Introduction
Manufacturing Dissent – The "Pound Case"

> Religious fermentation is always a symptom of the intellectual vigor of a society; and it is only when they forget that they are hypotheses and put to rationalistic and authoritative pretensions, that our faiths do harm.
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> William James, *Preface, The Will to Believe* (1908)

> Any judgement of MUSSOLINI will be in a measure an act of faith, it will depend on what you *believe* the man means, what you believe that he wants to accomplish.
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> Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935)

Ezra Pound's profession of faith in Mussolini's fascism marks one among many turning points, beginning in the 1920s, in which the poet fashioned himself into a spokesperson for totalitarianism. Literary historians have chronicled Pound's absorption of unorthodox ideas concerning the economics of "social credit," anti-Semitic conspiracism, and Italian Fascism's program for cultural and economic renewal – ideas that strongly appealed to Pound in the devastating aftermath of the First World War, as the destabilizing forces of inflation, unemployment, and global unrest frustrated a tenuous peace. Matthew Feldman's analysis of more than 1,500 of Pound's documents from 1933 to 1945 – including eight archival boxes at Yale's Beinecke Rare Book Library, containing transcriptions of broadcasts, leaflets, receipts, and a hodgepodge of notes and drafts, as well as his sizable FBI file, MI-5 correspondence intercepts, and BBC broadcast transcriptions – reveals a remarkably "coherent whole" in Pound's propagandistic output (*Fascist* 115). Pound's "conversion," Feldman explains, was to a fascistic "*secular 'millenarianism' constructed culturally and politically, not religiously, as a revolutionary movement centering upon the 'renaissance' of a given people (whether perceived nationally, ethnically, culturally, or religiously)*" (*Fascist* xi). Although Pound was indicted for treason *in absentia* in 1943, he was never convicted; upon his return to the US, he

pled insanity and was sent to St. Elizabeth's Government Hospital for the Insane, where he was held until his 1958 release into the custody of his wife (Feldman, "Pound Case" 87–90). The FBI investigation known as "the Pound case" leading up to his indictment illuminates the central question I pose in this book: What are the psychological, aesthetic, and cultural processes that drive us to pledge ourselves to charismatic individuals and declare ourselves "converts" to a cause?

Manufacturing Dissent examines how Pound and other casualties of literary modernism's "lost generation" both participated in and resisted individual and collective conversion – be it conversion to a system of belief or in counter-conversionary dissent from dogma. So while this is first and foremost a book about literary modernism, it is also deeply engaged with the psychology of William James (1842–1910), whose revolutionary writings launched what I am calling a "science of belief," based on his recognition that conversion is far more than a religious experience. James was a crucial figure in the experimental artistic and literary movement now known as "modernism," a movement that both reflected and wrestled with the psychological dilemmas of rapid technological change and social upheaval. Ever attentive to cultural transformation, James has been rightly accorded recognition as a "public philosopher" and influential modernist intellectual.[1] Even as recent scholars have revitalized our understanding of James's politics and his philosophical engagements with the social, they nonetheless underscore a conspicuous gap: none have investigated how James's understanding of the social realm is indebted to his pioneering work as a psychologist.[2] James's modernism is directly attributable to the psychology he founded, specifically on his recognition that the self is plastically malleable, aggregate, and distributed.[3] Conversion experience, for James, dramatizes this sense of the self as a composite of a broader social realm, what James termed the "one and the many."

Why conversion? More than any other emotional experience, religious conversion supplies the form and content for the radical empiricist recognition of the interdependence and co-emergence of subjective and objective experience. Furthermore, conversion heralds the dramatization of relations that James would later take up in his *Pragmatism* (1907). For James, whatever conclusions we might draw about experience are provisional. They are hypotheses that can and likely will change in response to further tests, experiments, and reasonable considerations. "To be radical," James writes, "an empiricism must neither admit into its constructions any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them any element that is directly experienced. For such a philosophy, the *relations*

that connect experience must themselves be experienced relations, and any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system." In short, for James, "real place must be found for every kind of thing experienced, whether term or relation, in the final philosophic arrangement" (*ERE* 42). Religious experience in all its varieties was of course included in this framework, but James was less interested in the theological content of those experiences than in how religious feelings and beliefs reveal a fundamental attitude and orientation toward experience, along with the deep structures of human thought that form the basis for action. James himself provided the rationale for extending the cognitive patterns he identified in religious experience to a broader public realm as a process of information transmission and social transformation.

