

ANALYSIS

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (1920)



Ezra Pound

(1885-1972)

The poem begins with an ironic “ode” on Pound’s poetic career as seen by his critics at the end of his London period, and continues through 12 parts of the opening section, which presents with complex allusions and varied rhythms the “tawdry cheapness” and degradation of culture in modern civilization, stigmatized as corrupt, commercial, mechanical, and lacking in cultural distinctions. The sources of degradation and sterility are traced from the aesthetics of the Pre-Raphaelites and the *fin de siècle* writers, and the effects are related to five characters variously symbolic of the times.

After an “Envoi” that acts as summation, the themes of the first section are ironically employed in the second section to reveal Mauberley, a passive aesthetic poet, as distinct from Pound, an active creative force, for in this second section Mauberley, the lover of beauty, only drifts through life without a vital understanding of relations to past and present, and leaves as legacy but one poem, “Medallion,” a precise, pedantic, passionless imagistic work.

James D. Hart

The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley saves itself because of its complex range of ironic statement. Without this it would simply have been a clever but one-sided indictment of contemporary culture. The poems in the sequence condemn their subject from a doubly ironic vantage point—the world of England (and of the Western alignment of World War I, including the ‘yankee’ world that had driven Pound to England), and Pound’s own estimate of himself as of 1920. The latter view involves a brilliant union of self-deprecation and insight into the misconceptions of his critics and reviewers.... The ‘E.P.’ of the title of the first poem is a mask of Pound and Mauberley; the poet rejected by his society is both Mauberley and his creator. Pound would prefer that Mauberley represent an aspect of himself which he wants to dismiss, as subsequent poems in the series demonstrate....

The war is a major symbol of the destructive change in cultural attitudes. The monuments are reduced to rubble; promising young artists are destroyed before they can begin to realize their promise; worse, the war is managed by a cynical and corrupt world (an ‘old bitch gone in the teeth’)... It is important to identify

poem IV with World War I, and to see the order in its self-committed historical sequence of specific events and persons. The concluding lines give with great force the special intensity of the war's disenchantment... Between poems V and VI there is a shift in time as well as in subject. The war was, after all, one in a chain of events; there was a 'before' as there is or will be an 'after.' Pound fixes upon the 1890s as the locus of the prewar world. He says little about the economic causes of the war, or the political maneuvers leading to it....

The feeling that the 1890s are after all outmoded (in addition to their having been destroyed by inner weakness) is brought sharply into focus in the melancholy portrait of Monsieur Verog of poem VII.... The criticism of Mauberley in the last five poems of the sequence puts poems VI and VII into a correct perspective: many artists of the 1890s were deficient in courage and unsound. They were made so because of the great errors of taste committed by the genteel arbitrators of the aesthetic conscience. The war was a culminating enormity, which wiped out both the critics who disliked the arts and the artists who had so inadequately practiced them. But the world is still uncomfortable for the dedicated poet, the heir of Flaubert, the 'stylist.' He is led, driven, compelled into exile....

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley provides a complex analysis of the ills that disturbed culture at the beginning of the decade. Briefly, simply, they were these: artists were forced, because of several failures of taste, into a reduced world and consequently produced works of art that were perfect in only a limited sense. They were not vital, not precise in the sense that the arts communicate and formulate most exactly the problems and the nature of humanity. The conservators of tradition, who wished art to be a servant of their proper views, made artists of integrity withdraw from the public world and practice their art in small, fine, limited expressions of a pale unvital beauty. The public was thus guilty, but the artists were themselves regrettably inadequate to the need.

The true artist would perfect his "style" and restore the arts to their proper role. Mauberley cannot do this, but another Pound (another *kind* of Pound) can and will. He must overcome the temptation to become a "soft Bohemian"; he must deal directly with the problems of communication in the arts and in criticism; he must do more than satirize the Nixons and the Lady Valentines. These are the surface meanings of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*; they must be considered always with a full appreciation of the qualities and nuances of statement which the texture of the poem itself gives.

