

# A Nihilistic Journey to Restore Art in Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"

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In "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", Ezra Pound criticizes the distorted art under the capitalism that had been dominant since the Victorian age. Because the grandeur of art, especially poetry, had decayed into a lower and tawdrier class, Pound reveals his genuine lamentation of contemporary reality throughout his poem. As an alternative to escape from the reality and to seek some meaningful virtue in the art, Pound, by way of the two poetic speakers, E.P. and Mauberley, attempts to return to the classical Greek era, Egyptian art and the Chinese orientalism. However, Pound implicitly confesses his failure in the end; he cannot find the ideal art he seeks. The sense of returning to artistic root remains pessimistic because Pound's attempt to evoke the classical sensation for salvation loses its ultimate goal. Indeed, he eventually recognizes the meaningless breakdown in the middle of pursuing his artistic goal. Even though his new trial seeks

the restoration of social crisis and revolutionary change in poetry, the reorientation to revive the classical values is entangled with his frustration and revulsion in himself as a decadent artist.

In addition, due to the banal horror caused by the remnants of World War I, the modern age greatly suffers from the disillusionment of the broken civilization in the waste land. On the whole, Pound focuses on the poetic era and language structure that ultimately disintegrate in the aftermath of World War I. As Ronald Bush argues, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” provides a striking example: a great deal of Mauberley's poignance has to do with Pound's conflicted attitudes toward language and history at the time he wrote (56). In the act of writing, Pound's creative attempt is resisted by emerging suspicions that poetry was itself implicated in the conditions of cultural and economic life (Bush 58). Pound reveals dissatisfactions with literary culture in London and the limitations of his previous work, but he ultimately aims to surpass both (Davison 785). Nonetheless, he fundamentally articulates the nihilism of western civilization in the process of his journey into the exotic cultures such as Egypt, Greece and China.

“Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is associated with Pound's autobiographical experience of the art, especially the one under the Victorian ideology of capitalism. While condemning the contemporary society in the modern age, Pound re-evaluates his arrogant attitude toward past art. Moreover, in relation to the evils of capitalism, Pound's poem about his contemporary history shows self-criticism as well as self-satire. In order to attain the poetic goal, Pound separates himself into two alter egos: E.P. and Mauberley.<sup>1)</sup> William Spanos equates Pound with Mauberley throughout the

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1) The only real difference between E.P and Mauberley is that Mauberley, sharing Pound's concern with aesthetic discrimination, allows a bemusement with life's subtleties to paralyze him. As Brian G. Caraher claims, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” involves an aesthetic and structural dissociation between Mauberley

poem and reads the poem as Pound's confession of artistic failure (73). He further argues, as the victim of the age, Mauberley deliberately employs the third person to mask his weakness from the reader and to protect himself from his own sentimentality (77). Above all, Pound detaches himself from the present in an effort to recover from the previous failure of his art in a wrong period:

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born  
 In a half savage country, out of date;  
 Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn;  
 Capaneus; trout for factitious bait. (5–8)

Pound equates his past self with the haughty Capaneus. Even though Pound acknowledges his troublesome behavior of the past, he does not forget to denounce internal problems in a half savage country. He also thinks that the self created in western civilization is one who is doomed to live without genuine art. In the midst of revitalizing the scheme for modernist poetics, Pound searches for the new possibility of writing a poem with new style and language.

I want to investigate Pound's journey toward the restoration of true identity as an artist in the distorted culture in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." Even though Pound wants to overcome the vanity of bauble art, he only ends up with dumbness as the mode of failure at the last moment of his journey. However, the process of his journey for the artistic goal can be seen to be meaningful and valuable in terms of his awakening and escaping from the dire reality. Concretely, as the exodus from the reality, Pound

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and Pound: the passive aesthete, he says, is played off against the active instigator (48): Caraher, Brian G. "Reading Pound with Bakhtin: Sculpting the Social Language of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley's Mere Surface." *Modern Language Quarterly*. 49: 1 (March, 2003): 38–64.

sets out for the classical and oriental environments like the Greek, the Egyptian, and the Chinese one, which results in the abortion of his journey. By adopting the other resources from his own Cantos and other writers' masterpiece, Pound comes to acknowledge the universality of his artistic problem and the limitations inherent in his art.

