Signifying Substance:
A Cultural Analysis of Early
Modernist Language Practice

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There is a striking paradox in early modernist theory and practice concerning the nature of poetic discourse. Whereas some of its major representatives argued for "natural speech" and "prose effects" in poetry, above all in reaction to what was seen as the debased and hollow post-Romantic poetic diction of their most immediate predecessors, these arguments did not signal the openness towards everyday usage that could be read into them. Rather than adopting patterns of common discourse, poets evince a harshly critical stance to it, and especially to the language of the popular mass media. In a narrative of degeneration that was typical for its time, T. E. Hulme, the *eminence grise* of the pre-World War I London intelligentsia, claimed that "One might say that images are born in poetry. They are used in prose, and finally die a long, lingering death in journalists' English. Now this process is very rapid, so that the poet must continually be creating new images, and his sincerity may be measured by the number of his images"(Hulme 1955: 75).

The critical attitude to mass culture that is to be noted in remarks like these is expressive of the "contamination anxiety" that Andreas Huyssen has identified as intrinsic to the polarization of high and popular culture in the early twentieth century. Yet, in spite of the implicit "contamination anxiety" and elitism evinced by the early modernists, poets of the period were unable to escape, whether they wanted to or not, modern mass culture in its various material manifestations. "The expressive forms of mass culture", Thomas Strychacz observes, "leave their traces in all modernist texts, if only in the work their authors must perform to exclude them"(Strychacz

1993: 8). The determinism suggested in this analysis is particularly noticeable in the approach to language, cognitively and technologically, in the early twentieth century.

In the following analysis I will try to show how the early modernist demand for substance in writing was affected by the contemporary metropolitan world of the mass-marketed word and image. My argument is that the resulting aesthetic was related to market conditions and technological means that modernist poets were quick to adopt but equally quick to disown or efface. Whereas the desired verbal substance is often to be found in the materiality of print, this circumstance is frequently displaced in the discourse of poets, through logocentric arguments, seeking the origin of poetic expression in spoken utterance, or through adoption of pre-modern signifiers like the handwritten sign or the Chinese ideogram. The most paradoxical expression of the double-bind of assimilation and displacement of mass culture phenomena is the return to antiquated printing techniques in the handcrafted productions of several limited editions of poetry in the early twentieth century. A modern offshoot of the Victorian Arts and Crafts movement, this purported return to origins was a critical response to modern mass culture at the same time as it was an important conduit to a modernist emphasis on the materiality of the signifier.

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The single most common phenomenon in language practice that the early twentieth-century London modernists attacked was "verbalism", a use of words for rhetorical purposes only and in which clear and distinct signification had disappeared. As a rule, the alleged language disorder was described as deriving from a separation between word and object, or a condition where that link had vanished altogether, leading to "rhetoric" and "abstraction". In the discourse on poetry, the exact historical provenance of this "verbal disease" (Eliot) shifted over time and depended on writer and polemical situation, but, at its most general, it tended to embrace most writing from Milton to the Romantics and, especially, the

most recent predecessors to the modernists themselves, the French Symbolists and the Aesthetic Movement in England. According to Ezra Pound, who claimed in 1915 that "for Milton and Victorianism and for the softness of the 'nineties' I have different degrees of antipathy or even contempt" (Pound 1974: 362), the Symbolists had "degraded the symbol to the status of word"(Pound 1970: 49), that is, a word insufficiently backed up by an object or referent. Although his activity as a critic still lay a few years into the future, T. S. Eliot showed that he had apprehended the current agenda when he commented in a letter to Pound on the article in which the statement on Symbolism was made: "I distrust and detest Aesthetics, when it cuts loose from the Object, and vapours in the void, but you have not done that" (Eliot 1988: 86-7).

