The Anatomy of Poetic Obscurity

"WHY CAN'T THEY SAY WHAT THEY MEAN?"*

BY ARCHIBALD MACLEISH

They being, of course, the poets.
Or rather, the contemporary poets—those who are now around. "Why can't they put it in so many words?" "Why can't they just come out with it?" There are various forms of the question and various tones of voice to ask it in—the indignant tone of the letter to the editor of the literary review, the contemptuous tone of the full-page institutional ad in the New York Times which bellows (lie quiet, ghosts of Avon and Weimar and Florence!) that the prime characteristic of a great work of art is to be easily understood, the earnest tone of the manifesto of the local poetry society, the outraged tone of the student who can't sit there silent any longer. But whatever the form and whatever the tone the intention is the same: "Why can't they say what they mean?"

"Doesn't a poet need to be read?" demanded a student of mine in the blazing first paragraph of a paper on Pound's Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. "If not, what is the purpose of poetry? Art must be amazed at what some people do to attain her!"

No humane man can be indifferent to such a cry as that even when it leaves him with a lecture to write over. At least I cannot be indifferent, for its anguish takes me where I live. Not only am I a practitioner of the art of poetry and contemporary to the extent of being still alive: I am also, in a sense, a teacher of the art. That is to say that I spend a considerable part of my time attempting to teach young men and young women, not how to write poetry—no one, I think, would seriously undertake to do that—but how to read it. The angrily held conviction, therefore, that one of the most characteristic of contemporary poems is not only unreadable but not seriously to be read is, to me, a matter of concern. When I reflect, as I must, that this conviction is not peculiar to one student in one college but may be held by many students in many institutions, including, conceivably, the University of Michigan itself, the concern becomes an active anxiety.

And an anxiety of a rather disturbing kind. I am not anxious only for the intelligence of the rebellious student—he happened, as a matter of fact, to be one of the most intelligent members of his class. Neither am I fearful for the reputations of my contemporaries among American and English poets. They have done quite well

Originally a Yale graduate (A.B. '15), with a Harvard LL.B. ('19) ARCHIBALD MACLEISH, since 1949, has been Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University. Already distinguished as a poet and writer of prose as well, he was in 1939 appointed Librarian of Congress, holding that office for five years. His Conquistador, in 1937, received the Pulitzer prize for poetry, and his Collected Poems, 1917-1952, gained the National Book Award, the Bollinger prize, and the Pulitzer prize for 1952. Mr. MacLeish served in the United States Army in the First World War and in the Second was called upon to direct the U. S. Office of Facts and Figures, to be assistant director of the Office of War Information, and to serve as Assistant Secretary of State. He is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the recipient of honorary degrees from a number of colleges and universities. The study of modern poetry here presented was delivered on May 19, 1955, as the annual Hopwood Lecture.

* Copyright, 1955, by the University of Michigan.
in spite of the revolt and it is at least arguable that some of them have flourished because of it. What disturbs me is the relation of all this to what can only be called the health of our civilization. A civilization without a poetry of its own is a contradiction in terms, and a civilization which rejects a poetry it has itself produced is sick: it is an Oedipus civilization stabbing at its own eyes. We may not like the kind of poetry we have produced in the West in this century. We may wish it were some other kind of poetry. But the fact is that this poetry exists and that it is ours. And the further fact is that if we lose contact with it we shall lose an essential contact with ourselves. Only this poetry can give us to see that aspect of our lives which poetry in any generation makes visible. When the poetry produced by a particular kind of sensibility is obscure to those to whom the sensibility belongs, the sensibility is obscure also—and the life out of which that sensibility has developed.

If this seems to imply that obscurity in poetry is, at bottom, a reader’s problem rather than a writer’s, I should have to agree that it means just that. Where the obscurity complained of is obscurity in an achieved work it is the reader, not the writer, who must deal with it. Gide’s observation that “obscurity is something the true poet should neither seek nor fear” carries the necessary corollary that obscurity is something the true reader must neither evade nor avoid: he cannot reject the poem merely because he finds it obscure without failing in his reader’s duty to the art.

