The Smooth and the Striated: Compositional Texture in the Modern Long Poem

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Many studies of the modern long poem address problems of genre. In evaluating poems of some length—especially those composed in multiple sections designated as "cantos," "letters," "songs," or "passages," and those whose parts are numbered in series—critics have often distinguished among these works by applying generic terms such as epic, series, meditative sequence, verse drama or narrative poem.[1] In this instance, however, I would like to suspend the question of genre in favor of making some qualitative distinctions based on compositional method and poetic texture. By compositional method I mean the manner in which the poet handles the materials of the poem. By poetic texture I refer to the quality of those materials in their joining to comprise the text of the poem. Compositional method and texture should be treated independently from

[1] In the introduction to *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1991), I was concerned to distinguish between the radical discontinuity of serial form in postmodern poetry and the organicism of the sequence as a mode of Romantic practice. Among the many studies of genre in the modern long poem, M. L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall make their case for the preeminence of the sequence in *The Modern Poetic Sequence: The Genius of Modern Poetry* (New York: Oxford, 1983). Michael André Bernstein evaluates the legacy of the Poundian epic in *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980). Frederick Feirstein has held forth the prospect of a revival of narrative verse in *Expansive Poetry: Essays on the New Narrative and the New Formalism* (Santa Cruz, CA: Story Line P, 1989).

genre and form, though naturally they are valences that change in accordance with the formal choices the poet makes. Thus compositional methods that succeed in the denser lyric may fail in the expansive epic; textures that are pleasing in the tightly wound sestina may be inappropriate in a loosely structured litany. But in the present space I'd prefer to set aside the measuring tape and run my hand along the weft of the fabric of a few long poems.

Poetic craft and the problem of beauty is almost irresistibly drawn to analogies with the other arts. Ezra Pound was particularly interested in emulating the precision and durability of sculpture and the intaglio method. The very notion of fragmentation in modern poetry has its inception in the "two gross of broken statues" that Pound describes as the stakes of Western civilization in the first World War.[2] Harmony and dissonance draw on musical relations of tonality. Considerations of spatial form inevitably refer to the media of painting and collage.

But in describing problems of compositional method and texture, I want to apply the somatic metaphor introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari near the end of *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*: "the smooth and the striated."[3] Smooth muscle tissue, to recall my one unauthorized visit to the gross anatomy lab of a certain University hospital, is that which "contracts without conscious control, having the form of thin layers or sheets made up of spindle-shaped, unstriated cells with single nuclei and found in the walls of the internal organs, such as the stomach, intestine, bladder, and blood vessels, excluding the heart." And striated muscle, comprising "the skeletal, voluntary, and cardiac muscle," can be "distinguished from smooth muscle by transverse striations of the fibers."[4]

On a purely epidermal level, one could distinguish "smooth texts" from "striated texts" according to the presence or absence of *striation*. One examines the body of the text to determine whether its tissue is arranged in parallel sheets or transverse striations. This literary meat may be marked by the continuity or discontinuity of apperception, a mellifluousness or harshness in enunciation, a laminar or disturbed surface. One can evaluate the consistency or fragmentation of authorial voice, the hypotac-

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[2] Ezra Pound, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" V in *Personae* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 191.

[3] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1987): 474-500.

[4] I am relying on the *American Heritage Dictionary*, Third Edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).

tic or disjunctive qualities of syntax, regular or irregular rhythms, the presence and variety of source materials, and the relative constraint by or liberation from formal devices. The "smooth texts" among twentieth-century long poems might include Wallace Stevens's "Auroras of Autumn" (1947), Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932), James Schuyler's *The Morning of the Poem* (1980), John Ashbery's *Flow Chart* (1991), A. R. Ammons's *Garbage* (1993), Clark Coolidge's *The Crystal Text* (1986), and David Antin's *Tuning* (1984). These texts maintain a consistent voicing; practice either a normative or a regularly-irregular syntax; refrain from difficult allusions; and suppress or restrain formalism. Notice, however, that the categories derived from evaluation of texture tend to cut across the more familiar groupings of literary movements and poetics (suggesting that the analysis itself is striated). The "striated texts" among the twentieth-century long poems might include Pound's *Cantos* (1972), Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* (1983), Robert Duncan's "Passages" series, Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1987), Ronald Johnson's *Ark* (1996), and John Cage's *Themes and Variations* (1982). The various striae of collage text, broken syntax, polylogism, dense allusion, and procedural forms tend to ripple and contort the sheet of language in the long poem. This "simple opposition" between two types, however, fails to hold on a closer inspection of the texts.

