Failure and the Phantastikon: Ezra Pound and Apocalypse

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Abstract

This article argues that although Ezra Pound frequently positioned himself against religious and Christian thought — exemplified in his statement that the birth of the English Vorticist movement represented the ‘End of the Christian Era’ — the apocalyptic sensibility expressed in much of his early poetry is structured by the social concerns and spiritual hopes expressed in biblical and early Judeo-Christian literature. Examining some thematic parallels between Pound’s pre-Cantos poetry and biblical apocalyptic literature, this article demonstrates two points: that Pound’s apocalypticism is driven by a sense of the failure of modern poetry, particularly in his involvement in Imagism and Vorticism, to affect genuine change in the social or political sphere; and that Pound’s early idea of the phantastikon is an attempt to construct a universe that is simultaneously derived from, and alternative to, this universe. In this way, Pound’s project was a rejection of contemporary Judeo-Christian religion, but was also an effort to recover for modern art and poetry the mythical structures of eschatology and renewal that were, in his view, the animating foundations of true religious thought.

Key words: Ezra Pound; apocalypse; eschatology; biblical literature; avant-garde; modernism; Imagism; Vorticism

On 1 April 1914, The Egoist magazine advertised the first issue of Blast by proclaiming the birth of Vorticism, an avant-garde movement Ezra Pound (1885–1972) had launched with Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957), as ‘The end of the Christian era’ (Moody 2007: 256). Nearly a decade later, Pound felt that the new era had arrived with Mussolini’s march on Rome in 1922: he declared it ‘Year Zero’ and dated subsequent letters and publications accordingly (for example, his 1935 publication Jefferson and/or Mussolini was dated ‘anno XIII’). Yet between these dates a series of disappointments convinced Pound that the public’s insularity and foolishness, the mercenary inclinations or cowardice of artists and ultimately World War I definitively precluded a new English Renaissance. His self-styling as a prophet of a new age of beauty began to look
embarrassing. In ‘Provincialism the Enemy’, a series of articles he wrote in 1917 in *The New Age* (a title not lacking in apocalyptic pretention), Pound stated that, ‘the lords of the temporal world never will take an artist with any seriousness’ (Pound 1973: 160).

Pound’s interest in comparing the period of his avant-garde ‘isms’ — Imagism and Vorticism — with the end of Christianity is both significant and ironic precisely because this essay will argue that the paradigm for his millennial aspirations can be elucidated by reference to biblical prophetic and apocalyptic literature. First, it will argue that the apocalyptic viewpoint is a result of the failure and breakdown of the prophetic viewpoint, which imagined salvation within historical and political terms. Pound’s apocalyptic tone was often inspired by the failure to envision the ‘temporal world’ as the source for the new era. His solution was to chart a middle-course between the visionary artist and history, an idea he called, in his discarded ‘III Cantos’ of 1917, the *phantastikon* (employing the Greek term for ‘imaginary’), which was not history as such, but an imagined history called into existence by the poet. Imagism and Vorticism asserted that the essential component of poetry, the image (which Pound later generalised into the vortex — an analogue covering multiple art forms), distilled the essential reality (be it moral, ethical, cultural, social, aesthetic, etc.) of the world around the poet, but then transfigured it into a new reality. Describing Imagism, Pound stated, ‘The image is the word beyond formulated language’ (Pound 1939: 102). In the way that the biblical books of Daniel or Revelation can only speak of history through the obscurity of fantastic allegories, Pound’s image was a radical break with the known and a revelation of the unspeakable — an entirely apocalyptic move. Biblical *apōkalypsis* (Greek for ‘revelation’ or ‘disclosure’) is the revelation of the *secret* history of the world, comprehensible only in the terms of Christian or Jewish belief. This study examines the roots of Pound’s feeling that a truly apocalyptic sensibility was necessary to shake the world out of its decline; when the history of this world only provided dead-ends and failures, it was incumbent upon the artist’s *phantastikon* to conceive of a new history from the ruins of this one.

