

MR. POUND GOES TO WASHINGTON

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Nothing foretells tomorrow to man
neither horrors in dreams nor in oracles
ef thet night-sight dont damn well smash 'em.

– Sophocles

It often seems difficult to get a fix on Ezra Pound. He was a variety of things to a range of different people at various stages of his working life. Think here on how the young poet chose to present himself not long after his arrival in London in 1908. Pound “would approach with the step of a dancer,” Ford Madox Ford recalled, “making passes with an imaginary cane. He would wear trousers made of green billiard cloth, a pink coat, a blue shirt, a tie hand-painted by a Japanese friend, an immense sombrero, a flaming beard cut to a point, and a single, large blue earring.”¹ As that evocative statement attests, this early version of Pound, who seems very much to have fancied himself as an updated and urbane version of the sort of medieval troubadour that so vividly captured his imagination as a university student enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, was every inch the visually flamboyant and self-conscious literary stripling. Fast forward a few years to 1914. Pound is now working—alongside his Vorticist comrade Wyndham Lewis—in what purports to be a properly iconoclastic mode. But then the conflagration of the First World War changed everything. The death and destruction meted out during this four-year period leaves Pound bereft and disenchanting. He soon ups sticks for Italy by way of Paris. Respite was sought and found in Rapallo. Pound cultivated yet another new persona whilst living on the Ligurian coast during the early 1930s. “Pound was born a teacher,” noted James Laughlin in 1987, “even

¹ Ford Madox Ford, *Return to Yesterday* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), 277.

if not destined to be a professor. He could not keep himself from teaching. In one way or another he was always teaching.” Along with Basil Bunting and Louis Zukofsky, Laughlin had been one of the “fortunate few who had passed through Rapallo during the years of the Ezuversity.” But what of the varied courses on offer at this particular institution? “These were literature and history,” according to Laughlin, “the way he wanted to revise it, because of course, as he insisted, all history has been miswritten since Gibbon. And poetics and the interpretation of culture.” The founder of New Directions also describes Pound’s teaching methods in Rapallo. He makes much in his memoirs of his instructor’s genial and relaxed teaching approach during these halcyon days. Laughlin places great emphasis on the fact that Pound was “the best, the funniest talker I ever knew. Our classes at the Ezuversity took place mostly at the lunch table and I have never had such entertainment. He practiced what I believe the rhetoricians call *tapinosis*, the application of colorful slang to serious topics, and we were given Villon and the troubadours, or even Dante, in his vernacular.”² Our now middle-aged and seemingly benevolent sage appears in this particular recounting to be calm and at peace. Yet appearances can—as is commonly known—often prove deceptive. This is something that comes to the fore in David Ten Eyck’s critical treatment of the poet’s creative output during the same period. “Pound cuts the figure in these years of a man working himself to the point of exhaustion,” Ten Eyck writes, “spreading his considerable energy and talent over an impossibly wide field, and in the process compromising the technical care that characterizes his finest poetry and losing the ability to make measured judgments on political, economic and cultural matters. Many of his activities at this time suggest a dangerously inflated sense of his own abilities and of their relevance to world affairs.”³

We know this to be true. Pound did indeed think that he could make a real difference in the realm of international politics the late 1930s. This belief led the poet to travel from Rapallo to New York in April 1939. Pound’s stated aim was to see if he could talk some old-fashioned common sense into the people in charge of the United

² James Laughlin, *Pound as Wuz: Essays and Reflections on Ezra Pound* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1987), 34, 35, 4, 166.

³ David Ten Eyck, *Ezra Pound’s Adams Cantos* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 5.