For Deleuze and Guattari, "smooth space" and "striated space"—which they relate to "nomad space" and "sedentary space"—are not found in simple opposition but in a "more complex difference by virtue of which the successive terms of the oppositions fail to coincide entirely. And no sooner have we done that than we must remind ourselves that the two spaces in fact exist only in mixture: smooth space is constantly being translated, transversed into a striated space; striated space is constantly being reversed, returned to a smooth space" (474). Striations continually organize the open space; growth disorganizes and smooths closed space. Deleuze and Guattari themselves express a preference for the "excluded middle" over binary opposition, for multiplicity over singularity. A literary model is preeminently a space in which a mixture of the smooth and striated will be present, rather than the exclusive dominance of the one over the other. But as Deleuze and Guattari admit that "de facto mixes do not preclude a de jure, or abstract, distinction between the two spaces" (475), I'll attempt to distinguish between smooth and striated characteristics in modern long poems as well as to show their interrelationships.

One duality occurs between *pedagogy* (instruction of the sort we find in Pound, meant to draw the reader into the cultural values of the tribe) and *polymathism* (education in multiple subjects, not always correlated; also found in the *Cantos*). Accordingly the models that Deleuze and Guattari employ in their discussion of the smooth and striated are themselves polymathic, encompassing the technological (textile); the musical; the mari-

time; the mathematic; the physical; and the aesthetic. I'll limit my discussion to two or three of these models.

The technological model distinguishes between woven *fabric* as a closed space defined by the warp and woof of intertwined threads; and *felt* as an "entanglement of fibers obtained by fulling," a textile "infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction" (475-76). In the *Cantos*, Pound repeatedly refers to Circe's loom as an analogue for his compositional method. Robert Duncan pays homage to Pound when he adopts the figure in "At the Loom," the second poem in his Passages series, to describe the syntagm and paradigm of linguistic structure and ultimately poetic texture:

> Back of the images, the few cords that bind
> meaning in the word-flow,
> the rivering web
> rises among wits and senses
> gathering the wool into its full cloth.
>
> (*Bending the Bow* 11)

Pound and Duncan are well aware that text, textile, and texture are etymologically derived from the Latin, "texere," to weave. The texture of their poetry represents the intertwining of diverse threads into a whole or "full cloth." Thus a fabric best describes the quality of their art.

As any good tailor will tell you, a herringbone tweed is never cut across the weft. Gertrude Stein, however, composes in the manner of a tangled skein to produce a text, or a textile, more like felt. A good example would be the short prose portrait "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene" (1922). The title puns on textiles (fur for coats and muffs; a skein of yarn for knitwear) even as the pseudonyms sheath the identities of the subjects. Perhaps Stein had the couture of her wealthier admirers and patrons in mind when she reprinted the piece in *Vanity Fair* (July 1923). The Misses themselves are busy "cultivating something, voices and other things needing cultivating":

> They were in a way both gay there where there were many cultivating something. They were both regular in being gay there. Helen Furr was gay there, she was gayer and gayer there and really she was just gay there, she was gayer and gayer there, that is to say she found ways of being gay there that she was using in being gay there. She was gay there, not gayer and gayer, just gay there, that is to say she was not gayer by using the things she found there that were gay things, she was gay there, always she was gay there. (*Selected Writings* 563-64)

Felt can be cut in any direction and still produce a patch indistinguishable from the others. Long passages of closely reiterated phrases produces a felt-like smoothness, or a nomadic space of shifting sand in which the

reader may soon become disoriented. For some readers unable to distinguish the "there there," Stein's longer texts are like living in Oakland.