In order to achieve the required hardness and precision in language, words had to "hover above and cling close to the things they mean" as Pound put it in 1912 (Pound 1973: 29). A recurring key word for this word-object relation was *substance*, signifying three-dimensionality in opposition to flat words with no clearcut relationship to a referent or signified. T. E. Hulme's term for such flat words were "counters" and it seems as if he was increasingly to hold the view (chronology is notoriously difficult in the case of Hulme's writing) that language in general was to be understood as a counter language with limited claims to exact referentiality. In "Cinders: A New Weltanschaung", a manuscript unpublished in his own lifetime, he stated that "World is indescribable, that is, not reducible to counters; and particularly, it is impossible to include it all under one large counter such as 'God' or 'Truth' and the other verbalisms, or the disease of the symbolic language" (Hulme 1960: 221). Statements such as this one have made critics describe Hulme as "a simple nominalist" for whom "language was totally arbitrary, pure convention, mere assigned names" (Schneidau 1969: 51), but a notable aspect of his writing is that poetry is singled out as a type of discourse which, when handled innovatively, could overcome the limitations of conventional language. In "Romanticism and Classicism", a piece which is usually recognized as late (for example in Michael Levenson's careful chronicling of "English literary

doctrine" in *A Genealogy of Modernism*), he states that poetry "is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one" (Hulme 1960: 134). This privileging of poetic discourse corresponded to his view, expressed in "Notes on Language and Style", that poetry is "always the advance guard of language" (Hulme 1955: 81), provided that each word has "an image sticking on to it, never a flat word passed over the board like a counter" (Hulme 1955: 78).

The notion of words as cognitively substantial, made solid as objects, had a notable currency in general modernist discourse on language in the first two decades of the twentieth century. It is to be found in Alfred Stieglitz's remark in *Camera Work* in 1912 that Gertrude Stein handled language as a "raw material" (Brogan 1991: 286) as well as in Eliot's observation that "Language in a healthy state presents the object, is so close to the object that the two are identified" (Eliot 1960: 149). As far as the London scene is concerned, Vincent Sherry has traced this focus on objectified, and implicitly visual, language to a strain in European thought (comprising writers and philosophers like Benda, Sorel, Le Bon, de Gourmont and Ortega y Gasset) which favoured the eye above the ear as sensory instrument for perception. According to Sherry, this set of ideas informed the aesthetics and ideology of early modernists like Hulme, Pound and Wyndham Lewis. Ultimately, the uncovering of this "European colloquy" "defies the long-prevailing faith that modernism, despite the antidemocratic politics of its major figures, affirms a poetics of colloquial music, celebrating the very sounds of common speech" (Sherry 1993: 6) and shows how "the physiology of the eye accounts both for a new literary language—a vocabulary of ultravisual immediacy—and the faculty (as they saw it) of dictatorial command" (Sherry 1993: 7).

This particular contextualisation of the favouring of the visual above the aural in modernist language philosophy is, however, complicated by a few factors. Whereas it is clear that someone like Hulme saw little value in an aurally based poetry, arguing that "new verse resembles sculpture rather than music; it appeals to the eye rather than to the ear" (Hulme 1955: 75), Pound, by Sherry's own admission, was "Not given to a single opinion on sight" (Sherry

1993: 44) and shows, throughout the period, a desire to accommodate both an aural and a visual dimension in his poetics. Accordingly, he had by 1914 developed a position that there are two different kinds of poetry, one closer to the visual arts and one closer to music. In the article "Vorticism" he stated that "There is a sort of poetry where music, sheer melody, seems as if it were just bursting into speech. There is another sort of poetry where painting or sculpture seems as if it were 'just coming over into speech'", a position that he repeated in a review of Yeats in the same year (Pound 1974: 380). In 1918 he seems to have found that contemporary poetry had become too visual when he stated in a letter to Harriet Monroe that "There has been no attention to sound for so long" and "I shall probably do some more work on sound" (Pound 1971: 127). As Sherry observes, Pound had an "extreme need to hold together the apparently contradictory standards of musical feeling and visual intelligence" (Sherry 1993: 50), a condition which Hugh Kenner has described as "a deep division in his mind" (Kenner 1997: 22).