1. Anti-Politics and Apocalyptic

Biblical scholarship has proposed that apocalyptic eschatology developed from the failure of prophets to justify a belief in the restoration of Israel after a series of catastrophic military defeats that ultimately deprived the nation of sovereignty.¹ Paul D. Hanson

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¹ Hanson’s view has been widely accepted, with varying reservations, by biblical scholarship. As recently as 2008, Norman K. Gottwald reiterated apocalyptic thought in terms similar to Hanson’s, as ‘Radical
outlined this view: when the destruction of the Jerusalem temple and the end of the Davidic monarchy definitively precluded any probable avenue for God’s salvation through those institutions, salvation could only occur precisely in the realm of the historically impossible:

The prophets no longer have the events of a nation’s history into which they can translate the terms of Yahweh’s cosmic will. Hence the successors of the prophets, the visionaries, continue to have visions, but they increasingly abdicate the other dimension of the prophetic office, the translation into historical events. At that point we enter the period of the transition from prophetic to apocalyptic eschatology (Hanson 1979: 16).

This leads to an anti-political attitude that rejects the struggle between the institutions of monarchy or religion as a source of salvation. This attitude looks outside of history itself for redemption, as in Daniel 2. 34, when the statue representing the four world empires is struck and destroyed by a ‘stone [...] cut out, not by human hands’. The statue, made from four materials, represents the historical succession of four kingdoms, but that order is decimated by an entirely external and divine force.

In ‘Provincialism the Enemy’, Pound states, ‘Fundamentally, I do not care “politically”, I care for civilisation, and I do not care who collects the taxes, or who polices the thoroughfares’ (Pound 1973: 169). As often as Pound donned the mantel of the prophet, this is not what one normally finds in the biblical prophets. When Amos proclaims doom on those who ‘afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, / and push aside the needy in the gate’ (5. 12), he passes judgment on the power relations in Israel. But this is not an apocalyptic attitude because ‘establish[ing] justice in the gate’ (Amos 5. 15) is a challenge for every generation and necessitates no fundamental paradigm shift, merely fidelity to God’s covenant. What concerns Pound is culture: not more equitable systems, but more civilised attitudes and behaviours. Wyndham Lewis in Blast similarly argued that ‘political struggles of emancipation are questions of “votes” and not of “art”’ (Puchner 2006: 115). And Bruce Comens notes that for Pound, ‘the ideal of representative government to some extent conflicts with Pound’s conviction that the arts are not democratic’ (1995: 30).

*pessimism* about the meaning of history fuse[d] with *radical optimism* that history is about the pass away before the divine kingdom” (Gottwald 2008: 343).

2 All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

3 In the unpublished poem ‘From Chebar’ (1913), for example, the title casts the speaker as a new Ezekiel (see Ezek. 1. 1, 3; 3. 15).
Anti-political elements are part of the root of much apocalyptic literature because it projects salvation into the realm of the divine. John J. Collins’s description of ‘the wise’ (maššilîm) portrayed in Daniel 10–12 identifies them as activists, but:

Their activism lies in making the masses understand. [...] The thesis of the visions is that the true meaning of events is not publicly evident but is known to the wise, through revelations. The real struggle is being fought out between the angelic princes (Collins 1984: 89; emphasis added). 4

The belief ‘that whatever happens on earth is a reflection of a celestial archetype’ (Collins 1984: 88) was common in the mythologies of the ancient Near East and gave apocalyptic writers the ability to view political struggles as shadows of cosmic events. Political history was illusory, whereas ‘true’ history was revealed in the eschatological vision. The reward for this understanding was the election of ‘the wise’ to a divine or quasi-divine status, ‘refined, purified, and cleansed, until the time of the end’ (Dan. 11. 35). This reading of Daniel coheres with Hanson’s thesis that prophecy ‘resisted the temptation of escape from the real world to the cosmic realm’, and translated revelation into socio-political terms (temple, monarchy, city), while apocalyptic found:

such translation increasingly difficult, as little within plain history could be identified with divine action and the political realm took on the appearance of unmitigated evil. A sudden resurgence of myth began to offer the possibility of escape rejected by early prophecy, and the result of this development was the death of prophecy and the birth of apocalyptic eschatology (Hanson 1979: 282).

