Two boys went to Harvard. One stayed home afterward, and became an insurance executive. The other went abroad, and became a banker and publisher. Both wrote poetry.

Two boys went to Penn. One stayed home afterward and became a physician. The other went abroad, and became Ezra Pound. Stevens: Eliot. Williams: Pound. It is as neat as a laboratory experiment.¹

Is it “as neat as a laboratory experiment”? Hugh Kenner’s statement seems at first sight to be a homage to Pound, who according to him became not just someone, a member of the community or a writer of poetry, but himself. Two of the other major Modernists are defined by their activity as poets (Eliot, Stevens); worse, one is altogether excluded from the field of poetry and sent back to the profession he practiced to survive (Williams). None of them had the luck to be able to live on money they had not labored for and Williams was a poet in the same right as Eliot or Stevens. The one who “became Ezra Pound”, if one reads Kenner’s lines, never became a poet, never became a professional, he just persisted in being in a kind of amazing autarchy, that, one could suggest, led him to poetic aphasia and political stridency.

More interestingly, the Pound/Williams connection is one that cannot be reduced to this antagonistic view, which outlines the dichotomies long used to define American Modernism: local versus expatriate, impersonal versus personal, social versus individualistic, etc. One or the other quality cannot be assigned to either poet in order

to oppose them without betraying the multifaceted quality of their poetic enterprises, the ambivalence of their commitments, and above all the seminal nature of their all-encompassing visions. The letters are the material manifestation of a link between two individuals, and in Pound and Williams’ cases, this correspondence also works on the notional level, as they bear witness to the tensions between two conceptions of poetry, and more specifically and controversially, of American poetry. Strikingly enough, the letters allow us to reassemble the scattered fragments of a poetics that is diversely formulated and exemplified in the poems and in the essays. A stronger sense of coherence emerges from the exchanges and discussions between the two poets and provides a better understanding of their particular brands of Modernism. For fifty years, after their first meeting as students at the University of Pennsylvania, Pound and Williams confronted their opinions, their choices, their achievements, in what turned out to be, for Williams at least, a life-long collaboration and struggle. Their letters mark the turning points of their careers and to this extent constitute a fascinating methodological instrument to define the demands at the origins of their works: in the sense of Engels and Marx, as well as Marinetti, the letters are a manifesto for American poetry.

A friendship?
Amazingly enough, a complete edition of the letters remains to be produced: the project started by Emily Mitchell Wallace\(^2\) numbers more than five hundred items, but it never reached publication. Hugh Witemeyer’s edition of the selected letters\(^3\) gives numerous samples of the texts that were exchanged between the two poets from 1907 to Williams’ death in 1963, with a hiatus from 1941 to 1945 due to World War II and Pound’s allegiance to Fascist Italy. None of the letters predating 1907 have been recovered and some were destroyed by Pound’s friends at the end of the war. Others that have been omitted are important, because they trace the debate that took place during Pound’s St Elizabeths years, a debate that raises the issues of

\(^2\) Emily Mitchell Wallace, “Lettres d’exilés, la correspondance entre William Carlos Williams et Ezra Pound”, in In’hui (Special Issue: William Carlos Williams), 14 (Winter 1980), 24-61.