



Tyrus Miller: Ezra Pound's Cantos Lost and Found : Paragram and Authority in John Cage and Jackson Mac Low

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For poets and critics whose work lies in the broad modernist current that began early in the century and continues today, despite all post-modern twists and turns, the legacy of Ezra Pound is a central problem. At first, it was a highly limited, fragmentary legacy, kept alive mostly by Pound's friends, his enthusiasts, and his followers—many of whom had to break with the man in order to develop his example as a poet. Later came strong, if contestable claims by scholars for the generality of Pound's influence. We lived, Hugh Kenner told us in his tour-de-force book, in a “Pound era,” a judgement that Marjorie Perloff also supported in her well-known essay “Pound / Stevens: whose era?”. [i][i] Now, through the historical and critical studies of a number of modernist scholars, and through the debates of historically and critically self-conscious poets about the legacy they have inherited, Pound has become a still more important if rather tarnished figure.

Charles Bernstein sums the problem up well in his 1986 essay “Pound and the Poetry of Today” when he notes that Pound's work seems at once a positive model of self-conscious, multivocal writing and an example of a “canonically authoritarian, culturally imperialist poetic and critical practice.” [ii][ii] He goes on to suggest that for poets and critics today “the irresolvability of the problem is Pound's legacy.” [iii][iii] The crucial task is not to separate out the golden grains of Pound's poetry from the heaping chaff of rant, delusion, and prejudice. Rather, it is to understand that the problem of Pound cannot be conjured away and that we must try to understand historically, politically, and poetically how it was possible for wisdom and blindness to flow together in the single life of this troublesome writer. It is in this context that I want to set the work of the anarchist poets Cage and Mac Low, both of whom were engaged enough with the work of Pound to subject the Cantos to a “writing through.”

In another essay I have focused on the ways in which Jackson Mac Low's paragrammatically generated texts served as models for exemplary sorts of subjectivity, “selves” that at once are shaped by and give shape to particular generic configurations of public and private discourse. In this essay, I go further into the political implications of such generative procedural writing, exploring the intersection between John Cage's and Jackson Mac Low's procedural “expropriations” of other texts and their explicitly anarchist politics. From the very moment of composition, by taking their words completely and explicitly from other texts, both writers experimentally put in play the relation of self and other, new text and old text, writing and reading, and poetry and other discourses. Their intertextual procedures suggest, through their choice of texts and creative handling of them, a highly conscious version of what Michel de Certeau called “reading as poaching,” [iv][iv] one type of a vast range of subversive tactics for consuming dominated culture. As a specific tactic of citational reading/writing, Cage's and Mac Low's intertextual poems represent exemplary demonstrations of anarchist cultural practice.

The explicit citations and quasi-citations that appear in the poems and other writings of Cage and Mac Low, therefore, do not exhaust the force of intertextuality in those works. For the acrostic, “mesostic,” and “diastic” forms they often use to structure their works are themself

ves, first and foremost, tools for “writing-through” already-written works. Cutting across individual texts or a corpus of texts, mesostic and acrostic forms shift the “motivation” and “relevance” of source texts in complex and often politically charged ways. The procedures displace the source text’s original claims on knowledge and authority, sometimes undercutting their bases in the work’s form, diction, and rhetorical address, at other times highlighting these claims in peculiarly inflected ways or changing the tone with which they are pronounced. Individual letters, independent of their role in composing a word in a meaningful place in a syntactical phrase, take on the power to organize a text, drawing words and phrases in their wake. At the same time, the seemingly contingent presence of a letter exposes an untapped productivity in the word. The detour through the letter reveals the permeability of the word to much broader subtexts and contexts excluded by a given manifestation in a determinate phrase. In turn, the poet may employ such techniques to exemplify how utterances are embedded in layered, overlapping social contexts and how different discourses are interpreted within these contexts (something that I will be considering further with respect to the poetry of Ezra Pound and its legacy)[v][v].

In discussing this relation of procedural intertextuality and anarchist politics, I want to reiterate the points of contact between the writing practices of Cage and Mac Low from the 1960s on and the theory of *écriture* advanced by the Tel Quel circle in France in the late 1960s, above all, by Julia Kristeva in her essays on paragrammatism and poetic language.[vi][vi] I wish to stress here the congruence of Cage’s and Mac Low’s poetry with Kristeva’s attempt to describe modernist poetics both semiologically and politically—their common participation in what David Rodowick has called “the discourse of political modernism.” [vii][vii] At the same time, I will suggest ways in which Cage’s and Mac Low’s anarchist understanding of their writing practices, their politics of “exemplification,” avoided some of the authoritarian pitfalls of Tel Quel’s avant-garde valorizing of “poetic language” as an inherently political counterpole to “ideological” and “scientific” discourse