## I. Pound's Adherence to 'Art for Art's Sake' in Classics

Pound protests the 'botched civilization' in order to transcend his fear of being annihilated by the tasteless art in the marketplace. In the Victorian art under which capitalism prevails, art's authentic identity has lost its conventionally noble form. The erosion of artistic value drives Mauberley to suggest another alternative art in opposition to the obscure reveries of the materialism:

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries  
Of the inward gaze;  
Better mendacities  
Than the classics in paraphrase!  
The age demanded chiefly a mould in plaster,  
Made with no loss of time,  
A prose kinema, not, not assuredly, alabaster  
Or the sculpture of rhyme. (25-8)

Despite capitalism's claim on the age, Pound refuses to permit the overuse of plaster because of its commercial purpose. Of course, the artificial plaster is useful to make massive products, but they have no

artistic distinction. Indeed, what Pound prefers to preserve in the artistic world is not commercial unity, but rather the sculpture of rhyme with alabaster. In other words, Pound resists the material decree that has broken art's innate meaning and value.

Pound's ultimate denial of the marketplace is closely related to his argumentation in *Art for Art's Sake* against the prevalent capitalism. Bush points out that Mauberley's case against the evils of materialism can be seen in the suite's opening poems (66). Mauberley addresses his growing resentment of the empty dignity rooted in the marketplace:

All things are a flowing,  
Sage Heracleitus says;  
But a tawdry cheapness  
Shall outlast our days. (41-4)

Because of the loss of artistic vitality, Pound draws a sharp dichotomy between the past sublimity in Greek art and the present cheapness in modern art. Indeed, this poem serves as Pound's point of departure for a disavowal of the money spirit in capitalism (Bush 67). His aversion to modern art opposes the penetration of tawdry cheapness into art. The siren song of the materialism to which the Bourgeoisie is addicted evokes clichéd art without any progress. According to Pound, the logocentric creed of art in Victorian politics is epitomized by superficial resonances.

Pound disdains the utilitarian principle of art, which results in the dehumanization of the modern world. The integral nature of the art for which capitalism seeks is antithetical to multiplicity of the Greek tradition. According to Pound's point of view, the art itself undergoes the shameful process of degradation in the name of material benefits, which leads to its futility; nothing remains in the artistic world of capitalism. The loss of

uniqueness that leads to the sameness in the name of 'Unity' is endlessly repeated. Thus, what Pound attempts to write in the wake of Mauberley is to search for the past nostalgia that Mauberley sounds with exquisite poignance, cultivated in Pound's growing resentment during the twenties and thirties (Bush 73).

By restoring the highly beautiful arts within the classical Greek mythology, Pound tries to overcome art's vulnerability to capitalism's tyranny. This is the ontological solution that will restore art's true spirit:

All men, in law, are equals.  
Free of Pisistratus,  
We choose a knave or an eunuch  
To rule over us,  
O bright Apollo,  
What god, man, or hero  
Shall I place a tin wreath upon! (53-60)

For Pound, the Greek mythology is a reservoir of beauty. His poetry, as a result, makes much use of mythology to express artistic truth, inventing an ideal world and expressing the inner desires of human beings in it; in doing so, it bases its images and metaphors on myths. Pound believes that artistic beauty has been stored in the Great Memory, a repository of archetypal images. Therefore, by depending on the meditative belief in myth, Pound claims that an ideal world could be recreated outside of western culture; he wants to rescue art from its oppressive materialism and banality.

Writing the poem "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" could be regarded as Pound's heroic attempt to rejuvenate the original purpose of art. From his viewpoint, western civilization caused the self-destructiveness of World War I, resulting in art's horrible dullness. Personally, it is impossible for

him to endure its painful stillness (Reising 24). To activate the dynamics of artistic energy through the poetic strategy of imagism, Pound resists the degrading force of the bloody war:

Daring as never before, wastage as never before,  
Young blood and high blood,  
fair cheeks, and fine bodies: (80–2)

The representation of young blood and high blood during and after the war reminds readers of the stasis of the art. The symbolic death of art means the depravity of purity in itself because of World War I. Overwhelmed by its terrible fragmentation, Pound describes the artistic crisis, namely disillusionment:

frankness as never before,  
disillusions as never told in the old days,  
hysterias, trench confessions,  
laughter out of dead bellies. (84–7)

The dead bellies of corpses represent art's chaotic image. There is no doubt that Pound recognizes the absence of artistic ideals after the war which is the consequence of the Victorian ideological disease. On the other hand, Pounds voice here echoes many of the prevalent attitudes and judgments that frustrated and antagonized himself.

