News from Afar

Ezra Pound and Some Contemporary British Poetries

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> *edited by* Richard Parker

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Cover

'Here's your fucking light, Shithead: Marie Curie runs towards Ezra Pound with a flask of light' (oil on canvas) by Allen Fisher, reproduced by permission of the artist.

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News from Afar

Richard Parker

"Here's Your Fucking Light Shithead": Ezra Pound and Contemporary British Poetry

"This country is really supposed to be on the eve of a XTZBK49HT (parts of this letter in cypher)"

Canto XXXI

This volume brings together some of the most gifted voices in contemporary British poetry to discuss the importance of Ezra Pound to their work and the work of other British poets and authors. Many of these writers, like Pound, write poetry in which formal innovation is a necessary concomitant to intellectual innovation; they are poets that in less testing times might have been termed the avant-garde. I concentrate on this cadre unapologetically and in the belief that if Pound is to have a legacy in Britain it must involve such practices, though Pound's influence extends beyond the *avantist* ghetto. This collection is preceded by Sons of Ezra: British Poets and Ezra Pound, a volume edited by James McGonigal and Michael Alexander that features essays about the importance of Pound to Edwin Morgan, Donald Davie, Charles Tomlinson, Gael Turnbull, Robert Crawford, William Cookson, Roy Fisher and Douglas Dunn as well as, at a somewhat further heft from Pound studies, Hugh MacDiarmid and Robert Graves. In his contribution Crawford, an insightful and central critic of modernism, sums up the position of many poets writing nearer to what might be termed the poetic mainstream, refusing point-blank to engage with Pound as a political poet: "As regards politics, Pound was a vicious nincompoop" (178). Many of today's non-mainstream political poets might well agree that Pound was vicious, and perhaps most vicious in his criticism, in which he introduced a vital, clarifying, encouraging viciousness. This is just the viciousness that Keston Sutherland diagnoses in the first piece of this book—and it cannot be disassociated from his politics. To think of him as a nincompoop, political or otherwise, is to forego much that he achieved in his prose criticism; the essays on Imagism, "How to Read" and his other great contributions to the modernist aesthetic. Pound's vicious invective would be a crucial building block in the foundations of modernism, as well as being a contributing factor to the direction of his political involvements in the 1930s. Crawford further elaborates on difference between the "Sons of Ezra" and the poets discussed in this collection, imagining a fantastic version of Pound: "I wish he had

written with more deft, gentle humour, and striven less to infernalize all his enemies" (178); a Pound-lite, suited to Faber's current list or the poems pages of the *London Review of Books* is what Crawford would have, a character of little appeal to the urgently experimental strands of British poetry in which I am interested and one who will not be found in this volume.

In his essay on Andrew Crozier's Poundian inheritance Alexander Howard usefully sets up such resistance in British poetry to Pound - or Pound's avant-gardism – as a product of the Movement, a group of poets who instigated a wholesale anti-modernist realignment of taste in Britain around the mid-twentieth-century which Howard calls a "conservative and distinctly parochial redefinition of literary taste" (112). The line of succession from Pound to the contemporary British poets in this volume is not, then, through the Movement, not the British "Sons of Ezra", but, for the most part, via a bridging generation of American poets – prominent among whom are those collected in Donald Allen's The New American Poetry. The New American Poets took up the baton of experimental Poundianism where their British confrères refused it - and these essays repeatedly argue that the midcentury U.S. poets are of greater interest to the British writers addressed here than the British poets of the period. All of The New American Poetry's most important figures had complex and fruitful relationships with Pound as readers, and many of them, including Charles Olson, Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg, had significant personal exchanges with him. Olson met, "saved" and, in turn, despised Pound at St. Elizabeths; Duncan reinvented the Poundian inheritance as synthetic Romantic Baroque; Ginsberg met Pound in Venice and miraculously extracted his famous late retraction of his abiding anti-Semitism, that "stupid suburban prejudice" (Reck 57), there. Olson's Projectivist undertaking is certainly Poundian in its group-forming intent, as well as in many points de repère in its formal ambitions, while both Olson's and Duncan's "open fields" are self-consciously Poundian. Ginsberg less frequently recalls the Pound of The Cantos, but that vein of muscular interaction with traditional forms that characterises Pound's early verse, and which introduces his distinctive modernism under the guise of the studied hard work of the poet-artisan, is repeated by Ginsberg, who exercises an interest in adapting traditional forms from within an unusual subjectivity that runs counter to the reactionary parochialism of the Movement.