Deleuze and Guattari distinguish further between *embroidery*, with a central theme or motif, and the smooth space of *patchwork*, "with its piece-by-piece construction, its infinite, successive additions of fabric" (476). For an example of embroidery one might turn to the sonnets of Elinor Wylie, such as "Pretty Words" (1932). For patchwork one might as well hold up Pound again, who also saw the *Cantos* as "your whole bag of tricks, / Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the thing's an art-form, / Your Sordello, and that the modern world / Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thoughts in" (1912, quoted in foreword to *Selected Cantos* [1]). Born in the remote mining town of Hailey, Idaho in 1885, Pound knew that frontier penuriousness would make the scrap bag of materials necessary for most household quilting and sewing projects. Although the compositional method of "ply over ply" eventually announced in the *Cantos* (4.15)[5] suggests multi-layered striae of allusion and quotation, the often haphazard patchwork or collage of reference demonstrates an affinity for smooth space.

A more recent example of literary "quilting" is found in Lyn Hejinian's prose poem *My Life*. Hejinian compares herself to "Penelope reworking the twill" (54), stitching together autobiographical material and more abstract leitmotifs in an elaborate numerical structure based on her age at the time of composition.[6] The first edition, written in 1978, is comprised of thirty-seven sections of thirty-seven sentences apiece that coincide with the years of her life. When she returns to the text eight years later, she expands the second edition to forty-five sections of forty-five sentences apiece. She abides by the textual directive to "Spin it, weave it, and wear it out, out" (44). The patchwork form of *My Life* is expandable. Rather than extend her narrative from a single end, she has opened her text from within. Like Penelope, she deconstructs her garment in order to reweave it with new thread. The sixth section, whose inset title reads "The obvious analogy is with music," refers to the traditional Hindu form of "raga" in which themes and variations are improvised within a prescribed frame-

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[5] The pagination of the New Directions edition of *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* varies somewhat depending on the printing, largely due to the addition of Cantos LXXII-LXXIII in later printings. I am reading from the eleventh printing (1989) and will cite the canto number followed by the page number in this printing for ease of reference.

[6] On quilting as technique and analogy to domestic arts in Hejinian's poem, see Craig Douglas Dworkin, "Penelope Reworking the Twill: Patchwork, Writing, and Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*" in *Contemporary Literature* 36:1 (Spring 1995): 58-81.

work. In such a form "time is added to measure, which expands" (19). Hejinian's *My Life* maintains its prescribed framework, like the blocking employed by quiltmakers, but it is a text expandable in any direction.

Deleuze and Guattari describe felt as an "anti-fabric" that "implies no separation of threads, no intertwining, only an entanglement of fibers obtained by fulling (for example, by rolling the block of fibers back and forth). What becomes entangled are the microscales of the fibers." They insist that an "aggregate of intrication of this kind is in no way *homogeneous*: it is nevertheless smooth, and contrasts point by point with the space of fabric" (475). To shift models for a moment, one might consider the process of accumulation—of droplets of water in a pool, grains of sand in a pile, or coins in a stack—such that the individual items are obscured in the aggregate of the whole. On the other hand there is the procedure of summation—the addition of two discrete numbers to produce a third, or the joining of two beams to form a right angle—such that the product does not obscure the separate identities of the component parts. The intrication of felt that destroys the individual entity of the fibers, and the intertwining of threads into fabric that respects their separation are two very different methodologies. Here I differ somewhat from the contention of Deleuze and Guattari that the smoothness of felt does not betoken homogeneity. Without enforcing a binary opposition of homogeneity and heterogeneity, I'd argue instead for the tendency of the smooth space of felt toward homogeneity and the tendency of the striated space of fabric toward heterogeneity. Felt may be initially composed of diverse cotton or woolen textiles, but the fulling process makes them indistinguishable even at close inspection: the soft texture is rather homogeneous; the material can be cut in any direction or shaped in any manner. Fabric, on the other hand, as in the aforementioned herringbone tweed, retains in all but the finest weaving of a single thread, the independent characteristics of its composite textiles. The patterning appears different at varying distances: from fiber to fiber; in the herringbone pattern; in the bolt of cloth; and finally in the cut of the suit. The texture is rough by comparison to felt. The smooth space of felt is indeed "*amorphous*, nonformal" (477), unpatterned, nonfigurative. Its texture remains essentially the same at every distance from which it is examined. And most American quilts, though unstriated, display intricate designs—with the exception of the so-called "crazy quilt" of miscellaneous materials assembled in a haphazard fashion.

