Dr Nicoletta Asciuto

Department of English and Related Literature

University of York

Heslington

York YO10 5DD

United Kingdom

**A Half-Watt Light for Photography**

**in Ezra Pound’s ‘Medallion’ (1920)**

At the end of the 1980s, Vincent Miller observed that Ezra Pound’s *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) was one of the poems Pound critics had most ‘disagreed about’.[[1]](#footnote-1) This poem still confuses and perplexes readers and scholars of modernist poetry, over a hundred years after its first publication. My intention in this note is to complicate established interpretations of *Mauberley*’s ending, which is perhaps the most mystifying part of the poem. If we historicize the lighting technology Pound chooses for his final stanza, it becomes clear that this reference was far from fortuitous. In this notorious coda, Pound-as-Mauberley puts the finishing touches on his poetic portrait of an unspecified subject:[[2]](#footnote-2)

The face-oval beneath the glaze,

Bright in its suave bounding-line, as,

Beneath half-watt rays,

The eyes turn topaz.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Many Pound scholars have discussed *Mauberley*’s coda as the part of the poem where, as Vincent Sherry notes, ‘Mauberley’s poetic is consummated’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Very few, however, have investigated Pound’s precise terminology: ‘half-watt rays’. For most Pound scholars, the subject’s eyes becoming ‘topaz’ indicate their metamorphosis from living being into artwork. Jo Brantley Berryman, for example, sees echoes of Beatrice’s ‘topaz-gems’ from the Empyrean’s river of light in Canto XXX of Dante’s *Paradiso*, while for Frances Dickey the ‘eyes lose their naturally “liquid” quality to become stone’, thus transforming ‘the living being [in]to an inanimate artifact’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Dickey follows Marjorie Perloff, for whom the topaz eyes are ‘lifeless—merely hard stones, jewels’, with the ‘half-watt rays’ symbolizing ‘the twilight and feebleness of Mauberley’s artistic inspiration’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Ronald Bush, too, maintains that the eyes of the female subject, quickly turn into stone under the poet’s gaze: the half-watt light simply ‘aestheticize[s] the singer no less than the glaze of porcelain’.[[7]](#footnote-7) For Julie Dennison, the image contributes to the ‘theophantic glow’ with which ‘Medallion’, and by extension the whole of *Mauberley*, concludes.[[8]](#footnote-8) For John J. Espey, the ‘half-watt rays’ become suggestive of a ‘star-lit night’.[[9]](#footnote-9) Ian Bell, in an article for *PAIDEUMA*, comes close to discussing the significance of these ‘half-watt rays’ for ‘Medallion’ in the context of magic-lantern phantasmagoria, only to dismiss the line as ‘an undeniably, deliberately *awkward* conflation’ (author’s emphasis), while for Massimo Bacigalupo Pound’s choice of the phrase ‘half-watt rays’ signals his appreciation of Laforguean-inspired ‘scientific terminology’.[[10]](#footnote-10)

All these interpretations disregard the historical context in which half-watt lamps were used in the 1910s. The term ‘half-watt’ has not aged particularly well. For today’s reader, it fails to summon up a particular atmosphere or a specific object. And yet the phrase is deeply rooted in technological language of the time. In 1978, A. David Moody wrote a fierce open letter to the editor of *PAIDEUMA* which seems to have been largely neglected by Pound scholars, evidencing how the ‘half-watt rays’ effectively pointed to the developments in lighting technologies in the mid-1910s.[[11]](#footnote-11) Moody was responding to a previous letter by Hugh Kenner, in which he claimed that the term ‘half-watt’ was a synonym, up to the 1940s, for ‘ordinary incandescent lighting’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Having found one of these very half-watt (or ½ W) bulbs ‘in a box of old photographic equipment’, Moody tried it for himself and described its light to the readers of *PAIDEUMA* as ‘not the usual white light of a clear electric bulb, but one nearer to natural light, with more yellow in it’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Moody would reprise this particular point in his biography of Pound.[[14]](#footnote-14) For Moody, the main takeaway for scholars of *Mauberley* is twofold: the yellowed light produced by the half-watt light bulb ‘might bring out the topaz of [the woman’s] eyes’ thus ‘appear[ing] to come alive’, but, Moody adds, ‘the medallion is being examined in a certain kind of light, and […] its art is of the kind for which that is the right light’.[[15]](#footnote-15) For what art was this the right kind of light?

