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POUND AND/OR JACKSON: TRACES OF JACKSONIAN HUMOR IN EZRA POUND'S WRITING

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> All right/ you want a STYLE out of America. Stick at it. BUT when it comes it mayn't be where you are lookin' fer it.
>
> Ezra Pound, "Costa Più Della Divina Commedia," 1931 (572)

"The Cracker-barrel voice"

Hugh Witemeyer has remarked that "Pound's declared pantheon omits a number of nineteenth-century writers who influenced him significantly" (203-4). He continues by drawing a somewhat implausible lineage between Pound and William Dean Howells.[1] The intention is sound enough; identification of a nineteenth-century American "usable past" for Pound apart from Whitman, a "STYLE out of America" that he draws upon, is rarely attempted. As Pound remarks, it may not be where scholars are "lookin' fer it." My inquiry here attends to just such a source: the American tradition of subversive dialect humor written between the Revolution and the Civil War era, writings which enjoyed especial popular acclaim in the Jacksonian period. Pound championed this as an age when America's vital development occurred:

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> American events from 1760 down to the belly flop and indecency of American civic decadence since Johnson left the White House. ("The 'Criterion' Passes," *P&P* 7:436)

A number of Pound's writings tap into an American idiom, one which apparently points to a folk or popular heritage. Where does Pound's colloquial "cracker-barrel" voice come from?[2] Eustace Mullins remembered how Pound

> referred to himself as "Ole Ez," and at various periods during his life, he contemplated an attempt to reach the American people through the medium of a native cracker barrel philosopher ... It was this desire that finally culminated in his series of broadcasts from Rome, in which he used an exaggerated Yankee accent. (313)

Beyond oral performance, this voice figures most extensively in Pound's correspondence, where it is pseudo-oral. It is there in his use of "eye-dialect" (phonetic spellings) and in the related use of "cacography" (misspelling):

> 2 be more eggsPlicit.
> Criks is the buzzards wot yakyaks about awt an' le'rs without bein' abl to purrJuice any. (vulgarly spelled with 7 le'rs)
> On brook?line: wot is a stoic?
> Answer: a stoic iz deh boid wot brings de baby.[3]

The voice appears in occasional doggerel poems, from "Ezra On the Strike" (1902) through the "Alf Venison" poems (albeit here in Cockney) to the "Yittischer Charleston" (1932).[4] It recurs in *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius*.[5] To a lesser extent it pervades the poetry proper, in cantos such as number 28:

> ...so I sez:
> Waal haow is it you're over here, right off the
> Champs Elyza?

> And how can yew be here?
> …
> Nawthin' more about Das Kapital…

Or Daniel Webster, speaking in canto 37:

> "I hesertate nawt tew say et will dee-precierate
> everyman's property from the etcetera
> to the kepertal ov Missouri, affect the price of
> crawps, leynd en the prordewce ov labour, to the
> embararsement……"[6]

Leslie Fiedler calls this Pound's "stage-hick accent" (138). Over Pound's career, the voice gradually degrades, falling into deeper and wilder distortion as the poet gets older and crankier.[7]

Where and when did Pound learn such a voice? He is uncharacteristically reluctant to reveal his sources in this case. In this essay I make my own suggestions, drawn from a necessarily longer study. I take my lead from Pound when he wrote: "A body of thought has been forming. I can trace its ancestry back a fair distance but cannot expect all of it in the space of one article" ("The 'Criterion' Passes," in P&P 7: 428).

His "grampaw" persona notwithstanding, Pound maintained a curious antipathy to the American vernacular tradition, particularly slamming Mark Twain and "the god damned blithering tradition of Huck Finn" ("Publishers, Pamphlets and Other Things," in P&P 5: 319).[8] Was this professional jealousy? The anxiety of influence? "Pound is … violently American," Wyndham Lewis remarked, adding mischievously: "Tom Sawyer is somewhere in his gait" (262). Dialect *is* there, of course, in Pound's frequently-noted use of Joel Chandler Harris (*vide* Michael North) and James Whitcomb Riley (see Stock and Fiedler) and also in his limited use of Bret Harte (all three of whom were at some time, interestingly, friends and collaborators of Mark Twain).

These precedents have been canonized apparently conclusively, without further consideration. My concern is that Michael North over-emphasizes the racial aspect of this use of dialect. Scholarly fixation with race decrees that studies ignore the sheer *multiplicity* of vernaculars existing side-by-side in Antebellum America, of which the broad "African-American"/minstrel show dialect was but one example. At times Pound took the voice of a poor white Yankee (*vide* Mullins). Other times he would mimic the Southerner: "Similarly unconvincing versions of colloquial American (white rather than black) appear also in some of his earliest 'light verse'," Leslie Fiedler notes (137). Such heteroglossia is characteristic of antebellum humor (see Lowell, Leland).