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is, in this sense, quite well suited to the American scene. While it most eloquently denounces "what the age demanded" and ironically portrays a state of culture deplored more prosaically and less subtly by the contributors to *Civilization in the United States*, it also rejects two of the principal ways of opposing it: the Shavian, Wellsian "reform" literature (as being too superficial and too pompous), and the *fin de siècle* preciousness, which too often led to an attenuated vision of alternatives. Of course, the "stylist" remains, but he is not a bohemian in his pose, and he accepts rather than forces his exile, seeking a suitable "haven," not a drawing-room of "sophistication and contentions." Perhaps a more strictly American analogue of Mauberley's plight is that of Lambert Strether, of James's *The Ambassadors* (1903). But Strether is, after all, "too old" to renounce his native town entirely for Paris; he returns to the United States, rather chastened in spirit and somewhat enlightened in mind. Strether's successors, two generations later, were not so easily dissuaded.

Frederick J. Hoffman
The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade
 (Viking/Crowell-Collier 1949-62) 56-7, 60-2, 66

This poem dramatizes the alienation of the poet from modern life and culture. As World War I saw the brutalization and destruction of men, so the years after the war saw the commercialization and debasement of art. Although it is tempting to identify the title character of this poem with Pound, it must be remembered that he was a master of the dramatic poem. But Pound does place "E. P." in the title of the first section, and many of the elements of the poem appear autobiographical. In the poem Pound cultivates a casual, conversational tone, a thickly studded, allusive style, and a deliberately disjointed continuity—all techniques highly influential on such poets as T. S. Eliot, and all carried to extraordinary extremes by Pound later in the *Cantos*.

John Espey, in *Ezra Pound's Mauberley*, has written illuminatingly of the poem and summarizes the first of the two sequences of lyrics as follows: "Tracing the movement of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* very briefly: It opens with an ironic 'Ode' on Ezra Pound himself, in which, using the clichés of the time and of his critics, he actually reveals his own character and career. Then, moving on to the age in which he lives, Pound characterizes it in his own voice (II), exposing those forces that make the artist's full realization impossible in modern England, the 'tawdry cheapness' (III) brought about by commercialism and the insistence on money as an aesthetic standard, the degradation of literature by the pandering of the press, the self-corrupting trend in democracy that bankrupts society. The climax of this denunciation is reached in the First World War with its sacrifice of youth (IV) going down to death for the sake of a diseased tradition (V). Turning from the present, Pound traces the sources of this degeneration, beginning with the overpowering of aesthetic values in the pre-Raphaelite period by the official morality of Gladstone and Ruskin...followed by the Nineties...when the artist was so driven that he took refuge in collapse or mediocrity. The list of Pound's (and, by implication, Mauberley's) "contacts" in the contemporary world follows, each portrait an illustration of what either yielding to, or resisting, the age's demands means in personal terms. The Jew (Brennbaum) erases all his inherited traditions in the interests of elegant conformity and acceptance; the opportunist author (Mr. Nixon) sucks up to the journals for the sake of popular success; the dedicated and uncompromising stylist (X) scrapes along in a collapsing country cottage; and the educated woman (XI) becomes the inheritor of sterile traditions that she does not understand. Inspecting himself in relation to the fashionable literary circles of London (XII), Pound realizes that he is unacceptable on all counts, and bows out with a brilliant, derivative lyric (Envoi) that combines echoes of many standard British poets and controverts the surface judgments of his critics used in the opening Ode."