Modernist literary experimentation in the first half of the twentieth century, I argue, is indebted to James's theorization of conversion not just as a commonplace psychological event, but as a cultural process for the transmission of ideas and the shaping of public opinion in and as discourse. James's own practice of converting his academic work and transmitting it for public consumption is instructive. Revision and recontextualization are the watchwords of James's own modernist conversionary practices. He reworked and republished his many popular lectures as essay collections. His professional writings are likewise innovative in form and sensibility, as James performs the interdisciplinary alchemy of marrying seemingly incompatible disciplines. A composite of philosophy, neurology, and religious history, for example, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is bursting at the seams with other genres: lively personal anecdotes and quotes from published correspondence and memoir as well as poetry and fiction. Missing, however, from accounts of James's modernism, and from American literary modernism more broadly, is his central importance as a pioneering philosopher of mind, one who laid the groundwork for a cognitive understanding of the mind-brain as a complex system. This mind-brain is malleably plastic. It is composite and capable of "compounding" with other consciousnesses in public space. It is situationally embedded in larger social contexts, an enactive and *affective* agent of change and invention. James therefore reconceived religious conversion in much broader ways, as a "general psychological process" of achieving "new birth" in the form of a radical cognitive transformation. In political terms, I suggest, conversion suggests a variety of *consent*, or *willing belief*, in an existing paradigm, while counter-conversions open up the possibility for *dissent*, for resistance, and *productive fracture and reconfiguration of existing paradigms*. This practice of strategic fragmentation and reuse of other texts

underpins a modernist aesthetics dedicated to exposing the materials and methods of conversion.

For James, conversion has meaning far beyond religious history. Conversion, meaning to "turn with" or "turn together," is the conceptual metaphor James deploys for all manner of sudden psychological transformations, gradual about-faces, and the many labyrinthine "turns" of thought which shape the beliefs that lend purpose to our actions. Importantly, the concept of conversion is what connects James's discussion of individual consciousness in his pathbreaking work *The Principles of Psychology* to political matters, especially the psychological dynamics of group behavior expressed in his public pronouncements against US imperialism and the "epidemic" lynching of African Americans, composed while he developed the Gifford Lectures later published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. We witness in James's work nothing less than the lexicalization of conversion as a cultural process. Understood from the cognitivist point of view, and in terms of metaphor, schema, and target domain, conversion can be represented in the following ways. Conversion accounts for the transformation of schema, or "changing one's mind," with target domains having to do with belief, when it comes to individuals, and to public opinion, when it addresses social groups. In the general psychological terms James establishes for this process, "conversion" accounts for the mental process of switching one's allegiance to another schema, dramatizing the general "turn" that defines conversion itself.[4]

Conversion is a cognitive process of individual and collective transformation that later modernists deploy both thematically and aesthetically in imaginative and experimental literature. American modernism anticipates a relatively recent enactivist account of the mind-brain as embodied, situationally embedded, and extended through human invention, including artistic creation. James's foundational psychological writings contributed to a modernist conception of the mind-brain as highly "plastic," or adaptively responsive to the environment, including one's social context; consciousness, or our sense of awareness, and the environment within which it is embedded, are mutually constituted by their interaction; and it is extended, through aesthetic practices that help readers come to terms with the technological and social complexity of the early twentieth century. In this sense, the individual mind occupies a liminal space within a larger biosocial contact zone, I argue, wherein individual "selves" negotiate their own autonomy and agency within and against systems that foster beliefs and behaviors that can be habitual or automatic.

James's wariness of the mob and of groupthink in general reinforced his understanding of consciousness as a phenomenon that was not merely internal or private; rather, the interactions between different minds, with their potential for "compounding" individual thoughts into collective beliefs, disclosed the trickier psychosocial dynamics involved in the production and development of group beliefs and behaviors, known collectively as "public opinion." James's understanding of a public that is constituted by individuals in a conversionary social process opens up a dynamic new theory of the public sphere, I suggest, in which "the public" is not an identity but a *process* of both information transfer and social transformation.

