermanent. Benjamin argues that this impermanence was the proximate effect upon “the people” of
their knowledge that the sovereign, in all probability, could always be tricked into one form of catastrophe or another through the manipulation of his belief in his singular possession of the engine of historical change, his inalienable morality.

It was in the dramas of Lohenstein and Breitinger that the collation of moral principles and catastrophe began to take their examples directly from nature. In their plays, transgressions against the sovereign’s moral code were justified by the “natural conduct” of the various assassins of stability that surround him: “The authors had available an immense store of images by means of which they could convincingly resolve historical and ethical conflicts into the demonstrations of natural history” (90). Beside the moral sovereign, those men and women who populated the play as its dramatis personae stood as creatures who could only reflect, but not possess, the sovereign’s natural apprehension of the moral universe:

Since it was the view of the age that all his historical life was lacking in virtue, virtue was also of no significance for the inner constitution of the dramatis personae themselves. It has never taken a more uninteresting form than in the heroes of these Trauerspiel, in which the only response to the call of history is the pain of martyrdom. And just as the inner life of the person has to attain mystical fulfillment in the creaturely condition, even in mortal pain, so do the authors attempt to impose the same restrictions on the events of history. (90)

Nature, in this sense, posed a contradiction in thought during the baroque. The autonomous sovereign was marked by his access to natural moral motives, but was able to participate in their fulfillment only when being lowered by that creaturely condition he shared with the remainder of the dramatis personae. The baroque was marked by its antithetical yearning for nature while also demonstrating, in the guise of the sovereign, its harmonious closeness to it. For the trauerspiel, this antinomy caused history to become
relegated to the setting in which the agonies of a natural disorder that punctually attend Opitz’s “concrete history” could play themselves out, as if they were merely political and uninflected by the sport that fate presented to ideas concerning nature and history:

And just as the transformation of history into natural history in the baroque drama was overlooked, so too, in the analysis of tragedy, was the discrimination between legend and history. In this way the concept of historical tragedy emerged. Here too the equation of Trauerspiel and tragedy was the consequence, and it acquired the theoretical function of concealing the problematic character of the historical drama as devised by German classicism. (120)

In fact, Benjamin is revealing the continuum that exists in his thought between tragedy and trauerspiel, inasmuch as what distinguishes the sovereign in each of these genres is his possession of a morality that is held at bay from those who surround him. The origin of this morality is nothing less than that which had constituted the mythological underpinnings of tragedy – antique Greek and Christian story. The trauerspiel sovereign, by virtue of his possession of the tradition of classical mythology to guide him in his decision-making process – e.g.: Julius Caesar’s rewriting of Oedipus – is that figure whose eventual violence singularly occludes the possibility for actual, concrete, natural history to transpire among the dramatis personæ who exist in adjacency to him. It is the common cleavage between what lies in the setting of either a tragedy or a trauerspiel that guarantees their shared identity. Benjamin, against his express wish to separate the two genres in our philological imagination, showed that both tragedy and trauerspiel do exist within a philosophical and aesthetic continuum. The point that should be clear is that natural history, allegory’s substance as Benjamin first conceived it, was available in those essential details of non-human figuration and force that led to the moral consternation of kings.
Taboo, then, as the object against which Modernism offers its critique, is not the taboo that Freud theorizes. Freud’s premise that taboos are created to protect us from an invisible “mana” that is capable of producing our destruction seems out of place beside the modernist “real” that experiences nature and history, both, as the forces of fate that shape it. If we agree that "mana" is something communicable and contagious, we seem forced to accept its being symbolically manifest. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud uses the example of a Maori chief to demonstrate this premise. The chief refuses to blow on a fire out of the fear that his breath, containing his disproportionate share of sacred mana, would infect the meat in the pot sitting over it, “so that the eater, infected by the chief’s breath would surely die” (28). Freud analyzes the logic of communication and contagion that makes this belief system possible and attributes it to man's ability to think symbolically. A symbol, on this score, is a thing that manifests the basic qualities of that which it signifies either by direct contact (contagion) or by resembling its essential qualities (communication). The chief’s breath symbolizes his immense power, and in a simple contest with another man's, would cause his death. A taboo arises to protect people from these natural iniquities. This theory of analogical communication and direct contagion, though, is not really at home within Benjamin’s thinking about taboo and the world of natural history that can be known under aesthetic uses of language that denude the surface of that which has been absconded by titles. It will be to the work of Ezra Pound that we turn for an example of how that natural history can be revealed by modernist expression that is attentive to this relationship.
Notes

1 In an early, unpublished, text concerning the origin of modernist language in baroque dramatic traditions, Benjamin writes:

The word as the pure bearer of its meaning is the pure word. But alongside this, we find a word of another sort that is subject to change, as it moves from its source toward a different point, its estuary. Language in the process of change is the linguistic principle of the mourning play. (“The Role of Language in the Trauerspiel” 60)

The two word theory of language has its origin, as we shall see, in Benjamin’s study of the trauerspiel.

2 Benjamin writes:

The existence of language, however, is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents. This use of the word “language” is in no way metaphorical. (62)

3 George Steiner’s introduction to the Origin of German Tragic Drama describes its scope, one that emphasizes this concern:

From an epistemological-formal point of view, and the two terms must be seen as interwoven, these cobwebbed texts were the occasion for a chain of reflections on the nature of aesthetic objects, on the metaphysical presumptions of allegory, on language in general, and on the problem, obsessive to Benjamin, of the relations between a work of art and the descriptive-analytic discourse to which it is the target. (15)

4 IX

My wing is ready for flight,
I would like to turn back
If I stayed timeless time,
I would have little luck

Mein Flugel ist zum Schwung bereit,
ich kehrte gern zurück,
denn blieb ich auch lebendige Zeit,
ich hätte wenig Glück.

-Gerhard Scholem, “Gruss vom Angelus”

A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

(Benjamin. Collected Works: Volume 4, 392)

The angel of history replaces the messiah and Benjamin re-reads the Messianic age’s utopia as being implacably removed from us by the total destruction that happens when we misread history as progress enchained to narratives of sequential causality. The way into heaven is blocked by this misprision even as that redemption remains possible in the angel’s unbreakable concentration upon, and interest in, man’s condition. Absconded, utopia, becomes a natural force separating man from the angelic messiah’s redemption, as he circles inside a world where the misreading of historical progress, as if it were that utopia’s harbinger, is overdetermined. Benjamin sides with the utopic possibilities present in all that is disconnected and disorganized in the angel’s fascinated gaze over history rather than with a Messiah that demands our perfect rupture in and with time.

George Steiner’s introduction to the OGT also argues that it was “as a philosopher of language (a Sprachphilosoph), a species entirely different from, in fact antithetical to what Anglo-American usage identifies as ‘linguistic philosophers’, as a metaphysician of metaphor and translation as was Coleridge, that Benjamin accomplished his best work” (20). Steiner realized that Benjamin’s theory of language, that it was an expression of historic reality, implied that a deep connection existed between words and man’s sense of fate:

Benjamin connects the strong caesura in the seventeenth-century alexandrine with the baroque instinct towards a segmented yet also equilibrated structure of statement. His hints towards a linguistic analysis of baroque theatrical utterance, of the way in which a pronouncement exercises an immediate, palpable fatality over speaker and hearer – almost
every locution being, in essence, either curse or invocation – are pioneering. (Steiner 20)

6 Benjamin writes, in “On Language as Such”:

Anyone who believes that man communicates his mental being by names cannot also assume that it is his mental being that he communicates, for this does not happen through the names of things – that is, through the words by which he denotes a thing. And, equally, the advocate of such a view can assume only that man is communicating factual subject matter to other men, for that does happen through the word by which he denotes a thing. This view is the bourgeois conception of language, the invalidity and emptiness of which will become increasingly clear in what follows. It holds that the means of communication is the word, its object factual, and its addressee a human being. (65)

7 Benjamin argues that the treatise is the proper philosophical form because it abandons the pretense of making a convincing argument in a systematic form for one that depends upon the writer’s “stopping and restarting with every sentence” (OGT 29). This attention to the matter of each sentence demands that a reader pauses to reflect:

This form can be counted successful only when it forces the reader to pause and reflect. The more significant its object, the more detached the reflexion must be. Short of the didactic precept, such sober prose is the only style suited to philosophical investigation. Ideas are the object of this investigation. If representation is to stake its claim as the real methodology of the philosophical treatise, then it must be the representation of ideas. Truth, bodied forth in the dance of represented ideas, resists being projected, by whatever means, into the realm of knowledge. Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of – even if in a transcendental sense – in the consciousness. The quality of possession remains. For the thing possessed, representation is secondary; it does not have prior existence as something representing itself. But the opposite holds good of truth. For knowledge, method is a way of acquiring its object – even by creating it in the consciousness; for truth is self-representation, and is therefore immanent in it as form. Unlike the methodology of knowledge, this form does not derive from a coherence established in the consciousness, but from an essence. Again and again the statement that the object of knowledge is not identical with the truth will prove itself to be one of the profoundest intentions of philosophy in its original form, the Platonic theory of ideas. Knowledge is open to question, but truth is not. (29-30)
Benjamin connects this pursuit of truth with the possibilities reflection holds in its presentation of a name.

The structure of truth, then, demands a mode of being which in its lack of intentionality resembles the simple existence of things, but which is superior in its permanence. Truth is not an intent which realizes itself in empirical reality; it is the power which determines the essence of this empirical reality. The state of being, beyond all phenomenality, to which alone this power belongs, is that of the name. This determines the manner in which ideas are given. But they are not so much given in a primordial language as in a primordial form of perception, in which words possess their own nobility as names, unimpaired by cognitive meaning. (36)

Benjamin’s sense of “truth” involves his description of a scaffolding that dispenses with unitary and monological genetic beginnings. For Benjamin a truth is something that occurs once a multiplicity of perspectives has been adumbrated and synthesized. Instead of genetic truths, Benjamin argues for a return to origins, but an origin that is essentially “inauthentic” in its virtuality:

Virtually, because that which is comprehended in the idea of origin still has history, in the sense of content, but not in the sense of a set of occurrences which have befallen it. Its history is inward in character and is not to be understood as something boundless, but as something related to essential being, and it can therefore be described as the past and subsequent history of this being. The past and the subsequent history of such essences is – as a token of their having been redeemed or gathered into the world of ideas – not pure history, but natural history. The life of the works and forms which need such a protection in order to unfold clearly and unclouded by human life is a natural life. Once this redeemed state of being in the idea is established, then the presence of the inauthentic – that is to say natural-historical – past and subsequent history is virtual. (47)
CHAPTER TWO:

LONG SERIES OF TRANSLATIONS: THE “UR-CANTOS” CRITICAL ANTIQUARIANISM

In his 1953 reissue *Diptych: London-Rome*, Ezra Pound made it clear that the full text of “Homage to Sextus Propertius” was meant to include the Ovidian epigram “quia pauper amavi” that he had once used as the title for the entire volume of poems in which it was first collected. What this authorial directive entails to the reception of the 1919 publication of *Quia Pauper Amavi* is the focus of the following two chapters. This chapter focuses specifically on the relationship between that title and the so-called “Ur-Cantos,” through an interrogation of the genetic production of that poem as it occurs in the publication venues that eventuate their final condition as a finished work in *QPA*. The next chapter complements this through an interrogation of the other long poem under this title, “Homage.” These two sequences compose the bulk of the volume of poetry gathered under this title and participate specifically in its argument: fate’s role as the force of nature in the production of natural history is not something that can be made to reside in a totalizing moment or attitude. With reference to the Collector and Allegorist figures discussed in the first chapter, I show that Pound criticism makes a mistake when it seeks to locate meaning singularly in Pound’s reactionary stance towards his own present moment. His was as much a criticism of, about, and *from* the past as it was of the present. This critical antiquarianism is made apparent once we attend to Pound’s stance towards
narrative that affirms Benjamin’s theory of the process whereby natural history is induced into speaking for itself. De-personalizing his poetry, as he did in the Ur-Cantos, Pound was able to reveal different aspects of that natural history that had been occluded by the title-making function that can be created in states of authorial anxiety. The Ur-Cantos pay attention to the way the title that organizes them, *Quia Pauper Amavi*, could allow them to gain a foothold in a poetic process that reveals the de-personalized prerequisite necessary to making natural history productive. It is in the Ur-Cantos that Pound perfects this technique through working out his anxiety over authorial interruption and the problem of anachronism by way of a staged argument over poetic rhetoric and narrative in Robert Browning’s *Sordello*.

At stake, then, in asserting such, is the common critical belief (intensified by *Diptych*'s inclusion of the third early Poundian experiment in de-personalized poetry, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley”) that the *Cantos*, and their immediate precursors, offer their readers complaint against the facile attempts of modern governments to administer the real, a militarized economy, the louche interests of a mass public fascinated by consumerist kitsch, an anemic London avant-garde, etc. Undeniably, they do complain, but only as a cedilla upon Pound's supervening commitment to a particular kind of criticism that celebrates *antiquarianism* as the anarchic terrain that we observe as being at stake in Benjaminian natural history. In this, Pound’s work provides a superlative example of the way in which modernist expression can be positively used to critique and overcome taboo’s possessiveness. That possessiveness, in the Ur-Cantos, is a question primarily of narrative form. Pound’s ability to de-personalize his poetry requires this first important formal step over his predecessor, Browning, in the modernizing of the long
dramatic monologue, a feat he would perfect in *Quia Pauper Amavi*, through the Ur-Cantos and his homage to Propertius. George Steiner unconsciously quotes Benjamin’s discussion of modernist expression in the *OGT*, mentioned in the first chapter, when he asserts in his great book on translation, *After Babel*, that Pound’s “Propertius” is an exercise in self-conscious “verbal archaism.” This attempt at modernizing Propertius can be shown to have begun under the arch of *Quia Pauper Amavi*, as it initiates Pound’s development into a poetic practice that can be profitably read as an attempt to subvert the power of taboo through its ironic deployment of this title’s meaning within the body of the poems that it heads up, and for which it serves to allow the natural history Pound cites to express itself. Before returning to how the Ur-Cantos deploy the antiquarianist disposition associated with the figure of the Collector it is necessary to focus on the theories and reception of Pound’s work associated with Jerome McGann and contemporary genetic textual studies. Antiquarianism, the habit of collecting things that appear disconnected from the present, like messages in a bottle, is the necessary disposition from which to write a de-personalized poetic narrative.

1

Pound's details, the fragments from past narratives that he either culls from their sources, or tumbles and refines in the modernist machinery of litotes and restraint, in and of themselves do not register as invitations for the kind of allegoric interpolation at stake in Benjamin’s sense of what it is that is needed to render natural history. Steiner's impression of Pound’s archaism seems just. On one level these details are meant to offer totalities of the perplexing myths that might be used to describe the present, and in this, to provide a wider cultural matrix from which to describe its variegated articulation. These
fragments of lost totalities belong to that which is inassimilable within narrow and
deterministic explanations of historical change. That is, they invite the reader to accept
historical discontinuity and fragmentation as the real condition of history. This invitation
is the sinecure gesture in Pound's general hermeneutics of distrust, pace Steiner, that
dismantle staid myths and traditions. Pound and his readers, Steiner argues, collude in
recognizing their mutual ignorance as in the case of Cathay and what Hugh Kenner once
called the invention of China. Steiner writes: “Pound can imitate and persuade with
utmost economy not because he or his reader knows so much but because both concur in
knowing so little” (378).

This trust explains Pound's critical treatment of his sources; it explains how he
used those sources to point out syntactical potentials in modern English and American
speech dialects free from worries of producing accurate translations. Pound's
antiquarianism and his mode of composition spur the critical rediscovery of what would
otherwise be taken for granted – the radical narratological advance that the Ur-Cantos
make in Pound’s poetic development. A few words about Pound’s understanding of his
compositional methods in general and the disposition of genetic studies in relationship to
the pioneering work of Jerome McGann concerning the poetic significance of a book’s
“bibliographic code” preface this chapter’s interrogation of the importance of the
editorial pre-history of the Ur-Cantos as they come to appear within the milieu of Quia
Pauper Amavi. McGann has argued that Pound’s poetry, once contextualized through the
materials of the books he produces, must be viewed as inherently critical of their own
moment. It is with that view and its concomitant belief that Pound’s “catch” holds no real
antiquarian interest inasmuch as they make no attempt to interpret the past on its own
terms that this chapter wishes to contend. Benjamin’s theory of language, as it is refracted in the section of *The Arcades Project* entitled “The Collector,” shows us how best to observe Pound’s critical antiquarianism as it serves to reveal the natural history that taboo occludes.

“Antiquarianism” is an amenable term to use when thinking about the imbricated figures of the Allegorist and the Collector that Benjamin once described:

The allegorist is, as it were, the polar opposite of the collector. He has given up the attempt to elucidate things through research into their properties and relations. He dislodges things from their context and, from the outset, relies on his profundity to illuminate their meaning. The collector, by contrast, brings together what belongs together; by keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time, he can eventually furnish information about his objects. Nevertheless – and this is more important than all the differences that may exist between them – in every collector hides an allegorist, and in every allegorist a collector. As far as the collector is concerned, his collection is never complete; for let him discover just a single piece missing, and everything he’s collected remains a patchwork, which is what things are for allegory from the beginning. On the other hand, the allegorist – for whom objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary, which will make known their meanings to the initiated – precisely the allegorist can never have enough of things. With him, one thing is so little capable of taking the place of another that no possible reflection suffices to foresee what meaning his profundity might lay claim to for each one of them. [H4a,1] (*Arcades* 211)

Pound’s details, then, wear their invitations to discover their provenance – that to which they refer in space and time – *as well* as their means of becoming textualized openly, in just the manner whereby Collectors and Allegorists share a relationship to the things that they hold and which hold them in their attention. It is the combination of Pound’s awareness of an historical detail’s provenance and the act of fiction that allows for its poetic textualization to occur that make Pound’s works belong amid the antiquarianist
spirit that Benjamin describes hiding within Allegorists and Collectors. Pound’s Ur-Cantos are, specifically, those that can be said to belong to the spirit of a critical antiquarian, a person more interested in obeying the strictures of the Collector in his wish to render the provenance of historical artifacts and poetic objects correctly than in registering their Allegorical profundity.

A few words about Pound’s general disposition towards the Ur-Cantos are necessary. Attention to the surface-level problems surrounding the poem’s allusiveness led by an education in Imagist technique that ignores the distinction in Pound’s thought between phanopoeia and logopoeia (roughly imagery and irony) does little to illuminate the implications of the critical-antiquarian stance that is necessary to comprehending the import of this poem’s use and engagement with the significance of textual fragments. Focusing on imagery does little to reveal what is most interesting about Pound’s text. The fragments Pound presents are significant, but not simply because of what they mention and the immediate comment they may make on their historical situation. Rather, it is the hermeneutic procedure they require of the reader that makes them so beguiling. Pound’s fragments provide insight through their moving away from the reader’s desire to imbue meaning into their referent. This casting off of attention from the immediate meaning of the fragment to the tonalities and focalization through which the narrative is revealed in each fragment’s emplotment within the poem’s greater architectonics favors understanding the textual authority in which that referent had once been situated, sourced, and cited. Pound, that is, finds means to identify historical affects of textual authority before they become encoded by the titles that are used to identify these authorial affects symptomatic textuality. (The discrete totalities of these details render a world outside of a
structural factitiousness that the titles belonging to a standard history use for instantiation.) Attention to the way tone, disposition, and the implied context from which each fragment has been appropriated for how it plays off against the greater serial structure of the narrative renders an authority in Pound’s texts that approaches the condition of expression that Benjamin associates with the de-personalized stance necessary for allowing natural history to speak. This is possible inasmuch as these fragments undermine the logical systems in which they appeared as ornamental proofs within a pre-given system of cultural knowledge while also thwarting the serial structure of the current poem in which they are being newly embedded by mitigating its essential cohesiveness. The materials of philological provenance thicken the poetic medium, as Jerome McGann shows in his study of the poetic medium in *Textual Conditions*, but they leave us knowing that the forces that compel historic change are incomplete and unreliably known by the way their textual exemplars display ambivalence when they become dislodged from their contexts. Traditionally these fragments might become subject to the allegorical profundity of the Allegorist who replaces original authorial affects with a spectacular explanatory idea. The hermeneutic procedure that Pound’s poetic promotes serves to register a fragmented concept of historical understanding, eroding those myths of continuity and causality that pretend themselves as the essence of nature and history. It is this strategy of disbanding the interpolation of allegorical authority over each fragment that allows Pound’s efforts to let him de-personalize his poem for the sake of natural history. Pound achieves this form in the Ur-Cantos.

Jerome McGann has other means to explore Pound’s poetics that illuminate what is at stake in this form. *The Textual Condition* and *Black Riders* focus on the
contradictory registers of symbolic experience that obtain between linguistic and bibliographic-/material- codes and how these relate to one another in determining the meaning of a poetic object. McGann helps to clarify his hypothesis that Pound's details diagram the broken concepts that underwrite myths of historical continuity when he suggests that “the Cantos is a work which is constantly reflecting upon itself, and not simply in a meditative way” (129). Pound's works, for McGann, do more than elicit an aesthetic interest in the strangeness of their references and the imagery they come to find themselves textualized in. In general, poetics of conceptual fragmentation do not have to invite the separation of the concept’s provenance from its actual referent. In fact, this is largely the premise through which McGann reads Pound’s poetry when he finds durable evidence for his claim that the Cantos reflective habits are formed in a space that lies beyond the surface of their poetic narratives in the thingness of the very books Pound publishes.

In fact, for McGann, the Cantos’ reflective artifice is only capable of being noticed after we have discovered the significance behind the non-linguistic, bibliographic orders embodying his books’ thinngness. Reflection and the appointment of significance to the narrative of the Cantos, McGann argues, occur retrospectively. A fragment's meaning is revealed after our apprehension of its material belongings. This allows us to observe the way these materials comment upon and clarify the metaphoric/meditative character of Pound's poetry. For McGann, the luminous nature of Pound's materials does not occur primarily through hermeneutic strategies of factual instantiation and the empirical methods of modern philology we use to verify provenance and determine poetic meaning. McGann’s emphasis on reflection, like Benjamin’s on the amanensis that
is implicit to baroque criticisms of taboo, *is an important aspect of Pound’s work, however, the problem that McGann’s theory delivers for contemporary criticism lies in its limited selection of that which is being reflected. Pound’s efforts, for McGann, are ultimately a reflection of Pound’s immediate moment. Alas, they are objects that are, perhaps, too easily “biodegradable.”

An example of McGann’s observation of Pound’s reflective criticism is available in his discussion of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. He discusses their value by placing them within a chronological discussion of Pound's publications. An earlier edition deployed a direct reference to the aesthetics of the Kelmscott tradition of fine printing. William Bird at Three Mountains Press printed *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in red and black as a purposeful homage to William Morris. *XXX Cantos*, we discover, replaces the Three Mountains publication and reduces the original homage to Kelmscott by giving it modernist décor: the allusion to Pre-Raphaelite medievalism, incorporated to the red historiated initialling of each Canto, is redone with provocative Vorticist initials. The Kelmscott tradition is reduced to a sack-cloth cover. McGann points out the commemorative and political significances in Pound's choice of Roman numerals. *XXX Cantos* is printed in 1930 by Nancy Cunard at her Hours Press. *XXX Cantos*, that is, reflects Morris's revolutionary socialism, instead of its decadent fancy, in the materials it uses. The complaint of cultural loss in the poetic surface of *XXX Cantos* is positively reflected in the utopic aspirations that the book’s materials serve to remind us of.

We might believe that McGann's reading of the latent fascism implied by the symbolic value (‘X’’s look like the crossed fasces used in Imperial Rome) of the title, *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, contradicts his commitment to interrogating only the materiality of
the bibliographic code, delicate as his comparisons to other lettering choices and font
types used in Pound's publication history may be. McGann, that is, must read the title in
order to suggest that Pound’s utopianism was also dangerously aligned with sadder
fascinations. This transgression is sustained within the larger argument that McGann
makes about how the protocols of interpretation appear to be governed by the publication
history of Pound's texts: “[T]he Cantos will want to preserve the integrity of those
separate parts – which are, after all, devices for organizing the reading experience. New
Directions and Faber have always preserved the distinctions by printing the first thirty
cantos as a single unit” (134-5). McGann's attentions to Pound's conservative approach to
publication allow him to argue against maintaining a liberal distinction between editing
and interpretation:

I bring up this matter of textual and editorial theory because the
case of the Cantos illustrates in the most dramatic ways the
difficulty, if not the impossibility, of separating textual/editorial
work from critical/interpretive work. A decision about how to treat
the physical presentation of Cantos 1-30 in an edition will
drastically affect how the work is read and understood. (Textual
Condition 135)

The antecedent continuum from which the bibliographic and semantic codes are
inseparably expressed is something like, in McGann's terms, “the socio-materiality of
things.” Granting that Pound did have such aims in mind for each of his work's iterations,
it is certainly incumbent upon us to concur that Pound's sensitivity to the sociomateriality
of his poetry entered directly into the garden of his poetic text. McGann concludes that in
order to preserve the rich sociomaterial instances of the Cantos we must be aware of how
Pound has already carefully selected their means and modes of best publication. We
want, that is, to be cognizant of the editorial horizons each title signals towards the
meaning of the poems it collects. Pound, for McGann, assumes that a complicated
continuum exists between words and things, as the indexical apparatus of a text assumes
parity with the poetic verbal icon it contains:

A poem containing history, written in the twentieth century, means
not simply “the tale of the tribe,” but the self-conscious
presentation of such a tale. It is therefore a poem which will have
already theoretically imagined a critical edition of itself. A
twentieth-century poem containing history will have to invent and
display, somehow, at least the equivalent of footnotes,
bibliography, and other scholarly paraphernalia. (Textual
Condition 129)

McGann is exactly right in his curtailed assumption about that word-thing, text
and “paraphernalia,” connection. Pound's imagination for the materiality of language isn't
capacious and liberal. His sense of satiric precision demands that we know how the
meaning of a word is ordered by its past textual use, making his attention to language
amenable to Benjamin’s belief that structural assumptions about a word’s arbitrariness
only reveals the degree to which that word is being suppressed by a culture enthralled to
the authority of titles. The purpose of Pound's imagination for the thingness of his poetry
opens theoretic discussion to the kind of play between names and titles incumbent upon
Benjamin’s theory of language. McGann believes that the Cantos’ mode of material
presentation offers his readers a critical history rather than one that is antiquarian. This
seems to be the correct, if inevitable, provision best afforded by McGann's close study of
the things through which Pound's poems arrive. Instead of forming a poetic devotion to
empirical things, showing that there is a hermeneutic procedure, made available in
Benjamin’s theory of language, through which to observe the Cantos’ patterns of
aesthetic reflection alters the determination that they are only critical of their immediate
historical moment. Pound’s antiquarianist disposition changes the temporal accent of his criticism from being sedulously pointed towards the present. Benjamin’s theory of language allows for a hermeneutic approach, rather than a reflective approach, to Pound's work that illuminates the poetic significance of his bibliographic code. Pound’s poetic practice alters and returns to his titles that which they would naturally occlude were they not thoughtfully considered. McGann may argue that by virtue of the mode of Pound's expression, the significances of his narrative fragments are destined primarily to foment a critical awareness of the social, political, and economic milieu in which his works participated, rendering Quia Pauper Amavi, for example, a complicated form of complaint. For McGann, the deictic accent of Pound's texts, available through a reader's sensitivity to the currency of particular uses of book-making traditions, is always set to the immediate “now.”