Pound also reproaches its destructive impact on art because of the tyrannical rulers' policy in World War I: imperial governments in the western culture. Although the authorities have asserted that soldiers can go back home after the war, they are shown to be deceptive:

Believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving

Came home, home to a lie,  
 Home to many deceits,  
 Home to old lies and new infamy;  
 Usury age-old and age-thick  
 And Liars in public places. (74-9)

Indeed, despite the utopian vision of the art asserted by the deceitful authorities, it is an undeniable fact that the art is being numbed by the delirium of World War I. As Laity claims, the motif of the First World War implies that under the pressures of modernity's life-threatening stimuli—all modes of perception become predicated on shock (426). So, the modern art whose immediate characteristics are defined by World War I becomes a series of decadent images without hope.

Having felt frustrated by the transformed art in his contemporary world, he determines to escape from the intolerable reality. Robert Casillo argues that Pound's escape and metamorphosis, both of which were denied Mauberley, [are] made possible by castrating Mauberley. In addition, Pound makes him into a victim, a victim who could serve to exorcise Pound's fears (63). Accordingly, Pound's disgust toward the present situation, more specifically, the lifeless art, gives him opportunity to recall the intact spirit of Homer's *Odyssey*. As Homer's character, Odysseus, determines to return to his home to meet his faithful wife, Penelope, Pound starts his journey to his ideal home to resuscitate the dead art. The figure that Pound seeks after through his journey is specifically characterized as Flaubert:

His true Penelope was Flaubert,  
 He fished by obstinate isles;  
 Observed the elegance of Circe's hair  
 Rather than the mottoes on sun-dials. (13-6)



Pound regards Flaubert, the nineteenth century French artist, as his ideal model of art. Pound recognizes Flaubert's point of view on art; Flaubert put emphasis on the aesthetic attributes of artistic work and on the importance of beauty, and he even believes that beauty is universal and permanent all through the ages and even enables himself to reach something divine and absolute.

In this scene, Pound predictably reveals his dissociation from philistine and destructive art. He has longed for the complete farewell to the grimace of the art that is produced by the industrial power in London as well as in America. Pound's desperate feeling from the reality forces him to find the memories of classical art since the [contemporary] age [demands] an image of its accelerated grimace. He even describes himself as a person digging the origin of the classical art and mediating the artistic view of the classical artists:

His true Penelope  
Was Flaubert,  
And his tool  
The engraver's. (251–54)

Above all, from Pound's perspective, Homer and his poetic work are depicted as the only homeland of the canon that deserves to be admired. By virtue of Homer's *Odyssey*, Pound strives to fulfill his exile. William Spanos points out that in his exile Mauberley, the artist, has no other choice than to contemplate beauty for its own sake (89).

In addition to his pursuit of the classical arts as reflected in Homer's literary works to avoid the fragmented art of the barren age, the poesies that Pound strives to pursue are to regenerate the Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics. As Russell J. Reising has already noted, Pound admires the

Pre-Raphaelites' contributions to art through their recognition and recreation of foreign art (23). The Pre-Raphaelites had long since been recognized and accepted by the time Pound wrote *Mauberley* (Reising 24). In comprehending the inevitable relationship between poetry and artistic philosophy, Pound's point of view reflects his suspicion of the modern age. As another alternative to save himself from the surge of barrenness and grimace, Pound sees the Pre-Raphaelite imagism of art as the ideal treatment for the corrupted painting of the vulgar world. By condemning the dominant ideology through the remembrance of visual art in the Pre-Raphaelite convention, he, to borrow Laity's words, offers a psychological bridge (427).

Through the Pre-Raphaelite movement, Pound denounces the political figures, such as Prime Minister Gladstone and Robert Buchanan, for their conservative Victorian ideology. Pound thinks that their influence on the modern age is so harmful that the modern art should be protected from their malice, and he believes that the only haven to shun from their malice is to return to the pre-Raphaelite visual arts:

Gladstone was still respected,  
When John Ruskin produced  
Kings' Treasuries; Swinburne  
And Rossetti still abused. (96-9)

For instance, Pound's recalling Dante Gabriel Rossetti is a mode of reforming artistic poetry to make it anew, which contrasts with the conservative and barren art of the Victorian era. His admiration for Dante is related with the defian[ce] of secularism in modern art (Banerjee137). Given this fact, Pound also intends *Yeux Glauques* to be read as a turning point toward a visual and objective aesthetic. In *Yeux Glauques*, *Mauberley*

recalls the artistic rebellion of the Pre-Raphaelites against the conventional respectability of Victorian taste and their consequent condemnation by Victorian morality. In particular, the sensible style and vision of the Pre-Raphaelites are believed to heal the modern sickness that the conservative powers threaten (Banerjee 139).

