

‘Process Poem’ or ‘Completed Edifice’?: The Twentieth-Century American Epic in the Twenty-first-Century Digital Age

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Walt Whitman had influentially argued that the authentic American poem needed to be more a ‘process’ than a finished form: ‘The want for something finished, completed, and technically beautiful will certainly not be supplied by this writer’, the poet insisted in July 1888, adding that his poems never gave ‘the sense of something finished or fixed’ but were instead ‘always suggesting something beyond.’¹ ‘Song of Myself’ (1855) led to a new American conception of the epic as inherently provisional, an answer to Emerson’s call for a great poem that would be ‘open-ended, provisional, multiform and celebratory’ and taking Emerson’s view that ‘it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem.’² Whitman had himself asked: ‘Of the great poems received from abroad and from the ages, and today enveloping and penetrating America, is there one that is consistent with these United States, or essentially applicable to them as they are and are to be?’³ Whitman was nevertheless confident that the United States warranted epic treatment when he declared in the preface to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* that ‘The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.’⁴ The poet later argued that ‘America is not finished’ and ‘perhaps never will be’, therefore encouraging his readers to view American culture as an ongoing process.⁵ Whitman’s words reflect the Romantic idea that long poems might capture not only the spirit of the period in which they are written, but also the changing spirit of the poet’s own inspiration as it ebbed and flowed,

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with Wordsworth's 'The Prelude' being one of the most influential prototypes in this respect. Though it may not have been Wordsworth's intention, the very title of this work pointed towards the validity of an aesthetic of open-endedness; its subsequent publication history – the work appeared in three radically different editions – also established a precedent for the printing of the 'epic-in-progress', a practice that, as we shall see, was adopted by many writers attempting to produce the epic poem of twentieth-century America.

Several attempts at the modern American epic have been regarded by critics as belonging within the sub-genre of the 'process poem', notably Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* and Robert Lowell's *Notebook* sequence. Each of these poems was written over a long period of time; they would grow to include a wide range of public and private experience; they were constantly tinkered with and expanded, but seemingly never reached a finalised shape or structure. In his influential study *The Continuity of American Poetry*, Roy Harvey Pearce explains that the structure of Whitman's 'Song of Myself' evinces 'little of that internal-external sense of necessity (in its most extreme forms, an Aristotelian beginning, middle and end; or a New Critical paradox, tension, ambiguity, or irony) which we tend to demand of an achieved literary work.'⁶ Pearce went on to assert that:

Like Pound after him, Whitman worked towards a new Paideuma: one entirely of process, of guiding, strengthening, energizing, and redefining the sensible self by putting it into direct contact with the world wherein it could be free, creative, and whole—a self proper to the American democrat...Totally process, it could, as Whitman himself said, have no proper beginning or ending. It could have no form bound by necessities of any sort. Its greatness

would lie in its resistance to that formalization which, as it was fatal to man,
would also be fatal to poetry.⁷

This new approach to the literary work has been seen as both indigenous to the United States, and as that country's unique contribution to the epic poem. In *The American Long Poem*, Stephen Fender explains that the 'process poem' is 'characteristically American,' and 'perhaps more central to American literary traditions':

[The poem] has no formal outline and, if it contains fragments of argument or story, they do not inform the whole. It is not long because of its message but because it needs to include, or to seem to include, everything it encounters during the course of its composition.⁸

Indeed, all of the poets mentioned above appeared to reject the Aristotle's ideal of completion and formal order, and instead sought to follow Whitman's sprawling record of ongoing American experience. Before beginning *The Cantos*, Pound had pointed out the link between Whitman and his own epic:

[Whitman] is America... He knows that he is a beginning and not a classically finished work... The vital part of my message, taken from the sap and fibre of America, is the same as his.⁹

Here Pound evidently shares Whitman's view that a modern epic needed to be more a 'process' than a finished form.

Just how the twentieth-century American epic should be presented to the world is complicated due to the highly experimental nature of the poems. In the past, editors such as Frank Bidart and George F. Butterick have tried to organize the poems into a ‘definitive’ or ‘complete’ edition. Subsequent debates and attempts to distinguish the definitive text reflect the priorities of the New Criticism - a generation of Academic poetry critics which flourished in the American universities through the middle decades of the century. The New Critics, as Terry Eagleton explains, wanted to ‘convert the poem into a self-sufficient object, as solid and material as an urn or icon.’¹⁰ Abiding by two essential rules of poetic creation put forward by their contemporary, and model poet, T.S. Eliot – that, a poet is ‘constantly amalgamating disparate experience’ into ‘new wholes’,¹¹ and that the ‘man who suffers’ is separate from the ‘mind which creates’¹² – New Criticism insisted that the poem was a ‘spatial figure rather than a temporal process’, something which could ‘be plucked free of the wreckage of history and hoisted into the sublime space above it.’¹³ The poet was therefore seen – in New Critical eyes – as a uniquely inspired craftsman whose main concern was to chisel and sculpt his imaginative material until it formed a perfected and timeless verbal artefact. Evidence of this desire for intrinsic coherence and completion can be found in Cleanth Brooks’ renowned study *The Well Wrought Urn*, in which he insists that his ‘primary concern’ is with ‘concentrating on the poem itself as a construct, with its own organisation and its own logic.’¹⁴