The “footnotes, bibliography, and other scholarly paraphernalia” of a critical edition are beguiling to the imaginations of Pound scholars eager to wrench the Cantos from their infamous capture by their venerable publisher, New Directions, withstanding their new but unimaginative re-issues of earlier publications. Pound’s fragmented narratives premise themselves on the way they take their anti-mimetic titles as their predicking condition. Without a hermeneutic lens that can observe them, titles like Quia Pauper Amavi (A Lume Spento needs obvious work) occlude concepts that might be used to describe alternative interpretive horizons. The modern fragmented narrative, in Pound’s hands, implies a hermeneutic that must conjugate at once the sociomaterial continuity of the thing against the conceptual fragmentation that underwrites the “real” history that those things would appear to be referring themselves to. However, reading
Pound's fragments as commentary on their moment only serves his work partially. Calling the *Cantos* a feat of reflective criticism helps rationalize the eventual decision to leave them outside of any possible consideration for a new, albeit mimetic, critical edition. Perhaps this is wise. An edition of the *Cantos* that reprints Caroll F. Terrell's annotations to the *Cantos* would be useless. Furthermore, as we have seen, McGann finds positive uses for the current state and nature of Pound's publications, if only that in their current conditions they draw a precise line to that which must be restored through further materialist criticism of Pound's texts. Not attending to the mimetic order of his poetic text is, however, not a fair option.

Reading Pound's textual fragments as being connected to the socio-material continuum from which they extend, become inscrutable, and end as implacable mysteries, is as much as to argue that they belong to Benjamin's dead and buried past as they do to a potentially recoverable future. Pound's poetic collections are as much acts of antiquarianism as they are criticism. The *Cantos*, on this scale, offer cure beside diagnosis. The protocols for reading Pound's works then, either through the knowable certainties of the bibliographic code or, by way of a hermeneutic that is sensitive to the name/title distinction, reflect differing uses and emphases of Benjamin's theory of language. At stake in that theory, as we saw in the first chapter, are two kinds of history. The one form of history belongs to the Collector, who finds a new title under which to organize the preciosité of every new thing he finds, and the other, belonging to the Allegorist, who finds new ways of describing his collection by adapting his name for that collection to suit its irregularities. Antiquarianism, on this score, becomes the act of grappling with the past through understanding both the strangeness and provenance of its
things and artifacts, as they are both concealed and revealed through the efforts of the antiquarian to understand their significance as objects of fate, open both to profundity and as artifacts within a developing history, measurable within its relationship to other things in a collection with like titles. Reading the Ur-Cantos for how they change according to the editorial horizons through which they were published makes both Pound’s critical-antiquariansim clear as well as the advent of a de-personalized poetry that could sustain its implicit tensions.

2

To situate the difference between my hermeneutic approach to reading Pound’s critical antiquarianism it is necessary to demonstrate how I would read the seepage of poetic indeterminacy into the sociomateriality of Pound's bibliographic codes. To do so would be to instantiate Benjamin’s theory of the relationship between words and names in light of the antiquarianist disposition that celebrates the uncanny, in distinction from McGann's reflective critique, pointed as it is towards Pound’s present. As McGann once did with reference to A Draft of XXX Cantos, I wish to draw special attention to the title of a volume of Pound's work, 1919s Quia Pauper Amavi. This tends to be a neglected object in Pound studies. The poems that this volume collected are remembered instead of the book they first arrived in. For example, the Ur-Cantos (“Three Cantos) are understood to have been the genetic reservoir to the first four poems that now inaugurate the Cantos. These early poems are cited most often as examples of what Pound was doing before Canto IV, where, it is usually argued, Pound demonstrates his first successful attempt at mature “impersonality.”
Few critics read these poems in their adjacency within the greater bibliographical environment of *QPA*. Profitably utilizing McGann's approach to the sociomaterial instant means finding in the poetic order of Pound's text a clue towards how he deploys the bibliographic codes governed by such a seemingly picayune title. Only through close attention to the editorial decisions governing the genetic production of the Ur-Cantos can we begin to disentwine the wrong-headed premises concerning the advent of modernist impersonality that govern their current reception from their actual entrée into the de-personalized poetry that Pound was developing.

“[Q]uia pauper amavi,” then, is a quotation of the latter half of a hexameter line, in the second book of Ovid's putatively cynical conduct poem, *Ars Amatoriae*. The whole couplet (2.165-166) reads: “Pauperibus vates ego sum, quia pauper amavi;/ Cum dare non possem munera, verba dabam” [“I am the bard of the poor because I loved as a poor man;/ Since I could not give gifts, I gave words”]. In colloquial Latin “verba dabam” (“gave words”) held an unusual connotation. It could also mean “used deceit.” Pound's image for this volume, then, implies a direct attack on the sentiment of sincerity that Ovid’s ironic conduct book would seem to signify. This changes the way we receive Pound's lyric voice in any of the poems that follow under this title. The most significant place to observe Pound's prevarication over the authenticity and sincerity of his lyric presence, and his discovery of the stance of de-personalization, occurs in the Ur-Cantos as they are presented in *Quia Pauper Amavi*. It is there that Pound is most concerned to take on the implication of duplicity and insincerity signaled by the Ovidian title. At stake in the “Three Cantos” is the identity, the name, of who it is that is speaking – Pound or a fictional author that the poem instantiates as its own attempt at de-personalization.
The critics who have made the most substantial contribution to our understanding of Pound's use of the personal, subjective, and lyrical voice – Christine Froula, Ronald Bush, and Herb Schneidau – concur that it was in his parley with Robert Browning in the Ur-Cantos over the appropriateness of authorial intrusion into modernist epic poetry that Pound came to make his greatest contribution to the formal resources of literary modernism. The achievement of an objective “impersonality” occurs, it is argued, after Pound learns to discard the subjective unity of a single narrative voice. This occurs, then, much later than 1919’s publication of QPA and Pound's remonstrance with Browning. These critics locate that event at least six years later with the first publication of the Cantos proper in 1925's A Draft of 16. Cantos. However, by utilizing a hermeneutic approach to Pound's fragmented narrative that compliments and carefully subverts Jerome McGann's materialist strategies for textual disambiguation, it is possible to open that judgment for reassessment.

Herb Schneidau explains that Pound ultimately refused to consolidate his poem behind a single synthetic mask, as had been Browning's practice. To arrive at this rejection Pound takes on the most difficult of Browning's dramatic personae, Sordello. Pound learns that the affected stance Browning used to organize his intentionally fragmented and disorienting poem concerning the Guelph and Ghibbeline uprisings in Renaissance Italy would not be sufficient to the kind of poem he wished to write, one where the critical elements of his research could display their own allegorical anachronism outside of a cohesive narrative tethered to an authorial sense of their historicity within a predetermined narrative that would assimilate them to simple cause and effect. Sordello uses a narrative voice that shuttles between “Browning” looking over
a diorama booth in which his hero and narrator, Sordello, undergoes changing fortunes as a troubadour. Sordello is also “Browning,” of course. Pound found this authorial conceit distasteful for its anachronizing impossibility, but more pointedly rejects it for the effects on the texture of the historical details that such a posture implied:

The very precision demanded in the etching of those details prevents them from being subordinated to any unifying principle—tonal or thematic unity imposed by a single mind, no matter how creative, tends to diminish the sense of jagged clarity. If the texture is made smooth... the details cannot stand out sharply. (Schneidau 140)

Schneidau demonstrates his sense of what Pound’s fragmented narrative means. Schneidau wants Pound's details to be an extension of his affinity for the “intuitive philology” of Gaston Paris, Theodore Reinach, and Leo Frobenius, admired at length by Pound in his essay “Analysis of this Decade” in The New Age Vol. 16, 1915. Pound sees these figures as foils to the “bean-counting” philology that valued enumerative philological practice – death by “multitudinous detail” he would say in 1911’s “Osiris” essay – over glossing cultural meaning.

The consequences of Pound's rejection of the unifying principle of a single narrative consciousness can be seen most clearly in contemporary theories and debates surrounding the relationship between writing and documentary research. These help us to comprehend how we might begin to understand how a de-personalized poetic narrative can be thought to actually come to pass. Textual critics tend to implement some limited use of authorship in their apprehension of poetic works, whereas genetic critics take a more rigorous approach to the definition of a draft – a term Pound was always careful to use about his poetry (after the bullying he took from classics scholars for his translation
of Propertius). The signature of authorship is a meaningless event for genetic critics working on authorial drafts. Authorship, they argue, makes sense only if publication is introduced as the overriding logic and principle of the organic growth of the text. Geneticists study drafts for their usefulness in locating moments when objects of authorial interest – either of their own device or citations from other sources – move from being probable avenues for further development into more regulatory schema, guiding large-scale directions and thematic affinities in a text's development. Geneticists posit textual teleologies without finalist, authorial, supposition. They focus on the appropriation of empirical potentialities by the organic forces and processes that go on to eventuate textual unities. Theirs is the study of the struggle between inspiration and appropriation:

Rough drafts demonstrate perfectly how, even for the most realist of writers, the will to referential veracity remains secondary to the organic primacy of the work: selected first of all for its reality-factor-value, the exogenetic detail is forced into the original context of the rough draft; but as the endogenetic logic develops, the writer can be seen abandoning, one after the other, over the course of the composition, all the realist characteristics that had been the initial reason for choosing such a demonstrative detail. As it meshes better and better with its context, the detail sometimes ends up becoming utterly unrealistic, if it doesn't simply run aground. (Pierre-Marc DeBiasi and Ingrid Wassenar 46)

What Pound accomplishes is an extraordinary upset of the “organic” force of his own work's primacy when he rejects Browning’s monological narrator for the “realist characteristics that had been the initial reason for choosing such [a] demonstrative detail[s].” Surveying a broken landscape of historical time, Pound transforms the usual logic of textual appropriation described by DeBiasi and Wassenar that obtains between the realist detail, open to verification in the referential world from which it is drawn, and
the genetic milieu into which it becomes organically forced and worked into a particular work's script. Pound's practice seeks to avoid the usual progress whereby an “exogenetic detail” is run aground by the organic mimetic world that governs and structures the work's text. The structural advantage Pound gains in allowing his details to fore-go their role as “demonstrative” of a work's preset theme is that of being free to disregard problems of authority and narration, properly the interests of textual scholars, for a writerly space in which the genetic forces of scripting are allowed to display their gestural inauguration. Pound sets the indeterminacy of each fragment at odds against any proleptic organizing structural intention. Authorial personality, once these strictures of text are discarded, becomes just one of many fragments competing within the milieu of the draft’s intentional horizon.

It is the structural decision to subtend authorship to the veracity of the realist fragment that allows Pound to adopt Browningesque personae while avoiding “any unifying principle – tonal or thematic unity imposed by a single mind.” Past critics, and this is certainly the position taken by Ronald Bush in his explanation of the genesis of the Cantos, have argued that Pound's solution to the problem of the singular narrating consciousness was much different. Bush views Pound as having agonistically multiplied his narrators, each competing for some share in the general explanatory authority of the Cantos.

Bush's explanation is indeed paradigmatic of the “impersonality” school of Pound criticism, indebted as it is to the authorial attitude, commitment, and style of T.S. Eliot. Bush reminds us that it was Eliot who asked Pound to consider excising lines 103-119 from “Three Cantos.” These lines were in Pound's own “voice.” In lines 103-119, Pound
apostrophizes to Browning about his difficulties in finding the correct mode for dramatizing an objective autobiography. (These lines occur in the 1917 version of the “Ur-Cantos,” published in Chicago by Harriett Monroe's journal *Poetry.*) Bush guesses that these lines struck Eliot as being redundant to the path taken earlier in that Canto. Pound has already engaged in an imagined discussion with Browning where he criticizes Browning’s “historical sense.” Bush makes the logical assumption that Eliot meant to give Pound advice of the sort that his leaving in of these lines would have been to draw the reader's attention too closely to the presence of his own personality by the dint of an otiose and repetitive insistence on Browning’s habits of distasteful anachronism. Lines 103-119 have the speaker seeking advice in a chary, yet insouciant, fashion from Browning about the arrangement, direction, and structure of the great poem he is imagining. These lines begin: “Or shall I do your trick, the showman's booth,/ Bob Browning?” The 'trick' to which Pound is referring is that of the subtle interior monologue that Browning affects as he looks in on the diorama booth. Browning’s reader is left to her own devices to sort out from whom this monologue emanates as the protagonist, Sordello, is observed ruminating over his own artistic development. Browning affects comparison to himself but leaves the things he compares mysterious and vague. Pound’s complaint about Browning's “trick” repeats his first complaint, made right at the poem's beginning:

And half your dates are out, you mix your eras;  
For that great font Sordello sat beside -  
'Tis an immortal passage, but the font? -  
Is some two centuries outside the picture.
In fact, two complaints can be heard. One has to do with the authority of the narrator as dramatized by the author, a kind of appeal for advice in the “brother's speech” of fellow poets. This complaint is the logical outcome of Browning's decision to half-reveal his own disguised presence in his poem. The second complaint is a direct criticism of Browning himself for his indefensible unscholarly anachronism. Browning, Pound is arguing, textualizes history by allowing his poem's organic endogenetic logic to run the reality of its exogenetic details – the Venetian font – aground. Pound's details operate oppositely. He allows exogenetic details to stand out by inviting his readers to interrogate their scripted instances within the genetic space created by the wake of the publication history of the Ur-Cantos and the ensuing critical commentary we imagine to have impinged upon it: Eliot’s advice foremost.

That is, as Pound overcame the insistence of the author's hand directing us to find final meanings, he could make the distinction between his own private discourse with Browning and his analytic criticism of Sordello's historicity in the same poem. Sordello, given Bush's assumptions about Pound’s motive, failed to make the necessary connection between veracity and decorum. The indeterminacies of the narrator's historical position served to obscure and diminish the poem's entire deictic structure. Was Browning, in his “brother's speech” with Sordello, affecting to be Sordello's contemporary or are we to believe in the diorama-booth's mid nineteenth-century position as being stationary and Browning’s voice just another imaginary persona? This kind of insecurity surrounding narration wouldn't allow Pound the freedom to register a variety of historical figures and evidentiary matter in the same text as it would become his practice in the Cantos. These
mistakes leave the author’s hand in the text available as its explanation and point of organizational focus.

Pound's actual published revisions reveal that he was indifferent to Eliot's advice. Eliot, it seems, was mistaken about the nature of Pound's critique of Browning, believing it to have been only an issue concerning Browning's subjectivist bias towards rendering historical details and the unacceptable anachronism that it created. The first and second parleys with Browning in the first of the three Ur-Cantos over facts and how to present them appeared to Eliot to be two different ways of addressing the same problem. Pound may have been indifferent towards the nature of Eliot's advice, but was far from inhospitable. Pound's actions were several and varied towards the way he would allow his remonstrance with Browning to play itself out in the Cantos. It seems that Pound trusted Eliot's eye for the appearance of thematic redundancy while understanding that his actual interest in Browning wasn't that of finding a proximate target to crusade against in the name of true and apt historicism. Pound sees in Browning's complex narrator a necessary step upon which he had to make an advance if he was to forego the subjectivist bias over historical details that that stance enforced.

The concern Pound felt about Browning's subjectivist bias, evident in his private dialogue with Browning in the language of Sordellian “brother's speech” and his analytical critique of Browning's factitious history, can be observed when we set the lines Pound did excise, concerning both poetic technique and historical veracity, against those he chose to let remain. Pound does away with

```
What a hodge-podge you have made there! -
Zanze and swanzig, of all opprobrious rhymes!
And you turn off whenever it suits your fancy,
Now at Verona, now with the early Christians,
```
while keeping lines that praise Browning's inventiveness and near solution to the problem of the role of the narrator in the modern verse epic. Pound leaves in the following lines of praise for the way Browning had: “Worked out the form, meditative, semi-dramatic/Semi-epic story.” This acknowledgment comes after an interlude away from his dialogue with Browning. In that interlude Pound imagines himself transported into the light-filled world of Catullus's Sirmio. These lines of praise are thematically redundant, qualifying his assessment of Browning's technique in the now familiar “brother's speech” and ought, given the supposition over Eliot’s criticism advanced by Bush, also to have been excised. This compliment is struck from 1918's version of the Ur-Cantos published in the literary journal *The Future*. They were, however, left in 1917's *Lustra*, and then again let to stand in 1919s *QPA*. We know that Eliot's editorial advice was made in reference to drafts of the poem he saw in the months before their being published in *Poetry* (1917).

Pound's inconsistent pattern of revision indicates that the total significance of *Sordello*'s delirious historicity, Browning's "semi" successful dramatic model for overcoming the anachronizing problems inherent to the presence of a single subjective narrator, and Eliot's editorial advice, cannot be relegated to Pound's worries about the role and manner with which the poet's own voice might be made to knowingly intrude in the modern long poem. Nor can it be made amenable merely to the serious, but formally secondary, problem concerning anachronism and verisimilitude. Were these positions, severally or together, sufficient, we would be better able to explain Pound's eccentric excision of his own narrative voice in dialogue with Browning, struck from *The Future*'s printing of the Ur-Cantos and then returned under new qualifications in *Lustra* and *QPA*. 
“[I]mpersonalizing ‘Three Cantos I’ altered its dialectical form and its tone,” Bush tells us (42). Impersonalizing but not yet impersonal, this Canto exists as a way-station on the path towards Pound’s mature practice of “impersonality” that the revision of these early cantos would produce with 1925s _A Draft of 16. Cantos_. But as early as 1918, with the placement of “Three Cantos” in the journal _The Future_, Pound looks comfortable enough with the objectivity of his assumptions about script, text, and the way facts become biologized within the genetic space of a poem prior to its publication to allow him to have gone the further distance of objectifying his tutelage to Browning. Pound, that is, can edit the Ur-Cantos with the clear distinction in his mind over the differences between his private remonstrance with Browning, the value of _Sordello’s_ formal contribution to the epic tradition, and his indifference to each. I see Pound's engagement with Browning in the environs of _Quia Pauper Amavi_ differently from Bush and Froula. They consider the first of the Ur-Cantos to have been an important precursor to Pound's eventual break with the subjectivist tradition in Canto IV.

In 'Three Cantos' Pound finds no clear resolution to the problem of reconciling subjective vision with the common world, but a second version of Canto IV which he composed while writing them reaches toward a solution that the final Canto IV would test. (Froula 18)

The actual pattern of Pound's thought about the manuscripts and his obvious indifference to the problem of the singular narrating consciousness asks we adjust our estimate of his flight into impersonality. We observe in his parley with Browning a continuation of Ovid's reception of Propertius and the complicated play with sincerity and decorum that reception entailed. Pound's ironic title, _Quia Pauper Amavi_, allows sincerity and satire their imbrication in the Ur-Cantos, knowable only after we understand the way those Ur-
Cantos deliver a poetic condition in which authorial deceit has been rendered hapless by Pound’s disposition over his own narratological position within the world of his poem. Pound’s critical-antiquarianism – the prizing of the exogenetic detail over its endogenetic narrative emplotment – that his parley with Browning helped him to achieve, allowed him to de-personalize “Three Cantos.” This allows the presentation of the story of his own tutelage to Browning in a manner that demonstrates his narratological advance as if it were fate’s product, the force of the detail over the narrative it is enfolded within. When Pound’s indifference to his own authority is made apparent in the history of the editorial changes that governed the publication of the Ur-Cantos is made apparent, we can understand that a poetic form becomes available in which he can actualize the archaic representation of a thing, unlike Browning whose interfering narratological anachronism causes him to reduce textual objects such as that “Venetian font” to the property-making power enlisted by the genetic forces of his poem’s title that serves to smooth out his appropriation. In this, the Ur-Cantos demonstrate the plausability of Benjamin’s tacit theory that when the Collector removes real historical details from the realm of their being possessed by historical narratives that insist upon the authority of their titles, into the world of things as they would have appeared in their real moment, that they are participating in the composition of natural history. This necessary experiment in de-personalization would help Pound to find in Propertius a forgotten theme that his translation of the Roman elegist would reveal.
CHAPTER THREE:
LONG SERIES OF TRANSLATIONS: ANTIQUARIAN-CRITICISM IN “HOMAGE TO SEXTUS PROPERTIUS”

It was the peculiar genius of Pound's Propertius and Cavalcanti to use antique material, to treat it with verbal archaism, but to make syntax and motion programmatic and modernist. Pound's versions of Latin and Provencal are meant to exemplify new possibilities in the stress-patterns, in the manners of address, in the segmentation of English and American verse.

- George Steiner. *After Babel*

I would know what was accounted poetry everywhere, what part of poetry was “indestructible”, what part could *not be lost* by translation, and – scarcely less important – what effects were obtainable in *one* language only and were utterly incapable of being translated.

- Pound, 1913, “How I Began”

List Seneca, Saint Jerome, Luther, Dryden. Holderlin, Novalis, Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Ezra Pound, Valery, MacKenna, Franz Rosenzweig, Walter Benjamin, Quine – and you have nearly the sum total of those who have said anything fundamental or new about translation. The range of theoretic ideas, as distinct from the wealth of pragmatic notation, remains very small.

- George Steiner. *After Babel*

If Pound’s parley with Browning provides us with a hermeneutic model for rethinking the way his poetic text can be viewed to critically entertain the title of his book
Quia Pauper Amavi, and, after McGann, be thought to alter the poetic meaning of that book’s bibliographic code in the accent on insincere authorship that his efforts at de-personalizing his narrative signaled, then it is also true that that volume contains what seems to be its ontological opposite. Pound’s complex antiquarianism, one that, in its argument with Browning, disallows an endogenetic force to smooth over the exogenetic details in the text that entertains them, also allows for another kind of historical recovery that can be best comprehended as that which foundationally belongs to lost historical interpretive traditions. Pound’s “Propertius” tends towards the pole favored by “The Allegorist,” then, in that it seeks to represent a submerged theme in Propertius’s work that would have been apparent to Propertius’s contemporaries and from which a total explanation of that Roman elegist’s intentions may be expected. Pound’s translation offers a complicated interpretation of Propertius spurred by his critical awareness of how Propertius would have been received by his knowing contemporary readers. In this sense, Pound’s reading is “allegorical” as it chooses to encounter Propertius’s work “under the sign of fragmentation and ruin” (Arcades 330). Pound’s “antique” criticism, then, serves those ends where the Allegorist orders the objects under his scrutiny by way of his initiation into an order that lies outside their being and against which he can measure his profundity, otherwise indiscernible from eisegetical impulses. Only by carefully understanding how Pound’s translation of Propertius is not strictly led by his own peccadilloes, but purposefully reacts with the title it is collected under, might the antique criticism Pound chooses to measure the wreck of Propertius’s text against be gainfully observed. Pound deploys the techniques Benjamin associates with modernist allegorical expression in “Propertius,” but for the end of allowing that which contemporary criticism
of Propertius has abducted and concealed – his fate as the inheritor of an Alexandrian elegiac tradition that was under attack and being soon repressed by his Roman, empire-happy, contemporaries.

It is customary to regard the influence of Propertius on Ovid as being negative. That is, we assume that where Propertius' *Monobiblion* was a sincere portrait of his tempestuous affair with Cynthia, Ovid acts as a tonic, offering his readers a cynical portrait of the ideals of Roman love elegy that Propertius innocently exploited. While Ovid is satiric, this rule of thumb has recently been rethought not to obtain with Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*. Critics now argue that the exemplary stance taken by the Encyclopedia Brittanica in 1911 which described the *Ars* as “[p]erhaps the most immoral book ever written by a man of genius” is mistaken:

> But it is these sorts of assumptions that apparently have caused many critics either to miss or to underestimate the emphasis of the *Ars Amatoria* on moderation and restraint. Ovid's version of moderation is often playful and ultimately subversive; but his insistence upon it is clear. (*Excess and Restraint: Propertius, Horace, & Ovid's Ars Amatoriae* 3)

Instead, Pound uses the half line from the *Ars*, “quia pauper amavi,” to register his commitment to a hermeneutic practice advanced in his 1911 article “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” where he complains about the dependence of modern art practices on presentist strategies of mimetic representation for their symptomatic inability to convey historic realities. He advances an alternative called the “Method of the Luminous Detail” that allows him to register the reality of Ovid’s conduct book in its relationship to the object of its proximate criticism, the sincere love poetry of its predecessor, Propertius’s love elegies.
George Steiner uncovers the ramifications of this method in his discussion of Pound's translation habits, noting that it is often true that the most persuasive translations have been made by writers ignorant of the language they translate, reworking and adapting prior translations where the question of mimetic correspondence to an original is inarguably absent. Steiner discusses Pound's successful adaptations of Ernest Fenollosa's manuscripts published in *Cathay* (1915). Pound's translations, he notes, fail when those manuscripts are unavoidably misleading, while inexplicably accurate given the often meager suggestions they work from. The line, “At fourteen I married My Lord you” from “Lament of the Frontier Guard,” “communicates precisely the nuance of ceremonious innocence, of special address from child to adult, which constitutes the charm of the original and which Waley misses” (Steiner 377).