Gertrude Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932) is a long poem made in smooth space. It possesses a linguistic texture and literary form akin to felt, and thus illustrates the properties associated with that textile by Deleuze and Guattari: "it is in principle infinite, open, and unlimited in every direction; it has neither top nor bottom nor center; it does not assign fixed and mobile elements but rather distributes a continuous variation" (475-76). The poem is

divided into five Parts with varying numbers of stanzas in each. At the end Stein declares rather blankly, "These stanzas are done" (*Yale* 464), which may indicate that they were completed to her satisfaction. And yet one doesn't have the sense that we've arrived at some point of conclusion, wholeness, or integration; only that the author has called a "halt" to the writing process.

What is there in the form of the poem, as "stanzas in meditation," that suggests an "infinite, open, and unlimited" space? I'd argue that the irregularity, variability of the stanzas themselves contributes to this impression. The stanzas are unequal in length. They range from the single line of Stanza XV, "It is very much like it" (*Yale* 350), that evokes the qualities of homogeneity and indefiniteness, to stanzas of several hundred lines that are in appearance not unlike the books of a verse epic. The poem is segmented, but it's not clear that any principle of division is employed. The indeterminacy of why any one stanza begins or ends contributes directly to the formal indeterminacy of the poem in its entirety. Stein declares in the text, "I wish to remain to remember that stanzas go on" (*Yale* 359). And shortly thereafter she asks, "I wish to announce stanzas at once / What is a stanza" (*Yale* 424). There seems to be little difference in the substance of the poem from one stanza to the next. If, despite its division into parts, the poem is homogeneous, an undifferentiated sameness, how does one find one's way through the poem? Felt can be cut in any direction and still produce a patch indistinguishable from the others. If the poem resists centering in any thematic, referential, motival, or structural manner, can such a text be read with anything like "comprehension"? If "an *amorphous*, nonformal space" displays none of the patterning that we associate with artistic form, can it still be called beautiful?

There is a degree to which the meditative mode—with its subjective involutions—enables the open, nonformal space of the poem. But I doubt that we can ask of Stein, as the neurasthenic Vivian Heigh Wood asks of T. S. Eliot in "The Game of Chess" section of *The Waste Land*, "What are you thinking of? What thinking? What? / I never know what you are thinking. Think" (*Collected Poems* 40).[7] The meditative mode classically marshaled a locus, dilemma, and theme in the abstract, toward which it directed its ruminations. For Stein, the poem is not a meditation *on* anything, but rather it is a poem *in* meditation. The stanzas are the act of meditation, not the expression of meditative thought. This is only somewhat helpful.

For Stein the writing process is a tangled skein, a directionality (movement through) rather than dimensionality (gridding, organization). In the midst of this anti-fabric (Stanza XVI), Stein declares:

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[7] I realize of course that the speakers in "The Game of Chess" are but masks of the unfortunate paralytic couple.

I have lost the thread of my discourse.
This is it it makes no difference if we find it
If we found it
Or which they will be brought if they worry or not
Without which if they begin or yet began
Can they be equalled or equal in amount
When there is a doubt but most of course
Of course there is no doubt.

(*Yale* 419)

She challenges the "purposefulness" of finding the master-thread of her discourse; of determining differences between here and there, beginning and ending, him and her, this and that, or one and another. In the aggregate intrication of Stein's discourse it finally makes no difference whether we've picked up one thread or another.

One of the most notable aspects of Stein's literary texture is her preference for a disjunctive syntax.[8] Her practice alternates between abruptly punctuated, declarative sentences, sentence fragments, and unpunctuated run-on sentences. In any case she rarely employs hypotactic constructions with their subordination of clauses. Consider "Does it join. / Does it mean does it join. / Does it mean does it mean does it join. / If after all they know / That I say so" (*Yale* 452). Syntax *is*, after all, the joining of the sentence; but Stein questions whether that joining is essential to the meaning of her utterance. Even in the case of declarative sentences such as "It is well known that they eat again" (*Yale* 317), one encounters substantial difficulty with the continuity and sequence of thought in the poem. Her disjunctive syntax creates a smooth space because it liberates the text from organizational sequencing.