Yet the new critical desire to see the twentieth-century American epic as a finished artifact has proved problematic, not least for the editors of Whitman and Pound. Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price - editors of the Walt Whitman archive online - insist that the text of *Leaves of Grass* cannot be thought of in such static terms:

Certainly some of the inadequacy of older models of criticism becomes clear. Many of us still talk about ‘Song of Myself’ as if it were a single, stable entity. Yet this poem took various forms and had various titles in the six different editions of *Leaves of Grass* from 1855 to 1881, and it had a complex pre-history in manuscripts and early notebooks.¹⁵

In contrast to the New Critical ideal of perfectly sculpted art work, Folsom and Price argue that *Leaves of Grass* was ‘Whitman’s title for a process more than a product’ and are highly critical of past editions of the poem, complaining that ‘the oddest choice made by the New York University Press editors was never to present, anywhere in the 22 volumes, a straightforward printing of the first edition, a document of primary importance in literary history.’¹⁶ Many of Whitman’s lines in the first edition do suggest that this is a highly unstable art-form, as the poet continually draws attention to the fact that he is recording things as they happen:

There was never any more inception than there is now,
Nor any more youth or age than there is now;
And there will never be any more perfection than there is now...

(*WWCP*, p. 676)

The verse generates the impression that Whitman had completely embraced the flux of modern life, and was determined to capture it as quickly and spontaneously as he could:

People I meet...the effect upon me of my early life...of the
ward and the city I live in....of the nation,
The latest news....discoveries, inventions, societies....

(WWCP, p. 677)

Such lines appear to be casual and improvisatory jottings; the poet's use of ellipsis is indicative to the way he saw the poem – even in its published form – as a 'draft' rather than a perfected article. The textual gaps create a feeling of excitement and instability and also seem to open up a space for further creativity, which suggests perhaps that the poem had been left open to be later informed by more direct experience.

Pound's *Cantos* appears to be in worse shape in print. In *Ezra Pound's Cantos: The Story of the Text*, Hugh Kenner notes that the two published texts of *The Cantos* – from Faber and New Directions – 'have a long history of divergence both from their own early states and from one and other.'¹⁷ He goes on to state that both texts 'may be shown to vary both from Pound's intentions and from common sense.'¹⁸ Kenner's emphasis on 'Pound's intentions' seem somewhat ironic, given the fact the poet himself appears to have had no clear destination for his poem in mind - if there is any consistency about Pound's comments on *The Cantos*, it lies in his frequent emphasis of this fact. In a letter sent to his father on 18 December 1915, Pound first described *The Cantos* as a 'big long endless poem.'¹⁹ Two years later, in a letter sent to James Joyce on 17 March, he again referred to it as an 'endless poem of no known category,' which was 'all about everything.'²⁰ Indeed, Pound had himself suggested that the best introduction to his work is lines from drafts of the first three Cantos first published in *Poetry* in 1917, but not included in the Faber or New Directions edition. These lines seem to suggest that Pound found himself on the path towards flux, as he self-consciously notes that this is a 'draft', and more to the point a 'draft' that not only announces its own provisionality, it also announces that it doesn't quite know what it is:

Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello*!
But say I want to, say I take your whole bag
of tricks,
Let in your quirks and tweeks, and say the
things an art-form,
Your *Sordello*, and that the modern world
Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thought in;
Say that I dump my catch, shiny and silvery
As fresh sardines flapping and slipping on the
marginal cobbles?

(‘Three Cantos I’)

Here, Pound seems to suggest that in order to be authentically modern the poet must forgo narrative continuity and simply render the fragmentation of a particularly well-stocked modern consciousness. This idea of the poem as a ‘rag-bag’ indicates that rather than some sort of systematic progression being imposed by the poet, the content will be randomly and haphazardly thrown together. The constant flux, then, of *Leaves of Grass* and *The Cantos* ultimately challenges any kind of New Critical ideal for the perfected verbal icon.

As the New Critical hegemony over academic poetry criticism declined during the latter half of the twentieth century, so greater attention was paid to the intrinsic nature of less ‘well-finished’ long poems that attempted to follow the aesthetic trail opened up by Whitman’s seminal *Leaves of Grass*. In recent years, new digital technology has emerged that aims to deal more adequately with the ‘chaos’ of the Modern American epic. In 2005, Folsom and Price explained that ‘our electronic archive is steadily making

available an increasing number of poetry manuscripts.²¹ Their ongoing efforts to re-edit Whitman's poem on the web was motivated by a desire to address what they deem to be the 'outdated scholarship' such as New Criticism. The editors seem to suggest a drastic movement away from the New Critical ideal of the 'well wrought urn' of past editions to a more inclusive digital edition of the poem that includes drafts, manuscripts and the varying versions of individual poems.