Significant and more apt influences exist, predating Harris or Riley (or Twain). "It is best to go at the thing chronologically," Pound wrote to Iris Barry, "otherwise one gets excited over an imitation instead of over a creation or a discovery" (L 90).

Harris, Riley and Harte are called "Local Color" writers. This tradition was the cosier, less radical and less experimental heir to a body of writing which had been developing since the Revolutionary Era and which reached its apocalyptic apogee during the Civil War. Where "Local Color" was "daown-home," moderate and sometimes downright saccharine, the earlier humorists employed the grotesque, the exaggerated and the violent. George Washington Harris, in his "Sut Lovingood" letters, exemplifies such transgressive writing. Here, for instance, white-trash Sut describes his mutilation of a slave's corpse in "Frustrating a Funeral" (1867):

> I then pried open his mouf, an' let his teef shet ontu the back ove a live bull-frog, an' I smeared hits paws an' belly wif sum ove my bugmixtry, an' pinned a littil live garter-snake by hits middil crosswise in his mouf, smeared like the frog plum tu the pint ove his tail. (165)

This is hardly "Uncle Remus." Add to this Matthew Franklin Whittier (the brother of the poet John Greenleaf) in the "Ethan Spike" letters:

> When I come tew, I was the darndest lookin site, I tell yew! Bloody as Uncle Ben used to be in hog-killin time. One eye bunged, four of my forrerd teeth driv clean daown my throte, an to craown all, the hull craown of my head was gone, an by that time, I spose, was bein smoked in a ingine wig-wom. ("Ethan Spike Goes West")

This is hardly meet subject for Riley. Neither is the following:

> There once was a pore honest sailor, a heavy drinker,
> A hell of a cuss, a rowster, a boozer, and
> The drink finally sent him to hospital,
> And they operated, and there was a poor whore in
> The women's ward had a kid, while
> They were fixing the sailor , and they brought him the kid
> When he came to, and said:
> "Here! This is what we took out of you."

Here, in canto 12, Pound repeats this old staple of obscene folklore, markedly distinct from Local Color gentility, and concludes with the explicit (dialect) punchline:

> "I am not your fader but your moder," quod he,
> "Your fader was a rich merchant in Stambouli."[9]

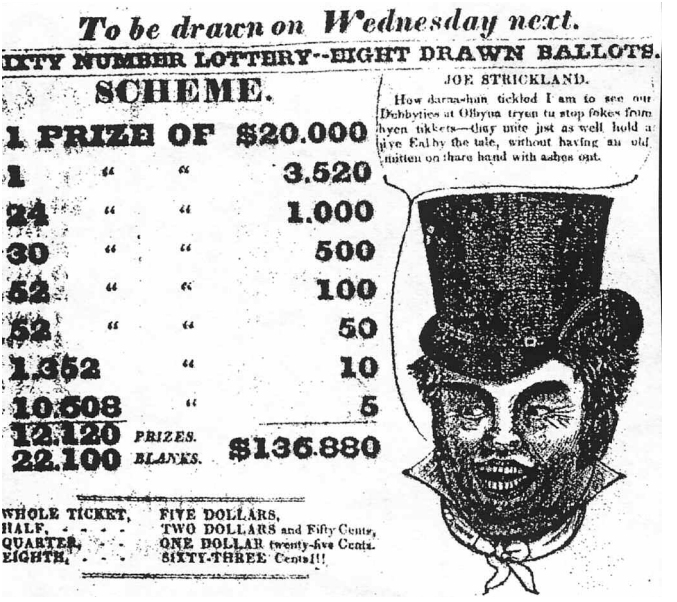
Nor were the Local Colorists grotesque, distorted or violent *in the text*. Importantly, they did not employ cacography; what Max Eastman calls "the fun of distorted words" (150), writing where "bad grammar is good fun" (156), and what Bakhtin calls "carnivalesque" language (150-155).[10] Such warped abandon and experimental chutzpah characterized the Civil War humorists, and can be found in Pound as well. Mencken found, in the "new poetry", "a spirit of experimentation [which] often passes into the grotesque" and

which "is shot through with *héliogabalisme*" (95).

Adams and/or Ploughjogger

Contra Walter Blair, its foremost historian, American dialect humor existed well before the nineteenth-century.[11] The journalistic guise of the illiterate-but-shrewd rural critic can be found in a document composed as early as 1763, when a correspondent of the Boston *Evening-Post* took the *persona* "Humphrey Ploughjogger" and wrote just such a satire to "poke fun at bugbears of the day."[12] This might be a negligible cavil (at least to Pound studies) if not for the true identity of the author of this seeming anomaly: future president John Adams.

