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UNDER THE SIGN OF PAIDEUMA: SCARY IDEOGRAMS & THE NEW FASCISMS

In memory of my sons, Dylan and Jesse

This summer (2006), as I was preparing to write this talk, I was struck by the seeming disconnect between the task I had before me and the news I was hearing each day on the radio.¹ More dead in Iraq. More dead in Darfur. More torture. More threats against Venezuela. More charred corpses in Lebanon. More crimes against humanity committed by the United States government with impunity. We are creatures of a culture best symbolized by the \$100,000 tax break for the purchase of a Hummer. We ride the streets in vehicles of death and imperialist violence while the ice caps melt.

I cannot continue to write about poetry in the ways I have in the past.² I have often championed the poetics of disruption, writing the same sentences we have seen in print all around us:

"This poetry challenges the status quo."

"This poetry explores the material conditions of its medium."

"This poetry engages in a contestation of the powers that be through a counter-hegemonic discourse that subverts the oppressive conditions brought about by narrativity, hypotactic totalization, unilinear construction of identities, monolingual constrictions of social praxis, bourgeois subjectivity in the expressive self of the poem, masculinist framings of generic expectations, essentialist constructions of ethnicity and race."

And at the end of the day I hear all about how the U.S. Senate has voted to uphold the President's erasure of habeas corpus, the torture

and secret imprisonment without trial of people from around the globe who hate our freedom, and how the Israeli government's relentless efforts to extinguish the Palestinian people along with their elected representatives is a *just* mission necessary for their and our homeland security, the fulfilment of a Biblical mandate to replace the British Mandate, and the securing of U.S. interests in the Middle East. Fascism is for us no longer simply a foreign threat but one at the very core of our postmodern globalized being. Fascism is no longer something we can so intricately carve away from our Poundian inheritance.

So what is to be done? How should two poetry journals, historically dedicated to the study of Ezra Pound's poetry and poetics, of the Pound-Williams-H.D. tradition, now conceive their mission for *these* times, under the sign of Paideuma, this, our current tangle or complex of inrooted ideas? Here, under the sign of Paideuma, under the sign of Ezra Pound, we confront two grounding tropes: Paideuma, Sagetrieb. And what are our implications *in* these tropes? Where do we stand, on what grounds are we to mark our locations in relation to the space of the Paideuma, the insistencies of the Sagetrieb? In the poem, perhaps, this empire of the word's turning?

FROBENIUS

We know the story of origins: Leo Frobenius, trying to erase the eurocentric maps of African culture and marking the space of cultural poetics, emplots his turn to paideuma. Paideuma: the vision of a totalized poetic culture in which the artist and the wiseman, the ruler and the visionary draw around themselves the longings of a people. The educational mission of poetry and of borders drawn in blood: these are, in part, our Poundian inheritance. Living under the sign of Paideuma and Pound's consciously fascist cultural poetics, we need to question the ease with which we fall into formulaic notions concerning the relationships between poetic forms and cultural politics, both in our necessarily recurring examinations of Modernist politics and in our contemporary extensions of Modernism as they implicate themselves in the politics of neoliberalism and a renascent fascism.

REVOLUTIONARY POUND

A common move by those who see themselves as positioned in some way in the stream of Pound's influence is to distinguish—to varying degrees—between his poetics and his politics. Despite Pound's political intentions, the argument often goes, the very form of the poetry enacts a politics at odds with those intentions. The political effect of the ideogrammic method is radically leftist despite Pound's avowed radically fascist and antisemitic politics. Burton Hatlen, for example, who complicates the left-right opposition in relation to fascism, has written, "I do not believe that *The Cantos* can accurately be labelled a 'fascist poem,' simply because Pound's political ideology undergoes a radical decomposition—or, if you like, a deconstruction—as it is transmuted by Pound's ideogrammic method" (Hatlen 145). The politics of the ideogram's formal alchemy, then, is what performs an immanent decomposition of ideology.

Charles Bernstein agrees with Hatlen, although he urges us to read Pound "through the fascism . . . in the most specific social and historical terms" in addition to "reading poetic forms politically, as an economy of signs . . . , thinking through the implications of poetic structures, rather than imagining them ever to be neutral or transparent" (Bernstein 156–57). Robert von Hallberg, on the other hand, insists that such structures are neutral, and in this way he can tell us that Pound wasn't *always* a fascist.³

TOTALITARIAN STRUCTURES OF LANGUAGE

So what is it about the ideogrammic method that possesses this alchemical power? This championing of the ideogrammic method or parataxis as something radical depends on the belief that an array of fragments breaks down the suffocating closure of mainstream society's insistence on narrative continuity, the totalitarian nature of the story we are supposed to believe and propagate as members of this society. We find our identity in the sheltering closure of this suppression of independent thought. Social discourse hems us in by limiting the possibilities for, or altogether erasing from view, an alternative discourse. This narrative framing seemingly reinforces the

illusion of the bourgeois subject as a free individual who sees the notion of self as the seat of power, the transparent execution of will.

