LAUGHING THROUGH THE ARMORY SHOW

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Walt Kuhn and Frederick James Greg made the Armory Show the first art exhibition promoted nation-wide in America, and taking advantage of advertising techniques pioneered by Barnum, they introduced the European avant-garde to American audiences as a spectacle the public should come judge for itself. The Show’s fanfare closely resembled Barnum’s promotions not only in volume and intensity, but in its seamless fusion of advertising and news reporting, and in its equal use of positive and negative press to secure the public’s attendance and participation. In a letter dated April 30, 1914, Alfred Stieglitz writes that the show was “a sensational success, possibly primarily a success of sensation,” (qtd. in Green 174). Nearly 50 years later Milton Brown, a somewhat stuffy defender of the Show’s higher aims, nonetheless writes that the Armory Show’s intensive publicity was a “drum-beating … almost worthy of Barnum,” and that the exhibition had “a circus atmosphere” (68). Not surprisingly, the more the press focused on this atmosphere and the more it played up the sense of scandal surrounding avant-garde art, the more the public’s interest grew. Though the Armory Show is identified especially with New York, where approximately 88,000 people attended, “over 100,000 more people visited the exhibition” in Chicago, where the Show met with far more outrage and mockery (Altshuler 74). The Show’s promoters were earnest enthusiasts of the new art, of course, and their decision to include post-impressionist work in the exhibition, so that the public could begin to situate the avant-

1 The following paper is excerpted from the second chapter of my dissertation *Imagining Audiences: American Modernism in the Age of Publicity*. Asterisks in the text mark the omission of large sections of the original chapter.
garde in a tradition of experimentation reaching back to accepted masters like Ingres, testifies to their wish to make the avant-garde approachable. Whatever their intent, however, the invitation they addressed to the public was written out in Barnum’s recognizable hand, and the public responded to the Show with patterns of behavior established in 19th-century exhibition halls. It rendered its verdict of fraud in accordance with expectations ingrained in its cultural memory by entertainments expressly organized to allow the public the pleasure of that verdict. Far from hindering America’s cultural acceptance of avant-garde aesthetics, fraud was part of modernism’s calculus of self-promotion. Moreover, the public’s interest in fraud guided modernists’ own thinking about art’s relation to modernity, and important elements of modernist aesthetics evolved in anticipation of an audience accustomed to reading suspiciously, as if looking for something hidden.

Surprisingly, scholars have not explored the suggestive relations between the Show’s advertising and its reception. Seeing Barnum’s entertainments as a context for America’s response to the avant-garde requires us to reconsider both modernists’ dismissal of this response as simple philistinism and subsequent interpretations of public dismay as evidence of avant-garde art’s political impact. Interpretations that take up these themes tend to conflate the public’s response with that of America’s most prominent critics, who were far more likely to see the avant-garde as a corrosive agent acting on both aesthetic standards and the socio-political order. But as Meyer Schapiro dryly observes, “The explosive wrath of outraged academicians and arbiters of taste was not altogether disagreeable to the public” (171). Unaccustomed to having its judgments solicited by America’s cultural hierophants, the public simply enjoyed the disarray that
the avant-garde introduced into American cultural affairs. It was taken too with the outlandishness of the new art’s enthusiasts, and newspapers – especially The Chicago Tribune – pandered to their readers’ amusement, portraying the Show’s supporters as pretentious, shallow, gullible, and rich. Interpretations of the public’s response which argue that typical reactions of amazement and mirth veiled something akin to the outrage that the Show also provoked overemphasize the durability of the connection between radical art and radical politics in the public imagination. In articles on the Show appearing in the daily newspapers, it is often difficult to discover the least trace of seriousness, and most reporters reveled in their role of perpetuating the public’s amazement and mirth. As Martin Green puts it, the press’s comments were made “quite genially,” comprising “jokes about the paintings’ unintelligibility and the (probably fraudulent) obscurity of all modern art—often with a reference to Gertrude Stein’s writings” (180). Through laughter the press helped Kuhn and Gregg produce the Armory Show as a spectacle for the public to enjoy, an entertainment that, like Barnum’s, mixed the pleasures of judging with the pleasure of watching others judge.

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In many respects, the public’s interest in modernist works’ fraudulence or authenticity was modernism’s good fortune. As in Barnum’s exhibition halls, the public attention that the question of fraud brought to bear on individual works like Duchamp’s Nude meshed with the mechanisms of publicity in such a way as to produce these works’ peculiar, fascinating power. The alchemy of the modernist spectacle is its power to transform public suspicion into the fascination that subsequently engenders aesthetic
criteria, which in turn sanction avant-garde works’ legitimacy. That an audience skeptical of a painting or a work of literature might produce its fascinating quality is a deeply counterintuitive idea. Without witnessing the sensationalism surrounding the Salon d’Automne or the Armory Show or the Ballet Russe, though, Henry James had already diagnosed aesthetic meaning’s dependence on an artwork’s public inaccessibility. He concluded that in the late 19th century, the production of a work as serious literature would require the attention of those presumably unconcerned with literature or those perceived as barred from grasping its more profound subtleties.

James’s diagnosis has far-reaching implications. In the first instance, it allows us to see the jokes, quips, and criticisms of modernism’s first popular audience anew, and to discover that even though this audience failed to grasp either modernism’s aims or its significance, many of its observations about modernism were in fact quite shrewd. Its concerns with representation and authority allowed the public to make observations and surmises about modernism that would elude its most adroit commentators for years. The shrewdness of modernism’s early audience derived not only from the overlap of modernist concerns with those of popular culture, but also from the fact that modernist art and literature created a position for their audience members that strongly resembled the position occupied by a viewer of Barnum’s exhibitions. Early modernist work was organized around a structure of viewership very similar to that modeled in 19th-century exhibition halls. As in Barnum’s exhibits, early modernist art implied a vantage point (the artist’s) suffused with understanding and a penetrating power of discernment that a

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2 Locating the fascinating power of modern art in the public clamor surrounding it in no way undermines narratives that present the emergence of modernist work in terms of a history of aesthetics or politics, and I am very far from disputing the merit or power of either modernism entire or the individual works I discuss.
viewer could achieve by properly understanding the work of art in question.

Modernism’s emphasis on the artist’s consciousness or genius was an awkward fusion of romantic genius and 20th-century publicity, and it defined the modernist spectacle at such. At the threshold of modernism’s emergence, this discerning, penetrating look stood as guarantee for the cultural value of work whose aesthetic criteria had yet to be articulated by critics or by the artists themselves. The alchemy of the modernist spectacle, as I put it earlier, became a part of the structure of modernist works – the forms of modernist poems and paintings were organized to facilitate the reception or the work as spectacle, to orchestrate the effect of this power of discernment on viewers or readers.