Adams's "earliest verifiable entry into print," published when he was twenty-seven, was probably intended as a "mild attempt to reprove" a friend's late journalistic contri-



"Joe Strickland," from an advertisement for Arnold's Lottery (1826).

bution to the intensive political wrangling between Governor Thomas Hutchinson and James Otis Jr.[13] Adams assumed this role that would persist through American dialect satire for the next two hundred years; subverting authority with native *horse sense*:

> The grate men dus nothing but quaril with one anuther and put peces in the nues paper aginst one anuther, and sum sayes one is rite, and others sayes tuther is rite and they don't know why or wherefor … ("Humphrey Ploughjogger to the *Boston Evening-Post*," 14 March 1763, Adams 61)

Again establishing a tradition, Anglophilia is indirectly criticized as Adams mocks those ministers in Boston who take on English fashions:

> They had ruffles on and grate ty wigs with matter a bushel of hair on um that cums haf down there baks, but I don't wonder they go so fin for there is a parcel of peple in Lundun that chuses um as they say and pays um … (62)

The illiterate pose, Adams made clear, served to radically differentiate Ploughjogger from English influence, and those Anglicised (ergo inauthentic), genteel, Bostonians:

> I Arnt book larnt enuff, to rite so polytly, as the great gentlefolks, that rite in the News-papers, about Pollyticks. I think it is pitty, they should know how to rite so well, saving they made a better use ont. (63)

Refined language (and refined clothing), he implied, did not equal refined behavior. Language, radicalized by misspelling and dialect, shames the *seeming* propriety of those in power, and trumps that flowery, vague language used by Adams's targets. "Ploughjogger was quite pointed in his chastisement of the abstracting propensities of the learned and political class,"

notes David Simpson (109). Pound would similarly attack abstract flummery in the poetry of his own time, in such axioms as: "Direct treatment of the 'thing,' whether subjective or objective," and "Use no superfluous word, no adjective, which does not reveal something" (Flint – after Pound – in P&P 1:119; Pound, "A Few Don'ts," in P&P 1:120). Both men were aiming for a language that eschews ambiguity and political duplicity, authority's claptrap and jargon.

They propose instead a language that extols "ching ming" ("right name," canto 59). Adams suggests a rural model of plain and plain-dealing speech, one recalling the "plain style" of the Puritans which sought to dispel the flamboyant (and blasphemous) excesses of Catholicism and Anglicanism, which in turn leads to an authentic, rural culture. The didactic purpose behind much of American dialect humor was to criticize the seemingly authoritative (Europeanized, cosmopolitan) culture (and language) with an autochthonous, vernacular culture and a recognizably independent grammar.[14]

Adams reprised "Humphrey Ploughjogger" at the time of the Stamp Act to again criticize Anglicized flamboyance and to offer a native alternative:

> But as to trade and shipping and such like, it seems to me we had better be without most of that than with it – for it only makes rum and such things cheap, and so makes folks drink today and flip instead of cyder, when they an't half so good and holsome – and it mades [sic] us all beaus, and dresses us up fine. … I always used to keep a comely boughten coat to go too meeting in, but I'le vow I'le never put it on again after first November, if the stamp act takes place; I'le cut up the hide of my fat Ox … and make a coat of that, with the hair on. (146-7)

Adams imagines a possible native American culture that anticipates the cult of the pelt-clad South-Western frontiersmen (*vide* Davy Crockett, Mike Fink), returning to a coarse, even grotesque, American soil. Again, what is manifested through examples of outer appearances (clothes) speaks also

of strategies for both political and linguistic independence. The homespun, primitive Ox-hide coat which suits the wearer without being ostentatious (anticipating Thoreau in *Walden*) reflects the primitive, independent, authentic language of the land. Divided between a classical, patrician (Anglicized) erudition (or "book larnin'") and native wiles, two models Pound hesitated between, Adams was again echoed later by Thoreau: "It is too late to be studying Hebrew; it is more important to understand even the slang of to-day" (238).

Jackson/Jacksonianism

Thoreau's thought reflects Emerson's influence, which in turn reflected Jacksonianism.[15] The tradition of a popular vernacular American literature first flourished in the time of Andrew Jackson's presidency (1829-1837); hence the term "Jacksonian humor."