This new inclusive digital approach to the modern American epic seems to have taken hold – Mark Byron is currently assembling the digital variorum edition of Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. In reference to the experimental nature of Modernist texts, Byron argues that 'scholars need to reconsider the grounds upon which such texts are understood' and that the poems 'are not fully-fledged objects at all, as conventionally understood, but rather text processes that require flexible, innovative editorial reflection, and subtle means of representation in order to more fully convey the precise challenge they provide to their own aesthetic landscape.'²² Byron is using the technology of Juxta to collect 'the very extensive set of variants for each canto pertaining to the production of Pound's epic poem over the course of sixty years.'²³ He explains that 'the degree of variation of each witness text from a chosen base text is visually represented next to each file in the comparisons list.'²⁴ This could be a very useful tool for future scholars. For example, in the first draft of 'Three Cantos I', Pound writes:

And we will say: What's left for me to do?
Whom shall I conjure up; who's my Sordello,
My pre-Daun Chaucer, pre-Boccacio,
As you have done pre-Dante?

Whom shall I hang my shimmering garment on;
Who wear my featherly mantle, hagoromo;
Not Arnaut, not De Born, not Uc St. Circ who has
Writ out the stories.²⁵

The poet cuts and condenses this passage significantly in the *Lustra* version:

And what's left?
Pre-Daun-Chaucer, Pre-Boccacio? Not Arnaut,
Not Uc St. Circ.²⁶

In terms of the poetry itself, the answer to ‘what’s left?’ is actually not a lot; our understanding of the *Lustra* passage depends on information held within ‘Three Cantos I’. The extent of Pound’s revisions appear to have created an entirely different poem. The technology of Juxta does appear to be a useful tool to help a reader not get lost in all the textual nuances of Pound’s experimentally unstable text.

The apparent benefits of the new digital editions of *Leaves of Grass* and *Cantos* raise the important debate whether other American ‘process’ epics should follow suit – most notably Olson’s *Maximus Poems* and Lowell’s *Notebook* sequence. Olson’s epic has had a complex, but ultimately flawed, journey from manuscript to final publication. George F. Butterick, who edited the collected edition in 1983, argues that ‘it is a series in the tradition of long poem encouraged by Olson’s predecessors’, who include Whitman and Pound. Butterick notes that although Olson spent nearly his entire career as a poet writing the three hundred ‘poems’, ‘letters’, ‘songs’ and ‘fragments’ that make up the series, he

had not worked from a preconceived plan or had any idea what his epic would grow to include:

All the evidence is that Olson did not intend, consciously, to write *The Maximus Poems* as it stands, a long series of epic dimension. The poems were begun spontaneously as a letter...stirred by the news that Vincent Ferrini was planning a little magazine in Gloucester to be called *Voyager*...They appear in order in which they were written—that is, chronologically—in all but a few cases.²⁷

In his influential 1950 essay ‘Projective Verse’, Olson had explained that when a poet ‘puts himself in the open’ then he ‘can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares for itself.’²⁸ The poet’s writing habits would seem to suggest artistic spontaneity and improvisation as he notoriously composed his verse on whatever was at hand, including scrap pieces of paper, restaurant placemats, receipts, envelopes and (most problematically for future archivists) windowpanes. Butterick informs us of how one poem for the series was ‘written on the back of an envelope and continued on to the back of the protruding letter, in which position it was found preserved among the papers, like a figure from Pompeii.’²⁹

Many lines throughout the *Maximus* series imply that Olson was following inspiration wherever it led him, rather than working from a preconceived plan. In ‘Letter 9’ the poet’s attention is apparently taken away by a ‘whirring bee’:

I measure my song,
measure the sources of my song,
measure me measure
my forces

(And I buzz,
as the bee does,
who's missed
the plum tree,
and gone and got himself caught
in my window

And the whirring of those wings
blots out the rattle of
my machine)

(*M*, p. 48)

The impression given here is of the poet as spectator, merely a passive conduit in the creation of his poem. The image of the bee on a typically random course with no distinct target or end in sight serves as an apt metaphor for the 'process' of the poem, as this 'buzz' of activity apparently takes precedence over the poet's more mechanical or methodological approach. In another 'projective' poem, Olson writes:

These days
whatever you have to say, leave
the roots on, let them
dangle

And the dirt

Just to make it clear
where they come from.

(*COCP*, p. 106)

Olson appears to be offering a dramatically different model of the poem to the New Critical ‘well wrought urn’ here, as the messy ‘roots’ and ‘dirt’ he has left to ‘dangle’ generate the impression of something less polished, yet much more organic and alive.

It seems to be in keeping with this pattern that *The Maximus Poems* was never finished: Olson died before the publication of the third volume, and as a result the manuscripts had to be assembled and edited by two of his friends, Butterick and Charles Boer.³⁰ The editors defend the publication of their posthumous edition by reminding readers that ‘Olson was the poet of openness and process’ and that he ‘never really concluded anything.’³¹ At least in the editors’ opinion, readers should see the poem as an ongoing series with flexibility of development, one which resists any sense of finality or closure. However, in *Editing The Maximus Poems*, Butterick explains that:

Although there have been a number of instances where an author’s work has been finished for him by a colleague or editor or other professional, there is no other instance that I am aware of, at least in English and American literary history, where a poet’s major undertaking has been “made” for him, given shape, after his death. I do not, of course, mean collections or selections of poems, but a work that has a definition or determination to it, like an epic.³²

