

# War of the Words: War and the Length of Poems

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**ABSTRACT:** This essay explores the connection between war and the length of poems, reading the Anglo-American poetry of the twentieth century in the context of the world wars. The essay traces the changes in poetic length in Italian and Hebrew poetry, focusing on the long poems of Yehuda Amichai and finding a tendency to express war experiences in short verse. In Anglo-American poetry after World War I, Pound and Eliot form an influential poetic bloc defining length from *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*. This Pound/Eliot complex comes undone as World War II ends, allowing for a regeneration of the long poem in the works of H.D., Zukofsky, Williams, Olson, Ginsberg, and others.

**E**ZRA POUND, SPEAKING OF HIS METHOD IN CAVALCANTI, wrote: “I have found out what I have found out by concentration on the text, and not by reading commentators, and I strongly suspect that is the road the next man will have to follow.”<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to disagree: the long poems discussed in this article are overwhelming, and the scope of scholarship on them is forbidding, and therefore, some disciplinary departures might offer an opening to undisciplined thoughts about my topic, that is, war and the long poem.<sup>2</sup> In the following I will employ Hebrew, Italian, and English to inquire about the relation between war and the length of poems.

For this line of questioning the Anglo-American tradition offers a unique example in the Pound/Eliot complex, which emerged from world war as an insurmountable poetic paradigm. It is as if *The Waste Land* had exhausted the possibilities of understanding the war as an expression of tradition, and Pound dared a radical reformulation of tradition that no one was bold enough to openly challenge. Both poets believed the war to be hell and the world after it to be indistinguishable from hell. The war and its interpretation as the expression of a botched civilization, whose

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<sup>1</sup> Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909–1965*, ed. and with introduction by William Cookson (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), 162.

<sup>2</sup> By “long poem” I mean a poem that asserts itself as such. For a more formal consideration of the long poem as a modernist historical genre, see Brian McHale, *The Obligation toward the Difficult Whole: Postmodernist Long Poems* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 1–17.

crisis of value must be rectified, are the decisive elements out of which *The Cantos* grow and *The Waste Land*, through Pound's editing, becomes the shortest long poem possible. In Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* the war becomes the crisis out of which a new formulation of culture must grow. Thus, the long poem was caught between Pound's opening and Eliot's closure—the radical and conservative uses of tradition and poetics of length, the long poem's war, became politically charged as the world moved toward its second war.

World War II plainly made the regeneration of the long poem possible; Fascism's fall took the Pound/Eliot complex down with it. Eliot and his use of tradition presented few difficulties to Louis Zukofsky, whose "Poem Beginning 'The'" is a brilliant demolition of *The Waste Land* and its poetics, but even "A" grew out of the war. H.D.'s *Trilogy* began publication in 1944; William Carlos Williams received the proofs for *Paterson I* at the war's end; Charles Olson broke through the complex to *Maximus* after a consideration of the war in "The Kingfishers" and "In Cold Hell, in Thicket" (1949–50). The long poem in America grew out of a new understanding of war and the way it relates to poetic tradition: for these authors Western civilization was violence visited upon the world, and the song of the long poem broke down the prophetic voice into voices and gazes of a weaker prophetic mode.

The question of what allows a poem to become long must be considered in light of war—war as a real-world event that has consequences and an outcome in terms of victory and loss, the old kind of war, before asymmetrical endless warfare became the norm.<sup>3</sup> In form, the long poem is already related to war; it defeats the reader, and it is, so to speak, at war. War is a gravitational pole of writing, a multifaceted force propelling what is merely long, or longer, into greatness, or greater, a combination of human circumstances that endows what is merely long with the weight of being a meaningful expression of the world's tenses.

War, especially civil war, is not only a convenient, perhaps lazy way of thinking about time but also a decisive, massive event with consequences whose (moral) reality can or must be elaborated in poetry. Poetry only rarely represents war directly, and in any case the relation of the long poem to war is predicated, not upon experience in combat, but rather upon being in the world at war. In other words, the long poem is not a reflection or a representation of war but instead is about war; it engages in war. Of course, not all long poems conform to this idea, but the twentieth century in the West offers few examples to the contrary.<sup>4</sup>

The connection is self-evident: war is perhaps the first event to allow the meaningful growth of the poem. The *Iliad* of course comes to mind and with it the *Odyssey*: the labors of war at Troy had to take place for Odysseus to be able to return. And the visit in hell that Dante brings to perfection is necessary.<sup>5</sup> War is hell, but hell is everywhere, and *The Commedia*, with its movement from Inferno to Paradise, stands on the long poem's path of war, like the three beasts blocking the pilgrim.