A more serious complication of Sherry's ideological context for the emphasis on visuality in modernist theory and practice is that this emphasis extended far beyond the London scene and the authoritarian ideological profiles of some of its protagonists. It is an emphasis that cuts through boundaries of gender and politics in that it is as characteristic of Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy and William Carlos Williams as it is of Hulme, Pound and Lewis. Consequently, although I agree with Sherry that the construction in modernist criticism of poetry as predominantly aural has to be seriously queried, I think the emphasis on the visual has to be further contextualized through incorporating reference to the visual arts, to the surrounding mass culture which was both rejected and assimilated in the modernist text, and, above all, to the technologies through which the modernist text was produced.

The significance of the visual arts to poetic practice at the time has been thoroughly dealt with in previous criticism and need not detain us here. Less attention has been paid to the culture that served as a context to both art forms, a metropolitan culture which

had turned abruptly visual in the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. The modernist breakthrough in the arts, like the philosophical and critical commentary which stuffed it with ideas, was, as Raymond Williams has noted, a metropolitan phenomenon, in which artists and critics, of whom many were immigrants, encountered "a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms were obviously distant" and in which "the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices" (Williams 1989: 45). The most common medial element in this environment was the mass-produced word and image which, through "Tube Posters, Magazine Covers, Advertisement and Commercial Art generally" as Wyndham Lewis put it in the second issue of *BLAST* in 1915 (*BLAST II* 1981: 47), showed its persuasive power. So inundated with the image had this world become that the perceiving subject could be seen to be in danger. Hillel Schwartz, observing that the "visual field was becoming as cluttered as a late Victorian parlor, as busy as a Wild West circus, as illusive as stereoptic pictures", states that "The irritable eye could be but a metonym of a sensational fatigue. Neurasthenia became a defensive act of drastic, selective inattention" (Schwartz 1986: 71).

It has been common to believe, not least because of statements of the artists themselves, that the new movements in the arts took off in scorn for the cheapness and vulgarity allegedly intrinsic to this new visual culture, and it is, indeed, an easy task to find an aggressively critical attitude not least to advertising in modernist writing. What is missed in this reckoning, however, is the extent to which the arts and the commentary surrounding them were infiltrated by the new visual culture and its modes of operation. Artists were in fact both fascinated and disgusted with it, obsessively and explicitly rejecting it but implicitly assimilating it or being assimilated by it. In the first issue of *BLAST* in 1914, Wyndham Lewis neatly summarized the paradoxical relationship to mass culture when stating that "the condition of our enjoyment of

vulgarity, discord, cheapness or noise is an unimpaired and keen disgust with it" (*BLAST I* 1981: 145).

Lewis, especially, would be prone to integrate elements of the visual mass culture as imagery in his writing, as in the following two passages from *The Enemy of the Stars*, first published in the first issue of *BLAST*: "Immense bleak advertisement of God, it crushed with wild emptiness the street" and "He repeated his name—like sinister word invented to launch a new Soap, in gigantic advertisement—toilet-necessity, he, to scrub the soul" (*BLAST I* 1981: 64 and 80). Like Lewis, Ezra Pound could be sarcastic about soap advertisements, as in his imagist admonition to "Consider the way of the scientists rather than the way of an advertising agent for a new soap" (Pound 1974: 6), a statement which is richly ironic; the well-known Pears's Soap ad, featuring Millais' painting "Bubbles", encapsulated almost everything the new artists rebelled against—Victorian values, sentimentality, commercialism—but the appeal to science was, on the other hand, one of the most common sales arguments in advertisements at the time. In her study of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century advertising, Lori Anne Loeb observes that "Innovation was an important selling mechanism.... While established products emphasized their improvement through 'scientific process', new products stressed their scientific origin" (Loeb 1994: 10). The function of the appeal to science, in the case of the mundane products for which it was used in advertising as well as, I would like to suggest, in the case of Pound's launching of a new poetic, "was to give them an almost magical aura" (Loeb 1994: 53).