Even though Butterick argues that he was open to the ‘disordered vitality’ of Olson’s writing, he also seems to share the Aristotelian view that the true epic requires ‘shape’, ‘definition’ and ‘determination’, that it should be a finished and formally coherent art work. Yet, the editors confide that they were not given adequate instructions on how to complete the poem: ‘There was to be no formal crescendo or apotheosis, no planned ascension to Parnassus. Time simply ran out for Olson.’³³ Butterick admits that a volume produced without the author’s immediate supervision or final approval has a limited authority: ‘Precise dates for the poems, so necessary to maintain the chorological order, often had to be won from the chaos...But even here, with the chronological arrangement, there is some discrepancy and overlap.’³⁴ The editors confess that certain poems were rejected from the volume because they were ‘unrepresentative’ of Gloucester (the focus of the poem), because they were not ‘sufficiently legible’, or because they were apparently ‘too obscure or insignificant.’³⁵ The fact remains, then, that although the editors portray and respect Olson as a ‘process poet’, the way in which the third volume was edited reflects the profound human desire to win coherence and closure ‘from the chaos’.

The manner in which Olson’s American epic was edited has remained constant with New Critical theory - to produce a reliable, readable text that has a sense of intrinsic coherence and closure. However, this seems at odds with the ‘process’ spirit of the poem. Lowell’s *Notebook* sequence has also been edited in the same vein, despite the fact that the poem appears to be open-ended in composition. In a letter to Elizabeth Bishop (dated 16 July 1966), Lowell implied that he had been considering writing a poem in the ‘catch

all you can' tradition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*: 'I have been thinking of Whitman's huge sweep, mostly in his thirties and forties, lines pouring out, a hundred poems a year, yet with long, idle afternoons of sauntering, chatting, at ease with what the eye fell on.'³⁶ When *Notebook 1967-68* was first published in May 1969, Lowell included an 'Afterthought' which explained the basic narrative structure and theme of his attempt at a long poetic sequence. His emphasis was on the serendipitous process of the writing:

The time is a summer, an autumn, a winter, a spring, another summer; here the poem ends, except for turned-back bits of fall and winter 1968. I have flashbacks to what I remember, and notes on old history. My plot rolls with the seasons. The separate poems and sections are opportunist and inspired by impulse. Accident threw up subjects, and the plot swallowed them—famished for human chances.³⁷

The sequence records a wide range of personal and public experience; however, having initially intended to give just one year to this project, and having emphasised this timeframe in his own commentary on the sequence, Lowell found that the actual compositional process was to spill over for nearly six. A slightly tinkered-with second edition appeared in July 1969, and a heavily rewritten and expanded edition – re-titled *Notebook* since the poem now recorded time longer than a year – was published in January 1970. The poet's comments indicate the sort of open-ended work-in-progress more characteristic of modern American attempts at the long poetic sequence. 'I am sorry to ask anyone to buy this poem twice,' Lowell apologised to his readers in 'A Note to the

New Edition', 'I couldn't stop writing, and have handled my published book as if it were a manuscript.'³⁸ In an interview with Ian Hamilton in 1971, Lowell confessed that writing and revising sonnets had become an obsession that had taken over his life:

I did nothing but write; I was thinking lines even when teaching or playing tennis... Ideas sprang from the bushes, my head; five or six sonnets started or reworked in a day. As I have said, I wished to describe the immediate instant. If I saw something one day, I wrote it that day, or the next, or the next. Things I felt or saw, or read were adrift in the whirlpool, the squeeze of the sonnet and the loose ravel of blank verse.³⁹

But this was not the last word, as no sooner had the third edition been published than the poet began to radically rearrange *Notebook* into two separate volumes entitled *History* and *For Lizzie and Harriet* (both printed in 1973). Frank Bidart, the editor, explains that, 'For a one-volume *Collected Poems* a choice had to be made.'⁴⁰ As Charles Olson's editors had discovered, the work of putting together a posthumous edition is complicated by both uncertainty as to the poet's wishes and by the presence of variant texts. Faced with several versions of one poem, Bidart's decision was clearly influenced by Lowell's comments in *History*, which increasingly had acquired 'definitive' status; but this does not change the fact that Lowell himself seems to have a desire to keep the creative process open to changing experience.

Once we begin to think of the twentieth-century American epic through the lens provided by digital resources new questions and problems emerge. There is a danger that inclusive digital editions will present these epics as merely a 'ragbag', treating

superfluous material - which the poet himself chose to leave out - as part of the poem. The irony is that within all the surplus that surround the composition of the poems, there seems to be evidence to suggest a common desire for artistic coherence and closure, and a sense of failure by the poets at their inability to achieve these. Beginning with Whitman, each of the poets discussed in this paper appears to have had a complex relationship with the opposed ideals of open-endedness and completion, giving rise to a tension that would remain unresolved throughout the composition of their long poems. Despite their often stated desire to capture the flux of experience, each of the poets had – at different times – contradictorily claimed that they were seeking aesthetic unification. Many of the poems themselves were divided into ‘parts’ or ‘sections’, which would seem to suggest that they were conceived of as belonging to a much larger and organised whole. Whitman had himself said in reference to *Leaves of Grass* that:

The whole affair is like one of those old architectural edifices, some of which were hundreds of years in building, and the designer of which had the whole idea in his mind from the first. His plans are pretty ambitious, and as means or time permits, he adds part after part, perhaps at quite wide intervals. To a casual observer it looks in the course of its construction odd enough. Only after the whole is completed one catches the idea which inspired the designer, in whose mind the relation of each part to the whole had existed all along.⁴¹