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 997-98

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley is Pound's first completely 'modern' poem: Dr Leavis, for instance, thinks the earlier poems mainly important in so far as they lead up to *Mauberley*, and Eliot in his introduction to the *Selected Poems* sees, also, the concentration and the freedom of the handling of verse in *Mauberley* as the reward of years of patient craftsmanship, of apprenticeship to strict techniques. *Mauberley* in Pound's general opus has the same place as *The Waste Land* in Eliot's; it is, so to say, his diploma piece. It is, in a way, the same sort of poem: a commentary on, a vision of, the fragmentation of contemporary civilization. I used to think a large part of its importance lay in the fact that, essentially, it made *The Waste Land* possible; Eliot's dedication of that poem to Pound as *il miglior fabbro* I interpreted in my own mind as being to the better craftsman, rather than to the better artist. I now think *Mauberley* a better poem than *The Waste Land*.... *Mauberley* has a very central place in Pound's work. It has been much praised....

Hugh Selwyn Mauberley can be seen, broadly, as Pound's farewell, at once wistful and ironic, to a purely 'aesthetic' attitude to poetry. His farewell is to the idea that tone can make a cult of 'beauty,' and in a minor degree of 'love' and of 'pleasure,' in indifference to, or in quiet defiance of, a greedily competitive and in the end violently self-destructive society. (The Great War is a central datum of the poem.) *Mauberley*, the 'hero' of the poem, is not wholly Pound; but he is a real aspect of Pound.... *Mauberley*, rather exceptionally among Pound's poems, is a poem full of adult self-criticism. He recognizes that he has lacked sufficient concentration because he has not, so far, been sufficiently aware of the strength and pervasiveness of the 'shoddy cheapness' in his age, a cheapness armed against him....

Pound...feels (the war is not the subject of his poem, but brought in as a kind of touchstone, to raise the question what is worth dying for) that he is living in a killingly philistine age, to make it objective, he makes the hero of his poem, not himself, but somebody rather like himself, but weaker, an essentially minor artist and a necessarily defeated man, as Pound is not. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, as a person, is the pure aesthete, looking back on the prolonged defeat of the aesthetic movement in England, of Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, of the poets, later, of the Rhymers' Club.

The poem 'Yeux Glauques,' for instance, is about the Pre-Raphaelites. It uses, as Pound is also to use in the *Cantos*, historical personages as emblems of, personifications of, something much wider than themselves. There is no name (though it is covered by some of the meanings of the word 'allusion') for this

device, which is one of Pound's main innovating devices. It is not symbolism; it is not imagism. It is the use of an historical proper name, or more rarely one out of myth or legend, to stand not for one abstract idea but for a cluster of attitudes. It depends very much, of course, on the reader sharing Pound's historical knowledge and either intuitively sympathizing with, or guessing and adjusting himself to, Pound's attitudes....

Pound's point...is a double one: in an age dominated by the quest for wealth and power, even people with the capacity for art and thought betray the best that is in them; and the artist who merely turns away in disgust from that quest, from society's general pattern, destroys himself, and feeds himself during the process of self-destruction on fantasy... The extraordinary just balance of *Mauberley* is one of the things that makes it a great poem. Apart from sheer brutal philistinism, an Edwardian aesthete like Mauberley has to contend with the kind of fashionable, patronising interest in literature of the English aristocracy, which is partly a kind of 'slumming,' partly a way of making oneself interesting... Mauberley's weakness, what Pound is centrally probing for, is that he is a *minor* artist, narrow in his scope, lacking the kind of energy of the great creative Renaissance artists, the energy that would have enabled him to transform his age....

The iris (eye)—iris (flower) pun...helps to prop the comparison of Mauberley to a botanist who has somehow failed to pick out his prize specimen. Mauberley is thought of at this stage in the poem as the man who has given up the struggle to *create* art, who has surrendered himself to a life of sensation. Passive sensation itself almost automatically discriminates: but Mauberley discovers that he has found his great prize orchid—the true emotion, the aesthetic correspondence of feeling and object, Eliot's 'objective correlative,' the shopgirl's 'Mr. Right'—too late. In a state of dazedness ('anaesthesia') he has by-passed the possible grand emotion ('affect')... Mauberley is left with 'mouths biting empty air,' symbols of catatonic paranoia, almost, of frustrated desire frozen into grotesque images of paralyzed rage and terror. Mauberley's tragedy is (to refine a little on a point which Dr F. R. Leavis was the first to make) the tragedy, or tragi-comedy, of the pure aesthete, for whom even the effort to make, let alone the effort to act...in the end seems a brutal and unnecessary disturbance of the delights of pure, passive contemplation.