Steiner's explanation is crucial for how it helps to debunk readings of Pound’s poetry that only wish to see in it a commitment to certain kinds of ephemeral observations and uses of historical archives. That species of Pound’s more durable set of concerns located in his discussion of the “Method of the Luminous Detail,” Imagism, is credited for the emotional concentration it creates through the collage of different planes of allusion. The ability to find the corresponding emotion is credited to Pound's knack for mimicry. He can “enter into alien guise, to assume the mask and gait of other cultures” (Steiner 378). That insinuation into otherness is intentionally curtailed, however. Pound does not actually penetrate across remoteness and uncertainty but relies entirely on that hermeneutic of trust (mentioned in the prior chapter) that he forms with his reader. This trust can be mobilized to defend effete readings of Pound's treatment of his sources; it explains how he used those sources to point out syntactical potentials in modern English
and American speech dialects free from worries of producing accurate translations. But, what of Pound’s “use [of] antique material”? What of Pound's ability “to treat it with verbal archaism”? This chapter makes the case for remembering the centrality of that antiquarian disposition in Pound’s thoughts in the context of his anti-mimetic thinking about the Method of the Luminous Detail, and how it could foil the presentist bias that Pound felt to have made London’s avant-garde sclerotic. It is this method that correctly aligns Pound with Benjamin’s theory of language and his interest in finding a mode of modernist expression that allows the taboo on natural history to be lifted. Here, the lost antique criticism that would have attended upon what has become the now giant figure of Propertius within the Roman elegiac tradition.

Perhaps the most important effect on Pound criticism, spurred by McGann’s focus on a text's bibliographic codes, has been the shift in that canon of critical texts we use to explicate Pound's *ars poetica*. While “Imagism” is dogmatically explained in the retrospective essay, “A Few Don't's...” after McGann's focus on the constructivist register that Pound exploited through the medium of bookmaking, we are behooved to regard the earlier essay “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris” (1911) for its discussion of the “Method of the Luminous Detail” in which Pound disavows the caprice of mimetic artifice at the expense of poetry’s charge to present something more akin to documentary veracity. This essay has become the more salient text for understanding how Pound approached the materials of his work. It sets out the principal problem that it would be his purpose to overcome. Pound identifies his preferred method for explaining historical events and conditions through presenting historical details without commentary and interpretation. For Pound, at stake was a commitment towards the way literary tradition could be made
to register history differently to the fact-seeking tendencies American historiography had
inherited from German Romantic Philology. History, poetically presented, could be more
than merely a record against which one could construe contemporary differences and
change.

It is this commitment that connects Pound most obviously to Walter Benjamin. A
few words about Benjamin’s sense of how “natural history” could be displayed are
necessary to encounter, such that Pound’s interests in displaying history without
comment can be seen for their consanguinity with Benjamin’s more clearly:

The interest which the materialist historian takes in the past is always, in part, a vital interest in its being past – in its having ceased to exist, its being essentially dead. To have certified this condition with respect to the whole is the indispensable prerequisite for any citation (any calling to life) of particular parts of the phenomenon of what-has-been. In a word: for the specific historical interest whose legitimacy it is up to the materialist historian to establish, it must be shown that one is dealing with an object which in its entirety, actually and irrevocably, “belongs to history” (Arcades 363).

This statement from The Arcades Project summarizes one of the two components in
Benjamin's thinking about what he would call “the dialectical image.” A dialectical
image is constructed when antinomial ways of thinking about the past are brought
together through a critic's apprehension of the vital significance of a particular object or
historical citation. These two kinds of historicism are symbolized by two different kinds of artist/critic – the Allegorist and the Collector. A short recount of their identities is useful if we are to see how Pound’s de-personalized poetry exemplifies their traits.

The Allegorist, Benjamin argues, thinks about the materials of history in an open-ended but theoretically secondary fashion. Of first importance to the Allegorist is the
story he uses to make sense out of the empirical data, just as Browning had favored endogenetic cohesion over historical veracity. The Allegorist’s story may be left unfinished or open, but its permanence as a story remains tethered to implacable concepts that prescribe how the story is told – deep structuralists, as it were. In contrast, Benjamin discusses the Collector and her fetish for completion. Every new object in the collection forces this sort of antiquarian to anxiously rethink the terms that govern that collection. If the explanatory concept that governs the story by which their collection is explained is foiled by new evidence, then that concept is disbanded and replaced. The Collector is made the model for the materialist historian, who, unlike the Allegorist, is concerned primarily to give the things comprising their collection their ontological status as exogenetic things and not symbols within a proleptic narrative. The Collector is driven by their commitment to the essential otherness of history. The Allegorist, and here Benjamin's “Angelus Novus” is perhaps a good shorthand instantiation, revels in the sight of history's anarchic dissolution of things, understanding all objects to be the umbra of a conceptual figure that gives them being and of which they can only be revealed through mimicry. While being antithetical poles in Benjamin’s thought about how history could be displayed, the Collector and the Allegorist inform each other’s identity in the insoluble similarity that lies dormant in their motivations toward concepts and completion. They each, as Benjamin theorizes them, take an interest in the past, collect its disjecta, because the world from which it is transported no longer exists.

Pound's materialism can be understood as just such a species of the antiquarian bias that Benjamin’s arrangers betray, with its commitment to historic veracity over the lineaments of mimetic convention (as we saw in the last chapter) and with its
commitment to past modes of critical reception. This has broad implications for how we may go about reading Pound’s homage to Propertius. We need to adjust our presuppositions about the supposedly depthless history we have been asked by contemporary interpreters to see served in the Cantos. What follows is an argument for the kind of protocol necessary to the assessment of Pound's project of rendering an antique criticism in “Homage to Sextus Propertius” that echoes the principles of archaic verbalism and difficult syntax Benjamin once located in the baroque trauerspiel, and of which was necessary for its ability to present fate as history’s natural force. In order to assess the stakes of Pound’s homage it is necessary to disentangle Pound’s efforts from various recent commentators; these critics help both to draw out the stakes of his translation habits as well as their seeming import, making the case that Pound’s translation was a knowing effort in modernist allegory.

1

J.P. Sullivan's reading of “Homage to Sextus Propertius” has, as its unstated task, the rescuing of Pound's work from the history of its critical reception as a botched translation. Classicists contemporary with Pound chastised him for his errors. Their criticisms are instructive for how they demonstrate a mode of analysis Pound was intentionally making risible through his fragments of Propertius’s elegies in translation. William Gardner Hale may have thrown the heaviest stone. In a letter to Harriet Monroe's Poetry, after its March 1919 printing of four of the poem’s twelve sections, Hale writes: “Mr. Pound is often undignified and flippant, which Propertius never is...such renderings pervert the flavor of a consciously artistic, almost academic original.” An anonymous
reviewer in the journal *The New Age*, November 27, 1919, Vol. 26 pp.82-83, writes, “It is however hardly fair to judge the 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' by reference to Propertius. It is obviously not meant as a translation, though it ventures rather too near the original to be taken as a free fantasia on Roman themes. Yet the seven major blunders in No.12 and the five in No.5 are enough to show that Mr. Pound refuses to make a fetish of pedantic accuracy.” In the same issue of *The New Age* Wilfred Rowland Childe chimed in, “He ought to be whipped for errors a fourth form schoolboy would detect.” Similarly, Mr. Martin Gilkes thinks that Propertius’s “intention had been twisted beyond recognition,” while Logan Pearsall Smith noted the risible attitude of Latin scholars towards Pound. He envied Pound his “thickness of skin.”

Unlike these first critics, Sullivan takes Pound at his word and argues that *Homage* was never meant to be a translation, or only just a translation. Drawing on the 1934 “Date Line” essay, where Pound outlined five different categories of criticism, Sullivan finds in the second, *criticism by translation*, the key to considering the “Homage” as an impressionistic criticism of Propertius' work. Pound's homage, for Sullivan, shows us what is too often neglected in Propertius, but otherwise leaves his skill as a translator open to dim views.

Brian Arkins explains that Pound was never entirely enamored of that element in Propertius’s elegies that dealt with his fascination for Cynthia. Pound, Arkins argues, thought Propertius to be the “dupe of magniloquence” when writing about his maudlin attraction to Cynthia (31). It is customary in this regard to recall Pound's expressed motive. In an exchange of letters with Iris Barry (the founder of MOMA's film department), Pound outlined what he felt to be the necessary training for a serious
modern poet. Pound exhorted Barry to read Propertius and Catullus for their dexterous
tonalities, not their subject matter. Noting that there were no good translations of
Propertius's work in English, Pound writes, “I shall have to rig up something” (Letters
142). The homage was meant to be a didactic tool used to exemplify Pound's estimate of
Propertius's metrical ear and the kinds of connections that Propertius could engineer with
interior-rhyme and parallelism. Pound's homage, once an idiomatic sea change was
decided, made risible the kind of classical education that had made rival translations
inadequate and misleading.

According to Arkins, Pound needed only Books Two and Three of Propertius’s
Monobiblon for the task. In fact he focuses exclusively on three clusters of poems in the
two books – Poems 10-15 of Book Two, Poems 28-34 of Book Two, and Poems 1-6 of
Book Three. In addition, Pound incorporates the closing and opening poems from the two
books he uses to exemplify Propertius: “Thematically, this means, in the main, poems
about Cynthia in Book Two and poems about poetry in Book Three, with the closing
poem of Book Two, 34, which deals with poets who write of love, like Propertius, linking
the two groups” (Arkins 33). Pound took the germ from which his translation would grow
from a poem that he did not in fact translate, 4.8, – the so-called “Ride to Lanuvium”. It
is this that was the source of what appeared to be his own interpretation of Propertius'
sardonic tone.

Pound's mistakes are plausibly explained as stemming from his pedagogical
impulse. Rejecting the Loeb edition for its musty Victorian translationese, Pound chose
the 1892 Mueller translation as his source. Mueller divided the poems differently than
Loeb. “[T]his means that he sometimes thought he was referring to entire poems when
we might not: for example, sections VIII, IX and X of “Homage” refer successively to
the poems Mueller designates III 24, 25, 26 and 27” (Arkins 34). Sections one and two of
the “Homage” refer to the poem that is enumerated in Mueller's first section of Book
Three. Most translations break this poem in two and enumerate accordingly – the second
section of the “Homage” stems from Mueller's third section of Book Three. It is there that
Pound claims a new orientation for the reception of Propertius's distinct mode of
incorporating forgotten Greek mythology into Latin vernacular poetry. We also find
Propertius’s vow of fidelity to his craftsmanship there. These struck Pound as being
concomitant facets of Propertius's ironic orientation to the elegiac tradition. Pound reads
into Propertius's allusions a similar critique and play with his audience's memory as the
one he was aspiring to achieve with his own previous and ongoing play with Luminous
Details.

In Section II of the homage, Pound transforms the task of translation itself to
present a critique of contemporary philology. The lines “et Veneris dominae uolucres,
mea turba, columbae/ tingunt Gorgoneo punica rostra lacu” [and the swift doves of
Mistress Venus, my flock,/ wet their purple beaks at the Gorgon's pool (Katz)] refer to
the source of Propertius' love poetry, the liquid source on Mount Helicon. Pound turns
this into: “The small birds of the Cytherean mother/ their Punic faces dyed in the
Gorgon's lake.” The periphrasis of Venus into “Cytherean mother” mocks erudition while
demonstrating the highly verbal sentimentality Propertius wrenched from his persistent
patterns of appositive re-naming. “Punic” reminds us of war and the rejected subject
matter of Propertius. Donald Davie once wrote that Pound intentionally makes these
mistakes: “Pound, who knows Latin well and could have written Homage only if that is
the case, is *deliberately* making outrageous mistakes to present us with the sort of person with a degree in Classics produced by British universities to run the Empire, a man sufficiently competent in Latin to get a lot right, sufficiently pretentious to produce a learned periphrasis, and sufficiently incompetent to subvert the whole point of a particular passage” (Arkins 37).

Another of those letters Pound sent to Iris Barry admits of the difficulties that Pound has in situating himself inside a canon of reception, and how these problems had been the same for Propertius, as he once attempted to utilize Alexandrian motifs in the Roman elegy tradition at a time when the call to write propaganda was at its highest pitch. Specifically, the problem that Pound broaches with Barry concerns what it was he and Propertius were to do with the moribund traditions that they were each inheriting – traditions that demanded the celebration of an ineffectual empire: “The value being that the Roman poets are the only ones we know of who had approximately the same problems as we have. The metropolis, the imperial posts to all corners of the world” (*Letters* 141). “The Homage,” Pound would also write, “presents certain emotions as vital to me in 1917 faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire” (310) [cited in Arkins 29]. Where Propertius could only stress the nature of his own way with the art of poetry in the opening of his third book, Pound takes the liberty of assuming the authority of his own thought to underline the significance of art in a dying culture. The relationship between art and culture governs the first two poems of the *Homage*. In “Notes on Elizabethan Classicists,” Pound writes, “When the classics were a new beauty and ecstasy people cared a damn sight more about the meaning of the authors, and a damn sight less about their grammar and philology...it is perhaps important
that the classics should be humanly, rather than philologically taught, even in class-
rooms” *(Literary Essays 240-41).*

Brooks Otis, an esteemed American Classicist, confirms Pound’s opinion. In 1965 Otis would argue that the textual problems in Propertius too often received more attention than his meaning [*Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 70.1 (1965)]. Pound would have us recall Propertius for his thoughts about art, sexual love, humor, rhythm, and logopoetic word-play. T.S. Eliot, in his introduction to Pound’s *Selected Poems*, credits Pound with having found the forgotten element of humor in Propertius: “It is also a criticism of Propertius, a criticism which in a most interesting way insists upon an element of humour, of irony and mockery, in Propertius, which Mackail and other interpreters have missed. I think that Pound is critically right, and that Propertius was more civilized than most of his interpreters have admitted” (PAGE). In fact, Pound's interest in demonstrating Propertius’s significance to Barry was originally constrained to the task of foregrounding Propertius’s play with musical cadence. Propertius, Pound argued, was exemplary of the Imagist credo that one composes “in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” (A FEW DON’TS/Osiris). Otis will say, “Propertius exploits the division of the dactylic hexameter by the caesura and the natural division of the pentameter into two half lines; one facet of this is to place both at the caesura and at the end of a line, a word with the same final syllable and so produce a kind of internal rhyme” (31-32):

Cynthia prima *suis* miserum me cepit *ocellis*
contactum *nullis* ante *cupidinibus*
Pound’s genius was to see Propertius' gift for marrying predictable rhythms with intonational ironies. Propertius grabs his Latin whole and offers: “language charged with meaning to the utmost degree” (Osiris?). By refining his deployment of irony through the defamiliarization of nearly lost Alexandrian allusions and a generative grammar led by cadence and internal rhyme, “by which the normal selectional rules of a particular language are broken in poetry, a rupture which contributes substantially to the overall effect being aimed at” (32). Pound could make the case that Propertius was an early practitioner of logopoeia as he takes account “of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances” (Osiris 32).

In addition to its being a useful venue for Pound to demonstrate the significance of logopoeia to Iris Barry, Homage was, in itself, another installment in a line of ironic anti-empire poems he was writing in the late teens and early twenties:

[The “Homage to Sextus Propertius”] presents certain emotions as vital to me in 1917, faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the British Empire, as they were to Propertius some centuries earlier, when faced with the infinite and ineffable imbecility of the Roman Empire. These emotions are defined largely, but not entirely, in Propertius’s own terms. If the reader does not find relation to life defined in the poem, he may conclude that I have been unsuccessful in my endeavor. I certainly omitted no means of definition that I saw open to me, including shortenings, cross cuts, implications derivable from other writings of Propertius, as for example the “Ride to Lanuvium” [IV. ViIi.] from which I have taken a color of tone but no direct or entire expression.

(Letters 231)

In addition, Pound's January 1920 letter to the London Observer reiterates the “Homage”’s purpose in presenting the Monobiblion’s “relation to life,” recorded in the letter above: “Leaving aside the personal aspect, the possible merit or demerit of a character sketch which never was, and never intended to be, an ad verbum translation; in
which I paid no conscious attention to the grammar of the Latin text; and of which *all my revisions were made away from and not toward literal rendering*” (70 my emphasis).

Pound’s method was meant to deter one from the surface of his work’s details and fragments for their exemplary status as indicators of a lost historical reality – here, both the relationship between Propertius’s musical syntax and that of his Alexandrian predecessors as well as the political protest Propertius encoded in his love poetry against “ineffectual empire.”

Pound's intention to translate the life of the poet rather than his poetry leaves room for a query about the accidental basis for his assumptions about that historical reality. Pound bases his findings on a handful of close readings that suggested themselves easily to the kind of ironic rendering he prefers. The most famous being the ludic paranomasia of the word “puella” as it becomes “devirginated young ladies.” Most translators would use either of the terms “mistress” or “young girl”. Pound, though, was an accomplished Latin comparativist, familiar with Propertius long before he set about to write the homage as a primer for Iris Barry. Barry gives Pound the opportunity to include and emphasize the love theme in a stylized mode, free from the maudlin expansiveness it holds in Propertius’s *Monobiblion*: “The Barry catalyst provided the poet with an opportunity not only to “modernize” this Latin author, recreating him as more consistent with the Imagist movement, but more importantly to summarize the basic love theme content of all the Propertian elegies into a condensed form” (Mages 70).

There are two techniques structuring the personae Pound constructs. The first insures a limited kind of verisimilitude with Propertius’ text, or at least a fidelity to that aspect of Propertius that Pound found it important to portray: “It would be inaccurate to
delineate Pound's portrayals as faithful character reproductions. If this were the case, we would not have the controversy over logopoeia in the *Homage*” (Mages 74). Pound's second technique was formed in his seeing how far his own use of logopoeia (ironic word choice) might go to enliven a dead poet for a modern audience. Wright makes the point that:

Pound's avowed purpose in the Homage “was to bring a dead man to life, to present a living figure”. In so doing we are presented, interestingly enough, with three different personae – the first being the ancient speaker, the second the modern poet, and the third a combination of the two in the final text. (Wright 136)

Sullivan compliments Wright’s finding. He finds that while Pound's errors are entirely in keeping with Imagist doctrine, the poem itself suffers from being too greatly under *Propertius's* influence – rather than its being the product of the kind of blended author that Wright locates. Holding this position allows Sullivan to do an end-run on those classicists who lament that the real Propertian themes, tones, and sensitivities had been perverted by Pound's liberty. This doctrinaire fidelity to Pound’s later comments on his poem misses the insight that recent critics like Wright have shed on the variety of different intentions and authors at play in his translation. Wright’s adumbration of the possible authorial voices in Propertius aligns his criticism with that impersonation school of criticism encountered in those current explanations of the Ur-Cantos discussed in the last chapter.

There are, in fact, various ways of explaining what it was that informed Pound's motives. Sullivan argued that Pound wanted to modernize Propertius’s romantic quest by giving it a degree of self-protective sophistication. This allows us to see Propertius as being less the victim of Cynthia's hysteria than as a poet willing to engage in the
emotional timbre of Cynthia's world while remaining clinical about its contents. Pound's Propertius, as Sullivan understands it, is designed to confront a sympathetic yet generic reception of Propertius as a tragic “servitium amoris.” This is the tradition of modern classicists who read Propertius as a sincere, impassioned, but foolish love slave.

Pound's Propertius, ironically, bases itself in historic critical authority. “Classic” critics, those contemporary to Propertius himself, were not fooled by Propertius’s perfervid declarations and portrayals of abjection. Classic poetic theories determined rigorously that sincerity is always and only a function of style. They distinguished between biographical facts and literary creation, poetry and history: “Sincerity for them is a function of style; no specific or necessary connections are to be made between personal poetry and personal experience. The point is obvious with Ovid, but is also highly relevant to the love poetry of Propertius” (Sullivan 39). Propertius, Sullivan notes, is unusual because of his avowal of his Alexandrian influence and care to incorporate its stylistic features in his work.

Roman elegists usually use Alexandrian epigrams to signal a specific style and mode. They do not, however, mean to elicit a deeper affiliation or obeisance to the timbre of the Greek tradition they appropriate. Propertius, though, asserted forcefully that the Greek elegists, Callimachus and Philetas, were his masters. This means that he purposefully aligned himself with a tradition that sought to find nuance, tone, and psychologically accurate portrayals of the emotional realities expressed in mythical love stories. Where other Roman elegists use myth for ornament and have an ambivalent, if not hostile, belief in their veracity (making them comparable to the Troubadours of Languedoc of the 11th and 12th C), Propertius's elegies provide their reader with the
presence of a continuous patina of sincerity in their liberal discussions of those
mythological parallels against and upon which Cynthia's behaviors are being drawn.
Propertius uses the mythological overlay as a homeopathic remedy to his pain and loss.
Pound’s response to this, and this is where his first and too earnest critics make their
categorical blunder, is to intentionally ignore Propertius’ mythological treatment of
Cynthia; in esse, Pound’s translation strategically gives up trying to represent the element
of poetic rivalry and critique that was advanced through Propertius’s mythological
Alexandrian overlay.

At the very same time, Pound's translation has little to do with recovering the
putative sincerity of Propertius’s romantic feelings for Cynthia, displaced in the original
through that mythological ornament. Pound’s actual recovery of Propertius’s allusiveness
demanded that he find a way to translate its mythopoetics in a manner that would reveal
itself as being of Propertius’s while also not being a facile transliteration. Pound’s
seeming belief that that signature of mythical allusiveness would be lost on a modern
audience can be better explained as stemming from his antiquarian disposition. That is,
Pound recognizes that the criticism of Propertius’s modern reception that he wishes to
launch – that it ignores Propertius’s self-conscious use of the stylistic opportunities
afforded by his Alexandrian precursors and their referential universe of myth – would fail
were he to naturalize it as ornament in a modern language. Allusion needs to be used
sparingly and with purpose if it was to draw attention to itself as a poetic overlay,
commentary, and poetic skewer as it had once for Propertius himself. The formal element
of mythologocal counterpoint in Propertius’s metier needed to be resurrected through the
invention of an entirely different kind of ironic timbre:
Propertius frequently manages to use mythological situations symbolically, a fairly rare distinction which he shares with Horace and Virgil. Myth (as in the originals of Sections I and II of the *Homage*) becomes a language in which he can talk of his poetic aims and methods. Not infrequently he succeeds in fusing erotic mythology with his own situation and this effectively adds a third dimension to his affair with Cynthia (for instance, ii 29A; compare with section X of the *Homage*). (Sullivan 44)

Pound edits Propertius’s mythical similes, omits them largely as ornament and, when moved, uses them sparingly to thicken the texture of his translation. This renders Cynthia a hazy impression, intentionally stirring the sort of false memories for a romantic “classicism” that Propertius’s modern translator-interpreters serve to represent. Pound’s ironic skewering of this pretense turns Propertius's sense of loss over Cynthia into a vehicle for Pound’s wider concern for what modernity sacrifices when it loses touch with its Greek roots.

Pound amplifies his lament about the state of the improper contemporary assessment of Propertius. Pound inflects his treatment of Cynthia such that he is able to render the import of Propertius’s praise more clearly. Propertius, that is, uses Cynthia to criticize a Roman culture that vividly cites Alexandrian precursors while forgetting the actual agonies that their myths were concerned to allegorize. That is, Pound's rendering of Propertius's own life *anticipates* the sexual cynicism exemplified by Ovid who uses the word “pasiphae” in Book One of *Ars Amatoria* to degrade women, the word implying that a woman's libido, once aroused, can become so unruly that she may lust for a bull. Pound connects Propertius to Ovid through his shared (Pound-Ovid) critique of the Roman elegiac strategy that makes stories of personal pain, war, and impoverishment, into etiolated allegoric psychomachia. Pound's discovery of this aspect of Propertius is
described by Christine Brooke-Rose. She finds two surprising, if not analogous, themes in the *Homage*. Brooke-Rose argues that what it is that makes the *Homage* “the real point of entry to the Cantos” is their treatment of love as “a generous, joyous, heedless thing” *as well as* “the underworld Persephone theme.”

Pound's emphasis on the free love motif in Propertius coincides with the advent of what JPVD Baldson describes as a sexual revolution in the last days of Republican Rome. No longer did women conform to the stoic roles of dutiful daughter and patriotic wife. That ethos discouraged displays of passion and longing; “love” was relegated to the bodily appetites, an impulse, that if indulged in for its own sake, would bring on a particular kind of love madness. The degeneration of feminine “prisca virtus” [preciosité] that typified Propertius’s rendering of Cynthia came as the consequence of the expenses incurred through Rome’s twenty year war with Carthage. This war constituted a courtesan class and a concomitant sentimental revolution concerning the inferiority of women. Catullus was the first of the Roman elegists to note the new roles women played in Roman society by giving his affair with Lesbia an apt rendering in the psychology of emotional engagement. Love, for Catullus, is not an accident or madness to be avoided. Lesbia is her own person. She is an object of deserved tenderness and affection. With her, Catullus: “can contemplate a permanent alliance” (Sullivan 50). Propertius and Catullus were romantic lovers; tender, and admiring “[t]heir mistresses [as] their equals, if not, as Propertius pretends, their superiors. They are valuable not simply as beauties, but as possible friends and intellectual companions” (Sullivan 50). Ovid, the last of the Republican elegists, obscures this romantic ethos of equality by returning to an older system of sexual cynicism. His *Ars Amatoria* is really a satire of love focusing on
seduction as an insincere game. In simple, Ovid is not absorbed in the stance that allows the women that he seduces their autonomous purity before they are assimilated to his purposes as objects of prey. Propertius is entirely absorbed. He desires to rescue Cynthia. He dreams of Cynthia lost at sea. He is clearly worried about her reputation.

Pound sets aside Propertius’s absorption with Cynthia and develops the theme concerning Propertius’s poetic inheritance and how to navigate it in a culture demanding monuments to imperial glory – a way of emphasizing the aspect of inheritance implicated in the “underworld” theme that Brooke-Rose mentions. Pound highlights those aspects of Propertius’s poetry that deal with the role of the artist in society. The portrait of jealousy, rapture, quarreling, and infidelity that Propertius delivers is left hanging by Pound for those areas where he adumbrates the tenuous position of the poet in a society organized around regimes of patronage that require poets to produce monumental poems dedicated to the prowess and honor of the emperor. Sullivan explains how Pound responds to the romantic element in Propertius’s poetry, finding that the “Cynthia” motif is a useful ruse for his own more direct critique of empire's reifying disciplines and hierarchy:

Pound is accentuating the conventional nature of this sort of thing in Roman poetry; the sophistication in Propertius is balanced here by the sophistication of the Poundian verse techniques, but against that, it must be said that the continued use of this tone makes us lose sight of the passion that makes itself felt in Propertius’s style – even at its most ironic and when it is working through stock themes and images. Pound seems to assimilate Propertius to Ovid. (57)

Pound reorients Propertius along the Ovidian axis of intelligent restraint, and in so doing offers a new way to read the sincere romantic elegy. Critics accuse Pound of perverting or straining the sense of Propertius’s lament, especially in his redacted versions (4 and
10) of their rows over fidelity. For Sullivan, however, Ovid and Propertius deconstruct one another: “Propertius’s light poems [Vertumnus] makes light of the whole conception of Ovid’s as yet unwritten Fasti, much as Ovid's Amores made light of his predecessors in elegy by changing amorous seriousness to mockery” (Sullivan 62). This, Pound perceives.

