



“Opportunist? Rightly Opportunist!”: Historical Materialism in Ezra Pound’s *Eleven New Cantos* (1934)

Walter Verhoeff

Master English Literature and Culture

Abstract: The present study explores Ezra Pound’s *Eleven New Cantos* (1934) in relation to the rise of mass-culture through a historical materialistic lens, allowing for an analysis of the possible rejection and revaluation of societal structures and processes by the artist through constructions of new and nonconforming narratives. As opposed to the commonly formulated hostile dichotomy between modernist intellectuals and the contemporary rise of mass-culture, Pound defines his ‘masses’ as victimised by conspiratorial structures and systems aimed at exploitation, manipulation, and repression. Through translation and reformulation, Pound reconstructs the canon of influential historical documents, and adapts existing ideologies aimed at redefining the masses’ relation to societal systems of control. Pound’s editorial alterations to the textual fragments of historical figures, such as Jefferson, Adams, Marx, and Van Buren, and his attempts at reconstruction, combining the ideas on economics of Douglas and Gesell, culminate in his idealistic, as opposed to materialistic, construction of a leader-figure characterised by a “passion for construction” with an incessant emphasis on “the will toward *order*.”¹

Keywords: Modernist Poetry, Ezra Pound, Historical Materialism, Mass Society, Authoritarianism

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Introduction

Published in 1934, Ezra Pound’s *Eleven New Cantos* reflects upon the post-WWI world, in terms of language, history, society, and economics, in an attempt to terminate the chaos by replacing it by “a permanent order freed from struggle.”² Pound’s *Cantos*, his “political weapon,” echoes a historical materialism, acknowledging the “material contradictions” that define the individuals’ place in society.³ Pound sees the rise of the masses during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as constricted by the inherent greed and usurious nature of laissez-faire capitalism and the corruptibility of governing bodies, especially in relation to the control of knowledge.

Not only will this historical materialistic lens provide a better understanding of Pound’s argumentation against a collusive elite and for the artist-as-leader, it will also provide a broader,

¹ Pound, *J/M*, 34; 99.

² Brooker, “Lesson of EP,” 23.

³ Eiselein, “Jefferson in the thirties,” 38; Volle, “Historical Materialism.”

more current interpretation of the rising influence of conspiracy theories in the post-pandemic world. With complete contemporaneous relevance, Pound relates us the ways in which the past can be (re-)constructed in justification of authoritarianism.

In **Section 2** of this paper, Pound's assessment of the masses is contrasted with those of his contemporaries, exploring the materialistic emphasis on repressive structures and processes. **Section 3** explores how Pound sees the masses as exploited through a "vicious economic system."⁴ By combining different economic theories with Jeffersonian ideals, Pound constructs alternative ideas on economics, aimed at liberating the individuals from "'usurocratic' conspiracy and the agency of the 'enemy'."⁵ In line with the historical materialistic "adaptation or destruction" of "incompatible elements," **Section 4** explores Pound's assessment of agency as liberating the masses.⁶ Pound argues for the necessity of a strong and authoritarian leader, able to withstand the greed and corruptibility of the systems they are required to alter or destroy. Ezra Pound's *Eleven New Cantos* (1934) reflects a historical materialism that, through "tradition" and "invent[ion]," sees the artist as liberator of the oppressed masses.⁷

2. Pound's Masses

Initiated during the late nineteenth and appearing ubiquitous during the early twentieth century, "Europe had produced 'a gigantic mass of humanity which, launched like a torrent over the historic area, has inundated it'."⁸ Ortega y Gasset, Spanish philosopher and author of *The Revolt of the Masses* (1930), saw destructive tendencies of "overcrowding", "intrusion", and the apocalyptic "dictatorship of the mass" in the "advent of mass culture".⁹ Bell furthermore recognises a process of "abstraction" formulated during the Enlightenment that had given rise to a society "ruled by equivalence" that "makes the dissimilar comparable by reducing it to abstract qualities."¹⁰ Bell sees this principle of exchangeability articulated in the "reproducibility characteristic of commodities" and the laissez-faire capitalism of the early twentieth century.¹¹ These "greyly 'standardizing' pressures" were perceived as:

A state of active repression of human possibilities; a state of antiquated discourse and composition; a state in which language is dulled and exhausted by custom and habit or reduced to the merely prosaic; a state in which everyday, ordinary language makes literary composition difficult or impossible; a state in which a merely instrumental language blocks access to an underlying spiritual or unconscious reality; a state in which a merely social language obstructs the most profound individual expression.¹²

This state required a response by those who felt their individuality threatened by the contemporary mass.

These individuals can be identified as the reactive modernists, or the Avant Garde, who saw societal and cultural quality values endangered by the population explosion that went paired

⁴ Pound, "Teacher's Mission," 631.

⁵ Brooker, "Lesson of EP," 27.

⁶ Volle, "Historical Materialism."

⁷ Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 48; Bell, "Mechanical TJ," 149.

⁸ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 3.

⁹ y Gasset qtd. in Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 3.

¹⁰ Bell, "Mechanical TJ," 163.

¹¹ Bell, "Mechanical TJ," 163.