Pound’s ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’ (1920) is animated by the view that the political sphere is antithetical to the true artist. ‘Mauberley’ begins with a reminder of the irreparable separation of his alter-ego, ‘E. P.’, from English society. In section VI, which presents a history of art and literature in Victorian England, Pound begins with the line, ‘Gladstone was still respected’ (Pound 2001: 189). 5 This line refers to W.E. Gladstone (1809–1898), a liberal politician and critic of the Pre-Raphaelites (Ruthven 1969: 134), to show bright points of artistic beauty against the bourgeois darkness. An even more devastating critique is section IV’s ‘home to old lies and new infamy’ (P 188), an allusion to David Lloyd George’s (1863–1945) statement as Prime Minister that the soldiers of World War I would return to ‘homes fit for heroes’ (Ruthven 1969: 133). The statement epitomised the corruption of truth in politics, and Pound reflected on the need for an

4 A reference to the divine surrogates of Israel (represented by the archangel Michael) and Persia and Greece (see Dan. 10. 13, 20).
5 Future reference to this work in this article will be designated ‘P’.
eschatological break with the situation in a 1917 letter to William Carlos Williams (1883–1963):

I thought the […] millennium that we all idiotically look for and work for was to be when
an American artist could stay at home without being dragged into civic campaigns,
dilutations of controversy, etc. (Pound 1951: 180–81)

In ‘Mauberley’, the poet’s priorities are radically different from the cynicism informing politics:

For three years, out of key with his time,
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain “the sublime”
In the old sense. Wrong from the start— (P 185)

The reference to ‘three years’ would be Pound’s association with Imagism and Vorticism — mid-1912 to 1915. The former association ended when the democratic inclinations of other Imagists conflicted with his own view of himself as creator and leader of the movement. The latter movement fizzled out when the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915) died fighting in World War I. The stanza ends with Pound’s judgement that E. P. was ‘Wrong from the start—’; however, are not all apocalyptic sentiments ‘wrong from the start’? While Pound would have emphasised the point more if he had broken the second line at ‘dead’ rather than ‘art’, there are apocalyptic connotations to the idea of resurrecting or resuscitating the dead, and thus creating something from an entirely negative position. Daniel 12. 2 is an example where, at the moment when Israel is rescued by the archangel Michael, ‘Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake’. But the characterisation of the time just prior to the resurrection of the dead is of a period where Israel’s suffering is at its greatest point: ‘There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence.’ The moment when time seems terminal, when Israel’s history is definitively over, is the moment that it becomes reversible and the dead live again. Like E. P., ‘The wise’ in Daniel are initially ‘wrong from the start’:

The wise among the people shall give understanding to many; for some days, however, they shall fall by sword and flame, and suffer captivity and plunder (Daniel 11. 33).

Therefore, the following stanza of ‘Mauberley’ immediately mitigates the harsh judgment that Pound places on his own work:

No, hardly, but seeing he had been born

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6 At one point, Pound told the American poet Amy Lowell (1874–1925) that he refused to consider the other Imagists his ‘critical and creative equals’ (Moody 2007: 224).
In a half-savage country, out of date; (P 185)

The ‘half-savage country’ refers to America, Pound’s national and political bête noire. The fact of E. P.’s beginning, his birth ‘[i]n a half-savage country’ that Pound regarded as a cultural backwater, identifies him as a hero who has started from the point of the furthest remove from his true goal, out of place as well as ‘out of date’. He begins in a place filled with pettiness and cynicism, politics and propaganda, Gladstone and Lloyd George, emphasising the seeming impossibility of him ever reaching his ‘millennium’.