States. “His reputation was such though that when he arrived there was an expectation that he had come over to preach Fascism,” A. David Moody explains, “and it was suspected that because he had travelled first class the Italian Government must have paid his fare.” But that doesn’t seem to have bothered Pound. He pressed on and arrived in Washington, D. C. on 22 April 1939. He was determined to be heard. Pound seemed at first to meet with a degree of success. He reached out to a number of his longstanding correspondents, such as the Republican Congressman George Holden Tinkham. Having arrived in Washington, the Congressman’s secretary scheduled appointments for Pound with a range of sympathetic influential figures—including the Polish Ambassador, Count Potocki, Congressman Jerry Voorhis of California, and Senator John Hollis Bankhead of Alabama. Ultimately, however, Pound’s well-documented affinity with and support for figures such as Benito Mussolini seems to have worked against him. “Even though Pound was there with the explicit aim of getting America to be true to its own Constitution, and explicitly not to import Fascism,” Moody concludes, “he had become too much identified with Fascism to be listened to.”⁴ True, the poet did, as the grandson of the esteemed Thaddeus Coleman Pound, get to observe a session of the House of Representatives from a specially reserved section of the public gallery. But he found it to be fairly dull. In this sense, then, we might say that this somewhat Frank Capra-esque trip to Washington ended not with an interventionist bang but with something more akin to a mere whimper.

This was around the time when everything started to go dramatically south for Pound. The sad and sorry tale has been told many times and need not be retold in great detail here. First, the controversial and shockingly vitriolic Radio Rome broadcasts. Then, the steel cage of and attendant crack-up at the Pisan D. T. C. Finally, the enforced return to and contentious treason trial in the United States. A mere six years after his last visit, come the end of November in 1945, Pound thus found himself back in Washington. Pleading insanity, he was transferred to and incarcerated at St. Elizabeths Hospital. That was where he spent his days and nights until his eventual release in 1958. And it was in Washington that

⁴ A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet: A Portrait of the Man and his Work, II: The Epic Years, 1921 – 1939* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014), 300, 307.

another version of Pound took shape. “He was no longer the *artiste par excellence* of his London-Paris days,” James Wilhelm opines,

nor the sternly threatening sage of the thirties; he now became relaxed, both in his dress and often in his manner, as if he had come to accept his fate. He was somewhat like Oedipus at Colonus. Photographs during this period show him relaxing in a folding chair out on the lawn, feeding the birds or squirrels, wearing Army fatigues or shorts, loosely clinging blouses that often revealed a rather hirsute chest, and looking perhaps deceptively (to those who were intent on seeing this) more like a vacationer in a campuslike vacation resort than an inmate confined to an asylum.⁵

Some of those intent on seeing Pound like this evidently caught Mary de Rachewiltz’s eye when she visited Washington. To say that she was left unimpressed by certain sections of the company her father was keeping at the so-called second Ezuversity would be something of an understatement. In her memoirs, de Rachewiltz writes that

the young people who came to see him were a new species of human beings in behavior: sloppy and ignorant. It seemed to me no one had read or seen anything, certainly had not read much Pound. There was no conversation. They came with tidbits of political information and racial bias in the nature of what bums might fish out of garbage cans. Vapid jokes. And if father threw a new name at them they ran off with it like crazy dogs with a bone and since it was all they had in their mouths they declared themselves experts: of del Mar, Agassiz, Benton.⁶

A significant amount of ink has already been spilt on the attendees at the St. Elizabeths iteration of the Ezuversity. Some of this ink has been spilt fairly recently. “They came out to the hospital,” Daniel

⁵ James J. Wilhelm, *Ezra Pound: The Tragic Years, 1925 – 1972* (Pennsylvania: Penn State UP, 1994), 282.

⁶ Mary de Rachewiltz, *Ezra Pound, Father and Teacher: Discretions* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 293-294.

Swift notes, “usually on Saturdays and Sundays, to sit with Pound on the lawn, to eat with him and listen, and to improvise around him a rough classroom.” Swift certainly goes into great detail when it comes to matters of a culinary persuasion. So as to curry Pound’s favour, campus visitors

brought him treats: fudge brownies, blue cheese and cookies. This was the kind of disposable, American food he liked. His visitors recall being handed mayonnaise on bread or a BLT wrapped in brown paper, a banana or a plain roll, but what he craved was luxuries for children: ice cream, apple candy, maple syrup, peanut butter. With the leftovers he fed the birds on the lawns and sometimes the squirrels, too, with a nut tied to the end of a string, which he would whisk away when the squirrel came too close.⁷

