



Response to Jennifer Scappettone

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Response to Jennifer Scappettone

Critics who cherish procedurally generated texts such as Mac Low's *Words and Ends from Ez* (like critics who cherish other parts of the post-Steinian avant-garde) made a bad habit, for much of the 1980s and 1990s, of retreating from explicit advocacy, avoiding anything that looked like an aesthetic judgment about individual books, writers, and poems; such critics often preferred to make their tastes and judgments known only implicitly, or even to deny (as socially determined, for example), such judgments, while offering meta-analyses of the literary systems and social formations that their favored texts appeared to critique.

As Jennifer Scappettone's essay suggests, things seem to have changed. We now have, and should be glad to have, arguments not just about the meanings and methods, but about the merits of individual texts such as this one, from committed advocates familiar with the assumptions those texts contain. I admire the research that Scappettone's essay shows, and I admire the devotion to a single author that it displays. Rather than quarrel with that devotion directly, I'd like to move the camera back a bit in order to see the assumptions—about how we read, and about why we read, difficult texts—that her article seems to me to contain. Here are some of those assumptions, numbered from one to six:

1. Modernist authors—especially Pound, but not only Pound—seek not just a personal stamp or voice, but what Scappettone calls “imperious personhood” (189). The modernist poem, that is, establishes (or tries to establish) the modernist author as an authority over some system of words, concepts, places, and things.

2. That system models a social system. The author's “administration,” or trope of administration, makes the text a trope for a social formation, or for an entire society.

3. This sort of authority is by its nature Fascist, at least in Pound (himself a Fascist) and perhaps in many non-Poundian texts: Fascist doctrine says that all the elements (i.e., persons) in a society must work together, all the time, for a common goal under the direction of one strong leader, and a text with modernist authority has all its elements (i.e., words and ideas) working together, from start to finish, to form a semantic and aesthetic unity, under the direction of the implied author.

4. If these aspects make the modernist text a trope of Fascism, then the way to create an anti-Fascist text is to remove or undermine one of those aspects: to make a text whose elements do not work together, which fails to offer semantic or formal coherence, or which seems to repudiate (or never to have had) any single implied author.

5. If texts are tropes of social systems, such an anti-Fascist text would trope anarchism, as a political philosophy, or anarchy, as a state of society: that is, a society with no person or set of persons in charge of the rest, and a society whose characteristics or coherences, if any, would emerge from many actors without a common goal, in a “collective errand of transitive meaning” (191).

6. Many avant-garde or post-Steinian texts have indeed jettisoned one or another of the aspects that seem to give modernist texts their unity. Mac Low’s *Words nd Ends*, however, outdoes them all: it is as “anarchist” a text as one could wish (as Mac Low could wish, since he himself endorsed anarchist principles). In it, there is really no one in charge: it is so free of semantic or propositional constraints that it appears to be “authored neither by Pound nor by Mac Low nor by the reader, but by some combination of all” (194). A less sympathetic reader might say that it appear to be authored by no one, being the result of a procedure independent of semantics and (once under way) of human control.

Scappettone argues—and here is what she adds to Watten and to Bernstein as a reader of Mac Low—that Mac Low’s anarchic, multi-authored text responds to Pound’s Fascist, single-author modernist text not only in what it does with or to its readers but in what it does with or to history and historiography. By scrambling or subjecting *The Cantos* (a “poem containing history”) to anarchist antiauthorial procedures, *Words nd Ends* (she writes) undoes Pound’s attempts to order and judge, offering instead “bluntly undifferentiated attention” that produces an “oppositional result”—opposed, that is, to Pound’s own forms of attention, to his attempts at personalized synthesis (200).

The idea of joint, unstable, or unlocatable authorship has special force and pathos in *Words nd Ends* because the original text (*The Cantos*) was a palimpsestic collage that turned its initially disparate materials to unitary Fascist ends. Mac Low’s text therefore represents “an ego-

trammeling, choral outbreak through the [Fascist] original's broken presence" (205).