A specific facet of their writing to which I devote discussion is Cage’s and Mac Low’s frequent “writings through” other texts using the proper name of authors and of friends. This is a complicated issue which I can only tentatively sketch out here, for a rich “politics of friendship” (Derrida) and “concept of friendship” (Deleuze)[viii][viii] are mobilized and put in play by their work. I will consider only one small part of this problem, specifically as it relates the name to death—to the literal death of mentors, teachers, and friends, as well as to the death of intention and authority in texts bearing dead authors’ names, texts which offer themselves up to the paragrammatic readings Cage and Mac Low perform by procedural means. It is highly significant, I want to suggest, that the proper name is at the center of these procedures. It is as if for Cage and Mac Low the names of the dead were the Golden Bough allowing passage into the paragrammatic underworld of free-floating texts and ghostly authors. Their procedures insist on the name as the mark of concrete individuality of men and women who thought, listened, and wrote. At the same time, the name marks the site of a loss of self. It indicates—even for the living—a sheer potential for being dead, for participating as dispersed textual bodies in the global interpenetration of discourses and languages. In this light, Cage’s and Mac Low’s own signatures on their paragrammatic texts also participate in this logic of naming, individuation, and death. Here, it seems to me, is one point at which we can locate the exemplary ethical gesture of these works. I see them above all as ways of coming to terms with the limits of one’s self, with one’s mortality; ways of giving oneself up to other people, of rendering oneself over to forgiveness and use by others; ways of forming free associations of people exposed to one another and to death, as exemplary “arts of dying” to help individuate, organize, and enrich life.[ix][ix]

Finally, I want to focus on a specific group of paragrammatic texts that seem to me of particular interest in defining the political implications of Cage’s and Mac Low’s writing. These are the texts in which both writers take up Ezra Pound’s Cantos as their source text and employ

Pound's name to "write through" the modernist epic. Pound—I will assert here without offering any extended justification—has been the single most important model for political poetry in 20th century American literature. Yet the "Pound tradition," at once an intertextual relation to Pound and a poetics of intertextuality defined by Pound, has, for this very reason, been inseparable from the need for Pound's successors to come to terms with his specifically fascist politics, with his grand ambitions regarding the generic and political tradition of the epic, with his conception of political writing more generally, and with the political implications of his individual techniques such as ideogram and allusion. This is true whether we are speaking of the first and second generation of Pound's followers such as Basil Bunting, Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, and Robert Duncan, or more recent poets such as Ron Silliman, Susan Howe, Bob Perelman, and Charles Bernstein. [x][x] Consistent with their anarchism, properly understood as an anti-political position, Cage and Mac Low recognize Pound's achievement as a political writer and seek to recreate his work in ways that negate or neutralize its politics, not simply in their unsavory fascist flavor but as politics simpliciter. Their gesture is not apolitical, in the sense of being aestheticist and "merely formal," but rather actively anti-political: attempting a "concrete negation" of the politics of Pound's work, authoritarian and even fascistic in large swaths. In their "writings-through" of the Cantos, more than in any other of their intertextual rewrites, Cage and Mac Low turn an aversive hand to their source, [xi][xi] converting Pound's politics from a coercive sense that is harmful because it masquerades as the great man's "common sense" to a peaceful nonsense that appears as such.

In this way, both Cage and Mac Low reveal the limits of the paragrammatical space established by Pound in the Cantos. Their poems preserve Pound as a name, as a ghost who may be forgiven and perhaps even admired. They reopen Pound's work from the thematic closure Pound himself only partially succeeded in imposing on his epic. In her tribute to Mac Low on his seventy-fifth birthday, Judith Malina singled out precisely his relation to Pound as an index of Mac Low's singular sensibility: "Jackson was a brave adept of greatness. He recognized the grandeur and the tragedy of Ezra Pound, even when the world would see only the awful, anti-Semitic side of his work. Mac Low approached the lone figure himself and entered into a poetic dialogue with him, beyond the grasp of the vengeful." [xii][xii] Yet this exemplary stance of "forgiveness" towards the imposing avant-garde patriarch comes at a high cost: that of shattering Pound's work to bits, indeed, divesting it of all that is essentially Poundian, which I see to be the systematic structure of epic intertextuality in the Cantos and Pound's political conception of the poet that was its correlate. Their gesture is coherent, because it opposes an anarchist anti-political poetics to both right- and left-wing political poetics that might take Pound as their inspiration. But it is also paradoxical, since it extends the Pound's intertext to the point of breaking with Poundian intertextuality. Weaving the name of Ezra Pound back through the Cantos, in their "writings-through" they explore the boundary spaces of the "Pound tradition"—at the edges where the very idea of generic tradition, the foundation-stone of Pound's epic poetics and politics, begins to disappear.