Whitman’s assertion that he had a clear grasp of the ‘relation of each part to the whole’ directly contradicts the depiction of this poet as improvisatory and following the dictates of serendipity. In ‘An Executor’s Diary Note’ to the final edition, Whitman claimed that his poem *was definitely finished*:

So far as you may have anything to do with it I place upon you the injunction that whatever may be added to the *Leaves* shall be supplementary, avowed as such, leaving the book complete as I left it, consecutive to the point I left off, marking always an unmistakable, deep down, unobliterable division line. In the long run the world will do as it pleases with the book. I am determined to have the world know what I was pleased to do.⁴²

Here, then, Whitman appears to be Walter Pater's model poet: the true artist who aspires towards 'that architectural conception of work, which foresees the end in the beginning and never loses sight of it, and in every part is conscious of all the rest, till the last sentence does but, with undiminished vigour, unfold and justify the first.'⁴³ In answer to questions about which edition of *Leaves of Grass* he himself favored, Whitman replied, 'I prefer and recommend this present one, complete, for future printing.'⁴⁴

Whitman's desire for readers to see his poem as a 'completed edifice' would seem to challenge Folsom and Price's opinion that *Leaves of Grass* is more a 'process' than a finished form. Though it might celebrate it, the poem *was not* the simple result of instinctive and spontaneous perception and composition; it was also the product of rational and deliberate construction. For example, the following lines appear in the first published version of 'Song of Myself': 'I am given up by traitors; / I talk wildly.... I have lost my wits.... I and nobody else am the / greatest traitor' (*WWCP*, p. 704). These lines are also scattered though the Thomas B. Harned Collection at the Library of Congress; the notebook is known as #80 and contains many trial lines:

It brings ~~all~~ the rest around it,
and ~~to~~ enjoy ?them? meanwhile and then
they all ^{stand on a headland and}
mock me
I am all given up by
~~traitors~~
A I am myself the greatest
traitor²
All The sentries have deserted ^{and the}
every other part of ^[illegible] me ^{but one}
I roam about drunk, and
⁴⁵
stagger

They are later to appear again in the same manuscripts:

I am given up by traitors,
I talk wildly I am surely out of my head,
I am myself the greatest
traitor
~~For~~ I went myself first
to the headland
Unloose me touch ~~I can~~
you are taking the breath
— stand it no longer
from my throat⁴⁶

Whitman redrafts the line ‘I am given up by traitors’ and incorporates it into completely different passages, seeking a place for it as if the poem were a kind of giant jigsaw puzzle. It seems somewhat ironic that this line is meant to give the impression that the poet has lost all self-control as he talks ‘wildly’ and without ‘wits’, but the notebooks demonstrate that he was, or at least he sought to be, very much in control of his poetic form. Folsom and Price even acknowledge that these manuscripts indicate that Whitman was ‘a careful craftsman’ and show ‘signs of careful, nearly obsessive, revising.’⁴⁷

Whitman may have been used as an ideal by poets, but it is perhaps more appropriate and helpful to see him as setting the precedent of a tension between ‘process’ and closure, two contradictory impulses which were to prove characteristic, almost definingly so, of the modern American epic poem. Contemplating the challenges presented to the prospective author of the modern epic, Pound had noted, in 1914, that:

Any work of art is a compound of freedom and order. It is perfectly obvious
that art hangs between chaos on the one side and mechanics on the other.⁴⁸

When Pound began composition of ‘Three Cantos’ in the summer of 1915, he appears to have been caught between two competing instincts that would seem difficult to reconcile: the desire to impose order and the desire to reflect chaos. This conflict of interest can be seen in drafts of the first three *Cantos*:

‘What do I mean by all this clattering rumble?’
Bewildered reader, what is the poet’s business?
Populate solitudes, multiply images, to fill up chaos

Or streak the barren way to paradise
To band out fine colours, fill up the void with stars
And make each star a nest of noble voices.⁴⁹

The poet is torn between the desire to either artistically flesh-out modern chaos or to try and create some kind of celestial unity and order within his verse. Despite insisting on the ‘process’ nature of his modern epic, Pound had at the same time – contradictorily – claimed that a coherent form would be discovered when he was finished. In a letter to John Drummond on 3 December, 1932, Pound argued that a reader would be able to see an encompassing form when he reached the end:

Most Cantos have in them ‘binding matter,’ i.e., lines holding them into the whole poem and these passages don’t much help the reader of an isolated fragment...More likely to confuse than help...⁵⁰

‘When I get to end,’ the poet insisted five years later, with telling emphasis, ‘pattern ought to be discoverable.’⁵¹ In 1944, the formula prescribed by Dante’s medieval epic seemed like a viable model to Pound:

For Forty years I have schooled myself, not to write an economic history of the U.S. or any other country, but to write an epic poem which begins “In the Dark Forest” crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends up in the light, and “fra i maestri di color che sanno.”⁵²

In July 1953, Pound yet again described the poem as a modern day ‘Paradiso’ and that he was ‘moving towards final coherence.’⁵³ He even notes to James Laughlin, the editor of