This does not mean, of course, that there are not forms of obscurity which justify the rejection of a poem. Gide makes it plain that his remark applies to “true poets” only. The poet who is obscure because he is incapable of accomplishing understanding, or who is obscure because he is afraid of being understood, is not a true poet and should be judged accordingly. If a man cannot write clean English, or if he affects, by calculated dubieties, meanings of which his intelligence is incapable, he deserves no one’s serious consideration. There is, however, all the difference in the world between the writer who deliberately contrives ambiguities in the hope of hoisting himself into significance, not by his own petard but by the chances of the dictionary, and the true poet who is obscure, or seems so, because of the controlled and achieved and intended implications of his work. With the true poet, obscurity, where it exists, is the condition of the poem and must be accepted by the reader in that sense. If the accomplished poem of the true poet is worth reading—we would agree, I suppose, that it must be—it is worth reading with its density upon it, for its density is part of what it is.

But to say so much is not, of course, to dispose of the problem. The obscurity, if there is obscurity, remains—and all the darker because the reader must stand before it alone. What is he to do about it? The answer depends, of course, on what his difficulty is and only he himself can tell us that. Let us therefore put the question to ourselves. What is this contemporary obscurity of which we so persistently complain when we speak of our own poets? Is it something more than mere difficulty of interpretation? If so, what? When the student rages or the respectable lady in the correspondence column spits, is it merely because the reading of this poetry is hard, or is it something else the protestants have in mind? Take Yeats for example. Is Yeats “obscure” within our contemporary usage of that word? Certainly “Byzantium” is as difficult as it is great, which means very difficult indeed. I have spent months over its reading in the past and I have no doubt I shall spend further months before I die. But is “Byzantium” obscure? Are any of Yeats’s greatest poems obscure?
Not, I think, if one means by the word an obduracy which will not yield to ordinary intelligence and perceptiveness. One of Yeats’s less important poems, a lyric from Words For Music Perhaps which has discouraged many readers, may serve us here:

**His Confidence**

Undying love to buy  
I wrote upon  
The corners of this eye  
All wrongs done.  
What payment were enough  
For undying love?  

I broke my heart in two  
So hard I struck.  
What matter? for I know  
That out of rock,  
Out of a desolate source  
Love leaps upon its course.

There is not a single word here which is not readily readable nor is the syntax in any way complicated. What troubles those readers who experience trouble is apparently the images and the implications. Writing “all wrongs done” upon “the corners of this eye” strikes them as meaningless. But the meaning, however dark it may be to the intellect, is perfectly available to the image-reading imagination, is it not? The imagination knows that it is in the corner of the eye that the wrinkles of suffering are written. Once that is perceived the first stanza reads itself. I suffered wrongs willingly to buy what I hoped would be undying love for which no payment would be too great.

What then of the second stanza? Here again the only problem is that of the image and here again the image presents itself to the eye that can see. The heart is struck so hard that it breaks as one might strike and break a rock—as Moses struck the rock from which water gushed forth in that wilderness. Only here what gushes forth from the rock of the heart—from that desolate source—is love: love that leaps upon its course.

How then does the second stanza relate to the first? There is no syntactical connection, but the connection of emotional relationship is obvious enough. I had hoped to buy love for myself—undying love—by suffering: I did not succeed but by this suffering I broke my heart, and from my broken heart—that desolate source—poured forth my love. It is a small poem but a poem profoundly and unforgottably true, not only of Yeats and his unhappy love, out of which came so much else that leaped upon its course—poetry—insight, but of many, many others also: indeed, in some measure, of all of us.

The difficulty in reading His Confidence, in other words, is in no way to be distinguished from the difficulty of reading a sonnet by Shakespeare or one of the Odes of John Keats. And the same thing is true of Yeats’s greatest poems also. Indeed Yeats differs from his comparable predecessors in two ways only: in his use of particular symbols and metaphors provided by his personal philosophic system, and in the special character of the critical apparatus which has grown up around his poems. The symbols and metaphors, however, create philosophical rather than poetic problems: they are poetically comprehensible in their own right and the philosophic significances can usually be ignored for reading purposes. As for the critical apparatus, it need not interfere unduly with the pleasure of reading Yeats. It is true of Yeats’s work as of the work of many of his contemporaries that interpreters have sometimes increased the poetic difficulties in order to increase the academic triumphs, but the general reader is under no obligation to accept professional estimates of the hardships and adversities. Yeats’s poems are poems, not puzzles, and the academic tendency to make riddles of them should not delude nor discourage the reader who comes to them as works of art. He should remember that...
“difficult” poets, or poets who can be made to seem so, are godsend to the unpoetical instructor—which is why so many courses, miseducated courses in modern poetry, are devoted to their work: the instructor can teach the difficulties, not the poems—a far easier task. With Yeats, as with all true artists, it is the poems which matter.