G. S. Fraser
Ezra Pound
 (Grove 1960) 52-9, 61-3

This is probably the first important modern American poem. Through his persona, Mauberley, Pound expresses his hatred of war, of commercialism in the arts, and his views of such contemporaries as Arnold Bennett ("Mr. Nixon") and Ford Madox Ford (the "stylist"). At the same time, *Mauberley* is Pound's farewell to London and to the period in which almost alone he championed Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and James Joyce. Eliot himself has called the poem 'a document of an epoch,' and the influence of its virtuosity in sound and rhythm may be seen two years later in *The Waste Land*.

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
 (Crowell 1962)

Pound's most famous work outside the 117 Cantos is his monument, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, sculptured indeed in memory of the artist Gaudier-Brzeska, dead in the war. Mauberley is dear to the modernist public created by Pound and Eliot, which learned from them to accept nothing not in their image, because it displays Pound's total disdain 'For an old bitch gone in the teeth / For a botched civilization.' *Mauberley*, like all of Pound's key works, is an experiment in style, detached and technical to maximum chilliness.... Here is the familiar post-trenches theme: contempt for Christianity, lament over forgotten ideals, fury at the pointless obliteration of a whole generation. Then the expatriate elite saluting itself, exasperated for having 'been born' in a half-savage century, out of date....What Pound added to the Muses' diadem was the interweaving of Greek and Latin with English, just as in his first lyric poems he 'imitated' Anglo-Saxon, Provençal, Chinese, Dante, and Dante's friend Guido Cavalcanti. All this was to have an intimidating and even comic effect on an audience without those languages.... It represented a totally fictitious authority in the minds of the audience.

Alfred Kazin

An American Procession: The Major American Writers from 1830-1930
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 326-28

With the appearance in 1920 of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Life and Contacts* and the first sections of the poem that was to occupy him for the rest of his life, *The Cantos*, it was clear that Pound had decisively expanded on and complicated his poetic technique. With his friends T. S. Eliot and James Joyce, he shared the ambition to exploit and to overcome the often depressing, often comic disparity between ancient and modern cultures by writing an epic for the modern world. Increasingly concerned with the relationships of art and society, Pound began working in longer, more complex forms. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* was a sequence of short, crisp cameos; it was, Pound wrote, “a study in form, an attempt to condense the James novel.” *The Cantos*, by contrast, were not condensations but a finally unending, encyclopedic long poem in open form, one that could include, however chaotically, all that was on Pound’s mind, from personal anecdotes to literary allusions of an enormous variety and range.

Both these works extended the technique of luminous detail. It became, in the *Mauberley* poems, more decisively a historiographical technique, as details, allusions, and fragments of quotations were inserted in the separate sections of the poem as means of evoking the whole flavor of the society and era from which they came. Once again, narrative structure, though hard to avoid, was suppressed wherever possible. In *The Cantos* this technique of often cryptic, fragmented, and highly allusive references was vastly extended, and narrative and expository structure was most daringly put aside. The result is a poem of greater flexibility and difficulty, if one that finally lacks the coherence of an overall design.... Between 1915 and 1920, as Pound worked on the *Mauberley* poems and the beginning of *The Cantos*, he became a committed social critic and theorist. The *Mauberley* poems show vividly how Pound’s bitter reaction to World War I, which convinced him of the bankruptcy of Western history, helped launch him on his ultimately disastrous career as social analyst and critic... The crucial point in Pound’s transformation into a passionately engaged social critic came with his discovery of the economic theories of Major C. H. Douglas.

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1591-92

Michael Hollister (2015)