II

In her early writings for *Tel Quel*—essays that include "The Engendering of the Formula," "Poetry and Negativity," and "Towards a Semiology of the Paragram"—Julia Kristeva sought to define in formal terms the logical peculiarities of poetic language. Language as used in poetry, in her view, escapes from the binary 0 or 1 logics that govern both scientific and everyday thinking: true / false, either / or, subject / predicate, literal /

figurative, conscious / unconscious, necessary / contingent, and so on. Noting that poetic language is always situated in at least two different logical spaces, in which for instance questions of whether a poetic trope is true or false are suspended, she defined the logical mobility of poeti

c language as a continuum spanning from 0 to 2 (rather than the binary choice of 0 or 1, true / false, either / or). In turn, she appealed to a number of different models, from set theory and topological spaces to Indian and Chinese philosophy and aesthetics, in order to specify the qualities and properties of this poetic logic. [xiii][xiii]

One of the ways in which she understood the doubleness of poetic language was the dispersal of its meaning in a multi-dimensional space of other texts, which Kristeva called “paragrammatical space.” As Leon Roudiez summarizes it, the paragrammatic nature of a text means that “its organization of words (and their denotations), grammar, and syntax is challenged by the infinite possibilities provided by letters or phonemes combining to form networks of significations not accessible through conventional reading habits.” [xiv][xiv] The graphic and phonic materials that lend a “normal” sense to a text can also solicit meanings in excess of that norm, as for example when a “non-conventional” reading transgresses word boundaries or orthographic rules. An interesting example of this is provided by the practice of the Russian futurist poet Kruchenykh, who would shift word boundaries to reveal words that formed across the division; especially useful for him was the Russian word “kak” (meaning what, like, as) which provided him with a whole lexicon of variants on “caca,” as if simile was in its substance excremental. Conventions of language-use in speech and writing, of course, serve to keep the paragrammatic productivity of texts to an acceptable minimum. Correlatively, poets may by intention or lucky accident or procedural method mobilize this productivity. Poetic techniques ranging from rhyme, metrical effects, and distortions of syntax, to generative procedures such as those used by Cage and Mac Low, can highlight and heighten the openness of texts to a variety of readings and meaning effects.

From this generativity within language that poetry, and especially modernist and post-modernist poetry, clearly exhibits, Kristeva derives a much broader set of hypotheses about the social situation of language and the discursive formation of society. In her view, the rather restricted case of the paragram can be extended above the minimal units of language to encompass words, phrases, texts, even whole discursive and ideological systems, so that the paragram in a narrow sense can be understood as a microcosmic figure of much vaster networks of discourse that make up the social world. Put in other terms, paragrammatism is a specific form of intertextuality or transposition of sign systems typical of poetry, but theoretically possible in all speech and analogically present at all levels of society in which sign systems play a role.

Kristeva would argue that this extension of poetics into social semiotic analysis does not imply enlarging poetry to a ridiculous scale, but rather understanding the specific case of poetry as a key example of a logic governing “all signifying gestures of collective productivity.” [xv][xv] She goes on to claim that “A radical general analogy traverses all these gestures. Social history seen as space, not as teleology, is also structured at all its levels . . . as paragram (nature-society, law-revolution, individual-group, classes-class struggle, linear history-tabular history being the non-exclusive oppositional pairs in which play the dialogical relations and the ‘transgressions’ always to be remade).” [xvi][xvi] History is not a poem, but history and poetry exemplify some of the same structural principles, she suggests.

As David Rodowick has suggested, this extension of *écriture* to the “writtenness” of social institutions was typical of the discourse of political modernism of which Kristeva was a crucial theorist in the 1960s. Yet Kristeva’s idea of a multi-dimensional paragrammatic space spanning from poetry across social structures all the way to the totality of social history did not just sketch out a semiotically-informed mode of social analysis. It was also a political valorization of a particular practice of avant-garde writing, the ambiguously named “revolution in poetic language” being carried out by her comrades-in-pen at Tel Quel. By waging war against what they saw as the repressive codes of realism and lyric expressivity, which had petrified the bourgeois subject in language and confirmed the ideological self-image of the bourgeois reader, this avant-garde writi

ng would, they believed, advance the political cause of the revolution. If poetry provided a model for understanding social history, then perhaps too poetic revolution could provide hints to the forms and dynamics of social revolution.

Aside from the obvious objection of the limited efficacy of avant-garde writing as a means of advancing political ends, there are two serious theoretical problems with this position. First is that the implication of a closed, "normal" text that could fix a single kind of reading and subjectivity is contradicted by the idea of paragrammatism itself. As both critical works like Roland Barthes' *S/Z* and literary works like those of Cage and Mac Low among others effectively demonstrate, any text, including the dreaded "classical realist" text, can be submitted to "deviant" readings that generate non-authorized senses, including non-sense. That is not to imply that all texts, genres, and techniques are the same in their openness or resistance to other readings, but simply that there is no way of determining, theoretically and in general, that a particular form will generate a given mode of reading and experiencing it. That is to say, the question can only be established by looking at concrete, historically contingent, and internally contradictory situations in which texts are received and read. What the theory of the paragram serves to establish is not which kind of writing mobilizes poetic language against ordinary language (and hence, which kind of writing is revolutionary and which reactionary), but rather, precisely that the distinction between poetic language and ordinary language is not decidable and hence cannot be used as a political criterion.