In the mid-1910s, half-watt lamps were all the rage in America and in Great Britain. Containing both tungsten filaments and nitrogen gas, in the U. S. these lamps were hailed as a technological ‘revolution’, twice as efficient as the best incandescent bulbs on the market in 1913.[[16]](#footnote-16) In Great Britain, about half a million half-watt lamps were reported to be in use by the end of 1914.[[17]](#footnote-17) Ezra Pound, based in London while writing *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, may well have experienced the ‘intense brilliancy of the half-watt lamp’, which produced a light so strong that it needed to be modified by using a shade.[[18]](#footnote-18) As a consequence of its brilliance, which could give the impression of daylight indoors, as well as of its cost efficiency, the half-watt lamp was frequently employed in moving picture projectors and in photographic studios—especially when photographing artwork.[[19]](#footnote-19) When Osram and General Electric first commercialized the half-watt lamp in Great Britain in 1914, the *British Journal of Photography* reported on a demonstration held by W. H. Smith, E. A. Salt and C. F. Trippe to promote the lamp’s properties, usage, and suitability for portraiture under artificial light.[[20]](#footnote-20) The new lamp was small, easy to use, and—more importantly for a photographer in those days—it ‘afforded a very uniform distribution of the light’, enabling photographers to recreate artificial daylight in their own studios.[[21]](#footnote-21) A year later, the same journal published ‘A Study of Half-Watt Lamps in Photography’ by Matthew Luckiesh, a researcher from General Electric (GE).[[22]](#footnote-22) In this study, Luckiesh, after reflecting on the ‘considerable success’ of the gas-filled tungsten lamp (also known as half-watt) in photography, explains that the rays of the half-watt lamp can best be harnessed in the kinds of photographic work requiring ‘an accurate reproduction of colour values in light and shade, such as in the photography of paintings’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Orthochromatic plates, that is black-and-white plates sensitive to all visible light except red, worked particularly well with half-watt lamps as they could emit all the visible rays, hence photographers could avoid the use of colour filters.[[24]](#footnote-24) Photography of paintings could be more easily executed thanks to the half-watt lamp, which helped achieve a rendering of colour comparable to that of ‘good daylight’, ‘at any time or in any weather’, and ‘ordinary screens’.[[25]](#footnote-25) Given that this was the principal use of half-watt lamps at the time of writing *Mauberley*, might Pound have come across these within a photographic context?

Pound was more interested in photography than he may have led others to believe, as Michael North and Christopher Bush have amply demonstrated in their work.[[26]](#footnote-26) Over 1916-17, Pound worked closely with American photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn on the vortoscope, an instrument producing so-called “vortographs” by way of three mirrors tied together.[[27]](#footnote-27) He was ‘clearly fascinated by the tinkering that went into producing those images’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Perhaps this collaboration was not the ‘significant missed opportunity’ Rebecca Beasley describes.[[29]](#footnote-29) Experimenting with Coburn on vortography allowed Pound to ponder the ‘suggestion of colours’ as mediated by the vortographer: ‘He [i.e., the vortographer] chooses what forms, lights, masses, he desires, he arranges them *at will* on his screen. He can make summer of London October’.[[30]](#footnote-30) The same is true of photography: depending on a number of variables, ranging from the light, paper, perspective, as well as screens and filters used, reality can appear altered and distorted by the camera. Pound clearly appreciated the aesthetic possibilities afforded by photography. Well before starting to work with Coburn, Pound had compared his own efforts to those of a photographer, if, however, in slightly demeaning terms of photography as art. In ‘A Rather Dull Introduction’ (published in the *New Age* in 1911, part of *I Gather the Limbs of Osiris*), in which he introduces his ‘method of Luminous Detail’, Pound also discusses photography as a useful metaphor for describing his own work as a translator and literary critic—in contrast to his work as a poet:[[31]](#footnote-31)

[I]f we desire accuracy of sentiment about a certain picture we goto see it, if it is inaccessible we buy a photograph and make allowance for the lack of colour, weread the date of painting, the artist’s name, and begin our concept of the art of acertain place and time, a concept to be enlarged and modified by whatever other masterpieces we see of like place and time, of like place, before and after, of like time and different place. A few days in agood gallery are more illuminating than years would be if spent in reading adescription of these pictures. Knowledge which cannot be acquired in some such manner as that of visiting galleries is relegated to the specialist or to his shadow, the dilettante.[[32]](#footnote-32)

No matter how faithful a reproduction of a painting may be, for Pound (as for most) it cannot substitute the experience of seeing it in person, of being face-to-face with the work of art itself. Pound continues that the ‘artist seeks out the luminous detail and presents it’, but ‘does not comment’.[[33]](#footnote-33) Pound’s criticism and translation work are therefore nothing but a reproduction equivalent to the experience of seeing photographs of paintings rather than the paintings themselves: ‘I have, if you will, hung my gallery, a gallery of photographs, of perhaps not very good photographs, but of the best I can lay hold of’.[[34]](#footnote-34) We might read Pound’s words as belittling photography, which he associates with mechanic reproduction and which he does not appreciate as a creative medium, a separate art form. As a critic and translator, he presents himself as more like a photographer than an artist, struggling to reproduce and retain the ‘luminous detail’ of the original artwork. Might Pound have been thinking of photographs of paintings in ‘Medallion’?

