

I

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Introduction Understanding Pound

It is the artist's business to find his own *virtu*.
Pound, 1912

Understanding Ezra Pound has never been easy. His erudition and experimentation, not to say his orneriness, have constantly challenged readers. His life as an expatriate in Venice, London, Paris and Rapallo clouded his identity as an American; the war years obscured it when he delivered a series of anti-American and antisemitic radio broadcasts supporting Mussolini. That led to his subsequent arrest, trial and imprisonment in a Washington, DC mental hospital. It also led to *The Pisan Cantos*, which won the prestigious Bollingen Prize in 1949. His release in 1958 saw him return to Italy where he died in 1972. Yet as he wrote in 1920, "I *am* terribly, appallingly, but I am not sure about the 'deplorably' American."¹ That for Pound did not change.

Literature, not politics, was his calling. As poet, translator, editor, critic, librettist, and dramatist, drawing on medieval, Italian, American, English, Chinese, French, and contemporary traditions, Pound created works that were as complex as they were absorbing. From 1915 until 1969 he worked on an ambitious epic poem, *The Cantos*, which embraced the multiple traditions that informed his work. Its part-publication over the years marked its constant re-creation as new influences and sources appeared. Before and during that effort, he produced a series of innovative lyric and dramatic poems that were alternately identified as Imagist or Vorticist but were undeniably modern. Yet he knew what he was seeking which a 1946 letter to his American publisher, James Laughlin, makes clear:

God Damn & buggar the punctuation
The important thing is
for the 1st time
to
emphasize
the articulation
of the thought.²

After a flirtation with pastiche and translation, rendered in *A Lume Spento* (1908), *Cavalcanti* (1912), and his magnificent effort at Chinese writing, *Cathay* (1915), Pound found an anchor in the work he labelled Imagist. But not before an engagement with romance which led to his belief that “art is vital” only when it interprets and manifests what the artist “perceives at greater intensity, and more intimately, than his public” (SR, 87). Imagism evolved as a reaction against abstraction in favor of precision, replacing Victorian generalities with the clarity found in Japanese haiku and ancient Greek lyrics. In “A Few Don’ts by an Imagist” (1913), Pound outlined the new aesthetic: an image was the presentation of “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” treated according to certain rules:

1. Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome. (LE, 3, 4)

The appearance of the slim, blue-bound anthology edited by Pound, *Des Imagistes* (1914), with work by Richard Aldington, H.D., F. S. Flint, Joyce, Williams and Pound, confirmed the importance of the new movement.

Throughout Pound’s poetic career, he sought the objective presentation of material which he believed would stand on its own, without the need for symbolist, expressionistic or romantic attributes. In the *ABC of Reading* (1934), he outlined the essential properties of this method which relied on the direct examination of the object and the invention of a means to render it more concisely (ABCR, 20). To this end, the Chinese ideogram, to become integral for *The Cantos*, provided Pound with a direct example of the new objective method. The ideogram, he explained, “means the thing or the action or situation, or quality germane to the several things that it pictures” (ABCR, 21).

Supplementing Pound’s thought at this juncture in his poetic development was his encounter with the Noh theatre of Japan which he examined with Yeats during the three winters they spent together at Stone Cottage (1913–1916) when Pound acted as Yeats’s secretary. At the time, Pound was engaged with the work of Ernest Fenollosa, whose widow had given Pound her husband’s papers: the first product was *Cathay*; the second was *Certain Noble Plays of Japan* (1916) with an introduction by Yeats; the third was “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (1919). Collectively, the result was to intensify Pound’s determination to make poetry “as much like granite as it can be . . . austere, direct, free from emotional slither” (LE, 12).

To incorporate the emergence of Vorticism, appearing as a system of energies in response to modern dynamism and technology, and rendered in Wyndham Lewis' typographically explosive magazine *BLAST* (1914–15), Pound redefined the image. It now became not an idea but “a radiant node or cluster . . . a VORTEX from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing” (*GB*, 92). But Noh theatre rather than the dynamism of the Vortex provided Pound with new direction for his work, for in Noh “Unity of Image” replaced plot: “the better plays . . . all are built into the intensification of a single Image” (*NO*, 27). But soon, as he embarked on *The Cantos*, even this approach would appear limited to Pound who had to find a way for the image to arrest the tension of competing materials while functioning as an element of reference and allusion. The image had to link different times together, one supplementing not cancelling the other.

Pound's progress can be noted in the quasi-autobiographical and satirical *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), a poem that undermines the authenticity of one aesthetic while suggesting another. A lyric tradition founders in a new climate that demands a mimetic image of decay, he argues. Representational art is hollow. The second part of the poem shows Mauberley's failure as an artist, one who can reveal no more than a profile, “Not the full smile.” He becomes a drifting figure inclined to postpone rather than encounter, although such idleness is soon shattered:

The coral isle, the lion-coloured sand
Burst in upon the porcelain reverie:
Impetuous troubling
Of his imagery (*SP*, 167, 169)

“Medallion,” the final poem of the sequence and a companion piece to the opening “Envoi,” is a further critique of aestheticism. A hard, ornamental imagism replaces the mimetic.

Mauberley marks a plateau, for with it Pound recognized what he hoped he would find in the poetry of his time which he outlined in “A Retrospect” (1918):

the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so, it will, I think, move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr. Hewlett calls “nearer the bone . . .” it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. (*LE*, 12)

Ahead of him lay the work of five decades, *The Cantos*.

II

Afraid the whole damn poem is rather obscure, especially in fragments. Have I ever given you outline of main scheme : : : or whatever it is?

I. Rather like, or unlike subject and response and counter subject in fugue.

A. A. Live man goes down into world of Dead

C. B. The "repeat in history"

B. C. The "magic moment" or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidien into "divine or permanent world."

Gods, etc.