Both Lewis and Pound found elements to emulate in the art of advertising and commercial print. In the second issue of *BLAST* Lewis observed, when commenting on work of "The London Group", that "The line of colour exploited is the cold, effective, between-colours of modern Advertising art. The beauty of many Tube-posters—at least when seen together, and when organized by a curious mind—is a late discovery" (*BLAST II* 1981: 77) and Pound was quite open about the commercial nature of his campaign for "imagism": "I have mucked in the filthy matter for the sake of a few young writers who need money and that oblique means to it,

reputation" as he put in a letter to Harriet Monroe in 1914 (Pound 1971: 35-6). Moreover, the way in which a term such as "imagism" had in fact taken on the character, if not the legal status, of a trademark is noticeable in the exchange between Pound and Amy Lowell, when the latter, in the view of Pound, had hi-jacked the term. "It stands", Pound stated, but quickly had to rephrase that into "*I should like it to stand* for hard light, clear edges"(Pound 1971: 38; emphasis added). Later, in his 1915 article "Affirmations, as for Imagisme", he commented: "Having omitted to copyright the word at its birth I cannot prevent its misuse" (Pound 1973: 344). Thus, although Pound was repeatedly critical of "the present advertising system" (Pound 1973: 380), it can be argued that his notion that, as he put it in a letter to Harriet Monroe in 1913, "in the end the greasy vulgus will be directed by us" (Pound 1971: 16) has to be contextualized not only by a philosophical framework which encouraged the "faculty (as they saw it) of dictatorial command" (Sherry 1993: 7) but by the modes of persuasion so visibly present in contemporary advertising.

It is doubtful, however, that the massive presence of visual culture and the bias towards visuality in contemporary aesthetic perception would have led to an exploration of visuality in writing if it had not been linked to the change in the technology of writing that was taking place at the same time. The authors appearing after the turn of the century were the first authors to use the typewriter for original production. Although the new technology was not adopted by everyone (Ford Madox Ford's manuscripts had to be sent to a typist by Pound) it is notable that the poets to have the starkest effects on modern poetics—Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams—were all using the typewriter before the First World War and Pound, characteristically, was quick to keep up with the state of the art. When Yeats redistributed an award of $200 to him, he invested part of this money in "a new typewriter of great delicacy" (Pound 1971: 28), quite possibly the new kind of portable typewriter, "the petite folding Corona", which had been on the market since 1910. The major consequence of this technological change was that original composition appeared as print even at its

point of origin. Pound not only used a typewriter at an early stage but was quick to utilise it for producing effects of spacing and line distribution that he conceived of as projecting sound and time values but which where spatial and sculptural in appearance. Such effects are to be seen in the Arnaut Daniel translation in the fifth article (published in the *New Age* on December 28, 1911) of "I Gather the Limbs of Osiris",

> I'll make a song   with exquisite
> Clear words, for buds are blowing sweet

in "The Return", published for the first time in *The English Review* in June 1912 and about which E. E. Cummings stated that the greatest effect it had on him was produced by "the inaudible poem—the visual poem, the poem for not ears but eye" (Kennedy 1980: 106) and in the first publication of the well-known "In A Station of the Metro" (*Poetry*, April 1913) where the even and non-conventionally long spacing isolates the signifiers into visual image units (it is to be noted that these typographical peculiarities are to be found only in the original printings, now conveniently republished in *Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose: Contributions to Periodicals*):

> The apparition   of these faces   in the crowd :
> Petals   on a wet, black   bough .

When commenting to Harriet Monroe on another poem, "The Garret", in the same issue of *Poetry*, Pound may have made one of the most significant statements for twentieth-century poetics: "… I believe I was careful to type it as I wanted it written, i.e., as to line and breaking *and capitals*" (Pound 1971: 17; emphasis in the original).