Ron Silliman has spoken of this transparency as the disappearance of the word through the repression of gesturality in language within the development of capitalism. The result, he explains, "is an anaesthetic transformation of the perceived tangibility of the word, with corresponding increases in its expository, descriptive and narrative capacities, preconditions for the invention of 'realism' [and reference]" (*New Sentence* 10). What is lost are any marks of the word's material origins in the social production of meaning. The standard hypotactically connected sentence that erases its materiality in the move to restrict itself to its referential function figures as the capitalist expropriation of surplus value, of embodied labor power.⁴ The apparently unmotivated orchestration of fragments by homology, on the other hand, comes to stand in for the communist reappropriation of value through the rematerialization of the labor power that had been made invisible or transparent by commodity fetishism. In short, we exist within the confines of narrative closure, and fragment-writing, such as the new sentence, as the material expression of avant-gardist desire, breaks out of this closure. Bernstein argues that it is precisely this fragmentation, and not Pound's fascist tendencies, that leads some writers to dismiss Pound altogether. The real problem for these particular poets and critics, Bernstein argues, is their "dislike for collage, parataxis, and the very strikingly rhetorical surfaces of Pound's poems" (155–56). They hate our freedom!

I would argue, however, that the only way readers might arrive at this homology between hypotaxis and commodity fetishism is through the hypotactic referential language of critical essays such as Silliman's. Mimesis here occurs by means of a formal analogy put into play by Silliman the critic who draws the connections between poetic structure and commodity production. But just such a type of analogy for the opposite conclusion is put into play by Georg Lukacs when he sees a formal homology between modernist fragmentation and social fragmentation under capitalism. The political value of poetic fragmentation, then, arises out of its theoretical contextualization, not out of any inherent political nature of form. Barrett Watson put it this way in his poem "Museum of War":

I do not remember a flatbed truck containing nine bodies, their hair and clothes burned off, skin incinerated by heat so intense it melted the windshield. As a child I made line drawings of battleships with compass and ruler, drawing precise trajectories from weapons to targets. The evidence says each bomblet contained 600 steel fragments lethal up to 40 feet, violating protocols of the new sentence-as if this kind of analogy were even news! (20–21)

I'm a bit curious about the recurrent need to expound the revolutionary nature of Pound's poetic form, a claim that often accompanies the rejection of his loathsome politics. One question that occurs to me is, "What might we lose if it turns out that Pound's form is not revolutionary?" The buried notion here seems to be that we want and need poetic form to be revolutionary. Given the scary emanation of fascist desire manifest in some of Pound's content, we are driven to reassure ourselves of the saving grace of Pound's poetic form.

The question here, I would wager, is not really about the revolutionary nature of poetic form, however, but about the desire to legitimize our fascination with Pound and our need to pose him as the great American father of twentieth century poetry in the avant-garde tradition. Fascination and fascism stand uncomfortably close together in such a formulation. The repressed question, it seems, is, "How can we love a fascist and still live with ourselves?" And so we are driven to seek out a revolutionary side to his poetry with which we can more comfortably align ourselves. But the Poundian method's revolutionary status results from the prior determination of his method as avant-garde. A revolutionary avant-garde fascinated by a fascist poet—such a possibility seems to blur the line between Russian and Italian Futurism and any other revolutionary/reactionary distinction. A fascist avant-garde—maybe such a line should be blurred.⁵