The significance of fraud and public suspicion in the history of modern art and literature’s emergence compels us to reevaluate modernism’s frequent conceptualization of the distance between artist and audience as a division or gap. The audience’s production of modernist art’s fascinating power and its role in investing the modernist genius with cultural authority exposes the gulf between artist and audience, which usually implies opposition, as a fantasy that obscures the deadlock between modernism’s social and cultural ambitions and its investments in popular culture – the ineradicable link between its forms, its success, and the commercial culture it pits itself against. In “Monumentum Ære, Etc.,” published in Blast in 1914, Pound writes that, “In a few years no one will remember the buffo, / No one will remember the trivial parts of me, / The comic detail will be absent.” Before his career was well underway, anticipating the face he would present to the public at the height of his poetic power, Pound already foresees the bluster of his self-promotion fading from public recollection, leaving only an image of essential poetic achievement. In the thick of his promotion of modernism, he
put himself forward in ways that now have a comic or buffoonish quality about them, but that are not therefore trivial. This chapter restores the comic details of modernism’s self-promotion in order to describe the lasting significance of the misrecognitions between artist and audience perpetuated by modernism’s early acts of self-definition.

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Many of the jibes at modern art’s expense, presented in newspapers as having been overheard on the gallery floor, were the publicized remarks of private individuals. They were often expressed in a language of fraud that, as I have argued, was not only something the Show deliberately provoked, but was also a discourse that served an evaluative purpose, having evolved over time in response to changes in the American market economy and its growing reliance on advertising and publicity. But the details of individual comments and the finer points of their engagement with the avant-garde never entered the public consciousness – that is, they never became part of public opinion. Especially for the avant-garde’s proponents, only the idea of fraud as a bourgeois, reactionary position remained. Long after the Show was acknowledged as a watershed cultural moment, critics continued to recapitulate modernists’ first dismissive response to the public. Characterizing the wealth of material professional wags produced at the Armory Show’s expense, Milton Brown writes, “[M]ost of the jibes directed at the avant-garde art, either in cartoons, jokes or jingles, were neither good nor funny. As one editorial writer pointed out, you can’t spoof what you don’t understand” (110). The manner of Brown’s dismissal is telling. The quips about the show do not measure up aesthetically, and the people making the quips do not understand European aesthetics, he argues, without attempting to discover what other ideas these quips may have contained.
However often the cry of fraud was expressed in a spirit that could justly be called either bourgeois or reactionary, seeing this residue of the public response as its sum ignores individuals’ intense concern that art would be swallowed up and deformed by a public life that increasingly fed on the energy of publicity. Examined as a series of individual statements rather than cumulatively, the public response reveals not only this particular concern, but at times, it offers shrewd insights into the specific aesthetic features of avant-garde art (cubism in particular) that reflect an awareness of publicity’s effects on modernist aesthetics, of which the modernists themselves seemed only inconsistently aware. The problem of the American audience’s response to the Armory Show has always been conceived as a problem of Americans failing to grasp the avant-garde’s languages; but it is equally a problem of the avant-garde having failed to understand the public and having failed to predict how its efforts to address the public would affect its own art. The irony is that, for the avant-garde, these failures were mostly fortuitous.

The public’s response to cubist paintings illustrates how its 19th-century cultural training made its assessment of modernist art’s marketing quite shrewd.3 Because of cubism’s non-representational character, cubist paintings were a hub for the whirl of speculation, mockery, and accusation that filled the newspapers. Cubism spawned satires, caricatures, quips, and newspaper cartoons that delighted in the public’s inability to render a definitive verdict on the question of cubism’s aesthetic legitimacy. The show’s examples of “primitivism,” on the other hand, exemplified for spectators by Matisse and Brancusi, primarily provoked anger, and the commonplace interpretation of

3 The words “cubist” and “futurist” were often used interchangeably by the public and in the press as generic terms for avant-garde art. Cubist paintings are generally meant since the Futurists refused to exhibit at the Armory Show having been denied an exhibition space devoted solely to their work.
such work as cultural regression proved deeply offensive to American sensibilities. Their “fraudulence” was too self-evident to elicit much debate (one might also speculate, though, that the works of Matisse and Brancusi seemed to Americans incapable of facilitating the debate about the changing relations between art and modernity that Americans were itching to have). Cubism was an entirely different story. The simple fact that Cubist paintings look modern made them plausible as modern art, while the fact that they looked like puzzles made them plausible as fakes.

This particular combination of characteristics slotted cubist works neatly into the tradition of spectatorship that Barnum had pioneered, that figures like John Haberle capitalized upon in their trompe l’oeil painting, and that the spread of advertising made second-nature for Americans. The only circumstance that permitted some to take cubism seriously and that saved cubist paintings from slipping entirely into these patterns of reception, many opined, was their number and the manner of their presentation. As if turning the key of a wind-up toy, an interviewer from the New York Times sets the critic Kenyon Cox in motion with precisely this observation:

A good part of New York grinned as it passed along from one paint-puzzle to another. But the fact that there were so many of these paint-puzzles, that they were dignified by an exhibition made New York, in spite of its grin, wonder if there perhaps was not something in this new art which was a little beyond the mental grasp of the uninitiated. (“Cubists” 6)

This characterization of cubist paintings as paint-puzzles, nearly reflexive for many commentators, was nonetheless offered in a variety of different tones – as insulting and dismissive, as nose-thumbing at the cultural elite, in pure fun, or more seriously, as a preliminary effort at expressing the idea that, like Barnum’s exhibits, the paintings

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4 The identification of Cubism as an industrial aesthetic was commonplace among supporters and detractors alike. Louis Fraina, “one of the founders of the Communist Party USA,” describes cubism and futurism respectively as representing “capitalism dominant and capitalism ascending” (Green 184).
concealed some essential bit of knowledge. Making fun of Duchamp’s painting, one of the Tribune’s writers on March 25, 1913, compared his Nude to “the cartoons that Kepler and others used to make years ago, in which the faces and figures of … contemporary statesmen were sketched in the branches and trunks of trees and in other natural objects” (“A Line-O'-Type or Two”). Here the quest for the hidden object is playful. More often it was derisive, albeit mildly so. Much of the public’s delight took the form of epithets that sought ironically to describe what the painting represented. It is a well known part of the Show’s lore that Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase was “likened … to an explosion in a slat factory” (Schapiro 171)\(^5\) and merited scores of other such comparisons.\(^6\) The greatest joke, in effect, was to make cubism a representational art, either by claiming ironically to locate some implausible referent in the painting or to treat the painting as concealing the referent named in the title. But often scoffers’ lingering uncertainty about whether or not cubism was legitimate gave this play a serious edge. As Milton Brown puts it, referring to Nude Descending a Staircase, “The search for the nude was on, as if discovery would reveal some great secret. The American Art News offered a $10 prize for the best solution” (110). Brown is smirking when he writes, “as if discovery would reveal some great secret,” but, even if it is difficult to know the viewer’s seriousness in any given instance, Brown’s remark nonetheless concisely describes the expectation of visitors who inherited Barnum’s cultural legacy.

