Burton Hatlen: On "Pound and Fascism"

To what extent did Pound commit himself during the 1930s not only to Mussolini as a leader but also to fascism as an ideology? And to what extent do the cantos which he wrote during this period serve as a vehicle for such an ideology?

[?.]

[T]he statement "Ezra Pound was a fascist" seems to me indisputably true . . . . Yet . . . while I would be willing to call Pound a fascist, I do not believe that The Cantos can accurately be labelled a "fascist poem," simply because Pound?s political ideology undergoes a radical decomposition?or, if you like, a deconstruction?as it is transmuted by Pound?s ideogrammic method.

[. . . .]

[I]f fascism began in a deliberate attempt to blend a "left"-wing egalitarianism with a "right"-wing authoritarianism, this political movement inevitably ended by giving a new meaning to such concepts as "community" and "authority." Fascism sought a principle of community that could serve as an alternative to the international working class community (a community, it should be noted, that defines itself in its struggle against the bourgeoisie) envisioned by socialism, and as my quotation from Mussolini suggests, fascism found such an alternative principle in the nation, as it defines itself in its struggle against national enemies. Yet the "volk" like the "proletariat" remains an abstract concept: no one can see "Italy" or "Germany." Therefore fascism created a concrete embodiment of the nation in the person of an all-wise leader ("Mussolini is always right," said a sign on the wall of every Italian classroom) and in the organizational structure of an all-powerful party. Fascism, remembering with acute nostalgia the ecstatic self-surrender of life in the trenches, celebrated the power of the leader and the submission of the loyal party member to the leader?s will as ends in themselves. Yet while this pronounced authoritarian strain may seem to mark fascism as a "right"-wing political phenomenon, it seems to me important to distinguish between fascist authoritarianism and genuine conservatism. For neither Mussolini nor Hitler claimed power on the strength either of a divine right to rule (as kings have been wont to do) or an inherent superiority in their "blood" (as hereditary oligarchies generally do). Rather both fascist leaders presented themselves as "men of the people." Thus the person of the leader becomes, in fascism, a concrete resolution of the opposing aspirations within the movement: he is at once the "great commoner," the "divine average" and the "man apart", a lonely, heroic incarnation of pure will. In this respect Mussolini?s description of fascism as "democratic authoritarianism" seems, if apparently paradoxical, nevertheless accurate. For in blending a "socialist" egalitarianism with a "conservative" authoritarianism, fascism became a new a kind of political movement that was neither truly "socialist" nor truly "conservative," neither a "left"- nor a "right"-wing movement, but rather something unique, dazzling?and (in the end) frantically self-destructive.

Fascism?s attempt to reunite the socialist and the conservative strains in Western political thought may seem, on the face of it, a laudable enterprise. Yet fascism, born in such promise, ended by declaring universal war on everything that was not itself: first bolshevism, then

socialism, then the Jews, then the "decadent" liberal democracies. And as fascism gradually united all the world against itself, it ensured its own destruction. A celebration of the nation as a transcendental principle of unity, a mythology and a political structure that claims to reconcile a quasi-conservative cult of authority with a quasi-socialist cult of "the people"?is there something inherently self-destructive in this mix of political ideas? Not, I think, until we add another crucial ingredient in the fascist brew: a demonized ENEMY. Yet we should make no mistake on this point: without an enemy to whom it could ascribe both superhuman powers and a mindless determination to destroy everything good and beautiful, fascism itself would have dissolved back into its constituent elements. For fascism could not do what it promised to do: above all, it could not resolve the struggle between capital and labor, managerial elites and wage-slaves. Instead it frosted over this conflict with a thick coat of rhetoric, thus introducing into fascism a split between political symbol and social reality that poisoned intellectual life in Italy and Germany throughout the fascist epoch. Refusing to recognize the inevitability of internal struggles within the nation, fascism sought to redirect the energy that might otherwise have gone into the capital / labor struggle toward real or imagined enemies of the nation. For if there are no fundamental conflicts within the nation, how was fascism to explain such undeniable social ills of the epoch as mass unemployment, bankruptcies of small businesses, inflation, etc.? Having ruled out the possibility that these economic ills might result from the structure of the national economy, fascism had no alternative but to blame these problems on something outside the nation?other nations which have denied "us" our rightful lebensraum?or on enemies who have infiltrated the body politic, to destroy its purity.

Thus fascism finds its logical fulfillment m a militarism directed against the enemy without and an anti-semitism which seeks to destroy the enemy within. As fascism summoned Italians and Germans to arm themselves in order to seize or to defend what was "rightfully" theirs, militarism and a cult of violence became not an accidental but an essential component of this movement. In Mussolini?s words

> Fascism believes neither in the possibility nor the utility of perpetual peace. It thus repudiates the doctrine of Pacifism?born of a renunciation of the struggle and an act of cowardice in the face of sacrifice. War alone brings up to its highest tension all human energy and puts the stamp of nobility upon the peoples who have the courage to meet it.