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<sup>3</sup> David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 34–38.

<sup>4</sup> There are many reasons for this, mostly based in the history of violence and the politics of canonicity. See Bruce Comens, *Apocalypse and After: Modern Strategy and Postmodern Tactics in Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Thurston, *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 55–57.



love and medieval lore and as a farewell to London.<sup>12</sup> Those are undoubtedly astute observations concerning the book as a whole and a fair assessment of the different personae in it. Still, it is possible to read “E.P. ODE” on its own as a fundamental point at which Pound commits to his project, literally selecting his sepulcher, namely, *The Cantos*. The poem does not describe the design of the project but rather speaks of committing to such a project until the grave, suggesting that it is a sepulcher that issues from the war. It is a fundamental part of the book, perhaps its core: a formulation of the cultural significance of the war:

## II



HE age demanded an image

Of its accelerated grimace,  
Something for the modern stage,  
Not, at any rate, an Attic grace;

Not, not certainly, the obscure reveries  
Of the inward gaze;  
Better mendacities  
Than the classics in paraphrase!

## IV

.....  
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.

Daring as never before, wastage as never before.  
Young blood and high blood,  
fair cheeks, and fine bodies;

fortitude as never before

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

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<sup>12</sup> Larry Scanlon, “Modernism’s Medieval Imperative: The Hard Lessons of Ezra Pound’s ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,’” *American Literary History* 22, no. 4 (2010): 838–62.

## V



here died a myriad,  
 And of the best, among them,  
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,  
 For a botched civilization<sup>13</sup>

This excerpt from “E.P. ODE” presents the general conceptual framework of Mussolini and Fascism in general: the Great War as the slaughterhouse of virtue with a mutilated peace still awaiting the emergence of the new.<sup>14</sup> The composition of *The Cantos* is a hideously complicated affair, but “E.P. ODE,” in its simplified longness, allows a view of *The Cantos officina*, its workshop. Pound shares with Yeats a view of the Great War as a thwarted civil war uniting war and hell.<sup>15</sup> E.P. standing at his grave—a consummate trope of modernity before the Great War—emerges from beyond it as the new voice and form of modernity, or so he would have it. In this respect it is as if Eliot and Zukofsky are overachieving A students in this master’s class. Eliot reacts directly, bringing the classic paraphrase to an Alabaster height in *The Waste Land*. When Pound struggles with the form of a Bach fugue, Zukofsky sets out to be the Jew who can command his respect and who gets an A from the gentile teacher.<sup>16</sup>

The Great War enables the growth of *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land*, but in Italy it has a different effect. Futurism and poetry associated with Filippo Marinetti before the war tended toward the longer poem, albeit in various mediums, with Aldo Palazzeschi’s *L’incendiario* (The arsonist) of 1915 being the prime example.<sup>17</sup> The poetry that emerges after the war and weathers Fascism is smaller, hermetic poetry, an extreme version of the delegation of the lived experience of war to the small poem. Indeed, Eugenio Montale, the major Italian poet of the twentieth century, never wrote a long poem; nor did Salvatore Quasimodo; and even Giuseppe Ungaretti’s *Vita di un uomo* (The life of a man) is long only by way of being a diary and an edited poetic record of a life.<sup>18</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini’s work, especially *Le ceneri di Gramsci* (The ashes of Gramsci), may be considered an exception. It would seem that the possibility of a long poem also depends on the ability of a culture to conceptually elaborate the moral meaning of war. In a place where

<sup>13</sup> Ezra Pound, *Personae: The Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound*, rev. ed. prepared by Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 185–88.