Pound speaks from the standpoint that his ‘out of date’ agenda was not ‘Wrong’, but in fact allowed him to see the deception of politics. He saw the reduced status of truth during the war as both a measure of the irrecoverable state of the world and occasion for identifying ‘deceits’, ‘usury’, and ‘liars’:

Died some, pro patria,
    non “dulce” non “et decor”…
walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places. (P 188)

The final line echoes Isaiah 59. 14: ‘for truth stumbles in the public square’. As opposed to the poetic vision of E. P., the public sphere is the place of ‘civic campaigns’ and ‘dilutations of controversy’, where truth is most suppressed. Pound wrote that ‘If Armageddon has taught us anything it should have taught us to abominate the half-truth, and the tellers of the half-truth, in literature’ (Pound 1967: 139). The soldiers, having fought in the war, go through ‘hell and back’ (to recall an old cliché), reached the furthest point from the deceits of the public sphere, and so return with a clear-sightedness. Like E. P., the soldiers must find themselves in the place of the impossible in order to achieve the understanding for revelation. Pound portrays them as lifting back the deceptions in a great revelation of truth:

    fortitude as never before
    frankness as never before
    disillusion as never told in the old days,
    hysterias, trench confessions,
    laughter out of dead bellies. (P 188)

The experience of the war has something of a cleansing effect in terms of wiping away all of the falseness that led to it in the first place. There are no more illusions, only
disillusions so great that they were ‘never told in the old days’. The ‘unbelieving’ soldiers make confessions in the trenches and corpses laugh, again recalling the apocalyptic motif of the return of the dead. Pound also makes the point that this sort of revelation takes an uncommon level of courage, relating the word ‘fortitude’ to the plainspoken ‘frankness’ rather than to a more refined ‘honesty’ or ‘authenticity’. In Pound’s view, not only has Armageddon ‘taught us to abominate the half-truth’, but it actually takes an Armageddon to reveal truth, suggesting again that truth can only be reached in the midst of the lie, that — like Pound’s predecessor Dante — Paradise can only be reached via Hell.

If the biblical prophet claims that the life of the nation will be saved if only the political and cultural institutions behave within history according to God’s will (i.e., alignment towards social justice, proper methods of worship, acceptance or rejection of foreign domination), then analogously, E. P.’s pursuit of the poetry ought to create a more humane and creative world, rather than one that ends in the carnage of World War I. The Imagist and Vorticist aesthetics expressed Pound’s faith that England was on the cusp of a new renaissance by recovering the image or the vortex — the fundamental bases of artistic creation — in the modern world. But the political history of Europe, culminating in the war, disconfirmed that faith. Therefore, the lines ‘trench confessions / laughter out of dead bellies’ might demonstrate a ‘doubling-down’ that is itself the mark of apocalyptic thought. Laughter suggests defiance in the face of death, and a will to continue when all has been lost. When Israelite prophecy was ‘Confronted with the apparent injustice of God, […] she confessed God’s healing presence in the face of everything’ (Crenshaw 2007: 105; emphasis added). In this respect, the laughter of the dead represents an ambivalent form of mockery: laughing at death itself, looking beyond into a future whose door is reached by walking ‘eye-deep in hell’.

Pound’s ultimate abandonment of the avant-garde is largely due to the failure of the poet to influence history in a concrete way, and so the poet simply asserts his higher ‘truth’ in the form of an unaccountable revelation. Out of the disconfirmation of prophecy, Collins writes, the apocalyptic visionary can find comfort in that:

apocalypses do indeed present a kind of wisdom insofar as they, first, offer an understanding of the structure of the universe and of history, and, second, see right understanding as the precondition of right action (Collins 1984: 17).

