

Clive Wilmer: On "Pound's Life and Career"

Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, but grew up and was educated mainly in Pennsylvania.

In 1908, when a projected academic career was cut short, he set sail for Europe, spending several months in Venice and finally settling in London, where he was befriended by his hero, W. B. Yeats. Between 1908 and 1911 he published six collections of verse, most of it dominated by a passion for Provençal and early Italian poetry. This is filtered through the medievalizing manner of Browning and the Pre-Raphaelites. Under the influence of Ford Madox Ford and T. E. Hulme he modernized his style, and in 1912 launched the Imagist movement, advocating concreteness, economy, and free verse. The oriental delicacy of his brief Imagist lyrics (e.g. 'In a Station of the Metro') soon gave way to the more dynamically avant-garde manner of Vorticism. Association with Vorticist visual artists (e.g. Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Wyndham Lewis) helped him to see how poems could be made up, like post-Cubist sculptures, of juxtaposed masses and planes. These lessons were reinforced by his work on Ernest Fenollosa's literal versions of classical Chinese poems, which he turned into the beautiful free-verse lyrics of *Cathay* (1915). Fenollosa had argued that Chinese written characters were ideograms--compressed and abstracted visual metaphors. In this interplay of concrete signs Pound saw the model for a new kind of poetry, dynamic and economical, which juxtaposed not only images but diverse 'facts'--allusions, quotations, fragments of narrative. Such a method, soon to be tried out in his major work *The Cantos* (on which he tentatively embarked in 1915), would permit the use of quotations from other languages and even gobblets of prose.

The range and brilliance of Pound's contacts in all the arts convinced him that London was to be the centre of a new Renaissance. He cast himself in the role of impresario, editor, and advocate, contributing to Yeats's mature style, discovering and promoting Joyce and Eliot, advising an American businessman on the modern works of art to buy in London. But his hopes foundered in the waste of the First World War, and the consequent disappointment was to colour the rest of his life's work. In the short term it provoked his first major poems, 'Homage to Sextus Propertius' (1919) and Hugh Selwyn Mauberley (1921). These two ironic sequences represent a contrast. The free-verse 'Homage', an ironic persona poem based on the lyrics of the first-century Roman poet, is a defence of the private and erotic in poetry against the imperialistic jingoism promoted by war. Mauberley, in tautly rhymed satirical stanzas, depicts the war as the *Götterdämmerung* of an emasculated and philistine culture, condemned by the limitation of its own horizons. The poem is also evidence of Pound's close working relationship with Eliot, whose taste it reflects (cf. the 'Sweeney' poems of the same period). The relationship was to culminate in the crucial part played by Pound in cutting *The Waste Land* (1922).

Mauberley has been described as Pound's farewell to London. In 1920 he left, spending four years in Paris then moving on to Italy, where he settled in Rapallo in 1924. He was now concentrating on *The Cantos*, his 'poem including history', and the first section was published in 1925.

As *The Cantos* shows, he was now preoccupied with economics. The war, as he saw it, had

been caused by the rivalries of international capitalists. He thought he had found a solution to the evils of unchecked capitalism, one especially favourable to the arts, in the Social Credit theory of Major C. H. Douglas, who argued that a system of state credit could increase purchasing power in the population at large, thus promoting creativity and removing power from bankers and financiers. Attracted to Mussolini by his energy and his promises of monetary reform, Pound naïvely assumed that the Italian leader could be persuaded to put Douglas's theory into practice. At first, the main target of Pound's attacks is 'usury', which he depicts (e.g. in Canto 45) as an unnatural force that pollutes the creative instinct in humanity. By about 1930 the usurers he condemns are usually Jews, and his language is vitiated by virulent anti-Semitism.

A Draft of XXX Cantos (1930) presents the poet as wandering Odysseus, travelling among the dead. Through juxtaposition, he uncovers repeated patterns in history and experiences moments when the world of time is transfigured by the eternal world of the gods. The mainly Mediterranean emphasis of the first thirty Cantos then gives way (in Cantos 31-70, published 1934-40) to the economic policies of early US presidents and the governance of ancient China. Despite an increase in prosy didacticism and much consequent turgidity, these sections contain some of Pound's finest poetry (e.g. Cantos 36,45, 47, and 49).

In the later 1930s Pound devoted much of his energy to defending fascism and trying to avert war. When war broke out, he embarked on a series of fanatical addresses to American troops, which were broadcast on Rome Radio. As a result, he was arrested by partisans in 1945 and handed over to the US forces, who held him for six months at a Disciplinary Training Centre near Pisa, pending trial on a treason charge. It seems likely that the inhuman conditions he endured there for the first three weeks accelerated the breakdown in rationality already to be glimpsed in his writings. Repatriated to the United States to stand trial, he was found unfit to plead on grounds of insanity and incarcerated in St Elizabeths Hospital, Washington DC, from 1946 to 1958.

His imprisonment brought about an artistic recovery. The Pisan Cantos (1948), drafted in the DTC, are the most directly personal poems he wrote. In adversity, and conscious of the tragedy of Europe, he contemplates his own past in that context, especially the water-shed years of the modern movement. Suffering and retrospection induce a new humility, exemplified in his care for the life around him--the insects, the animals, the camp guards. In St. Elizabeths he completed two rather more cryptic sections of the poem--Section: Rock-Drill (1955) and Thrones (1959)--as well as a programme of translations from the Confucian classics.

On his release he returned to Italy, dying in Venice in 1972. Despite moments of defiance, his last years were overshadowed by self-doubt and consciousness of his 'errors and wrecks'. In rare public utterances he condemned The Cantos as a failure, a view he seems not consistently to have held; but the poem was never completed. In 1969 he concluded its publication with Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII: thirty-two pages of verse, mostly serene but poignant in its fragmentation.

Pound was the central figure in the modern movement, personally responsible for the renewal of English poetry in the 1910s. Yet he remains a controversial figure. His brutal politics have been damaging to his lofty view of the artist and civilization; he is also condemned as an élitist, an obscurantist, and a charlatan? a man deficient in self-knowledge, with no real understanding of the modern world despite his avant-gardiste posturing. None of these charges quite shakes the substance of his achievement, which is fundamentally a matter of

technical accomplishment to a point where refinement of skill becomes a moral quality. Such is the sensitivity of his verse movement that it seems to release independent life and otherness in his subjects, as if it had discovered them by chance. This is so whether he seeks to evoke the movement of olive leaves in the wind or the character of a Renaissance condottiere. The same quality lies behind his genius for translation, an art he has been said to have invented for our time: uncannily, he creates a language for each author which registers the remoteness of the author from our world while at the same time making his work available to us. If Pound is obscure, it is largely because of his wide frame of reference; he was also an educator, who used poetry to introduce his readers to works and ideas he had discovered for himself. It is hardly his fault that his syllabus has never been adopted.

Pound's poetry is collected in two volumes: *Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 1984)--the American edition is entitled *Personae: Collected Poems* (New York, 1971)--and *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1972; London, 1981). *The Translations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Hugh Kenner (New York and London, 1953), is a large selection with major omissions. *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (London and New York, 1954), suggests the scope of his criticism, while *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson (London and New York, 1973), includes much of his polemical writing as well. The fullest biography is Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character* (London, 1988), though it has been severely criticized.

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