SCARY IDEOGRAMS

Pound writes that "The ideogramic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register" (GK 51). One example of this ideogrammic poesis in action is the way the Bush administration orchestrated the propaganda campaign leading up to the current war with Iraq. The task is

to place disparate facets together—such as the World Trade Center, Osama bin Laden, and Saddam Hussein—and then let the audience draw the manufactured conclusions. Yes, the Bush administration connected the dots for us—as Pound did in his critical works—but they did so merely through unsubstantiated assertion. They rightly counted on the power of the American people's susceptibility to the ideogrammic method. A second example of scary ideogrammic logic involves some highly recognized contributors to the Buffalo Poetics Listserv who urged us to stop pussyfooting around and support the Bush regime's attacks on those responsible. Through imagistic magic we ended up with the paratactical juxtapositioning of Al Qaida and the people of Afghanistan—and then they let us bridge the gap.⁶ A third and much scarier example involves the international secret torture program called Operation Condor. Operation Condor was a multinational secret police operation that involved the construction of torture and death camps in the Southern Cone nations of South America. The scary parataxis involves the coordinated efforts of Latin American dictators, the United States FBI, exiled Nazi torture experts, and Israeli secret police. I find this vortex dizzying enough when I try to comprehend the U.S. recruitment of Nazis, but I am completely projected into the Imagistic stratosphere by the intellectual and emotional complex in which Israelis and Nazis effectively work together—in however mediated a way—in the administration of death camps and other terror campaigns that led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Latin Americans.⁷

I am making two points here: (1) that the ideogrammic method is not at odds with narrative closure but in fact invites it—that this was critical to Pound's hoped-for creation of a new culture; and (2) that this invited narrative is by no means guaranteed to be leftist. We can end up with Mussolini as quickly as Trotsky or the Zapatistas or—in keeping with the desires of the extreme left of the U.S. Democratic party—Hillary Clinton.

I believe we have to reconfigure the ways we contextualize the reception of poetics of heightened parataxis. The old argument that parataxis functions as a dismantling of the repressive linguistic structures of late capitalism will just not fly anymore. If anything, the language use of our current hegemonic structures operates far more

paratactically than hypotactically. Parataxis is the favorite tool of the right-wing avant-garde of neoliberalism. This from George Bush:

Because the—all which is on the table begins to address the big cost drivers. For example, how benefits are calculate, for example, is on the table; whether or not benefits rise based upon wage increases or price increases. There's a series of parts of the formula that are being considered. And when you couple that, those different cost drivers, affecting those—changing those with personal accounts, the idea is to get what has been promised more likely to be—or closer delivered to what has been promised. Does that make any sense to you? (“President Discusses”)

We now need to contextualize paratactic poesis as the presentation of fragmented knowledge and as the imperative to develop our synthesizing capacities. The only way that we can claim that the ideogrammic method, or any other poetic technique for that matter, has a particular political outcome or produces a particular state of consciousness is if we create the theoretical framework that draws our attention to just those political effects. In speaking of his poem “In a Station of the Metro,” Pound stated, “I dare say it is meaningless unless one has drifted into a certain vein of thought” (*EP&VA* 205). I propose that one such vein of thought should include, for example, the goal of reconstructing the effaced networks of global capitalism so that we *can* connect the dots from CIA cocaine production in Colombia to covert support for right-wing coups around the globe to the introduction of crack in Black, Latino, and poor white urban neighborhoods in the U.S. to the maintenance of university and welfare institutions that divert oppositional thinking and activities away from the actual centers of neoliberal power. I am not at all arguing *against* the strategic use of parataxis or the ideogrammic method but *for* the deliberate political reframing of these methods as a task for making explicit political connections. Political reconstruction is only totalitarian within a totalitarian framework. Here I agree in part with Von Hallberg—artistic forms *are* neutral when extracted from a given politicized context. But I would add that they never occur outside of such a context—which in reality is what he also believes when he argues in “Libertarian Imagism” that

imagist ideology should be connected to syndicalism rather than to fascism.

Fascism was not the result of Pound's poetry; it was the necessary condition for its realization. Only in a culture managed by a Mussolini could a fascist cultural poetics take place. The notion of paideuma itself as the "tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period" (GK 57), something akin to his definition of the vortex of a given cultural formation, suggests that the paideuma precedes the cultural poetics that consolidates rather than anticipates the "new civilization" Pound was seeking.⁸ "The 'New Learning' under the ideogram of the mortar" (GK 58) can only take place under the totalitarian control of the culture at large—and that seems ominously close today.

IN CONCLUSION

In the rockets' red glare, there we will see the dull opacities of history. In the blank anonymous unmarked perforations of death, there we will see the abyssal grounds we tread. In the seductive vacuum of the image's empty space, there we will mark the comings and goings of our implications in the best and the worst that our culture—this moment in the blanked-out sun called the present—has to offer as it inscribes, erases, overlays, and reinscribes the lineaments and trails of tears and blood we leave in our wake under the sign of Paideuma.