‘The wise’ of Daniel, in this sense, are those élite few who have already received revelation and attempt to live that revelation in spite of present circumstances.
Envisioning oneself as wise beyond your peers was a common theme among the esoteric traditions such as apocalyptic, and as Leon Surette explains:

history is seen as a story of conflict between superior individuals of small number (“the few”, whether defined genetically or by enlightenment) and an oppressive inferior mass (whether defined genetically or by ignorance) (Surette 1993: 38).

In this way, the European avant-garde of Pound’s early years is apocalyptic in the sense that its radical aesthetic practice anticipates a future whose justification is questionable. The obscurity of avant-garde aesthetics implied a racially alternative sensibility about the world, but that sensibility was always only accessible to a few and, ultimately, only to the poet. For example, Pound’s Imagist transmutation of ‘faces in the crowd’ to ‘Petals on a wet, black bough’ in his 1913 poem ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (P 111) suggests the movement from one realm of experience to another, but that movement is never justified or, to put it another way, only justified by the privileged viewpoint of the poet. The reader may accept the transmutation, or not, but they cannot rationalise or debate it because its terms are those set forth entirely by the poet.

The avant-garde is apocalyptic in another sense as well. Pound’s aesthetics were dedicated to constructing an entirely new conception of the world — in some sense, a world alternative to this one. At its most apocalyptic, the book of Isaiah predicts a new creation that lies outside of history:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; 
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. (Isaiah 65. 17)

And this new creation comes to pass in the final chapters of Revelation: ‘Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away’ (Rev. 21. 1). When the prophet fails within history and society, the only option is to envision a world absent of both, and the next section will argue that Pound conceived the possibilities of art and literature to be the blueprint for that new world.

2. The Phantastikon

‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’ describes an aspect of art and poetry fundamental to Pound: every artwork tends toward a kind of absolute independence from the world and ‘every masterpiece contains its law within itself, self-sufficing to itself’ (Pound 1973: 25). A masterpiece is not simply its own ‘take on the world’, but its own self-contained system. The world might provide elements from which the poet drew as artistic impulse, but those elements were not of the world as objective representations:
The primary pigment of poetry is the IMAGE. The vorticist will not allow the primary expression of any concept of emotion to drag itself out into mimicry (Pound 1981: 154). Rather, the image steps outside of history and becomes the starting point of something new, and Witemeyer argues that the image’s revelation is part of the poet’s ability to create an ‘imaginative “world”’ (Witemeyer 1969: 15). Drawing from Pound’s quotation that ‘The essential thing about a poet is that he build [sic] us his world’, Witemeyer states that the faculty Pound called the phantastikon is the ability to see ‘patches of the macrocosmos’ (Witemeyer 1969: 50). These ‘patches’ can construct ‘different worlds out of what [poets] see, out of what is reflected by the “filmy shell” of the consciousness’ (Witemeyer 1969: 51).

The idea of ‘different worlds’ within poetry does not immediately suggest apocalyptic thought, but as Collins argues, the description of alternate worlds in biblical and apocryphal literature in the form of otherworldly journeys and divine beings is fundamental to apocalyptic literature: ‘The existence of another world beyond what is accessible to humanity by natural means is a constant element in all the apocalypses’ (Collins 1979: 9). The book of Revelation constructs an image of heaven (visible only to John of Patmos) and subsequently begins to break down the distinction between the celestial world and this world. Or, the book of First Enoch takes its protagonist on a journey through supernatural lands. But if these apocalypses compelled readers to seek the ‘truth’ of the world by reference to mythological or cosmic worlds beyond this one, Pound’s secular aesthetic hoped to keep:

the poet’s vision always in touch with the world of his senses, holding firmly to the principle that truth should be visible in things, rather than invisible beyond them (Pratt 1978: 22).