And Yeats’s poems are, to an unusual degree, whole and complete within themselves, requiring nothing of their readers—if we may call it nothing—but the power to see and hear and feel and smell and taste and, above all, think. Misinterpretation comes when it does come, not from ignorance of the glosses but from a failure to understand the syntax (which, in Yeats, is as powerful as it is subtle), or from a failure to be present sensuously and imaginatively at the scene, or from a failure to exercise the full power of the intelligence in relating the experience of the poem to one’s own experience of the world. None of these things are easy to do in a poem like “Byzantium” or “Vacillation” or “Among School Children” or “The Statues,” but the difficulties in the way are not difficulties which anyone, I think, could properly call obscurities. A work of art is not obscure, as I understand the usage of the word, if it demands of its readers or listeners or observers that they come to it fully awake and in the possession of all their faculties. It is obscure only if it demands of them what their faculties at their best and liveliest cannot provide.

No, what the assailants of contemporary poetry have in mind is not the difficulty of inward meaning one finds in Yeats. At least it is not Yeats they mention. Their principal target is and has been for many years Ezra Pound, and if there is one thing more than another which is patently true of Ezra Pound it is the fact that the meanings of his meanings are not in doubt. His diagnosis of his time and of all previous times in his Cantos comes down to the simplest of propositions—that usury is the mother of all ill. His ideas about literature—and they are numerous—are as definite and precise, and as fruitful, as ideas could well be. And his emotions, at least the emotions his poetry expresses, are as plain as they are few:

Tard, très tard, je t’ai connue, la Tristesse,
I have been hard as youth sixty years.

J’ai eu pitié des autres
probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my convenience.

It is accurately said. Love of dead men and women you will find in Pound, but for the living—including, at the last, himself—little but exasperation or contempt or rage. It is not, therefore, because his intentions are dark that Pound can be charged with obscurity. It is for another and a wholly different reason—a reason which may go some way to elucidate the nature of the whole complaint about contemporary poetry.

What brings the charge of obscurity down upon Ezra Pound is the character of the references to persons and to events out of which he constructs the fabric of his more important work. The beginning of the Sixth Canto will serve as an example:

What have you done, Odysseus,
We know what you have done. . . .
And that Guillaume sold out his ground rents
(Seventh of Poitiers, Ninth of Aquitaine).
‘Tant les foeti com auzires
Cen e quatre vingt e veit verz’
The stone is alive in my hands, the crops will be thick in my death year.

Who, says the indignant reader, is this William? And what was seventh of Poitiers and ninth of Aquitaine? And why ground rents? And what is this Provençal couplet about making love to somebody a hundred and eighty-four times? And in whose hand is the stone alive? And what stone? And what is the relation between the live stone and the thick crops and the death year?
And who am “I” who suddenly appears at the end? And why—a thousand times why—go at it in this way anyhow?

Well, the answers to the first seven questions can be quite accurately supplied if anyone is willing to take the trouble. A Mr. Carne-Ross was, with the following results: William is William IX of Aquitaine (distinguished poet who was the Hopwood Lecturer of 1933), and the thick crops refer to the fruitful results throughout the kingdom of so much royal potency, and the stone alive in the hand, orchidaceous pun aside, refers to the fact that the arts of the stonecutter and the builder, like all the rest of the arts, flourish under a potent father-king as distinguished from an impotent usurer-king. All of which, of course, makes complete sense as well as establishing the fundamental truth in view: that everything does well, including, presumably, the two noble ladies, where wealth isn’t hired. The last question however still remains. Why go at it this way? Why not say it in so many words? Why, in any
event, not put it all down so that it can be understood without the assistance of such scholars and interpreters as the ingenious Mr. Carne-Ross?