Between 1908 and 1919, Pound would routinely visit the Tate Gallery and the reading room at the British Museum in London, where he might have come across half-watt lamps in the context of looking at paintings as well as of photographs of paintings.[[35]](#footnote-35) As Hugh Kenner notes, Mauberley’s ‘visual particularity comes out of an art-gallery and his Venus Anadyomene out of a book’.[[36]](#footnote-36) Among the books Pound probably read in the electrified British Museum was Salomon Reinach’s *Apollo: An Illustrated Manual of the History of Art Throughout the Ages* (1907), which he directly refers to in ‘Medallion’: ‘The sleek head emerges | From the gold-yellow frock | As Anadyomene in the opening | Pages of Reinach.’ (*NSPT* 123, lines 7-8).[[37]](#footnote-37) Indeed, Pound’s insistence on the oval shape of the female subject’s face, as Dickey shows, would correspond with the statues visible in the pages of Reinach.[[38]](#footnote-38) Pound’s poem is not quite a ‘museum’ and he is not quite a ‘curator’ as Dickey suggests; instead, he seems to be an observer in a studio where a photographer is taking pictures of artworks.[[39]](#footnote-39) After all, Mauberley, Pound’s persona in the poem, wanted to do nothing but ‘[t]o present the series | Of curious heads in medallion’ (*NSPT* 120, lines 24-25), without specifying exactly *the artistic medium* he would employ to present them. In his 1928 introduction to the Faber & Faber edition of Ezra Pound’s *Selected Poems*, T. S. Eliot would remark how *Mauberley* ‘is compact of the experience of a certain man in a certain place at a certain time’ and also ‘a document of an epoch’, and therefore, we can add, of a certain style in poetry—a not-so-covert nod to Pound’s own gear shift in his poetry after 1920.[[40]](#footnote-40) A subtle allusion to the 1910s, the ‘half-watt rays’ say much more about the poet-observer than they do about the portrayal of the presumed ‘clear soprano’ (*NSPT* 123, line 4).

It is in the photographic studio that ‘[t]he eyes turn topaz’ under the light of the lamps used in that setting; the ‘gold-yellow frock’ (*NSPT* 123, line 6), the ‘honey-red’ of the braids (lines 9-10), and the ‘intractable amber’ (line 12) all would be enhanced by a warm, yellow light. Pound is deliberately vague about whose eyes exactly may be turning yellow: in this final stanza, the absence of personal pronouns allows us to hypothesise it may refer to a statue’s eyes as they are filled with the yellowing ‘half-watt’ light, but also to Mauberley’s own eyes, as he observes the artworks in the artificial daylight recreated by the ‘half-watt rays’. Most significantly, *Mauberley* illustrates Pound’s fascination with mechanical reproductions of art, and their implications for the future of poetry. Can ekphrastic poetry, too, become a representation of a series of artworks, as Mauberley sets out to do? But also, more importantly, can poetry successfully reproduce other poetry and other art? Can art—and the experience of art—be effectively translated and “photographed” into poetry? These are the intricate, unresolved issues preoccupying Pound, and stirred by the experience of modern art and technology, at the time of writing *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*.