In 1917, Pound published ‘III Cantos’, a premature attempt at his epic Cantos, which became his primary work for the remainder of his life. Save for a few sections that reappeared in A Draft of XVI Cantos (1924), the ‘III Cantos’ were abandoned, but are often considered central for understanding the concerns Pound struggled with in initiating his epic and have been referred to as the ‘Ur-Cantos’ (Liebregts 2011: 86). In the closing lines of Canto I, Pound reflects on the power of the poet’s ability to build a believable world for himself and the reader:

And now it’s but truth and memory,  
Dimmed only by the attritions of long time.  
“But we forget not.”  
No, take it all for lies.  
I have but smelt this life, a whiff of it—
The box of scented wood
Recalls cathedrals. [...] (P 233–34)

The third and fourth lines echo the ‘old lies and new infamy’ in ‘Mauberley’ and follows Pound’s proclamation that the only truth he can claim is his poetic vocation and the tradition of poetry. The following lines then insist that he does know this life and has experienced it in finer, sensuous details that provide the starting point for a new phantastikon. ‘The box of scented wood’, a solid image of the concrete world, bears no obvious relation to cathedrals, let alone the history of Christianity, but that may be precisely the point: it is the consciousness of the poet that selects the association and creates the relation between the box of wood and cathedrals. The poet is now ‘build[ing] us his world’.

The cathedral in particular is a site that compels the worshipper to consider the supernatural world. It suggests the possibility of another world and is the nexus between these two worlds, a place where we are asked to consider the ‘beyond’ of history or the ‘beyond’ of the temporal world. The cathedral is the anteroom of the apocalypse — not quite the new world outside of history, but the space indicating that world as objective fact. With this in mind, Pound moves directly into the dilemma of art and the ability of the artist to create that new world:

[...] And shall I claim;
Confuse my own phantastikon,
Or say the filmy shell that circumscribes me
Contains the actual sun;
    confuse the thing I see
With actual gods behind me?
    Are they gods behind me?
How many worlds we have! [...] (P 234)

The ‘filmy shell’ of the phantastikon is where, following Witemeyer, the ‘patches of the macrocosmos’ are found, but are simultaneously part of the poet’s consciousness. The dilemma that Pound raises is that the sensation of reality experienced by the phantastikon, being often more substantial than the temporal world, is often vital for the poet. The goal is to take the objective materials of the world and transform them into a subjective representation which was so powerfully wrought, that it tended toward objectivity in its own right. Of these lines, Peter Liebregts writes that:

Pound openly wondered whether he now had to solve the question of the ontological status of immediate experience, that is, whether he had to state whether this vision did objectively appear to him from without, or whether it was a mere subjective projection from within (Liebregts 2007: 89).
By posing these lines as questions, Pound considers this choice or, perhaps more accurately, whether he should refuse the choice of one over the other. The *phantastikon* is Pound’s attempt to ‘steer a middle course between subjectivity and objectivity’ (Liebregts 2011: 89). The ‘thing I see’ can be, perhaps should be, confused with the ‘actual gods behind me’, giving the ‘thing I see’ the power of creation. But the plural ‘gods’ in the following question, ‘Are they gods behind me?’, exposes the implications of the confusion: if one world can be created, then perhaps there is no limit to the number of potential creations.

Pound then shifts the ability of creation to the arts in general, exploring how artists construct themselves through their art, but in doing so construct a new world around them. Furthermore, these lines address painting as well as writing, suggesting that the *phantastikon* is common across the arts. This was one of Pound’s goals in formulating Vorticism, which Pound hoped would become, ‘a designation that would be equally applicable to a certain basis for all the arts’ (Pound 1939: 93):

Oh, we have worlds enough, and brave décor,
And from these like we guess a soul for man
And build him full of aery populations.
Mantegna a sterner line, and the new world about us:
Barred lights, great flares, new form, Picasso or Lewis. (P 234)