Interestingly, more recent commentary on Propertius has come to accept Pound's reading of the real-politik in his work that instrumentalized “romance.” Vincent Katz's introduction, “Preserving the Metaphor,” to his new translation of Propertius’s elegies points out exactly what was at stake in the Alexandrian influence:

Callimachus of Cyrene (305- 240 B.C.E.) had an important position at the library in Alexandria and was a central figure in a literary debate on the best means to reinvigorate poetry. In Callimachus’s opinion, what was needed was a poetry of erudition, refinement – arcane and limited in scope. The Roman poets of the first century B.C.E. saw in Callimachus’s poetry, and in the modern and urbane pastoral poetry of Theocritus (c.310-c.250 B.C.E.), ways to escape the rut of pompous epic poetry that, in Roman times, often served as a crude vehicle for propaganda or self-aggrandizement. (xxx)

Propertius used myth in a particular way, often foiling his reader’s expectations, in just such a Callimachean fashion:

Propertius’s use of mythology is distinctive: in many cases, details and emphases of myths are different in Propertius than in other surviving sources. The myths were received by Romans and Greeks in various versions, and poets in particular felt free to mold them to their uses. Still, the frequency of Propertian anomalies points to a wilful use of material, which is not always consistent, though it is poetically effective. (Katz xxxi)

Katz gives us an example of this will in Propertius’s deployment of the myth of Milanion's wooing of Atalanta in 1.1. This myth would have been understood as an
example of the lengths to which a lover must go to successfully seduce his beloved. Romans would have expected Propertius to relate the story about the golden apples laid in Milanion’s path by Atalanta as a trick in their foot race where marriage was the promised wager. Instead of this story, Propertius remembers the bravery Milanion displayed as she confronted wild animals and the Centaur Hylaeus during the run: “There are many such cases in Propertius, in which he subverts expectations as to the emphasis a particular myth should take” (Katz xxxii). Katz lets us know that what Propertius is affecting to achieve during his misdirected mythological allusions, is a careful subversion of scholastic rhetorical models. Taking scholastic exercises like “praising custom” or “refusals to accept obligation” as his starting points, Propertius incorporates literary and personal elements into his implicit critique of their usual deployment in the construction of a climate of sentiment that reifies empire and its rulers. Katz points out that Propertius’s poems deploy complex modes of personal address when these mythological excursions give vent to personal observation. By using informality to address Cynthia in moments of intense emotion “as a means to innovate the development of a tone,” Propertius can oppose the language of intimacy and earnestness. Once insouciant parody has been established, Propertius addresses the causes of war directly, using the same informality. Here in 3.7, his friend, Paetus has died at sea while on mission.

Money, you are the cause of life's problems!
Because of you, we travel to death too soon.
You offer cruel sustenance to men's vices:
seeds of trouble grow from your root. (3.7.1-4)

Pound's sensitivity to the reason for Propertius’s shifting modes of address, from lover to republic, allows him to develop a “germ of humour” about the topic of intimacy and
obsessive desire most critics find to be Propertius’s central preoccupation. Pound's slighting treatment of Cynthia is based in his assumption that the truth of their relationship was recorded in 4.8., the so-called “Ride to Lanuvium.”

In 4.8., Propertius organizes an evening of debauchery with two courtesans. Cynthia has taken a trip to Lanuvium with a different lover to observe the annual fertility rites on display there. The rites include the chore of feeding a deadly snake in a cave by a young virgin. Be she impure, the snake will bite her, she will die, and the year's harvest will fail. Cynthia and her paramour are attending only to mock this magical thinking in a carnivalesque concupiscent display. Meanwhile, Propertius, neglected by Cynthia, is having his revenge. Unfortunately for him, Cynthia returns early, reads him the riot act, and winds up spending the evening in his arms, the two courtesans having been driven out. Micaela Janan provides the best summary:

Failing of the goal in one sense or another can be amply documented from Propertius’s whole chronicle of his affair with Cynthia, not just this poem; his verses schematically mirror a via dolorosa of sexual antagonism that anticipates the elegant sorrows of courtly love. However, 4.8 intensifies the sense of impasse by reducing him to impotence and his mistress to violence, degradations that the fragile congeniality of the poem's conclusion does more to underline than to erase (as we shall see). The elegy may be read – in this as in other respects – as a conspectus on their entire relationship, especially since it is his collection's very last word on the subject. Beneath the joyful comedy of this elegy lurks an unresolved tension, rendered all the more insistent by the uneasy proximity of Cynthia's ghost in 4.7 and her embittered retrospect on their romance. Why should Propertius’s final word on the affair be so fraught with doubt and subterranean despair? (117 The Politics of Desire: Propertius IV Micaela Janan)

Janan believes that Propertius’s despair is located in his insight into sexuality. Propertius discovers that as a mode of being in the world, sexuality is inherently flawed. 4.8, while
despairing over Cynthia's infidelity, offers the careful reader the solace that all sexuality is a road to perdition, comically implied by the sardonic way Propertius portrays his rival. 4.8 offers the image of an overpowering sexual rival, a “vulsus nepos,” that accompanies Cynthia to Lanuvium. The rival is a contradictory figure, though. He is fortune’s favorite for the evening, but otherwise impotent. The depilated younger man is designed to figure as an image of that which is sexually amorphous, an object for both male and female attention. This is his resource. He needs to make himself smooth because he is, in fact, aging:

Propertius’s jibe that his rival must soon sell himself as a gladiator speaks to the other man’s spendthrift habits, but also to the imminent disappearance of his wealth’s source. Propertius depicts his rival less as Cynthia's compliment than her mirror: the nepos, too, depends precariously upon his sexuality for his daily bread. Cynthia's sudden return from her tryst with him hints that this rather pathetic figure, youth and finances dwindling, cannot in truth bear the weight of Propertius's grand jealousy: Propertius is surprised in flagrante delicto because he expected the nepos to keep her happily occupied rather longer than the poor man could manage. (120 Janan)

Sexuality is as often a masquerade as it is a source of romantic attraction and love. In fact Propertius’s insights must be seen as stronger than a mere reflection on Cynthia. At this point in the poem Propertius ridicules the device that has allowed him to portray himself as the slave of love:

Cynthia is an allegory for poetry itself. The most obvious level on which this is true is that, inasmuch as Cynthia is the first word of the first poem, she would have served as the title of the Monobiblos according to ancient poetic practice. Propertius, thus, later speaks of his Cynthia being read all over town (2.24.2), meaning the Monobiblos. By the same token, when the poet says he wins fame through Cynthia, the statement is humorously double-edged, meaning both his poetry and the love affair he professes to recount therein. On this level, Cynthia's infidelity, her
passing from hand to hand, becomes a metaphor of the successful poet's fame. Thus what is most a cause for the character Propertius's shame – his being betrayed by his mistress – is the sign of the poet Propertius's glory. (Subjecting Verses: Latin Love Elegy and the Emergence of the Real. Paul Allen Miller 63-4)

Miller confirms the association between “Cynthia” and “poetry” by reminding us that the correspondence would have been granted by the coterie of elegy readers Propertius wrote for. “Cynthia” was a name linked to the poetry of Cornelius Gallus, the first Roman Elegist. It stood as a metonym for the genre. Gallus’s work mentioned Mount Cynthius on the isle of Delos as being Callimachus's (the Alexandrian pater familias to the Roman Elegists) proper home. “That association was reproduced by Vergil's sixth Eclogue where the god directing Vergilian discourse away from epic material was given the cult title Cynthius” (64). Miller traces the use of the masculine form, Cynthius, through Meleager and Catullus. The opening lines of the Monobiblos are a direct imitation of lines from Meleager.

The imitation of Meleager, however, contains ironies that have not been noted. Cynthia is prima, but the announcement of her firstness is a quotation and hence already secunda. If we recall the literary significance of Cynthia being the first (prima) word of the poem, then the programmatic nature of this statement becomes clear. It also indicates that the poetry that follows will be organized around polarities and inversions such that the surface meaning is often at odds with that contained in the subtext. Cynthia might be first but only in a way that announces her as second. The poem itself, rather than having a stable centre, functions as the locus for a series of tensions between a set of analogous polarities and their inversions. (Miller 85)

Pound's translation, then, takes these series of textual tensions and relations and recasts them in a new idiom. Hooley finds this modernizing gesture in the initial lines of the homage where Pound takes:
Callimachi manes et Coi sacra Philetae
in vestrum, quaeso, me sinite ire nemus
primus ego ingredior puro de fonte sacerdos
Itala per Graios orgia ferre choros
(4.1 in Mueller, 3.1 in Teubner, 3.2 in modern eds)
and transforms it into
Shades of Callimachus, Coan ghosts of Philetas,
It is in your grove I would walk,
I who come first from the clear font
Bringing the Grecian orgies into Italy, and the dance into Italy

We see a living example of Pound's rejection of Browning's “translationese”: “What Browning had not got into his sometimes excellent top-knot was the patent, or what should be the patent fact, that inversions of sentence order in an uninflected language like English are not, simply and utterly are not any sort of equivalent for inversions and perturbations of order in a language inflected as Greek and Latin are inflected” (“Translators” 148). Pound's creative misprision of the last two lines depends upon his interpretation of their central importance, their claim of originality in bringing tradition into a new language. Miller argues that graios choros can become “Grecian orgies,” and that Pound’s awkward phrase “into Italy” is softened in its second mention such that “[i]t [is an] anatomizing of the process of bringing Propertius – as new idea – into English. Propertius's creative accomplishment is effected by his manipulation, subtle twisting, of a number of conventions – the restricted codes of Latin love elegy – that don't exist in English verse” (38 my emphasis). What Pound has done, and here the element of deceit, “verba dabam,” that lies tacit in the expanded context of the Ovidian reference that Pound uses to code his volume of poetry, is to turn the man, Propertius, into his coded name for poetic imitation that aims itself covertly as political criticism. Effectively, Pound buries
Propertius as Propertius once had Cynthia. Ironically, this comes by way of Pound's enlivening that part of his poetry aimed at skewering the pretenses of Roman propaganda, the very stuff that made Cynthia's promiscuity adulatory and the implied title of Propertius’s work that Propertius had used to cunningly camouflage himself from criticism. The burial of Propertius is accomplished through Pound’s understanding that the sexual cynicism we once appointed to Ovid was learned from Propertius. Through the work of recovering an antique form of the critical understanding of what Propertius’s elegies meant as both satirical protests against empire, and as complicated commemorations of the Alexandrian tradition that avoids “the rut of pompous epic poetry,” Pound can demonstrate in his allegorical citation of Propertius’s mythopoetic ornament the reality of a crucial moment in Propertius’s original reception, free from the contemporary taboo that was placed on such a reading, in the natural history of the elegiac tradition. That the elemental force of nature in this history was Propertius’s desire to criticize empire’s imbecility, camouflaged behind the street name for elegiac poetry, “Cynthia,” that he was undermining, must have struck Pound as fortunate.
CHAPTER FOUR:

DE-PERSONALIZATION AND E.P.’S FICTIONAL CREATIVITY IN

“HUGH SELWYN MAUBERLEY”

The worst muddle they make is in failing to see that Mauberley buries E.P. in the first poem; gets rid of all his troublesome energies. (T. Connolly, ‘Further Notes on Mauberley’, Accent (1956), 59; quoted Brooker, A Student’s Guide, p.188)

“That total fake, Ezra Pound.”
– Vladimir Nabakov

Perhaps no greater red-herring has been uttered by a poet about his work. Pound’s Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, much like “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” involves itself with the activity of poets creating epitaphs for other poets. We over-interpret Pound’s meaning if we believe that E.P., troublesome energies and all, is missing from the poem. This chapter involves itself with understanding the way names and titles suggest that what Pound achieves in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is a de-personalized narrative, one attributable to the fictional creativity of “E.P.,” the poem’s solitary speaker. E.P., imaginatively buried by “Mauberley,” is what the poem allows Pound both to become and leave behind, as his avatar for that natural history that belonged to the artistic and cultural milieu of London in 1919, a milieu that he had come to disdain and for which he
saw no viable future for his own experiments in modernist expression. This reading, then, is also a consideration of that criticism that registers the poem, and Pound more broadly, as an archly difficult example of modernist impersonality. Rather than having to retain the anterior authorial consciousness that is implicitly at play in these theories of impersonality, it is possible to read *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* according to the stance Benjamin felt was necessary to making modernist expression tangible. That is, Pound discovers in 1920’s *Mauberley*, after his preliminary work with finding the correct formal position from which to adopt the stance of a de-personalized narrative. Pound discovers something like the incredibly productive formal context that the “deadening of the emotions, and the ebbing away of the waves of life” that Benjamin ascribes to de-personalization.

Max Saunders’ magisterial treatment of the relationship between biography and modernist aesthetics, *Self Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature*, has refocused contemporary critical energy over the formal and generic grounds upon which theories of impersonality have been raised. While his thesis that “the autobiographical is central to modernist narrative, and never far from the surface even in the extended poetry of Pound or Eliot,” and his ensuing readings, including and especially of Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, does provide an interesting coincidental instance of the way names and titles influence one another, a puzzle yet remains (12). Saunders writes, “In autobiographical fiction, the protagonist’s name is not (or at least isn’t usually) ‘one’s name,’ but someone else’s” (5). The undecidability of how much is fiction and how much is fact in *Mauberley*, is left, simply, that – undecidable. Without a theory of language that allows for the way names and titles interact, theories as eloquent
and interesting as Saunders’ must repeat the problem of voice in formal terms, leaving impersonality a refined but reductive approach to those texts that theorists and critics interested in modernist expression choose to argue from. Modernism, after Benjamin’s understanding, has to be that writing which is best suited to deconstructing the taboo that titles create, allowing for the kind of de-personalized fate that natural history, being neither nature or history, signals in its attempts to locate for itself an apt name.

In fact, Saunders’ study of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley complicates the problem by finding a new, third, voice, beside those that might be imagined as belonging either to Pound or Mauberley, to consider as a possible narrator. Saunders theorizes that there exists a belletrist/ literary memoirist at work in the poem. He places a particular emphasis on the poem’s title when he reminds us that it was never Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, simply, but Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts (John Rodker’s Ovid Press [London], 1920). In 1949, when Pound had other worries such as escaping indefinite imprisonment at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, his collected works appeared. The title in this issue was simplified, leaving out the appositive “Life and Contacts.” Important enough was the full title to Pound that it reappears in the 1958 reprinting of the collected works, appearing, as it stands today, as Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Contacts and Life.

Pound’s corrected title for the 1958 issue of his collected work gives Saunders the lead in his formal approach to the poem and the ensuing discovery of this third voice. Saunders explains the poem’s first sequence as belonging to the genre of imaginary biography (finding its closest accompaniment in Max Beerbohm’s Seven Lives) in which Pound invents a number of imaginary aesthetes – E.P., the woman of “Yeaux Glauques,” Monsieur Verog, Brennbaum, Mr. Nixon, Lady Valentine – for satirical treatment. If,
then, these imaginary aesthetes were Pound’s/Mauberley’s “Contacts,” then that portion of the poem that describes a “Life,” Saunders suggests, is, formally, an objective treatment of the imaginary biography of “Mauberley,” the eponym appointed to the whole poem’s second sequence. It is here, though, that Saunders’ formalist approach reaches a threshold in its explanatory possibilities.

Saunders claims that two versions of imaginary biography are at work in the second sequence, giving it its objectivity and overall coherence. The “Mauberley” section’s “metabiography” has Saunders locating the third voice of the belletrist in the parodic note signaled by Pound’s title for the entire poem. This voice criticizes the oversincere genre incorporate to the flattery regimes of late 19th century biography.

The metabiographical element in the poem’s second sequence is Saunders’ primary argument for the “Mauberley” section’s coherence and objectivity. Archly formal in its appropriation, metabiography posits the invented belletristic author, ‘E.P.’ This is something of a less interesting argument than the second mode of imaginary biography Saunders finds at work: “allobiography.” Saunders would have us understand Pound to be writing in a free and indirect style that fuses an external narrator with “Mauberley”’s consciousness. Saunders innovates here, and imagines that Mauberley is not a unitary consciousness, (as Ronald Bush asserts), but a composite:

By “allobiographical” I mean that the “objective” presentation of Mauberley draws upon, or can be connected with, biographies of other people – real biographies rather than the imaginary one of Mauberley. It is not merely a matter of lives, but of the aesthetic activities and standpoints of other people as well. (406)
It is with the question of allobiography for what it suggests about impersonality that this chapter deals. The play with naming and titles that occurs in this poem can be read in such a manner that the author’s hero, Mauberley, is not he with whom the focalization of real biography is shared. Rather, Pound’s technique in this poem allows him to share his own authorial consciousness with these same “others” that impinge upon the imaginary consciousness of Mauberley. It is this invention that makes *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* a de-personalized poem, one that allows Pound to approach a condition where his fate is acknowledged and overcome, as he bids farewell to London, allowing it and its own natural history to speak through the poem’s actual author, the representative of London’s effete avant-garde, “E.P.”

The consequences of such a reading of *Mauberley*, one where the forces of natural history share the stage with Pound’s authority, has a direct impact on recent readings of Pound and upon the issue of impersonality more generally. Saunders’ thesis depends upon a kind of essentialism that allows personhood to be performed and imitated: Pound, that is, “impersonates” imaginary voices. Before returning to the problem of *Mauberley* to demonstrate how I see Pound using aesthetic language to de-construct or de-create his personality, it is important to deal with theories of impersonality that continue to work from an essentialist bias. Mutlu Blasing, Sharon Cameron, and Virginia Jackson provide eloquent important and eloquent defense for the disposition underlying Saunders’ thesis. Their work on the issue of voice and subjectivity, like Saunders’, has prepared the ground for understanding what is actually at stake in reading Pound’s work after Benjamin’s sense that de-personalized language can de-construct taboo. Saunders is surely correct when he suggests that “Pound’s self might, at least in a poem such as this, be another
‘persona,’ an impersonation of an attitude rather than a robust expression of conviction” (378). If this is indeed the case, what needs testing is something that appears as an after-thought to Saunders when he sums up the blended object of Pound’s narration, the allobiographical second sequence “Mauberley”: “Yet insofar as its composite portraiture is of Pound’s own contacts, it is also imaginary autobiography: fictionalizing Pound’s own experience as the experience of a fictional persona” (410). This thought, that authorial subjectivity is the reflection of the experiences of a fictional persona, confronts the performative and essentialist bias that yet informs contemporary theories of “impersonality.” I favor disbanding the term for its promiscuous emphasis on dramatic models beholden to an anterior creator for their theoretical heft. The narrative stance that imagines the narrator, imagining itself writing its own author, reflects Benjamin’s understanding of the relationship between the productive context of de-personalization incorporate to modernist expression and that stance’s relationship to the processes Benjamin’s theory associates with literary language as it confronts the taboo making functions of titles. This position needs the context provided by recent work on impersonality and lyric subjectivity to be fairly measured.

Mutlu Blasing’s recent reading of Ezra Pound’s Cantos, found in Lyric Poetry: The Pain and Pleasure of Words, is exemplary of the return to essentialist, yet complex, theories of subjectivity in lyric poetry. Blasing’s exploration tends to do Pound’s version of impersonality, never really a performance, a disservice. To demonstrate what is at stake in Blasing’s misreading, I take on the implicit challenge to re-theorize poetic-subjectivity called for by Sharon Cameron when she says that we have no idea what the prefix “im” in impersonality means. While Mutlu Blasing's reading of Pound is
interesting, a rapprochement is necessary in order to confront the conclusions she draws about poetic-subjectivity and impersonality. This rapprochement extends into a wider look at the work of Virginia Jackson who shares similar critical pre-dispositions to Blasing and Cameron in her discussion of lyricism and subjectivity.

Listening closely to the phonemic play in the *Cantos* for the "lyric" connections that lie outside their content, Blasing values Pound's poetry for its ideological "fluidity" but regards it to be the accidental by-product of his intent. Her theories of “metaleptic” subject-formation, caused by the ontological priormess of the "mother-tongue," and the ensuing protraction of authorial intention to what it is that constitutes the "real" history that delivers this tongue, allows her to dismiss Pound's avowed intentions to demonstrate historical repetition and the details that illumine the actual conditions that he may have thought to be governing cultural production. Here is the conclusion she draws after reading Canto 71, an Adams Canto:

The prevailing defense of the Cantos is that its epic openness and polyvocality save the poem from being a totalitarian text, which, in the standard reading, is aligned with "lyric closure." But we always only hear other voices as edited by Pound. My argument is that lyric language, which is "open" to a different history, keeps the poem ideologically fluid. The text has a kind of negative capability because it allows language to organize in a fashion that undoes tendentious messages. To motivate the signifier, the lyric listens to the words otherwise, and if we listen to words otherwise, we hear a different Adams - or, more accurately, different Adamses - than the one he [Pound] would like to leave for the record. (*Lyric Poetry* 161)

Blasing draws new implications from the timbre of Pound's “voice,” at the expense of his intent: "[b]ut we always only hear other voices edited by Pound" (162). Whether this is true or not is beside the point. Pound's version of subjectivity makes the
difference between his intention and what he edits moot. Blasing pursues her own
definition of subjectivity in her discussion of lyricism and the construction of the lyrical
"I," by making use of the poetic figure of metalepsis and two different regimes of signs,
adopted from Lacanian psychoanalysis. She has us understand that the lyric "I"
constitutes itself in its breaking away from, or "transumption," into the Other. That is, in
Lacanian terms, the subject breaks free from the closure of her Imagination of the Real to
instantiate a position within the Symbolic, the residuum of culturally recognized
significances and positions with which the subject must negotiate. For Blasing the
empirical Real is that stage in which an infant acquires his or her unique version of the
mother-tongue through processes of imitation and mimicry. This imitative babble
becomes the eventual ground from which unconscious memories form a lyrical
"microrhetoric." It is this pre-conscious mimicry which motivates the maturing poet in
her confrontation with, and eventual transumption into, the Symbolic order.

Poundian babble plays a different tune, Blasing argues, from his intention, caught
as he is within a microrhetoric that shapes the poem:

Thus lyric language shapes the poem's development and arguments
at a different level than the patterns that subject rhymes or the
repeats in history provide. The poem is convincing because these
larger patterns, "rhymes," and repeats by which Pound would
organize his tale are grounded in another kind of patterning that
does not work by argumentation and "proof-bringing." The
repetitions, patterns of sounds, rhythms, and syntax, make for the
"persuasion" of Pound's form as they train the reader to "see,"
imagine, desire other kinds of links, in the same way that one is
moved to connect the different senses of rhyming words. (157)

Neither the content of the historical repetitions Pound finds nor the choices over
what parts of the record Pound edits, and interprets, are of significance to Blasing. This is
understandable, perhaps, as she is concerned only to trace the presence of the mother-
tongue inside poetry that would pretend itself otherwise as clear public speech. What is of concern is the way she values Pound's mother-tongue at the expense of his content. This eventuates a misprision of those elements of Pound’s rhetoric that are beholden to a textual “mother-tongue” that was as much scripted and silent as it was vocalized. Blasing's phono-centric bias overlooks the broader palate from which Pound would have acquired his authorial subjectivity and as such it misses how Pound's poetic-subjectivity may not be ascribed, merely, to pre-conscious sound patterns.

In essence, Blasing uses Lacanian terms to give the socially-constructed, virtual lyric-'I' a terrain through which it is thought to appear in its constitutive act of metalepsis: "The lyric ‘I’ is a metaleptic figure, an Apollonian illusion of an ‘individual’ projected upon, to use Nietzsche's words, ‘a piece of fate’ (1979, 54)" (5). Blasing goes on to explain the "material" base from which the subject breaks into the symbolic order and, presumably, acquires the rules for the paradigmatic and syntagmatic construction of meaning:

But figural and "rational" languages alike depend on a prior material language and a prior operation that gets us from the material letters and sounds to words. And that operation cannot be subsumed under the rubric of figuration because it has a history. We did not come with language; we all had to learn it. To dismiss the materiality of language is to dismiss the emotionally charged history that made us who we are - subjects in language, which is the subject of the lyric. (6)

Blasing goes on to argue that the individual subject is a deeply a-historic illusion when it fails to include the material story of language acquisition. It especially fails to explain the work that poets do if it makes this failure. She writes, "the historical permutations of the concept and status of an ‘individual’ are not of help in understanding poetic subjectivity, which will elude methodologies that assume that concept as a given –
itself a Western bourgeois assumption" (5). Her theory is supple. The lyric-"I," as Blasing deploys the mother-tongue in symbolic language, serves to reify the structural distinctions Lacan describes between the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, while at the same time preserves her indebtedness to post-structural theories of subject formation formulated by Gilles Deleuze, the theorist most responsible for bringing the idea of virtuality to the psychoanalytic table, and for whom the “Symbolic” is the objet de crise:

In the largest terms, my argument is that poetic language generates such theoretical oppositions yet resists their terms because it remembers the history that creates the gaps internal to language. These distinctions come to be posited through a lived history of language acquisition, the passage from body language into symbolic language. (10)

Blasing's reading of Deleuze and Guattari is obvious in her appraisal of the historical construction of “body language” and the resistance it offers to structural analyses of the subject. (She dedicates the third chapter of her book to a close reading of Deleuze's Logic of Sense.) The presence of their notion of a "Body without Organs" or, less cryptically, the idea of personhood on which "assemblages" (adapted from their narrow reading of Marx's Capital) of "desiring machines" (they abandon this term after writing Anti-Oedipus but retain the concept in a "delirium" of new replacement terms in Mille Plateaux) or "part objects" coalesce, inscribe, and deteriorate, is clear. The care Blasing gives in showing that the unconscious is constructed, and not a feature of an oceanic and deep cultural expression, a central feature of Guattari and Deleuze’s rethinking of psychoanalysis after their work on “body language,” does her reading of their work credit which makes her retention of the Lacanian structure within her Deleuzian discussion of subject-formation all the more strange. Blasing retains the psychoanalytic "Symbolic" order to maintain her greater claim that discourses of reason
rely on the aboriginal poetic, lyric, language that we call the "mother-tongue." In a deft piece of dialectical thinking, she holds that the non-rational language of the mother-tongue subsumes the acquired languages of reason and the irrational. The worlds of rationalized symbolic logic and the dream-logic of the irrational Imaginary constitute reifying opposites. The non-rational is then free to become the antinomial Other to that opposition.