<sup>14</sup> This does not simplify the problem of Fascism’s origin in the war. See Renzo De Felice, ed., *Il fascismo: Le interpretazioni dei contemporanei e degli storici* [Fascism: The interpretations of its contemporaries and the historians] (Bari: Laterza, 1998), 157–63.

<sup>15</sup> James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 112–34.

<sup>16</sup> For a very common trope of Jewish immigrant experience, see Grace Paley, “Mother,” in *Later the Same Day* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1985), 109–12.

<sup>17</sup> Davide Podavini, “The Anthology *Poeti futuristi*,” in *The History of Futurism: The Precursors, Protagonists, and Legacies*, ed. Geert Buelens, Harald Hendrix, and Monica Jansen (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), 33–52.

<sup>18</sup> An important exception might be Cesare Pavese’s *Lavorare stanca* [Hard labor] of 1936; see Sergio Pautasso, *Ermetismo* [Hermeticism] (Milan: Bibliografica, 1996).

power decides meaning, poetry must stay small or grow against steep odds, as Lorca's life and death exemplify.<sup>19</sup>

World War I is a dramatic moment in Hebrew literature as well. Much of that literature concerns the bloodbath that came after the war in the east, in which some seventy thousand Jews were killed collaterally as the front shifted. Hebrew poetry of the time grew out of the war's traumas, and persecution was transformed to revolutionary Zionist zeal in long poems such as the works of Uri Tsevi Greenberg, Y. Lamdan, and A. Shlonsky. Certainly, Russian revolutionary poetry, especially that of Blok and Mayakovski, was influential, but its influence serves as only a partial explanation because revolution truly seems to have been a conceptual necessity of the time, emerging from the experience of World War I and its aftermath while also projected toward the eventual, inevitable Zionist war over the land. It is remarkable that after the 1948 war, the experience of war, the hell that is war from a subjective perspective, is mostly reserved for the short poem, as it is in other cultures.<sup>20</sup> The outstanding contrary example is Uri Tsevi Greenberg, who raged between the world wars in long verse and ideologically charged book-length compositions but fell silent during World War II.<sup>21</sup> Only when the war ended did he begin publishing the incredibly long lamentations over the murdered Jewish people that came to be *The Streets of the River* (1951), a poetic achievement of such pain that it is hard to read.

The point is that the genesis of the long poem in modern Hebrew is closely related to what Dan Miron has called the prophetic mode.<sup>22</sup> The details are many, but the length of the poem is related to a moral position, a vantage point that allows for a flow of poetic discourse alternately abusing and consoling a people who won't listen. The prophetic is a form of length that Allen Ginsberg introduces into American poetry after the war, already in *Howl* (1956) with the appearance of Moloch and a tone whose very profanity is the prophecy of a new age. The moral implications of this stance are laid out more explicitly in *Kaddish* (1961), at the heart of which is the undoing of facile distinctions that are war's result: the good and the bad, the victims and the heroes. The fractured consciousness of Naomi is that of war and persecution, and the enemies are many: "But then went half mad—Hitler in her room, she saw his mustache in the sink."<sup>23</sup> Naomi is half mad, but only half; there might not be a mustache in the sink, but Hitler is in the room in a very real sense since the defeat of the Nazis did not guarantee morality after victory. Naomi's paranoia is at least partially justified. The prophetic length, so to speak, is prone to moral injuries because its voice already makes moral claims, even when disparaging all such claims. In fact, Yehuda Amichai writes of his being subjected to war in short poems, but he ends his first and very important book from 1955, *Now and in the Other Days*, with a long poem, a cycle of twenty-four sonnets called "We Loved Here."<sup>24</sup> It is a poetic achievement, beautiful in form and deep in thought, a disjointed love story grounded in the events of the 1948 war. History and the

<sup>19</sup> Lisa Nolan, "A Politics of the Body: José Antonio Primo de Rivera's Fascism and Federico García Lorca's Benjaminian Response," *Modern Drama* 50, no. 1 (2007): 1–24.

<sup>20</sup> Jon Silkin, ed., *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Classics, 1997). Of course, anthologized items tend toward the shorter forms available, but the poetic length present in the anthology faithfully represents most of the respective literary cultures.