(*SL*, 210)

Pound's 1927 outline of his epic poem to his father describes a scheme he desired but could not achieve. The completed poem, stretching over fifty-four years of effort, is more varied, digressive, repetitive and exciting than he suggests. "Various things keep cropping up in the poem" he added in the original letter and he was right (*SL*, 210). From the classical world of Greece to Renaissance Italy, from China in the T'sung dynasty to America during and after the War of Independence, the poem contains an encyclopedic range of allusion and reference. Languages are equally divergent with Greek, Latin, French, Chinese, German, Provençal, and English, among other languages, present. Canto XX, dealing with Nicolo d'Este's reaction to the execution of Parisina and Ugo, is a jumbled reminiscence. But one should "take that as a sort of bounding surface from which one gives the main subject of the Canto, the lotophagoi: lotus eaters, or respectable dope smokers; and general paradiso. You have had a hell in Canti XIV, XV; purgatorio in XVI etc." he explains (*SL*, 210).

The outlines Pound refers to are not exact and critics (including Yeats in *A Packet for Ezra Pound* [1928]) have often been misled by the determination to see the poem as ordered with a structured plot and series of developing characters. But as Pound reminds us, "there is a corking plot to the *Iliad*, but it is not told us in the poem" (*LE*, 394). *The Cantos* incorporates the concepts Pound summarized in an essay on medievalism when he wrote that

We appear to have lost the radiant world where one thought cuts through another with clean edge, a world of moving energies "*mezzo oscuro rade*," "*risplende in sè perpetuale effecto*", magnetisms that take form, that are seen, or that border the visible, the matter of Dante's *paradiso*, the glass under water, the form that seems a form seen in a mirror . . . (*LE*, 154)

Intersections of radiant forms is one concept of *The Cantos*; the lessons of history from the Italian Renaissance, Chinese dynasties and American Revolution is another.

The Cantos was published in nine separate volumes beginning in 1925 and ending in 1969; its first periodical publication was in 1917. The titles were tentative, allowing Pound the freedom to revise, or restructure. Four of the nine volume titles use the word “Draft” to suggest the temporal nature of their form. Indeed, “Three Cantos,” the first publication of the long work which appeared in *Poetry Magazine* in 1917, was entirely recast with the material from Canto III becoming that of a new Canto I in 1925. But early readers were hardly enthusiastic. On first scanning “Three Cantos,” Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry*, became ill: “I read two or three pages of Ezra’s Cantos and then took sick – no doubt that was the cause. Since then, I haven’t had brains enough to tackle it.” When she recovered a month later, she wrote: “I can’t pretend to be much pleased at the course his verse is taking. A hint from Browning at his most recondite, and erudition in seventeen languages” (*EP/ACH*, 194). Yet as Basil Bunting would later remark of this monumental text, “you will have to go a long way round / if you want to avoid them.”³

“An epic is a poem including history,” Pound wrote in “Make It New” (*LE*, 86) and in this *The Cantos* excel. His range was wide and incorporated documents of various times and cultures to enhance the objectivity and authenticity of his work. Whether it was the correspondence of John Adams, the letters of Malatesta or the documents and literal signs he saw at various stops in his life, Pound integrated them into his text to create a visual history. Canto XXXIV, for example, contains a pyramid filled with words in English and Hebrew, while Canto XCIII contains hieroglyphics. Visual musical notation appears in Canto LXXV, and as late as Canto XCVII a symbol representing a temple augments the line of poetry (XCVII/696). Throughout the poem, Chinese ideograms, the very embodiment of picture and thing populate the text, while actual signs are reproduced as in Canto LXV/371. The presence of historical figures lends referentiality to the text, whether it is Adams, Napoleon or Mussolini.

The lyrical engages the dramatic. Often, in the midst of the sweep of history, there is a pause and a single voice speaks. Canto XXXIX ends with

Dark shoulders have stirred the lightning
A girl’s arms have nested the fire,
Not I but the handmaid kindled
Cantat sic nupta
I have eaten the flame. (XXXIX/196)

Throughout *The Pisan Cantos*, the most personal section of the entire work, narrative, personal history and lyrical retrospection mingle:

Serenely in the crystal jet
 as the bright ball that the fountain tosses
 (Verlaine) as diamond clearness
 How soft the wind under Taishan
 where the sea is remembered
 out of hell, the pit
 out of the dust and glare evil (LXXIV/469)

Pound unknowingly comments on this process when John Adams reflects that

whenever
 we leave principles and clear propositions
 and wander into construction we wander into a wilderness
 a darkness (LXIV/359)

The Cantos seeks to undo the hard categories of drama, satire, documentary, diaries, hymns, elegies, epigrams, essay, catalogues and sermons, to cite only a few of its other genres. The overlaying of so many genres has the effect of eliding their differences, fulfilling Pound's dictum that literary forms often subvert the distinction between them. The poem, an intellectual autobiography simultaneously manifesting a history of literature and culture, also incorporates myth which mediates the personal into something unusual. Consequently, *The Cantos* is polyphonic in theme and serial in form, with recurrence rather than linearity its thrust. In his quest for *vers libre* ("To break the pentameter, that was the first heave"⁴), Pound rejected formal completeness and proportion, substituting flux and openness, supplemented by a poetics of quotation. This is Pound's use of statements by others to elucidate his own argument. "Beauty is difficult," he writes, a multi-layered declaration first used by Beardsley, referenced by Yeats and repeated by Pound in Canto LXXIV/464.

An outline of *The Cantos*, corresponding to their publication in book form, begins with

Cantos I–XVI (*A Draft of XVI. Cantos*, 1925). The opening seven deal with mythical, visionary and legendary materials, including Odysseus' descent to Hell, the metamorphoses of Dionysus, and troubadour and Italian parallels to Ovid. Modern life, by contrast, is shown to be lifeless. Cantos VII–XI focus on Sigismundo Malatesta, master of fifteenth-century Rimini, and his struggle to enhance the art of his city. Cantos XII to XVI criticize modern monopolists, idealize Confucian order, and conclude with an escape to Elysian fields.