Cage and Mac Low, setting out from an anarchist position, offer a more consistent, exemplary view of their own special practice of paragrammatic writing than the more absolute version offered by Kristeva in describing the "revolution in poetic language" begun by Mallarmé and Lautréamont and continued by Joyce, Céline, Beckett, Roche, and Sollers. [xvii][xvii] For in reflecting on their own writing as a practical testing-ground of anarchist ideas, Cage and Mac Low avoid setting it up as more revolutionary and more politically efficacious than other forms of writing. Thus, in a talk in 1992, Mac Low rejected both the notion of a political vanguard, which for him held connotations of a Leninist party tyranny, and an artistic avant-garde, which he argued was presumptuous and exclusionary:

"Avant-garde," like "vanguard," carries within it the self-congratulatory presumption that one's group is "ahead of" and more knowing than everyone else in one's field--more far-seeing and worthy of leading--and justified in putting down all who do not share the group's preconceptions. [xviii][xviii]

Rather, for Mac Low and Cage, it is more a matter of "Here's what I do, for example. . . ." Thus they also seek to accept the range of responses to their work, including those of puzzlement, boredom, and hostility, without sorting them into oppositional political categories, into enemy and friend. When asked, for example, whether it bothered him when people walked out in the middle of his performances, Cage in his characteristically cheerful way: "No, because it's they who have left. I'm still there."

In later writings, Kristeva offers a somewhat mitigated view of her previous advocacy of avant-garde writing. Here she suggests that a consciously employed paragrammatism helps us to imagine new modes of subjectivity and new social forms in which these modes might be at home. Such

writing helps us imagine, she writes, “a hierarchically fluctuating social system,” “a social totality governed by a code and an instance which supports it, while at the same time providing for the independence of the human units in relation to it and providing for autonomous and relatively small groups, communities of social work.” [xix][xix] The social system she describes—fluidly composed of small, autonomous communities of collective work—is markedly anarchist in outline, rather than typically Marxist, as Kristeva’s explicit political allegiances of the early seventies might suggest. Indeed, when we decode her jargon, we could see her to be describing something like a performance of Jackson Mac Low’s poems for dancers, *The Pronouns* (which I discuss at length in the following chapter). These poems offer the performers a set of general, under-determined instructions to act out with bodily movement:

Subsequently another says something between thick things

while coming against something or fearing things.

& almost immediately another’s discussing something brown.

At the same time another’s disgusting.

At the end another is separating from still another. [xx][xx]

Mac Low mobilizes the difference between sign systems, the paragrammatic rewriting of a set of written instructions into a set of actions that at once realize and transpose the text, setting in play the text’s “code” while asserting the “independence” of the community of performers from that code. As he writes:

There is a seemingly unlimited multiplicity of possible realizations for each of these dances because the judgements of the particular dances will determine such matters as degrees of literalness or figurativeness in interpreting & realizing instructions

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Thus, while the text of each dance-poem is completely determinate &, if realized,

to be realized in its entirety, the actual movements & actions constituting any

particular realization are very largely unpredictable from the text of the poem of

which it is a realization. [xxi][xxi]

In thus highlighting the potential divergence between “label” (the verbal instruction designating an action) and “sample” (the movement that singularly instantiates the label), Mac Low explores the logic and limits of exemplification, in the sense discussed in my introduction. As his title “The Pronouns” implies—pronouns being the typical example of the linguistic category of “shifter”—Mac Low foregrounds the role of the performer’s choices in correlating between word and gesture and in articulating the indicative relations of bodies, signs, and space.

So too Cage understood the performance situation not simply as a sample realization of an artistic work, but also as an exemplary form of sociability that the work facilitates and partially organizes. As Deborah Campana explains:

Cage was fascinated with the social relationships that arise between a score and the performers’ parts or, more precisely, the conductor and the members of an ensemble that must interpret them. How do instrumentalists play for a given period of time without playing together? Can a group of musicians become an ensemble without each person losing his own identity or individuality? Can musicians come together without each person losing his own identity or individuality? Can musicians come together without becoming an ensemble or group? Can a group come together without a leader?[xxii][xxiii]

Notations and realizations are metonymies of social forms and relations among performers and between composers, conductors, performers, and listeners. Hence, any realized performance of an indeterminately scored work will also connote a singular state of sociability, correlated to that particular, contingent realization, as well.

Both Mac Low and Cage, indeed, in their exemplary staging of events which enact possibilities of difference from and within ordered structures, as well as Kristeva, in her argument that paragrammatic writing can help us imagine alternative subjectivities and forms of sociability, appeal to a logic of exemplification. There is something of a theoretical paradox here. At the level of textual structure, Cage, Mac Low, and the avant-garde writers Kristeva champions often attempted to break with representational codes underlying linguistic referentiality. Especially in the case of *Tel Quel*, such anti-representational aesthetics were understood as also implying a critique of representational politics, the basis of bourgeois democracy. The mimetic logic by which a set of words could be taken for a surrogate of events and things was thought to be a crucial prop in that ideological belief that a “representative” within the State could express the collective will of a class or public. Yet exemplification also implies reference and mimesis—an example, a sample, provides a model which may be transplanted, propagated, and extended. Once again, however, the anarchist position of the poets provides a more consistent view of this possibility. For in continuing to appeal to textual structures as the basis of the exemplary nature of paragrammatic writing, Kristeva

again fails to realize the implications of her own concept and reverses the order of priority between paragrammatic writing and exemplary effect. Cage and Mac Low, in contrast, take as their point of departure the social frame within which artworks are received and interpreted—which is why performance is so central to their practice as writers. The social mimesis implied by exemplarity is primary for them. The dialogic relation of the exemplary model, individuated readings of that model, and free choice in realizing and elaborating (or rejecting) models is their poetic alternative to both the politics of representative government and the poetic authority they associate with it.