NICOLETTA ASCIUTO

University of York

1. Vincent Miller, ‘Mauberley and His Critics’, ELH, lvii, 4 (1990), 961-976 (p. 961). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The ‘unspecified subject’ mentioned here has been often identified as Raymonde Collignon, a famous French soprano of the time. Among the earliest critics of Pound’s poems to claim this are Hugh Kenner, The Pound Era (Berkeley, 1971), 288, and Jo Brantley Berryman, Circe’s Craft: Ezra Pound’s Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (Ann Arbor, 1983), 141-142. I concur with A. D. Moody that there is very little in the poem itself to know for certain that Mauberley is thinking of the soprano Raymonde Collignon specifically; see A. David Moody, Ezra Pound: Poet: A Portrait of the Man and his Work: Volume I: The Young Genius, 1885-1920 (Oxford, 2007), 378. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ezra Pound, ‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberley’, in New Selected Poems and Translations, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York, 2010), 123, lines 13-16. Further references to this edition will be indicated as *NSPT* and followed by page numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Vincent Sherry, Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism (Oxford, 1993), 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Berryman, 185-186; Frances Dickey, The Modern Portrait Poem: From Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ezra Pound(Charlottesville, 2012) 181-182. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Marjorie G. Perloff, ‘Pound and Rimbaud: The Retreat from Symbolism’, The Iowa Review, vi, 1 (1975), 91-117 (p. 102). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bush, ‘“It Draws One to Consider Time Wasted”: *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*’, American Literary History, ii, 1 (1990), 56-78 (p. 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Julie Dennison, ‘“His Fundamental Passion”: *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and the Ekphrastic Vortex of “The Eyes”’, PAIDEUMA, XXX, 1-2 (2001), 185-201 (p. 196). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John J. Espey, Ezra Pound’s Mauberley. A Study in Composition (London, 1955), 64, 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ian Bell, ‘The Phantasmagoria of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*’, PAIDEUMA, V, 3 (1976), 361-385 (p. 376); Massimo Bacigalupo, ‘Note’, in Ezra Pound, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, ed. and trans. Massimo Bacigalupo (Milan, 1982), 174; Ezra Pound, ‘Irony, Laforgue, and Some Satire’, Poetry, 11, 2 (1917), 93-98 (p. 97). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. A. David Moody, ‘Letter to the Editor, 10 February 1978’, PAIDEUMA, vii, 1-2, 345-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hugh Kenner, ‘Letter to the Editor’, PAIDEUMA, vi, 2 (1977), 263. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Moody, ‘Letter’, pp. 345-346. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Moody, Ezra Pound: Poet, 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Moody, ‘Letter’, p. 346; Moody, Ezra Pound: Poet, 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘A Half Watt Lamp!’, Lighting Journal (1 August 1913), 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. R. E. Neale, ‘Lamps and Lighting Developments in England during 1914’, Electrical Engineering, xlvi, 11 (1 November 1914), 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Anonymous, ‘To Wake Up Some People’, Lighting Journal, ii, 2 (1 February 1914), 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Neale, ‘Lamps and Lighting Developments in England during 1914’, 454. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. ‘The Properties and Use of “Osram” Half-Watt Lamps’, The British Journal of Photography, lxi, 2820 (22 May 1914), 404-406 (p. 404). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. ‘The Properties and Use of “Osram” Half-Watt Lamps’, The British Journal of Photography, lxi, 2820 (22 May 1914), 404-406 (pp. 404-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Luckiesh, who was to become the Director of the Research Laboratory at GE and an authority on light and illumination, had been investigating (amongst other things) artificial daylight and photographic light from 1913 to 1922, with his unit at Nela Park, GE’s headquarters in Cleveland (Ohio); see Edward J. Covington, A Man from Maquoketa. A Biography of Matthew Luckiesh (Cleveland, 1992), 52. The study was published across three numbers of the British Journal of Photography over May 1915. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Matthew Luckiesh, ‘A Study of Half-Watt Lamps in Photography. I’, The British Journal of Photography, lxii, 2870 (7 May 1915), 303-305 (p. 305). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Luckiesh, ‘A Study of Half-Watt Lamps in Photography I’, p. 305; ‘Orthochromatic Plates in Portraiture’, The Photographic Journal of America: the Oldest Photography Magazine in America, lix, 7 (1 July 1922), 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Practicus, ‘Photographing Paintings’, The British Journal of Photography, lxii, 2872 (21 May 1915), 332-333 (p. 333). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Michael North, Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word (Oxford, 2005), 28; Christopher Bush, Ideographic Modernism: China, Writing, Media (Oxford, 2010), 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. North, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Alvin Langdon Coburn, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Photographer: An Autobiography with over 70 Reproductions of His Works, ed. Helmut Gernsheim and Alison Gernsheim (New York, 1978), 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Rebecca Beasley, Ezra Pound and the Visual Culture of Modernism(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ezra Pound, ‘Vortographs and Paintings by Alvin Langdon Coburn’ (1917), in Literature & Photography Interactions, 1840-1990: A Critical Anthology, ed. Jane M. Rabb (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 200-205 (p. 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. James Longenbach, Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past (Princeton, 1987), 46, 48-49; Ezra Pound, ‘I Gather the Limbs of Osiris: A Rather Dull Introduction’, The New Age: A Weekly Review of Politics, Literature, and Art, x, 6 (7 December 1911), 130-131 (130). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Pound, ‘A Rather Dull Introduction’, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Pound, ‘A Rather Dull Introduction’, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Pound, ‘A Rather Dull Introduction’, 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Dickey, 174. According to Catherine E. Paul, Pound was ‘admitted as a reader at the British Library on 8th October 1908’ and ‘soon began to treat the Bloomsbury institution as his office’, in Poetry in the Museums of Modernism: Yeats, Pound, Moore, Stein (Ann Arbor, 2002), 70, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hugh Kenner, The Poetry of Ezra Pound (London, 1951), 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Dickey, 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Dickey, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Dickey, 174-175. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. T. S. Eliot, ‘Introduction’, in Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (London, 1948), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)