Cantos XVII–XXVII (*A Draft of the Cantos 17–27*, 1928). Modern profiteers versus Renaissance life and pleasure, following a return to Venice

in Canto XVII. The goals of the Quattrocento in contrast to the lack of direction and destructiveness of the modern age.

Cantos XXVIII–XLI (*A Draft of XXX Cantos*, 1930; *Eleven New Cantos*, 1934). The so-called Jefferson Cantos which celebrate the New World and the rationality of the American Founding Fathers contrasted with the darkness of Europe (Cantos XXXI–XXXIV). Canto XXXVI successfully translates Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega." The section ends with the battle between institutionalized swindling and the voyage of Hanno; it concludes with a comparison between Mussolini's *virtu* against monopolists and that of Jefferson.

Cantos XLII–LI (*The Fifth Decad of Cantos*, 1937) Reforms in Leopoldine Italy and an examination of Siena in the eighteenth century where money was not hoarded but shared. The anathema of usury in Canto XLV, while corrupt England is castigated in XLVI. The peace experienced in Chinese landscape, the destructive victory of Waterloo where usury triumphed and the battle of usury against light and nature (LI).

Cantos LII–LXXI (*Cantos LII–LXXI*, 1940) The Chinese Cantos stress a Confucian presentation of Chinese imperial history from the Book of Rites through the Manchu period. Pound shows that only when Confucian ethics rule does the empire flourish; Taoists and Buddhists stunt the growth of the kingdom. The ideal emperor is Yong Tching who died in 1735.

The Adams Cantos (LXII–LXXI) present in detail John Adams and his fundamental contribution of integrity and energy to America; from documents and other sources, Pound presents Adams's impressions of France and England, and his role in creating the Constitution. Focus in this section on the art of government. Cantos LXXII and LXXIII form the "Italian Cantos," unavailable in a complete *Cantos* until 1985.

Cantos LXXIV–LXXXIV (*The Pisan Cantos*, 1948). Pound, in the Disciplinary Training Center near Pisa after his arrest, meditates on the fall of Italy and the end of his dreams of an improved society; the test becomes an elegy for a Europe that has disappeared with details of his early experiences with Joyce, Ford and others. Mythic visions and Confucian ideals sustain him as he discovers that "What thou lovest well remains." Conflict between the paradisaical possibilities of nature and the dark night of the soul as he faces imprisonment and even death. Pound's presence in the poem increases from this section on.

Cantos LXXXV–XCIV (*Section: Rock-Drill*, 1955). First part refers back to the American and Chinese Cantos; second looks forward to a possible *paradiso*. Celebration of civic virtue and courage, as well as pagan mysteries and the neo-Platonic strain in medieval thought. Presents the natural

universe through an animistic vision. Canto XCV ends with the shipwreck of Odysseus and his rescue by the nymph Ino.

Cantos XCVI–CIX (*Thrones*, 1959). With a title from Dante's *Paradiso*, the poem now blends two themes from *Rock-Drill*: the examination of history and the celebration of virtue and intelligence. Explores early Christian Europe as well as nineteenth-century European and American governments. Details on the regulation of civic and guild life in Constantinople and the philosophers of Light in the so-called Dark Ages. Early English history plus the Parliamentary crisis of the seventeenth century is interrupted by flashes of Eleusinian mystery and pagan theophanies. Nature and light celebrated.

Cantos CX–CXVII (*Drafts & Fragments*, 1969). A return to Venice and the poet's private situation; reflections on the failure of the long poem but a celebration of life despite its fragmentation.

History, myth and anecdote embody the inclusiveness of *The Cantos* whose verse forms transcends periods and genres. The work embraces patterns that are Homeric, Dantescan and even Quattrocento, which Pound summarized as the mysteries, whether of Eleusis, Dionysus, or Pythagoras. The structure or method of arrangement Pound follows is fragmentation and contrast so that Confucius is set against the modern Inferno of Cantos XII–XV or Vienna set against Cavalcanti (XXXV–XXXVI). This establishes a radical break from the organic structures found in many of his predecessors. Pound prefers collage to the sequential, organic, lyric poem. For Pound, his discrete structures are the meaning; the form of the poem is its reality. A line from Canto CXIII presenting “the mind as Ixion, unstill, ever turning” (810), summarizes the tension between order and chaos in this form of poetics.

III

It has been complained, with some justice, that I dump my notebooks on the public. Pound, 1918

Reception of Pound's poetry in general, and *The Cantos* in particular, has been mixed. Readers were generally confused and anxious by the seemingly twisted forms of his work. Early critics such as T. S. Eliot and Louis Zukofsky recognised the difficulties in Pound's violation of lyric norms and offered guides. Eliot anonymously wrote *Ezra Pound His Metric and Poetry* in 1917, Pound editing the work before sending it on to John Quinn for publication in New York by Knopf to coincide with the appearance of *Lustra* (1917). Zukofsky published an essay in 1929 on *The Cantos*,

acknowledging Pound as “both the isolated creator and the worldly pamphleteer.”⁵ In 1940 James Laughlin, Pound’s publisher, was so concerned about the reception of *Cantos LII–LXXI* that he convinced Pound of the usefulness of pasting a small explanatory pamphlet into the first 500 copies of the volume. *Notes on Ezra Pound’s Cantos* contained two essays, one unsigned by Laughlin, the other by the poet Delmore Schwartz.

Critics have wrestled with Pound’s texts since their first publication and various reference books, guides and annotations have seemed necessary, despite Pound’s repeated admonition that the best way to read *The Cantos* is simply to engage the text, without cribs, dictionaries or phrase books. In 1934 he wrote to one reader that she should

skip anything you don’t understand and go on till you pick it up again. All tosh about *foreign languages* making it difficult. The quotes are all either explained at once by repeat or they are definitely *of* the things indicated.