<sup>21</sup> Dan Miron, *The Prophetic Mode in Modern Hebrew Poetry* (Milford, CT: Toby Press, 2010), 252–54.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 127–90.

<sup>23</sup> Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems, 1947–1980* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1987), 220.

<sup>24</sup> Yehuda Amichai, *Yehuda Amichai: A Life of Poetry, 1948–1994*, selected and trans. by Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 23–26. Only six of the twenty-four sonnets have been translated into English.

conceptualization of the subject's position within it drive its length, and it is almost a measure of the subjection of the individual's fate to the historical Jewish fate. After each major Israeli war, Amichai wrote a long poem that conceptually justified war while continuing to mourn the experience of being subjected to it. Chana Kronfeld, in her insightful book on Amichai, reads him as a radical thinker who uses various techniques to subvert nationalism.<sup>25</sup> I believe he doth protest against war, mourning its victims, while conceptually justifying and committing to it in the long poems. In short, his protest against war is as radical as grief's protest against death.

The form of Amichai's sonnets and the model for his long poem are drawn from the work of Lea Goldberg, perhaps the most relevant modernist who had enormous impact on Hebrew literature. At the time she was of course considered less serious for not writing books that were conceptually long poems, but she did in fact write some very interesting long ones in controlled, limited forms. Where *prophetic* in Ginsberg turns to *protestis*, in Amichai *terstis*, being a witness, a survivor of war, turns to a weak prophetic stance. The poetics of such a position lead away from scolding and toward a (pseudo)autobiography of laments and consolations, musical variations on the sigh and breath, always-already justifying the Security Style that reigns unopposed.<sup>26</sup> It remains a fact that in Hebrew poetry after the 1948 war the length of poems changes to the short form, which is still dominant. Even Nathan Alterman, a pre-state major poet, failed miserably at writing a long epic poem about the formation of the state, and his long-awaited book published in 1956, *Ir ha-yonah* (Lying city / City of the dove), signaled the end of his poetic reign.<sup>27</sup>

The weak prophetic stance and its association with a limited, formally closed long poem circle back to Eliot. As complex as *The Waste Land* is, it does grow from a recognition shared with Pound that the postwar city and perhaps the world itself are hell on earth. Here is an excerpt with Pound's editing:

Ferrible Unreal City, [~~H~~have sometimes seen and see]  
 Under the brown fog of [~~y~~our] a winter dawn,  
 A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,  
 I had not thought death had undone so many.

The reference to Dante is clear, as is the use of classic paraphrase over mendacities. With the help of Pound's master Messer, Eliot arrives at a length that is proper, one that to exceed it would be unseemly, or useless, if you're not Pound or at least A Pound. In December 1930 Zukofsky addressed the issue directly, describing how Pound's *Inferno* almost undid "A": "Had I read Cantos XIV, XV, and XVI and the later American ones before I wrote A 1&2, the poem would never have been written. . . . But since it was done, and since the malign disease of being unable to write any more short verse . . . had already set in, I couldn't see any way out but to continue."<sup>28</sup>

Zukofsky might be ironizing, but the Hell Cantos are a sibylline moment determining whether one can enter hell, and they can go the long poem's distance. The problem seems to

<sup>25</sup> Chana Kronfeld, *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 59–79.

<sup>26</sup> The term refers to the hegemonic system that ruled Israel until at least 1973. See Uri Cohen, "Unraveling the Wars of 1948," *Jewish Social Studies* 18, no. 3 (2012): 120–36.

<sup>27</sup> Michael Gluzman, "Ir ha-yonah ve-si'akh ha-adon" [The city of the dove and the discourse of the master], *Ot [Letter]* 6 (Autumn 2016): 87–118.

<sup>28</sup> Barry Ahearn, ed., *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 79.

be that of mediation or, rather, with Eliot being a perfect mediator of tradition. The past can be mediated, but it is a tale of desolation so perfectly mediated by Eliot as to make the medium obsolete. Eliot's long poem craves transcendence, or immediacy, the voice of Pound already calling in that desert. Immediacy in poetry is not necessarily Fascist, but immediacy is Fascism's poetics.<sup>29</sup> The quest for immediacy is at the figurative heart of Il Duce's relation to power, the *Fuhrer befiehl*, the abolition of distance from the people and between the people, the party, the state. Life from death.