While formal innovations are accepted and fundamental to both Projectivist poetics and Beat Poetry, alongside Pound's critical perspicacity and even his epistolary style – the modernist's politics and political praxis are most certainly not acceptable. Pound is a poet – in Duncan's, Olson's and Ginsberg's versions of him – whose selective abilities are suspect. For the endlessly eclectic Duncan, Pound was a poet who cannot chose and who,

implicitly, mis-chose his political allegiances at the time of the century's greatest conflagration. Olson's disappointment with Pound follows a similar route, with an initially energising interaction at St. Elizabeths coming to frustrate Olson, pushing the younger poet towards a realignment of the primacy of mind over body that he perceived in Pound and therefore onto the Projectivist verse of *The Maximus Poems*.² Ginsberg neutralises Pound's threat, writing that

anyone with any sense can see it as a humour, in that sense part of the drama – you manifest the process of thoughts – make a model of the consciousness and anti-Semitism is your fuck-up like not liking Buddhists but it's part of the model as it proceeds – and the great accomplishment was to make a working model of your mind – I mean nobody cares if it's Ezra Pound's mind – it is a *mind*, like all our minds, and that's never been done before – so you made a working model all along, with all the dramatic imperfections, fuck-ups – anyone with sense can always see the crazy part and see the perfect clear lucid perception-language-ground. (*Composed on the Tongue* 8-9)

At this point we reach the departing point with the British Poundians contained in this volume with the New American Poets. In contradiction to Ginsberg – at least for those deciding on the extent of Pound's treason, and for Pound himself, and anyone wishing to read him seriously – the matter of whose "mind" or "fuck-up" we see modelled in *The Cantos* actually *is* of some import; to suggest it is as interchangeable as the great singular Beat-Romantic self/consumer is to write off Pound's project rather violently.

Through the 1950s and '60s this American reading that posits an Ezra Pound who, in spite of his manifest importance as formal innovator and literary critic, fails to make the political choices that seem elementary to the liberal consensus of the period, remains dominant. For Olson, Duncan, Ginsberg and others, the trick was to present a Pound whose political sensibilities could be dismissed in their entirety: to ignore him as a political writer while adopting his formal and critical inventions from within something approaching a vacuum. Elizabeth Bishop produced the nadir of this tendency with "Visits to St. Elizabeths" (1950); which builds to the following list:

This is the soldier home from the war. These are the years and the walls and the door that shut on a boy that pats the floor to see if the world is round or flat.

This is a Jew in a newspaper hat that dances carefully down the ward, walking the plank of a coffin board with the crazy sailor that shows his watch that tells the time of the wretched man that lies in the house of Bedlam. (*Poems*, *Prose*, and Letters 127)

Bishop's accretive method reduces Pound, through its child-like construction and pat thumbnails of his ward-mates, to a madman. It thereby offers a far less threatening poet than a Pound unchained, sane *and* fascist. The double meaning of "lies", thickens the image – either Pound "lies in the house of Bedlam" in that he has been incarcerated there, or he has lied in order to get there an evade his just punishment for treason. This position does not just state that Pound's political beliefs were wrong, but insists his whole method of political understanding and communication – his entire output as a political poet, and, thus, *The Cantos* – can be dismissed as an aberration, something both mad and/or bad and separate from Pound's formal innovations.

In spite of their continued championing of Pound after Britain had abandoned him, the New American Poets were, then, centrally ambivalent about Pound – and the difference in attitude towards Pound between today's British avant-gardists and their American forebears is important. As Gavin Selerie writes, "[g]iven the prevailing conservatism of British poetry, Pound's articulation of what is valuable in the tradition and his model of a re-formed poetics still resonated in a later era" (216) going on to state that "Olson and Ginsberg negotiated a way through the negative features of Pound's ideology, and these manoeuvres fed into the experimental British scene from the late 1950s on." (216) It is unarguable that while the New American Poets' strategy of neutralising Pound's ideological inheritance did indeed ease the passage of the poet's legacy to later generations, it is in part the reinstatement of Pound's approach to the political that is of primary importance to many of the poets under discussion in this volume. J.H. Prynne's position does not go much further than Crawford's in this regard, suggesting that Pound's "overall grasp of political thought in any complexion was close to infantile" (Prynne/Sutherland 206). Prynne's poetics, however, would offer routes into a far more involved Poundianism, as we shall see.