(SL, 250–251)

The discontinuity of the poem, however, put readers off, while Pound’s own comments in the work (“I cannot make it cohere,” CXVI/816), plus various errors of fact and misuse of sources, gave many scholars cause to reject his effort. Some critics ungenerously referred to *The Cantos* as “a shifting heap of splinters” or a “nostalgic montage without unity, a picaresque of styles.” Others countered by arguing that the first fifty years of this century are “the Pound Era” and understood the poem as generating a new aesthetic with “syntax yielding to parataxis” as Pound juxtaposes “concrete particulars that he considers meaningful in the conviction that they will speak for themselves.”⁶ Supporters declared that collage was the designated form of the work, linked to elements of Cubism and modern art, with metonymic preference replacing metaphoric expansion in the text. Detractors condemned the work as a textual mess. Pound himself unknowingly provided a guide to *The Cantos* when he wrote in 1916 that “the work of art which is most ‘worth-while’ is the work which would need a hundred works of any other kind of art to explain it. A fine statue is the core of a hundred poems” (GB, 84).

Casting a shadow over these formal assessments, however, are Pound’s politics and antisemitism which Charles Olson, among others, evaluated:

Shall we talk a 100 Cantos and not answer the antisemite who wrote them? Shall we learn from his line and not answer his lie? . . . For Pound is no dried whore of fascism. He is as brilliant a maker of language as we have had in our time. The point is not that this mitigates, or in any way relates to the punishment the U.S. shall deal to him . . . what is called for is a consideration, based on his career, of how such a man came to the position he reached.⁷

Pound was an activist who insisted on “ideas which are intended to ‘go into action,’” or “to guide action and serve as rules (and/or measures) of conduct,” an aesthetic for his writing as much as a guide to his thought (*GK*, 34). But from 1941 to 1943, they took on a particular coloration in his radio broadcasts which altered his ideas from the thirties when he espoused the Social Credit views developed by C. H. Douglas who sought to correct the inequitable distribution of wealth, purchasing power and credit. The control and exploitation of credit by private banks was for Douglas – and soon for Pound – the main culprit. Because the banks charge excessive interest (Pound labelled it usury) for the use of money and credit, prices would always be higher than purchasing power. Government control of credit and interest rates and the issuance of “national dividends” directly to the consumers was the Social Credit answer.

By the time of the Depression, Pound was convinced that the forces which caused the First World War were accelerating to a second. Simple economic reforms would be the only answer. In Italy, however, he began to admire Mussolini’s form of National Socialism and continuously sent a barrage of articles and “letters to the editor” to a wide range of American periodicals; they mostly dealt with political and economic issues. These instigations found their way into such venues as the *Boston Herald*, the *New York World Telegram*, the *New Republic*, *Time*, and *Esquire*, as well as college publications, little magazines and local newspapers in far-flung communities. In 1935 alone, he sent approximately 150 items to such journals. He also spent time writing to US Congressmen including Senator Bronson Cutting, Representative George Holden Tinham and Senator William E. Borah, visiting the last in Washington in 1939.

During the thirties Pound also published a good deal of writing instructional in tone, from the *ABC of Economics* and the *ABC of Reading to Jefferson and/or Mussolini* and *Guide to Kulchur*. With a determined voice, he taught his readers how to understand the centrality of economics, the value of literature and the necessity of reaffirming what he believed to be fundamental political ideals. What he sought was to aestheticize the political. Various pamphlets, mostly dealing with money and economic matters, supplemented his prose works – all while he added forty new sections to *The Cantos*, sections that reflected his focused engagement with American politics and history. Van Buren, Jefferson and John Adams became the poem’s new heroes.

While concentrating on American politics and politicians, Pound was also pursuing Mussolini. He wrote first to Il Duce’s private secretary in April 1932. He finally met Mussolini himself in January 1933, the memorable event recorded at the opening of Canto XLI. In *Guide to Kulchur*,

Pound expressed tentative faith in Mussolini because he “told his people that poetry is a necessity *to the state*” (GK, 249). Pound admired Mussolini’s determination to rid Italy of its historical clutter (see *J/M* 66) and initiate his vision of a new, productive Italy: “Producers represent the new Italy, as opposed to the old Italy of balladeers and tour-guides,” Mussolini proclaimed.⁸

By the forties, Pound took an active role in supporting fascism, making more than 100 short-wave broadcasts over Rome Radio between 1941 and 1943. Criticizing the American government, he defended the policies of Mussolini and Hitler and developed a litany of antisemitic attitudes and remarks. In July 1943, after several of his broadcasts were monitored in Washington, he was indicted for treason by a US Grand Jury. Apprehended in Rapallo in May 1945, he spent six months in the Army’s Disciplinary Training Center near Pisa; suddenly flown to Washington, he underwent a psychiatric examination, a federal court then declaring him mentally unfit to stand trial. From December 1945 until May 1958, he was imprisoned in St. Elizabeths Hospital, Washington, D.C., a federal institution for the criminally insane. The controversy surrounding him intensified when he won the Bollingen Prize for Poetry in 1949 for *The Pisan Cantos*. But his goal remained clear: “I must find a verbal formula to combat the rise of brutality – the principle of order versus the split atom.”⁹

Pound busied himself with many other activities while he was writing his epic, none more important than that of anthologist, a task he understood as shaping literary history as well as taste. He began with *Des Imagistes* (1914) and continued with the *Catholic Anthology* (1915) *Profile* (1932), the *Active Anthology* (1933), and *Confucius to Cummings* (1964). His efforts not only established connections with such notable writers as Joyce, whom he approached for *Des Imagistes*, but he managed to organize volumes that reflected critical developments in the movement of literature at the same time he expanded his own readership. What the anthologies collectively illustrate is Pound’s belief that “a man can learn more about poetry by really knowing and examining a few of the best poems than by meandering about among a great many” (*ABCR*, 43). An anthology for Pound was a laboratory for readers because for him the “proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one ‘slide’ or specimen with another” (*ABCR*, 17). And readers of Pound’s letters know that he was forever making lists of texts for his recipients to read, lists that were eclectic, inclusive and confident. “Rub it in that EP has spent 30 years introducing the BEST of one nation to another & not the worst . . .,” Dorothy Pound told James Laughlin in 1947, after spending a morning discussing anthologies and selections with “the boss” (*EP/JL*, 167).

