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Silence and Solidity in Early Anglo–American
Modernism: Nietzsche, the Fourth Dimension,
and Ezra Pound.
(A Two-Part Essay)

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IAN F. A. BELL AND MERIEL LLAND

Silence and Solidity in Early Anglo–American Modernism: Nietzsche, the Fourth Dimension, and Ezra Pound. Part One.

The ‘age’ in which Pound situated his portrait of literary London, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), was, we are instructed in the second poem of the first half of the sequence, one which ‘demanded’, with impatience, an ‘image’ of its ‘accelerated grimace’, a ‘mould in plaster’ made with ‘no loss of time’.¹ When the ‘age’ is given a more extended voice in the second half of the sequence, amidst the catalogue of presumed failings thrown at the figure of Mauberley himself, we are told that his ‘sense of gradations’ is ‘out of place’ amid a resistance to ‘current exacerbations’—a matter merely of ‘Mildness, amid the neo-Nietzschean clatter’ (Pound, *CSP* 219). This latter accusation is read customarily as an indication of Mauberley’s passivity and incapacity, his failure to confront what ‘the age demanded’. Well, no. A play across a rather neglected version of Nietzsche, several of the basic tenets of Vorticist principles, and an invocation of the shapes associated with the mathematical trope of the Fourth Dimension will allow not only a more purposive account of Mauberleyan activity, but a wider schema for approaching Pound’s tactics of silence, stillness, and illegibility—tactics which are linked closely with Modernist anxieties about objects and objectification.

It is silence that orchestrates Pound’s first use of the word ‘vortex’ in the opening stanza of ‘Plotinus’ a poem of 1908:

As one that would draw through the node of things,
Back sweeping to the vortex of the cone,
Cloistered about with memories, alone
In chaos, while the waiting silence sings:²

The immediate context is theosophical—the familiar story of the occult arcanum so prevalent in Pound’s literary London³ and itself an accommodating host to fourth dimensional interests⁴—but for the moment we