As to the music of poetry, one might associate a smooth textual space with a lulling if uneven rhythm, whereas in a text that occupies a striated space one might expect to find a more strident fixed rhythm. It is of course possible for "beautiful" poetry to be composed in either a lulling or a strident rhythm: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's dreamy dactyls in "The Song of Hiawatha" provides a classic example of the former, and Alfred Lord Tennyson's galloping dactylic dimeter line in "The Charge of the Light Brigade" would serve for the latter. Both however are metrically regular. In their discussion of the musical model, Deleuze and Guattari ally themselves with Pierre Boulez's contention that "in a smooth space-time one occupies without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts

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[8] For an extended study of this aspect of Stein's poetics, see Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).

in order to occupy" (477). In the regular patterning of stressed and unstressed syllables—that is, in metrical verse—one counts out a striated space-time. The irregular distribution of stresses in nonmetrical verse should contribute to the occupation of a smooth space-time. Stein's poetry, no less than any other subtly crafted art form, presents complex rhythmical arrangements that challenge the simple oppositions of smooth and striated space-time. On average Stein's rhythmical manner is emphatic rather than soothing. She prefers a declamatory address to the lyric-melodic voice of song. The following passage from Stanza VII gives some sense of her music:

> What do I care or how do I know
> Which they prepare for them
> Or more than they like which they continue
> Or they can go there but which they mind
> Because of often without care that they increase aloud
> Or for them fortunately they manage this
> But not only what they like but who they like.
> There can be said to be all history in this.
>
> (*Yale* 342)

The predominantly monosyllabic diction and the clustering of stresses that halts the flow of the language suggests an assertive voice that is unusual for the introspective genre of meditation. Stein's emphatic-irregular rhythms are no doubt displeasing to those readers who come to poetry in search of the melodic beauty of lyric. There are as many soothing, nonmetrical poems in English (Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking" comes to mind) as there are lulling, metrical works (such as Tennyson's song "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean"). Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, however, occupies smooth space-time in a rough manner. The emphatic-irregular rhythm of the poem is partly to blame for the difficulty that many readers experience in appreciating this work.

Stein's compositional method tends toward textual homogeneity. Compared to the texture of common speech, *Stanzas in Meditation* displays an almost complete absence of substantive and proper nouns. One encounters a preponderance of deictics, pronouns, adverbs and connectives—the non-semantic, non-referential grammatical functionaries of the sentence. Take for example the following sentence from Stanza IV: "While they can think did they all win or ever / Should it be made a pleasant arrangement yet / For them once in a while one two or gather well / for which they could like evening of it all" (*Yale* 320). It seems that some sort of social engagement—perhaps one of Stein and Toklas's famous evenings at 27, rue de Fleurus—is being described, but the identities of the persons involved and the particular pleasantries are stripped bare; the arrangement is rather more linguistic than social. Yet a few lines further on we are

startled by the appearance of a substantive description: "But it is I that put a cloak on him / A cloak is a little coat make grey with black and white / And she likes capes oh very well she does." The departure of a guest from the soirée seems to provoke this brief expostulation on styles of outerwear for a Paris evening. Stein's writing is neither totally opaque nor completely transparent, not unintelligible in not being clear.

One could compare the dense obscurity of Robert Browning's *Sordello* (1840) or Louis Zukofsky's "*A*"-9 (1938-40) to the holey obscurity of Stein's textual space. Deleuze and Guattari take Benoit Mandelbrot's fractals as a model of smooth space. "Fractals," such as the Koch curve that approximates the form of a snowflake or irregular coastline, "are aggregates whose number of dimensions is fractional rather than whole, or else whole but with continuous variation in direction" (486). They suggest that a fractal form in three dimensions, Sierpensky's sponge (a cube with square holes geometrically cut into each side in infinite regression), "becomes less than a volume but more than a surface (this is the mathematical presentation of the affinity between free space and a holey space)" (487). Stein's fractal text, like the Sierpensky sponge, is infinitely hollow, its total volume approaches zero. But it is no less complicated for being an empty space rather than a striated and differentiated space.

In contrast to the *felt* of Stein's long poem, Ezra Pound's *The Pisan Cantos* (1948) approaches the condition of *fabric*. The technological model of Deleuze and Guattari designates woven fabric as a closed space defined by the warp and woof of intertwined threads.