¹² Williams, *Modernism*, 5; 70.

with the Education Act of 1871.¹³ As a consequence of an expansion of the reading public, the intellectuals and the Avant Garde, or “the living, throbbing, suffering, vital ... souls,” felt threatened by the “mentally unquickened, mechanical, soulless.”¹⁴ As made apparent through this dichotomy, conceptually, the ‘masses’ function equally in identifying the ‘Other’ as they do in processes of self-affirmation—as one who does not belong to the ‘masses’ remains individual. Carey thusly identifies the concept of the ‘masses’ as an “imaginary construct” that “can be reshaped at will, in accordance with the wishes of the imaginer.”¹⁵ Carey recognises the ‘masses’ in “images, equally arbitrary, of ‘typical’ mass men or mass women,” or in individuals through abstractions of typical masses: “In the presence of one individual we can decide whether he is ‘mass’ or not.”¹⁶

In Pound we can see similar reactive tendencies “in response to the crisis of World War I, post-war economic depression and the attendant demise of liberal values.”¹⁷ Pound also recognises the process of ‘abstraction’—“The disease of the last century and a half has been ‘abstraction’”¹⁸—and, not too dissimilar from the intellectuals discussed by Carey, argued “that the modern world / Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in.”¹⁹ Pound’s ideas on intellectual appetite perhaps even concur with y Gasset’s “mass man” as “unambitious”:²⁰

‘Man, a rational creature!’ said Franklin.
 ‘Come, let us suppose a rational man.
 ‘Strip him of all his appetites, especially his hunger and thirst.
 ‘He is in his chamber, engaged in making experiments,
 ‘Or in pursuing some problem.
 ‘At this moment a servant knocks. ‘Sir,
 ‘“dinner is on the table.”
 ‘“Ham and chickens?” ‘Ham!’
 ‘And must I break the chain of my thoughts to
 ‘“go down and gnaw a morsel of damned hog’s arse?”
 ‘“Put aside your ham; I will dine tomorrow;’
 Take away appetite, and the present generation would not
 Live a month, and no future generation would exist;²¹

In this passage Franklin argues for the importance of an ambitious and active class of individualistic intellectuals as bearers of cultural progression. Franklin’s intellectual “appetite” suppresses his appetite for “Ham!” and argues the latter to be a disturbance to the former. It is this intellectual labour, in its superiority over worldly desires, which sustains the “exalted dignity of human nature etc.”²²

Carey includes Pound in the hostile dichotomy between intellectuals and the masses, but neglects that Pound never excludes the “servant” of Canto 31, as emphasised by the enjambment after the intrusion of a ‘mass man’. Instead, Pound sees the masses as victimised by the bourgeois, aristocracy, and societal structures and processes which, for example, see the masses as opportunity—“and it gave him an i n s p i r a t i o n,” this being “an i-de-a, I-mean-a

¹³ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 6.

¹⁴ Hardy qtd. in Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 10.

¹⁵ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 23.

¹⁶ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 23; y Gasset qtd. in Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 23.

¹⁷ Brooker, “Lesson of EP,” 11.

¹⁸ Pound, “Teacher’s Mission,” 632.

¹⁹ Pound qtd. In Brooker, “Lesson of EP,” 24.

²⁰ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 23.

²¹ Pound, *Cantos*, 155-6/31.

²² Pound, *Cantos*, 156/31.

biz-nis i-de-a?”—for exploitation.²³ Pound’s use of the typewriter allows for the construction of these strangely formatted words through the machine’s “rigidity and its space precisions.”²⁴ The typewriter’s ability to “indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases” implicitly reflects the very nature of the masses’ repression through the ruling class.²⁵ As Heidegger argues, the typewriter “withdraws from man the essential rank of the hand, without man’s experiencing this withdrawal appropriately and recognising that it has transformed the relation of Being to his essence.”²⁶

Thus, through Pound’s making explicit of the role of the machine as expression of the mode of production within historical materialism, the reader is made aware of the processes that, out of reach from the consciousness, enforce the masses to adhere to rigid societal structures. Pound provides an example of the superiority of the ruling class as “Mr Corles”

merely lit a cigarette and walked away from his
battery and seated himself in a field,
So some subaltern gave the order to fire
and Mr Corles did not suffer the extreme penalty
because his family
was a very good bourgeois family in Vienna
and he was therefor sent to a mind sanatorium.²⁷

As Americans, Pound and the Thomas Jefferson Pound allows to speak through fragments of correspondence and speech, have “‘an ear for stilled voices,’ a responsiveness to ‘the scrutable, palpable past,’” allowing Pound to scrutinise Europe “unencumbered by the worldliness with which Europe had learned to inhabit the European world.”²⁸ Eliot argues that this “historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence,” an awareness Pound effects directly through his use of historical documents translated into the present.²⁹ Pound criticises the corrupted aristocracy through Jefferson, who states: “I can further say with safety there is not a crowned head / in Europe whose talents or merits would entitle him / to be elected a vestryman by any American parish.”³⁰ This lack of “talents or merits” is paired with “the grossness of his [Lafayette’s] ignorance of government and history,” placing the past in the present.³¹ Pound “equates the training of kings with the training of animals” who are,³² as a consequence of letting “everything bend before them and banish whatever might / lead them to think,”³³ entirely “deprived of that organ...” of thought,³⁴ leaving the masses in the hands of a plethora of incapable aristocrats:

The King of Spain was a fool, the King of Naples a fool
they despatched two courriers weekly to tell each other, over a
thousand miles

²³ Pound, *Cantos*, 173-4/35.

²⁴ Oldon qtd. in Williams, *Buddha in the Machine*, 128.

²⁵ Williams, *Buddha in the Machine*, 128.

²⁶ Williams, *Buddha in the Machine*, 133.

²⁷ Pound, *Cantos*, 172/35.

²⁸ Kenner, *Pound Era*, 4.

²⁹ Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 49.

³⁰ Pound, *Cantos*, 154-5/31.

³¹ Pound, *Cantos*, 155/31.

³² Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 127.

³³ Pound, *Cantos*, 158/32.