If we wish to identify a British Poundian poetry of more relevance than that of the "Sons of Ezra" we must reclaim Pound as an avant-gardist, and, in

contrast to the New American Poets, it is perhaps time that serious readers of Pound, and serious writers using his example in their work, must also reclaim him as a political poet. Robert Hampson points us towards this realisation in his essay on Eric Mottram, writing that reading Pound, as studied in the Mottram manner, "forced a confrontation with the relationship between poetry and politics (that in Yeats or Eliot was obfuscated or side-stepped)" (90). Selerie also implies a similar engagement in his essay, while younger, post-Poundian and post-Prynnian, writers such as Danny Hayward and Laura Kilbride foreground the utility of Pound as a political poet – a marked development from the "confrontation" Hampson and Selerie describe.

This double reclamation is what marks out this collection and contemporary British thinking on Pound: all of them in one manner or another adapt formal innovations broached by Pound, and the most successful ones, I would argue, make use of Pound's example as a political poet as well. Which isn't to suggest that anti-Semitism, fascism or even Social Credit and Gesellite economics are aspirations of today's political poets. Many of the poets discussed here tend to be more implacably opposed to the politics of the right than the liberal consensus that damned Pound at the time of the Bollingen prize; and their alignment is representative of a general tendency in Britain's experimental poetry scene. In fact, Pound's return to Britain comes at a time when much of the period's poetry is shaped by a concern with the oppressive and liberatory powers of language as displayed in the poetry of Prynne and those that have followed him, a lineage that descends to Prynne from Pound via Olson and Ed Dorn, as Ryan Dobran and Joshua Kotin demonstrate. These poets recognise the immense persuasive force of Pound's poetic-political rhetoric, and the underlying connection between this aspect of his thought and his technical innovations and critical aperçus. Pound here is an American Augustan, a poet for whom the question of how to address political concerns in a public poetry is central.

The central Pound for such poets is exactly the Pound that neither the New American Poets nor Crawford (nor, perhaps, even Prynne) can stomach – a man apoplectically sacrificing his judgement upon the altar of his rage. In his piece "In Memory of Your Occult Convolutions" Sutherland captures the essence of this Pound with an extended collage of Poundian invective. This is a Popian Pound, pursuing a combined political/aesthetic/moral criticism that Duncan and Ginsberg optimistically hope might be useful shorn of its anger – hoping that the anger distorts elements in the poetry that are recoverable if we extract them. Sutherland proves, however, the centrality of this mode – exactly that desire to "infernalize all his enemies" – to Pound's political, critical and aesthetic senses. Elsewhere Sutherland has written that

Nietzsche's philosophy [...] is so intensely dependent on its pageant of idiots that it couldn't exist for a single untimely moment without them. [...] [T]he same is true for Pound's poetry and essays, which everywhere project, mock and vilify the halfwit incapable of being bucked up by beauty, hearing the subtle measure of Pound's verse, or correctly despising Carlo Dolci, as the perennial "Mr. Buggins" cannot.³ (*Stupefaction* 5)

The Cantos and Pound's criticism become a modern Dunciad and Peri Bathous respectively. The objects of Pound's rage and the rage itself are shown to be at the heart of Pound's project; invective is Pound's poetry, and as such is unavoidable for a Poundian poetics. To dismiss Pound's politics as "fuck up" is to dismiss all of Pound.

Danny Hayward's "Or Storming the Shopping Centre: Poetry, Competition, Pound, *Quid*" places this connection in the context of a generation and of the specific political anxieties of that generation. The Pound and Wyndham Lewis of *BLAST*, a signal moment in early-twent-ieth-century infernalizing, are shown to predict *Ira Quid*, a publication which is the expression of the indignation of a poetic generation, as well as being a conscious infernalization every bit as violent as *BLAST*. Sean Pryor's essay "Some Thoughts on Refrigeration" develops this concern to connect Sutherland's *The Stats on Infinity* (2010) to Pound's *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919). Pryor maintains the centrality of contemporary political consideration in both pieces, and proceeds to demonstrate that connection through a powerful close reading.