But here again our guide has gone before us. The fault, says Mr. Carne-Ross, is in ourselves, not in Mr. Pound. Mr. Pound should not be denounced because we can't take his broad hints and reconstruct an entire corner of history out of a man's name and a tag of Provençal verse. The trouble is that we have lost the common heritage of myth and legend to which earlier and more fortunate writers could appeal and have become incompetent readers. No one is to blame but the generations which broke the tradition and the only remedy, if we wish to read again, is to shore up the shattered columns and rebuild the city.

It is not, I think you will agree, a very comforting or a very persuasive answer. It is quite true that Milton made copious use of curious names and events which his readers were able to identify only because they and he had read the same books and studied the same languages. It is true also that all those elder poets who constructed their poetic world out of classic mythology or ancient history or the tales of Boccaccio found ready readers only because their generation knew Boccaccio and the myths as well as they. But are Guillaume and his couplet really of that order? Was there ever a time when an English poet could expect to be generally understood in such terms? And Pound—let there be no mistake about that—does wish to be understood: "... in discourse," he says in his Seventy-ninth Canto, "what matters is/to get it across e poi basta." Indeed the aim of writing, as his Eightieth Canto sees it, is "to bring your g.r. to the nutriment/gentle reader to the gist of the discourse."

No, the problem is considerably more complicated and more interesting than Mr. Carne-Ross makes it seem. Pound's references in his Cantos are drawn from the poetry and art and politics of a dozen languages and countries and there has never been a "common heritage of myth and legend" in English, or, I think, in any other tongue, which contained anything like that body of public knowledge. Nor has any "common heritage of myth and legend" in any country ever contained the kind of recondite or purely personal or purely scholarly allusion to which Pound is prone. Take, for example, the First Canto with its magnificently cadenced account of the voyage of Odysseus from Circe's island to that beach in Hell: the strong pull of the rhythm when the wind takes hold of the ship and the levelling off after, like the levelling off of the vibrations of a climbing plane, when the sail truly fills and the ship runs in the open sea. Towards the end of this Canto, after an extended passage which would be wholly intelligible to anyone who knew Homer, and readable enough whether one knew Homer or not, there suddenly appears a character named Divus (patently no Greek) who is commanded to lie quiet, and, beside him, a "Cretan" of whom nothing is said but that an unspecified "phrase" is his. Their position in the Canto indicates that they are persons of importance but nothing in the Canto itself identifies them, nor is there anything in the common heritage of the English-speaking peoples either now or at any previous time which would enable a reader to discover who they are or why they are there. As a matter of fact, only Pound himself, or a sedulous student who had read Pound's other writings, or, conceivably, a specialist in late Latin texts, should such a man take to reading contemporary poetry, could very well know the necessary answer. For Andreas Divus was a scholar who lived early in the sixteenth century and wrote a Latin translation of the Odyssey, "little more than a trot or a pony," which Pound, as he tells us in an essay of 1918, had picked up in a Paris bookstall about 1908 or 1910 in an edition of the
early 1800's which contained also the Hymni Deorum of a certain Cretan named Georgius Dartona, the second of which (to Aphrodite) contained, in turn, the phrase here suggested. And why is Divus to lie quiet? Because the preceding matter is largely a translation, or rather a magnificent transubstantiation, of his text.

Now this, you may very well think, is a special and understandable case: an ingenious method of at once confessing and concealing plagiarism. It is, I assure you, no such thing. To begin with, Divus, not Pound, is the beneficiary of this traffic as the great translator—for Pound is surely one of the greatest in the history of our tongue—very well knew. Again, and more important, Divus and the Cretan are not isolated instances. They are two among multitudes in the Cantos and elsewhere. The Second Canto, the most lyrical of the lot, contains, for example, in the midst of such a Mediterranean scene as no other modern poet has accomplished, “the voice of Schoeney’s daughters.” You find there Sordello, whom even an age which has forgotten Browning remembers; you find Eleanor of Aquitaine—no problem surely; you find Homer—“Ear, ear for the seasure, murmur of old men’s voices”; you find Helen; you find Tyro whom any classical dictionary will identify as the beautiful daughter of the King of Elis who was seduced by Neptune as she walked by the river bank

And the blue-grey glass of the wave tents them,
Glare azure of water, cold-welter, close cover . . . ;

you have all this, and in the middle of it you have the voice of Schoeney’s daughters. And who are Schoeney’s daughters? How can a man discover them? Only by reading Golding’s translation of Ovid, which few have read and none can now buy, where it is written:

Atlant, a goodly lady, one
of Schoeney’s daughters.