Andrew Jackson should, ideally, rank larger in Pound's pantheon than he does. "We were diddled out of the heritage Jackson and Van Buren left us," Pound wrote in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, while concentrating only on Jackson's economic policies, not the cultural aspect of his presidency.[16] "Only in the last few years has any work been done to do a little justice to Andrew Jackson," he complained elsewhere ("The Central Problem," P&P 8:109). It's not clear why Pound himself did not do more justice to Jackson.[17] Martin Van Buren, Jackson's less-heroic vice-president and successor, rates more prominent and repeated mentions in Pound's writings than Jackson. For instance, canto 34. When Jackson "appears" it is significantly not as a philosopher-ruler, like Jefferson or Adams, but symbolised in his vulgar effects:

> President Jackson's spittin' box and a broken pipe on the floor. (169)

Learning and erudition were not among Jackson's strengths. He was the first "log-cabin" president, and under his presidency

the common man – the artisan, the Jeffersonian agriculturalist – was celebrated, along with his culture and language. Likewise when Pound quotes Adams's dictum "Be in miniature a portrait of the people at large" (67/391), he gropes at Jacksonianism.[18] This uncharacteristically democratic Adams was the one Pound extolled. Again, it must be asked, why not Jackson? Possibly Pound could appreciate Adams's ambivalence; his abstract political celebration of "the people" coupled with a snobbish personal contempt for what Pound termed the "accursed groveling vulgus".[19] Like Adams, Pound was not an obvious democrat; Mencken observed that "[m]any of the new poets are ardent enemies of democracy, for example, Pound" (94).

"With the beginning of the Jacksonian democracy," wrote Constance Rourke, "public speech burst forth in a never-end-

"Sut Lovingood" by Justin H. Howard.

ing flood" (63; also Blair 39). Jacksonian language was blunt and unpretentious. Pound knew this, and noted it in canto 89:

> …Louis Philippe suggested that
> Jackson stand firm
> And not sugar his language. (615)

Nevertheless, dialect writers could burst into vernacular ecstasies equal to any patrician orator. Wrote "Ethan Spike":

> I'm chock brimin, full, runnin over, an afeared of spillin! Words, spoken, oral, episterlary, or other wise dont kim within two rows of apple-trees of meetin the case. … My feelings is onexpressible an past findin aout. Sich a rush of idees. Bird of my country, moult me a quill – a quill did I say – give us all yerv got, even to yer tail feathers – strip yerself quick, and then kill me the British Lion that I may use his blood for ink![20]

Jacksonian rhetoric was opposed to "book larnin'" and patrician (read: Anglicized) education and diction. Haughty figures of authority, particularly politicians, were serially humiliated by rural tricksters like George W. Arnold's "Joe Strickland," here confounding the politicians who wished to ban lotteries:

> Ses I mistur debbytiz – ar yew a pak ov sich tarnal sap heds az tu think yew kan maik a lor tu stop me frum byin a forrun ticket – no not by a darn site ses I now mistur Debbytiz iph enny of yew kan lift youre selves off ov this flore by the waizebun ov youre own britchiz – oney gist tu inchis un stay thare til I kount Phorty then I'le b'leve yew can maik enny lor youre a mind tu …[21]

Pound, in his correspondences with American politicians, and in his attempts to go to Washington himself, there to speak "horse-sense," partakes of this very tradition. In a letter to George Tinkham, Pound revives the comic standard role of the office seeker:

> If yr/ Boston office is being a nuissance why not put ME into it. I know you picture me floatin' round in a gondola plucking water lilies etc/etc/ But my favorite theologian Scotus Erigena defined sin as; a LAPSE from reality.
> Mebbe a little political close up wd/ be valuable experience for one still young but not exactly in first blush of jejune innocence … my life has not been one long Sunday school, though doubtless etc. I am IG GURUNT and how of the sidelights of Bastun. (L/GT 183)

Aside from exhibiting authentic peripheral naivety regarding politics, Pound also defines himself self-consciously against the stereotype of effete, European "book larnin'." Such a philosophy is echoed in canto 54, when Pound writes:

> The highbrows are full of themselves
> learnèd, gay and irrelevant
> on such basis nothing stands (278)

Uncomfortable with book learning, he writes in canto 22:

> Heaven will protect
> The lay reader. (102)

Pound's pronounced antipathy to the academy is there, too, in canto 28, where he lauds "Pa Statdvolk," who is "Worth a good million, not a book in the place…" (138).

Significantly, Pound's next line from canto 54 echoes the Crockett of the Jacksonian almanacs: "HAN OU was for huntin', huntin' tigers and bears, leopards." Countless boasts of the South-Western "rip-tailed roarer" were of the bear-lickin', painter-whippin' variety.[22] Such popular, vernacular, democratic language was augured by Emerson in "The American Scholar" in 1837, along with the Yankee dialect exemplified by Seba Smith's "Jack Downing." "Mose," the "Bowery B'hoy" was being imitated throughout the theatres and Negro minstrelsy was being developed on the Bowery and in the

comic papers. Voices were being found, experiments made. Then: nothing.

By the time Van Buren succeeded Jackson, an all-too commercial industry had assimilated and neutered the Jacksonian voice, bowdlerizing any subversive content. Yankees and roarers became ubiquitous and exhausted; and that rot of the time – middle-class, feminized genteelism – set in.