\(^5\) This famous line comes from Julian Street’s satirical “Why I Became a Cubist” (Altshuler 68).
\(^6\) Milton Brown records a number of them:

The Nude was variously described as ‘a lot of disused golf clubs and bags,’ ‘an assortment of half-made leather saddles,’ an ‘elevated railroad stairway in ruins after an earthquake,’ a ‘dynamited suit of Japanese armor,’ a ‘pack of brown cards in a nightmare,’ an ‘orderly heap of broken violins,’ or an ‘academic painting of an artichoke’. (110)
At the Armory Show, though, there was no Barnum, no figure who could be trusted to answer definitively either for the avant-garde’s legitimacy or for the content of individual paintings. Instead, there was a proliferation of contradictory speculations that generated intense interest largely because these speculations intimated that any definitive solution to the Show as cultural puzzle would always be deferred. This difference between the Show and Barnum’s exhibitions was crucial. Cubism’s public claims to authority rested on its insistence that it achieved a more accurate or complete way of rendering modern perception, and the public, for better or worse, desired some measure of this perception’s authenticity. The public was encouraged in its desire by artists like Francis Picabia, who used a scientific-sounding language to explain and justify cubism. One of the functions of art, he writes in a statement published by the Sunday World, is to “objectize [sic] the deepest contact of their [artists’] personality with nature,” and he concludes his short excursus by calling “This new expression in painting … ‘the objectivity of a subjectivity’” (“Picabia” 49). The audience’s desire to measure Picabia’s aesthetic objectivity with something like scientific rigor – parodied in Hy Mayer’s cartoon – undoubtedly corresponds to what we customarily call philistinism, insofar as it seems to restrict aesthetics to rationally knowable phenomena, and also because this desire for certainty betrays the audience’s desire to find consolation in art.

The public’s concern with authenticating cubism, though, whatever its origin, is not trivial, and the public’s willingness to cling to this desire posed questions about modernism’s meaning that modernism was at a loss to answer. The public, after all, was only following up on artists’ own impulse to translate their work into prose for public consumption. These prose expositions seemed to justify the public in asking why an
“objective” rendering of perception’s immediacy should seem incomprehensible and require lengthy explanations. This question laughs at the proliferation of retrospective efforts to confer the quality of immediacy upon the experience of viewing modern art. We see this laughter in the way the public mocked the murky and obfuscating language artists used to insist that their perceptions are the basis of modern art. The Sunday World solicited “translations” of Picabia’s statement on modern art (printed, obviously, in English) and offered an “original cubist drawing to be made by a member of the art staff” as a prize (Henry Street Settlement 162). The subhead for the column presenting Picabia’s statement reads, “Did the Armory Show Puzzle You? Just Read This, Which Tells All About It—Prize for a Translation.” More than simply making fun of Picabia’s convoluted explanations – like his statement that, “Reality imposes itself upon us not only under a special form but even more under a qualitative form” – the Sunday World’s gag depends on the idea that that the words translating Picabia’s paintings will always require yet another translation. The Sunday World’s joke at Picabia’s expense has something philosophically prescient about it. It supposes modernist representation as a regressus ad infinitum where the endeavor to translate the nature of modern perception into an unknowable paint language and then into obfuscating English is the beginning of a process that proceeds indefinitely. The last two terms of this series should be modernism rendered in plain speech, and then the ability to experience modernism work in its immediacy, but the joke presupposes that no such terminus exists. This particular joke poses as an objection to modernism what Borges once described as the nature of the aesthetic feeling. At the conclusion of his short essay “The Wall and the Books,” he
suggests that the “imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon” (188).

In my first chapter, I suggest that Barnum’s revelations never resolved the questions the public was asking, but that the public itself felt satisfied because they had, even in a form that was subsequently useless to them, the fragment of Barnum’s knowledge their desire had fixated on. At the Armory Show, the public intuited that a great deal was staked on the power of the artist’s consciousness, but as the proliferating explanations of modernism demonstrate, the public did not have any collective faith in the artist’s knowledge or understanding. There was no voice whose authority could call a halt to discussion. Even as it was clearly attracted to the artist-as-celebrity, the public nonetheless aggressively belittled the artist’s own vision as an aesthetic criterion. Newspaper wags suggested ironically that viewers should have little trouble identifying spontaneously with the artist’s vision. On March 25, upon request, The Chicago Tribune reprinted a poem from “A Line-O’-Type or Two”:

This thing, which you would almost bet,  
Portrays a Spanish omelettes, 
Depicts instead, with wondrous skill, 
A horse and cart upon a hill.

Now, Mr. Dove has too much art 
To show the horse or show the cart; 
Instead, he paints the creak and strain. 
Get it? No pike is half so plain. (lines 9-16)

The public found it laughable that the standard for art’s authenticity, let alone its aesthetic merit, should become identical with the artist’s vision, that the viewer should be asked to focus his or her attention with this strictly imaginary standard in mind. The satirist here suggests that, detached from any other criterion, the painting is not only incomprehensible, but focuses on insignificant minutiae. Worse, just as discussions of
cubist painting always required another explanation, the elusive and unverifiable nature of the artist’s vision, it seemed, was always being pushed into further and more inaccessible removes. On February 19 “A Line-O’-Type or Two” printed the verse:

    The point of view—No, that won’t do;
    There simply is no point of view.
    Since with sensation we are dealing,
    We’ll have to say, “the point of feeling.” (lines 1-4)

Phrases like “point of feeling” may be crude, but they do not entirely misrepresent what Picabia says about perception. As in Barnum’s exhibition hall, where Barnum’s power of discernment becomes that which exhibition-goers desire, the Tribune’s poet-in-residence intuits that the spectator is supposed to become fascinated by some X within the painting, identified here ironically as the “point of feeling.” But, the writer believes, there is no fascination because the public does not believe that the artist knows anything particularly illuminating about modernity. A rhyme in the February 28, 1913 edition of the Tribune makes precisely this point:

    I called the canvas Cow with Cud,
    And hung it on the line,
    Although to me ’twas vague as mud,
    ‘Twas clear to Gertrude Stein.7 (lines 9-12)

Again, these lines make fun of artists’ desire that the public should believe that their self-exploration has yielded some knowledge or satisfaction that the audience lacks. In the Tribune’s verse Gertrude Stein is the sujet supposé savoir, but as this bit of doggerel would have it, she is supposed so chiefly by Gertrude Stein. Even the artists presenting their work in the Show, this author alleges, cannot interpret what they have painted, and the implication is that modernism as a movement held together by a handful of “believers” who are either dupes or frauds or both. This charge was commonplace. Cox

7 Green also cites this verse (180).
insisted simply that critics who failed to condemn the avant-garde “are themselves hypnotized into a belief in qualities that do not exist” (6). It was more immediately gratifying, certainly, for many viewers to believe that figures like Stein were duped by their own fascination with modern art than to struggle with its unfamiliarity, and this intransigent attitude will always be part of the significance of modernism’s arrival. But this intransigence is also the condition of modernism’s acceptance. Clearing the air, Cox assumed, would bring the movement to its knees. What is missing, however, from the jokes that appear in rhyme in the *Tribune* or from the Cox’s vituperation is the recognition that their laughter was what ultimately made the work fascinating to the public. Their laughter produced, as it were, “the point of feeling.”

Stein was not the only literary figure *The Tribune*’s humorists ridiculed in connection with the Armory Show, nor did they limit their critiques of modernism exclusively to painting. Though Harriett Monroe wrote commentaries on cultural events for *The Tribune* (including initially disparaging reviews of European avant-garde), the writers for “A-Line-O’-Type Or Two” took time during the Armory Show’s exhibition in Chicago to blast her magazine and in particular its association with Ezra Pound. The *Tribune* published a satire called “Contemporomania,” and after a faux French epigraph by “Baudelaine” (presumably a mix of Baudelaire and Verlaine), it begins:

Let us write poetry.
No; let us write squish and swosh.
When the end of the line of squish
Falls west of the easterly edge of the page,
“Poetry” will call it poetry.
The Friday Literary Supplement of the Chi-
cago Evening Post
Will call it great poetry. (lines 1-8)

One cannot help savoring the irony of Pound’s being mocked in terms (“squish and swosh”) very similar to those he would later use to disparage verse that failed to strike
him as sufficiently masculine. With a mindset similar to Cortissoz’s, the satirist takes aim at the association between iconoclasm and genius. Punning on the words “foot” and “metre,” it says that the poet will abandon these traditional measures and write lines instead by the yard and the hectare (this latter term seems one way among others of mocking Pound’s European archaisms). As the poem continues, the yard as unit of measure nonsensically becomes a French lawn, and in this way, is obliquely connected to Duchamp’s *Nude*:

Let us run the lawn-mower over the hectare.
It is now a nude hectare.
It is now a naked hectare.
It is a French hectare.
Is not this suggestive?

This is poetry à la “Poetry.”
This is poetry à la d’Elle.
This is poetry by the yard.
This is also poetry by The Pound. (29-37)

As parody, “Contemporomania” has considerably less energy than many of the jests at cubism’s expense, in part because parodies of a brow-beating, didactic manner that simply amplify these qualities rarely succeed as humor. The parodist’s engagement with Pound’s aesthetic ideas is also more perfunctory than many of the *Tribune*’s responses to cubism. The parodist makes clear that this is because he or she sees Pound’s iconoclasm as derivative. The parodist, in fact, responds to Pound as if his work were an entirely transparent collection of aesthete mannerisms. The simple, flat lines add up, so to speak, to the conclusion that mania for the modern is a mania for that constellation of self-promotion, moral edginess, and iconoclasm (or eccentricity) that the Armory Show was able to conjure more dazzlingly than was Pound. Even in poetry though a mania for the modern, the parodist opines, is also a mania for the artist’s vision: avant-garde poetry is poetry by the Pound.
Ezra Pound, Cubism, and Modernist Fantasy

From the first, Pound marketed his power to discern what separates authentic literature from second-rate work and identified this power of discernment as identical with literature’s essence. An ad for his 1912 translation of Cavalcanti’s sonnets and ballads reads:

Mr. Pound, who is widely regarded as the most original force in American poetry since Whitman, here devotes his genius and his rich knowledge of things medieval to the rendering into English verse of the work of Guido Cavalcanti, the friend and in more than one way the inspirer of Dante. The result is a book that may fairly lay claim to the distinction of being one of the most significant volumes of poetry ever done by an American. (‘Pound’s Cavalcanti’ cover)

The text of this advertisement describes the alchemy Pound used to build and enhance his reputation as a poet throughout his career. It asserts his originality, which gives Pound the credentials not only to know Dante’s work, but to bring to light the poetry and friendships that were Dante’s very inspiration. The astuteness of Pound’s discernment and his poetic skill, in turn, yield “one of the most significant volumes of poetry ever done by an American,” which accomplishment then certifies him once more as an “original force” in poetry, characterized by “his genius and his rich knowledge.” The bootstrapping of Pound’s reputation enacted in this advertisement, whose overzealous language is hardly atypical of advertising for books at the time, jibes with Pound’s self-positioning in his nearly contemporaneous essay “Patria Mia,” published in installments in A. R. Orage’s magazine The New Age. This conflicted, contradictory, and prescient essay, which Pound wrote to establish his credentials as America’s ambassador of letters in England, shows how well Pound understood that “genius” was what he was selling. He writes,

With the real artist there is always a residue, there is always something in the man which does not get into his work. There is always some reason why the man is always more worth knowing than his books are. In the long run nothing else counts. In reading the true artist’s work in bulk one is
always vaguely aware of this residue, but it is precisely the sort of man who has it in him, that is shunted out of commercial publication. *(Prose 111)*

Like Barnum’s supposed ability to separate the fraudulent from the authentic, Pound’s residue, something that even the true acolyte can only just feel, is both the artist’s vision that the acolyte envies and desires and the essence of the artist with which the acolyte identifies. In “Patria Mia,” as if he had been coached by the Prince of Humbug himself, Pound instinctively relies on the language of fraud not only to grab the public’s attention, but to make himself the object of public fascination. Anyone familiar with Pound recognizes in the last phrases of the paragraph cited above the disdain for publishers that played so important a role in Pound’s early self-definition. And when he attacks these editors in “Patria Mia,” more often than not, he dismisses them as frauds, disseminators of a fraudulent literature, mass-produced according to the suspect techniques of a fraudulent modernity. Pound asserts the strength of his discernment in this essay in order to reorient what counts as fraud for the public, and his assignation of the label “fraud” to established culture in turn enhances his reputation for acumen and discrimination. On the strength of his discernment, Pound positions himself as a guide capable of sorting through modernity’s contradictions, even though the contradictory, fragmentary character of his remarks on modernity show that he is evidently no more clear about what to value and what to dismiss than a host of other cultural commentators.