Atlanta and her sisters stand alone in their private darkness amidst all that light, but not so the rest of the masked figures of Pound’s poems. As you read on into the later Cantos the masks crowd around you until, in the Pisan group, the naked face is the exception. Only a reader who was himself present in the Disciplinary Barracks of the American Army at Pisa during the months of Pound’s incarceration could possibly identify the greater part of the shadowy figures of that Inferno: could possibly know, for example, that the roster of Presidents of the United States refers to a list of Negro prisoners, or that the Steele of “Steele that is one awful name” identifies the officer in command of the stockade. The references here are not only outside any common cultural heritage: they are outside the possibilities of common knowledge of any kind. Only with the aid of commentators and interpreters—very special commentators and interpreters—can they be read at all and some references have thus far mystified even the most devoted of the glossarists. The world still waits, I believe, for the identification of a certain nobleman with dirty lace cuffs who pops up out of nowhere in the Café Dante in Verona.

Now, the cumulative effect of all this is, without doubt, infuriating. Even so wise and gentle a man as that fine Greek poet, George Seferis, betrays irritation when he thinks back over his experience of the Cantos: “The reader turning the pages becomes dizzy noting the successive insertions of foreign texts; of incidents or of conver-
sions, very often in a foreign language; of persons known from history or entirely unknown, whose unexpected presence he cannot explain... The irritation is understandable. But is irritation or even rage an adequate answer to the puzzle? Is it really enough to say, as a very considerable number of our contemporaries do say, that you “can’t read” Pound—or “can’t read” contemporary poetry in general because of Pound; that its obscurities are unnecessary; that they could easily be dispensed with; that the whole thing is a fraud? Here is a man whose position as “true poet” is not open to question: Eliot gave it as his opinion some years ago that Pound was then the most important poet writing in English. Here, furthermore, is a man whose declared purpose as a poet is to communicate: a man to whom the first law of discourse is to communicate e poi basti. Is it possible to dismiss the work of such a man as deliberately dark or intentionally obscure or merely incompetent? Is it conceivable that a writer of this stature and these beliefs would devote his life and his art to frustration or could, without adequate reason, construct so curious a monument to himself? And yet what reason can there be for the use by any writer, no matter what his position or his convictions, of a vocabulary of reference which no one but himself or his coterie or some desperate candidate for the Ph.D. can ever be expected to unravel? How can Pound feel obliged to represent essential parts of what he has to say not by common but by proper nouns, unknown as well as known; by fragments of quotations in numerous tongues, including tongues neither the writer nor his readers speak; by fragments of history as it was or as it might have been, either in his own country or in some other; by bits of conversation between unrecognized conversationalists; by the dry feathers and old tags of the gossip of the art studios? Why doesn’t he come straight out with it in comprehensive and comprehensible words? Why, in brief, doesn’t he say what he means?

He question with which we started has, you see, somewhat altered its character. What began as an irritable complaint about the habits and practices of contemporary poets as a group has become a disturbed and rather disturbing inquiry into the reasons for the behavior of one of them. Unless we are prepared to assert, as no intelligent man could, that Pound’s principal poems are a vast and foolish hoax, we must consider that their method has a purpose. But what purpose?

A specific example, taken from Pound’s finest poem, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, may perhaps make the question more precise. In the first section of Mauberley, the Ode, which sums up the dilemma of the literary young man whose literary fate is to be the subject of the sequence, there occurs the line

His true Penelope was Flaubert.

Here, of five words, two are proper nouns, but proper nouns in this case with which any intelligent reader will be familiar. Penelope is of course the beloved to whom through thick or thin a wanderer returns. Flaubert is a novelist whose theories of style and whose handling of experience altered the course not only of the novel but of the art of letters generally. What is being said, then, to the reader who understands these references, is that a certain literary style and attitude were the end and object of someone’s searchings—in this case Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’s. But this is being said not in several dozen words but in five, and with a gain, not a loss, of allusiveness and precision. Pound’s line is far more meaningful than my paraphrase, as well as being briefer, handsomer, and more memorable. And the same thing is true, it will be found, throughout this re-
markable poem. Very little of Mauberley is about its subject: the greater part of it is its subject. The poem is less a poem, in the ordinary sense, than a detailed tapestry made up of proper names and the figures they evoke; made up of moments of past time, of gods, of mottoes, of landscapes. Where a literary generalization would have been possible, there is Flaubert 
tout court.
Where Mauberley's frenzied pride is in issue there, instead of the appropriate epithet, is Capaneus on the walls of Thebes.
Where it is Mauberley's gullibility which is to be exposed there is no adjective, there is only the image of the trout and its factitious bait. The figure takes the place of the abstraction.