Lowell and/or Biglow

The next noteworthy development came in 1846. America had entered its war with Mexico, and one of its harshest critics was a poet.

His long poem had, in its "First Series," launched a virulent attack on America's involvement in that war, earning for the poet the accusation of treason. First published in installments in the radical, abolitionist press, the poem featured a bricolage of oft-changing narrative voices, three very independent personae, switching between a voice of pedantic erudition replete with classical epigrams and asides, a slangy drawl of cracker-barrel *nous*, spoken by an illiterate poet in Yankee dialect verse, and the degraded snarl of a decimated cynic.

The poet, a multi-lingual anti-Semite, had even, like Pound, eaten flowers; although in his case with a knife and fork "at a literary supper in one of Boston's great houses" (Hall 102). This was James Russell Lowell; the long poem was the *Biglow Papers*.

The *Biglow Papers* injected a truly literary consciousness in to Yankee dialect humor. In this narrative, the nigh-illiterate poet Hosea Biglow writes dialect verses against the American campaign in Mexico, which he then passes to the local parson Reverend Homer Wilbur to supposedly correct. However, Wilbur retains the dialect, and simply adds his own lengthy annotations and digressions. As the letters progress, Hosea Biglow's low-down friend Birdofredum Sawin enters the War, and his letters back to the village are also interpreted in verse

"Birdofredum Sawin," by Edward Windsor Kemble, from James Russell Lowell, *Biglow Papers*.

form by Biglow, then re-interpreted by Wilbur. These three pronouncedly different voices compete on the page, as Pound would say "so that sound runs upon sound" (27/131), and the reader is shuttled between nit-picking Latin allusions ("*Aut insanit, aut versos facit*") and crude, vernacular verse (Lowell 49). Maybe this sounds familiar.

Similarities between *The Biglow Papers* and the *Cantos* abound. Both poems treat the same period in history; John Calhoun and Daniel Webster, vigorous opponents of Andrew Jackson, are denounced in each. Both poems are concerned consciously with language itself, and language as a politicized weapon. An eminent scholar, Lowell was thoroughly versed in, and fiercely proud of, Yankee slang. He viewed American vernacular as a totem of independence from the English. Pound's John Adams advises in 1780 "to show U.S. the importance of an early attention to language" (68/400). *The Biglow Papers* bristles with rebukes to England, as does Lowell's essay "On a Certain Condescension in Foreigners" (1869).[23] Parson Wilbur, while a stickler for grammatical propriety, also celebrates Yankee dialect and "ordinary discourse":

> A person familiar with the dialect of certain portions of Massachusetts will not fail to recognize, in ordinary discourse, many words now noted in English vocabularies as archaic … Shakespeare stands less in need of a glossary to most New Englanders than to many a native of the Old Country. (41)

Elsewhere, he proclaims that "[t]he chief thing is, that the messenger believe that he has an authentic message to deliver" (142). Pound also proposes a democratic language which eschews ambiguity:

> Don't think that soft talk is wanted
> you write down what you take for the facts
> call pork pork in your proposals… (61/336)

Reverend Wilbur and Pound both freely modify and twist the languages of the classics. In the mid-nineteenth-century, the Latin-quoting country parson was already an established comic standard. Wilbur takes refuge from his own dark age in the classics: "I have ever preferred the study of the dead languages, those primitive formations being Ararats upon whose silent peaks I sit secure" (90). Compare this with Mauberley, "born / In a half savage country, out of date / Bent resolutely on wringing lilies from the acorn." Wilbur even acknowledges that "We are all more or less bitten with this martial insanity. … *Semel insanivimus omnes*" (79).

While Pound could assume this folk-role – a more dignified take on Gertrude Stein's "village explainer" – he could equally resemble the other two personae of the *Biglow Papers*.[24] Hosea Biglow, the poet of the triad, surely recalls Ezra Pound:

> He's a traiter, blasphemer, an' wut ruther worse is,
> He puts all his ath'ism in dreffle bad verses.

Elsewhere:

> Call me coward, call me traiter,
> Jest ez suits your mean idees, –
> Here I stand a tyrant-hater,
> An' the friend o' God an' Peace!

Lastly, and least flattering to Pound, he resembled Birdofredum Sawin, a stooge and ultimately a casualty of the War. Sawin, a cynical schemer who joins the army out of indolence and greed is the anti-hero of *The Biglow Papers*, finally whittled down by events to "the dead corpse, not of a man, but of a soul, – a putrefying lump, horrible for the life that is in it" (119). Yet he is also the dialect voice at its most undiluted. If Lowell measures the "Queen's English" as the least authentic, the most complex descent into dialect and cacography marks the purest independence from "English" English.