The Pound/Eliot complex was such an influential bloc because it was the product of the Great War, its poetic elaboration. It is a form that seeks to be war, as Yeats recognized in "Meditations": "But take our greatness with our violence?"<sup>30</sup> Violence and greatness are necessarily related, and the Great War drives the long poem's length; it is a form of poetry that must seek to grasp war as an expression of culture as greatness or downfall and a continuation of tradition whether lost or recovered. War is part of the Pound/Eliot poetic complex in much the same way as the voyage to hell and back is part of the classic epic from Homer to Dante. World War II and the *Lager* proved the unprovable: that there is no end to the proximity between hell and war, as well as distance between greatness and violence. In different ways it took another world war to unseat the complex and to demonstrate the failure of Europe's poetics and politics, highlighting the Euronarcissism of Eliot's and Pound's understanding of the Great War, even while nodding to an Orientalized HinduChina.<sup>31</sup>

The long poem is at war—*The Waste Land* is the blitzkrieg; *Four Quartets*, Stalingrad. And it is as gendered as war itself. As World War II was ending, H.D. directly engaged with Pound, *The Cantos*, and war as she broke away from her own poetic form and into the length of *Trilogy*.<sup>32</sup> The first part, *The Walls Do Not Fall*, was published in 1944 and already contains a vision of war as an expression of male repression and a poetic search for a female power of life to undo it. Clearly, part of her poetic maneuver is to bring the Old Testament to bear on a female prophetic voice, finding, like Herodotus, a foundation in Egypt.<sup>33</sup> As a response to Pound, her worldview may be more fully formulated in *Helen in Egypt* (1961), but the decisive shift occurs during the war out of which her long poem emerged:

An incident here and there,  
and rails gone (for guns)  
from your (and my) old town square:<sup>34</sup>

Williams received the proofs for book 1 of *Paterson* in September 1945, shortly before VJ Day, and subjected the poem to radical changes.<sup>35</sup> Though he had been contemplating and working on *Paterson* since as early as 1923, the poem finally emerged out of the war and is in a host of ways

<sup>29</sup> Augusto Simonini, *Il linguaggio di Mussolini* [The language of Mussolini] (Milan: Bompiani, 1978), 127–31.

<sup>30</sup> Edna Longley, "W. B. Yeats: Poetry and Violence," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 95–110.

<sup>31</sup> Paul Douglass, ed., *T. S. Eliot, Dante, and the Idea of Europe* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> *Trilogy*, by H.D. (Cheadle: Carcanet Press, 1973).

<sup>33</sup> Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas, "Seaward: H.D.'s *Helen in Egypt* as a Response to Pound's *Cantos*," *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal* 44, no. 4 (1998): 464–83.

<sup>34</sup> *Trilogy*, by H.D., 3.

<sup>35</sup> Clark Lumberry, "So Much Depends: Printed Matter, Dying Words, and the Entropic Poem," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 3 (2004): 627–53.

in dialogue with Pound and Eliot.<sup>36</sup> At the heart of the poem stands book 3, “The Library Fire,” in which the burning library is evocative of war:<sup>37</sup>

Fire Burns; that is the first Law.  
When a wind fans the flames

are carried abroad. Talk  
fans the flames. They have

maneuvered it so that to write  
is a fire and not only of the blood.<sup>38</sup>

*Paterson* moves in many parallel lines—war, the historical fire at the library, and other historical fires—with an ease that underlines the poem’s uncanniness.<sup>39</sup> It also restores the inferno to its fiery origin, undermining the presence of Dante that is so fundamental to Eliot and Pound:

How shall I find examples? Some boy  
who drove a bull-dozer through  
the barrage at Iwo Jima and turned it  
and drove back making a path for the others—  
.....

We read: not the flames  
but the ruin left  
by the conflagration

Not the enormous burning  
But the dead (the books  
remaining). Let us read<sup>40</sup>

The library burns, the world burns, and it burned in the past (the burning of the library recalls the original settler violence). War is one of the forces driving the poem; it unblocks something that had eluded Williams before. In the opening of part 2 of book 2, we find the poetic refutation of Eliot:

Blocked  
(Make a song of that: concretely)  
By whom?