New Directions, that he had a final number of Cantos in mind: ‘There will be 100 or 120 cantos, but it looks like 112.’⁵⁴ In 1962, Pound seemed to suggest that the poem was held together by an encompassing form: ‘The problem was to get a form—something elastic enough to take the necessary material. It had to be a form that wouldn’t exclude something merely because it didn’t fit.’⁵⁵ Because of this evidence of complex structures, critics such as Daniel Pearlman have attempted to argue that *The Cantos* is a formally coherent epic poem.⁵⁶ Stephen Sicari goes as far as saying that an informed reader should be able to see how Pound uses epic tradition to create ‘unity, cohesion, and systematic growth of the poem toward climaxes of light in the final cantos.’⁵⁷

Any new editor of *The Maximus Poems* has to take into consideration that Olson did not remain entirely sanguine as the ‘process’ of the series sprawled out of control: ‘Very much am caught by the bastard,’ Olson wrote to friend and fellow poet Robert Creeley on 24 April 1951 regarding the first poem of the series, ‘but, after I ‘[thought I] had the final mss done...it almost pulled me over-board! that is, I was so damn pleased I had a big one, I forgot the oars!...and for this week I have been writing, to pull in, and at the same time allow more line.’⁵⁸ Even though Olson claimed that he never ‘corrected’ his work, many of the poems in the series had been extensively revised and a significant number were excluded by the poet himself from the first two published volumes - evidence that the assembly and organisation of the poem by the poet was much more complicated than Butterick and Boer suggest.⁵⁹ More than thirty drafts had to be discarded from the first volume because Olson felt that (in his own words), the series ‘had got off its proper track’ and many more were extensively revised because he felt that ‘they were too obscure’ for a reader to understand, reflecting the fact that practical issues such as a

concern for audience comprehension ultimately challenged this poet's allegiance to the freewheeling process, prompting a greater desire for coherence.⁶⁰ In September 1953, Olson even tried to bring the series to a conclusion in the form of three poems titled 'Max X', 'Max Y' and 'Max Z' because he could not see 'the path forward'.⁶¹ In a notebook dated 15 September 1957, Olson remarked dismissively that: 'The error of the epic at this point in time [is] that with the long poem you get something into which you can throw anything (as though we were looking for some hole in the ocean or earth in which to deposit atomic waste—a silly search & a silly goods...'⁶² Here, Olson clearly did not want his epic to become a mere dustbin for his poetic ramblings. During the assembly of the second volume for publication, the poet acknowledged that there had to be some constraint put on the 'process':

I'm stuck with this damn book again. It's all right to be difficult, but you can't be impossible, and there are 'spaces' here—some of them, of time lost, work not executed properly enough—which ruin my necessary gamble that, in any case, in such a method of composition there are such shaky places—always, even in the apparently best poems.⁶³

The final poem of Olson's epic had been written long before the poet received news of his terminal illness, and he also gave 'secret notes' to the editors, which according to Butterick offered a clear 'summation of dominant themes of the late *Maximus Poems*'.⁶⁴ Such examples indicate that Olson was far from immune to the conflicting desires for 'process' and closure that had also afflicted several of his poetic predecessors and contemporaries.

Just how Lowell would feel about his art being transformed into digital flux is complicated by his allegiances to New Criticism. The poet's critical essays and interviews certainly do suggest that his main allegiance was towards the sort of artistic finish and technical craftsmanship admired by his contemporaries (and often, his friends), the New Critics. In a 1943 essay on T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Lowell also argued that 'form is nothing else but unity and integration' and that 'each part' should be written as 'a reflection or modification of the preceding parts.'⁶⁵ In an interview with Al Alvarez, printed in *The Review* (August 1963), Lowell explained that his theory of art was indebted to New Criticism:

I began writing in the thirties and the current I fell into was the southern group of poets—John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate—and that was partly a continuation of [Ezra] Pound and [T.S.] Eliot and partly an attempt to make poetry much more formal than Eliot and Pound did: to write in metres but to make the metres look hard and make them hard to write. It was the period of the famous book *Understanding Poetry*, of analysing poems to see how they're put together; there was a great emphasis on craftsmanship.⁶⁶

And much later in his life, in an essay for the *Kenyon Collegian*, published 15 December 1974, Lowell maintained that his aesthetic was shaped by New Criticism:

The kind of poet I am was largely determined by the fact that I grew up in the heyday of the New Criticism. From the beginning I was preoccupied with technique, fascinated with the past and tempted by other languages.⁶⁷

In a prefatory ‘Note’ to *History*, Lowell confessed that he had been feeling dissatisfied with the haphazard and provisional nature of the *Notebook* sequence and that he had attempted to recreate out of this ‘jumble’ a much more polished and less intimate work of art: ‘My old title, *Notebook*, was more accurate than I wished, i.e., the composition was jumbled. I hope this jumble or jungle is cleared—that I have cut the waste marble from the figure.’⁶⁸ By claiming that he had ‘cut the waste marble from the figure’, Lowell encourages his readers to see the poem as the ‘well-wrought urn’ or verbal icon rather than an open-ended organic process.

History represents a movement away from temporal experience and towards fixity and stasis. For example, in *Notebook*, Lowell contrasts his method of scribbling out lines to catch the ongoing flux of experience to that of Elizabeth Bishop’s compositional technique of waiting for ‘the unimagined phrase’ to finish her poem:

Have you ever seen an inchworm crawl on a leaf,
cling to the very end, revolve in air,
feeling for something to reach something? Do
you still hang words in air, ten years imperfect,
joke-letters, glued to cardboard posters, with gaps
and empties for the unimagined phrase,
unerring Muse who scorns a less casual friendship?