By the end of the poem, having suffered "the loss of a leg, an arm, an eye, and four fingers" Sawin is reduced to "a *vox et prœterea nihil*"; highly redolent of Pound at *his* lowest and most vernacular, in the Rome radio broadcasts (134).

Civil War Humor

Dialect humor frothed up again as the uncertainties of the mid-century antebellum period swelled. Its greatest pioneer and experimenter, Charles Farrar Browne, recognizing the

"Paster uv Sed Church, In Charge"

"Petroleum V. Nasby," by Thomas Nast.

central figure in an age mesmerized (literally) by show arts, illusion and humbug, took Phineas Taylor Barnum's philosophy of distortion, exaggeration, inversion and the grotesque, and forged its written equivalent in the form of the "Artemus Ward" letters.[25] Dialects were mixed-up, cacography made freakish, and staid, commercial literary forms were burlesqued and warped.

Civil War humor, at its best, is aggressive. As the crisis approached and then erupted and as horror and slaughter ensued, a shrill and often nihilistic form of humor reflected this.

David Ross Locke's "Petroleum Vesuvius Nasby," openly indebted to Browne's experimentation with "Artemus Ward," was another dark precursor to the Pound of the Rome broadcasts.[26] Locke was a committed opponent of slavery; Lincoln commended him and declared "I should be willing to resign the Presidency if I could write such letters."[27] Conversely the character Nasby, like Pound, was an office seeker, an anti-abolitionist trying to avert war ("I felt that my conscience wood not be easy unless I did all in my power to avert the evil," Locke 27). He was a Copperhead, that is a Northern supporter of secession, a traitor to the Union (compare with the "Mugwump" Thaddeus Coleman Pound). Nasby burnt down black churches and led racist lynchings. This is his voice:

> In the South, every hill-side wuz dottid with the carcasses uv Noo Ingland schoolmarms, who, hevin been suspected uv teechin niggers to rede, wuz justly hung; and the pleasant crack uv the whip wuz heard all over the land. O, them Arkadian days wen it only took 20 minits to arrest, try, sentence, hang, and divide the close uv a Yankee skool-teacher! (Locke 49)

If this seems too severe a comparison, re-read the Rome broadcasts; was Pound not, perhaps unconsciously, continuing this tradition of grotesque and violent excess? After all, contra Noel Stock, when has Pound ever truly resembled

James Whitcomb Riley? Pound's orthography resembles Locke's far more closely.

Comparing the "Local Color" writers (Riley, Joel Chandler Harris, Bret Harte) to the likes of Whittier, Locke and Lowell, is like comparing the violence and frenzy of the Civil War with the stiff conservatism of Reconstruction; the dawning of the so-called "Brown Decades" (Mumford 1-4). As Pound wrote, "THE CIVIL WAR drove everything out of the American mind" (J/M 95).

The genteel poet and anthologist Edmund Clarence Stedman (a good friend of Pound's bête noir, Howells) deplored this "contagion of our newspaper exchange system … a muddy tide of slang, vulgarity, impertinence, and buffoonery that is not wit" (Harrison 111). He kept it well away from his popular poetry anthologies. Civil War humor, I suspect, has been exiled from the textbooks and anthologies ever since, for its unpalatable content, inseparable from its severe form; not so "Local Color." Yet the strongest, most original American dialect humor comes into play in times of war, be it the War with Mexico or the Civil War. Indeed, the earliest instance of a "Yankee" voice as starkly opposed to an English voice, both on the stage and in print, came from the fervor of the Revolutionary War: Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast* (1787). Wartime is when humor was at its most vicious; partisan and chaotic, employing eccentric spelling and slang in a frenzy to attack the enemy and their press. The relevance to Pound is clear.

Conclusion

The question remains: *Did* Pound read popular, dialect literature other than Riley, Harte and Harris? In a letter to Harriet Monroe, Pound praises George Ade, an inheritor of the dialect tradition, as a superior speaker of "Amur'k'n" to the "American brood" of poets (L 15). His grandfather, Thaddeus, was an abolitionist, a contributor to *The Liberator*; it is quite possible that he owned copies of the Nasby letters.

In 1937 Pound wrote to the popular broadcaster and writer Alexander Woollcott in some of his thickest cacography and dialect. Woollcott's response is telling:

> it occurs to me that you may have decided that if you could make your theory of money clear to me, you would then know you had reduced it to terms so simple that anyone could comprehend it. But I doubt if you can manage it even if you recover from your atavistic

"Artemus Ward," from *Artemus Ward, His Book* (1862).