³⁴ Pound, *Cantos*, 159/32.

what they had killed...the King of Sardinia
 was, like all the Bourbons, a fool, the
 Portuguese Queen a Braganza and therefore by nature an idiot,
 The successor to Frederic of Prussia, a mere hog
 in body and mind, Gustavus and Joseph of Austria
 were as you know really crazy, George 3d was in
 a straight waistcoat,³⁵

Pound recognises in this authority the collusive nature of conventional forms of government where “despotism / or absolute power...unlimited sovereignty” have prospered and functioned to exploit, rather than serve, the masses.³⁶ Historically, greed and usurious practices had been present, regardless of governing structure; the corruption of absolute power “is the same in a majority of popular assembly, / an aristocratical council, an oligarchical junto, / and a single emperor, equally arbitrary, bloody, / and in every respect diabolical.”³⁷ Regardless of the structure’s principles regarding authority, manifestations of corruption have “never failed to destroy all records, memorials, / all histories which it did not like, and to corrupt / those it was cunning enough to preserve.....”³⁸ William Carlos Williams summarises this corruption of a ruling class through “[u]sury—the work of double-crossing intellectual bastards in and out of government and the church—rules the world and hides the simple facts from those it torments for a profit.”³⁹

Pound argues for “the persistence of greed in every society,” often characterised by secrecy and the observation that the “possessor [of absolute power] be kalos k’agathos, theocrat, baron, bojar, or / rich man matters very little.”⁴⁰ For example the “Bank president” of Canto 37, who, “acting in illegal secret,” used his absolute power to exclude government officials from the real committee of Bank’s directors in an attempt to obtain a re-charter.⁴¹

Pound demonstrates the “statesmen, mostly ignorant and, if not ignorant, either shallow or shifty, all engaged in passing the buck, or in avoiding the question, i.e. ANY question whatsoever” through the exploitation of child labour.⁴² Pound uses excerpts from Marx’s *Das Kapital* (1867) to indicate how a “report of ’42 was merely chucked into the / archives and remained there while these boys were ruined / and became fathers of this generation....”⁴³ Here, Pound describes the exploitation of the “unfortunate labourers” as a consequence of an inability, or an unwillingness even, of the state to protect its people from the exploitations of laissez-faire capitalism: the state “had / been intending to introduce such a law but found itself / (re/ child labour not limited to 12 hours per day) always / blocked by the jealous uneasiness that met any law tamp- / erring with the absolute freedom of labour.”⁴⁴ Pound’s derisive use of “absolute freedom” functions to create a stark contrast between the experience of ‘freedom’ and its confining reality, and, simultaneously, draws a parallel with the evils of the “absolute power” opening Canto 33.

³⁵ Pound, *Cantos*, 159/32.

³⁶ Pound, *Cantos*, 160/33.

³⁷ Pound, *Cantos*, 160/33.

³⁸ Pound, *Cantos*, 160/33.

³⁹ Williams, *Selected Essays*, 167.

⁴⁰ Chace, “Canto as Cento,” 91; Pound, *Cantos*, 161/33.

⁴¹ Pound, *Cantos*, 184/37; Terrel, *Companion to the Cantos*, 151.

⁴² Pound, *J/M*, 13.

⁴³ Pound, *Cantos*, 162/33.

⁴⁴ Pound, *Cantos*, 162/33.

This collusive nature of the ruling class is extended beyond the aristocracy to include the “factory-owner” who “denounced the inspectors.”⁴⁵ In their attempt to maintain “absolute freedom of labour,” these owners found ways to manipulate the system:

And if the same small boys are merely shifted from the spinning room to the weaving room or from one factory to another, how can the inspector verify the number of hours they are worked?⁴⁶

Thus, regardless of the state’s willingness or the laws put in place, the system allows for corruption and manipulation abetting the exploitation of the masses. Pound recognises the dynamism of greed and usury, as omnipresent in all systems, and how the ruling class “have enquired what / theories are in fashion” and consequently “have reported their / facts to fit” generating “150 millions / yearly, merely in usurious discounts....”⁴⁷

Pound sees these symptoms of mass-exploitation through “hard labour, poverty, / ignorance,” as a consequence of the control over knowledge.⁴⁸ This control is aimed at “the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity.”⁴⁹ Through Pound’s reference of “type-founding to which antimony is essential,” we are made aware of the inherent political power that knowledge is accompanied by.⁵⁰ Pound here refers to the necessary “antimony,” an essential element of the alloy used to make type-metal, which allows for an independent type-founding “so that the U.S. would not have to obtain its books from England.”⁵¹ The “antimony,” which is thus related to the creation, preservation, and spread of knowledge, is made political by the diplomatic role it fulfils: the U.S. must acquire raw materials in Spain in order to gain cultural independence from England.

This transatlantic reference is furthermore relevant for the balance between the exploited masses and the ruling elite, as “language is itself a field of class domination, subordination and resistance.”⁵² Pound provides several examples of this in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935), for example in the character of “a lying and obsequious British politician who dislikes ‘colloquial language’ because the reader might understand it,”⁵³ or in the laws of Lloyd George which

were framed in such sloppy and ambiguous language that NO ONE, positively no one, could make out what they intended: i.e., they really took the legislative power out of the hands of the legislators and left it for wangers and pettifoggers, to be construed to the gang’s greatest advantage.⁵⁴

Thus, language, and consequently knowledge as well, becomes a field of control. By deliberately limiting the accessibility of their language, the ruling elite exclude the masses from participation in the discourse on societal control and exploitation. Also, a deliberate deployment of ambiguity allows for meaning to be construed and reformulated at will.

⁴⁵ Pound, *Cantos*, 162-3/33.

⁴⁶ Pound, *Cantos*, 163/33.

⁴⁷ Pound, *Cantos*, 163-4/33.

⁴⁸ Pound, *Cantos*, 158/32.

⁴⁹ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 21.

⁵⁰ Pound, *Cantos*, 158/32.

⁵¹ Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 127.

⁵² Brooker, “Lesson of EP,” 43.

⁵³ Pound, *J/M*, 43.