After the First World War, Pound conveys the precariousness of modern art exacerbated by the war's cruelty in the streets of London. The ironic burden of these reminiscences is epitomized by the reference to Lionel Johnson. The death of Lionel Johnson represents the smell of decay resulting from the remnants of the disturbing battle. The aesthete's indiscriminate propensity to alcoholism and the sensuality of religious ritual reveals, Spanos points out, the degenerative effects of a hostile cultural environment on the artistic sensibility (85):

For two hours he talked of Galliffet;  
Of Dowson; of the Rhymers' Club;  
Told me how Johnson (Lionel) died  
By falling from a high stool in a pub  
But showed no trace of alcohol  
At the autopsy, privately performed—  
Tissued preserved—the pure mind  
Arose toward Newman as the whiskey warmed.  
(124–131)

On the other hand, Lionel's death is reminded of the purity and nobleness of his artistic goal by his sticking to classical austerity and fine judgment. As Sutton argues, the nostalgic treatment of the poets of the nineties is appropriately touched with dark humor as Monsieur Verog reminisces, about the tarnished glories of the past (24).

## II. Returning to the Ancient Culture: Egyptian and Chinese

Pound also dissents from the hegemonic ideology of capitalism in “The Cantos.” In this sense, Walter Sutton's argument that Pound shift[s] from the aestheticism of his efforts to revive the past to the more engaged and socially conscious poetry of “The Cantos” seems to be correct (16). Pound realizes that he is incapable of finding the artistic vitality in the ideology of western capitalism. Larry Scanlon says, “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” represents a consummation of [Pound's] effort while the sequence certainly articulates Pound's revulsion to modern mass culture and to modern politics (841). As a vent to escape from the western ideology and culture, Pound visits the exotic places outside the western tradition, as reflected in his persona, Mauberley, a decadent artist, who is not merely an aesthete since he creates a medallion art, but is cut off from the main stream of social and intellectual life (Sutton 18). In “the Cantos”, Pound's inward struggle against the arbitrary art of the western world makes him wander to and fro all over the world. Indeed, Pound illustrates his historical journey for Egypt, China, and the Greek underworld in search of his utopian world.

On the same trajectory against modern decadence, Pound's earlier expectation of Egyptian art is revealed in Three Cantos (1915–17). His burgeoning desire for mysterious art directs him to ancient Egypt. Indeed, Pound's interest in Egypt, which reflects his poetic resistance against the Victorian era, is the product of his occult conviction. In particular, the presence of hieroglyphic language is expected to replace the murky and obscure art of the Victorian period. But Pound has to acknowledge the aesthetic similarity between the Victorian art and the Egyptian one. He mistakenly ignores the underlying aesthetic connection between them. It is

true that Pound's interest lies only in an ideal imagination of Egypt against the ideological crisis of the Victorian world. From this moment, Pound shifts his artistic interest from Egypt to China. For Pound, Egypt serves as the place that provides the opportunities for poetic experimentation. In spite of the inconsequential effect of Egypt, the exotic place like Egypt is essentially a fluid point of reference that exists in a series of shifting oppositions to both China and Greece (Fletcher 4).

Pound's visit to China functions to reinforce his artistic curiosity and his desire for exploration of something new and challenging. In "Cantos", Pound seeks a productive metamorphosis in art that, he might believe, enables the dead art to be resurrected in terms of Orientalism. A genuine revolution in Pound's thought appears in China. Despite the dark uneasiness and the spiritual paralysis of the modern world, he insists upon creating a new visual art through imitation of the Chinese epigram. From the narrator's point of view, the newly translated form of art may reinstate the glorious memory of the past:

The silos were emptied  
 7 years of sterility  
 der im Baluba das Gewitter gemacht hat  
 Tching prayed on the mountain and  
 Wrote MAKE IT NEW 新  
 On his bath tub  
 Day by day make it new 日 (Canto LIII: 55–62)