> and exhausting relapse into the prose style of the late Josh Billings … (McWhirter and Muhly 110-111)

"Josh Billings" (Henry Wheeler Shaw) was a nineteenth-century mis-speller and dialect humorist, who toured with Nasby and Mark Twain. Philip Larkin independently noted the similarity, calling the *Cantos* "a tessellation of languages and civilizations and periods streaked by a kind of Josh Billings humor" (168). Was Pound familiar with Josh Billings's work? Woollcott points out that Henry Wheeler Shaw was, like Pound and himself, a "Hamilton man," making Pound's awareness still more plausible.

Pound was certainly aware of James Russell Lowell. In *Moeurs Contemporaines* (1918), there are the lines:

> And she said:
> "You remember Mr Lowell,
> He was your ambassador here?"
> And I said: "That was before I arrived."

With this coy reply ("That was before I arrived") Pound acknowledges his consciousness of an earlier American lineage, while ironically placing it at a distance from his own works, as if jealously separating Modernism from its forebears.[28]

Thirty-seven years later a more conciliatory Pound wrote to E. E. Cummings from St. Elizabeths, in a period when he was reconciling himself gingerly to American letters, referring to a well-known poem from the *Biglow Papers*:

> By the way, I don't know if you meet Mr Lowell (Rob[er]t. not the late Ja[me]s. R. in seance)
> did yu ever, speaking of Ja[me]s/ putt anyone onto hunting fer the lost strophe of
> "John P.
> Robinson, he"[29]

What, all-importantly, does this go to *show*? This paper provides notes towards new ways of reading Pound, as well as wider definitions of, and assumptions about, Modernism. It points to possible new directions of scholarship and to further popular-vernacular precedents *beyond* Harris and Riley. Pound's debt to vernacular America is underrated (a point acknowledged somewhat queasily, but seldom explored). These are notes towards a deeper, more serious inquiry.

New York

Notes

[1] Pound's *antipathy* towards Howells was pronounced and in earnest. See, for the tip of an iceberg, Pound's letter of 28 November 1917 to Mencken, in which he refers to Howells as a "mutton-shank" (L 125).

[2] The phrase "cracker-barrel" is applied to Pound as early as 1928, in a criticism by W. R. Benét: "Too much stuff – gosh-ding it all! – gits printed anyway. But sittin' round the stove on their cracker-barrels, with their old goatees waggin' away of a winter's evenin' ther really be a few right peart fellers readin' a bit here an' there this side th' big pond" ("The Phoenix Nest" 660. Reprinted in P&P 5: 27.).

[3] Pound to William Carlos Williams, December 1954 (L/WCW 293). See Materer 251-2. Examples are legion in Paige; see 280, 302-3, 306-7 (to Eliot), 294 (to F.V. Morley), 300 (to Joyce), ad infinitum.

[4] Pound "does" Cockney, seemingly after Thackeray's "Yellowplush" letters, in "Mr. Hawkins on Mr. Carter," an *Egoist* squib of January 1914 (P&P 1: 213).

[5] For instance poem 70 ("Ole Brer Rabbit watchin' his feet"); poem 187 ("Yaller bird, let my crawps alone"). See also poems 76, 82, 110, 117.

[6] These are eye-dialect; case of cacography in canto 19: "I gawt ten thousand dollars tew mak 'em, / And I am goin' tew mak 'em…" Also canto 28 (quoted below).

[7] The question arises: at what point does Pound's written voice begin to change, and how closely is this reflective of, and concordant

with, his alleged mental breakdown? See Materer 251: "The humorous dialect is used … throughout an entire letter to E. E. Cummings in 1935; and it is about this time in the middle thirties [that] the serious breakdown in his personality occurs." Pound's longer-lasting correspondences, such as that with William Carlos Williams (1907-1958), provide other possible gauges. By 1946, Williams had noticed a change and was chiding Pound: "You can't even make a sentence, not even a phrase that is intelligible [.]" Williams to Pound, 8 July 1946 (L/WCW 231).

[8] Pound also announced this antipathy to the readers of *Poetry* magazine, in a favorable review of Robert Frost's *North of Boston*: "There is nothing more nauseating to the developed mind than that sort of local buffoonery which the advertisements call 'racy' – the village wit presenting some village joke that is worn out everywhere else … and one is god-forsakenly tired of the post-Bret-Hartian, post-Mark-Twainian humorist" (LE 385-6).

[9] In the Motif Index, this is J2321, "Man made to believe he is pregnant." In *Pissing in the Snow*, a selection of obscene folktales, Vance Randolph records a similar tale ("The Man That Had a Baby") from the Ozark mountain region in which a drunken man's anus is taped shut and he is induced to believe that he has given birth to a monkey (23).

[10] See also Bridgman 58: "The distortion in Josh Billings' sentence, 'The duk is a foul' is purely for the pleasure of distortion."