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It has not escaped critics’ notice that in his poetry, wherever Pound’s romantic fetishization of genius meets his instinct for 20th-century salesmanship, his work tends to share several important characteristics with advertising. At the turn of the century, Pound was not alone in considering that advertising promised art both a mechanism for
“play[ing] to the crowd,” as Marjorie Perloff puts it, but also a way to enliven the dreariness of quotidian existence (10). For every Marinetti, who exaggerated the futurists’ destructive aims for publicity’s sake, there is a Lèger, who saw advertising as a means of disrupting superficial sentimentality about art (Weiss 61, 68-9). Like many artists Pound’s own interest in advertising extended to its style. Those contemporary books that are well-written, Pound tells us, “have the same excellencies which one finds among our ‘advt.’ writers. For in the composition of advertisements there is some attention paid to a living and effective style” (Prose 109).8 As Timothy Materer explains, though, in “Make It Sell! Ezra Pound Advertises Modernism,” modernism’s use for advertising is often more substantial than either stylistic borrowings or imagining advertising as an antidote for Arnoldian sentimentality about culture. Pound’s attention to the question of publicity helped to instantiate the modernist work as a repository of meaning whose authenticity was staked on the public’s attention. Imagism, Materer argues, was in part a publicity strategy intended

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\text{to suggest that the movement had a secret or mysterious ingredient or quality (as advertisers may refer to “secret ingredient X,” “xylitol,” or “Fahrvergnügen”) that only the user of the product can appreciate. In imagism the secret ingredient was referred to in the March 1913 Poetry as a “certain ‘Doctrine of the Image,’” which the imagists had not “committed to writing” and which “did not concern the public.”} \quad (18)
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The technique Materer describes here belongs to an era in which advertising has become publicity, an address to public opinion rather than to the individual. Habermas explains that, “Because publicity for specific products is generated indirectly via the detour of a

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8 Pound’s prescriptions for Imagist writers could also have served as guidelines for the prose of America’s (relatively) new mass circulation magazines like McClure’s and The Saturday Evening Post. Christopher Wilson writes that, “Written words … were valued in direct proportion to their clarity, ‘strength,’ and above all, their ability to persuade, to cut through the reader’s barriers of resistance and ‘impose’ an idea” (49). Pound’s ideas about writing are too complex to be embodied in a single phrase, but this sentence nonetheless fits with a number of Pound’s more regularly emphasized aesthetic prescriptions.
feigned general interest, it creates and not only solidifies the profile of the brand and a clientele of consumers but mobilizes for the firm or branch or for an entire system a quasi-political credit, a respect of the kind one displays toward public authority” (194). It is dreary to think of imagism as having a brand profile. But as I have shown, the creation and mobilization of public authority was Pound’s aim, and Pound intuitively grasped the dynamics Habermas describes as characteristic of publicity.⁹

The activity Materer describes, though, is particularly illustrative because it implies a connection that stretches back from Pound’s authority through the movements he helped to promote, to his literary essays and then finally to the individual work. In the case of the Feejee Mermaid, the thread stitching the fish’s tail to the monkey’s torso makes it hard to ignore that Barnum’s publicity and self-promotion required an artifact assembled in such a way that, seeing it, the spectator would believe Barnum knew something he or she did not. Similarly, the creation of Pound’s authority was ultimately staked on whether or not the reader felt Pound’s vision and discernment in his work. Over the course of his career, Pound pursued a number of strategies that sought to make his consciousness identical with the essence of his art. The idea of personae, for example, is compelling in part because it is intimately connected with the idea of a single perspective behind a multiplicity of masks. Or, as Jean-Michel Rabaté has argued, the

⁹ Other instances of Pound’s activities as a publicist for modernism have been amply documented – Lawrence Rainey’s description of how Pound secured The Dial’s annual prize for The Waste Land before it was published and of The Waste Land’s subsequent meteoric success is only the most spectacular of Pound’s feats.
speed of *The Cantos* – that is, the rapidity of its allusions – mimes the imaginary vigor, speed, and acumen of a single consciousness making sense of history.\(^{10}\)

Pound’s 1915 translation of Rihaku’s (Li Po’s) poem “The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance”\(^{11}\) and the note Pound attaches to it illustrate not only his impulse to make his own consciousness identical with his poems’ essence, but also, how establishing his the power of his perspective and discernment becomes a *de facto* solution to the most difficult of problems, the relation between sign and referent:

The jeweled steps are already quite white with dew,
It is so late that the dew soaks my gauze stockings,
And I let down the crystal curtain
And watch the moon through the clear autumn.

By Rihaku

Note.– Jewel stairs, therefore a palace. Grievance, therefore there is something to complain of. Gauze stockings, therefore a court lady, not a servant who complains. Clear autumn, therefore he has no excuse on account of weather. Also she has come early, for the dew has not merely whitened the stairs, but has soaked her stockings. The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach. (*Personae* 136)

The irony of Pound’s note is not only that its didacticism runs roughshod over the reticence whose value the note particularly emphasizes, but that the note’s indirect reproach of “modern readers” overwhelms the woman’s wordless reproach of her negligent suitor. That last line, “The poem is especially prized because she utters no direct reproach,” makes the note’s function clear, since it “reads” the poem for the reader even as it calls attention to the layers of sophistication that stand between the reader and Pound. The title of the poem, like the title of many cubist paintings, suggests to the reader the elementary reading strategy of looking for the grievance the title speaks of in

\(^{10}\) One of Charles Olson’s “main merit[s],” Rabaté writes, is “to ally the remarks on the ‘ego’ to the notion of the speed of utterances by which Pound intends to measure historical time against formal and poetical space. Speed results from the relation of time and space, and Pound articulates speed with enunciation when he transforms his poem into a series of traces of foregone speeches or ‘verbal manifestations’” (41).

\(^{11}\) Rihaku is the Chinese poet Li Po.
order to know the mind and emotions of the poem’s speaker. But, in addition to substituting Pound’s reproach for hers, it also establishes his own way of seeing as the object which the reader should seek. Every detail in the note serves this aim. The passive construction *is especially prized*, for example, opens onto questions like “By whom?” and “Among which poems?” that suggest no matter how much Pound gives, he always holds something more in reserve. Even Pound’s treatment of what the words in his poem signify reinforces the effect that his consciousness holds the poem together.