(*N*, pp. 234-235)

Bishop would apparently work on a poem for years sometimes, pinning the text in her kitchen or on a bedroom wall with spaces for “the unimagined phrase”, as Lowell put it. When the phrase came the poem was finished. In *Notebook*, Lowell seems to suggest

that, although Bishop is waiting for some yet ‘unimagined phrase’ to make the poem ‘click like a closing box’ (to use a Yeatsian term), these ‘imperfect joke-letters’ will never be properly finished. However, Lowell significantly alters the meaning of these lines in *History*:

Have you ever seen an inchworm crawl on a leaf,
cling to the very end, revolve in air,
feeling for something to reach to something? Do
you still hang your words in air, ten years
unfinished, glued to your notice board, with gaps
or empties for the unimaginable phrase—
unerring Muse who makes the casual perfect?

(*RLCP*, p. 595)

Here Lowell’s emphasis changes from accepting ‘imperfection’ to wanting to make ‘the casual perfect.’ Bidart, who helped Lowell with the process of revision, reports that:

The aesthetic of *Notebook* had been very much connected to the whole desire for immediacy...there had been that feeling that art can be much more connected to fleeting feelings, insights, perceptions, marginal half-thoughts and how all these bear down on one’s life...But I think that he was not at all happy with that aesthetic. And he was simply not happy with the writing.⁶⁹

Whitman’s apparent embrace of flux in *Leaves of Grass* was often cited as an important precedent by subsequent writers who sought to give birth to this ‘National

Literature’, tasking themselves with the ambition to produce the twentieth-century American epic. Yet there was also frustration at the lack of fixity and precision in Whitman’s aesthetic, a sense of the limitations of his ‘barbaric yawp’. ‘To break the pentameter, that was the first heave’, Pound would acknowledge in *The Cantos*, but he, along with the other poets here selected, was equally concerned about the absence of a stable form that might make the long poem coherent, and – like Whitman before him – was fearful that the lack of this resulted in a descent into unruly chaos. Although Pound admitted that the ‘unity’ of the classical epic was too ‘simplistic’ to accommodate the flux of the modern world,⁷⁰ and that poetry in the twentieth century had to become more provisional and experimental, his repeated concern over whether or not he could make his life’s work cohere speaks of an equally pressing aesthetic demand. The attitude is neatly illustrated by a characteristically blunt comment by Pound, who, in old age (but still in full possession of his critical faculties), expressed his disappointment with *The Cantos* on the grounds that he ‘could not make it cohere’, that it was a ‘botch.’⁷¹

Editors, then, of the twentieth-century American epic using new twenty-first-century digital technologies have the difficult task of negotiating the gulf – which the poet’s themselves felt - between open-endedness and completion. As Byron notes, the poems ‘require flexible, innovative editorial reflection’, but too inclusive editions containing all kinds of miscellaneous material (that the poet himself did not see fit to publish) run the risk of portraying these poems as a chaotic ‘ragbag.’ However, equally apparent is the failing of ‘definitive’ editions to truly define what is authentic and what is not. The modern American epic is a story of poetic openness to the artistic ‘process’

being qualified and counterbalanced by the desire to bring process to an end, to ‘make it cohere’.

Abbreviations

- RLCP* Robert Lowell, *Collected Poems* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003)
- N* -- *Notebook 1967-68*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969)
- COCP* Charles Olson, *Collected Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997)
- M* -- *The Maximus Poems* (Berkeley: University of California, 1983)
- C* Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1996)

Endnotes

- ¹ Horace Traubel's *Conversations with Walt Whitman* in Francis Murphy, ed., *Walt Whitman: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1975), pp. 124-125.
- ² 'The Poet', in Larzer Ziff, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1982), pp. 263-264.
- ³ 'A Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads' (1888), in Murphy, *Critical Anthology*, p. 114.
- ⁴ Preface to *Leaves of Grass* (1855), in Francis Murphy, ed., *Walt Whitman: The Complete Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd, 1975), p. 769.
- ⁵ Letter to Emerson (1856), in Murphy, *Complete Poems*, p. 769.
- ⁶ Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Continuity of American Poetry* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 74.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, p. 75.
- ⁸ Stephen Fender, *The American Long Poem: An Annotated Selection* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd, 1977), p. vii.
- ⁹ 'What I feel about Walt Whitman', in William Cookson, ed., *Ezra Pound: Selected Prose 1909-1965* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973), pp. 115-116 (p. 115)
- ¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 48.
- ¹¹ 'The Metaphysical Poets' (1921), in Frank Kermode, ed., *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 59-67 (p. 64)
- ¹² 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919), in Kermode, *Selected Prose*, pp. 37-44 (p. 41)
- ¹³ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, p. 48.
- ¹⁴ Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), p. x.
- ¹⁵ Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman: An Introduction to his Life and Work* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2005), p. xi.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. xi
- ¹⁷ Barbara Eastman, *Ezra Pound's Cantos: The Story of the Text 1948 – 1975* (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1979), p. xi.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. xi.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 287.
- ²⁰ Forrest Read, ed., *Pound / Joyce: The Letters of Ezra Pound to James Joyce with Pound's Essays on Joyce* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 102.
- ²¹ Folsom and Price, *Re-Scripting Walt Whitman*, p. xi.