The question of representational or non-representational texts is thus a secondary one for them, relative to the models to be offered up for potential adoption by others. We can see this priority of the social over the formal in the generically inconsistent shape and inclusiveness of their written corpus, which encompasses everything from totally abstract phonemic or graphic marks to fully elaborated, dialectically-argued essays. Nor do I think it is accidental to Cage's work that we have such a substantial body of published interviews with him, despite his necessary employment in these of the normative codes of grammar, intonation, and self-reference. For he consistently offers exemplification as an alternative to the logic of political or ideological representation, and through artistically important, the narrower question of textual representation remains relative to particular situations and works.

III

Marjorie Perloff, first in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* and then especially in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition*, brought to the attention of readers the possible affiliations between Pound and John Cage. Her essay "The Portrait of the Artist as Collage Text" explicitly links Pound and Cage through the heritage of Pound's hybrid criticism, exemplified by his paean to vorticism, *Gaudier-Brzeska*. She goes on to suggest that *Gaudier-Brzeska* was closely related to Pound's hybrid poetry and implies that the work of Cage and other contemporary critics, prose fictionists, anthologists, and poets should be seen as part of a broad intertextual network—what Kristeva would call a "paragrammatic space" established early in the century by Pound and to some extent William Carlos Williams. Another essay in *The Dance of the Intellect* discussed in detail Cage's mesostic poems and his collage-essays and lectures, thus further reinforcing the placement of Cage within the "Pound tradition." [xxiii][xxiii]

In the Charles Bernstein essay already quoted earlier, Bernstein similarly sets up a confluence of aspects of Pound's work with broad tendencies in contemporary writing and anthologizing, taking finally as his major example Jackson's Mac Low's "writing through" of the *Cantos*, *Words and Ends from Ez*. Bernstein claims that "At an allegorical level, *Words and Ends from Ez* exercises the authoritarianism that underlies *The Cantos* ." [xxiv][xxiv] He goes on to conclude that Mac Low text liberates the utopian element in Pound's poem and "is an imaginative extension" of its dynamics:

Words and Ends is less a countertext to *The Cantos* than an act of homage and a topographical map of features of the work otherwise obscured by its narrative thrusts. By purging *The Cantos* of any remnant of montage, it

As my introductory remarks should have suggested, I will want to take issue with this conclusion, since I see Mac Low's homage as far more troubled than Bernstein does and the result more like a razed building than a paradise of writing. For now, however, the important point is the active way in which poets and critics have underscored--and perhaps even exaggerated to some extent--the attractive force of Pound's epic intertext and the active participation of Cage and Mac Low in it.

Cage was already familiar with Pound's work in the 1930s, when the aspiring composer was an avid reader of the avant-garde journal *transition*. He also mentions in some of his early writings on music Pound's book on George Antheil, whom Cage thought gimmicky and cheap. But as he explains in a 1985 interview with David Shapiro, his engagement with Pound's *Cantos* came much later; early in the 1980s he was asked by a magazine editor to do a writing-through of the *Cantos* and took it on as a project. [xxvi][xxvi] The result was "Writing Through the *Cantos*," published in Cage's collection *X: Writings '79-'82*. Similarly, Jackson Mac Low's *Words and Ends from Ezra* was written between 1981 and 1983 on the stimulus of a projected issue on the *Cantos* of Michael André's journal *Unmuzzled Ox*. After writing through the first section of the *Cantos*, "A Draft of XXX *Cantos*," for the special issue, Mac Low decided to proceed through the entire poem. [xxvii][xxvii]

I want first simply to describe the procedures followed by the two poets in writing through the *Cantos* and compare the results, surprisingly different given the close similarity of the methods and the common source-text. In both Cage's and Mac Low's poems, the words selected from the *Cantos* must have in them the appropriate letter from the name "Ezra Pound," so that the whole name will be spelled out in the proper order within the sequence of words. Both capitalize the letter from the name, wherever it falls in the word. Cage employs two additional constraints, typical of his writing-through method and used in other poems as well. First, the word must not repeat the name-letter or contain either of the letters adjacent to name-letter. Thus, to take an example Cage gives, in writing through *Genesis* using the name JEHOVAH, the first word without an E after the J was "Jabal"; this becomes the first word of the poem. The first word with E in it that does not have a J before the E or an H after the E was "He"; this becomes the second word of the poem. This constraint helped Cage keep the environment of the name-letters clear of interfering letters and of foregrounding the paragrammatic inscription of the name within the words. The second additional constraint was that syllables within which a name-letter appeared could not be repeated. Thus, for example, in one of the stanzas of a writing-through of *Finnegans Wake* using Joyce's name, the J-syllables include: Joe, Jschute, Jic, Judge, Jeb, Jell, Jord, Jame, Jun, Jin, Jy, Jig, Jist, Job, Jik, and so on without repetition. This constraint has the practical benefit of shortening the mesostic text, allowing greater compression of long source-texts like the *Wake* and the *Cantos*. But it also has the more substantial effect of allowing the phonic and graphic differences their fullest independence and play, unaffected by repetitions, which might either highlight a syllable that is heavily used in the source-text or devalue it by blunting the surprise of its singularity. In essence, Cage levels out the variable frequency of syllables as they appear in English in order to heighten the differences and analogies between them at the level of their specific qualities. Cage also allowed himself the choice of taking words that lay before or after the selected word, so long as they did not violate the letter-rules; such supplementary words were selected by taste.