Once in power, both Mussolini and Hitler immediately began a rapid expansion of their nations? military forces, and both rulers demanded the "right" to use these forces to conquer colonial empires?Mussolini in Africa and Hitler in the Slavic regions east of Germany. And just as fascism sought every possible opening that might serve as a pretext for an attack on the "enemy without," it also sought throughout its history to mobilize "our" forces against the "enemy within" which Fascism everywhere identified as "the Jew." If the "nation"?a community, depending on circumstances, of culture, race, and/or religion?is the supreme reality, then the Jew is almost always sooner or later defined as the alien presence within the nation, the "race" without a home-land in a world where, fascism assumes, only rootedness in a homeland can give substance to our lives. Thus if aggressive war became the logical external culmination of fascism, Auschwitz, became the logical internal culmination of this movement: a systematic use of the organized state apparatus to "purge" the nation?and eventually the world?of Jews, to render the body politic "pure" once again. It was the discovery of a common enemythat, ultimately, drew the German volk together in that experience of brotherhood which they craved; it was the common determination to eradicate

"Jewishness," rather than the irresistible will of the Fuhrer, that impelled Germany forward toward the conquest of Europe; it was the trench heaped with naked corpses, the polished boots and the clean gloves of the SS officer staring down with cool contempt at the dead, that became for almost all of us the ultimate symbols of fascism. (And as for Mussolini, his version of fascism has become in the public mind only a more feeble?therefore a less demonic, but therefore also in the end a merely grotesque?imitation of Hitler?s.) From an attempt to recover authentic community and legitimate authority to the cooly mechanized mass murder of Auschwitz and Babi Yar: so moves, in brief, the inexorable, terrible dialectic of fascism.

[?.]

If Pound?s politics circa 1933 reflect the relatively positive aspirations of "early" fascism, his political development from 1933 to 1940 parallels the inexorable movement of fascism itself toward nihilism. For in Pound?s political thought as in the fascist movement as a whole, the search for a society that would respect both the European cultural heritage and the aspirations of workers and peasants for economic justice gradually gave way to an obsession with the ENEMY: a group of "obstructers" who have, Pound persuaded himself, deliberately and persistently thwarted the attempts of decent people to create a just and orderly polis. Furthermore, Pound increasingly tended to identify the "obstructers," the "hoggers of the harvest," as Jews, so that by 1940 the terms "usury" and "kikery" had become, for him, synonymous. To some extent Pound?s movement toward a doctrinaire anti-semitism may represent a desire to keep up with his beloved Duce. During the 1930s Mussolini fell more and more under the sway of Hitler, whom he had once regarded with contempt. As a consequence, official propaganda in Italy as well as in Germany increasingly described the Jews as the power behind both Bolshevism and what Hitler called "finanzcapital," and a survey of Pound?s political writings in the last half of the 1930s suggests that he dutifully followed this shift in the fascist party line. Consider the following dates:

> 1933-4: Hitler comes to power in Germany. Mussolini is at first deeply suspicious of this new brand of "fascism." In mid-1934 Italy and Germany come to the verge of war over Austria. Pound, writing Jefferson and/or Mussolini in 1933 refers contemptuously to Hitler?s "hysterical yawping" [p 127].

> 1935-7: Mussolini and Hitler move steadily toward an alliance, culminating in the Anti-Comintern Pact of 1937. Mussolini increasingly discards the "revolutionary" rhetoric which he had employed as late as the early 1930s. Instead he tends to portray himself as the defender of "Catholic Christian culture" against the destructive threat of "atheistic" or "Jewish" (in fascist rhetoric these terms tend to become interchangeable) bolshevism. He sends armies into Spain and Ethiopia, under the banner of "Catholic Christian culture." In 1937 Pound writes the Guide to Kulchur. The positive treatment of Lenin in Jefferson and/or Mussolini now gives way to denunciations of "Marxism" as false in theory and destructive in practice [p 277]. The self-proclaimed worshipper of Venus who had once condemned Christianity itself as a hypocritical fraud now extolls the virtues of "Catholic culture" [p 261]. (Yet neither Pound nor Mussolini have become "believers." Rather they see Catholicism as a picturesque part of the Italian cultural tradition, and as a useful way of training peasants in habits of obedience.) To his praise of Catholicism, Pound subjoins an attack on Protestantism and on "semitic" ways of thinking [p 185]. If the Guide to Kulchur never explicitly praises war as the health of

the state, at least the book ostentatiously ignores Mussolini?s invasion of Ethiopia and his increasingly aggressive posture toward Italy?s European neighbors.