In order to see not only the anarchism in Mac Low's procedurally generated texts (in general) but the special force of Mac Low's procedure applied to Pound, one must already know a lot about Pound. In this way this anarchist contemporary avant-garde poetic text—quite as much as the modernist Fascist poetic text from which it derives—exemplifies Robert Chodat's claim that modernist and contemporary non- and antidiscursive poetic texts are parasitic on "prose sense," on ordinary language, and on discursive texts in a way that other kinds of poems are not. "Alternative modes of making sense," Chodat writes, "whether through 'spatial form' or 'sound patterning'"—or, I would add, doubly palimpsestic historical implication—"presuppose the norms of rationality that we learn initially . . . in the process of making sense of speakers and agents" outside of poems.¹ We might even think of Mac Low's texts—so dependent on what we know, or hope to know, about Pound, Pound's knowledge, futurism, and the Italian Renaissance—as a politically antithetical, anarchist form of Poundian fan fiction, written out of admiration and very partial emulation, with an implied audience of other (uneasy, conflicted, anti-Fascist) Pound fans.²

Pound saw poetic texts as tropes of social arrangements, and of historiographical approaches: their organization modeled, for him, approaches to history, to government, and to social life. So—to judge by Scappettone's essay—did Mac Low. Should we? In doing so, are we not making a mistake both Walter Benjamin and (less famously) Richard Wilbur warned against, in thinking that the same sort of judgments can or ought to apply inside works of art and outside them? Wilbur—a clear opponent of McCarthyism and of the war in Vietnam—warned readers against considering any poems as tropes of any society, since no society should be or could be organized as neatly as Wilbur's poems.³ What do we give up, what ways of reading have we rendered hard to use, when we imagine, as we so often do, that poetic texts are tropes of social formations, or tropes of the history of any society?

1. Robert Chodat, "Sense, Science and the Interpretation of Gertrude Stein," *Modernism/Modernity* 12 (2005): 603.

2. One of many good explanations of "fan fiction" in general, for those unfamiliar with the term, is Rebecca Tushnet, "Legal Fictions: Copyright, Fan Fiction and a New Common Law," *Loyola of Los Angeles Entertainment Law Journal* 17 (1997): 651–86, available online at <http://www.tushnet.com/legalfictions.pdf>.

3. Richard Wilbur, "The Genie in the Bottle," in *Mid-Century American Poets*, ed. John Ciardi (New York: Twayne, 1950), 7.

Though Scappettone speaks intriguingly of *Words and Ends* as a paradoxical attempt to reorganize from the roots (“radically”) our ideas of lyric and of history, most of her terms of description and praise for it are negative or reactive. Mac Low’s work subverts, undermines, scrambles, calls into question, cancels out, even “exorcises” aspects of Pound’s beliefs and of Pound’s practice. Mac Low’s “bluntly undifferentiated attention . . . produces an oppositional result” (200); his “discontinuous” text “retains no memories and leaves intact no narrative impulse of beginning or ending, consummation or rupture” (204). Another of Mac Low’s sequences “undermines grammatical hierarchies” (209).

These are the normal, though hardly invariable, terms of praise in academic literary criticism at the moment, especially though not only among academic critics who take their bearings from Stein and from the language writers. Are they enough for us, as readers of poetry?

Are they enough for us, as readers of history? Mac Low’s “conglomerate historicism” should “derail and reroute our thinking about history” (197) if we read it as Scappettone intends. Yet the derailing seems clearer than the rerouting. One might even ask whether Mac Low’s procedure—without implicit narrative, account of causation, or account of how and why people choose to collaborate or to dissent—is something like the opposite of history, rather than an alternate route to history writing that someone who wanted to write history could actually take.

Can an “ambient” text ever be a history, or even a trope of the writing of history? Tan Lin’s own advocacy of the ambient, the unreadable, the entropic, sometimes seems to me less a serious argument than a provocative parody, meant to elicit grounds for refutation, as when Lin writes: “The best reading experiences have been silenced [Lin does not say by what or by whom] or whited out like a machine/diagram for the production of white noise.”⁴ If this description covers Mac Low it may not constitute a recommendation: Lin himself applies it to designer shopping bags and to best sellers.

Faced with such texts as Mac Low’s, and with such claims as Scappettone’s, for derailing, subverting, undermining, exorcising, we might ask, as Mark Schoening has asked: “Are we beings whose deliverance lies in the absence of structure?” Or rather are we “beings whose attraction to the idea of emancipatory change, understandable

4. Tan Lin, “American Architecture Meta Data Containers,” *No: A Journal of the Arts* 5 (2006): 247.

though it may be, has led to a distinctly 'modern' form of utopianism less liberatory to us than we imagine?"⁵

On the other hand, if we insist that poems are, should be, will be, tropes of large-scale social organization, of government, society, and history, we might go on to ask: What would a poetic text look like that offered neither a trope of Fascism, nor of anarchism, but of social democracy? Could such a text count as modernist, or as avant-garde? Do the terms in which we now analyze modernist and contemporary texts make such a text impossible to find, or to discover, or to appreciate?

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5. Mark Schoening, "Literary Interest Now," *Modern Language Notes* 29 (1999): 175–88.