Eliot dedicated *The Waste Land* (1922) to Ezra Pound as *il miglior fabbro*, the greatest craftsman, stealing a line from Dante's *Inferno* that was in turn meant to pay homage to Vergil. Pound and the modernists, despite their reputation for experiment in technique and form ("To break the pentameter, that was the first heave" [81.532]), maintain the value of *craft*. The quality of weaving becomes an analogue for the composition of the poem. The vertical, stable warp would designate the paradigm, those eternal and recurrent elements of the epic. The horizontal, moving woof would designate the syntagm, the passing threads, the momentary (time), the immediate (sensation, physical world), but also the narrative contiguity of materials.

Pound's concern for "craft" and his fear that Usura "gnaweth the thread in the loom / None learn to weave gold in her pattern" (45.230) suggests the importance of striation, finely woven fabric as opposed to "shoddy," the woolen material made from scraps or used clothing and hence synonymous with inferior goods. By 1865 in the United States "shoddy manufacturers" were notorious for getting rich on government contracts by supplying inferior quality clothing, shoes and equipment to the Union army. The poorly-constructed, compressed material often fell apart when wet. The inevitable enlisted man's joke was that the horses were better shod than he.

In a passage from Canto LXXX that refers simultaneously to Circe at the loom and a view of the American flag flying over the Disciplinary Training Center in Pisa, Pound remarks:

> the warp
> and the woof
> with a sky wet as ocean
> flowing with liquid slate
> Pétain defended Verdun while Blum
> was defending a bidet
> the red and white stripes
> cut clearer against the slate
> than against any other distance
> the blue field melts with the cloud-flow
> To communicate and then stop, that is the
> law of discourse
> To go far and come to an end
> simplex munditiis, as the hair of Circe
>
> (80.508)

He aspires to the "simple neatnesses" of effective communication. The direct address of the public voice represents a rejection of the florid aestheticism that marred his earliest work. Similarly, the black prisoner who makes a writing table out of an Army-issue packing box also testifies to simple, effective craft:

> What counts is the cultural level,
> thank Benin for this table ex packing box
> "doan yu tell no one I made it"
> from a mask as fine as any in Frankfurt
> "It'll get you offn th' groun"
> Light as the branch of Kuanon
> And at first disappointed with shoddy
> the bare ram-shackle quais, but then saw the
> high buggy wheels
> and was reconciled,
> George Santayana arriving in the port of Boston
> and kept to the end of his life that faint *thethear*
> of the Spaniard
> as a grace quasi imperceptible
>
> (81.532-33)

Despite the marks of cultural difference between Africa, Europe, and America, one can ultimately differentiate between the product of fine craftsmanship and the shoddy work of poor quality.

What is woven in the texture of *The Pisan Cantos?* The critic Michael Alexander claims that this section of Pound's long poem is especially a "poetry of personal memory, perception, reflection and reading—as contingent phenomena of the shocked and distractable mind of Ezra Pound" (194). *The Pisan Cantos*, perhaps because they rely on the scattered recollections of their author, are more variegated in their source materials than several other sections of the poem. As Alexander points out, however, "any strong semblance of overall architectural plan, and of continuity beyond that provided by the author's life, now breaks down....the poem becomes for the first time openly autobiographical: it changes from a would-be objective presentation of ancient history to a private report on the author's actual situation and feelings: 'the drama is wholly subjective'" (194). Pound's intensely striated historical project begins to unfold into an autobiographical discourse. Against the totalizing fabric of history, the smooth space of *patchwork*—of a life and a mind rent and mended—asserts itself.

The texture of Pound's poem remains heterogeneous. The phrase "Beauty is difficult" serves as a refrain through *The Pisan Cantos*: "'Beauty is difficult, Yeats' said Aubrey Beardsley / when Yeats asked why he drew horrors / or at least not Burne-Jones / and Beardsley knew he was dying and had to / make his hit quickly... / So very difficult, Yeats, beauty so difficult" (80.525). Pound does not equate beauty with the elegant, the harmonious, or the mellifluous; but rather with the difficult, the discordant, and even the contentious. *The Cantos* are difficult; but they are also beautiful. They weave in colloquial American speech, slang, and obscenity ("Hey Snag, what's in the bibl'? / what are the books of the bibl'? / Name 'em! don't bullshit me!" [77.487]), including an "army vocabulary [that] contains almost 48 words" (77.485). But there are also passages of great lyrical writing—such as the Libretto against vanity ("What thou lovest well remains, / the rest is dross / What thou lov'st well shall not be reft from thee / What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage / Whose world, or mine or theirs / or is it of none?" [81.534-35]) and the empathetic description of Brother Wasp (83.546-47) that have often been excerpted. Yet it is finally a mistake to isolate these most personal, elegiac modes of the poem from the often difficult, striated text that gives them such great poignancy.