Historians of early twentieth-century British and American literary modernism have often portrayed the public sphere as a space that facilitates mass deception. Indeed, the Freudian psychoanalytic model dominates accounts of modernist responses to advertising, propaganda, and mass media.[5] James's understanding of conversion as a cognitive process of transformation brings to light an important missing chapter in the relationship of literary modernism to the burgeoning mind sciences in the early twentieth century. These writers, I argue, can be rightly accorded the status of mind scientists because their writing makes the psychodynamics of conversion visible and available for critique; at the same time, their writing stages counter-conversionary disruptive strategies for encouraging reader dissent from rigid, authoritarian perspectives.

The literary modernist mind scientists after James witnessed the First World War and the "manufacture of consent" firsthand in the rise of state-sanctioned propaganda, psychological behaviorism, and social engineering. A century ago, media critic and political philosopher Walter Lippmann coined the phrase "the manufacture of consent" in his analysis of newspaper bias in *Liberty and the News* (1919). The point he made then, and later elaborated in *Public Opinion* (1922), was that the sources of objective information upon which an informed electorate depends are shaped by both subjective beliefs and commercial interests. Confronted by a culture of groupthink, crowd contagion, and global fascism, literary modernists deployed a Jamesean variety of civic modernism based upon an ethics of estrangement, in which the internally conflicted "sick soul" is the means of both psychic and civic regeneration. James and an American modernist cohort, I maintain, developed a public-spirited mind science designed to rehabilitate public opinion through fragmented and fractured perspectives, defamiliarizing representational forms, and rigorous self-awareness regarding

the materials, modes, and methods of artistic manufacture. Conversion in this context not only captures modernism's revolutionary spirit of artistic and cultural transformation but corresponds to a cognitive method of transforming thought within a conceptual space, be it an individual mind or public opinion.

Modernism's "Sick Souls:" Fascism and Other Dangerous Conversions

In the realm of language and modernist aesthetics, conversion accounts for the techniques that authors use in order to invest old ideas with new language and new meanings, to rehabilitate literary expression and, as Pound insisted, "Make it New." As one of literary modernism's impresarios, Pound promoted this language of newness as a defining feature of modernist experimentalism. This *making* of the new was a collective enterprise that not only invented new literary forms in which to reimagine the world, but also brought that new world into being. Conversion, the act of turning thought and language, both reflects and creates the "new," and as a self-appointed spokesperson and coiner of movements – Imagism and, later, Vorticism – Pound might be understood as one of its chief "pattern-setters." Rob Wilson's account of conversion as *metanoia*, a "grace-drenched change of mind and thought turning the subject away from wrong living and sinfulness toward a pursuit of godliness and the vocation to beatitude" which he identifies with James's concept of "saintliness" in his *Varieties*, captures this exhilarating sense of the "new" that is at the heart of an American *poetics* premised on rebirth (7–8). This portrait of conversion remains incomplete, however, without attention to the "sick soul" that not only represents the "heterogeneous" and "divided" selves in search of resolution within modernist writing, but also productively catalyzes modernist dissent from totalitarian agendas. In the 1920s and 1930s, Pound sought relief from his own soul-sickness in his personal identification with Mussolini as the archetype of the artist figure and pattern-setter for a new global regime.

But Pound was by no means a cultural outlier. What makes Pound's case both terrifying and instructive is how commonplace conversions like his in fact are, particularly given the dramatic changes that the American media landscape has undergone in the decades since the Second World War. Feldman underscores the important fact that Pound was indicted for treason along with seven other Americans who also produced shortwave propaganda for the Axis powers. Had it not been for lawyer