The note’s most didactic characteristic – Pound’s repeated use of “therefore” – suggests that the poem’s words can be decoded with an exactness approaching scientific rigor and with telegraphic speed. But this pseudo-scientific trapping always wavers between signaling that sufficient erudition reveals the solidity of the link between sign and referent and, on the contrary, that Pound reconstitutes in a highly subjective way links that are already dissolved. His note suggests that the author’s “residue” he describes in “Patria Mia” is no longer something one senses after prolonged engagement with the author’s work, but something one must have contact with in order to approach a work correctly in the first place.

Pound’s faith in authorial vision, variously formulated, appears in nearly all of his books. It guides his thinking for most of his career, becoming more powerful, more

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12 As Pound comes to define the true artist, he or she (though usually he, for Pound) exhibits characteristics of the scholar, the sage, and the man of action, all of whom are the expression of some inaccessible and remote quality – some combination of knowledge, judgment, and force – that inevitably shows through the artist’s speech, action, or work. Of these three figures, the “man of action” category is the most difficult to deal with. It opens onto the intractable question of Pound’s commitments to fascism and anti-Semitism. I will pass over a careful discussion of this taxonomy here, but not because I wish to separate out Pound’s aesthetic production from his politics. On the contrary, I think tracing the genealogy of Pound’s criteria for genius opens up avenues for making a fresh approach to familiar elements of this discussion. Obviously, Pound’s brief meeting with Mussolini would occupy a central place in this genealogy, as it does in Bob Perelman’s remarks on Pound’s ideas about genius. Perelman describes what Pound sees in Mussolini as
immediate, and more clearly that which the reader should seek. In his 1938 *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound writes,

How to see works of art? Think what the creator must perforce have felt and known before he got round to creating them. The concentration of his own private paideuma, whereof the shortcomings show … in every line of his painting, in every note of his melody. (114)

Know the “[creator’s] own private paideuma” — that is, the particular way that the author’s subjectivity is determined by “the complex of ideas which is in a given time germinal” — that’s Pound’s advice for how to look at a painting. Pound requires of the viewer that he or she reproduce the specific form of attention that, to his mind, makes the work cohere.¹³ Part of the enigma of the power to focus one’s attention is that it should also be effortless. Pound begins the *Guide to Kulchur* with an exchange from Confucius’s *Analects* that emphasizes this simplicity:

*Said the Philosopher: You think that I have learned a great deal and kept the whole of it in my memory?*

*Sse replied with respect: Of course. Isn’t that so?*

*It is not so. I have reduced it all to one principle.* (15)

Well before the publication of *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound’s prescriptions for cultivating the discernment of an artist had become at once so demanding and contradictory that they cannot but strike one as absurd.¹⁴ Pound gives his *ABC of Reading* (1934) the alternate “a union of utter acuity and irresistible force who perceived multiple perspectives instantly and had only to pronounce his clear and powerful word to create social value, a new language, and a new world” (29). Interestingly, excluding the idea of creating a new language and a new world, Perelman’s description would do for a description of Barnum.

¹³ Evidently Pound’s idea stuck with the first generation of Pound scholars. In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner writes of Wyndham Lewis’s cubist print called “Alcibiades,” from his *Timon of Athens* series (1912), “It is one of history’s great feats of attention, attention to an unaccountable array of elements, all interacting. Being pure lines, the elements have no survival power of their own, save by virtue of the interaction that attention guarantees” (234).

¹⁴ Even at the beginning of Pound’s career, this faith in the power of genius definitely had its comic side. William Carlos Williams recalls that, “[Pound] could never learn to play the piano, though his mother tried to teach him. But he ‘played’ for all that. At home, I remember my mother’s astonishment when he sat down at the keyboard and let fly for us—seriously. Everything, you might say, resulted except music. He took mastership at one leap; played Liszt, Chopin—or anyone else you could name—up and down the scales, coherently to his own mind, any old sequence. It was part of his confidence in himself” (AWCW 56-7).
title “Or gradus ad Parnassum, for those who might like to learn,” separating the poet from the true cultural novitiate with his allusion to Quicherat’s poetics. Pound adds, “The book is not addressed to those who have arrived at full knowledge of the subject without knowing the facts” (ABC 9). I prize this little note because it is so tempting to read the last sentence as pure irony. How, after all, can one have a “full knowledge” of any subject without “knowing the facts”? Such is the miracle of the artistic genius. There is no irony in this line; in fact, it corresponds precisely to the definition of genius Pound gives in Guide to Kulchur: “By genius I mean an inevitable swiftness and rightness in a given field. The trouvaille. The direct simplicity in seizing the effective means” (Prose 105-6). Gaudier-Brzeska, Pound said, had so developed a sense of form, he could determine the meaning of Chinese ideograms simply by looking at them. Culture’s favorites, geniuses, are exempt from the need to attain Parnassus by a series of steps; it is theirs for the having with a single bound.

If the extent of Pound’s commitment to the artist’s power of vision was idiosyncratic, it was not his idiosyncrasy alone. In the debates surrounding the emergence of a modern aesthetics at the turn of the century, the category “taste” has much the same importance. As a concept “taste” will always awkwardly straddle the idea of an innate power to separate the good from the bad and the idea of a carefully cultivated faculty honed by the acquisition of cultural capital. The Nation took up this concept, in all its contradictoriness, on March 14, 1912 in a column plainly titled “Good Taste.” Ostensibly, the feature reviews a recently-published German book, Guter und Schlechter Geschmack im Kunstgewerbe (Good Taste and Bad in the Applied Arts). The reviewer begins by recommending the German book, not yet translated into English, insofar as it
might be used as the basis of a parlor game: “The parlor game we have in mind would consist in going through the two hundred and eighty pictures imbedded in the alien German text and guessing whether they illustrate examples of good taste or bad taste.”

“After one has puzzled over the picture of a sixteenth-century interior and decided that it is ugly,” the reviewer suggests, “it is stimulating to hunt through the text and find that the room presents a ravishing example of the Renaissance decorative style in its best estate.”