The Pound/Eliot complex is that block, and *Paterson* as a whole is a poetic response, a breakthrough.

<sup>36</sup> Williams’s correspondence with Zukofsky makes this clear. The letters from March 4, 1944, to January 3, 1946, discuss war, Pound, and work on *Paterson*. They include Zukofsky’s powerful letter on Pound addressed through Williams to Charles Norman for the “Case for and against Ezra Pound,” *PM*, November 25, 1945.

<sup>37</sup> Margaret Dickie, *On The Modernist Long Poem* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1986), 95–98.

<sup>38</sup> William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), 113.

<sup>39</sup> Kamran Javadizadeh, “The Institutionalization of the Postwar Poet,” *Modernism/Modernity* 23, no. 1 (2016): 113–39.

<sup>40</sup> Williams, *Paterson*, bk. 3, pt. 2, 120–23.

Olson served in the information office during the war, and in two major poems, “The Kingfishers” (published in 1950) and “In Cold Hell, in Thicket” (written in August 1950), he engages with *The Waste Land* quite directly.<sup>41</sup> Like Williams and Zukofsky, Olson responds to Pound in the form and poetics of his long poem *Maximus*, begun at around the same time, offering self and place as new possibilities driving poetic length.<sup>42</sup> War is essential to our understanding of these key poems as turning points. “The Kingfisher” opens Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry, 1945–1960*, and “In Cold Hell, in Thicket” opens the Norton anthology of postmodern poetry, both highly influential collections that helped define postwar American poetry.<sup>43</sup> In these two poems Olson forges a path through war to the long poems, by engaging both war and hell. In “The Kingfisher” Olson brings back the America of the conquistadors, the endless slaughter, as well as a bird, creating its nest out of fish bones and excretions—rejectiona, life in the wasteland:

And all now is war  
Where so lately there was peace,  
and the sweet brotherhood, the use  
of tilled fields.

.....

The light is in the east. Yes. And we must rise, act. Yet  
In the west, despite the apparent darkness (the whiteness  
which covers all), if you look, if you can bear, if you can, long enough  
as long as it was necessary for him, my guide  
to look into the yellow of that longest-lasting rose

.....

hear  
hear, where the dry blood talks  
where the old appetite walks

la più saporita et migliore  
che si possa truovar al mondo

.....

with what violence benevolence is bought  
What cost in gesture justice brings  
what wrongs domestic rights involve  
what stalks  
this silence  
what pudor peyorocracy affronts  
how awe, night-rest and neighborhood can rot  
what breeds where dirtiness is law

<sup>41</sup> A letter to Olson’s friend Edward Dahlberg reports his car trips out to various Civil War sites. See Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson’s Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 18.

<sup>42</sup> Creeley offers a reading of the formalist principles with hardly a reference to the outside of poetry. See *The Collected Essays of Robert Creeley* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 100–102.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 3–8; and Paul Hoover, *Postmodern American Poetry: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994), 4–8. It appears that the term “postmodern” was first used by Olson in a letter to Robert Creeley in 1951.

what crawls below

.....

I pose you your question:

Shall you uncover honey / where maggots are?

I hunt among the stones

The poem is well known and has been discussed at length. It is truly remarkable, as it directly engages and circumvents the Pound/Eliot block already moving toward length. Life is found, and war finds its violent past, erupting not from a crisis of culture but rather from decades of violence and oppression visited by the West on the rest of the world. The reference from Marco Polo's voyages says in Italian that for cannibals the best and tastiest meat is human flesh.<sup>44</sup> The maggots where the search for honey takes place are a direct reference to Pound and his view of Mussolini's hanging.<sup>45</sup> The argument is clear enough: life grows out of the rejected, not the hallowed. Violence breeds violence, the West as it was seen by Eliot and Pound is plagued by the return of its own violence, and war is the eruption of all that is repressed by the civilized order. What is clearly rejected is not the referential power of tradition that fills these poems with resonance but rather the kind of necrophilia associated with the tradition's concentration on hell and Dante's visit to it. Nevertheless, the journey to hell is necessary, and "In Cold Hell, in Thicket" it is undertaken:

All things are made bitter, words even  
are made to taste like paper, wars get tossed up  
like lead soldiers used to be  
(in a child's attic) lined up  
to be knocked down, as I am,  
by firings from a spit hardened fort, fronted  
as we are, here, from where we must go

God, that man, as his acts must, as there is always  
a thing he can do, he can raise himself, he raises  
on a reed he raises his

Or if it is me, what  
he has to say.