⁵⁴ Pound, *J/M*, 77.

Pound's assessment of the newly arrived "popular newspaper" appears to fit in Carey's categorisation of the intellectuals, finding in the newspapers only "an overthrow of standards."⁵⁵ However, Pound's critique is focalised around the conscious control of knowledge and manipulation of truth by the press, rather than the masses' "gullibility with regard to newsprint."⁵⁶ Pound argues that "for 50 years" the education of the masses has been diluted by "inaccurate reports about letters" by "a great number of affable, suave, moderate men, all of them perfectly and smugly convinced of their respectability and all incapable of any twinge of conscience on account of any form of mental cowardice or any falsification of reports whatsoever."⁵⁷ Pound's emphasis on the structural deprivation of truth from the masses is exemplified by Jefferson who states "A tiel leis...en ancien scripture, and this / they have translated *Holy Scripture*..."⁵⁸ Terrell translates this as: "according to such laws; in old handwriting."⁵⁹ This fragment exposes the structural dilution and manipulation of truth through funnels of authority or corruption; a historic mistranslation controls the knowledge of the present. This is furthermore emphasised by Pound's use of "hidden fields" of reference such as Jefferson's private correspondence,⁶⁰ which, through the act of making public, attempts to counter the "secret knowledge which only intellectuals could possess" through the "despotic historical blackout which suppressed vital documents."⁶¹

Pound argues that the 'free' press, who "exercise almost 'any and every' activity utterly regardless of its effect on the commonweal," are entirely corrupt "either from economic or personal causes:" "English papers...their lies....."⁶² Instead, Pound values a press aimed at "public utility" rather than a press that "merely serves special interests."⁶³ This manipulation of the press is reflected in Canto 41:

Pays to control the Times, for its effect on the market
 'where there is no censorship by the state
 there is a great deal of manipulation...'
 and news sense?⁶⁴

Rather than bearing any "news sense," the papers are guided by economic benefactors and, lacking a state censorship of the press aimed at "public utility," constitute a corruption of their societal function in favour of "serv[ing] special interests."

Rather than criticising the fictional masses and their connotations, Pound focuses on the structures and processes that control and manipulate these masses. Pound's modernism aims not to "defeat,"⁶⁵ but, instead, to liberate the masses through giving "the names and the manner of that murderous business" and by repeatedly asking himself "[t]hrough what mechanisms did he [or they] act?"⁶⁶ Pound recognises the political and economic power within which the control over the exchange of knowledge and truth lies, exposing especially the collusive nature of newspapers.

⁵⁵ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 6; 10.

⁵⁶ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 31.

⁵⁷ Pound, "Teacher's Mission," 630.

⁵⁸ Pound, *Cantos*, 156/31.

⁵⁹ Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 124.

⁶⁰ Fender, "Words of the Page," 96.

⁶¹ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 71; Eiselein, "Jefferson in the Thirties," 35.

⁶² Pound, "Teacher's Mission," 632; 631; *Cantos*, 154/31.

⁶³ Pound, *J/M*, 41.

⁶⁴ Pound, *Cantos*, 205/41.

⁶⁵ Carey, *Intellectuals and the Masses*, 21.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Selected Essays*, 167; Pound, *J/M*, 15.

3. The “New Subject”

One of the systems by which the masses are manipulated is the “new subject”: economics.⁶⁷ An exploration of Pound’s revaluation and reconstruction of economic theories is crucial in understanding the materialism that controls and exploits the masses. Pound uses different economic ideologies, mainly those of C. H. Douglas and Silvio Gesell, with an emphasis on “useful effort” or “inherent activity,” and, in combination with fervent acts of measuring, renews the economic structures of society.⁶⁸ The value of labour is logically determined through market prices, assigning monetary value to the “effort of converting one thing into another.”⁶⁹ This valuation of effort, however, problematises those acts of labour undervalued in monetary terms, painfully obvious “for poets, who for the most part have had great difficulty in selling the products of their imaginative labor.”⁷⁰ Thus, “useful effort” recognises that labour “may or may not have a money value attached to it. Yet ‘if this effort is useful effort—‘useful’ in the sense that a definite, healthy and sane human requirement is served—the wealth of the community may thereby be enhanced.”⁷¹ This emphasis on the “commonweal” forms logically from Pound’s abhorrence of the with greed sodden laissez-faire capitalism.⁷² In its defence of “the interests of primary producers against those of the middlemen who live off wealth created by others,” ‘useful effort’ values labour only in relation to “its use for the promotion of well-being,” thusly disregarding market valuation of labour.⁷³

In situations where labour was valued through a market equilibrium, set in motion by the process of laissez-faire capitalism, Social Creditors often recognised that “there was often ‘poverty in the midst of plenty’.”⁷⁴ Douglas’ objective, namely an increase in “purchasing power for consumers,”⁷⁵ is echoed by Pound, who argues for “dynamic and mobile” use of money, rather than the “crowns lying dead in / his coffers.”⁷⁶ Consequently, an increase of monetary circulation will put the money “into people’s pockets.”⁷⁷

Besides the hoarding of money restricting the masses’ purchasing power, Douglas recognises a detrimental flaw in the economic system in that “[t]otal cost exceeds total purchasing power.”⁷⁸ Pound sketches the situation for us: “a factory... / It pays workers, and pays *for* material,” it pays “workers in salaries, wages, and dividends” and “cover[s] costs of production.”⁷⁹ However, as factories’ costs, through “production”, “overhead”, and “repay” of interest and loans,⁸⁰ logically exceed the total money that “stays fluid, as power to buy,”⁸¹ the

⁶⁷ Pound, *J/M*, 86.

⁶⁸ Kenner, *Pound Era*, 303; Trotter, “Form-Sense and Dictator-Sense,” 84.