Although the striking features of Chinese characters look like new styles, the strange arrangement causes considerable emptiness of space in the poem. Furthermore, the narrator fails to feel his spiritual rebirth on account of his recognition that the underlying power of the emperor exists

in ancient China. Given this discrepancy between his expectation and the reality, the Chinese ideograms will not remove his long-term ennui concerning modern art, but they will only precipitate him into confusion:

Wrong, said Confucius, in what he says of thoes  
Emperors  
But as to the lost dog, quite correct. (Cantos LIII:113-4)

Pound's attention is gradually shifted from the aestheticism of his efforts to revive the past to the more engaged and socially consciousness (Sutton 16). Due to the imperial presence in China, Pound must leave his desire for a new art unfulfilled. In the long run, his visit to China ends up with the fruitless voyage for him. Vooght asserts that aestheticiz[ing] and reconfigur[ing] history in China is useless to redeem or venerate the past (209).

The narrator's artistic endeavor in China is associated with the de-centering of modern capitalism in terms of the revolutionary rebel. By locating the historical context in ancient China, the narrator intends to deconstruct the dominant authority of western culture. At first, he wants to overcome the modern era's uncertain darkness by adapting to the Enlightenment of Confucius. In *A Guide to Ezra Pound's Selected Poems*, Christine Froula explains Pound's political purpose in "Cantos" LII as follows:

Pound is proposing the ethics of Confucius and Adams as a radical cure for modern political and economic systems His Chinese/American diptych appeals to reclaim the roots of their own cultural heritage before the usuracracy gained control of the Union. (189)

In *Cantos*, the Chinese social structure is suggested as a way to break from and to reform the western pattern of art in accordance with liberal thought. Even though Pound does not replace the decadence of Victorian art with the Chinese language in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", he objectifies the possible art that looks uncanny in his "Cantos." The narrator illuminates at least one more imaginative landscape of art by virtue of the Chinese ideograms which his poetic practice has come to share with political practice, a devotion resolving the conflict between art and society.

Even so, Pound realizes that his journey in China is the continuation of his self-delusion. The marketplace contradicts the narrator's anticipation of a progressive cure for the absolute anarchy of the imperial city (Alderman 153):

Hoang Ti contrived the making of bricks  
and his wife started working the silk worms,  
money was in days of Hoang Ti. (Canto LIII:19–21)

The Chinese translation sits uneasily in ancient forms and among ancient codes, creating an incongruity between new and old. This unexpected truth disrupts the narrator's transient pleasure. Moreover, it leads him to believe that there is no place in the world where timeless and structureless art can be politically enacted without the power of money.

In rejecting the decomposed art damaged by the usura, "Cantos" deliberately uses Homer's Greek epic, "The Odyssey", as a literary device in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." The narrator starts his sailing to the sea of possibility by putting on the persona of Odysseus. His desire to know about the future makes it possible for him to dream of going down into the underworld:

And then went down to the ship,  
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and  
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship,  
Bore sheep aboard her, and our bodies also  
Heavy with weeping, and winds from sternward  
Bore us out onward with bellying canvas.(Canto 1: 1-6)

After meeting Tiresias, however, he unexpectedly encounters Elpenor who had died in the middle of his voyage. Although Elpenor is not the main character of Homer's "Odyssey", he represents himself as being influential to the artistic task of composing an elegy in the grand manner required by the meaningless theme; he symbolizes the dread contingency of a finite being in the world. Feeling guilty for his comrade, the spirit of the narrator tortures his conscience; he has to bury his friend:

Shattered by nape-nerve, the soul sought Avernus.  
But, thou, O King, I bid remember me, unwept, unburied,  
Heap up mine arms, be tomb by sea-board, and inscribed:  
A man of no fortune, and with a name to come.  
And set my oar up, that I swung mid fellows.  
(Canto 1: 53-7)

The narrator's adventure creates no hope for a better world, because Elpenor cannot be renewed after his death. This indicates the manifestation of how "The Cantos" frequently encode the frailty of Pound's authoritative prophetic posture (Vooght 209). He is ostensibly filled with pessimistic despair and guilty about the future in "The Cantos." In consequence, Pound comes to be aware of the meaninglessness of his journey for Greece, as in his previous journey for Egypt and China respectively.