²² Mark Byron, 'Digital Scholarly Editions of Modernist Texts: Navigating the Text in Samuel Beckett's 'Watt' Manuscripts', *Sydney Studies in English*, Vol 36

²³ <http://www.juxtasoftware.org/?tag=cantos> [Accessed 01/06/2011]

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Ronald Bush, *Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 56.

²⁶ 'The Future Cantos' in Appendix B, Bush, *Genesis*, pp. 304-312.

²⁷ George F Butterick, *A Guide to The Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. xxx.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 240.

²⁹ Butterick, *Guide*, p. L.

³⁰ George F. Butterick, *Editing The Maximus Poems* (Storrs: The University of Connecticut Library, 1983)

³¹ Butterick states, 'Call me Ishmael, after taking seven years to write, was finished in an afternoon. *The Post office* remained unfinished since 1948, as did "Red, White and Black." He never did write his study of Mayan glyphs for which he received a Viking Fund grant. He never really concluded anything, the poet of openness and process.' Butterick, *Editing*, p. vi.

³² Butterick, *Editing* p. V.

³³ Ibid, p. V.

³⁴ Butterick, *Guide*, p. Lv.

³⁵ Butterick, *Editing*, p. xiii

³⁶ Saskia Hamilton, ed., *The Letters of Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 472.

³⁷ Robert Lowell, *Notebook 1967-68* (New York: Farrar, Straus And Giroux, 1969), p. 159.

³⁸ 'A Note to the New Edition', Robert Lowell, *Notebook* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), p. 264.

³⁹ 'A Conversation with Robert Lowell', with Ian Hamilton, *The Review* 26 (Summer 1971), in Jeffrey Meyers, ed., *Robert Lowell: Interview and Memoirs* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1988), pp. 157-58.

⁴⁰ Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, eds., *Robert Lowell Collected Poems* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. xvii.

⁴¹ Quoted in Roger Asselineau, *The Evolution of Walt Whitman: The Creation of a Personality* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), pp. 6-7.

⁴² Ibid, p. 6.

⁴³ Walter Pater, *Appreciations with an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1910), p. 21.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Asselineau, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Whitman's notebooks are available on World Wide Net:
<http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/whitman/specres17ae.html> [Accessed 03 April 2006]

⁴⁶ <http://bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/whitman/specres17af.html>

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 30.

⁴⁸ T.S Eliot, 'Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry', in J. P. Sullivan, ed., *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), pp. 67-80 (p. 73)

⁴⁹ Manuscript drafts, quoted in Mary Ellis Gibson, *Epic Reinvented: Ezra Pound and the Victorians* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), p. 90.

⁵⁰ D.D. Paige, ed., *The Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907-1941* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 323.

⁵¹ Ibid, pp. 293-94.

⁵² 'An Introduction to the Economic Nature of the United States', in Cookson, *Selected Prose*, p. 137-155 (p. 137)

⁵³ Quoted in Lewis Leary, ed., *Motive and Method in The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: Columbia Press, 1961), p. 33.

⁵⁴ Quoted in William Cookson, *A Guide to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London, Sydney: Croom Helm, 1985), pxxxiii.

⁵⁵ Interview with Donald Hall, *The Paris Review Interviews*, Issue 28, Summer/Fall 1968. Available on the World Wide Web: <http://www.theparisreview.com/viewinterview.php/prmMID/4598> (Accessed 15 November 2011)

⁵⁶ Daniel Pearlman, *The Barb of Time: On the Unity of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (New York: Oxford University Press)

⁵⁷ Stephen Sicari, *Pound's Epic Ambition: Dante And The Modern World* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. xi.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (California: North Atlantic Books, 2000), p. 235.

⁵⁹ 'Charles Olson, Early Unpublished Maximus Poems, 1953-1957' *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives*, Number 6, Fall 1976, pp. 4-67.

⁶⁰ Quoted in Butterick, *Guide*, p. 141.

⁶¹ Ibid, p. xxxvii.

⁶² Quoted in *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives*, Number 5, Spring, 1976, p. 61.

⁶³ Written on the TS of an early version of “Stage Fort Park” Butterick, *Editing*, xvii.

⁶⁴ Butterick confides that, ‘It might, of course, have been included, but because there were no explicit instructions that this was the case...the decision was readily made not to...’Butterick, *Guide*, p. XLix

⁶⁵ ‘T.S. Eliot *Four Quartets*’, in Robert Giroux, ed., *Robert Lowell: Collected Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 47.

⁶⁶ ‘Robert Lowell in Conversation’, with A. Alvarez *The Review* 8 (August 1963) in Meyers, pp. 81-82.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Ian Hamilton, *Robert Lowell: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 57.

⁶⁸ Frank Bidart and David Gewanter, eds., *Robert Lowell Collected Poems* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 1074.

⁶⁹ Hamilton, *Biography*, p. 420.

⁷⁰ ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris’, *The New Age*, 7 December 1911-15 February 1912, in Cookson, p. 32.

⁷¹ Quoted in Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 893-894.