⁶⁹ Kenner, *Pound Era*, 303.

⁷⁰ Marsh, *Money and Modernity*, 31.

⁷¹ Kenner, *Pound Era*, 303.

⁷² Pound, “Teacher’s Mission,” 630.

⁷³ Trotter, “Form-Sense and Dictator-Sense,” 83; Douglas qtd. in Kenner, *Pound Era*, 304.

⁷⁴ Hickman, *Letters of EP*, 261.

⁷⁵ Hickman, *Letters of EP*, 261.

⁷⁶ Pound, *J/M*, 80; *Cantos*, 161/33.

⁷⁷ Pound, *J/M*, 80.

⁷⁸ Kenner, *Pound Era*, 307.

⁷⁹ Pound, *Cantos*, 190/38; Hickman, *Letters of EP*, 269.

⁸⁰ Hickman, *Letters of EP*, 269.

⁸¹ Pound, *Cantos*, 190/38.

masses could never purchase what they have produced: “there is and must be therefore a clog.”⁸² This is Social Credit’s “A+B Theorem.”⁸³

However, more relevant than an economic study of the early twentieth century, Pound takes these economic principles and, in rather conspiratorial terms, “Invent[s]”, that is by “discover[y]” and “construct[ion],” and articulates systemic alternatives to the laissez-faire system of American capitalism.⁸⁴ Pound adds to Douglas’ Social Credit ideas with Silvio Gesell, who “proposed a system of stamped money in order to accelerate monetary circulation and to free money from interest.”⁸⁵ Pound refers to Gesellian thought in Canto 41: “And Woergl in our time?”⁸⁶ The Austrian town of Wörgl incorporated a “system of stamped notes called ‘labour notes’ ... that were issued by the municipal office” and were encouraged to purchase, rather than save, causing the local economy to recover due to an increase in “currency movement.”⁸⁷

Besides some typical Jeffersonian ideas already mentioned, such as “natural value” as opposed to market value and its “distributionist” aim at increasing “access to money,” Pound echoes the “agrarian ideology.”⁸⁸ In Canto 32, he recognises “wealth ... as actual produce and real property rather than money”⁸⁹: “Oryzia mutica, the upland or mountain rice... / seed of perennial succory...very famous turnip of Sweden.....”⁹⁰ Pound identifies that wealth is to be acquired through the physical labour of growing crops, and that, above all, this wealth is “perennial” as opposed to the arbitrary monetary value of (printed) money. This principle builds upon Pound’s earlier critique of the press and those in control of knowledge—by preventing the seed of knowledge to be planted in the masses—as Pound is aware that “[a] field is one thing to the strolling by-passer, another to the impressionist painter, yet another to the farmer determined to plant seed in it, and get a return.”⁹¹ Pound argues that the Jeffersonian ideals and Douglasite inventions were victimised by those “dilutions” of truth mentioned in the previous section, and, “had they received adequate attention and open discussion,” could have prevented economic struggle.⁹²

In unifying Douglas’ and Gesell’s economic ideas with Jeffersonian ideals, Pound reflects Douglas’ inclination of “demoniz[ing] finance as a sinister international conspiracy” aimed at exploiting the masses, through the covert manipulation of the economic system.⁹³ Pound points us to “the signs of a ‘usurocratic’ conspiracy” in Canto 33.⁹⁴ In this Canto, the bank conspired “to bring about an unfair deflation of reserve bank loans” causing “many small business enterprises, dependent on such loans, [to have] the rug pulled from beneath them.”⁹⁵ Pound depicts how the masses are kept in the dark: “wd. suggest, gentlemen, / you be careful not to give out anything about any dis- / cussion of discount rates,” and, how, consequently, a small group profited of this secrecy: “he was out after a loan of 60 millions, and got it” while “the country at large did not know it.”⁹⁶

⁸² Pound, *Cantos*, 190/38.

⁸³ Hickman, *Letters of EP*, 269.

⁸⁴ Bell, “Mechanical TJ,” 149.

⁸⁵ Blanc, “Gesell’s Theory,” 1.

⁸⁶ Pound, *Cantos*, 205/41.

⁸⁷ Blanc, “Gesell’s Theory,” 8.

⁸⁸ Marsh, *Money and Modernity*, 12-3; 22.

⁸⁹ Marsh, *Money and Modernity*, 22.

⁹⁰ Pound, *Cantos*, 157/32.

⁹¹ Pound, *J/M*, 42.

⁹² Pound, “Teacher’s Mission,” 632-3.

⁹³ Hickman, *Letters of EP*, 269.

⁹⁴ Brooker, “Lesson of EP,” 27.

⁹⁵ Chace, “Canto as Cento,” 98.

⁹⁶ Pound, *Cantos*, 164/33.

To strengthen his conspiratorial view of economics, Pound employs acts of strict measurement. For him, the act of measurement, and proper and truthful measurement especially, is crucial in the construction of truth, a role reserved for a nation's "voltmeters and steam-gauges."⁹⁷ Opposing the fog and secrecy of the banks' conspiracies, Pound tries to present the truth in the most transparent terms, measuring the amounts and values of economic disproportions. Pound measures the import of tobacco in France:

‘Their tobacco, 9 millions, delivered in port of France;
6 millions to manufacture
on which the king takes thirty million
that cost 25 odd to collect
so that in all it costs 72 millions livres to the
consumer.....
persuaded (I am) in this branch of revenue
the collection absorbs too much.’⁹⁸

Here, Pound walks us through the process of importation by analysing how the price is defined by the costs of importation and, crucially, to costs of tax collection. The monopoly with “the privilege of tax collection” is “costly to everyone except those who own the monopoly.”⁹⁹ After coming to a conclusive market price of “72 millions livres,” Pound forces us to pause and think about the “consumer.....” through the use of enjambment and following it with ellipsis. As a reader, we are confronted with the process by which the market value is corrupted through monopolies and conspiracies at the cost of the masses (the “consumer”).