### III. Abortion of Artist's Search: comparing with Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

As the contemporary modern poets, Pound and Eliot share the similarity in that their characters in their poems, more specifically, Mauberley and Prufrock take the pursuit of the artistic haven in the torrents of material devastation, which ends up with the nihilistic abortion. Pound's journey is paradoxical in that he encounters the indeterminate circularity of art at every moment without attaining what he has aimed at. Pound's abortive journey can be compared with the situation of Alfred Prufrock in Eliot's work. It is the comparably empirical dilemma that T. S. Eliot affirms in his "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." In this poem, Eliot portrays the corruption of poetry as seductive women talking of Michelangelo. As a typical representation of a modern man, Prufrock tries to reverse the artistic retreat that western capitalism threatens:

There will be time, there will be time  
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet:  
And time yet for a hundred indecision,  
And for a hundred visions and revisions. (26–33)

Prufrock's inevitable struggle to overcome the inconsistent reality is reflected in the prevalent assumption that there is a spiritual bankruptcy in his mind. In order to gain the unified sensibility, as a skeptical poet, Prufrock yearns for the nostalgia toward the value of past art.

Despite the indecisive discourse on poetry, Eliot implicitly emphasizes the idealization of innocent art by asking "Do I dare disturb the universe?" In spite of his inherent terror, Eliot dares to resist the universal crisis of art. Just as Odysseus in Pound's Cantos meets Elpenor in the underworld to

know the future, Prufrock is willing to hear the artistic prophesy from the dead Lazarus. Unfortunately, there are strikingly eruptive moments in which Prufrock cannot reach the ideal state of art:

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,  
And turning toward the window, should say:  
'That is not it at all,  
That is not what I meant, at all.' (110-3)

Ironically, this passive affirmation informs us of artistic retreat in the real world. From Eliot's point of view, the modern city reveals its artistic brutality through Prufrock's self-conscious indecision (Lowe 1). The impossibility of reaching an artistic paradise in the modern world is reflected in this poem. In this manner, his state of nihilism deeply embedded in his poem surprisingly resembles that of Pound in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." Similarly, the characters of the modern age are still closely tied to indeterminacy for both Eliot and Pound; there is neither beginning nor closure.

Through the voice of Shakespeare's Hamlet, Prufrock reveals the inward weakness that annuls his artistic goal, just as Mauberley is uncertain of his artistic drift amid aerial flowers time for arrangements drifted on to the final estrangement (Pound 72). In spite of Prufrock's denial of his resembling Hamlet, he describes his confusing situation as follows:

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—  
Almost, at times, the Fool. (114-22)

Prufrock cannot escape from his insanity. Associating Hamlet's voice with that of Prufrock, Eliot emphasizes the humiliating truth that the ideal of the modern art is subconsciously lost. As Lowe claims, Prufrock's stroll from the start is aimless, and it is drawn insidiously towards something he cannot evade (7).

His wandering without reaching a certain goal leads him to the state of self-isolation. Eliot displays Prufrock's self-isolation from the modern world through his meticulous introspection in the poem. Moreover, Eliot identifies Prufrock with the aging poet, who recognizes the limited scope of his subjective art after getting older:

I grow old I grow old  
I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.  
(123-4)

This symbolic embodiment of the human condition prevents Prufrock from progressing toward the ideal state of art, because of self-torture. Depressed and collapsed by his loss of artistic goal and his immersion into social isolation, Prufrock anticipates the existential angst that figures so prominently in Modernist art of the early twentieth century (Lowe 5). Prufrock is unambiguously entrapped by his loneliness in the modern world. Like Prufrock in Eliot's poem, Mauberley feels the ontological conflict of self-imprisonment in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", while continuing his artistic journey. In the long run, Mauberley admits the vanity of his journey:

Nothing, in brief, but maudlin confession,  
Irresponse to human aggression,  
Amid the precipitation, down-float

Of insubstantial manna,  
Lifting the faint susurrus  
Of his subjective hosannah. (349-54)

From this individual confession, it can be assumed that Mauberley's empathy and passion to defend eternal art are misled by his conscious disjunction. In other words, this journey contributes to the loss of conscious expansion in his search of artistic meaning.

#### IV. Nihilism Reflected in the Poetic Techniques: Structure and Language

In relation to Cantos and Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", Mauberley's wandering journey has no optimistic destination and even ends up with his failure, Pound shows the nihilism in modern art through the irregular sequence of the poetic structure in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." This is why modern art regarded Pound as a pessimistic poet. At the beginning of the poem, it is presumed that Pound's motivation for the journey relies upon the deliberate deconstruction of modern capitalism in favor of Art for Art's sake. Larry Scanlon argues, Pound presses this exemplarity to its limit in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", a condensed meditation on the historical predicament of the modern poet (840). On the other hand, one can discern that the poem is finally touched with the irrevocable influence of Nietzsche, who is the precursor of nihilism. Pound, as a modern writer, seems to indulge in the rhetorical technique of Nietzschean philosophy when he writes "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." As Riddel argues, there are admittedly thematic traces of Nietzsche woven

throughout the texts of modernist style to identify historical banalities (210). Indeed, Pound's style certainly articulates his revulsion to modern mass culture and to modern politics (Scanlon 841).