In his study of *The Aesthetics of Visual Poetry 1914-1928* Willard Bohn expresses doubt about the significance of the typewriter for visual poetry in early modernism when stating that "in fact it had little or no impact on the movement. Almost without exception the early poems were drafted as handwritten manuscripts"

(Bohn 1986: 3). The reason for this argument is that Bohn is unnecessarily restrictive in his selection of poets representing visual poetry, focussing on poetry (like that of Apollinaire and other conduits to what was to become known as concrete poetry) which utilised iconographic effects that *could not* be produced on the typewriter. Given Bohn's wide definition of visual poetry "as poetry meant to be seen" (Bohn 1986: 2), it can be argued that virtually all the poetry produced within modernism had this intention and capitalised on the available technology, whether through the typewriter or the various fonts, type sizes and iconographical arrangements that were being explored in contemporary mass-produced print. It seems obvious that Pound wanted his "In a Station of the Metro" to be seen (why would he otherwise have wanted it produced in that unconventional fashion?) and occasionally the visual aesthetic was pointedly expressed to the public, as when the December 1917 issue of the literary journal *Others*, edited by Alfred Kreymborg with the assistance of William Carlos Williams and including among other items Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" (a poem not usually recognized as a visual poem), was designated as "A number for the Mind's eye/Not to be read aloud" (Brogan 1991: 12).

A consequence of the twin impulses of a visual aesthetic and a technology with which to produce it was that one further nuance can be seen to be added to the concept of *substance* in the word and in writing. A word could be made substantial through a perceived closeness or identification between word and object but also by the very materiality of its printed manifestation. The sudden possibilities of a varied printed texture mobilised the conception of the printed word as *a signifying substance* of a cognitive status similar to that of paint or clay, an association desired by many writers at the time. No other writer was to take this conception as far as Gertrude Stein who was singled out as a "Post-Impressionist" in writing in 1912 (Brogan 1996: 286).Yet, in one of the many paradoxes riddling modernist conceptions of the poetic text, Stein neither explored typographic visuality in her work, nor, for that matter, construed writing as spoken in origin. In the first of numerous subsequent "How to Read

Gertrude Stein" essays, Carl Van Vechten in the August 1914 issue of *The Trend* claimed that "once in answer to a question Miss Stein asserted that her art was for the printed page only" (Simon 1994: 42) but Stein never composed directly for the printed page or utilised print self-reflexively. On the contrary, Stein's text, although it might convey the impression of self-reflexively turning back upon itself as printed matter, actually reflects back on the original site of composition and its private context. Through meticulous archival studies, Ulla Dydo has disclosed how a Stein piece usually originated in small *carnets* where notes for composition shared space with "letter drafts, shopping lists, guest lists, addresses and telephone numbers, doodles and small drawings, drafts of dedications for books, titles, calculations of income and expenditures, contents for proposed volumes, notes and poems to Alice Toklas, and book lists" (Dydo 1988: 86), later to be transcribed into the *cahiers* and eventually handed over to Toklas for typing, each step chiselling away the extraneous material. In a sense, it could also be said to be a manner of composition at one remove further away from the public sphere of the market than that of, for example, Pound. Where Pound's writing almost at its point of origin has the character of official statement, that of Stein gradually emerges out of a privately enclosed world, a fact which is of course highly significant from a gender perspective.

The absence of apparent typographical self-reflexivity in Stein—joined initially with her own stated lack of concern with the printed appearance of her work ("He can do me as cheaply and as simply as he likes but I would like to be done" (Stein 1986: 53), as she said about a putative publisher)—could make Stein's work seem unmarked for medium and an extreme contrast to that of E. E. Cummings, the typographically most self-reflexive of twentieth-century Anglophone poets. As much a junior as Stein was a senior to the other modernist company, Cummings had started to explore his characteristic style in 1916-1917 (Kennedy 1980: 106) although his first printed poems were to appear at first in 1920. This was a style for which, as Bohn also admits, the typewriter was of crucial significance. As already noted, Cummings was impelled

towards a visual poetic by the physical appearance of an early poem by Pound and at an early stage formulated his approach when stating that "The day of the spoken lyric is past. The poem which has at last taken its place does not sing itself; it builds itself, three dimensionally, gradually, subtly, in the consciousness of the experimenter" (Kennedy 1980: 128).