Laura Kilbride demonstrates a similar utility in Pound's invective for the radical leftist poet Anna Mendelssohn; a poet for whom an interest in Pound might seem unlikely. As Kilbride's essay demonstrates, however, an ear for Pound's invective does not obviate the need to criticise Pound, as Mendelssohn does fulsomely, often in a mode clearly derived from Pound. This rebarbative reaction to Pound in Poundian terms is a feature of many of the poets addressed here; Allen Fisher's poem "Atkins Stomp" (first published in *Brixton Fractals* in 1985 – and contextualised here by Juha Virtanen), which co-opts Pound's language of transcendence in terms of the far-right politics of the 1980s, captures some of this, as does his painting, "Here's your fucking light, Shithead: Marie Curie runs towards Ezra Pound with a flask of light" (1988), which is reproduced on the cover of this volume and depicts an enraged Marie Curie pursuing an aged Pound in a Cold War/ Thatcherite waste land. Mendelssohn and Ian Sinclair also emerge from this scene, as do many of the poetries described by Hampson and Selerie. While

David Vichnar primarily connects Pound to Sinclair through a shared, historiographical interest in psycho-geography, it is also clear that Sinclair's Pound is one connected with the political topography of 1980s London. Gareth Farmer's essay on Veronica Forrest-Thomson's Pound adds another approach to this nexus, with a careful reading of Forrest-Thomson's testing of the Poundian rhetorical programme within a recognisably Prynnian method.

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Just as McGonigal and Alexander stretched their conception of the contemporary to allow Graves and MacDiarmid into Sons of Ezra, the conception of the "contemporary" held in this volume is flexible enough to accommodate the deceased, such as Forest-Thomson and Mendelssohn, and more than forty years of poetic history. I would suggest that the contemporary moment of critical appreciation of Pound that we are currently experiencing began in the 1960s, with the contributions of Donald Davie, crucially present at the University of Essex from 1964 till 1968 (his key work on Pound, Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor, appearing in 1964), and Eric Mottram, a leading propagator of Poundian critical sense and poetics at King's College London from 1960 until 1990. Though Davie is the better-known poet, his Movement stylings are some way from Pound, and would seem to fall into the anti-camp delineated by Howard. His contribution to *Sons of Ezra* reveals this clearly; he admits that "the Poundian practices I defended for in theory, I could not make work in practice" (Modernist Essays 229), going on to quote from his poem "Mickiewicz in England", written "conspicuously, if not very inventively, in one of the styles of Pound's Cantos." (229) A brief quote will serve to show Davie's failure to approximate a persuasive Poundian voice:

Did Belloc baulk, did Pound protest When Saintsbury found Sienkiewicz unlicked? Who quoted Kochanowski, and to cap What Latin tag? Who cared That he was salvaged from Cyrillic script, The Ronsard of Czarnólas? (230)

The iambic tendency, the rolling syntax and the readily traceable argument from statement to statement, all mitigate against Davie having any profound understanding of either Pound's prosody or argument – a supposition which is entirely dismissed, however, by Davie's ground-breaking analysis of the mechanics of Pound's verse in *Poet as Sculptor* – a work cited as paramount in

both Hampson's and Selerie's accounts of British Poundian poetics.⁴ Davie's simultaneous understanding and misunderstanding of Pound shall remain mysterious, and though his contribution to Pound studies endures, his was not the voice to pass on Pound's poetics.

As Hampson demonstrates, Mottram produced more satisfactory poetry in the Poundian vein than Davie, and the length and inter-connectedness of his time in London allowed him a thoroughgoing influence on the generation of critics and poets that passed through his seminars at King's College London, as well as those he encountered at the numerous events he organised showcasing new poetry elsewhere in the city. Hampson makes it clear that it is Mottram's intervention, as an evangelical Poundian also committed to the continuing project of new poetry, that marks the beginning of "now" in contemporary Poundian poetry in Britain, and this volume therefore includes both Hampson's memoir and Amy Evans' retrieval of a symptomatic essay by Mottram on Pound from the archive at King's, with the intention that they should serve as keystones for this volume's argument about Poundian poetics in Britain today.