Deleuze’s strategy for undoing the authority of the Symbolic order is something less dialectic. He rethinks the statutory prescriptions as they had come to be described and practiced within the institution of French Psychoanalysis. The Symbolic and its preference for signifiers and interpretation over that which they signify – the signified and a world knowable through sensation – demarcates subjects and objects independent of context. Deleuze laments that the institution of psychiatry had granted itself this authority by forgetting about the meaning of the content of the signified and its connection to reality. Deleuze's purpose, in part, was to examine how the Imaginary, as it is spurred by contractual remonstrations with the empirical Real, eludes the false constraints of the axioms enlisted by sovereign Symbolic "different(c)iations" (*Difference and Repetition*) and as such opens itself to any variety of delirious opinion about reasonable predication. Prior to their axiological encoding by the psychoanalytic Symbolic Order, subjects and objects are haecceities, events, or unique mixings of parts and conditions in time.

Deleuze's misgivings about psychoanalysis are founded in his rejection of institutionalized definitions and fixities that faith in the Symbolic order bequeath and which help to obviate the multiplicity of part-objects that compose the assemblage of the
subject. Deleuze's 1977 discussion of psychoanalysis with Claire Parnet, occurring just after the writing of *Anti-Oedipus*, offers the most candid evidence of this rejection and the replacement of the Symbolic order in his thought by the contractual, machinic, extrinsic, assemblage he calls "desire" (mixing Spinozan/Erigenean "haecceities" and Nietzschean "will") that is formed directly between the Imaginary (plane of consistency) and the Real (field of transcendence) without Symbolic mediation:

Psychoanalysis then has, in effect, its own references and has no more use for an external "referent." Everything that happens in psychoanalysis in the analyst's consulting room is true. What happens elsewhere is derived or secondary. An excellent method for encouraging trust. Psychoanalysis has ceased to be an experimental science in order to get hold of an axiomatic system. Psychoanalysis, *index sui*; no other truth than that which emerges from the operation which presupposes it; the couch has become the bottomless well, interminable in principle. Psychoanalysis has stopped being "in search of" because it is now constitutive of truth...[quotes Serge Leclaire on the contra-rational inflation of figures into literal behaviors that Psychoanalysis prefers] ... The psychoanalyst has become like the journalist: he creates the event. At any rate, psychoanalysis advertises its wares. So long as it interpreted or so long as it interprets (search for a signified), it returns desires and utterances to a condition which is deviant by comparison with the established order, by comparison with dominant meanings, but by the same token localizes them in the pores of this dominant, established body, like something which can be translated and exchanged by virtue of a contract. When it discovers the signifier, it appeals to a specifically psychoanalytic order (the symbolic order in opposition to the imaginary order of the signified), whose only need is itself, because it is statutory or structural: it is it which develops a body, a corpus sufficient by itself. Once again we clearly come up against the question of power[.] (*Dialogues* 87)

The deployment of multiplicity of meanings over totality and symbol is worth thinking about, as it touches upon recent theories of the lyric and poetic-subjectivity. The lyric "I", if we are to take Deleuze’s anti-Symbolic argument seriously, cannot believe
that metalepsis is a useful heuristic. However, what we find after we take the material substrate of language acquisition seriously as it is tropologically refracted into theoretic discourses like Blasing's, may not be that it constitutes the ground for the subject's eventual metaleptic formation. Finding a world without an irrational-Symbolic that is different in kind from the rational-Real leaves metalepsis open to the possibility that what it breaks is only ever a question of degree and not the transumptive leap into the symbolic order Blasing argues that it is. Rather than being a "metonymy of a metonymy" metalepsis implies understanding that metonymy (replacement) is a species of the genus synecdoche (condensation). Implied by this understanding is the knowledge that poetic tropes are learned from the confrontation of the will to repeat and the natural law that abhors all repetition. For Deleuze, this confrontation produces the ground of scriptable/sayable Symbols that disguise Nature's profound independence from the mimetic principles of identity(genus), resemblance(perception), opposition(predication), and analogy(judgment). Metalepsis, on these terms, registers rather than represents the subject’s disguise in Symbol. Blasing's concern to instantiate the ontological priority of the non-rational to lyrical language forces her to smooth over the foundational difference between Lacan and Deleuze. That Deleuze’s linguistic theory closely recalls Benjamin’s processual understanding of the relationship between names and titles is not, perhaps, surprising.

In fact, poetic-subjectivities like that which belong to Ezra Pound, and obliquely acknowledged by Saunders, follow Deleuze’s appraisal for the multiple more readily than Blasing’s implicit favoring of the singular in the metaleptic break into the symbolic order. Pound's distinct impersonality, one in which he grants his narrator the power to construct
his subjectivity as a blend of fact and fiction, goes unheralded in theories and readings like Blasing's. Her preoccupation with the Symbolic Order, as if it, alone and autonomous, were the hearth and home of all cultural production permeates a number of recent theories about the relationship between subjectivity, history, and lyric-poetry. Pound’s de-personalized poetry requires no such metaleptic break for its expression.

Sharon Cameron, for example, finds that "we don't know what the im of impersonality means" (ix). Impersonality, in a nutshell, usually refers to the artist's understanding that her style underwrites and conditions the form of aesthetic production. Cameron's return to the topic of impersonality betrays its essentialist bias in its tacit answer to the rhetorical question she poses, when it offers Simone Weil among its exemplary impersonal figures. Her version of impersonality ignored the constitutive factor that style plays in the registry of the real. Weil’s understanding implies, instead, that impersonality involves the dissolution of a person or ego that is at odds with a foundational aptitude for self-fashioning. Weil's philosophies of egoic-dissolution depend on there being some essential thing that can be dissolved. Pound's impersonality begins with the much different premise: that there was ever any such thing as a person to begin with. Impersonality, to hazard a definition then, is the awareness that style lends existence its ability to aesthetically register itself for an audience's consideration. It was his prerogative to extend this belief such that he became the screen upon which his narrator, Mauberley, would fashion his fictionally creative author, “E.P.”

We might begin to address Blasing’s impulse to combine Deleuzian and Lacanian models of subjectivity with that which Sharon Cameron believes has been perennially missing in our understanding of impersonality. We might restate her problem then by
finding first what the prefix "im" predicates before asking how it does so. At first blush we know that "im" directs us to consider what it is that goes 'into' the making of a "person." We lose that sense of clear predication and can understand Cameron's sense of urgency about impersonality as soon as we imaginatively contrast the first predicate with the next prefix we find - "per." The predicate per also signals direction - now to a sense of what it is that personhood moves through or by. Blasing, in fact, catches hold of the complicated processual understanding of subjectivity that is signaled through impersonality's predicates. Her attachment to the figure of metalepsis as a transumptive or frame-breaking device, usefully considered as an heuristic to describe poetic self-fashioning, brings her close to thinking about a processual or constructed subjectivity, similar to Pound’s and Benjamin’s, rather than one that is expressive like Weil’s.

Blasing's emphasis on the materiality of language extends her thought towards reconsidering the givenness of the empirical subject authoring a text with referential language for the authority of an artist's Symbolic self-fashioning through the asignifying material properties of "voice, rhythm, and sound shape" necessary for the transmission of the signified content of referential language:

The emphasis on an extralinguistic "individual" is a historically specific form that the repression of the material and formal rhetoric of poetic language takes. For the subject represented in or by or as the poem's referential language, the subject that is its fiction, is absolutely distinct from the subject, produced and heard in the voice, rhythm, and sound shape of the poem. (Cameron 5)

Were the lyrical-subject to be thought through by way of the process of conjugal predication of the impersonal that Blasing associates with referential language, rather than by the way of its breaking across the disjunction between the referential and the material components of language, then it becomes possible to see that the metaleptic
break occurs in the poet's mind as they posit themselves and their narrator as imaginary beings and before either or both of these entities are textually mimicked.

Cameron's focus on the predication of impersonality suggests that what we have, in fact, is the phenomena for some entity to posit itself as being a self-directed agent. The compound predication incorporate to impersonality, and its undecidability, would seem to suggest that, when all else remains, subjectivity occurs through the act of constituting choice itself. Impersonality, as I construe it in this context, means something different in kind to personality and personal. That is, in speaking of being *impersonal* we might mean that we are not ontically determined. We learn to cite our selves within our own remonstrance with natural history.

Memory and the art of predication that it makes possible has been re-examined such by modernist aesthetic practices that we can now see that what has constituted certain Truth was a condition of how we process and cite the melange of personal and public coordinates of incidence that figure within the past. Impersonality requires understanding that styles of re-membering always involve new understandings created in the encounter and placement of facts that lie before us on that path. Impersonality, as the stylized structuration of memory itself, replaces received ideas about organic modes of memory tethered to and organized by the variabilities of circumstance, for an abstract arrangement that is subordinate to the consequential rules of linear predication. Impersonality demonstrates that voluntary and involuntary memory eventually moves beyond the tasks of recollection and reminiscence for the end of permitting new, willed, re-organizations of the subject that follows forms of knowledge not located in the self's
archive of experiences (represented synthetically to recall) but rather in the syntactic play of sequential predication.

This willed determination of the body of a subject's memory in the hands of modernist thinkers and poets like Ezra Pound is a more complicated matter than creating an interpretive matrix that balances text and context, history and biography, for its promise of a best understanding of the meaning of their work. Once the predicating work of impersonality has been posited as the ground for the syntactic play of abstract subject formation, what modernists like Pound and Benjamin discover is that the object of generational production – the individual self or subject – is a delirium grounded in only one of many possible linear abstractions that mask themselves in synthetic thought. If the essence of selfhood is believed to have some preceding existential claim it would make null the distinctions and differences that sequential predication produces. The notion of a singular and discrete person, constructed by the sequencing of citations and abstractions from both the empirical real and the subject's memory, is undermined if we posit an essential subject at the outset of that process. The subject is, in point of fact, an agglutinative syntax before becoming paradigmatically thematized and Symbolically Ordered.

For Pound, that Odyssean oar of the virtual self that is arrived at in this process of syntagmatic self-making instantiates how style cites the delirium that is the mix of memory and matter we use to define identity. Through the exercise of choice-making, identity makes new forms for modeling and remarking. The modernist theories and aesthetics of Pound and Benjamin show us, though, the folly of the desire to leave behind the guarantees of self-interested choice-making; there is no essential self to offer up for
dogmatic binding and over which to perform some ceremony of mourning after its
dissolution. At the same time, Pound and Benjamin register the dreamlike nature of the
narcissism that reifies such beliefs. Poundian de-personalization teaches us that
murdering Narcissus, freeing oneself from one's personality, comes at the expense of
knowing that we have only ever been captives within a community of dreaming slaves,
whose dreams of belonging extend the real duration of the self’s exile in the provinces of
regret, litost, and impoverishment. "Time is the evil." Pound will say in Canto XXX,
referring to the production of just these sentiments after the romance of self-creation is
abused.

Cameron gives us an interesting example of the ambivalence implied by the
subject-predicating function of the impersonal she theorizes, by way of a thought
experiment in which she asks us to consider just what it is that suffers when our body is
attacked: personhood or personality. The implication of her experiment underlines the
nature of impersonality's undecidable wager between accepting the delirium of
personhood and the knowledge that that personhood is personality’s derivative. Cameron
argues that it is impossible to believe that an attack is made on your personality if your
body has been attacked. Personality, that is, is inalienable: "In distinction, personality
stresses self-ownership, the of or possessive through which individuality is identified as
one's own" (viii). Simone Weil pursued a painful program of intense self-unmaking
through a practice of active attention and concentration upon the particulars in her
immediate environment that she called "de-creation" (this, the homeopathic habit she
used to overcome her bouts of depression coupled, as they were, with deep and painful
migraine headaches), Cameron similarly acknowledges the antinomial nature of
impersonality. Weil uses a processes of de-creation, attentiveness to the feelings and sensations conveyed to her personhood by nature, to allow what it is that is essential in those sensations to register as objective and verifiable facts within the construction of her personality. She searches, through active selection, for essential things that affect her personhood and that are capable of being aesthetically represented and rendered subject to an act of self-interpretation.

In her reading of Weil, Cameron shows the opposing yet possible truths by which impersonality modifies and makes human identity uncertain:

One way of approaching impersonality is to say that it is not the negation of the person, but rather a penetration through or a falling outside of the boundary of the human particular. Impersonality disrupts elementary categories that we suppose to be fundamental to specifying human distinctiveness. Or rather, we don't know what the im of impersonality means. (ix)

For Weil we learn that the impersonal was marked by all that is inanimate, non-human, and outside while also being a call to pay ever closer attention to the particular qualities of the bad mood that her headaches presented. Rather than seeking release, Weil found ways to endorse their painful being. Through moving and thinking within the duration of the pain that her headaches caused, Weil found a way to experience an aspect of herself, unavailable to her in a state of health, as "dead wood" or "a chlorophyll conferring the faculty of feeding on light."

Pound finds different resources to register this ambivalence. His technique, though, unlike Weil’s, leaves no discernible pattern through which to make such determinations of self-overcoming. His textualism plums both history and the delirium that a real archive of events – a veridical order of memory – exists: under, through, and with which to register a foundational connection to the discovered tenements of the self.
Pound’s impersonality, to use the term, is different in kind to Weil's, in that it prefers to understand selfhood as belonging to broader genetic or historic explanations than to just those immediate environmental particulars that attach themselves in Weil’s concentrated attention.

Recently, Virginia Jackson has investigated one of the most powerful form-making pre-dispositions of the nineteenth century and lends a valuable insight into why certain aesthetic practices lend themselves to dismantling assumed understandings of thematic apperception that writers like Weil and Pound, in disparate times and contexts, find abducting their interest. Jackson focuses on the history of our assumptions governing what it is that constitutes lyricism and lyric poetry through the work of Emily Dickinson. The idea of "lyric" poetry has, she argues, seeped so permanently into our consciousness that our generic predispositions have grown to entirely occlude the actual work of many of its presumed exemplary avatars like Emily Dickinson. Lyricism, she argues, has come to stand for any writing that would seem to want to separate itself from historical public events. Roughly speaking, we think of history as being the story of the public world and the lyric mode as being precisely not that; the lyric is the ongoing mode of address for all that remains outside of history, all that is private. Jackson's work, *Dickinson's Misery*, upsets this distinction. She finds our too easy assumption that Dickinson wrote lyric poetry at all an invitation to think more broadly about what we mean by lyric, especially in its implied relationship to historicity, finding in Dickinson's work a keen awareness of the world about her and its place in time, and as such, a counterexample to our assumptions of what it is that determines her work as being the sine qua non of ahistoric lyricism:
As the most formally defined of modern literary genres, the lyric has been misunderstood as the genre most isolated from history - indeed, as the exemplary model of literary genre as a category separable from history. But Dickinson's work may be a model for an alternative approach in which the reading of genre and the reading of history are mutually implicated in each other. (55)

In fact, the point to Jackson's work appears not to be the blind overturning of convention and genre. While she shows how lyric poetry was always already inflected by a sense of history, especially in the case of Dickinson, her work serves to nuance our understanding of lyricism. She does this by tracing the roots of reductivist approaches to the lyric, beginning with the writings of John Stuart Mill. Lyric poetry has been conditioned to accord itself with the belief in an isolated (Mill used a prison metaphor) "I" that, as Northrop Frye once said, "pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else: a spirit of nature, a Muse...a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction, or a natural object" (in Jackson 130). This conceit engenders the bypassing of any particular addressee or "you" for a universal "we" situated ideally in "a form of transcendentally apostrophic address" (130).

Lyric poetry gives the reader the vacuous thrill, under this reductivist arch, of becoming a peeping-tom or a blackguard. We overhear a poet in a moment of affected confession. For Jackson the benefit for the reader in this act of overhearing is the confirmation, if not the affirmation, of themselves in their particularity. Lyricism, on Mill's account, encounters itself very much as that technique borne out of the traditional definition of impersonality that asserts differences without being able to make any that matter. Mill's lyricism asserts a general reader that prefers to make distinctions that differ without suggesting any particular reader who might assert those distinctions in practice.
Mill, Jackson notes, finds the conceit that the particular is at once the universal to be a problem. Mill contrasts lyricism with the eloquence of observably addressed direct-speech that enacts change and makes a difference.

As it pertains to Dickinson, Jackson asserts that we have made Dickinson's writing into lyric expression after this modern interpretation of the genre. Dickinson is universally acknowledged for her autonomy. We have been used to reading Dickinson's work with an acute concern for hearing reflexivity and formal self-awareness or, for reading the ways she addresses a universal theme through the conceit of a private and particularly idiomatic speech concerned to conceal any determinative singularities that might implicate Dickinson herself or any determined empirical reader. In the medallion chapter - "5. Dickinson's Misery" - Jackson does a close reading of a poem first published in 1945, and perhaps never sent in Dickinson's lifetime:

On the World you colored
Morning painted
rose -
Idle his
Vermillion
Aimless crept
   Stole
the Glows
Over Realms
Of Orchards
I the Day
before
Conquered
with the Robin -
Misery, how fair
Till your
wrinkled Finger
shored the
pushed
sun away
Midnight's awful Pattern
Jackson's thesis that lyric poetry ought not be disentwined from its historical place of utterance, that "historical determination appears indistinguishable from figurative power," is tested here against preceding readings of poems in which she has found particular empirical addressees. She finds in the figurative language of this poem a similar universe of actual empirical reference. Jackson acknowledges that the usual lyrical affectation of an "I," by-passing any individual "You" in its addressing of a universal "We," is achieved here but, at the same time, argues that if we are truly alert to the silent assumptions that Dickinson could be suggesting we might agree that this poem does have a single empirical addressee in mind. This addressee could distinguish between a general reader of a universal theme, and themselves, as a particularly intended reader interested in some discrete event shared with Dickinson. To paraphrase Jackson's argument, the scene of writing (the poet's work) is intentionally confused with the performance of direct address (Dickinson's message to a particular reader). Jackson reads this poem's eighth line, "Misery, how fair" as plaintively elegiac and as a coded personification available to a specific and intended reader. She writes, "Or is ‘Misery’ here a figure of address, another name for ‘you?’ If read as the latter, then this ‘you’ has slipped from cause to effect or, like the morning, partakes of the qualities of both" (207). For Jackson this doubled referentiality in the poem and the presence of an apostrophe to some particular "You" coded as "Misery" bends the inner timing and sequentiality of the poem's form: "Like the other apostrophes we have remarked in Dickinson's poems, the
apostrophe to ‘Misery’ performatively brings before and after into the present tense, overdetermining the ninth line's ‘Till’ in the same way that ‘your/ wrinkled Finger’ appears excessively determinate in the poem's last lines" (207). That authorial “Finger” and the implied pronoun shifts now embody both "you" and "I,” the writer and the reader. The finger's undecidable identity, Jackson argues, lends it a paternal, patronizing authority, inasmuch as it positively offers a possible destination for the address of the poem but then passively revokes any determinable agency to enable that transmission. Jackson reads this unhelpful finger as a metaphor for Dickinson's general attitude towards publication and the deleterious effect it had on Dickinson's identity in the moment of her constructing a poem. Publication ignores poets if they are women, which for Dickinson, Jackson argues, is "not a speaker, not an "I," not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self" (210). To publish, Jackson argues, would have meant for Dickinson to give up her self understanding of her position within the contemporary language of sentimental lyricism and "especially in the discourse of vicarious feeling – of sentimental lyric reading – that developed around that genre" (212). The production of vicarious feelings endemic to sentimental lyricism requires the poet to forgo their identity as poet and to adopt clear positions as “women who write poetry.” The ability of women to produce inauthentic feeling was unsettling; Dickinson was good at it. Publication implied submitting oneself to a kind of confession of identity that made aesthetic construction of feeling a parlor game. The new attention to the way lyricism is always under the torque of empirical circumstance, and the meaning Dickinson's work can be believed to have registered, through Jackson's discovery of empirical readers and ambivalent poetic sequencing, reflects the style or precision-work of the citation of the
delirium of self-hood that my understanding of Pound’s de-personalized poem requires.

To hazard a summary, if rational languages “depend upon a prior material language” [Blasing] and that material language is the object of a person’s self-making that “stresses self-ownership” as Sharon Cameron suggests, then the scene of writing, as Jackson theorizes it after Dickinson’s address, presents a spectacular problem. How can we believe that modernists who write such that the predicating impersonal subject, regardless of the difficulty and imagination of their focalizing agent, can “slip from cause to effect”? Dickinson’s poem, in fact is a precursor for just this inverted agency, available in Mauberley, a poem that thematizes:

A consciousness disjunct,  
Being but this overblotted  
Series  
Of intermittences

Which is to put the question about what actually appears in the poem and its empirical reference to the test. Is it “overblotted” or a “series/ Of intermittences”? The question is worth asking, remembering the difference between the Deleuzian and Lacanian theories of subject formation that Blasing asks that we entertain, one in which thresholds of our understanding language are broken-through, and in that breaking, constitutive of different forms of subjectivity, and the other in which “partial objects are not the expression of a fragmented, shattered organism, which would presuppose a destroyed totality or the freed parts of a whole” (326 Anti-Oedipus). Blasing, of course, described the assemblage of partial objects in terms of a “body language” that “remembers the history that creates its gaps” (8). When Pound decides to publish his poem anonymously as E.P., he takes on the similar narratological position as Dickinson, writing a poem in which the conduits of self-expression are hostile and appropriative. As
“Mauberley,” the poem’s narrator, imaginatively “murders” the creative fiction of the belletrist E.P., we are asked to conceive of ourselves, like Dickinson’s readers of “Misery” believing that publication itself has made E.P. "not a speaker, not an "I," not a consciousness, not a subjectivity, not a voice, not a persona, not a self." This was the fate Pound imagined for himself were he to remain writing in London. Playing with the titles and names of this poem (it was first published without Pound’s signature in 1920 as the de facto work of “E.P.”) allowed Pound to at once express this fate and escape it. Explanations that depend upon the presence of the author’s “impersonal” finger for their entry into the hermeneutic circle of Mauberley miss the way Pound’s “de-personalized” narrator, E.P., allows Pound to express the reality of this fate as a fictional creation, hanging what was to be his fate on the title “Mauberley.”
CHAPTER FIVE:

“DO YOU WANT ANY MORE OF THIS ARCHAIC INFORMATION ON FOLKS, UP TO 1745?”: RETHINKING EZRA POUND’S ITALIAN RENAISSANCE AS DE-PERSONALIZED POETIC PRACTICE

If an irony has gone unnoticed it is at least time to mention it here: Benjamin’s theory of language and its relationship to taboo is predicated upon an inalienable contradiction. The purpose of trauerspiel and modernist expression is to deliver unto natural history its own powers of articulation, free from the taboos that quarantine it in legal possession and title. Modernist antiquarianism, Benjamin tells us, is amenable to our understanding of the way giving ourselves names allows us to participate in the creative capacity of God. Our names are our fate. At the same time, Benjamin argues that the best way to help nature speak so that it might articulate its own name is to enter into the productive context of depersonalization. Benjamin, that is, would have us put ourselves in a situation where we might find the name of fate while, effectively, foregoing our very own. This irony plays itself out to great effect in Pound’s work: whether through a self-conscious narratological technique in the Ur-Cantos, or by advancing an archaic mode of criticism in Propertius, or by disavowing authorship in Hugh Selwyn Mauberley altogether. Pound would leave the stage of his poetry as if it were the effort of some other force than that of his own authorship. Without having to work out some picayune formalist understanding of autopoiesis – in which it is possible
to posit a fictional author being narrated by each poem’s implied narrator(s) in acts of fictional creativity – we can positively adduce what was actually at stake in Pound’s de-personalized narratives.

This chapter takes Benjamin’s understanding of the way the symptoms of depersonalization – the self’s alienation from its body as its emotions become deadened – leads to “the concept of the pathological state, in which the most simple object appears to be a symbol of some enigmatic wisdom because it lacks any natural, creative relationship to us.” What we see occurring in Pound’s work is his ongoing development of a style that allowed him to play with just this sort of pathology. Pound’s poetry can be read for how it entertains examples of just this kind of hermeneutic pathology for the end of producing “an incomparably productive context.” Past criticism has often stopped short in its registration of the significance of Pound’s investment in, and representation of, symbolic acts of augury, believing Pound’s play with mythical hermeneutics to be Pound’s actual textual strategy and belief system. In fact, Pound’s effort to de-personalize his poetic narrative(s) allows him to confront Benjamin’s irony such that the “productive context” of his work is the real manner through which his poetry comes to be manufactured. That is to say, Pound’s de-personalized authorship provides him with the opportunity to co-create *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. The import of the creative friendship that Pound held with Nancy Cunard and the natural history of their relationship is the subject of this chapter. I return to discussing the way Pound’s de-personalized stance sheds light on Benjamin’s theory after discussing this history and how it has been variously discussed and misunderstood in recent criticisms of Pound and his often disagreeably difficult politics that persistently obviate his social commitment.
In other treatments of Ezra Pound’s modernism, a number of tensions and paradoxes have arisen within attempts to account for the meaning of his difficult lyrics. For example, what has counted as the legitimate object for materialist apprehension seems to shift according to each critic’s belief in the significance of an author’s politics, as their modes of institutionalized “pre-reading” come up against poetry that is often wilfully esoteric. Nowhere are foregone conclusions more apparent than in materialist readings of Ezra Pound’s early *Cantos*. These *Cantos* have been especially open to politicized reception as they are understood to focus on the Renaissance warlord-condottiere Sigismondo Malatesta, and were written at the moment of Mussolini’s rise to power. Pound’s reputation leads critics to see his interest in Malatesta as a logical symptom of his fascist sympathies rather than, for example, as the outcome of his fervent admiration for an Italian culture that has historically supported the arts. Mussolini was only one potential inheritor of this largesse. Thus the problem with common materialist readings led by Pound’s reputation is that they tend to avoid the real complexities of Pound’s personal politics, evident in the conflicting habits of his being at once a “causeur” – a kind of muckraking provoker – and a poet sensitive to the implications of textual appropriation. This latter habit, in particular, asks that we understand him as a socialist cultural producer, while acknowledging that any materialist approach to modernist aesthetics is going to have to deal with the crucial question of what “counts” as the ground for materialist criticism.