Stein and Cummings could be seen, as they usually are, as extreme examples of Anglo-American poetry from the early twentieth-century period, but the crucial question, to which my argument is heading, is whether they should be seen as qualitatively different from poets like Pound, H.D., Eliot and Williams in their handling of the word as a material signifier, especially when the resulting text is considered rather than the stated aesthetic which underpinned it. Although Pound, for example, construed some his typographical departures from convention as based on a metrical argument, as when he defended the written "line and breaking and capitals" in the letter to Monroe quoted above by saying that "I'm deluded enough to think there is a rhythmic system in the d— stuff..." (Pound 1971: 17), the resulting text relied for its effect on the shape and distribution of the printed texture. As is well known, Pound's work would, in *The Cantos*, become increasingly dependent on typographical appearance and, arguably, as self-referential, in its esoteric system of allusions and ideograms, as any text by Stein or Cummings. The true difference, I would like to argue, is rather to be found in the circumstance that Stein and Cummings offered less resistance than other writers to the conception of their texts as materially bonded and, as a consequence, to the understanding of them as bonded to the material culture without which they would be inconceivable. As we have already seen, Stein's literary texts emerged out of the jottings of a daily material life, making them, as Michael Davidson has observed, "as immediate as childhood rhymes or shopping lists (and therefore just as easy to dismiss)" (Davidson 1997: 40). Cummings, similarly, saw his poems as part of an ordinary, mundane and material culture when he stated, in the "Foreword" to his 1926 collection *is5* that "It is with roses and locomotives (not to mention acrobats Spring electricity Coney

Island the 4th of July the eyes of mice and Niagara Falls) that my 'poems' are competing" (Cummings 1991: 221).

The majority of the modernist poets, in contrast, were markedly uneasy about the associations of a material mass culture that their own interest in materiality brought with it, and the critical reception of them has followed suit in effacing the materiality of the signifier and, consequently, the material culture of its historical site. In the Anglo-American sphere, the awareness and uneasiness about the materialising of the signifier in modernist discourse can be traced at least to Yeats. Having established his reputation on a post-romantic ideal of the poet as bard and singer, he indicated, already in the 1893 collection *The Rose*, that the status of the poetic word was going through a social and cognitive change. As in most of his poetry, Yeats here introduces the thematic focus of the collection by positing poetic utterance as song—"*Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!/Come near me, while I sing the ancient ways*" (Yeats 1952: 35)—but when he reaches the concluding poem it is in the awareness of the fact, and in apology for it, that his poetry is a written artefact and not song. Wishing to be accounted a "*True brother of a company/That sang, to sweeten Ireland's wrong*", he asks to be seen as not "*any less of them/Because the red-rose-bordered hem/Of her, whose history began/Before God made the angelic clan,/Trails all about the written page*" (Yeats 1952: 56). Although Yeats was never to let go of the construction of poetry as song, the awareness of the status of his work as written and material would have significant consequences for his handling of it. Starting with the 1904 collection *In the Seven Woods* he was to adopt the aesthetics and technology of pre-industrial printing technique, which, paradoxically, can be seen as a gesture of rejection of modernity at the same time as it is an early example of a modernist highlighting of the material signifier. In a recent study of the publication history of the volume, the first to be published by the Yeats family venture Dun Emer Press, David Holdeman argues that *In the Seven Woods*, like other Yeats volumes printed in the same manner, "are modernist in their own rights. Rejecting aestheticism's evasions of tangible realities, they give direct treatment to materiality"

(Holdeman 1997: 22) and "By calling attention to its status as a book—as a written artefact prepared for a small elite to read individually—the volume's bibliographical codes pull against the celebration of oral, popular traditions…"(Holdeman 1997: 81).