Pound was similarly energetic as an editor and literary promoter. Best known perhaps for his editing of *The Waste Land* in 1921 from nearly 1,000 lines of poetry to 434, he not only refashioned the text, but trumpeted its virtues. To John Quinn in New York he declared “about enough, Eliot’s poem, to make the rest of us shut up shop,” characteristically adding, “I haven’t done so; have in fact knocked out another Canto (not in the least *à la Eliot*, or connected with ‘modern life’)” (*EP/JQ*, 206). Yeats earlier benefited from Pound’s sense of precision and exactness in poetic expression during the three winters they spent together at Stone Cottage, just as Williams and Zukofsky would profit from his direction.

Joyce, although not directly subject to Pound’s editorial knife, also gained from his efforts: in late 1913, and at the suggestion of Yeats, Pound first made contact with Joyce. The letter was a pure solicitation: Pound was looking for new material for a host of periodicals and ended his note with this declaration: “I am *bonae voluntatis*, – don’t in the least know that I can be of any use to you – or you to me. From what W. B. Y. says I imagine we have a hate or two in common – but thats a very problematical bond on introduction” (*P/J*, 18). Pound then decided he wanted to print Joyce’s poem “I Hear an Army” in *Des Imagistes* and would pay for it. Joyce, impressed with this aggressiveness, sent Pound the first chapter of *A Portrait of the Artist*. Pound sent it at once to the *Egoist*, the first to print any portion of the work; a few years later, Pound convinced Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, editors of the *Little Review* to publish episodes of *Ulysses* beginning in 1918. Pound also convinced Joyce of the value of moving to Paris, thereby making it possible for him to be in contact with such figures as Sylvia Beach who, of course, published *Ulysses*.

As a foreign correspondent, Pound maintained his American identity and link with North America. Whether it was *Poetry*, the *Smart Set*, the *Little Review* or *The Dial*, Pound found an identity as America’s agent in Europe, transmitting back home the newest voices and works that he discovered in Europe. He relished the role and when he found out in March 1923, for example, that he would no longer be a contributor to *The Dial*, he confided to Kate Buss that “I don’t know where to go next. As far as I can see, my communication with America is over. I.e., public communication. The last link severed” (*SL*, 186). But he enjoyed being a promoter/agent for foreign journals as well. He acted as liaison between a series of writers and Ford Madox Ford’s *English Review*, Dora Marsden’s *Egoist* and Henry Davray’s *Mercure de France*. A great deal of his early time in London was spent in finding new talent, a habit he continued throughout the later part of his career.

Yeats, in commenting on Pound's preference for style rather than form – the style always “interrupted, broken, twisted into nothing by its direct opposite, nervous obsession, nightmare, stammering confusion” – also recognized that “he has great influence, more perhaps than any contemporary except Eliot.”¹⁰ This admission acknowledged the inescapability of Pound among the moderns and his centrality in the moral and literary geography of European literary culture, something Pound himself observed. To an interviewer in 1960, he asserted that “I am the last American living the tragedy of Europe.”¹¹

IV

We advance by discriminations.

Pound, 1912

Eliot, one might argue, initiated the recuperation of Ezra Pound with his edition of Pound's *Literary Essays* in 1954. Pound was still in St. Elizabeths, writing, translating and officiating over the development of American poetry from his post in what he called the nut house. Many came to bear witness: Charles Olson, Robert Lowell, Allen Ginsberg, Louis Zukofsky, Archibald MacLeish, William Carlos Williams and Eliot. Marshall McLuhan also came in the company of Hugh Kenner, the critic who advanced an understanding of Pound's work with *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* which preceded Eliot's work by three years. It began with the assertion that “there is no great contemporary writer who is less read than Ezra Pound.”¹² Buttressed by the appearance of Pound's literary essays, canonizing his ideas on the art of poetry, tradition and contemporaries, Pound's work was open for review. A cascade of critical titles followed.

Studies of individual poems soon appeared, showing the new confidence of critics, supplemented by a series of textual examinations beginning with Donald Gallup's essential bibliography published in 1963, revised in 1983. Guides to Pound's poetry soon appeared, culminating in 1971 with the appearance of Hugh Kenner's magisterial *The Pound Era*, a work that re-established the centrality of Pound for a post New Criticism generation, one that was taught to see Pound as not only a progenitor but pillar of modernism.

By 1970, a retrospect was already underway: Eric Homberger edited *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*, while J. P. Sullivan edited *Ezra Pound: A Critical Anthology*. In 1972, *Paideuma*, a journal devoted to Pound scholarship, began. In 1976, Ronald Bush's *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* provided the first detailed study of the origin and structure of the poem, extended by the more recent textual studies of Richard Taylor and

his efforts to construct a variorum edition. Carroll F. Terrell's fundamental research tool, the two-volume, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, appeared in 1980. Barbara Eastman's *Ezra Pound's Cantos: The Story of the Text* (1979) and Christine Froula's *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Pound's Cantos* (1984) furthered textual interest, extended by Peter Stoicheff's study of *Drafts & Fragments* entitled *Hall of Mirrors* (1995).

Keeping pace with the critical and textual discussion of Pound has been several editorial projects. In 1985 Mary de Rachewiltz published *I Cantos*, a dual language version of the poem and the first complete edition containing the formerly excluded Cantos LXXII and LXXIII, the "Italian Cantos." It also incorporated several final revisions by Pound to the text, resulting in what Massimo Bacigalupo has called "a new Cantos for Pound's second century" (*PAI*, 15 [1986], 298). A revised edition of *Personae* with corrected texts appeared in 1990. On a larger scale is the notable eleven-volume 1991 Garland facsimile edition of all of Pound's periodical contributions in poetry and prose. This is a fundamental research tool making accessible a major corpus of Pound's writing. A volume of formerly inaccessible or unpublished prose, entitled *Machine Art and Other Writings*, appeared in 1996. A continuous set of letters has also emerged, supplementing the 1950 publication of Pound's correspondence edited by D. D. Paige and retitled *Selected Letters* in 1971. The bibliography to this *Companion* lists the principal editions of these and other texts.