[11] Walter Blair's principal study is *Native American Humor* (1937). While Blair dates his opening chapter "Beginnings" between 1775 and 1830, he finds few examples prior to 1800, and even these are hardly convincing. Benjamin Franklin's humor, cited by Blair, owed nearly everything to English precedents, particularly Addison and Steele's *Spectator*. Blair privileges Seba Smith's "Jack Downing" letters (beginning in 1830) as "a starting point" (39), passing over George W. Arnold's earlier "Joe Strickland" letters for no apparent reason. Blair was clearly not aware of the "Humphrey Ploughjogger" letters, and nobody has since tried to revise Blair's chronology to explain this much earlier anomaly. It is to be presumed that Adams's squib was not unique and that there are more, probably earlier, examples of similar humor before 1763. I have identified a form of cacographic dialect humor in print as early as 1722, from the pen of Cotton Mather no less, in "A

Friendly Debate; or, A Dialogue Between Academicus, and Sawny & Mundungus". See my comments in a forthcoming essay, provisionally titled "The Yankee, Cotton Mather."

[12] Robert J. Taylor, "Editorial Note" (Adams 59).

[13] Taylor, "Editorial Note" 58, 60.

[14] See North 81. North ignores the examples of other, earlier forms of dialect ventriloquism; the performance of dialect defiance to English hegemony predates the era of minstrelsy. It is there in "Yankee Doodle."

[15] On Emerson's debt to popular Jacksonianism, see Reynolds 484-506.

[16] J/M 97. Pound comes closest in the "Chronological Outline" of "Economic Nature of the United States" when he notes: "1829-1841 – Jackson and Van Buren in the White House. Fight between the banks and the people. The people won …" (SP 150). See also "A Visiting Card" (SP 279). William McNaughton reported hearing Pound at St. Elizabeths saying: "Respect the people's creative urges" (24).

[17] See H. J. Heckford's letter in *Paideuma* 8.1 (Spring 1979), 178: "It looks as though Pound was a Jacksonian democrat." For more on Pound's use of Jackson, see Kimpel and Eaves.

[18] The quotation comes from "Thoughts on Government" (1776), *Portable Adams* 235.

[19] Pound to Harriet Monroe, 30 March 1913 (L 18). See also L 16: "and in the end the greasy vulgus will be directed by us."

[20] "Ethan Spike on the Great Eastern" 205. Whittier echoes Adams's Ploughjogger, who "don't never know when to stop, hardly, matter comes in to my noddle so fast" (letter to *Boston Evening-Post*, 5 September 1763, in Adams 93).

[21] "Joe Strickland" [George W. Arnold], New York *Enquirer*, June 9, 1827, 2-3 (in Read 289).

[22] For examples, see Boatright 33-42.

[23] Nevertheless, Lowell accepted the position of Ambassador to England from 1880-1885.

[24] Lowell's emphasis on the use of different narrative personae preceded his first meeting with Robert Browning. While he liked Browning's poetry, he recognized also a propensity for willful obscurity in the very work which precipitated Pound's *Cantos*, when "he offered his copy of Sordello to anyone who would put his hand on his

heart and swear he understood it" (Duberman 127).

[25] For comparisons, albeit fleeting ones, between Pound and Browne/Ward, see Mark Van Doren, "Preface" to Paige's *Letters*; Materer, "Doppelgänger" 251; and Kenner 57. The reference is made severally, then, but always glibly and without further examination.

[26] On Locke's debt to Browne, see Harrison 24, 99.

[27] Harrison 113. Lincoln *did* write dialect humor, if not of the same caliber as Locke's. See "The 'Rebecca' Letter" of 27 August 1842 in Lincoln 1: 291-297.

[28] In 1937, writing a furious reply to a critic, Pound attacked Harvard as an institution. In his execration, he takes in the Lowell dynasty: "Traitors and falsifiers and extortioners [sic] for 150 years… The nature of that family is FOUL, it hath a viscid glitter, but is basically false, *faux monnayeurs*" (Knowles 238-9). See also Pound's comments in "And the Remainder" (1930) against "the casting of a pale Lowelization on all things" (P&P 5:214). Much of this antipathy was brought about by Amy Lowell; perhaps Pound's reconciliation in the 1950s was brought about by Robert (see below). Then again, in the late-1950s canto 103, Pound (pointedly?) omitted Lowell's name from the attendees at Nathaniel Hawthorne's funeral.

[29] Letter to E. E. Cummings, 15 January 1955, *Pound/Cummings* 364. A typical verse of Lowell's original poem goes:

> The side of our country must ollers be took,
> An' Presidunt Polk, you know, *he* is our country;
> An' the angel thet writes all our sins in a book
> Puts the debit to him, an' to us the *per contry*;
> An' John P.
> Robinson he
> Sez this is his view o' the thing to a T.

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