Pound, a close associate of Yeats for a few years in the early century, was, as we have already seen, profoundly divided in his stance towards the word in poetic discourse. Although concerned to secure a musical and oral construction of the word, his poetics moved insistently towards a materialising of the signifier, especially as of his adoption of the Chinese ideogram as an ideal for poetic image construction. As is well known, Pound, through his study of Fenollosa, came to see the ideogram as a model for the poetic image in its juxtaposition of elements. The theory was based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the ideogram as verbal signifier (in spite of its pictorial origin it is as arbitrary in relation to meaning as words in other languages) but it was to lead Pound onwards in his project to escape abstraction and establish a concrete poetic language. Through loading the material sign of the ideogram with the conceptual weight of precise image and idea, Pound opened the way for valorising the printed manifestation of the "luminous detail" that his new method in scholarship had identified as empirical substance. In effect, this meant a valorising of print and the technology which had made this approach to poetic creation possible, but, significantly and tellingly, this move from sound to print is occluded by its recourse to pre-modern technology. Just as in the case of Yeats's transition from fin-de-siecle aestheticism to early twentieth-century modernism with *In the Seven Woods* in 1904, which was effected through a return to Renaissance hand-crafted printing technique, Pound hides the traces of the materialising of the signifier through disowning the technology he had come to rely on.

Where Yeats and Pound handled the "contamination anxiety" produced by modern material culture through displacing it to pre-modern technologies, T. S. Eliot would exhibit a more openly expressed revulsion to print and a desire to separate the self from its printed manifestations, most notably through the impersonality

doctrine which, I think incorrectly, has been generalized into a widely shared modernist dictum. It served to rationalize circumstances that were closely tied to Eliot's own situation and gradual assumption of the role as most important modernist critic and poet, a process that runs in parallel with his growing unease about the material nature of his work. Although he, as we have seen, would take over some of the "verbalist" criticisms of Pound and Hulme in demanding word-object referentiality, he had, as Michael Levenson has pointed out, "passed through no imagist phase" (Levenson 1984: 158) and there is a comparatively smaller degree of pictorialism in his work and a greater reliance on spoken utterance. His early poem "Portrait of Lady", appealing to visuality in its title, differs interestingly from Pound's and William Carlos Williams's' contemporaneous and similarly titled poems in his notable use of dialogue and a non-visual style. Eliot criticism has also tended to point to this element of the aural in the poetry. *The Waste Land*—the typographically most adventurous of Eliot's poems—has, for example, been described by Dennis Brown as aiming "to get behind written narrative altogether...to the shared world of essentially oral culture: the realm, not of writing, but of myth, ritual and even dance" (Brown 1990:102).

If Eliot's poetry is construed as not relying on the objectification of the signifier this can be traced to a higher degree of language scepticism than evinced by, for example, Pound and be seen as congruent with one of the extremes of Hulme's position. Where Pound adopted the realist stance, imagining word-object correlation to be ideally possible, Eliot at an early stage seemed inclined towards the nominalism of Hulme's chessboard-cinder projection, where language and its object are necessarily separate and impossible to fully align. As a consequence, Eliot's poetic style would tend more to syntactical patterns than the word-based poetry of Pound, and correspond to his critical advocacy for a "rhetoric of substance" rather than the word of substance in Pound's critical parlance. Ultimately it would also lead seamlessly on to the contrast between a transcendent Word and a failing, mundane language in his later Christian poetry, the words that "strain,/Crack and sometimes

break, under the burden,/Under the tension, slip, slide, perish" in the last section of *Burnt Norton*.

However, Eliot's engagement with the signifier offers a variation on the relation between the word and materiality. Where writers like Pound, Lewis, Williams and Stein, in spite of occasional disparaging remarks about the market, could indulge in the possibilities of print, Eliot at an early stage displays a more distanced and reserved attitude, visible in his strong tendency of separating his own person from the work produced, a desire which, in his case, seems to arise out of an acute need. Here, the "contamination anxiety" caused by a surrounding material culture seems to overlap with an "invasion anxiety" that becomes gradually apparent as he establishes his position as "the best living critic, as well as the best living poet, in England", as he put it in a letter to his mother (Eliot 1988: 280). 1919 was a crucial year for the intersection of these processes. Having two separate volumes in print of a fairly limited poetic output, and preparing for a third, while continuously publishing essays and reviews in the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Athenaeum*, he had reasons to start thinking of himself as important in the literary sphere at the same time as he was beginning to find his actual material circumstances harder to bear and requiring delimitation. Whereas in 1914, as a newcomer to London, he had compared the metropolis favourably to Oxford and found "it quite possible to work in this atmosphere" (Eliot 1988: 55), he now felt that "the *immediate* neighbourhood and some of our neighbours, are not what we should like. It is rather noisy" and "The gregariousness of the life appals me" (Eliot 1988: 282 and 310). The class bias suggested in these remarks is confirmed by his attitude to the publications and audience he had started to cultivate. *The Athenaeum*, from which he had received an offer to become assistant editor (which he was to reject), was "the only weekly that I should care to be associated with" (Eliot 1988: 286), especially as this would give him credit "among the people who count". What we find here is the initiation of a process that Leonard Diepeveen has identified as Eliot's "construction of his audience", a process which targeted an "elite audience" and encouraged the readers to "think of themselves more as