One cannot know exactly what the author had in mind when he or she used the word “stimulating.” This word seems to suggest a complex reaction that consists of a joke at the player’s own expense and a joke at the expense of taste itself, for the rooms after all remain “ugly.” Having recommended the book as a way of measuring one’s cultural sophistication, the reviewer abruptly changes course in the next paragraph. “But the book can be put to serious uses as well. Only in that case the process must be reversed. The student should first devote himself to the text…. The authors’ principles are so few and so simple, according to the reviewer, that “The reader will be surprised to find that in deciding between what is good taste and bad taste, he is not consciously applying a standard, but pronouncing judgment almost as intuitively as the child who says he like this and doesn’t like that.” Yet, “it is open to doubt whether in practice we are as faithful to-day to the principles of good taste as we are conscious of them in theory” (256).

Without any irony at all, this paragraph traverses nearly all of the contradictions that comprise the category of taste: the principles of good taste are exceedingly simple, but are rarely applied correctly; they are innate, but acquired through careful study; they are practiced unconsciously but require constant vigilance; they teach one to understand what might otherwise be taken for ugly as the height of aesthetic accomplishment; they are
steeped in tradition and entirely arbitrary. In “taste,” here as in Pound, we find only an empty category, a placeholder whose primary characteristic is that its possessor seems able to locate and derive satisfaction from something hidden in the object being scrutinized.

We can imagine many circumstances in which taste is a useful concept in spite of its being difficult to define or paradoxical, even in spite of its being a concept predicated on particular exclusions – its usefulness is shown by the fact that a great many people routinely agree on examples of good taste and bad. What is striking in both Pound’s writing and in *The Nation*’s column is the purity of the standard for genius or taste. In both cases it is imagined as a sureness of instinct unfazed by temporal, cultural, or linguistic boundaries. Under such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that taste became embodied by an individual rather than expressed through a culturally negotiated set of standards. In his *Autobiography* William Carlos Williams describes his first encounter with Marcel Duchamp in Walter Arensberg’s studio:

> Seeing on Arensberg’s studio wall a recent picture by Duchamp showing five heads, in pastel shades, the heads of five young women in various poses and called, I think, “The Sisters” …, I wanted to say something to [Duchamp] about it. He had been drinking. I was sober. I finally came face to face with him as we walked about the room and I said, “I like your picture,” pointing to the one I have mentioned.  
> He looked at me and said, “Do you?”  
> That was all.  
> He had me beat all right, if that was the objective. I could have sunk through the floor, ground my teeth, turned my back on him and spat. I don’t think I ever gave him that chance again. I realized then and there that there wasn’t a possibility of my ever saying anything to anyone in that gang from that moment to eternity—but that one of them, by God, would come to me and give me the same chance one day and that I should not fail then to lay him cold—if I could.  

(*Autobiography* 137)

It is always difficult to distinguish between the Williams who is a genuine *inconnu* and the Williams who strategically exaggerates his naïveté. “I bumped through these periods like a yokel,” he recalls, “narrow-eyed, feeling my own inadequacies” and describes himself as “unable to compete in knowledge with the sophisticates of Montmartre”
(Autobiography 137). Even allowing for the requirements of his American bumpkin act, Williams’s defensiveness decades after the fact indicates how strongly the idea of cultural contest was present both for Williams and Duchamp alike. His admission that his knowledge did not measure up to Duchamp’s shows that he understood the stakes. “He had me beat all right, if that was the objective.” Williams was the dupe, and as is eager for the chance to show up someone from “that gang.”

Williams’s response also shows that at that moment in Arensberg’s studio, Williams was already under a sort of transferential effect, believing Duchamp the sujet supposé savoir. As the Tribune pointed out in its verse on Gertrude Stein, however, most of the public was not. The audience fell back upon the kinds of judgment tasks I have described – judgments of authenticity and fraudulence, often measured against the judgments of others, and judgments based on the idea that cubism presented a puzzle. Insofar as they call upon the viewer to intuit the relations of a painting’s parts to the whole, these latter judgment tasks allow us to situate modernism’s fascination within the broader social context. In the 19th century the importance of being able to navigate the exhibitions had to do with proving one’s ability to read signs and referents against the instability of the marketplace. Examining a trompe l’oeil painting, viewers spontaneously performed these part-to-whole comparisons. James Cook, for example, transcribes an account of a father and son’s interaction as they looked at George Platt’s trompe l’oeil painting Vanishing Glories:

A gentleman who looked as if he hadn’t the greatest confidence in his eyes was showing his little son Vanishing Glories last night, and the boy asked: “Is that hinge real or painted, papa?” “It’s real son—no, I believe it’s painted.” “Is the revolver real?” “No, I think it’s painted. I don’t
This boy’s technique for approaching the *trompe l’oeil* painting – proceeding from puzzle to puzzle in an effort to extrapolate a judgment about the whole painting from local determinations of authenticity or fraudulence – resembles not only the way visitors to the Armory Show initially approached cubist art, but the way critics have continued to, focusing on “those bits and pieces of the world that we are offered in [for example] *Man with a Pipe* – the moustaches, buttons, sleeve ends, etc.” (Clark 217). Clark has recently faulted criticism of cubism for failing to move beyond this technique even though, he believes that “This is the sort of attention, … – moving over the picture surface piece by piece, paradox by paradox – that Cubism was designed to elicit” (173). Both cubist and *trompe l’oeil* paintings pushed the West’s established techniques of illusionism to an extreme that produced profound tensions between localized passages in a painting and its totality.

For Clark moving beyond lavishing attention on the dazzling felicity of cubist paradoxes involves questioning the narrative of linear progress that underpins critics’ descriptions of cubism’s evolution, and ultimately, undermining the assumption that cubist paintings demonstrate another way of looking at the world. Questioning this narrative leads Clark into the territory of fraud by a surprising route. There is nothing in Clark’s analysis of Weiss’s interest in the cubists’ deliberate courting of public suspicion or in the sophisticated back and forth between cubist work and Parisian popular culture. Instead, Clark shows that, between 1911 and 1913, Picasso continuously returns to particular techniques that he has already rejected as inadequate. Clark argues that the

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15 Cook quotes here from Alfred Frankenstein’s history of American *trompe l’oeil* painting.
paintings such as *Man with a Guitar*, *Young Girl with an Accordion*, and *Women with a Zither* ("Ma Jolie"), executed between 1911 and 1913, "pretend as if" they were derived from a new epistemology, and that they recapitulate, with great pleasure and vigor, techniques that had already proved unable to solve the aesthetic and epistemological problems Picasso had set out for himself: to devise a way of painting grounded in perception and mimesis that nevertheless breaks emphatically with a Western tradition predicated on a particular, seemingly ineluctable understanding of light. For Clark, the proof of this pretending is the difficulty of convincingly relating the way cubists paintings are put together, that is to say, of explaining how the totality relates to a painting’s local effects – those recognizable representations of bits of the world like a mustache or a newspaper. In Clark’s words, the picture does not “effect a connection between its overall visual language and its stated particulars” (216). Clark’s phrasing is justly circumspect; but his point is that in his execution of several important paintings, Picasso feigns having arrived at a solution and goes on as if it had. “[T]he pretending in Cubism,” Clark says, “is done with such imaginative vehemence and completeness that it constantly almost convinces – both the viewer and no doubt the painter in the first place. Pretending is Cubism’s power” (180).