Lawrence Rainey and George Bornstein have authored the two most important attempts to read Pound’s work through reference to material realities. However, in part because of certain blind spots in their apprehension of the relevant material archive,
neither Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism* nor Bornstein’s *Material Modernisms* have adequately studied *A Draft of XXX Cantos* for how it forces us to reconsider Pound’s politics. “Canto XXX” offers an important coda to Rainey’s reading that needs to be included in our apprehension of the Malatesta Cantos for how it refines what was most important in Pound’s engagement with this figure. The classic location for studying Malatesta is Cantos VIII-XI, first published by William Bird in 1925 at his Three Mountains Press, as a part of *A Draft of XVI Cantos*. Sigismondo Malatesta’s role as a military leader is featured explicitly in “Canto X” and it is this Canto that has rendered the most damning evidence in those arguments surrounding the relationship between Pound’s biography and his poetry. *Institutions* is exemplary. It reads Pound’s interest in fascist politics through the representation of Malatesta’s powers of divination in “Canto X”; just as Malatesta can read the portents in naturally occurring phenomena – e.g.: the flight of an eagle – for their direct effect on the success or failure of his military ambition, so can Mussolini intuit the real needs of Italy and the most efficacious means for their achievement. However, “Canto XXX,” published in 1930 by Nancy Cunard’s Hours Press in *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, offers the reader a much different way of understanding Pound’s interest in the Malatesta family that puts pressure on this received bit of wisdom concerning the relationship between Pound’s interest in Mussolini and Malatesta.

Rainey examines with a great deal of sedulity the details of Pound’s biography and how they illuminate the published page. In particular he is interested in discussing the politics of Pound’s ‘discovery’ of a manuscript in Rimini – the so called “Broglio” manuscript – that describes the history of the Malatesta family. *Institutions of Modernism* has so dominated our recent reception of them that Pound’s interest in the Italian
Renaissance now registers in modernist studies, generally, as proof only of his interest in authoritarian patrons and, by extension, Benito Mussolini and the politics of fascism.

Rainey writes:

Pound, in short, had found his imaginary patron and the resolution to the question of art, authority, and public consensus. The thread that links together this intricate complex of events and motifs is the figure of the great patron, Sigismondo Malatesta, and the question of faith in his judgment: through him, the modernist culture of patronage was assimilated to the emerging culture of Fascism. (109)

In the Spring of 1923 Ezra Pound returned to Italy to conduct further research into Sigismondo Malatesta, the “quattrocento” ruler of Rimini. He travelled to Rimini – a small town located South of Ravenna on the Adriatic Coast of Italy. Malatesta especially interested Pound at this moment because he exemplified the kind of ideal patron of the arts that he and his own group of friends – HD, Wyndham Lewis, TS Eliot, and James Joyce – sorely lacked as they attempted to revolutionize the way poetry, prose, and painting were practiced. Malatesta’s role as a condottiere-for-hire to each of the five major Italian city states – Venice and Milan in the North, Florence in central Italy, and Rome and Naples in the South – intrigued Pound, who saw in his seemingly indiscriminate war-making a concomitant consistency of commitment to supporting the arts and culture of Rimini. Malatesta’s singular mission was the reconstruction of the church of San Francesco (often called the Tempio Malatestiano). This church is famous for a few things. First, it is considered a landmark in Western architecture because it was the first to incorporate Roman triumphal arches into its structure. Also, it is famous for its elaborate sculptures and bas-reliefs by Agostino di Duccio. It has a fresco in the sacristy
by Piero della Francesca. Pound was not unique in his praise. The nineteenth-century historian Jacob Burckhardt gave Sigismondo an exemplary status by calling him a leading figure in the furtherance of humanism. In contrast, Nietzsche emphasized Malatesta’s rebellious side and located in him the advent of modern individualism, at war both with authority and with a world hostile to beauty.

Rainey takes Nietzsche’s side and locates in Pound’s worship of Malatesta all that gives him his eventual excuse to favour rash acts if they could be shown to serve his art. As damning evidence of Pound’s worship of wilful individualism we are given the fact that he wished to meet Antonio Beltramelli, a journalist from Romagna, who had celebrated Sigismondo in his newspaper articles “The Chants of Faunus” (1908) and “A Temple of Love” (1912). These articles narrate Sigismondo’s love for Isotta degli Atti, his mistress and third wife. Beltramelli’s articles popularized the idea that the ‘I/S’ initialling that accentuates the church of San Francesco was a secret code that reinscribed the church as a temple to Malatesta’s love for Isotta and, as such, an insolent monument to his disregard for its sacredness. The “S” and the “I,” everywhere appointed in the church, were thought to represent these lovers’ first names. Beltramelli’s eventual publication of Mussolini’s “The New Man” in 1922 calls the dictator a modern Malatesta, making Rainey’s claim that Malatesta organized fascistic impulses in his early twentieth-century enthusiasts easy to believe.

As if Pound’s desire to meet Beltramelli in 1922 weren’t enough evidence of his favouring a Nietzschean interpretation of Malatesta, his behaviour on March 12, 1923 apparently drives home all that was wrong with his enthusiasm for this ruthless strongman. Attempting to see the manuscripts of Gaspare Broglio at the Biblioteca Gambalunga
in Rimini, Pound finds the building closed. The town librarian was at home ill with the flu. Returning a week later to the same impediment Pound finds a peculiar ally, Averardo Marcheti, his hotel keeper and co-founder of the “Fascio Riminese.” It was the Fascio Riminese who caused the collapse of Rimini’s socialist administration through brutality and intimidation. Marcheti, happened and prevailed upon by Pound, complains to the town boss, Dr. LuigiMarcialis, the Fascist “Gran Cordone Mauriziano.” In the middle of his illness the Gambalunga librarian is shamed and intimidated by Marcialis into opening the library. Pound sends a triumphant and maudlin letter home to Dorothy about the librarian, Aldo Francesco Massera, “who may die of the shock.” Rainey writes, “Here, for Pound, was swift action replacing bureaucratic delay. He would never forget it, and almost immediately he sought to commemorate the event” (130).

In fact when we understand this sorry story of Pound’s relationship to these elements in the fascist machinery and his unconscionable wish to be given access to any and all Malatesta documents, as if they belonged to him personally, the conclusion to “Canto X” and its use of the Broglio manuscripts seems a perverse parody of the real fights taking place in Italy between black-shirts and moderates. Pound’s commemoration of Malatesta’s martial success uncomfortably inflates his own “triumph” over Massera:

And they came at us with their ecclesiastical legates
Until the eagle lit on his tent pole.
And he said: The Romans would have called that an augury
E gradment li antichi cavaler romanj
Davano fed a quisti annutti,
All I want you to do is to follow the orders,
They’ve got a bigger army,
But there are more men in this camp. (47)

The lines from the Broglio manuscript, as translated by Rainey:
E gradment li antichi cavaler romanj
and greatly the ancient knights roman
Davano fed a quisti annutiti
gave faith to these annunciations

Malatesta’s role here as warlord-diviner who can read the hidden meaning of an
eagle’s landing, and the authority his interpretive skills give him over his troops (arrayed
before the battle between the Malatestine Ferrarese and the Imperial Roman armies at
Nidastore, 1461, whom Malatesta would lead to victory), stands at the centre of Rainey’s
assertion that modernist difficulty, as Pound deployed it, is designed to frame irrational
leaps of faith – like that made by Rimini’s fascist “boss” in his zealous assistance to
Pound’s quest – masquerading as the authority rendered by experience. The “natural”
authority of Malatesta’s augury is used to paper-over his venal lust for power and
authority. Rainey takes great consideration to show that it is the hermeneutics of “faith”
that Pound mentions which allow him to craft difficult poetry and bully librarians: “it is
faith that the Romans once gave to such annunciations, and faith that Sigismondo now
demands of his men” (112). In this way, Rainey’s reading of a small portion of “Canto
X” for its connection to the real-world of Italian fascism is ultimately overreached by the
actual evidence in Pound’s work against such a contrite diminishment. It is to that
evidence, in “Canto XXX,” that I would like to turn my attention.

“Canto XXX” makes us see that Pound’s attention to the materiality of cultural
production both during the Italian Renaissance and at the time of his own writing is just
as significant to the way he approaches Malatesta as his finding in him a proto-fascist
hero. Funnily enough, the manner by which we might recover this lost narrative was
authored by Rainey himself at an earlier moment in his career. Rainey was once
concerned to show how Pound firmly established himself as an avant-garde poet through
his invention of a unique poetic technique. In his first study of Pound’s Italian Renaissance, *Ezra Pound and the Monument of Culture*, Rainey reminds us that Pound began to practice a new form of quotation in his Italian cantos that was pointedly designed to criticize the American reception of the German philological tradition – a tradition he learned as a Medieval studies graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. In quotation, Rainey once located the source of Pound’s ethical commitments. Pound, we learn, connected the businesslike rigor of institutional philology “with habits and practices of capitalist culture in the United States” (66).

It was Pound’s rejection of any “get-and-spend” system, broadly, that drove him to craft an aesthetic practice that confronted the myths of precision and completion that he saw undergirding both the contemporary philological practices that wasted intellectual energy on recovering the meaningless provenance of textual curiosities and the fetishized commodity exchange system of Western capitalism. “Pound invokes the standards of philological accuracy only to savage the institutional apparatus that sustains them. His literalist translations parody the typical features of the loathed institution,” Rainey continues to write. Rainey offers many examples of Pound using quotation “creatively” in the Malatesta Cantos to subvert the practices of professional philology. He provides close contextual readings of the lines Pound used from the Provençal poet Raimbaut Vaquerias, the figure of “Pan,” and fifteenth-century letters transcribed during his ten months of archival research in various Italian towns and cities.

Pound’s sensitivity to the resources of quotation rendered new possibilities for parody and critique within the Malatesta Cantos. My reading of “Canto XXX” allows us to see the relevance of this neglected tradition of Pound scholarship to parts of his text.
that have not traditionally been connected with the Malatesta Cantos. By offering new
details about how Pound actually transacted the business of sorting out which archives to
visit we learn more about how he made his decisions as to which materials to include in
the Cantos. This helps us to a more complete understanding of his engagement with the
Malatesta family. It is more complicated than encoded testimony to his burgeoning faith
in the dictates of strong cultural leaders like Benito Mussolini. Pound can be seen making
an ongoing commitment to the social world of the texts he was encountering and to the
agents that gave him access to them – the poet/printer Nancy Cunard in particular.

Cunard was an English writer, publisher, activist, and anarchist poet. She rejected her
family’s upper class values and devoted much of her life fighting racism and fascism,
evidenced by her work as the editor of Negro: An Anthology (1934). Negro collected the
writing of African American writers like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston in
protest of an unfair trial being waged against those wrongfully accused of rape, the so-
called “Scottsboro Boys.”

“Canto XXX” translates a letter sent by the Jewish printer Hieronymous
Soncinus in 1503 that describes the print-world of Venice. Pound’s privileging of this
letter at the conclusion of his Cantos dealing with the Italian Renaissance takes on a host
of ironic references once we understand the significance of that year to the Malatesta-
family. The letter seemingly pays tribute to the printers and die-cutters instrumental to the
dissemination of humanist learning in the Renaissance but it also deflates the centrality of
patronage to their production:

Whence have we carved it in metal
Here working in Caesar’s fane:
To the Prince Caesare Borgia
Duke of Valent and Aemelia
…and here have I brought cutters of letters
and printers not vile and vulgar
   (in Fano Caeseris)
notable and sufficient compositors
and a die-cutter for greek fonts and Hebrew
named Messire Francesco da Balogna
not only of the usual types but he hath excogitated
a new form called cursive or chancellry letters
this Messire Francesco who hath cut all Aldous his letters
with such grace and charm as is known
Hieronymous Soncinus 7th July 1503.
and as for text we have taken it
from that of Messire Laurentius
and from a codex once of the Lords Malatesta…

and in August that year died Pope Alessandro Borgia,
   Il Papa mori.

Explicit canto
XXX (148-149)

A few details need to be worked out to see this letter’s complex ironies properly.

Less than a year after his academy was founded (1502), Aldus found himself embroiled
in world politics. Aldus Manutius (Teobaldo Manucci) studied Greek at Ferrara under
Guarino de Verona. Aldus sought to conserve the works he learned from by
disseminating them in type. In Venice, Aldus created a Greek academy, employing Greek
craftsmen and workers in his household. He created the first printed edition of Aristotle
before going on to print Aristophanes, Thucydides, Sophocles, and Herodotus. In this
Canto we see the Imperial troops Malatesta had once been depicted as defeating in 1461,
mentioned in “Canto X,” again arrayed against Malatesta and his Venetian allies, the
Angevin intruders. In this Canto, though, it is Aldus’s life-long Ferrarese connections
with the royal Borgia family that are being discussed. These connections are likely to
become Aldus’s greatest liability as Italy was being devastated by the unpredictable
forces of national and international strife:
The library of the dukes of Milan was carried off to Blois by the French conquerors in 1499: and in 1502 the famous collection of the Montefeltro dukes of Urbino was looted by the troops of Cesare Borgia. It is not surprising that Aldus’ prefaces are full of flames, war, the loss of friends and the destruction of books: not only scholars but entire cultural centres were being swept away.

1503’s martial backdrop and the threat it figured to Aldus becomes even more fraught when we learn that he was facing a very public accusation of theft from Hieronymous Soncinus himself, “Soncino” claimed that it was he who had paid for Bembo’s (Francesco da Balogna) Greek punch-cutting services.

Aldus does not explicitly put forward the Hebrew *Introductio* as his own work, and in fact in 1510 the famous Jewish printer Gershom [Hieronymous] Soncino laid violent claim to it as his own youthful composition which someone (understand Aldus) had corruptly printed. It was this same Soncino who in dedicating his 1503 italic Petrarch mentioned that he had obtained the services of the famous punchcutter Messr Francesco da Balogna, who had cut all the types that Aldus ever printed with.

The dire implications of Canto XXX’s letter, which Pound uses to conclude his Italian Renaissance Cantos, are made curious by its relaxed, convivial, and conversational tone. Some speculation is in order: either this letter comes before Soncinus’s rancorous split with Aldus over recognition of the making of Greek and Hebrew founts or it is an unmatchable example of the printers’ calumnious strategizing within the “treacherous rage and rivalry” of Venetian proto-capitalism. Soncinus is here soliciting help from Malatesta against Aldus; or, even perhaps, Pound is transcribing a letter of introduction being sent from Soncinus to the Imperial army on the speculation of the suit he was about to wage against Aldus. If this were the case, then its unfortunate interception by the Malatestine (re: Ferrarese) faction – deftly recorded in Pound’s mentioning of the origin of the manuscripts he was quoting: “and as for text we have taken it…from a codex once
of the Lords Malatesta…” – would speak less to the Malatesta family’s Providential wisdom than to their ability to capitalize on the caprices and confusions of war. This is far from worship of the Malatestine powers of augury and voluntary will. A new study of the manuscripts germane to the Malatesta Cantos would go far in disambiguating this letter.

What does become clear in this Canto is the way it provides overwhelming evidence that Pound was never enamoured of Sigismundo Malatesta. 1503 is significant for yet another reason: after Sigismondo Malatesta succumbed to the papal forces of Pope Pius II (1460) he was left bereft of his possessions and given Imperial orders to repair to Rimini in a state of excommunication. Sigismondo’s nephew, Pandolfo, inherits Rimini upon Sigismondo’s death and, as the result of his uncle’s failure to meet Imperial satisfaction, unceremoniously sells it to Venice to maintain his own family’s livelihood – in 1503. The death of the Pope withstanding, Pound’s choice to remember this year in “Canto XXX” for the intrigue of pirated credit in the spreading of Greek humanism, as well as for its commemoration of the most tragic moment in the Malatesta family’s fall from power, sends a direct message to his careful readers that he is implicitly refusing to remember that family for anything other than their role as handmaids to Italian arts and letters. Through a clever citation that refers to the political and domestic intrigues that governed Renaissance Italy, the narrative concerning the theme of “interpretive practice,” which Rainey asserts as central to the faith-and-authority principle he finds underlying the “Malatesta Paradigm” led by Pound’s “bourgeois” historicist sensibilities, asks to be reconsidered.
Rainey’s disdain for bourgeois historicism blinds him to Pound’s transcribed letter in “Canto XXX” and its evidence of the vexed engagement he had with the Malatesta family. The letter carries a further resonance in that it draws specific attention to itself as a letter describing the new Venetian print marketplace – an ironic deployment of a handwritten manuscript. Rainey’s correlated disdain for touristic-historiography makes it impossible for him to understand Pound’s acute attention to a multiplicity of different kinds of cultural production and communicative practices. If Pound’s attention to Malatesta as his retro-fascist hero is mitigated by “Canto XXX” and its remembrance of the end of the Malatestine dynasty, then it also shows us that as text his Cantos are necessarily irreducible to narrow thematic approaches launched singularly through the material clues located in his biography.

In fact, as text, Pound’s Cantos are just as respectful of the materiality of their own production (through socialist-inherited alternative publishing) as they are of the individual bourgeois tourist’s so-called right to the archive. The biographical details that Rainey uses to demonize Pound’s “bourgeois historicism” need to be placed in this larger context. How did Pound know at all that there were manuscripts of such great importance that he dare not miss his opportunity to view them in that Rimini library? When Pound found them, Broglio’s manuscripts had never before been published: “Broglio’s manuscript was still unpublished in 1923, and because this passage had never been quoted or transcribed in secondary sources it could be examined only by going to Rimini, where the original manuscript is preserved” (123). As we shall see, the problem with Rainey’s rendition of Pound’s visit to Rimini is that it glosses over Pound’s expectation for that trip. Rainey allows his reader to feel indignation over the mean manner by which
Pound “discovered” the Broglio manuscript but it is Rainey’s own rhetoric that determines what the Malatesta Cantos means because he provides only partial evidence from Pound’s biography to show the putative unifying effects of the authoritarian interpretive paradigm he believes Pound to have been advocating. Why do we need to believe that Pound’s rancour stemmed simply from his sense of being slighted by the, perhaps, dilatory habits of a provincial librarian?

Rainey’s narrative about Pound’s research in Rimini explores the broader connections between Pound’s growing fascination with fascism and authoritarian interpretive practices; but his is not the only reading of the Malatesta Cantos. Ronald Bush suggests that the Cantos are universally open to multiple readings, presenting an archetypal example of Modernism’s ideological dissonances, inconsistencies, closures, and openings:

Along with an inclination toward mythic closure, the Cantos sustain a genuine commitment to radical openness of a kind now commonly associated with postmodernism. More, a continuing and vigorous conflict between ideologies associated with openness and closure, the bohemian and the mandarin, epic and lyric, constitutes one of the sequence’s identifying marks. (67)

Bush describes Malatesta’s role as the ideological face of Pound’s faith in authority and how it marks a shift away from the political stance he held in the 1920s: “Pound’s interest shifted from London’s bohemian mix of anarchism and feminism to a continued fixation with strong and patriarchal cultural forms” (76). Bush interprets the Malatesta mask as a site of ideological indeterminacy.

Even when materialist critics like Rainey and Bush draw substantially different conclusions from much the same evidence there are yet others who also claim to make materialist criticisms that focus on evidence of an entirely different sort. George
Bornstein, for example, is interested in discerning the politics and aesthetics of the various print cultures alluded to in each edition of the Cantos’ bibliographic codes, the materials of book-making. Where Rainey situates the meaning of Pound’s work in history by looking somewhat exclusively to his biography for its explanation, George Bornstein’s work situates the meaning of Pound’s text in history by looking exclusively at the choices Pound made in directing how his texts were made. Bornstein reads a socialist discourse in the choices Pound and fine-printers implement in his published texts. Pound’s early Cantos reflect in their self-conscious use of particular materials his interest in the Arts-and-Crafts movement of William Morris and the Kelmscott Press and by extension its explicitly socialist ethic. When William Bird used red and black ink for the illuminations and mixed them with a modern Caslon typeface in his printing of A Draft of XVI Cantos and when John Rodker repeated the process in 1928 with A Draft of the Cantos 17-27, Pound was able to create a direct reference to Morris’s socialism while updating its aesthetic repertoire to accommodate the changed tastes of a contemporary audience. For Bornstein these allusions carry an important statement about Pound’s ethical commitments:

The effect was to gesture at once backwards and forwards, to invoke the opposing bibliographical principles of Morris’s Kelmscott Press and of Lane and Mathew’s Bodley Head, of a medievalizing ideal and a modernizing aesthetic, of craft rather than industrial production, and through Morris of a set of socialist principles rarely identified with Pound. (37)

Nancy Cunard was among the publisher-printers who helped Pound deploy these principles in publications of his work. Her edition of A Draft of XXX Cantos retained the Caslon typography (an uncial or round letter-form that harkened to ‘medieval’ scribal
hands) favoured by Morris but updated it through the ‘Bodley Head’ modernizing aesthetic of John Rodker.

Cunard’s printing differed from Bird’s and Rodker’s then: solely in black ink (save the embossed red cover-title), it featured illuminated initials and designs by Pound’s wife Dorothy made out in a Vorticist style. This marked her Cantos as a book that deliberately aimed to complicate the established codes Pound used in his commitment to Morris’s aesthetics. A Draft of XXX Cantos retains and extends Pound’s material allusion to socialism by staging a confrontation between the growing commodification of print (the Arts and Crafts aesthetic had been exhausted by Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group by 1930) and the craft tradition evidenced by Dorothy’s vorticist initials. Morris’s rusticism is also evoked in a simplified form by the choice of a heavy sack-cloth cover (which is deftly subverted by the neat vorticist initials and simple black typeface). The allusion to the medievalizing Morris and the modernizing Bodley Head of Lane and Matthews, worked out in prior editions of the Cantos, is thus carefully rethought in Cunard’s printing. What makes hers of particular interest is its implicit critique of what we believe constitutes the difference between craft and industrial production. By simplifying the Kelmscott tradition to a choice in cover fabric Cunard consciously frames the industrial aesthetic implied by vorticism. Ironically, the hand-carved initials retain all that was most “social” in the printing house: the collaboration between designers like Dorothy and craftsmen like the unknown carver who created the blocks from her drawings.

If case studies of the political codes that are insinuated through material allusions like Bornstein’s, or, perhaps, even my own reading of A Draft of XXX Cantos, overstate
the meaning of Pound’s text by conflating choices concerning book production with his personal politics, then Rainey’s study of Pound’s tenure in Rimini in 1922 attempts to interpret Pound’s aesthetic techniques by reminding us of his actual responses to the political changes to which he was exposed. But, as we have seen, Rainey’s approach is seriously curtailed by its choice of privileging a thin synchronic moment in Pound’s biography through which it attempts to explain all of the complexities inherent in Pound’s deployment of the Malatesta “mask.”

Rainey ignores Pound’s anarcho-feminist interests in the reading he exercises over Pound’s supposed lapse into abject hero worship. It is important to my argument that Pound was always also behaving as a socialist poet, inspired by just those ideals to reference and remember Nancy Cunard’s effect on The Malatesta Cantos. By recovering Cunard’s role in creating *A Draft of XXX Cantos* we can see how Pound honoured the anarcho-feminist roots he formed in London, by choosing to publish with small alternative publishing venues first, and through an active poetic comparison of the hardships faced by Aldus and the Venetian print milieu to those faced by contemporary cultural producers, like Nancy Cunard, whom he continued to be in league with years after leaving London. It is unfortunate that in the process of demonstrating Pound’s sense of bourgeois entitlement, *Monument* makes Nancy Cunard look like Pound’s anaemic helpmate.

Cunard knew Pound’s interests well. She behaved as his researcher for nine months prior to his arrival in Rimini, locating rare books and transcribing “wash-lists” of materials he thought might be useful to him. In 1922, as a registrant in the “Ezuversity,” she was doing research for him at that very Gambalunga Library in Rimini that Rainey
focused on to narrate Pound’s indirect intimidation of Aldo Massera. It was Cunard that discovered the Broglio manuscript that piqued Pound’s interest and unfortunate ire. Their meeting in Pisa at the end of her tenure in February of 1923 allows Rainey the opportunity to sum-up their relationship: “[p]ublisher and poet, in short, moved in a homogenous world of elite tourism and understood the shared premises of bourgeois historicism” (157). It is important that we understand what Rainey misses in his slight treatment of Cunard, evinced in his donning her with the anachronistic title of “publisher.” Cunard would not open the Hours Press in Paris until 1928, becoming a publisher half a decade later than Rainey states.

Cunard was originally brought close to Pound during the course of an illness she suffered while in Paris. He prompted her to write poetry as a means of overcoming extended bed-stay (1920-21). Although she never took Pound’s literary advice in any of her own publications, Outlaws, Sublunary, and Parallax she did, it seems, harbour an abiding affection for him. This is evident in the way she adjusted her plans to meet his needs. In 1922, Cunard intended to travel as a tourist through Europe following an itinerary she had created for herself that included visiting Sanary, South of France (February), Monte Carlo (March), Deauville (mid-summer), and Spain (late summer). Her plans change after meeting Pound in Normandy, as she is soon on the Orient Express heading to Italy, all the while sending letters back expressing her wish that he join her, her purpose for going changed from that of tourist to researcher. In September she arrives in Venice and her investigations begin in earnest. She writes:

Tennis is going on, at the Lido; I will watch you after we have bathed together.
Do come, do come. I can see us at Breakfast splitting a fig, muttering over the foulness of the tea (chose que je fais seule a present). Now and then a scandal will raise our laughter; there will be hours devoted to the 2 typewriters. Do come…

I feel so ill in the mornings, so exhausted most of the time; arrivez me tenir campagnie – come as soon as you get this – documents abound in Italy you know – you can refresh (!) yourself amongst them after having seen the Princess Volupines floating, and dancing.¹⁴

On October the 11th she asks Pound for more information about Malatesta:

Ah dearie me – will a 50th century Ezra look into our lives and wash-list do you think? You told me much too little of the plan of Sigismondo – give me a very clear idea of its shape and portent, and intent. Isotta? And her blue gown, and the intended poisoning.