His reference to the Italian painter Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506) contrasts the ‘sterner line’ with the ‘aery populations’, suggesting that Mantegna represents something more solid and substantial than the décor. Mantegna’s form is the basis for a clearer *phantastikon* than more superficial stylistic flourishes. Moreover, ‘new form’, as attributes of Lewis and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973), is certainly, coming from Pound, a genuine honour. Where Pound makes the key contrast between the earlier lines and later lines is in the phrase, ‘the new world about us’. From this perspective the ‘new world’, flowing from the ‘sterner line’ of Mantegna’s art, is objective and now exists ‘about us’, rather than as ‘aery populations’ within the confines of the soul. As Liebregts states, it is the ‘struggle between the subjective and objective [...]’, between the *creatio ex nihilo* [creation from nothing] and the *ex nihilo, nihil fit*, [nothing comes from nothing] that Pound faced’ in this canto (Liebregts 2011: 86). Therefore, these lines propose the process by which the truly great artists impose subjective visionary experience onto the world as objective fact, compelling the world to conform to their vision rather than vice versa. In this sense, the question, ‘Are they gods behind me?’, is a legitimate one because
Pound is never entirely certain which phantastikons are compelling enough to become creatio ex nihilo.

Pound, reflecting on the language of gods and cathedrals as a religious element, delves into a religious tradition that, as I have shown above, he seemed to have very little regard for. In the Christian tradition, he felt that there was, at one time at least, the possibility of rebirth, renewal, and creatio ex nihilo, but apparently he now felt that it was left to poetry to take up the mantel of the creator. Pound asserted that an artwork was its own ‘autonomous’ world in ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’, containing ‘its laws within itself, self-sufficing to itself’. To the extent that art and poetry were their own independent worlds, he intended to create worlds through the arts. When he spoke of Vorticism as a basis for all the arts, he was not attempting to break down the barriers between the arts for he wrote later that:

A painter must know much more about a sunset than a writer, if he is to put it on canvas.
But when the poet speaks of “Dawn in russet mantle clad,” he presents something which the painter cannot present (Pound 1939: 97).

In this sense, the phantastikon of the poet is entirely separate from that of the painter or musician, and Pound sets up each artist as the potential creator of his own phantastikon, provided that it was grounded in a transcendent characteristic: ‘change hath broken down / All things save Beauty alone.’ (P 195).

This other world might speak to our world and of our world, but it never can be fully identified with our world. This practice of world-making is sometimes based on utopian thought or cosmic speculation, and it might have a variety of methods to get from here to the ‘beyond’, but it is always based on, as von Rad defines eschatology, a ‘consummation of the historical process in events which lie beyond the scope of the world’s history’ (von Rad 1965: 113–14). And yet, Pound does not take this process to mean a total abandonment of history or the social world, but rather seeks to propose an entirely different entrance into history by using the social world as a way of reading the story of beauty, the Vortex, or the Image into history, just as Daniel or Revelation reads the will of God into a history of persecution and defeat. Like most apocalyptic thought, the End also implies a New Beginning, and where Pound once declared the ‘End of the Christian Era’, his own apocalyptic sensibility is founded upon the basic structures of Christian apocalyptic: an autonomous world that is, in spite of itself, reflected in this world; that
world as the image of salvation; an ending that is intimately bound up to the commencement and course of history. Witemeyer notes that Pound saw the history of art as a ‘complete order’ that changes when something is added to it, but is, ‘eternally living and relevant because it exists in a timeless order’ (Witemeyer 1969: 4), and Pound’s time in the avant-garde was the first step to explaining this order, a project he would take up in earnest in the *Cantos*. Apocalyptic writing casts back one’s eyes over history in a different light; it highlights relationships in the world that cannot be understood except in terms of a new era that has yet to manifest itself. Similarly, Pound was searching for a ‘more totalizing narrative, an Ur-narrative, […] an apocalyptic narrative that could subsume all others’ (Comens 1995: 32), and this ‘Ur-narrative’ envisioned the next world by searching out for the origins of this world in the history of artistic genius or beauty. This search led him to extoll Mantegna, Picasso, Lewis, and many others as an example of this alternative history; it also led him to declare that alternative history to be finally revealed in the world with the rise of Mussolini and fascism.

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**Further Reading**