But what then is this figured writing? How, except in its own terms, is it to be described? In an age in which every other book is a book about symbolism, are we to call these figures symbols? Not certainly in any sense but Suzanne Langer's, to whom everything that means is so defined. These are rather signs than symbols. They stand, not, as Yeats's symbols do, for the invisible essence which only this particular visible form can express, but for general ideas or conceptions which general terms could also have communicated. The particular is chosen instead of the general: the figure in place of the abstraction.

What we have, in other words, as a number of recent writers on Pound have helpfully pointed out, is a kind of picture writing. The common coinage of familiar discursive writing in which the same word may serve a multitude of different uses, designating now one particular event and now another, is rejected wherever possible in favor of a series of unique and specific words designating unique and specific situations. As in the case of picture writing, the number of signs is limitlessly increased, but each sign belongs much more nearly to its thing than in the case of signs made out of the interchangeable terms of the generalizing dictionary. One critic of Pound's work has referred to his figures as pictograms or ideograms, but they are much more specific than that. Ideograms have also, in their way and within their limits, exchangeable meanings: Pound's figures have not. The figure of the line "His true Penelope was Flaubert" is not pictogram Flaubert set down beside pictogram Penelope in associated conjunction. The figure is Flaubert and Penelope; Flaubert in the context of Penelope; Flaubert, if you will, in Penelope's dress.

We could multiply instances throughout Mauberley and the Cantos, but the situation is, I think, clear. The obscurity of which complaint is made in Pound is an obscurity of the specific. His meanings are dark because he composes in pictures and because his pictures are sometimes, like private photographs, too peculiarly unique; because the particular figure does not signify to all, or, in extreme cases, to any, of Pound's readers. Here is somebody in Mauberley whom an expert on the generals of the Franco-German War might recognize as one of them—though even he might well be wrong. Here in the Cantos is what may be a Chinese god or a Chinese girl or even a Chinese philosopher: only a Taoist would know, and not many Taoists read Pound. Here is "Poor Jenny" whom no one but the Pre-Raphaelites would recall—and the Pre-Raphaelites are dead. The figures are meaningful enough—specifically and wonderfully meaningful—when they are identified, but until we can place these ambiguous figures they are so many faces in a heap of faces signifying nothing, and our question repeats itself with point and passion: Why not say it in general and generally comprehensible terms? Why hand us the private photographs to figure out if we can?

Pound, if we asked him—if we looked back through his theories and his theorizing—would tell us something by way of answer but not enough. For years in his younger days he went about London
attacking English poets of renown as fabricators of a mere "vehicle for transmitting thoughts" and demanding the substitution of what he called "specific rendering." Now "rendering" is a Symbolist word of the nineties and we may look to Symbolist doctrine to define its meaning. To the Symbolists the poet's business was with his experience, and particularly with the experience of his consciousness, and every moment of that experience was unique. It was therefore the poet's task to invent a particular language appropriate to his particular life. What was basic to Symbolist doctrine, in other words, was the diversity of experience, and what Pound was doing in his early days in London was to carry Symbolist doctrine to its logical conclusion: the conclusion that diversity of experience must be expressed in diversity of terms. If you can't generalize experience you cannot generalize about experience. All you can do is "render" it "explicitly" in its inherent explicitness, placing your reader where you yourself have been—naked among the minute particulars. Literature to Pound, as every fortunate school boy has now been taught, is language "charged with meaning" to the greatest possible extent, and the greatest possible extent is the extent made possible by "explicit rendering."