Furthermore, through Pound's altered repetition of the same fragment in Canto 41, the act of measuring is emphasised by the inclusion of the ‘at sign’: “delivered in ports of France @ 8 sous / 9 million 600 thousand.”¹⁰⁰ Curiously, this sign does not have a proper name in English, being referred to as the “‘at sign’ or sometimes the ‘commercial at’.”¹⁰¹ This latter name is relevant in its function of measuring ‘commerce,’ indicating the rate at which produce is being sold. Pound strips the fragment of all language irrelevant to the act of measuring and the usage of a symbol uninhibited by language acts as the climax of measurement. The emphasis on an objective representation of the flawed market—through the usage of the ‘at sign’—enables Pound to exclude language's ambiguity, which, as discussed in the previous section, had proven ambiguous in its transference of an objective truth. Thus, his usage of the ‘at sign’ distances Pound from the collusive elites he sees as exploiting the masses.

By a similar approach Pound exposes the political power that accompanies economic power through a comparison between two presidents, the president of the bank and the president of the U.S., Van Buren:

4 to 5 million balance in the national treasury
Receipts 31 to 32 million
Revenue 32 to 33 million
The Bank 341 million, and in deposits
6 millions of government money
(and a majority in the Senate)

⁹⁷ Pound, “Teacher's Mission,” 630.

⁹⁸ Pound, *Cantos*, 154/31.

⁹⁹ Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 121.

¹⁰⁰ Pound, *Cantos*, 205/41.

¹⁰¹ Webb, *Clash of Symbols*, 14.

Public Money in control of the President
from 15 to 20 thousand (id est, a fund for the secret service)¹⁰²

Pound strips Van Buren's words to the bare essential measurements, thusly emphasising the monetary contrast between the two presidents. Furthermore, the insertion of the verse "(and a majority in the Senate)" alludes to the bank's "devoted partisans" in the Senate, and, by placing the verse in brackets, it becomes apparent how this monetary power also grants political power.¹⁰³

Thus, through an exploration of the systems that control knowledge, in **Section 2**, and economics, in **Section 3**, Pound exposes the conspiracies, consciously kept secret, that, fed by greed, exploit and suppress the masses. In exposing the intertwining of political and economic power, Pound deploys minimal amounts of language, favouring an emphasis on concise measurement by focusing on monetary values and using the 'at sign'. This, consequently, contrasts with the manner in which these systems of control have been exploited historically, using language ambiguity and deliberate secrecy. Furthermore, Pound always attempts to "make it new," meaning re-constructing different economic theories fed by Jeffersonian ideals.¹⁰⁴

4. Agency

After having identified the problems inherent to the systems that control society, we now turn to Pound's solution through an exploration of agency in *Eleven New Cantos* (1934). Even though the reader is confronted with Pound's uncertainty of literature's role in "response to the world turmoil of the Great Depression": "Litterae nihil sanantes," Pound undertakes the construction of an ideal individual to reinstate order in chaos.¹⁰⁵

Pound provides several examples of poor leadership and its consequences. In Canto 33 he introduces "the gent. at / the head of that dept."¹⁰⁶ This situation describes a prisoner of war camp where the prisoners are victims of the quartermaster's inept government. Instead of feeding and caring for the prisoners, "apply the resources of this country, / wheresoever they are to be had," the quartermaster is entertained with bureaucracy: "If the troops cd. be fed upon long letters, I believe the gent. at / the head of that dept. (in this country) wd. be the best / commissary on earth."¹⁰⁷ The importance of "[s]imple competence"¹⁰⁸ in the midst of plentiful "resources" indicates that "removal wd. be necessary to more able commissaries rather than / to a more plentiful country."¹⁰⁹

As a response, Pound constructs leaders with "affinities of Odyssean 'polumetis' (many-mindedness), Confucian inner discipline, an ability to commit ideas unswervingly to action, and a 'will towards order'."¹¹⁰ Throughout *Eleven New Cantos* it becomes apparent that Mussolini, or, rather, the Mussolini as constructed by Pound, embodies all qualities Pound sees crucial to effective leadership. Before exploring the essential qualities of the leading individual, Pound attempts to contrast Mussolini with the corrupted and greedy ruling class explored in

¹⁰² Pound, *Cantos*, 184/37.

¹⁰³ Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 150.

¹⁰⁴ Pound, *J/M*, 112.

¹⁰⁵ Redman qtd. in White, "Canto 32," 268; Pound, *Cantos*, 161/33.

¹⁰⁶ Pound, *Cantos*, 160/33.

¹⁰⁷ Pound, *Cantos*, 160/33.

¹⁰⁸ Chace, "Canto as Cento," 92.

¹⁰⁹ Pound, *Cantos*, 161/33.

¹¹⁰ Brooker, "Lesson of EP," 26.

Section 2 and **Section 3** of this study. Pound sketches Mussolini's situation before acquiring a ruling position:

Eleven hours the day, 32 centimes the hour
 'and you stole it'
 said the employer at Orbe
 After the boss had worn out his best only shoes.¹¹¹

Pound's version of Mussolini had been familiar with the exploitation of the masses, "Mussolini appeared as almost indistinguishable from the people he talked to, worked with, or walked alongside."¹¹² By naming Mussolini "the boss," a name more applicable to the Mussolini after 1922, a contrast is created between the actual boss, "the employer," and the person not yet in charge but who already possesses the qualities of a Poundian "boss."