Again, Clark does not use this language, but in effect, he describes critics’ treatment of cubism as participation in an ideological fantasy. Žižek writes, “What we call ‘social reality’ … is supported by a certain as if” (*Sublime Object* 36, his emphasis). What he means is that regardless of what one knows or suspects, one goes on behaving as if such-and-such were the case. For Žižek, this proves that ideology is on the side of doing rather than on the side of knowing. To clarify this idea, Žižek considers Kafka’s
The body of critical work on cubism yields the same “final telltale blankness” one confronts in the analysis of fantasies, “inert construction[s] which cannot be analysed, which resist … interpretation” (Sublime Object 74). Yet critics go on writing and viewing the paintings as if cubist work made good on its promise. This is something more subtle than the self-hypnosis to which Cox claims the avant-garde’s supporters have succumbed, but it is not altogether distinct.

Cubism is exemplary not only because of the aesthetic shifts it helps to inaugurate, but also because its reception elucidates the importance of ideological fantasy in the reception of modernist work generally. Modernist fantasies restore the communication between art and the public that does not happen. Thus, rendering a highly sophisticated form of this fantasy, Adorno writes that, “The communication of artworks with what is external to them, with the world from which they blissfully seal themselves off, occurs through noncommunication; precisely thereby they prove themselves refracted” (Aesthetic 5). It is this communication through noncommunication
that is intolerable. More often this fantasy is premised on encounters between the public and the avant-garde like that which occurred at the Armory Show. In these versions the public’s response, which is not understood, is interpreted as an unreceptive hostility, and the audience becomes within the fantasy what Žižek calls the destabilizing dimension. The destabilizing dimension of fantasy “encompasses all that ‘irritates’ me about the Other, images that haunt me about what he or she is doing when out of my sight, about how he or she deceives me and plots against me, about how he or she ignores me and indulges in an enjoyment that is intensive beyond my capacity of representation, etc.” (*Sublime Object* 192). The laughter of audiences and critics is this irritant, but it becomes an element filling out modernism’s ideological fantasies only after it served as modernism’s midwife. During the Armory Show’s first three weeks in New York, as value accrued to paintings thanks entirely to the oppositional forces generated by the Show’s publicity, modernist art had made its first forays into the mainstream of American culture. It did not take long for modernism to become, in one way or another, in vogue. The significance of this fantasy of hostility is indicated by modernists’ insistence on its force long after they had won their authority. The place of social antagonism between the artist and the public in modernism’s self-construction does not admit of the possibility of its disappearance.16

World War I made Pound right, at least in part, when he wrote that, “In a few years no one will remember the *buffo.*” In “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” Pound adopts a harsher line toward market capitalism than he had in “Patria Mia,” and there seems to be

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16 Žižek writes, “As soon as the belief (which, let us remind ourselves again, is definitely not to be conceived at a ‘psychological’ level: it is embodied, materialized, in the effective functioning of the social field) is lost, the very texture of the social field disintegrates” (*Sublime Object* 36).
no distance at all between the modern public’s inability to appreciate art and modernity’s horrors. “We see τὸ καλόν / Decreed in the market place” Pound writes in the third section of “E. P. Ode Pour L’Election de Son Sepulchre,” which offers, among other things, a sustained indictment of commodity culture. There is no need for any bridge between this section’s excoriation of the marketplace and the next section’s descriptions of those sent to die in the Great War, or the poem’s famous coda, which begins: “There died a myriad, / And of the best, among them, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth, / For a botched civilization” (Personae 188). I am easily caught up by the brutal power of these lines, which draw their strength in part from their apposite proximity to Pound’s earlier indictment of commodity culture; and that is why it will always be a kind of sacrilege to think of cubist work or vorticist poems as the Fiji Mermaids time consecrated with legitimacy. But the buffo continues to haunt modernism, not because it reveals modernism as a fraud (this idea has never seriously been at issue) nor because it vividly shows how modernism made common cause with the market economy in order to promote itself (this point too has long been settled). Rather, the buffo guides us behind the curtains, as it were, behind the hostility between artist and audience cultivated in and through modernism’s attachment to spectacle, and points us to the deeper antinomies that modernism’s ideological fantasy conceals. These antinomies constitute the deadlock between modernism’s social and cultural ambitions and the source of its power – the ineradicable link between its forms and the society it pits itself against.

One of the pleasures of digging through an archive is that history sometimes writes postscripts more gracefully than one could have managed on one’s own. On March 16, the day after the Armory Show closed in New York, the Times ran a story with
the headline, “TAILORS CUT LOOSE FROM PARIS STYLES – Designers of Women’s Clothes Say the Revolution in America Is Now Complete. – AGAINST FUTURIST FASHIONS – Convention Is Advised to Study American Pictures and Ignore the Cubist Creations.” Adjacent to this story is a smaller announcement bearing the headline, “THE CIRCUS COMES TO TOWN – Led by the Elephants as of Old, Barnum & Bailey’s Big Show Is Here.” The day the Armory Show closed the circus’s elephants paraded down First Avenue to Madison Square Garden. As a literary critic, one cannot ask for more than that the repressed – the buffo – should return as a parade. This year, the circus was also once again to have a savor it had been lacking, I suppose, for circus connoisseurs:

Restored to their place in the circus this year will be the freaks. For several years they have been left out of it, but the management has decided that, after all, the old idea of having the human grotesques on exhibition is the right one, and that strange company of Siamese twins, fat women, living skeletons, giants, dwarfs, bearded ladies, and the like will assemble for Saturday’s opening. (7)

I do not mean here to make light of the obviously appalling category “human grotesques.” Rather, I would only observe that, right on cue, the spirit of Barnum returned to offer New York a compensatory fantasy for the one it lost when the Armory Show left for Chicago. New York, it seems, did not have cause to complain. How could Pound or Picasso or Stein or whomever, compete with the endless anticipation of a happy ending, anyway? “After a few weeks the [animals’] confinement to the Garden basement will be a thing of the past and there will be just the long, warm months under the flapping canvas and the open sky.”
Works Cited