Cunard is already working on gathering information about Sigismondo and Isotta as well as other figures like Alberti, the artist Malatesta hired to renovate his temple.

Another letter begins:

Wed

Ezra.

You now have an enemy in Venice! or rather I have one for you. Went to [Ongavia] at once, and stuffy they were indeed. The man took your letter from me, I pointing out the names merely, and read a line or two previous before he could be stopped _ _ “The bruïtes” says he, “oo are the bruïtes, hein?” it was a good moment. And they had no historical catalogue, nor anything else (I will go elsewhere now) and all the information was that Alberti was an architect.
On October the 26th Cunard sends Pound information taken from another location in Venice:

Yesterday went to a very smelly shop and asked for some wash-lists, meanwhile I had my eye on a grand old volume which turned out to be accompanied by 7 more vellums 2 feet long and broad, the encyclopedia of 1745 – Leonello Borso, and Gemiste are there, all the others likewise, but not in intimacy. There is also the name ERP, come upon by chance – it says that ERP (is a village) & voyez Erpenius – but not time now to copy the others [sic] summary, but will – as the 8 vols are mine | I love your letter | now comes Lewis’ voice – “in 10 minutes”, (I must get up – darling Ezra – I am frozen, more than you.)

On the 27th Cunard continues to describe her findings:

Mentioned

The works of Gemiste.

Gessner_Bibliothèque
de Histor Graec. l. 2, ch. 30. (and the last sign seems to be in Arabic, and it must be eighteenth century greek!)

No this will not be much use. I don’t think any of it will…

Cunard observes some information she gleaned about Alberti before stating her intention to move on to Ravenna and then Rimini: “I shall leave on the 1st, perhaps going to Ravenna, Rimini for 2 days, and thence on from Bologna, or from here again immediately to Paris[..]” Plainly it was Cunard who confirmed for Pound the influence on Cosimo de Medici of the Byzantine neo-Platonist Gemisthus Plethon – characters who are at least as important to the Italian Renaissance Cantos VIII-XI as Malatesta. It was Cunard who honed Pound’s research into Italian Renaissance neo-Platonic thought and
the political implications of that thought to Aldus, Hieronymous Soncinus, the Borgia family, and the Malatestas.

Rainey spends too much energy intervening into Pound’s aesthetic portrait of Sigismondo by relating it to his interest in Mussolini’s political manner and misses this aspect of collaboration in his biography altogether. Rainey’s insistence that Pound lapses into a kind of psychological torpor grounded in his need to find transcendent authority allows him to fixate on one line in particular from “Canto X”: “All I want you to do is to follow the orders.” For Rainey there is no clearer moment in the Cantos of Pound’s transference of interest in Malatesta onto Mussolini. However, to discuss Pound’s sensitivity to communicative practices and the materiality of cultural production we must include his published interest in all forms of Renaissance transmission (including Aldus, Bembo, et al.), not just the pretentious gestures and battlefield utterances Pound dramatizes and on which Rainey chooses to focus. Bornstein’s approach seems best when it is complemented by studies of poetic themes that encompass both the history of a text’s production – what resources were available and when – and the creation of a work in time focusing on apt biographical details that can actually illuminate the production of the text.

In fact, Pound directly implicates and critiques the martial language of Malatesta with his reading of the cultural production of Aldus Manutius, showing his interest in the condottiere to have always been split between his admiration of his talents as a fierce leader and his role in preserving and supporting the humanities. Malatesta’s role in “Canto XXX” is much different than it is in “Canto X,” showing the earlier Canto to have been a strategic development within a larger narrative arc. This fact asks us to revise the hermeneutic institutions Rainey believes to be underpinning Pound’s “faith” in
Renaissance humanism inasmuch as they are thought to hold Malatesta’s inspired powers of interpretation at their ethical centre. In taking issue with Rainey’s assertion that Pound’s research into the Malatesta manuscripts in Rimini only indicated his faith in the benevolence of encultured patrons I am implicitly questioning the simple thought that Pound held a religious vision of human communication, one that is ultimately tethered by his faith in the transcendental authority of divinely inspired acts of augury.

I am also supporting a form of materialism that understands the need to focus on the materiality of texts and the textuality of material, informed by Pierre Bourdieu’s identification of those salient features of the “symbolic alchemy” out of which the abstaining artist invests work for profit. Bourdieu specifically theorizes Pound’s received stance – that of a carbuncular yet isolated intriguer for the arts. *Rules of Art* offers a somewhat Darwinian vision of human struggle in the creation of avant-garde cultural positions. Cunard’s engagement in the material production of the Malatesta Cantos undermines Rainey’s vision of Pound as a solitary artist struggling to find the “legitimate categories of perception and appreciation” in his attempt to assert dominance within a cultural field (157). Bourdieu argues, though, that aesthetic creation never really happens via individual geniuses but that the field of cultural production treats creation as such, thereby “producing” the notions of creativity that authorize individual authors.

While Pound and Cunard certainly do search for legitimate ways to instantiate their shared appreciation for socialist viewpoints, Rainey has obvious difficulty (or, it simply is not his interest) seeing how the imaginative quotation of a letter by the type-cutter Hieronymous Soncinus in “Canto XXX” helped Pound form a new “institutional concept” of the avant-garde; the creation of such a concept being the “prize” allotted to
the winners of its game (148). Because Pound chooses to legitimize a close and detailed appreciation for the materiality of cultural production, both by the way he poetically foregrounds a transcribed letter referring to the network of intrigues between national politics and domestic economics of Renaissance Italy, and for how this alludes to his own collaborations with Cunard, A Draft of XXX Cantos inherently challenges Rainey’s understanding of how Pound recast his authority by insisting on the inseparability of the symbolic and material functions of art. Cunard’s garnering of information pertinent to the Malatesta Cantos and her work as their printer speaks to a degree of collaboration that asks us to reconsider the assumed irreducibility of symbolic and material production as well. Bourdieu notes that this kind of encoding of symbolic significance in the materials of textual production defies our uncritical common-sense understanding of how literary meaning circulates in a transcendent realm of pure “culture.” This common sense perpetuated the illusion, Bourdieu argues, of “[t]he irreducibility of the work of symbolic production to the act of material fabrication performed by the artist” (156).

Rainey defends his particular approach to uncovering the institutional socialité of the production of the Malatesta Cantos in the introduction to Monument. He argues for the importance of exploring some of the relationships that gave Pound his access to the materials and manuscripts that inform his work, drawing our attention to the problems that had grown out of treating difficult modernist poetry as though it were just an abstract linguistic game that is played, ultimately, to the reader’s frustration to form coherent meaning. Rainey’s dislike of abstract verse gives him a very practical reason to employ theories about the value of describing texts by the lights of their material and institutional modes of production. Institutions argues that when we fail to include the author’s
connection to the institutions that published her or his work we surrender ourselves to idle speculations – in this case, speculations about the writer’s motivation to write “meaningless” work, or about an audience’s strange desire to read it. Rainey argues that if we do not pay attention to the immanent materials by which a poet can be seen constructing their work we have only the option of speculation left to us. He argues that only when we pay attention to the materials of an author’s moment in historical time – how, when and why a poet created a work – are we able to make grounded and reasonable challenges to the private meanings that are said to emerge in the closed interpretive conditions modernist difficulty putatively invites. For Rainey, the institutions of a text’s material transmission demonstrate the real significance of the high modernist landmark publications – *Ulysses*, *The Waste Land*, *Helen in Egypt*, and *The Cantos*. Because his focus on the material transmission of texts tends to interrupt immanent readings with questions about authorship and contexts of publication, Rainey’s work asks that we take greater account of the personal stories that frame the difficult works of modernism. Strange then that the nascent valuation of the labour and socialité that book-making commands leads him to overlook Cunard (nearly) altogether in *Monument of Culture*; stranger yet is that her influence on Pound’s expectations for travelling to Rimini is nowhere mentioned in *Institutions*. This inconsistency leaves open the question as to just what does count as an important element in a bibliographically inspired biography. What counts as an authentic institutional relationship within modernist publication history?

Arguments like Rainey’s and Bornstein’s attempt to answer this question in one of two ways: either they situate the meaning of Pound’s work in history by looking to his
biography and how he can be seen to have responded to political change, or they situate
the meaning of Pound’s text in history by looking exclusively at its material production.
We wind up with elegant case studies concerning the poetics behind the allusions
encoded in the materials used in the production of his texts; or, trenchant criticisms of
Pound’s aesthetic work by way of biographical interventions that demonize Pound’s
practice. By merging these two modes of criticism to show how materialist scholarship,
ideally, allows us to steer clear of the pratfalls of biographical-historicism that pretends to
offer complete unvarnished truth about a poem’s meaning by pinning down the author’s
movements, and by avoiding that criticism that wants to "situate" or “ground” the author
"in context" without considering the broader networks and institutions of transmission
and creation we can find a more robust object for critical apprehension. If we choose to
concentrate on Pound’s practices of quotation, such as his use of Soncino’s letter in
“Canto XXX,” his consistent position as a socialist poet and thinker emerges. (This
ethical position was something that he learned as a habitué of the one-time Fabian
newsletter and cultural-review published in London, The New Age.)

Otherwise, Rainey’s partial reading of Pound’s lapse into fascism and of the place
of augury in Pound’s Malatesta Cantos, buried beneath his seemingly impenetrable
critical apparatus in Institutions and Monument, misses an important aspect of his interest
in Italy, the Venetian print-world, and the economy of friendship and respect he mentions
through deft acts of quotation. Nancy Cunard remembered these motives. She uses a
personal copy of her Cantos to express gratitude to another man of arts and letters,
similarly interested and invested in the practice of fine printing: Walter Strachan (see
Figure 1).
For Walter Strachan from his friend Nancy Cunard trusting we will always discuss fine poetry and fine printing. London. Nov 13. 1951."

Figure 1. Ezra Pound, *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, (Paris: Hours Press, 1930). Reproduced by kind permission of the Department of Special Collections of Simon Fraser University Library

Pound’s estimate of Cunard certainly surpassed Rainey’s assessment of her as bourgeois-tourist (most likely because he never thought of himself as such). Pound’s bruckle conclusion to his letter to his wife, Dorothy, from the Pisan detention centre on December 4th, 1945 is worth remembering. His passion for “Nancy” and what she meant
to him is plain: “News of Nancy? Etc. I keep thinking of the inhabitants of the planet. Wyndham is back in London. NO. NOT Nancy Cox. But also of her while one is at it./ Mao. Love E. and love to Mother” (175).

The use of the Soncinian letter and the ambivalent, if not mean, Venetian print milieu it refers to, in tandem with the variety of forms of assistance he received from Nancy Cunard in the construction of the Italian Renaissance Cantos, challenges our sense of Pound’s intended aesthetic horizon as that belonging to him as the sole practitioner of a difficult avant-garde modernism that seeks to obscure meaning in the name of authority. The wider stance I take towards a text’s sociology shows the importance of being sensitive to what Bourdieu’s critique shows us to be the imaginariness of the separation of symbolic production and material fabrication. The way art is made into a cult-object by this separation is utterly deconstructed by the bibliographic codes deployed in Cunard’s *A Draft of XXX Cantos* and in the poetic subjects Pound uses to complete both his engagement with the Italian Renaissance and this particular volume.

The neat reversal of economic and symbolic capital Bourdieu locates at the centre of the creation of an avant-garde, rich only with symbolic capital (the more successful a work is financially the less symbolic value is appointed to it), is echoed by the twin stories Pound cites in “Canto XXX” about the impoverishing print worlds inhabited by both Aldus and Cunard. (Cunard, daughter of the shipping magnate Sir Bache Cunard, lived primarily off of her mother’s meagre stipend. Her father squandered the family fortune while she was in her early twenties.) Bourdieu’s measure of the work done by time in the creation of symbolic value is mirrored in Pound’s refusal to celebrate the passing of a patron in the poetic text and by the inherent difficulties fine-printing of
modernist poetry presented in 1930. Broadening our bibliographic sensibility to include Cunard’s role in the symbolic and material construction of *A Draft of XXX Cantos* shows that Pound directly deploys:

[T]he specific logic of symbolic alchemy that maintains that investments will not be recouped unless they are (or seem to be) operating at a loss, in the manner of a gift, which cannot assure itself of the most precious countergift, “recognition,” unless it sees itself as without return; and – as with the gift that it converts into pure generosity by occulting the countergift to come – it is the *interposed time interval* which forms a screen and which obscures the profit promised to the most disinterested investments. (170)

Pound’s concern to give credit where he finds it due disallows acceptance of the miracle-making function time gives to those objects it allows the screen of cultural value to obscure and call “art.” What “counts” as apt, in this materialist mode of criticism, is how the mode of production that foregrounds the tedium-laced caprices of actual archival work shapes poetic meaning.

Cunard’s voice, recorded in this essay’s title, deserves to be remembered, then, for how it co-authored Pound’s Italian Renaissance. While Rainey’s attention to the role of the institutions – printers, agents, publishers – that created modernism is spot-on, it misses the way Cunard’s involvement in the Malatesta Cantos went far beyond the ‘normal’ institutional relationship that obtains between poet and printer. Rainey’s treatment, like Bornstein’s, is partial in that he leaves out of the “symbolic alchemy” by which these *Cantos* are created, an important element in the story of their material transmission. Ironically, it is with a story about ‘transmission’ itself that Pound chose to end his engagement with the Italian Renaissance and the Malatesta Cantos. By listening closely to this story we learn how the symbolic alchemy of the production of *A Draft of XXX Cantos* speaks to a form of depersonalized production that allows an alternative
view of Pound’s political beliefs to be remembered. The fate to which that commitment has been heretofore ascribed deserves to be measured against the personal names of Pound and Cunard in their joint production of that book.
CHAPTER SIX:
THE SUBSTANCE OF ALLEGORY: “NATURAL HISTORY” IN THE WORK OF
WALTER BENJAMIN AND T.W. ADORNO

Ezra Pound, by his own admission, was a literary man whose authorial anxieties focus not so much on the specific problem of natural history but often enough upon his own prodigious personality. It was Pound who put Pound himself under taboo. Hence, his increasing de-personalization and simultaneous recourse into antiquarianism and literary pseudonyms that masked themselves as forgeries, exponentially charged by the anarchic proto-feminist insights of collaborators such as Nancy Cunard. Together, Pound’s Quia Pauper Amavi, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, and A Draft of XXX Cantos form a spectacular enactment of literary crisis where the perceived disparity between the poet’s authorship and the poet’s de-personalization inflict risk, poem by poem, upon the very works he is producing. It is a moral crisis not unlike the one Pound envisioned for himself at the end of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley in which he proposes a fictionally creative author forging a biography, one that he himself might have become, but instead chooses to bury. Anxiety concerning acts of literary recovery and production, his own and his reader’s, concerned Pound to the end.

Ezra Pound’s experiments with de-personalized poetry have provided useful examples of the way in which naming, either the title of a collection of poems or of the author’s identity, demonstrates that rational decision making is not the best criterion by
which to describe the force of nature at work in historical time. That a name can interpret a title to reveal that what that title holds away from view is the possibility that events are determined not so much by consequential behavior as by the force of fate. That is, according to antiquarianists like Pound and Benjamin, natural history is not so much the production of a critique of taboo, as it is a belief that history is occluded by false assumptions about how its telling unfolds when it ignores history’s oblique origins in nature, persisting in a complex reconsideration of the cipher that that abandoned teleology remainders to modernist quandary – fate.

Theodor W. Adorno maintained these concerns. Unlike Benjamin, Adorno did not view fate as a natural and universal problem. Unlike Pound, Adorno did not locate in the play and contest with personality the disposition towards the real that allowed fate to be articulated. Adorno finds fate to be intangible, ephemeral, and transitory. It is the consequence of our focusing too narrowly on Adorno that has led to the misreading of what modernists could variously mean by these terms and those strategies of de-personalization that Benjamin tacitly began to theorize through the figures of the Allegorist and the Collector. These figures illuminate Pound’s complicated antiquarianist response to the problem of anachronism in poetic narratives, as he frugally defends the right of the exogenetic detail to show its provenance over and against its organic emplotment while also recovering and foregrounding a classic mode of reading that serves to secure a forgotten endogenetic pattern of elegiac reception, made possible by the complex ironies he discovers and critiques through the Ovidian half-line that he uses for a title to the volume of poems in which “Three Cantos” and “Homage to Sextus Propertius” appear. That his later poetry would continue to plumb the resources of
historical critique is done a disservice by understandings of modernist allegory that smooth over the tonalities of Pound’s varied and ambivalent responses to anachronism. This is but one of many examples of the way allegory as a model of reception is open to a broad array of interpretive applications to modernist thought and poetry. It needs further consideration, as we can discern in its own contested history and implication in the thoughts and theories of Benjamin and Adorno a further proliferation of its interpretive possibilities.

If Adorno’s concern seemed to have been to drive out into view the very ephemerality of natural history’s dialectical core he yet deployed and refined Benjamin’s theory of language:

> From *Minima Moralia* to *Metacritique of Epistemology* the titles of Adorno’s works are intentionally concrete forms. They seek to title emphatically, as names: “A title must hit home like a name” [*Gessamelte Schriften* Vol. 11]. For Adorno the title becomes a name in the mediation of art and concept, presentation and concept: *Aesthetic Theory* is a theory of aesthetics, a theory that is itself aesthetic. These titles claim that the work they contain is the presentation of the object itself. In the title, then, as in the work, the mediation of concept and presentation establishes a unity of thought and object. Rather than functioning denotatively, the title as name is to be a microcosm of the work. To the extent that the title embodies what occurs beneath it, it closes itself off to the marketplace. Paradoxically, however, the aesthetic element through which this occurs, by permitting the essay’s concepts to enter into a relation in which they may achieve their cognitive aim, at the same time makes the essay vulnerable to the boutique, to an abstract autonomy that, in its empty difference, signals its conformity.

(“Title Essay: Baroque Allegory and “The Essay as Form” 125)

Robert Hullot-Kentor explains Adorno’s cleavage to the Benjaminian theory of language and the element of marketplace appropriation and boutique taboos that are implicitly its concern to critique and comprehend. This chapter is provoked to a closer
interrogation of that two-word theory – names and titles – that constitutes the under-
sense, or hyponoia, in Benjamin and Adorno’s parleys with modern allegorical
expression. A contest, of sorts, can be said to have occurred between Benjamin and
Adorno over just what the category of “allegory” should mean and how it was to relate to
natural history. This contest occurred before allegory would become the central
problematic through which contemporary Critical Theory would come to understand the
collective energies of these, their foundational instigators. This chapter turns to the early
days in which this contest appeared to demonstrate how the substance of an allegorical
criticism, “natural history,” was variously construed by Benjamin and Adorno. In so
doing this chapter demonstrates how the role of fate within the constellation of ideas
attending upon natural history in Benjamin’s thought, was transformed by Adorno into
the transitoriness that lies at the core of his “negative dialectic,” the term he gives to the
sum of the allegorical processes that produce natural history. Necessarily, this is, also, to
lobby for a different approach to the significance of Benjamin and Adorno’s work, as it
looks closely at just what culturally derived explanations of textual authority meant, as
their collective understanding of allegory separates itself from its traditional definition,
grappling with modernist practices where the “devising of figurative words,” “arbitrary
coinings,” and “formed archaisms” was commonplace (OGT 55).

That is, their contest depended upon different ontological beliefs about what
natural history was; where Benjamin could assert that the arbitrariness of the bourgeois
Sign/ Title was really only ever a recalcitrant disguise for the “formed expression of the
real content” of the unleashed forces of natural history, Adorno would argue that natural
history was dialectical, transitory, and the very truth of the non-identity of things with
that which they denote. Hullot-Kentor’s admirable exploration of Adorno’s attempt to inflect the relationship between names and titles with the mediating force of psychoanalysis shows how that attempt creates tension with Benjamin’s original theory. Hullot-Kentor places an obvious and apt emphasis on Kant’s influence on Adorno, rendering Adorno’s belief in the transitoriness of natural history a reflection of Kant’s belief that “[t]he objectivity of the idea was formulated subjectively” (126). Hullot-Kentor’s attention to the role of Kant in Adorno’s thought cannot be gainsaid; however, it is unclear whether he draws the most felicitous conclusion when he argues that, unlike Adorno, for Benjamin: “[t]he idea is constructed in opposition to natural history” (Hullot-Kentor 128). Benjamin’s imbrication of natural history with “fate” – which is neither history nor nature but a kind of virtuality – needs critical pause. It does not seem immediately necessary to conclude that when something is virtual it can no longer also be an idea. This chapter provides the necessary background to a better understanding of natural history and by extension that which these modernist theorists would assert as being the fraught purpose of allegory to uncover – the world made taboo by appropriative titles.

Contemporary aesthetic theories and their commentators have tended to be insensitive to the assumed differences between Benjamin and Adorno, locating in imagery of ruins and fragments only those particular features of their debate that are, ultimately, a caprice of their being made to fit in with post-modern approaches to language, text, and culture. Benjamin and Adorno’s thinking about allegory, however, must be disentwined from a post-modern genealogy such that its own structures of thought can be explored for what they teach us about the purpose of the actual allegorical
relationships that they believed to have obtained between things and aesthetic objects like tragedy, trauerspiel, and modernist allegorical expression more broadly. We may still find that allegory is best comprehended as any aesthetic tool, any thing that can hint towards the ambivalent position of the presentation and critique of power; in special, for Benjamin, this methodological ambivalence was aimed at those unfortunate uses of language that would appropriate and make untouchable the very natural historical forces he was concerned to let speak and from which intent his linguistic theory was spun. Allegory, for Benjamin, was designed to produce a new form of anamnesis for the end of returning to commoditized titles their proper man-made names. Theirs, Benjamin and Adorno’s, in this sense, was primarily a debate over just what it is that the language of boutique marketplace culturalism appropriates and transforms. Benjamin felt that words had the power to change the very things they named when arranged or collaged; juxtaposition, citation, and commentary had the power to critically disambiguate. For Benjamin, the philosophical tract was the highest form in which this critique could be carried out. Adorno, half in agreement and half in seeming incredulity, offered a different understanding about what the allegorical power of language made apparent. Adorno asserted that language was an effective agent of representation only inasmuch as it respected the powers of both nature and history to present the truth of a thing’s essential transitoriness, another way of affirming the non-identity of things. For Adorno, this truth came, via allegory, to be represented as a concept of that transitoriness that precedes a thing’s named existence. Their debate was not over allegorical technique inasmuch as it was minimally concerned to define the best form for its deployment. Unlike Benjamin,
Adorno favored the range and a-thematic expansion that an essay provided for allegorical criticism.

Allegory was a term that was, at first, used by Benjamin to describe the specific formal condition that distinguished the métier of the German baroque trauerspiel from its classically influenced cousin in the German tragedy. Benjamin’s thesis was that trauerspiel and tragedy used fundamentally different substances to inform their content. The trauerspiel was inclined towards using real historical details to advance its intricate plots, while tragedy relied on universal truths congealed in mythical narratives from an archaic past age of heroes to explain collective historical changes. For Benjamin this meant that the chief aesthetic tool in the trauerspiel writer’s toolbox could not be a symbol. This is because symbols effect the meaning of the works that they participate in by their universalizing truth-making auratic powers. Rather than rely on the implied manifestation of an historical reality in the object-hood of a symbol, the trauerspiel deployed allegory. The difference between an allegory and a symbol – allegory is usually thought to be something like a continuous “extended metaphor” – actually implied an entirely new mode of communication for Benjamin.

In some critical apprehensions of Benjamin’s work this new mode becomes translated into its very own medium. Two statements from the trauerspiel study demonstrate why this is so: “[a]llegory is not a playful illustrative technique, but a form of expression, just as speech is expression, and, indeed, just as writing is”; also: “allegory is not convention of expression, but expression of convention” (OGT 162, 175). The insight that allegory is its own medium, like speech or writing, alive with its very own essential difference from other mediums (immediacy is to speech (Ong) as
commemoration is to writing (Derrida) as convention is to allegory (Benjamin), etc.) has largely set the stage for Benjamin’s (and Adorno’s) reception. Benjamin was the first modern cultural theorist inasmuch as his work pointed critical study away from a preoccupation with work immanent textual artifacts that host an embedded verbal icon. Instead, Benjamin offers a theory of textuality that locates meaning in what lies outside a text’s signified content in the materials and historical context of the sign as it is opened up to view through the critical work of an allegorical interpretation. To that end, Terry Eagleton notes that what Benjamin reveals is that: “[a]llegory, obsessed as it is by emblem and hieroglyph, is a profoundly visual form; but what swims into visibility is nothing less than the materiality of the letter itself” (Walter Benjamin: Or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism 4). Benjamin’s radical approach to allegory demonstrates that the meaning of a text can lay every bit outside its bibliographic apparatus. That is, both the explicit and implicit commentary that makes clear an allegorical text’s anagogic under-sense is every bit as important as what lies inside a text, as the key to its own always already allegorized (pre-) reading.

Another way to think through what Benjamin means when he claims that allegory is the expression of convention can be found in what he says about the theological symbol. Benjamin understands classic theological symbols to be defined by the unity of their materialization with the transcendental objects that they point out. Benjamin argues that this unity is distorted in contemporary philosophies that rely on the language of appearances and essences. For Benjamin, the baroque symbol is, unlike its classical precursor, not infinite, sacred, or redemptive, but dialectic. Benjamin historicizes the role of the symbol in aesthetic practice and notes that: “the harmonious inwardness of
classicism plays no role” (OGT 161). Classicism invents allegorical speculation merely as a framing device to the symbolic unity it hosts. In the baroque period, allegory begins to appear as having its own conceptual-structure such that it rivals the symbol’s unity. An allegory in this sense becomes the mode of pointing away from itself towards something else that is not designated by the symbol. Allegory in the trauerspiel serves to elevate profane things into the realm of sanctification. When Benjamin argues that allegory is the expression of a convention what he means to suggest is that the allegorical substrate serves to critique and interpret the symbol’s implied unity of material and transcendental meaning:

And the very same antinomies take plastic form in the conflict between the cold, facile technique and the eruptive expression of allegorical interpretation. Here too the solution is a dialectical one. It lies in the essence of writing itself... The sanctity of what is written is inextricably bound up with the idea of its strict codification. For sacred script always takes the form of certain complexes of words which ultimately constitute, or aspire to become, one single and inalterable complex. So it is that alphabetical script as a combination of atoms of writing, is the farthest removed from the script of sacred complexes. The latter take the form of hieroglyphics. (OGT 175)

What emerges from this is the way in which Benjamin is tacitly construing two antithetical hermeneutic processes. The “single and inalterable” complex of the divine symbol becomes something that is, ultimately, a non-verbal icon. Allegory, as that which “is the farthest removed” from the symbol is left without any “inalterable” theological rebus to be used for the task of its de-coding. This helps to explain the two dominant images Benjamin uses to explain his linguistic thought: the ruin and the hieroglyph. The sense of self-enclosed possession of meaning that the symbolic-hieroglyph evinces is categorically at odds with the ruin of allegory that, in its essentially invisible character, is
knowable “as a combination of atoms of writing”: “It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script” (OGT 176).