In this current collection, a variety of critical approaches seek to present the work of Pound from complementary perspectives: descriptive, analytical, historical, cultural, and textual. The opening essay establishes Pound's prominence and importance in shaping the modernist enterprise. George Bornstein documents Pound's efforts in literary politics as he helped "to produce, distribute and institutionalize modernist works." Advice that was practical, technical, and even personal was freely offered to Yeats, Eliot, Lewis, H.D., Joyce and others. Pound, Bornstein argues, acted as a "permanent principle of innovation," a point borne out by Yeats: "to talk over a poem with him is like getting you to put a sentence into dialect. All becomes clear and natural."¹³ The modernist insistence on poetic accuracy and the effort to fuse elite and popular culture were further goals Pound promoted.

Hugh Witemeyer looks closely at Pound's early poetic development, detailing the tension between the worship of beauty and the reform of culture. From early lyrics and translations to the satire and experiment of *Mauberry* (1920), Pound's texts embody the neo-classical ideal of the epic poet as a man of learning as well as imagination, argues Witemeyer. The three following essays study Pound's epic text, *The Cantos*, in detail, beginning with Daniel Albright's analysis of the dual, self-scrutinizing

structure of the early Cantos which both erase and reinscribe their content. Beginning with a discussion of the term “canto” and its application to the poem, Albright shows Pound’s reluctance to model his work on classical or medieval European examples *or* modernist experiments. Browning was his example, although after “Three Cantos” (1917), Albright discloses how Pound reconceived the poem, replacing a centralizing consciousness with a fragmented perception affirming dislocation through juxtaposition. Japanese Noh theatre provided the clue for Pound with its anti-discursive, incisive style of “ragged surfaces imprinted with voices”; the shape of *The Cantos* started to take form. Succeeding the Noh theatre as a modeling influence were satire, fugal patterns, and the ideogram, all contributing but also challenging the structure of the work – challenges that Pound would spend more than fifty years struggling to resolve.

In Pound’s “Middle Cantos,” Ian F. Bell charts some of the solutions. Reading these works as a cultural map, Bell shows how Pound constructs a means of settlement through the founding of a sixteenth-century Italian bank in Siena, eighteenth-century reforms in Tuscany, the history of China and the career of John Adams. In his diagnosis of the corruption of culture brought about by usury, Pound returns to the values of Confucian thought and the ideal of the American Republic. Recapitulation and anticipation are the historical moves Pound undertakes between Cantos LXII–LXXI where accuracy and precision become the keynotes, Pound appropriately concluding *The Fifth Decad* with the ideogram for the “right name” (LI/252). Bell underscores the dynastic impulse of the poem designed to maintain Confucian reverence for the work of documents and the preservation of the law.

The law takes on a different meaning, however, in Ronald Bush’s essay “Late Cantos.” Allied with fascist doctrine and antisemitic harangues, the poetry nonetheless possesses moments of “tragic enlightenment.” Pound’s arrest, detention, trial and imprisonment, the law now understood as punishment, contributed heavily to a new urgency and retrospective tone in his long poem. Written between 1945 and 1958 exclusively in captivity (first in Pisa and then St. Elizabeths), the late Cantos contain both the most accessible and troubling passages of the entire work. After affirming natural order and hierarchy in his poems of the thirties, Pound, especially in *The Pisan Cantos* and the final volume *Drafts & Fragments*, rediscovered earlier sympathies for the bohemian and the outcast.

During the war, Pound wrote only fragments, although in 1944 he wrote the two formerly unpublished Italian Cantos, Cantos LXXII and LXXIII. Yet in Pisa, he sought to redeem the energies of light and reason through his writing. Diary and reminiscence impose themselves on visionary poetry. *Section: Rock-Drill* and *Drafts & Fragments* incorporate Confucian

wisdom into a response to the atmosphere of decayed post-war culture which *Thrones* shifts to the mythic world of Odysseus and harmony, at times so abbreviated as to be unreadable and hermetic. *Drafts & Fragments* mixes a melancholy lyricism with an elegiac tone, with nature offering a lament: “A wind of darkness hurls against forest” (CX/801). But as he strove to celebrate light, Pound also understood that “my errors and wrecks lie about me” (CXVI/816).

Tentativeness replaces dogmatism as *The Cantos* comes to its open-ended close, surrounded by textual confusion which Bush unravels, including the addition of Canto CXX, a revision of lines from Canto CXV with its paradisaal closure:

I have tried to write Paradise
 * * * * *
 Let the Gods forgive what I
 have made
 Let those I love try to forgive
 what I have made.

(Notes for CXVII et seq./822)

James Laughlin added these words as the conclusion to the 1972 edition of the poem, but Faber & Faber rejected them, complicating matters. In the past twenty-five years, there have been no less than six significant versions of the ending of *The Cantos*.

Richard Taylor addresses many of these matters in his essay on the textual history of the poem. Against the dramatic changes in textual criticism over the last twenty years, Taylor examines the difficulties in sorting out the compositional history of *The Cantos*. Interferences in the production of text – from accidental errors to substantial editorial interventions – have affected the publication of the poem, and reprinted editions have only exacerbated the level of inaccuracy, introducing new errors. The instability of the text of *The Cantos* originates in its disparate composition and publication over a lengthy period and its peculiar history of attempts to revise and correct the poem, often marked by non-authorial changes.