.....

ya selva oscura, but hell now  
is not exterior, is not to be got out of, is  
the coat of your own self, the beasts  
emblazoned on you And who  
can turn this total thing, invert  
and let the ragged sleeves be seen

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<sup>44</sup> *Viaggi*, lib. 2, cap. 75; lib. 3, 13, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Michael Davidson, *Guys like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 204–7.

by any bitch or common character? Who  
 can endure it where it is, where the beasts are met,  
 where yourself is, your beloved is, where she  
 who is separate from you, is not separate, is not  
 goddess, is, as your core is, the making of one hell  
 .....  
 even as he will forever waver

precisely as hell is, precise  
 as any words, or wagon  
 can be made

Both Williams and Olson find length after the war, but Zukofsky, perhaps because he was a Jew, was quick to realize the implications of *The Waste Land* and literally stepped over Eliot in 1928 with “Poem Beginning ‘The.’” The poem is a remarkable takedown of *The Waste Land*, ridiculing the gravity and solemnness of the learned poets’ poetry, their anti-Semitism included. Like the others, Zukofsky deals directly with Eliot but struggles with Pound and *The Cantos*. “A” is the form of Zukofsky’s answer to Pound, and it only truly began to grow from the war in “A-8” to “A-12” and beyond.

One way in which the American long poem emerges, or is unblocked, has to do with the poetic reckoning that begins to consider war as a result of a history of violence visited by this “botched civilization” upon others. The long poem is facilitated by the outcome of World War II, allowing for a greatness of violence—after all, it was the “good war” and America’s violence of war did save the world—but these poems do not celebrate America’s good war (Whitman) but rather open toward a deeper reckoning with power. Williams remembers Paterson’s settler violence, Olson reflects on Mayan demise, and Zukofsky uses Hebrew, Yiddish, and Shakespeare to destabilize Eliot’s French, German, Italian, and colonial Orient:

258 The villainy they teach me I will execute  
 259 And it shall go hard with them,  
 260 For I’ll better the instruction,  
 261 Having learned, so to speak, in their colleges.<sup>46</sup>

This villainy captures some of the beauty and hilarity of Zukofsky’s play with tradition. The four lines are almost a precise quotation of Shylock’s famous “Pound of Flesh” monologue: “The villainy you teach me I will execute—and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.” I am a Jew, Zukofsky hollers, subtly tinkering with Shakespeare. The game is endless, as is Shylock’s rage and the argument he makes that there is nothing to be found in the Jew that is not a projection of Christian bad conscience.

The blindness toward colonial violence and its role in the world wars is the chink in the armor, so to speak. The collapse of Fascism and the colonial empires is the consequence of war and drives these long poems as well as the so-called postcolonial long poems of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, and Claudia Rankin’s *Citizen*. The labels are less important than the restoration of faith in the long poem because it is at war, measuring a poetic way to the

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<sup>46</sup> Louis Zukofsky, *Anew: Complete Shorter Poetry* (New York: New Directions, 2010), 18.

“post” of the modern, of the colonial, of war. It allows for a multitude, multiple voices, ears, eyes, and I’s. The postwar long poem opens to place, difference, play, and multiplicity unsubjected to a Fabro striking the senses. In *Paterson* Williams arrives through the library fire at a point of endless fracture, a hell of mirrors and endless oscillation between object and subject, between art and history, a flickering flame of life itself.

“And what is the message”? At the end of “In Cold Hell, in Thicket” Olson answers: “The message is a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time.” The long poem asserts something that was lost, becoming the vehicle of reckoning, a bloodless bloodbath of history and civilization tumbling toward destruction, while groping the precipices of hell, longing for hope. A