Pound's ideal individual is defined as a "Genius," "capable of dealing with NEW circumstances,"¹¹³ who is able to "sort out the roots from the branches ... and to grasp the MAIN STRUCTURE of his subject,"¹¹⁴ and who is able to "*get things DONE*."¹¹⁵ Pound sees these characteristics culminated in Mussolini and/or the artist. Pound argues that no "estimate of Mussolini will be valid unless it *starts* from his passion for construction."¹¹⁶ Pound sees the ideal leader as artist, as "the antennae of the race,"¹¹⁷ and argues that "[t]he party that follows him [the artist] wins."¹¹⁸ Thereby justifying the totalitarian rule of the artist, as for example in Fascist Italy, because "[w]hen a single mind is sufficiently ahead of the mass a one-party system is bound to *occur as actuality* whatever the details of form in administration."¹¹⁹

We can see this authoritarianism of the artist in Pound's language and the freedom he grants himself to alter the facts, in this case historical documents. Even though Bell argues that Canto 31 is characterised by the "literal repeatability" of Jefferson's private correspondence,¹²⁰ Pound enforces his voice through the poem by altering Jefferson's. In addition to the construction of "not Jefferson's, but Pound's (or perhaps Pound's interpretation of Jefferson's) political-economic-social-cultural-historical vision" through the re-ordering of fragments of documents,¹²¹ we can see detailed changes in language to suit a more authoritarian voice. Rather than repeating Jefferson's words: "Yet I am persuaded you will find... that the collection of this branch of the revenue still absorbs too much,"¹²² Pound alters it into "persuaded (I am) in this branch of the revenue / the collection absorbs too much."¹²³ By enforcing a more archaic word order, placing the verb prior to the subject, Pound's conclusion, that the collection is too expensive, is given more weight. Furthermore, Jefferson's "I am" is edited to function as editor's intervention. Through the parenthetical "(I am)" Pound inserts himself into the fragment, and, through the minimalistic addition of parenthesis, emphasises the editorial control over Jefferson's words.

¹¹¹ Pound, *Cantos*, 203/41.

¹¹² Hull, *Machine has a Soul*, 92.

¹¹³ Pound, *J/M*, 19.

¹¹⁴ Pound, "Teacher's Mission," 631.

¹¹⁵ Pound, *J/M*, 89.

¹¹⁶ Pound, *J/M*, 33-4.

¹¹⁷ Pound, "Teacher's Mission," 630.

¹¹⁸ Pound qtd. in Zanotti, "Fascism," 386.

¹¹⁹ Pound, *J/M*, 125.

¹²⁰ Bell, "Mechanical TJ," 166.

¹²¹ Eiselein, "Jefferson in the Thirties," 39.

¹²² Jefferson, *Writings of TJ*, 69.

¹²³ Pound, *Cantos*, 154/31.

One of the primary qualities Pound saw in Mussolini was his ability *to get things done*. Through authoritarian rule, allowing the individual in charge to bypass all bureaucracy, Mussolini was celebrated for his “[e]xecutive actions, not conferences and talk...He cuts through. No idle words...Accomplishment! Not fine-spoken theories; not plans; not speeches he is going to make. Things done!”¹²⁴ Pound argues that the shrewd decision and policy as set by the leader could counter the economic systems that inevitably lead to war (“guns are a merchandise”¹²⁵). Through Mussolini’s implementation of passports, he was able to prevent Italians from working in France, who, through their newly acquired land “by the so-called peace,”¹²⁶ sought to refuel the war-machine by digging for iron. Pound argues that Mussolini’s implementation of such laws is justified in order to protect the masses from “the love, the loving and tender love of banks for munition works.”¹²⁷ Pound saw Mussolini’s absolute power justified through his “will toward *order*,” instead of the corrupted ruling class “thirsting for power.”¹²⁸ This point, however, appears to remain deliberately vague with Pound continuing to justify Mussolini’s absolute power in relation to poetic, rather than practical and political notions, of leadership.

In order for leadership to be effective, one requires “the capacity to pick out the element of immediate and major importance in any tangle.”¹²⁹ Pound echoes this in his recreation of his meeting with Mussolini in 1933. Pound recalls Mussolini’s reaction to *A Draft of XXX Cantos* (1930):

Ma questo,
said the Boss, ‘è divertente.’
catching the point before the aesthetes had got
there;¹³⁰

Rather than a statement of politeness, Pound saw in this reaction Mussolini’s ability to immediately separate the core idea from the fog that surrounds it. This is further emphasised, and connected to the ability to get things done, by the example given of Mussolini’s efficiency: “Having drained off the muck by Vada / From the marshes, by Circeo, where no one else wd. have / drained it.”¹³¹ The unidentified “there” is thus defined by the isolation of the result: “drained it.”

Pound’s use of historical documents reflects the “opportunism of the artist, who has definite aim, and creates out of the materials present.”¹³² Pound argues that the artist, and thus the leader, be “[o]pportunist? Rightly opportunist!” in order to be able to reconstruct the past into the present.¹³³ We can relate this to T. S. Eliot’s discussion on tradition. Rather than finding individuality and agency in ways “in which he [the artist] least resembles anyone else,” “the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.”¹³⁴ Eliot argues that through “great labour” a sense of history

¹²⁴ Diggins qtd. in Trotter, “Form-Sense and Dictator-Sense,” 84.

¹²⁵ Pound, *Cantos*, 191/38.

¹²⁶ Pound, *J/M*, 72.

¹²⁷ Pound, *J/M*, 72.

¹²⁸ Pound, *J/M*, 99.

¹²⁹ Pound, *J/M*, 66.

¹³⁰ Pound, *Cantos*, 202/41.

¹³¹ Pound, *Cantos*, 202/41.

¹³² Pound, *J/M*, 15.

¹³³ Pound, *J/M*, 64.