1938: Mussolini?s government adopts a comprehensive set of racial laws, modeled on?if in some minor respects weaker than? the Nuremberg laws, and designed to exclude Jews from participation in any area of Italian life. In 1939, according to Noel Stock, Pound?s "attitude towards the Jews" suddenly takes "a turn for the worse," as he begins to display "an unhealthy interest in Jewish participation in any activity whatsoever," and as he spends more and more time reading anti-Jewish tracts and articles of a type which previously he "had barely or never opened."

1940: Mussolini somewhat reluctantly joins Germany in declaring war against Great Britain and France, then a little later the Soviet Union, and then a little later still the United States. In 1941 Pound begins a series of broadcasts over Rome radio in which he acclaims Hitler and Mussolini as defenders of "Europe" against a gigantic Jewish conspiracy and vigorously defends the right of Germany and Italy to conquer and rule over the "inferior" peoples of eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.

As we read through Pound?s political pronouncements from Jefferson and/or Mussolini through the Rome radio broadcasts, we encounter almost all the major themes of fascist ideology: 1) a generalized unhappiness over the destruction of the social bonds that traditionally joined men and women together and joined both to the soil, 2) a vigorous protest against the inability of the Western nations to end unemployment and make full use of their productive capabilities, 3) a rejection of the Marxist theory that economic distress results from the attempt of capital to preserve its control over labor, and of the Marxist belief that only in a classless society will poverty and unemployment disappear, 4) an attempt to find in the nation-state an alternative to the socialist concept of the working class, as a model of an organic community, 5) support for the use of the full power of the state to stimulate economic development, to end unemployment, and to ensure that the basic needs of people for food, shelter, and clothing are satisfied, 6) a cult of the Great Leader who incarnates the nation and whose indomitable will carries the nation forward toward its destiny, 7) an obsession with the external enemy which denies the nation its "rightful" lebensraum, and with the internal "enemy" (i.e., the Jew) who "saps" the nation?s strength from within, 8) a celebration of violence as the only effective way of defeating the enemy, and an elaborate ritual of "symbolic violence" centered on the army, the police, and paramilitary party organizations . . . .

I come finally, with some trepidation and sorrow, to the last of the six basic polarities which I have isolated in Pound?s political thinking, the tension between his fear of, and hatred for, Jews and his (largely unconscious) attraction toward (or even envy of) them. Actually, there are relatively few references to Jews in the cantos which Pound wrote during the l930s, but these references seem to me very significant. Pound?s first extended treatment of this comes in Canto 35, the"Mitteleuropa" canto. The tone of this canto suggests a facile, snobbish, but still essentially superficial "social" anti-semitism. Jews here have "funny accents," they have "foreign" names ending in "?ovitch", and they are more given to family loyalty and to sensual pleasure than are Gentiles. But I do not hear a hatred of Jews in this canto, rather, if anything, I hear a distinct envy of

> ?. the warmth of affections,
>
> the intramural, the almost intravaginal warmth of
>
> hebrew affections, in the family, and nearly everything else

On the other hand, Canto 52 opens with a blast of vicious Jew-hatred, worthy of a Hitler. These passages suggest that Daniel Pearlman was quite correct to detect in Pound an impulse to identify with Jews as well as a deep hatred of Jews. Thus the "Jewish theme" in The Cantos seems to move, like the other themes I have here discussed, toward paradox.

However, I should here note that anti-semitism plays a unique role within Pound?s political system, as it did within fascism as a whole. For to Pound, Jews seem to constitute a kind a of parody of both of the two political identities which I have sketched above?i.e., the "authoritarian" and the "revolutionary" identities. Indeed, Jews seem to possess all of the traits that Pound admired, but always "in excess." Thus he would see Jews as too concerned with preserving their "cultural heritage," causing them to neglect the great maxim, "Make It New." At the same time, Pound also seems to see Jews as the agents of a destructive "modernization" of European culture. So too, Pound would see Jews as claiming an elite status, as God?s "chosen people"; they "stand apart," but not in the positive creative way of the Great Artist or the Great Leader. At the same time, Pound sees in the loyalty of Jews toward one another an inverted reflection of his own a vision of an artistic community. Jews are also, to Pound, too concerned with amassing private property, while at the same time they have spawned ideas (socialism, communism) which question the very right of people to own private property. And the allegiance of Jews to a patriarchal God represents for Pound a "cult of the will" gone wrong, while at the same time Jews also, he implies, love in the "wrong" way: perversely or too intensely. By thus representing in Pound?s mind a parody of everything that he himself wanted, Jews came to play a scapegoat function in his thinking, as they did for fascism in general. If we could only purge the world of "Jewishness," Hitler proclaimed, then we would have workers happy in their factories and bosses safe in their offices. So too, I think, the idea of a world purged of Jews meant for Pound a world in which true mastery and rightful authority (his own, for example) would be recognized by all men, and in which a loyal band of artist/comrades (Gaudier and Hulme returned from the dead, Eliot escaped from the clutches of the church) would together create that ideal community for which he never stopped longing?a world, in short, wherein authority and community would come together at last, in a joyous marriage.

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