Selerie's essay extends the narrative from Mottram's circle to suggest some of the variousness with which Pound's precepts have been taken up and reacted against in London over recent decades. Like Hampson's piece, with which Selerie occasionally disagrees, this paper is a valuable contribution to the historiography of Pound in British poetry and should likewise be considered one of the keystones of this collection.

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Of the poets addressed in this book it is Geoffrey Hill that comes closest to the dualism regarding Pound of the New American Poets. In *Scenes from Comus* (2005) we find:

Nothing is unforgettable but guilt. Guilt of the moment to be made eternal. Reading immortal literature's a curse.

Beatrice in *The Changeling* makes me sweat even more than Faustus' Helen, let alone Marlowe's off-stage blasphemous fun with words

or Pound's last words to silence. Well, let well alone. The gadgetry of nice determinism mákes, breáks, comedians. All the better if you go mad like Pound (*grillo*, a grasshopper; *grido*, a cry from the fields). The grief of comedy | you have to laugh. (66)

We all know that Pound wasn't mad, even Bishop, with that lie/lie pun, acknowledges the convenience of denoting him as such; we all know that that pose was a fiction as functional as the New Americans' discarding of the Poundian invective. The myth of Pound's late silence was also a convenience, convenient to Pound and a family wishing to avoid further scandal; and, conveniently for Ginsberg, a deep, ponderous silence can be tantamount to an apostasy. Perhaps we might forgive Hill his claim for Pound's madness in the context of his late sequences, all of which are written primarily in the confessional mode: it is really Hill that is mad here. In fact, Hill's version of Pound's mad silence isn't quite the exculpatory silence Ginsberg enjoys. Rather, it is a silence in the face of the great works of Hill's predecessors, Thomas Middleton, William Rowley and Christopher Marlowe, great tragedians, for whom Pound is relevant for his own apparently tragic life; his late silence equivalent to the silence at the conclusion of *Hamlet*. That Pound was in any way a tragic figure is of course a reformulation of the New Critical dualism (it was of course the fascist/anti-Semitic tragic flaw that was to blame, not anything more central to Pound's aesthetic sensibility) – but at least it's a more complex reduction than Bishop's.

Besides, as Mark Scroggins demonstrates, Hill's connection of Pound to Ruskin is revelatory and shows a profound understanding of Pound's aesthetic sense that is of great use. In fact, Sutherland's insistence that it is necessary to Pound's aesthetic project that the poet "vilify the halfwit incapable of being bucked up by beauty" (*Stupefaction* 5) sounds like a militant version of the Ruskinian aestheticism that Hill insists upon. 5 But that he couches it in a rhetoric some of the way towards the British mainstream, Hill is very much in agreement with Sutherland and Mendelssohn.

Tony Lopez, a quite different poet from Hill, should perhaps be grouped with Hill here, as another poet that employs Pound's historical sense, or, more accurately, his historiographical sense. Lopez, however, describes a technique that is elaborated out of Pound's fragmentary, innovative late poetics that is quite removed from Hill. Whereas Hill's primary poetic lifting from Pound is the same synthetic Anglo-Saxonism that Michael Alexander picks up and runs with in his Pound-inflected Anglo-Saxon translations (the reader might compare Alexander's *The Earliest English Poems* [1966] and *Beowulf* [1973] with Hill's *Mercian Hymns* [1971]), Lopez, like Iain Sinclair, uses an extrapolated modernism that goes beyond the limits of Pound's

experimentalism to address cultural and historiographical concerns that are intimately connected with Pound's project.

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This volume collects a series of translations in self-consciously Poundian styles, as well as an essay on Poundian / Zukofskian traductory practice. Pound's achievements as a translator are more frequently emulated by the poets in and around the British mainstream than the rest of his work; Christopher Logue, David Harsent, Seamus Heaney and Alice Oswald are all his "sons" in this respect, openly accepting the influence of his example and producing works that reproduce some of the cadences he uses in some of his translations. Michael Alexander's Anglo-Saxon translations for Penguin must be considered among the central vehicles of distribution for one of these kinds of Poundian translation. Cathay (1915) and "The Seafarer" (1911), rather than *The Cantos*, are the points of reference here, texts which, through their innovations, would prove medial to the project of *The Cantos*, and which safely pre-date the vicious nincompoopism of the 1930s while also eliding the particular contextual references that colour even much of his early work. Cathay introduces a manner of translation that is timeless and, in some senses, neutral – something close to a translatorese readily applicable to all styles and ages; Eliot's quip that "Pound is the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time" (Selected Poems xvi) is not entirely complimentary; Lewis calls this innovation Pound's "translation racket" (Pound/Lewis 234).