Unlike the majority of Cage's writings-through, his work on Pound is not printed as a mesostic--meaning that the word is spelled out vertically down the middle of the page, with irregular left and right margins--but rather a spelling out of the name horizontally in more traditional linear form. According to Jim Rosenberg, with whom Cage consulted for a variety of computer-related works, this typographical arrangement was adopted because of the publisher's demand to save page s

pace and does not reflect any difference in composition method. [xxviii][xxviii] The only thing that is visually unusual about the poem is that its right margin is justified instead of its left, and that there is a running sequence of numbers which keys the individual lines to page numbers in the New Directions edition of the Cantos . Of course in agreeing to write out his text as a continuous block of lines, like a right-justified form of blank verse, Cage effaces all of the substantial typographical and visual aspects of Pound' s poem. [xxix][xxix]

Mac Low, as I have noted, also uses Pound' s name to write through the Cantos , but employs a different supplementary constraint than Cage, which has important effects on the results of the procedure. He has none of Cage' s fastidious rules about letter- and syllable-repetitions, which effectively erase large swaths of Pound' s poem, consigning it to the blank margins of his writing-through. But in Mac Low' s poem, the letters of the name must not only appear in the word, but they must also have the position in the selected word that they have in the name: this is the form that Mac Low designates as "diastic," in contrast to the "acrostic," where the word is spelled out at the left margin, or to Cage' s "mesostic," where the word is spelled out in the middle of the page with irregular right and left margins. Thus, the letter E must appear in the first position of the word, the letter Z must appear in the second, R in the third, and so on. If the word contains the letter in the wrong position, Mac Low does not eliminate the word in the Cagean fashion, rather he truncates or supplements the word from part of the preceding word until the letter is in the correct position. This constraint thus has the practical effect of breaking word-boundaries and chipping off endings as autonomous word-like elements of the poem. In addition, whereas Cage eliminates punctuation in order to concentrate on letter- and syllable-values, Mac Low uses the punctuation of the source-text to determine line-endings and stanza-length. Thus, where a selected word is followed by a comma, dash, or unpunctuated line-ending, Mac Low' s corresponding line ends, utilizing that punctuation. Where a selected word is followed by end-punctuation--a period, exclamation-point, question-mark, or suspension-points--or by an unpunctuated strophe ending, Mac Low' s stanza comes to an end. Thus, the visual design of the poem, which in most places resembles an irregular stanzaic ode, is also derived from the paragrammatic interference of the source-text with the generative constraints.

In the examples that follow, I have reproduced the first five lines of Cage' s "writing-through" and the first stanza of Mac Low' s poem, along with the corresponding passages from the Cantos from which the lines are derived. I have highlighted the letters of Pound' s name in the places where they determined the selection of a word:

John Cage, "Writing Through the Cantos" :

and thEn with bronZe lance head beaRing yet Arms 3-4

sheeP slain Of plUto stroNg praised

thE narrow glaZes the uptuRned nipple As 11

sPeak t0 rUy oN his gooDs

arE swath blaZe mutteRing empty Armour 14-15[xxx][xxx]

Canto I:

And thEn went down to the ship 1

[. . .]

Men many, mauled with bronZe lance heads 32

Battle spoil, beaRing yet dreory Arms

[. . .]

Slaughtered the herds, sheeP slain Of bronze 36

Poured ointment, cried to the gods

To PlUto the stroNg, and praiseD Proserpine;

Unsheathed thE narrow sword 39

[. . .]

Canto III:

The silvery water glaZes the uptuRned nipple, 16

As Poggio has remarked.

[. . .]

That no man sPeak t0, feed RUy Diaz 26

ON pain to have his heart out, set on a pike spike

And both his eyes torn out, and all his gooDs sequestered

“And here, Myo Cid, arE the seals, 29

[. . .]

Canto IV:

Thick like a wheat stalk 61

BlaZe, blaze in the sun

The dogs leap on Acteon.

Stumbling, stumbling along in the wood,

[. . .]

The empty Armour shakes as the cygnet moves.

68[xxxi][xxxi]

Jackson Mac Low, Words and Ends from Ez :

EnnZe earRing ory Arms,

Pallor pOn laUghtered laiN oureD Ent,

aZure teR,

un-

tAwny Pping cOme d oUt r wiNg-

joints,

preaD Et aZzle. [xxxii][xxxii]

Ezra Pound, The Cantos :

Canto I:

And thEn went down to the ship 1

[. . .]