The numerous quotations and more than twenty languages in the work present immense challenges to publishers, editors and printers. Taylor tries to sort them out by outlining the value of a variorum edition and a proper publishing history of the poem. For example, the 1970 New Directions printing of the poem incorporated no less than 138 changes to the text but no public record of them exists. Differences between British and American editions did not help the textual confusions. Errors and corrections to the text of *The Cantos* plus inconsistent methods and contradictory intentions prevented the establishment of a definitive edition of the work during

Pound's lifetime. But such errors, must not continue, Taylor concludes, although two troubling questions persist: just what *is* the text of *The Cantos* and how can it be established? These questions are of central importance to any understanding of the poem.

Peter Nicholls considers the impact of *The Cantos* on a generation of younger writers, arguing that the poem functions as a kind of matrix, a textual world inhabited in different ways by different writers. "Emulation and resistance" describe the poetic response to Pound's work by a younger generation. Creeley, Duncan and Olson, not to say Ginsberg, Ashbery and Howe, realized that "the fact of Ezra Pound and his work is inescapable" as Creeley declared, adding, perhaps more importantly, that "Pound has given us . . . possibilities." Pound, Nicholls demonstrates, presented a tradition counter to that of Eliot and the New Critics. He showed what is possible in a new poetics if the poet dared to violate the traditional academic constraints and protocols. Pound's influence was both enabling and prescriptive: he opened poetry up to a range of different knowledges, while embedding the poetic act within a complex historicity – yet monumentally imposing himself on the poetic landscape.

"Pound as Critic" is the focus of Massimo Bacigalupo's essay, an exploration of the ways Pound's poetic aesthetic mirrors his prose criticism. The numerous volumes he published beginning with *The Spirit of Romance* (1910) and ending with the anthology *Confucius to Cummings* (1964), display a surprisingly unified approach and focus for his persistent topics: the virtue of close reading, the essential union of poetry and history, the necessity of representing the objective in art, literature as source data for the study of man, and a belief that a few dozen facts could give us the intelligence of a period (*LE*, 46; *SPR*, 22–23). Or as Pound preferred to say, hard bits of mosaic can contain the world.

Catch phrases and quotations Bacigalupo shows to be the première stylistic feature of Pound's prose. His model? The spoken word with its shifting tones and emphases. The search for "passionate simplicity" (*LE*, 53) in his prose reflects the intensity of his quest for exactness in his poetry. Literature and the artist, the subject of his pre-World War I writing; individual writers such as Gourmont and James, the focus of his prose in the 1920s; textbooks on literature and economics, the center of his work in the 1930s; politics and economics, his obsession in the 1940s; translation, his concern in the 1950s – these form the nexus of Pound's prose whose goal was simple: to teach us through language to "Wake up and live!" (*EP/JL*, 180).

Ming Xie investigates Pound's abilities as a translator and his treatment of language in the establishment of a set of new texts based on primary

forms, admitting that Pound's new English versions often substitute for the originals. But translation strengthened his own poetic innovations which, in turn, guided his translations. Hardly a scholar of foreign languages, although he studied Romance Languages at university, Pound pays more attention to meaning and its equivalences than to grammar. Pound conceived of translation as an invented turning of previous material, originating in his understanding of "troubadour," which in Provençal derives from *trobar*, to invent, from the Latin, *tropus*. Translation for Pound is to approximate the sound and alliterative stress of the original language. His aim was always fidelity to the original in both meaning and atmosphere. Or as he told W. H. D. Rouse in 1935, "no need of keeping verbal literality for phrases which sing and run naturally in the original" (*SL*, 273). What he sought in his rendering of originals was the "raw cut of concrete reality combined with the tremendous energy, the contact with the natural force" (*SL*, 273). And as Xie explains, *The Cantos* is itself an "epic of translation" with a multilingual, intertextual web of cultures simultaneously existing in various modes of translation from allusion to quotation and even parody.

Reed Way Dasenbrock initiates the final section of the collection, a series of essays on Pound and extra-literary topics. He begins with a new look at the Pound/Visual Arts nexus, arguing that Pound was attracted to the social and public nature of art, not the art itself. The public nature of art meant that it demanded patronage, a topic which fascinated Pound who sought a similar state for poetry – and partially found it for his own work in his relationship with the New York lawyer John Quinn. Drawing an analogy between the patronage of the Italian Renaissance and the conditions of his own time, Pound sought to get poetry into the public spotlight through its link with the visual arts. Hence, Vorticism and Pound's efforts, along with Wyndham Lewis, to promote it. And later, in the important Malatesta and Venetian Cantos (VIII–XII, XXIV–XXVI), he explored the impact of patronage on the arts. Dasenbrock completes his analysis with an original reading of the role of the visual arts in Pound's political thinking and, in particular, his attraction to Mussolini.

Michael Ingham examines the link between Pound and music, noting the compelling connections between poetry and musical sound. He demonstrates the depth of Pound's 1920 remark to Agnes Bedford, "meaning is all tied up with sound" (*SL*, 161), through a survey of Pound's efforts at musical composition – principally his two operas, *Le Testament de Villon* and *Cavalcanti* – and his various musical criticism. Ingham details the roots of Pound's absorption with music through his friendship with Walter Morse Rummel, Arnold Dolmetsch, George Antheil and, of course, Olga Rudge. He also provides an intriguing comparison between Pound and

Charles Ives, and argues that the order of *The Cantos* is the order of the voice – found in song, conversation, politics and love.

Tim Redman tackles the knotty issue of Pound's politics and economics – not only their origins but influence on Pound's writing. Redman argues that Pound's political philosophy "largely conforms to a set of populist beliefs deeply rooted in American history." He begins by explaining the importance of Thaddeus Pound, the poet's paternal grandfather, in state and national politics, and his influence on the political consciousness of his grandson. His mother's side was equally prominent, since his maternal grandmother was the daughter of Mary Wadsworth whose family arrived in America in 1632. And while aesthetics, rather than populist politics, shaped Pound's early years in Europe, politics was always at hand. Redman traces the importance of A. R. Orage and the *New Age* circle, the influence of C. H. Douglas and Social Credit, and the politics of art on Pound, notably how copyright laws, passports and publication restrictions exercised him into action.