Eliot was the inventor of Pound having been the inventor of Chinese poetry in English for our time, and Harry Gilonis must be the inventor of the Poundian translation racket for the contemporary moment. Harry Gilonis and Robert Sheppard both attempt refurbishments of Pound's far-Eastern translations here, with Gilonis retranslating poems from *Cathay* in a manner that sounds little like its recent imitators, and Sheppard translating Li Shang-yin in a style that is again far from the sonorities of Pound's Fenollosa period. In "How to Read" Pound writes that "Before I die I hope to see a few of the best Chinese works printed bilingually, in the form that Mori and Ariga prepared certain texts for Fenollosa, a "crib", the picture of each letter accompanied by a full explanation." (Literary Essays 39) Both of these sets of translations are deeply indebted to the Poundian processes suggested here. While neither reproduce the ideograms, they both attempt to mime the act of deciphering such ideograms in all their non-English complexity. In that respect their translations can be read as something like the "cribs" that Pound valorises, in all their partialness and fragmentariness.

Alex Pestell's essay on Michael Kindellan and Reitha Pattison also looks at a translation practice that is doubly Poundian, highlighting a procedure derived from Louis Zukofsky's (itself complicatedly Poundian) homophonic technique to approach the work of Bertran de Born, a key figure in Pound's early engagement with the poetry of the troubadours.

Tim Atkins' "Happiness" is the final piece in the book and presents a unique blend of essay, meditation and poetry. Atkins is a translator in and out of the Poundian tradition, his extensive translations of Petrarch, which have appeared in a number of volumes, feature a welter of post-Poundian free-translation techniques. The piece here announces itself as "a Translation of the 10 Buddhist Ox-Herding Poems", material that Pound would have been unlikely to translate, though Atkins makes implicit use of and explicit reference to Pound's traductory practices throughout. It offers an account of Atkins' passionate reading of Pound; a Pound defused not through Bishop's condescension or Ginsberg's wishful thinking, but by an insistence upon and proving of (in both senses) the great love that lies at the heart of Pound's craggy project. As Atkins concludes, partly in defiance of Pound but also in affirmation, "happiness is the only economy" (322).

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The Cantos is the defining political poem of its era and thus any poets of whatever political persuasion attempting to write a public verse in English must inevitably encounter it. This volume displays a variety of uses to which Pound has been put by British poets writing in the contemporary moment that runs from Mottram to Now. It is in the fields of political writing, historiography and translation that Pound is most useful for these poets, and in which his experiments have been extrapolated away from his work to the furthest extent. To be a practicing Poundian today is to be outside of Pound's purview in terms of his signature tones, techniques and politics; yet it is necessary to have passed along Poundian paths to have arrived at such a point.

Notes

¹ In a note that Pound made at the time of Olson's visits to St. Elizabeths Pound insists that "Olson saved my life". A facsimile letter containing this statement is printed in Julien Cornell's *The Trial of Ezra Pound* (71).

² See Olson's memoir "GrandPa, GoodBye", collected in Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths.

- ³ See Pound's ABC of Reading (26) for a gloss on "Mr. Buggins".
- ⁴ Davie was Ph.D. supervisor to and, later, colleague of J.H. Prynne. Prynne, in his turn, via important personal correspondences with Olson, Dorn and other American poets, opened an important line of communication between Cambridge and the American avant-garde. Ryan Dobran notes Davie's acknowledgement of Prynne's collaborative assistance in a footnote to his paper in this collection, noting about the book's chapter on Cavalcanti that "[s]ome pages of Chapter VI derive immediately from conversations with J.H. Prynne' (*Poet as Sculptor* vi).
- ⁵ "Pound / was a Ruskinian, so it works out, so it // fits and sits fair to being plausible; / which is our métier." (Without Title 52)

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