individuals than as part of a mass audience, and certainly not as parts of the general reading public" (Diepeveen 1996: 47).

A part of this process of delimitation was the conception of print as necessarily unsatisfactory. When starting out as a critic in 1916 he observed to Aiken that "Composing on the typewriter, I find that I am sloughing off all my long sentences which I used to dote upon. Short, staccato, like modern French prose. The typewriter makes for lucidity, but I am not sure it encourages subtlety" (Eliot 1988: 144) and a couple of weeks later he described to his mother how he saw his new line of work ("I am learning something of the ins and outs of journalism") as enmeshed in a network of market relations: "These short notices are invaluable to the publishers, as they get from them all the little phrases, such as 'enthralling', 'good workmanship', 'a book of wide appeal', et cetera, which, with the name of a good newspaper after them, constitutes an important part of advertisement" (Eliot 1988: 149). By 1919 this fairly sanguine, if disillusioned, view was being infiltrated by more nauseated overtones when he described his "furiously laboured articles" to Mary Hutchinson: "…you don't know how crude and undigested and undigestible they often seem to me when I see them in print" (Eliot 1988: 302). By this stage print had started to become associated, to his cognition, with waste, mass culture and women; having observed to Pound in 1917 that "too many women…lowers the tone" (Eliot 1988: 198), he described his work as an editor of *The Egoist* to his father by saying that "I struggle to keep the writing as much as possible in Male hands, as I distrust the Feminine in literature, and also, once a woman has had anything printed in your paper, it is very difficult to make her see why you should not print everything she sends in" (Eliot 1988: 204).

The most apparent basic pattern to Eliot's considerations on his writing and print is a persistent desire to escape materiality or to conceive of the object as always beyond or unrecoverable by the material signifier. From this perspective, his early poetry, and especially *The Waste Land*, could be seen as progressive stages in a process of exorcism, through which materiality and the culture associated with it could be detached from the self and consigned to

the page. The impersonality doctrine of his poetics, expressed in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (originally published in *The Egoist* in September 1919) as "a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 1960: 52), can in this respect be interpreted as a more fundamental separation complex, through which the integrity of the self could be safeguarded through detaching the material circumstances that threaten it. In a 1917 letter to Robert Nichols he intimated something of this process when suggesting that "the best promise for continuity is for one to be able to forget, in a way, what one has written already; to be able to detach it completely from one's present self and begin quite afresh, with only the technical experience preserved. This struggle to preserve the advantages of practice and at the same time to defecate the emotions one has expressed already is one of the hardest I know" (Eliot 1988: 191).

Eliot's ascetic desire to escape materiality exhibits one extreme in a spectrum of responses to a material culture of social and commercial relations that had become an inescapable contextual aspect of the word in the two first decades of the twentieth century. Although this context made for the most explosively innovative period in the history of the printed signifier, many writers expressed a similar escapism by construing the signifier as something else than its material self, pointing to an immaterial oral presence or transcendent reality, or as relieved of its modernity, and consequent association with mass culture, through recourse to pre-modern printing or writing technologies. Two consequences can be traced as results of this assimilation-detachment pattern. One was the development of a self-contained, self-reflexive poetic discourse which, as a signifying substance, marked paper space but failed to signify beyond it. Another was the development of a critical discourse on poetry which effaced the materiality of the poetic text which had been established by writers, and which, in so doing, de-historicized it into immaterial and universal presence.

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