The compositional method of *The Pisan Cantos* relies chiefly on its "conversational unpredictability" (Alexander 199). Pound's text is marked by abrupt segues between and the occasional reprise of autobiographical anecdotes, cultural allusions, historical references, and political bric-a-brac. The poems assume the miscellaneous character of scattered recollection. The terrible isolation of the Disciplinary Training Center denied Pound the luxury of free and intelligent conversation. But in his distractable mind he assumes the dual rôles of the raconteur spinning a complex web of anecdotes and an auditor standing at the periphery of several intriguing con-

versations. One passage from Canto LXXXII recalls the London literary society of 1909, including a seance and a visit to W. B. Yeats's Monday evening salons:

> Miss Tomczyk, the medium
> baffling the society for metaphysical research
> and the idea that CONversation.....
> should not utterly wither
> even I can remember
> at 18 Woburn Buildings
> Said Mr Tancred
> of the Jerusalem and Sicily Tancreds, to Yeats,
> "If you would read us one of your own choice
> and
> perfect
> lyrics"
> and more's the pity that Dickens died twice
> with the disappearance of Tancred
> and for all that old Ford's conversation was better,
> consisting in *res* non *verba*,
> despite William's anecdotes, in that Fordie
> never dented an idea for a phrase's sake
>
> (82.538-39)

Thirty-six years have passed, but Pound still remembers the quality of Ford Madox Ford's conversation that never sacrificed substance for style. This brief glimpse of the halcyon days of British modernism contains more than the nostalgic lament of a defeated and friendless man. Pound asserts his preference for the dialogic mode of conversation and not-so-subtly mocks F. W. Tancred's sycophantic request for the singular purity of Yeats's lyric recitation.[9] Although Pound was to serve as Yeats's amanuensis from 1913 to 1916,[10] this passages alludes to the conflicting aesthet-

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[9] Humphrey Carpenter describes this incident in *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*: "It was Olivia and Dorothy Shakespear who took him [Pound] to Yeats's London lodgings at 18 Woburn Buildings, where Yeats held regular Monday evening salons for his admirers and literary friends. In Canto 82 Ezra describes one of the admirers, F. W. Tancred of the Hulme group, asking Yeats in absurdly respectful tones if he 'would read us one of your own choice / and / perfect / lyrics'. Ezra could scarcely hope to progress as yet beyond this outer circle of acolytes, but Yeats took notice of him from the outset" (119).

[10] For a full treatment of the relationship of Pound and Yeats during this period, see James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats & Modernism.*

ics of Pound's heterogeneity of materials and Yeats's symbolist compression and more focussed themes. But as a reflection of present (1945) circumstance, Pound feels liberated in the open form and unrestricted discourse of conversation, and he recoils from the formalist restraints of the lyric as if they were made from the wire mesh of his cage in Pisa. In contrast to Stein's *Stanzas in Meditation*, *The Pisan Cantos* are highly variegated and wide-ranging in their references to persons and places. But Pound's text nevertheless creates a smooth space in its conversational unpredictability.

To distinguish between the smooth and the striated in the modern long poem is no less difficult than to separate the beautiful and the disfigured, the harmonious and the discordant, the pleasing and the caustic. There are those who will object that things appealing or repugnant should be readily identifiable. This is true in the abstract, as an ultimately subjective ideation of what these characteristics should mean. But in nature—as in aesthetic practice—aspects of the smooth and the striated, the beautiful and the damned, do not appear in an unadulterated or titrated form. There is always an admixture. Further, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that observing the processes of combination and exchange are more interesting than the scholarly imperatives to classification and division: "What interests us in operations of striation and smoothing are precisely the passages or combinations: how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces" (500). In considering these qualities as interrelated elements of a compositional method or literary texture rather than as limiting absolutes in themselves, we arrive at a finer appreciation of the artfulness of modern poetry.

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