and Pulitzer-prize-winning poet Archibald MacLeish's timely intervention while serving as wartime Librarian of Congress, Pound could have served a life sentence for treason. MacLeish was also a government-employed propagandist; he directed the Office for War Information on behalf of the Allied campaign ("Pound Case" 85–87). Far from seeing Pound's conversion as accidental, either a consequence of naiveté or mental illness, Feldman maintains that Pound's fascism developed from quite mainstream tendencies. In the aftermath of the First World War, in which the deaths of millions (and many more from a global pandemic) had not achieved the promised liberation or relieved economic and social disparities, millions more around the globe and in Western democracies "converted" to fascism. In *The Revolt of the Masses* [*La Rebelión de las Masas*] (1930), Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset anticipated not just Pound's individual conversion but many millions' shift toward totalitarianism as a consequence of "intellectual hermetism" (69), a variety of insular thinking that terminates, potentially, in fascism. This mental incapacity, as he saw it, makes it impossible for an individual to recognize his own "insufficiency" by "a comparison of himself with other beings. To compare himself would mean to go out of himself for a moment and to transfer himself to his neighbour" (69). With this diagnosis, Gasset anticipated the demise of democracy in his own country, in which fascism arose out of the refusal to share power with political factions considered "the enemy." He diagnosed a global symptom that he feared endangered democracy, writing that "In almost all [countries], a homogeneous mass weighs on public authority and crushes down, annihilates every opposing group . . . It has a deadly hatred of all that is not itself" (69). Violence, he maintained, had achieved a new "prestige" throughout Europe, filling a paucity of dissenting public opinion with "brute force" (127). The "real question," for Gasset, as he concluded his important analysis of "mass man," is not whether the "revolutionary" or the "reactionary" possesses the right to rule, but who will take up "a sentiment of submission to something, a consciousness of service and obligation" (188–189) to what he described earlier as "indirect action" upheld in "liberal democracy," the "political doctrine which has represented the loftiest endeavor towards common life" (76). Not long after Gasset's *The Revolt of the Masses* appeared in an anonymous English translation in 1932, civil war broke out in Spain. On April 26, 1937, a sunny market day in the Basque town of Guernica (Basque: *Gernika*), the *Luftwaffe*, together with Italian fascists, bombarded the seat of Basque liberation and democratic self-governance. This was psychological warfare at its most reprehensible, for there was no military reason to bomb the

village. Rather, Francisco Franco believed that by destroying a potent symbol of democracy, he could undermine Republican resistance to the traditionalist nationalism he wanted to install to combat the "seven enemies of Spain" – "liberalism, democracy, Judaism, the Masons, capitalism, Marxism and separatism" (Van Hensbergen 227). Like Pound, Franco was similarly "anachronistic" in his desire to return to an earlier, prelapsarian past. Because of that desire to return to a mythic past, thousands of civilians died in Guernica. Inspired by eyewitness accounts published in American newspapers, Pablo Picasso depicted the psychological terror and helplessness of those who fell victim to the fascist onslaught (Van Hensbergen 3–5). Ultimately, Picasso's rendering of the event became an effective instrument of propaganda – in the best sense of the term – used to awaken complacent observers to the material and psychic violence of totalitarianism.

By the time of his 1945 arrest for treason, Pound had delivered more than 120 radio broadcasts for fascist Italy, as "an American," in his words, on a mission to "save the Constitution" and warn against "usurers who destroy us." Pound held to a faith first and foremost in himself, but secondly and more broadly in the artist figure as a heroic individual, a dynamo, and a force for transformation. Pound published, *pro bono* and avidly, for several fascist organizations, including the British Union of Fascists (BUF) and the Italian Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF), and, by the time of his first indictment *in absentia* for treason in 1945, he was on the payroll of the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (NSDAP) – that is the "Nazi" party. His radio broadcasts from the summer of 1940 to spring 1945 earned him roughly 250,000 lire, or $12,500 – a salary that, by today's standards, represents the equivalent of $185,000 in purchasing power. As Feldman has shown, working as a propagandist was no casual side-gig or misbegotten detour for Pound. His was a full-throated endorsement of the Nazi-Fascist axis, and his broadcasts, along with his poetry, were intended to convert the masses to its ideological point of view (*Fascist* 107–108). Even after Pound turned himself in to authorities, and while held for six months at a US detention center near Pisa, he memorialized his faith in Mussolini's fascist vision by penning *The Pisan Cantos* – for which he was later awarded the prestigious Bollingen Prize in 1949.

How was it that Pound and so many others found solace in totalitarianism? Here, I follow the path of Pound's gradual conversion to fascism as well as his career as a fascist propagandist in order to put his transformation into conversation with the major findings of this book: there are

identifiable cognitive dynamics that can help us understand conversion in all its salvific and dangerous varieties; there are ways in which artists are uniquely capable of exposing fundamentalist ideas to creative transformation; and, there are artistic methods to fortify democratic citizenship by providing the cognitive resources to resist the lure of binary, monistic, authoritarian, or exclusionary thinking.