Men many, mauled with bronZe lance heads, 32

Battle spoil, beaRing yet dreory Arms,

Pallor upOn me, cried to my men for more beasts;

SlaUghtered the herds, sheep slaiN of bronze;

PoureD ointment,

[. . .]

37-76

Canto II:

[. . .]

1-26

Quiet sun-tAwny sand-stretch,

The gulls broad out their wings,

niPping between the splay feathers;

Snipe cOme for their bath,

bend oUt their wiNg-joints,

SpreaD wEt wings to the sun-film, 33

[. . .]

a tin flash in the sun-daZzle. 39[xxxiii][xxxiii]

Formally, we can see that in both cases, the distributional frequency of the letters of Pound's name is crucial in determining the path through Pound's text. "N," "D," and "E" -- three extremely common letters -- tend to pull in closely grouped sets of words, sometimes even successive ones; similarly the paired vowels "O" and "U" are often cohesively linked. By contrast, if I may be allowed the pun, "E" to "Z" is the least easy transition to negotiate. "Z" is the force of erasure, ellipsis, negativity, and forward impetus in the poem of both. Moreover, in Mac Low's poem it has an extraordinarily fortuitous effect. His writing-through of Pound's Canto CX X should have begun with the name-letter "Z." Yet the letter "Z" does not appear in Pound's fragment. As a result Mac Low left what he called "a long silence," giving simply the identifying title, the date of "composition," and the name "Ezra Pound" in parenthesis; the rest of the page is blank. He remarks that "This seems peculiarly appropriate (though attained not by planning but by chance-operational method) in view of Pound's long silence toward the end of his life." [xxiv][xxxiv]

Cage's engagement with Pound is marked by considerable ambivalence, even distaste. In his forward for X, he notes that the mesostic method of using Joyce's and Pound's names to generate poems from their texts served "to free me and the reader not only of my intentions but also of those of Joyce and Pound." [xxxv][xxxv] He goes on to remark with wry wit that while he thinks Joyce would have been delighted by what had happened with his text, Pound would have been, if not delighted, then relieved. And he quotes from Pound's last fragmentary Canto CXX: "Let those I love try to forgive what I have made." His retrospective comments in the interview with David Shapiro, however, are themselves far less forgiving towards Pound. He says that having written through the Cantos --

I must say that I don't regard them as highly as I do the Wake. The reason is that there are about four or five ideas that keep reappearing in the Cantos, so that in the end the form resembles something done with

stencils, where the color doesn' t really change. There' s not that kind of complexity, or attention to detail, as there is in Joyce. In the Cantos when something changes you can say, "Oh, there' s that again." [xxxvi][xxxvi]

From this remark, it is clear what Cage reacts against are the very generic structuring devices by which Pound sought to render his intertextual web literarily coherent and politically effective: thematic nodes, analogies, repetition, cross-referencing.

Mac Low, while less explicit than Cage in his criticism, also suggests with his dedication of *Words and Ends* the complicated nature of his relation to Pound: "in memoriam . . . `freeing the sparks' ." Bernstein reports that Mac Low had corresponded with Pound in the 1950s, but broke with him over Pound' s anti-semitism. For Mac Low, then, Pound is a poet who must pass through the purgational, purgatorial fire of chance in order that the light of his example may shine without blinding. Mac Low had already taken issue with Pound in his witty and unusual paragrammatic poems *The Presidents of the United States of America* (1963), of which Mac Low wrote from George Washington to Millard Fillmore before breaking off the project. The method involves drawing up a table of the original iconic meanings attached to letters of the alphabet, predominantly from the Phoenicians, with a few other letters coming in from Latin and Anglo-Saxon. For example, "A" originally derives from "ox," of which the inverted letter is an abstracted image; "F" and "Y" derive from "hook"; "N" corresponds to "fish"; and so on. Mac Low then took the letters of the given president' s name and created a list of nuclei-words, which he then combined freely, adding a small number of transitional words and phrases, to make his poems. George Washington, for example, yields the following meditation on the founding father:

George Washington never owned a camel
but he looked thru the eyes in his head
with a camel' s calm and wary look.

Hooks that wd irritate an ox
held his teeth together
and he cd build a fence with his own hands
tho he preferred to go fishing
as anyone else wd
while others did the work for him
for tho he had no camels he had slaves enough

and probably made them toe the mark by keeping an eye on them

for he wd never had stood for anything fishy. [xxxvii][xxxvii]

Mac Low' s poem on James Monroe becomes an oblique comment on the Monroe Doctrine, still largely guiding U.S. foreign policy in Latin America in the nineteen-sixties:

James Monroe

laid a hand

as heavy as the ox that stands on every peon' s tongue

on all between the waters between

the new world and both old ones

& looked across both of them

baring but

puppy teeth then. [xxxviii][xxxviii]

In Mac Low' s texts on Martin Van Buren and William Henry Harrison, his relation to Pound surfaces. Martin Van Buren, the eighth president, was one of the good guys of Pound' s historical cosmos, mostly because he supported Andrew Jackson in his fight against rechartering the Bank of the United States, during the so-called "bank wars." Canto XXXVII is in large part cribbed out of Van Buren' s autobiography, which was not published until 1918 and in Pound' s view had been suppressed by the shadowy forces that ruled finance, politics, and publication. Mac Low gently mocks Pound' s view of American history with his conclusion to the Van Buren poem:

Martin Van Buren lived in a fine big house in New York State

before he was president

but how did he get his hooks into

Ezra Pound' s head?

look!