In particular, Pound shows the nihilism in modern art through the irregular sequence of the poetic structure in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." As Spanos mentions, the discontinuous structure in the poem allows readers to question the failure of the whole unity in modern world (73). Pound's effort to dissociate himself from Mauberley can be interpreted as the irregular orientation of the point of view (Spanos 74). The distorted portrait of Mauberley prevents readers from being absorbed in the lack of coherent development. Even though the poetic potential for the structural sequence is required to account for his terminal judgment, Pound is successful to reveal the troublesome nature of poet in the absence of subtle sequence of poetic structure.

Besides, the intended erratic image in Pound's poem stresses the absurdities of the modern world. Daniel Pearlman points out that Pound [is] one of the first modern writers to take as subject matter the illogical, disjunctive contents of the mental imagery at the roots of consciousness (309). Pound also recognizes the imprecise language, but he raises a more intricate imagism for a more radical condemnation of Victorian ideology. The indeterminate differentiation between language and reality makes a coherent reading impossible, because of the disturbance it causes. Pound tends to invoke the political contradiction in the design of modern art throughout the poem. Although Mauberley embarks on a mental pilgrimage in search of things enduring and redemptive, one can observe that the unified form of art is skewed in every poetic structure (King 386).

Above all, Pound's visual language in his poem can be seen to emphasize anarchic propaganda as his political reaction. He seeks to exploit this poetic anarchy in order to reveal the infinite art of the modern period

(McNaughton 136). By suggesting the disgusting features of the modern art, he refuses to be assimilated into the culture of his age. In a larger sense, his oversimplified art can be regarded as some sort of the political reflection against the modern age. For this reason, Pound employs exotic foreign languages as a means to escape from and even to try to transform his contemporary politics. For instance, as a way of satire, the horizontal and eccentric movement of the Chinese epigram resonates to heal the poet's political paralysis (Brandabur 99).

Odd as it seems, Pound's preference for erratic poetics including his language and images is the most effective way not only to express the political tension that he encountered, but to relieve himself from it. From Pound's standpoint, the poetic quality in art is nearly something violent that needs to be deconstructed and de-signed to prevent the mental death of the western world. However, Pound's effort to re-write sterile and unproductive art reveals his ontological unwillingness to act. He might still be afraid of liberating himself from the declamatory power of the hegemonic tradition. Thus, Pound cannot transcend decadent art of the modern era in the practice of his own artistic evolution. As Coats points out, Mauberley reflects Pound's image of being reluctant to overcome the decadence of the modern art in that Mauberley is ignorant of the way the world works, and that he shows the powerlessness to combat the cynical actors the poem blames for the war. Even Mauberley's unpreparedness to speak as a poet to the political climate of the war's aftermath speaks for Pound's lack of will to act.

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Abstract

## A Nihilistic Journey to Restore Art in Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"

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Ezra Pound shows his pessimistic attitude toward the distorted art under the capitalism in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." Because the grandeur of art, especially poetry, had decayed into a lower and tawdrier class, Pound reveals his genuine lamentation of contemporary reality throughout his poem. Pound, by way of the two poetic speakers, E.P. and Mauberley, attempts to return to the classical Greek era, Egyptian art, and the Chinese orientalism. Pound's motivation for the journey relies upon the deliberate deconstruction of modern capitalism in favor of Art for Art's sake. However, he eventually recognizes the meaningless breakdown in the middle of pursuing his artistic goal. The reorientation to revive the classical values is entangled with his frustration and revulsion in himself as a decadent artist. In addition, due to the banal horror caused by the remnants of World War I, the modern age greatly suffers from the disillusionment of the broken civilization in the waste land. On the whole, Pound fundamentally articulates the nihilism of western civilization in the process of his journey into the exotic cultures such as Egypt, Greece and China.

**Key Words:** nihilism, "art for art's sake", "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,"  
Alfred Prufrock, decadent artist  
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