In its function as the interpretation of that symbol, allegory stands as its unfinishable interruption, interpretation, and explanation.

In thinking about what it is that constitutes the substance of allegorical content, instead of the implications of its mode of expression upon the reality that it cites, it is possible to see how this way of thinking about allegory makes a new contribution to Critical Theory in distinction from past critical encounters with Benjamin and Adorno’s work that focuses on teasing out its application within traditional hermeneutic practices and theories. Benjamin and Adorno’s theories about allegory have had a wider institutional application, pace Eagleton’s swimming signifiers, than they would have felt justified in giving warrant. Understanding how Adorno adapts Benjamin’s understanding of natural history is of some consequence if we are to know better how Benjamin’s sense of taboo allowed him to theorize a distinctly modern form of allegorical expression and for how Adorno both borrows from and changes that theory.

The natural history of Adorno

It is Benjamin’s understanding of natural history, one that makes the king the sporting object of natural vicissitudes that Adorno forgets. Adorno, while retaining some of Benjamin’s broader claims concerning the actual historical essence of the monad in its putatively ideal manifestations, uses natural history somewhat capriciously, given Benjamin’s attention to the historical and aesthetic changes that undergirded the advent of the trauerspiel. Adorno’s purpose was quite apposite to Benjamin’s, afterall; he
borrowed the concept of natural history to attack what he felt was the false “subjectivistic standpoint” in Heideggerean philosophy. This occurred at a time in German history when Heidegger had become an overwhelming force by completely capitalizing philosophical discussion. Adorno focuses on the dialectical differences between nature and history, inventing a new underpinning from that which had been cited as the content of the trauerspiel – man’s possession of and by fate. Adorno overlooks the way Benjamin carefully disambiguated both nature and history within the context of his aesthetic apprehension of the trauerspiel’s deployment of natural history in his description of its difference from tragedy. Be that as it may, the idea of possession is maintained in Adorno’s appropriation. However, the work Benjamin produced to demonstrate the king’s possession of the taboo-making power of title, as a way to organize or deal with fate, at the core of Benjamin’s trauerspiel study, is lost. The problem of fate, as Adorno mis-appropriates it, perhaps unawares, cannot be disentwined from his contribution to post-Marxist concepts of natural history and is of signal importance to the continued discussion of the relationship between allegory and modernist expression.

Robert Hullot-Kentor and Susan Buck-Morss help introduce us to Adorno’s repurposing of natural history. They help to make the lines of Adorno’s borrowing from Benjamin’s trauerspiel study clear. Just before he raises the issue concerning Benjamin’s thoughts about allegory being “the original history of signification” in his Kant lecture, Adorno leads us forward with a discussion of what natural history looked like to him. Unlike Opitz, who provided Benjamin with the typical behaviors and situations concerning baroque political life, Adorno paints a picture that is entirely abstract. History is defined by Adorno as being the traditional medium through which “the qualitatively
new” emerges: “it is a movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been, but rather one in which the new occurs, it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new” (“Natural History” 253). Adorno’s immediate concern in his 1932 Kant society lecture, given this vexed understanding of history, is to try to characterize exactly what constitutes the “natural” in the concept of natural history. If history, in its concrete form, cleaves towards what phenomenology promises – that meaning is only nominal, that it might be nothing more than the interpretation of the existing in itself, post res, without proof, and as that which is “new,” then nature is that movement in which that very “newness” appears. It would be grossly wrongheaded to assert that nature and history share an identity in Adorno’s thinking. It should be sufficient to know that Adorno rejects both ontological and phenomenological understandings of nature and history for his distaste of Heidegger’s mélange of these two kinds of philosophy in what he, Adorno, terms “neo-ontology.” Instead, Adorno argues that “[n]atural history is not a synthesis of natural and historical methods, but a change in perspective” (261). That change in perspective includes Adorno’s rethinking the role of fate in Benjamin’s understanding.

Susan Buck-Morss explains that this change in perspective comes about in the assumption that nature and history are not collapsible terms that give up priority and advantage to either a phenomenological or an ontological thesis. Instead, nature and history are critical points within an allegorical structure that is based upon their intra- and inter- tensions. “Nature provided the key for exposing the nonidentity between the concept of history (as a regulative idea) and historical reality, just as history provided the key for demythifying nature” (Origins of Negative Dialectics 49). Buck-Morss sees in
non-identity and critical “demythifying” the opportunity Adorno takes to raise the schism between Idealist (ontological) and Phenomenological concepts of history. She argues that, for Adorno, actual or concrete history cannot be identical with the concept of “History” because this would always do concrete history some diminishment. At the same time, natural understandings of history, un-tethered to an awareness of a philosophy that may govern historical representation, cannot be thought to be identical with any concept of “Nature.” The resolution to the series of non-identities that these insights produce tempt a blending of their terms that it is Adorno’s prerogative to reject. Adorno refuses to give either history or nature status as being ontologically prior. Rather, his goal is to destroy the mythical power appointed to the concepts of both nature and history for their production of passive attitudes towards the status quo that he thought to be silently informing Benjamin’s determination that fate is a natural force informing history. Concepts of natural history such as Benjamin’s, Adorno argues, in their tendency towards a kind of latent myth, produce wildly irrefragable yet delirious intensifications.

For Adorno, there are no transcendent laws of history independent of the actions of men and material reality upon one another. Historical change, the engine of the new, depends on the combination of material reality and the critical consciousness that can temper, as titles that are also names, that reality. Rather, the materials of man’s intellect draw upon and change that material reality. Buck-Morss checks Adorno’s contribution here, showing that natural-history as he construes it is a process of dialectical compositional innovation. Where she sees Adorno making his precise contribution is in his focus on the role of the present moment within that process. Adorno believes that he may sidestep the metaphysical problem of historical relativism by so doing. That is, he
rejects any teleological argument for historical truth while accepting some limited concept of truth’s historicality: “For Adorno, the present did not receive its meaning from history; rather, history received its meaning from the present. Not a transcendent and absolute idea, but the ‘present objective situation of truth’ was the goal of his critical inquiry” (Buck-Morss 51).

It is here that Adorno’s plea for a change in perspective in apprehending natural history is most easily comprehended. Adorno sees a constitutional tension between the inner logic of material and the course of history. Instead of winnowing one another into a Hegelian synthesis, material and history can only appear as compositionally entwined within particular concrete configurations, knowable in the instant of their encounter, closed to Benjaminian anamnesis and its tacit tethering of materiality with the authority of the theological symbol. At the same time, this understanding retains the eidetic identity of Benjamin’s distinction between classic and modern uses of allegory inasmuch as the rift that modernist allegorical allusion covers is no longer that of the timeless theological unity of the symbol, but rather that of the tensions in time that obtain between material and a collective apprehension of its significance. Adorno’s is an antiquarianism pointed towards gathering together the ephemeral “now” as it is indelibly separated from the past. Buck-Morss leads us to see how history and material are assimilable thoughts in Adorno’s “natural history” Kant lecture. She explains that each, nature and history, are dialectical concepts in their own right, for Adorno. The ramifications of Adorno’s pairing of two discrete dialectical concepts together – history and nature – lies in the wild pullulation beyond all perspectivally conditioned thought that he appoints to the power of modernist allegory.
To define the dialectical terms of each, nature and history, then: nature has a positive, materialist pole. This pole is concrete and exists as that which is mortal and transitory, the substance upon which the material of labour and corporeal bodies is expended. It also has a negative pole. Nature, in this negative pole, is the world that has not yet been incorporated into history through the penetration of man’s reason: “In this sense, nature was ‘the mythical…that which is eternally there…as the fateful construction of pre-given being.’ This was nature’s static side, perpetuated by the unchanging rituals of the people who submitted to its domination” (Buck-Morss 54). History also has positive and negative values for Adorno. Positively, history can be known as the dialectic of social practices; it is the mode of transmitted social behaviours in which the qualitatively new can be recognized as emerging. Negatively, history has meant the long story of the same, clothed in circumstantial difference: “it merely statically reproduced the conditions and relations of class rather than establishing a qualitatively new order” (Buck-Morss 54).

Buck-Morss describes how Martin Heidegger’s existentialism was that which Adorno’s work on natural history was actually aimed at upsetting. Heidegger’s positing of “nature” and “history” as terms within the ontological category of “Dasein” erased the double character that Adorno’s dialectical definitions were careful to find. With that loss of the dialectic in Heidegger’s thought so went the opportunity for negative critique. The fallacy in Heidegger’s thought that especially rankled for Adorno was that:

Either social conditions were affirmed as “natural” without regard for their historical becoming, or the actual historical process was affirmed as essential; hence the irrational material suffering of which history was composed was either dismissed as mere contingency (Hegel) or ontologized as essential in itself (Heidegger). (Buck-Morss 54)
Ontologies, such as those that belong to Heidegger and Hegel, result in ideological justification and affirmation. Adorno offers, as an alternative, the informative possibilities found in the “concrete unity” of nature and history, alive and autonomously working in any analysis of reality. Taking his cue from Benjamin’s introduction to the *OGT*, Adorno argues that the only way to maintain a critical perspective that guarantees this unity its location in thought is to analyze its empirical and phenomenological extremes. In extremes, we are able to see the acquired, sedimented, and retarding effects that useless tradition confronts us with as if it were natural and just. It is Lukacs’ definition of second nature (*Theory of the Novel*), whereby the commoditized world is emptied of its meaning by conventions that no longer serve the interests of those who consume them that spurs Adorno to refine his understanding of natural history. “Second nature,” Buck Morss explains, provides Adorno with a “negating, critical concept which referred to the false, mythical appearance of given reality as ahistorical and absolute” (55).

Adorno finds, then, “second nature” amenable to Benjamin’s sense of natural history. Natural history, with Lukacs language of critique and negation, gives Adorno that vent through which to advocate against convention, primitive fetish, and the submission of mind to fate. Ignoring the complexities of historical interpretation, Heidegger, after Adorno’s rejection of his existential subjectivity, is argued to have lapsed into a false spiritualism. Ignoring the complexities incumbent upon interpretations of what appears as second nature, Heidegger, Adorno finds, retreats from the truth that inwardness is acquired.
Adorno’s adoption of Lukacs’ belief in the acquired essence of subjectivity meant that he was risking a form of historical relativism; truth for Adorno could easily be construed as the apt apprehension of a thing’s historicity. In order for his sense of natural history to not fall into this trap, Adorno was leery of it becoming another “meaning-filled totality.” Buck-Morss informs us that it is here that Adorno borrows most accurately from Benjamin’s trauerspiel study. Specifically Adorno makes use of Benjamin’s decision to turn his Kant studies in one particular direction. In their study of Kant, Scholem introduced Benjamin to the language and rigors of Jewish mysticism. Benjamin turned that language away from religious mystery and applied it to aesthetic thought:

“Benjamin’s religiosity was secular and mundane, at the same time that he approached profane objects with a religious reverence. His was thus an “inverse” or “negative” theology in which mysticism and materialism converged, and as a model for philosophical thinking it made no little impression on Adorno” (6).

Benjamin’s religion of the mundane was an extension of his reading of the substance of the allegorical citation-work implicit in the chronicle-structure of the baroque trauerspiel. Allegory, as we have noted, did not mean a story invested in drawing out communal values and ideas but: “was instead the concrete expression of that idea’s material foundation” (Buck-Morss 56). The allegorical could only present concrete particulars of either natural or historical “extremity” if it made itself felt to its observer as belonging to a ruin or a fragment of an ephemeral cultural totality. It was the habit of holistic occlusion that drew Adorno to Benjamin’s reading of allegory. The productive value of such an occlusion was that it guaranteed the mystery of historical material, that un-theorizable “first nature” that Lukacs found embedded in the life-world of things. That
this mystery could only be experienced as the truth that history is essentially transitory
suited Adorno’s dialectical redefinition of fate within the environs of natural history all
the better.

Benjamin’s approach to natural history implies an existential strain in its
ontological roots. For Benjamin, allegory allows him to argue that trauerspiel undoes the
classical schematic where nature held a symbolic value as an ahistorical and
universalizing idea. For Adorno, history and nature, once they have been denuded of their
invariants and dialectically re-defined and arranged, raises to view a degree of historical
facticity that is able to release the truth that history and nature are essentially transitory
objects:

Nature itself is transitory. It thus contains within it the moment of
history. Whenever the historical appears, it refers to the natural,
which passes away within it. Conversely, where “second nature”
appears, whenever that world of convention confronts us, it is
deciphered by the fact that its meaning becomes clear precisely in
its transitoriness. (TW Adorno. “The Idea of Natural History” 264)

Adorno sees in history and nature the transitoriness that underlies their intra-
compositional dialectic and tends to ignore the problem of the manifest symbol that
distressed Benjamin. Buck-Morss explains that it was this freedom that was original in
the method of argument Adorno would term the “negative dialectic.” The truth that both
nature (after it has been reified) and history contain each of the other’s transitoriness is
expressed through a critic’s understanding that that transitoriness has been caused by the
fact that reason and reality do not coincide, making symbolic thought, in its ability to
manifest itself, a red-herring.

Like Buck-Morss, Robert Hullot-Kentor also begins his appraisal of Adorno by
affirming Adorno’s indebtedness to Benjamin. Adorno and Benjamin, he notes, agree:
“argumentation is fruitless.” The standard mode of philosophical argument – the statement of an assumption, its development, supplies of proof, and a conclusion – betrays a naïve faith in the genetic stability of the real and its assumed continuity with reason. Adorno rejects this faith and finds in the micrological study of things the generative force for a limited facticity to emerge in finding the concrete dialectical origins promised by natural history.

Hullot-Kentor, then, in helping us to further set the stage for our apprehension of Adorno’s acute reaction to Heidegger and how this reaction effected his understanding of natural history, also begins to provide us with reason to doubt that the purpose of Benjamin’s OGT was to return to the word “idea” its name bearing qualities, in contradistinction to “natural history.” Motivated to survive Heidegger’s transcendent reception in Germany, Adorno developed an argument that sought to demonstrate Heidegger’s flaw: “the conceptual synonymity of myth and nature.” Further, Adorno demonstrates how this synonymity would lead to the ‘neo-ontological’ (Adorno’s word for Heidegger’s philosophy) repression of the non-organic identities of nature and history by way of the existential invariables incumbent to Heidegger’s thought that produced an essentialism that was akin to Benjamin’s beliefs about fate. Nonetheless, identity and its relationship to fate is not such an invariant in Adorno’s thinking about nature and history. Adorno’s critique of the enlightenment, that reason becomes the myth it sought to replace, begins in his early work on rethinking natural history away from the existential roots Benjamin granted to the concept.

Hullot-Kentor reminds us of why Adorno’s break with Benjaminian existentialism occurred in Adorno’s reading of Odysseus, a reading that pays special
attention to the way names effect the identity of the hero. That is, Adorno concentrates on the way disguise affects Odysseus’ own personal psychology in the Polyphemus section of *The Odyssey*. Using the word “Udeis” to both disclose and conceal his identity before the Cyclops, Polyphemus, Odysseus is shown to be sacrificing his own transitory identity. “Udeis” – the response Odysseus gives to Polyphemus when that monster asks Odysseus to identify himself – rather than being just a clever pun on Odysseus’ own name, is also a scream of terror: to avoid being eaten, Odysseus screams out to Polyphemus that he is “nobody/Udeis.” It is because the scream is also a pun that Odysseus can re-count to himself, after danger has passed, that he was always the naturally rational schemer. That is, he fixes his identity retroactively. This identity is inherently duplicitous as the “schemer” gets away with fooling Polyphemus by accidentally mimicking his own name while sincerely fulfilling Polyphemus’ expectation that he provokes fear and trembling in Odysseus. The monster’s “first” nature has possessed Odysseus’ identity in that moment of fear; Adorno castigates Odysseus for taking credit for the merit of his accidental fortune:

By making himself like Polyphemus, in answering to his needs, he gains power over him, destroys first nature, and differentiates himself from what would overwhelm him. Yet this differentiation is apocryphal. Ulysses emerges from the struggle a self-identical, invariable, force of nature as the power of self-preservation, a second immanence, that does to itself and first nature, by self control, what it once feared from first nature: it destroys particularity. He has become “nobody.” The historical voyage itself has become a natural event. External mimicry of the natural force of the Cyclops becomes internal self-identical mimesis, ultimately the order of the ratio; which is itself a structure of the self-sacrifice of particularity to universality. Thus, in its conscious control of nature, the self has triumphed by becoming opaque to its self-reproduction as second nature. (237)
Hullot-Kentor eloquently makes the motive behind Adorno’s criticism of the relationship between alienated commodities and alienated psychological identities palpable. They each point out that what we believe to be natural is the result of an accidental alignment of protective self-possession and the real. Identity is its own history. Fate, as the force of nature within natural history, is an insufficient explanation for the paradoxes produced by the transitory and dialectical identity of individuals as they accidentally name themselves in the face of that “nature.”

Given this, Adorno felt that natural history could no longer be used to support portmanteaus like “Dasein.” Adorno would demonstrate in his lecture on natural history that Heidegger proffered the word in his own nationalistic impulse to replace foreign terms in philosophy with German ones. In “Dasein” Adorno sees the same kind of potential for the vitiation of experience and identity signaled by that unforeseeable pun emitted in Odysseus’ terrified scream. Adorno argues that the identity of the historical facts that “Dasein” dissolves – the transitoriness of nature and history – makes of neologisms only a second degree of linguistic formalism. They are ineffective conduits for the expression of natural history. That is, words become abbreviations for concepts that are expressed in their thinker’s consciousness only. The negative dialectic, and its reliance upon the name-title relationship, is aimed precisely at de-mythifying the post res identity of this neo-ontological project and the Idealist predisposition for a nominalistic verity that completes itself in the accidental structures and substrates of a subjectivity that is conditioned by the transitoriness of natural history.

Adorno’s dispute with Heidegger is not simply one of taste. Witness to the collapse of Kantian ontologies that attempted to still the debate over historical relativism,
Adorno acknowledges that Kant’s work had led German philosophy into a morass of subjective formalism. Turning to phenomenology for answers, Adorno notices that it also fails to overcome the subjectivistic bias when it assumes the Idealist/rationalist ratio as its starting point. Like neo-Kantianism, phenomenology posits the dualism of nature and history, winding up in investigations of an essentially ontic structure of being that ignores the historically situated constructions of any particular consciousness. In essence, Adorno rejects as false the idea that being can be understood through an awareness of the “historicity” of a subject. The difference between the historical subject and its emplotment gives to that emplotment an unfair advantage within the autonomous ratio that this kind of phenomenology unknowingly assumes and uses to draw distinctions.

Adorno rejects Heidegger’s Idealism, for, like Kant, it begins with a disposition towards an autonomous reason that has no other mode of expression than subjectively imposed forms. The ratio assumes that “Being,” as a kind of totality, is the only apt claim in which the absolute subject can express its interests. In this it assumes the priority of the actual over the possible in the formation of any subject’s identity: “ratio” maintains the superiority of the category over its elements. Historicity, the way we categorize phenomena, is an illusory solution to the problem of reconciling the dialectics of nature and history:

In the tradition of subjectivistic idealism, historicity assumes their division at the point where categorical thought excludes facticity. Heidegger simply reduces history to nature by subsuming it under historicity. Rather than the reduction of history to a natural fact, Adorno urges, it is necessary to be able to grasp history itself as nature and nature itself as history. This capacity would overcome the subjectivistic predominance of thought over its object and amount to an actual solution to the problem of relativism. (Hullot-Kentor 244)
The replacement of the general category of historicity with the facticity of the “concrete particular” implies the new perspective that would not allow for the sacrificial logic practiced by Odysseus in his self-domination. At stake is the way in which reason allows “the ratio to consume its relation to its object” (244). Hullot-Kentor allows us to see that this logic implies the kind of act of self-possession that Benjamin warns against in his special definition of taboo.

For Benjamin, as we have noted in the introduction to this study, nature has a real history that is articulated as the force of fate; fate being neither “nature” nor “history.” History, too, had its own relationship with nature; History causes nature to lament in its being misunderstood by explanations that pretend to possess it within a systemic totality. It was the task of modernist aesthetics to demonstrate and express this history and this nature by confronting the places where fate, the force of nature within history, is absconded by the mythical thinking which activates itself as the precursor to those systemic totalities that moot and hide natural history’s articulation behind the taboo making functions of those titles that this History, told as if it were Enlightenment’s singular progression, wrongly use for its articulation. For Benjamin this did not mean that ideas were in need of refurbishing such that they could, like Adam, name things in the fullness of their philosophical import. Rather, the names that man uses were sports; names were neither titles nor that primordial and pure Adamite word they sought to emulate. Benjamin’s sense of natural history needn’t fall into Adorno’s psychologism for it never posits fate’s subjectivity. For Benjamin, rather, natural history is the object of that play where the modernist word entices natural history into writing. At the same time, Adorno’s path towards subjectivity offers to Benjamin’s theory a possibility for
understanding how de-personalization might be achieved, free from the maudlin sentiment that Benjamin appoints to it, when he introduces a theory of dialectical transitoriness aimed at replacing the existential strain in Benjamin’s belief about the force of fate in natural history’s allegorical construction. Fate, ultimately, for Benjamin was felt in that understanding that acedia once gave to the medieval chroniclers from which trauerspiels were descended; the universe is terminally unmotivated.

In summarizing the argument of this book and offering an account of its basis in the way natural history influenced a modern reassessment of what allegory could reveal it is useful to start by restating in simplest terms the original thesis with which it began. Modernity created that moment in which teleological explanations of history and nature could no longer be believed. The loss to what that confidence guaranteed as always being possible to lose determined that the traditional mechanisms through which teleological explanations offered and enforced their explanations – names, titles, fate, and taboo – were left as newly emptied ciphers in need of thoughtful reassessment once the neat demarcation between nature and history was revealed as anything but. In this moment, natural history became a new problem for philosophical contemplation. Old teleological explanations had obviated the complex relationships and confusions that really obtain between the identities of nature and history. Throughout the foregoing study of the way in which allegory could be aimed at revealing the hidden ambiguities that exist when their demarcation is revealed as false, I have tried to maintain a consistent distinction in my employment of the terms that allegory constellates. Names and titles unfolded a history out of the unnatural, quintessential, human, and poetic taboo. Obviously a full explication of Adorno is beyond the scope of this book, but it is given that his dominance
has produced the condition in which the modernist discussion of these terms has been forgotten. The very virtuality of fate, being neither nature nor history, that Benjamin understood it to be, and of which Pound’s exercises in de-personalization are apt examples, has been replaced by Adorno’s assertion, made in his lecture on natural history, that “nature is illusory because we have lost reality” (267).

It should become apparent that what it is that has been forgotten is not the historic moment in which modernism took hold. No discussion of its advent fails to mention the end of collective faith in teleological explanations for the world and man’s existence. It is less difficult to recall the ensuing philosophical debate that consumed thought in the early twentieth century, as it sought to reinvest the ciphers from those teleologies arriving like messages in a bottle on the shore of a new era of doubt and skepticism than it is to remember the terms through which modernism attempted to do so. Nature and history could no longer pretend they were friendly cousins out for a walk, secure in their familial restraint. What we have forgotten is the genealogy to this difficult climate and the various ways these once separable categories became tempestuously embroiled once their genetic coordinates were put into question.

For Pound and Benjamin, natural history gave to the terms name, title, fate, and taboo a distinct set of meanings. Names and titles retained their nineteenth century connections to legalistic questions of possession, guaranteed by the older Lockean presumption of the self as a thing that one is entitled to possess, giving to the religious accent on naming that Benjamin describes its real calculation in broader questions of property and individual rights. At the same time fate and taboo became legitimate problems to these early moderns, no longer defensible in their usual teleological context.
Fate becomes a term that Benjamin invests with the special qualities of virtuality, uncertain, ultimately, of this determination, but providing a sense of its identity in the trauerspiel’s experiments with catachresis and formed archaism. Taboo, on this score, is all that fate is unable to articulate as that which is unnatural within natural history.

Adorno will contest these terms, as we have seen, most particularly upon the identity of Benjamin’s understanding of fate. It was this term, as the force of nature within history that Adorno would view as retaining a winsome and pensive existential undecidability. Adorno was convinced that the dialectical core of natural history depended upon its ephemeral transitoriness, the “real” being ineluctably a nonce category open to its eventual service within the boutiques of post-modernism, refined but not reduced in its stupefying responsibility there. Fate, nature, the “real,” Adorno writes in his essay on natural history: “will turn out to be not meaningful but meaningless” (255); or, more pointedly, and coming just upon his selective appropriation of Benjamin’s passive claims that nature is “transience,” he overturns both Benjamin’s philological separation of tragedy from trauerspiel and Benjamin’s linguistic theory when he overlooks the accent on virtuality in the construction of natural history: “[T]he mythology that underlies tragedy is in every sense dialectical because it includes the subjugation of the guilty man to nature at the same time that it develops out of itself the reconciliation of this fate: man raises himself up out of his fate as man” (267). The loss to Adorno in his thinking about fate as that which is to be transcended is that it disallows in some fundamental way the kind of virtuality Benjamin tried to describe as modernist allegorical expression and which Pound practiced as the signature poetic move in modernist poetry. The outcome of Adorno’s orientation towards the real is that names

178
and titles become reactive cinders of performative contradiction; indiscernible, one from the other, titles that hit home like names entertain the risk of becoming consumables in the marketplace, rather than in the careful apparatus of intricate de-personalized self-unmaking that Benjamin theorized as the role of nature in history and Pound practiced in acts of antiquarian virtuality.
WORKS CITED


Cunard, Nancy Clara. *Letters to Ezra Pound*. Bloomington: Lilly Library Special Collections, Ezra Pound MSS. Box 3. All ensuing letters belong to this file.


The New Age. 27.26, 1919.