I want to know how a poet became a

The paragrammatic method of these poems—expanding the letters of the name into a word-list by transposing an alphabetic sign-system into a pictographic sign-system—allows Mac Low considerable latitude for humor, satire, and commentary. At once, he satirizes directly the monumentalized history of great men, foregrounds the contradictions in the assumptions of representative democracy, and comes to terms with the intertextual politics and poetics of his predecessor Ezra Pound. By comparison, the second section of *Words and Ends From Ez*, which writes through the section of Pound's poem containing the Van Buren canto, is more radically destructive and hence sparser in its traces of its precursor:

deRstood xplAins,

Perhaps,

cOndemning foUnd,

I caN they Dug Ed iZed `s)

pResident nds At Press. . .

tO on,

Used thaN rienDly Eeling yZed weRed s

thAn Presidents tOgether”

n BUren. [xl][xl]

In the end, however, we need to credit the special sense in which this destructive appropriation is also an homage for the dead—and to death as a release from self into a state of scattering and dissemination into a new physis of the letter. Mac Low makes this idea explicit in his dedication to Pound: “in memoriam. . . `freeing the sparks.” [xli][xli] Similarly, his title “*Words and Ends*” not only playfully remarks his scrappy rejection of Pound's sculptural aesthetic—a kind of jagged Merzbau leaned against Pound's marble tempio—but also reflects on the termination of the poet in the legacy of his terms, his ending in (“nd”) the exteriority of words. Printed words on the page imply, as Michel de Certeau notes, a withdrawal of the body that makes possible a mobility and deviance in the practice of reading not available to the context-bound speaker:

In earlier times, the reader interiorized the text; he made his voice the

body of the other; he was its actor. Today, the text no longer imposes

its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the

reader's voice. This withdrawal of the body, which is the condition of

its autonomy, is a distancing of the text. [xlii][xlii]

Or as Jacques Derrida suggests in a more general sense, writing is a kind of artificial posthumousness (that may, of course, extend into the actual death of the writer):

For the written to be the written, it must continue to `act' and to be legible

even if what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what

he has written, for what he seems to have signed, whether he is provisionally

absent, or if he is dead, or if in general he does not support, with his

absolutely current and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his

meaning, of that very thing which seems to be written `in his name.' [xliii][xliii]

Both Cage's *Writing Through the Cantos* and Mac Low's *Words and Ends from Ezra* are uniquely heterodox forms of elegy, realizing the possibilities of both the death-like exteriority of the text carrying the author's name and the reanimating quality of the performing voice. They enact in a new way the very classical topos with which Pound began his *Cantos*: the descent into the underworld and the reanimation of the dead, a summoning of them to speak again. "Writing-through" the dead poet's text, Cage and Mac Low can celebrate Pound as he "ended up," as "E-Z-R-A P-O-U-N-D," a contingent pattern of words woven of letters. Yet in the vocal performance of their through-written texts, they also allow Pound to speak again, not brought back from the dead and not in the epic mode, but redeemed through the elegiac delay of death and writing.

In conclusion, I want to recall a remark by David Antin from his 1974 essay "Some Questions about Modernism." At that time, Antin was looking back on the heady experimentalism of the late fifties and sixties and attempting to draw some conclusions about the direction of future work in post-modern art and writing. He noted the breakthrough that procedural conceptions of artistic production had been, but also suggested that the "success" or "failure" of such works "appeared to be based upon something more profound than programming skill or ingenuity could explain." [xliiv][xliiv] "My own sense of it," he continued, "was that the choice of a mechanism that `worked' usually carried with it domain implications of a very different sort than the ones that `failed'." [xlv][xlv] The most significant art of the present, he concluded, seemed "to be beginning from reconsiderations of the domain question . . . at the level of the question of art's claim to truth and what that would mean." [xlvi][xlvi] The postmodern condition, in his view, implied "the reopening of that question in much more complex terms than we have ever seen before." [xlvii][xlvii] In this chapter I have tried to bring out the "domain implications" of Cage's and Mac Low's work, suggesting that their success and failure with respect to Pound lies precisely with their political differences and specifically with the latter poets' anarchist difference from the political as such. The Pound tradition's claim to truth resided with a political conception of history and

a set of epic intertextual practices for realizing that conception poetically. In rejecting the tie that Pound established between techniques of intertextuality and the political and historical truth of art, Cage and Mac Low break through into an exemplary elegiac space with Poundian epic in which the truth-claims of art can be weaker, more complex, and perhaps freer than before.

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