Pound's conversion to fascism, I suggest, is a harbinger of what recent media analysts have described as the present "epistemic crisis" afflicting the global public sphere: the loss of a shared understanding of truth and reality as an essential basis for democratic societies (Benkler et al. 33). Although current political issues are well beyond the scope of this book, the "Pound case" helps underscore some important lines of inquiry for the present investigation of literary modernism and the psychodynamics of conversion, understood in Jamesean terms as a *process of gradual or sudden mental transformation*, whether expressed as agreement or consensus, or as counter-conversionary dissent, disagreement, and debate that may possibly catalyze still further "turns" in thought.

A feeling of disequilibrium or unease precedes all such transformations, according to James, to which his metaphors of the divided self and the sick soul lent a visual identity. Those figuratively sick souls who survived the First World War and sought to shore up civilization's ruins were primed for conversionary crisis. Just as Pound found fascism, T. S. Eliot, for example, found the Anglican church. Writes Leon Surette: "Pound *had* a conversion experience – in 1919 – but it was ideological, not religious" (13). Against that background, the primary interest of this book is the psychological or cognitive process that Pound went through and that a generation of modernists found themselves reckoning with.

That process begins with devotion to a single person or system of belief that then becomes the unifying source of identity. Pound's fascist conversion, outlined in his *Jefferson And/Or Mussolini* (1935), began with his research into the Italian "Renaissance man," poet and freelance soldier, Sigismondo Malatesta (1417–1468) in 1922, the same year that Mussolini marched on Rome and declared the start of a new fascist millennium. Malatesta, the epic hero of what would become the *Malatesta Cantos* (VIII–XI), suited Pound's ideal of the gentleman warrior, "the heroic male who could embody both the man of action and the man of sensibility." Invoking this ideal in *Jefferson And/Or Mussolini*, Pound would praise both historical figures as great artists, though from a distinctly authoritarian perspective: "The greater the artist the more permanent his creation. And this is a matter of WILL" (16). Indeed, his incipient fascism had already

emerged, in 1929, with his worship of art as a regenerative "force," comparable to physics, with the power to "affect one mass, in its relation ... to another mass wholly differing, or in some notable way differing, from the first mass" (*LE* 21). By 1931, Pound applied this understanding to the role of literature "in the state," having to do "with the clarity and vigour of 'any and every' thought and opinion. It has to do with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself." In his 1934 essay "The Teacher's Mission," Pound argues that "[t]he mental life of a nation is not man's private property. The function of the teaching profession is to maintain the HEALTH OF THE NATIONAL MIND" (*LE* 59). Moreover, this "national mind" is racially determined, yet always under threat from the contaminating influx of some other racial strain with its own mental qualities and tendencies. In Pound's view, when one person acts, they act in concert with the national – that is, racial – mind. According to this thinking, individuals are never particular and unique. They are objectified as representatives of a larger group that thinks and acts in concert with a totalizing, *a priori* metaphysic, like national or racial "destiny." These ideas conflating race, nation, and biology, as poet Jean Toomer and others argued, had been scientifically discredited well before the Nazi-Fascist axis launched its racial propaganda. Nonetheless, Pound believed. The epic narrative built around a heroic man, a social code, a force acting on the masses, a cleansing and purifying hygiene of race and nation: each of these elements speaks to Pound's conversionary turn toward totalitarianism in the 1930s.

At the core of this fascist faith is an innate hostility toward the ideals James sought to promote: democratic individualism and an equality of human beings based on the sacred possession of mind. Historian Roger Griffin's helpful definition of fascism as a uniquely modernist phenomenon is important to adduce here, by way of clarifying terms. Fascism, Griffin writes, is a "revolutionary species of political modernism" whose primary mission is "to combat the allegedly degenerative forces of contemporary history." The thrust of fascism is future-oriented, seeking nothing less than "the rebirth, or palingenesis, of the nation" (181). In general, fascism seeks to root its regenerative principles in a mythic past that is ethnically and ideologically pure. Institutional and cultural pluralism, individualism, social justice, and liberalism are seen as ideas to be confronted and forcibly eradicated through the mobilization of the masses in revolt against the system. Although our own understanding of the fascist turn in global politics in the 1930s is indelibly marked by our knowledge