NOTES

1. I have chosen to make only the slightest editorial changes in this paper in order to remain faithful to its original (polemical) delivery as a public speech.
2. As I was setting out to write a critique of Alain Locke's liberalism by looking at the metaphors he used to frame the cultural poetics of the New Negro, I came to feel that I had nothing to say to match the demands of our current political condition. What did any of us have to gain by hearing again that the Harlem Renaissance could not withstand the forces of historical change? That is was Locke's liberalism and elitism that ultimately deflated his project of cultural change—marked by Locke's metaphor of the dam of racism? Locke claims that this dam is holding back black power's development and must be strategically pierced in order to produce a hydroelectric transformation of African American power. And it is through the enlightened cooperation of the educated ten percent of blacks and whites that this dam will

be transformed, preferably—for Locke—before it is blown up by the uneducated black masses that racism otherwise keeps in place.

3. See, e.g., Von Hallberg 64.

4. The serialized string of such referential sentences, Silliman writes, finds its apotheosis "in the modern unemployment line" (*New Sentence* 13).

5. See Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression*.

6. Ron Silliman, Marjorie Perloff, and David Antin led the call to stand united as Americans against Al Qaida. See, for example, Ron Silliman, September 18, 2001:

This solidarity [of the American people around the flag] is a unique and probably temporary phenomenon. It is certainly something that the left needs to address and examine. But a movement that surrenders its credibility by pretending that the murder of more than 5,000 people doesn't warrant a response, or which pussyfoots around the issue by reframing the assault is "criminal" rather than as an act of war, will have silenced itself before it has ever had the chance to speak. ("What Is to Be Done")

For all entries in this discussion, see the September and October 2001 archives for the Poetics List.

7. While Mossad's dramatic capture of exiled Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann in Argentina rightfully captured the headlines in 1960, their work with the U.S. and Latin American dictators and generals—and at least indirectly with other German Nazi exiles, not to mention Nazi and neonazi figures born in Latin America—did not get such press. In addition to this international sharing of torture and interrogation methods (which became formalized later as the School of the Americas), Israel worked especially closely with the brutal dictators and juntas of Argentina (leading to the deaths of over 2,000 Argentine Jews in addition to other Argentines) and later Guatemala, which served as the munitions center from the 1970s on. In order to cut down on shipping costs and possible interception, Israel built a munitions plant in Guatemala through which the Reagan administration was able to deliver arms to armies and paramilitary death squads (including the Nicaraguan Contras) without directly violating the legal limits imposed by the U.S. Congress and international law. See, for example, Bisharah Bahbah, *Israel and Latin America*.

8. "Pound's concept of the image as a vortex, for example, incorporates the social turbulence of London in a manner that resembles the correspondence between Jünger's concept of Gestalt—the 'visible order' of power—and the total mobilization of society. Indeed, projected onto society as a whole, the figure of the crowd becomes a dynamic form resembling the necessary illusions and afterimages associated with Gestalt psychology. At once archaic and modern, the fascist world-picture embedded in the doctrine of paideuma depicts the public sphere, and its private possessions, in a state of total mobilization" (Tiffany 23).

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JOEL NICKELS

THE ART OF INTERRUPTION:
WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND
NEW MATERIALIST POETICS

In the early twentieth century, experimental literature and economic theory maintained a rich, if somewhat confusing, dialogue. Ezra Pound's economic meditations, from *ABC of Economics* to *What is Money For?*, are well known. But as Michael Tratner notes, theories of credit, debt and consumption also play a shaping role in the works of authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and Zora Neale Hurston.¹ Luke Carson, in like manner, shows how large a part monetary exchange plays in Gertrude Stein's *Everybody's Autobiography* and *The Geographical History of America*, and in her writings on Roosevelt and the New Deal.² Amidst these shifting tides of literary economics, a Social Credit journal called *New Democracy* served as a curious showcase for modernists such as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, Jean Toomer, Marianne Moore, E. E. Cummings and T. S. Eliot.³ Today it seems strange that a journal devoted to such a seemingly specialized area of economic inquiry would receive submissions from major literary figures such as Williams, Toomer, and editor of *New Directions* James Laughlin.⁴ But as critics such as Alec Marsh and Jean-Michel Rabaté suggest, usury, money and credit were not simply a matter of abstract calculation for many modernists.⁵ Instead, economic theory constituted an entire metaphoric of blocking mechanisms and circulatory processes that was deeply ingrained in literary modernism. In this context, Social Credit became a highly influential form of "experimental" economics whose symbology overlapped broadly with literary experiments of the period. This leads one to ask what the status of economic theory has