Moving to Italy in 1924 brought for Pound a new interest in Mussolini's fascism and, by the early thirties, a renewed study of economics. Redman analyzes Pound's political philosophy (stimulated by his re-reading Jefferson and Adams) as a development of his economic concerns and shows how it influenced his conception of *The Cantos*. Other economists such as Silvio Gesell and Odon Por – later supplemented by Brooks Adams and Alexander del Mar – supplied ideas which Pound drew on and combined with his notions of Social Credit and Confucius to formulate his political and economic principles which *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) summarizes.

One origin for Pound's sympathy with the Social Credit/fascist ideal, Redman concludes, is in a so-called American fascism which has its roots in American populism. Reacting to rule by a predatory economic plutocracy, this group supports a strong executive which will control civil liberties and eliminate the opposition between financier and producer in an effort to restore to the population their sovereign right to control money. From Pound's understanding of Chinese history, Social Credit philosophy, the achievements of Mussolini and the ideal of Jefferson and Adams emerges the foundation of his political and economic theories.

Helen M. Dennis shows that although Pound's poetry encodes conservative configurations of the feminine, this did not prevent Pound from collaborating with a range of unusual, independent women – H.D., Mrs. Mary Fenollosa, Harriet Monroe, Marianne Moore, and Olga Rudge to name but a few. The enigma exists in his personal life as well as poetry, since he outwardly maintained a marriage but inwardly sustained a personal romance with Olga Rudge for forty-nine years. Beginning with a survey of

Pound's association with various women who encouraged or supported his work, especially Dorothy Shakespear and Margaret Cravens, Dennis analyzes the tension that often surrounded Pound's relation with women, whether it was Bride Scratton or Sheri Martinelli. Dennis also carefully documents the way Pound transformed so many to these women into mythological figures in his poetry, acknowledging that in the cultural exchange of marriage (and sometimes love) the female body absorbs spiritual and aesthetic value. For Pound, the female is always a presence, immanent and transcendent in his work.

Concluding the volume is Wendy Flory's review of Pound and anti-semitism, this issue, rather than treason – the original charge against him in July 1943 – taking precedence as the source of outrage against him. The context of the Holocaust has intensified the denunciations of Pound's anti-semitism, she notes, but also delayed a careful analysis of his position. Reluctance to confront the extent of American antisemitism at the time of the Holocaust, Flory explains, determined the attitudes toward Pound. His antisemitism served as “a convenient place-holder for all those whose antisemitism was not being confronted.” Denouncing Pound as “the real antisemite” became an effortless alternative to any serious analysis of the problem of antisemitism in America and in oneself.

Flory explains the antisemitism of Pound, dominant from 1935 on, as his suffering from paranoid psychosis. She focuses on Pound's state of mind and notes the absence of any but passing and immaterial antisemitic allusions in *The Cantos*. His radio broadcasts she reads as disorganized rantings reflecting his confused and delusional attitude. Pound's fixation on an economic-conspiracy theory, linked to his manic component, determined the erratic tone of his radio broadcasts and his frequently psychotic response to the political and economic topics he discussed at St. Elizabeths. Such distortions help to explain his antisemitism and clear the way for a sharper understanding of his poetry.

Has literature a function in the state? This is the provocative question Pound asks at the opening of “How to Read” and answers through his work and its aesthetic. He disputes the Senecan tag, *litterae nihil sanates* (literature heals nothing), quoted twice in *The Cantos*, by arguing for writing that galvanizes its readers. Literature, he argues, renews the past through the language of the present, while giving it fresh meaning. “The news in the Odyssey is still news” he wants us to understand, just as he tries to convince us that literature is the first step to moral action (*ABC*, 44). Books feed us with energy; the “Arts work on life as history works on the development of civilization and literature. The artist seeks out the luminous detail and presents it” (*SPR*, 23). Our job is to spot it.

NOTES

- 1 Pound in Walter Sutton (ed.) *Pound, Thayer, Watson and The Dial, A Story in Letters* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1994), p. 169.
- 2 Pound in David M. Gordon (ed.), *Ezra Pound and James Laughlin, Selected Letters* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. 145.
- 3 Basil Bunting, "On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos," in *Collected Poems, New Edition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 110.
- 4 Pound in Marjorie Perloff, "Pound/Stevens: Whose Era?" in Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 17.
- 5 Louis Zukofsky, "Ezra Pound," in *Prepositions, The Collected Critical Essays of Louis Zukofsky*, expanded edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 69. Zukofsky also reminds his readers that "the poet and his personae in the *Cantos* are not present in sharp, medieval outline. Dante wore robes and had a theology to accompany him on his journey" (p. 75).
- 6 Lucy Beckett, *Wallace Stevens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 64; Geoffrey Hartman, "Toward Literary History," in *Beyond Formalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 358; Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Eva Hesse, "Introduction," in Hesse (ed.), *New Approaches to Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 48.
- 7 Charles Olson in Catherine Seelye (ed.), *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound* (New York: Grossman/Viking, 1975), pp. 17, 19.
- 8 Benito Mussolini, "Orientamenti e problemi," in Edoardo and Duilio Susmel (eds.), *Opera Omnia di Benito Mussolini*, 36 vols. (Florence: La Fenice, 1951-63), XI, p. 283.
- 9 Pound, interviewed in Rome in late February 1960 by Donald Hall, printed in "Ezra Pound: An Interview," *Paris Review*, 28 (1962), 47.
- 10 W. B. Yeats in J. P. Sullivan (ed.), *Ezra Pound, A Critical Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 184.
- 11 Pound, in Hall, "Ezra Pound: An Interview," 51.
- 12 Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1951; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 16.
- 13 Yeats to Lady Gregory, January 3, 1913, in Richard Ellmann, "Ez and Old Billyum," in Ellmann, *Eminent Domain: Yeats among Wilde, Joyce, Pound, Eliot and Auden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 66. In the same letter, Yeats added that Pound "spoils himself by too many experiments and has more sound principles than taste."