¹³⁴ Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 48.

can be obtained that “involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”¹³⁵ Pound provides an example: “...wish that I cd. subjoin Gosindi’s Syntagma / ‘of the doctrines of Epicurus.”¹³⁶ Pound, engaged in the labour required to obtain that historical sense through his use of fragments from historical documents (“take the text and let time transpose it”¹³⁷), attempts to construct “an eternal truth” which is “eternal because it could be applied in the present.”¹³⁸

In his function as “editor-poet,” Pound translates historic documents, both private and public, into verse.¹³⁹ Consequently, *Eleven New Cantos* is “seen in this way to fail in so far as they depend unjustifiably on external and sometimes tedious sources.”¹⁴⁰ This conclusion, however, is negligent of the ways in which Pound successfully translates the past into the present, obtaining a “dictator-sense” that aimed at presenting the fragments “in usable form, as something which would not bewilder the mind of man or turn the mind of woman towards bed,” favouring the public dictatorial declarations over illuminations to be found in “the most shrouded of intimacies.”¹⁴¹ Rather than scrutinising the “tedious sources,” the reader is presented with “the kind of truth which should appear immediately self-evident to all, without prompting or coaxing.”¹⁴² Eiselein recognises a similar process in Pound’s translation of, for example, Jefferson’s correspondence: “He tightens the language.”¹⁴³ We can see a direct reference to this in the opening line of Canto 31: “Tempus loquendi, / Tempus tacendi,” meaning “There is a time to speak, there is a time to be silent.”¹⁴⁴ By following these lines by the declarative “Said Mr Jefferson” Pound remains in editorial control of Jefferson’s words. Before commencing on *Eleven New Cantos*, Pound explains his process—understanding the relevance of the past—and presents us with Jefferson’s correspondence “as the technological ‘still workable dynamo’.”¹⁴⁵

Pound thus identifies the importance of an individual’s command of language and rhetoric. This is echoed in Canto 37 where Martin Van Buren, President of the United States, finds himself fighting the banks in attempt to save the masses from exploitation. Van Buren’s intentions align with Pound’s ideal leader, resisting the inherent greed of laissez-faire capitalism, but his actions fail to accomplish what Pound’s Mussolini has. Van Buren’s lack of total control over language constitutes a failure to connect with his audience:

Said one of the wool-buyers:
 ‘Able speech by Van Buren
 ‘Yes, very able.’
 ‘Ye-es, Mr Knower, an’ on which side ov the tariff was it?
 ‘Point I was in the act off considering’
 replied Mr Knower
 In the mirror of memory: have been told I rendered
 the truth a great service by that speech on the tariff
 but directness on all points wd. seem not

¹³⁵ Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 49.

¹³⁶ Pound, *Cantos*, 156/31.

¹³⁷ Pound, *J/M*, 80.

¹³⁸ Craig, *Politics of Poetry*, 5.

¹³⁹ Eiselein, “Jefferson in the Thirties,” 31.

¹⁴⁰ Brooker, “Lesson of EP,” 17.

¹⁴¹ Trotter, “Form-Sense and Dictator-Sense,” 90.

¹⁴² Trotter, “Form-Sense and Dictator-Sense,” 90.

¹⁴³ Eiselein, “Jefferson in the Thirties,” 33.

¹⁴⁴ Pound, *Cantos*, 153/31; Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos*, 120.

¹⁴⁵ Bell, “Mechanical TJ,” 158.

to have been its conspicuous feature.¹⁴⁶

As recognised by Preda, Van Buren lacks the “adjustment between language and [his] respective space/time.”¹⁴⁷ Similar to the use of “such sloppy and ambiguous language” used in law-making, allowing the language “to be construed to the gang’s greatest advantage,”¹⁴⁸ a failure to translate, ideas into language and the past into the present, will prevent the masses from being liberated by the artist.

Conclusion

Ezra Pound’s *Eleven New Cantos* (1934) reflects a historical materialism in that it aims to expose the restrictions imposed on society, the consequent exploitation of the masses by a smaller, socially and economically more powerful group, and Pound’s argument for the artist’s, in this case Mussolini’s, rejection and revaluation of the materialism.

The aim of the artist and leader, as defined by Pound, is very much concerned with didactics: the ideal leader “tried to educate another. It wasn’t technically and officially his business ... but ... he couldn’t exactly help himself.”¹⁴⁹ Pound defines leadership according to ideal characteristics, as inherent and naturally belonging to the artist in response to materialistically oppressive societal structures.

Crucially, Pound’s objective remains vague, describing his objective only through “the will toward *order*.”¹⁵⁰ Fitting with the historical materialistic view of a “continuous” process of clashes between rigid and oppressive structures and agency,¹⁵¹ *Eleven New Cantos* “requires a similarly unqualified faith in the driving will towards order of the constructive single personalities at their centres.”¹⁵² Pound’s use of tradition, judging the historically determined structures as corrupted, using economic traditions to ‘invent’ the present, and translating and altering historical fragments into the present, echoes the emphasis on progress rather than a static terminus as the “‘uncompleted structure’ of ‘tradition’ denied the easy satisfaction of fixity or self-sufficiency by its emphasis on process or growth which ... ‘properly *is* not but is only always *becoming*’.”¹⁵³ Concludingly, *Eleven New Cantos* shows that “[w]hat they have lost is definite, and what they have gained is indefinite.”¹⁵⁴

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¹⁴⁷ Preda, “Canto 37,” 304.
¹⁴⁸ Pound, *J/M*, 77.
¹⁴⁹ Pound, *J/M*, 14.
¹⁵⁰ Pound, *J/M*, 99.
¹⁵¹ Volle, “Historical Materialism.”
¹⁵² Brooker, “Lesson of EP,” 24.
¹⁵³ Bell, *Scientist*, 172.
¹⁵⁴ Eliot, *Sacred Wood*, 9.

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