That is the theory. But face to face with a poem we cannot read because the explicitness of the rendering is explicit in terms of someone or something we can't identify, the theory does not help us very much. It does not resolve the obscurity. If anything the obscurity resolves it. The poem stands there meaningless for all the talk, and we are suddenly given to see that the theory is merely what literary theories so often are—an excuse and a self-justification. Pound has made a virtue, as the Symbolists before him made a virtue, of rejecting the generalization, the least common denominator, and presenting the unique and diverse and fragmented experience in equivalents of itself. But in so doing he has quite obviously been driven, as the virtue-makers commonly are, by something other than literary choice—by an unnamed literary necessity. "Explicit rendering" is not inevitably and always a good thing in itself. It may produce marvellously precise and moving effects when its explicit equivalents are legible, but when they are not legible it may produce no effects at all. And it is quite obvious that they must often be illegible. There are simply not enough publicly recognizable photographs in any man's bureau drawer to enable him to present an extensive or complicated experience by this means.

The theory therefore fails to justify the obscurity of which we complain: we must go beyond the choice to the necessity. We must go to the reasons which produced the theory. We must ask why, granted that "explicit rendering" is not always and under all circumstances a better way of writing poetry, Pound was obliged to persuade himself and others that it was? Why was it impossible for him to employ those readier means of communication which had been open to poets, including the greatest poets, in the past? When anything happened to Goethe, as Gide once remarked, he turned it into a generality. Why could not Pound?

The answer—and it is an answer which has much to say about the whole question of obscurity of reference in contemporary poetry—is, I think, this: Neither Pound nor his contemporaries have been able to turn the particular into the general as Goethe did because the general is not available to them as it was a hundred years before. Goethe's was a time in which the particular found its place in the general naturally and easily and was best observed in that context. Ours is a time of a very different character. The "general order," if there is one, is no longer open to serious writers in prose or verse, and the particu-
lar is so overwhelming in its particularity that it can only be understood, when it can be understood at all, in its character as itself. The consequence is that our literature has of necessity become a literature of particularity. In prose we have been forced toward that particularity of the external world which we call “realism,” or toward that other inward particularity which attempts to present the moments of the individual consciousness in their ungeneralized and ungeneralizable diversities. Poetry, moved by the same influences, has been driven in the same direction. But because the end and purpose of poetry is not merely to represent or to comprehend experience but to possess it, “realism” of whichever kind has not served as the poetic means. Poetry has been driven not merely to designate the particulars but, in some way, to contain them. The labor is not new in kind. Thousands of years before our epoch it was practiced by Chinese poets in their attempts to possess isolated moments of experience. What is new with us is the application of the method. Ours are the first poets in the history of the art to attempt to use the poetry of specific equivalents for such extended renderings of public experience as Eliot’s vision of the modern world in The Waste Land or Pound’s view of universal history in The Cantos.

The essential point, however, so far as their obscurity goes, is not that our poets have made the attempt. The essential point is that the attempt has been forced upon them. Lacking a “general order” to contain the great sequences of time and space and to provide metaphors for their expression, our contemporaries have had no alternative, if they wished to handle those sequences, but to represent them in their specific equivalents. The obscurity of reference in contemporary poetry, in other words, is truly an obscurity of necessity rather than of choice. If it is not, for that reason, less obscure, it is, or should be, less offensive. A reader who feels that difficulties have been deliberately thrown in his way in accordance with some aesthetic doctrine or other, has occasion to feel indignant: a reader who understands that the difficulties he faces are difficulties inherent in the approach to the experience he is attempting to possess, has none. If labor is demanded of him it is labor imposed not by the whim of the poet but by the necessities of the poet’s task.

This is not to argue that all the difficulties of reference in modern poetry are inescapable. The greatest of modern poets, Yeats, succeeded in forcing the most characteristic of all contemporary experiences to express itself in terms and images which any reader with the least awareness of himself and of his world can comprehend. There can hardly be a student in any American college worthy of the name to whom The Second Coming is not a meaningful statement. But the fact that other contemporary poets have not achieved Yeats’s mastery of the experience of the age does not mean that their work is not essential to an understanding of the sensibility of our time, or, what is perhaps more important, to its expression. Those readers who have come to see that poetry is an instrument of knowledge, and that the knowledge it can convey is a knowledge of their own lives, and that their own lives must be lived in the age into which they have been born, will not willingly be excluded from the poetry of their own time by those difficulties of communication which are a characteristic of the time and a condition of its experience.