Such was Pound’s day-to-day existence during visiting hours in St. Elizabeths. A. David Moody has a number of illuminating points and supplementary observations to make about this particularly trying part of Pound’s life. “His mind was probably not a comfortable place of confinement,” Moody argues, “being rarely still or at ease. Its ideas milled about demanding attention and expression, mostly the same old ideas insisting as ever on instant action against the world’s follies and stupidities.” He was still, for instance, very much preoccupied with questions pertaining to the topic of liberty and governance. He was also still very much interested—as his involvement with the so-called ‘Square Dollar’ educational publishing venture attests—in imparting his thoughts on such matters to the next generation of fervent and committed American patriots. “There was work to be done,” Moody asserts, “and he mainly got on with it.” Yet that is something of an understatement. Truth be told, Pound was remarkably productive during this period. To begin, he sought whilst confined in the “bughouse” to put his thoughts on educational matters such as those listed above on paper and then out into the wider world. Further to that, Pound also offered practical and creative advice to aspiring poets, and worked on a number of translations of classical Chinese

⁷ Daniel Swift, *The Bughouse: The Poetry, Politics, and Madness of Ezra Pound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017), 227, 228.

texts. If nothing else, this brief survey surely confirms something that was said at the start of introduction. Pound was—beyond a shadow of a doubt—many things to a variety of different people at certain pivotal junctures in his life and career.

By the same token, however, we need also to remember that Pound was first and foremost a poet. Despite his rather hectic schedule, he also managed to pull together enough original materials for not one, but two new volumes of *Cantos*. The first of these collections—*Section: Rock Drill 85-95 de los cantares*—was published in 1955, whilst Pound was imprisoned at St. Elizabeths. The second—*Thrones: 96-109 de los cantares*—was finalized in Brunnenburg and published first in Italy in 1959, not long after the treason charges against Pound had finally been dropped. The two editions evidently share certain traits and characteristics. “Their world is made up out of books,” Moody observes, “and so immersed is the poet in his reading and in his making that his actual world is indeed blotted out. The reader can easily forget where Pound was as he wrote them.”⁸ That is, at least to a certain extent, true. One can lose sight of the fact that these are poems of imprisonment. One cannot, however, lose sight of the fact that the poetry contained in these two collections is difficult and recondite. This is especially true of the verse contained in *Thrones*. In the poet’s own words, these cantos denote “an attempt to move out from egoism and to establish some definition of an order possible or at any rate conceivable on earth.” Pound intended *Thrones* as a record of “the states of mind of people responsible for something more than their personal conduct.”⁹ One might think all that relatively straightforward. But that would be a mistake. In characteristically Poundian fashion, this late section features a bewildering college of marginal historical figures and abstruse references, drawn from an esoteric range of source-materials pertaining to economics, medieval politics and legal history, modes of monetary exchange, and good governance: all of which circulate within the volume’s macaronic and elliptical design. Given that Pound had been mining such a vein for decades by the time he sat down to work on *Thrones*, it seems reasonable to assume that this compositional emphasis on assemblage would have come as no

⁸ *Ezra Pound: Poet: A Portrait of the Man and his Work, III: The Tragic Years, 1939 – 1972* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2015), 289, 344, 346.

⁹ Cited in Donald Hall, *Remembering Poets: Reminiscences and Opinions* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 242.

shock whatsoever to critics interested in *The Cantos*. It should thus be as something of a surprise to find, to quote from the work of Peter Nicholls, “that the late sequence *Thrones* which might be thought to represent these techniques at their most radical has attracted relatively little systematic comment. In fact, *Thrones* has proved to be the part of the poem that even dedicated readers like least.”¹⁰ Critics who think poorly of the penultimate section of *The Cantos* have certainly focused on the difficulties caused by the thematically discursive and formally compressed form of *Thrones*. This is foregrounded in Daniel Perelman’s withering critical account of Canto XCVII. In Perelman’s altogether despairing estimation, this canto is simply mystifying: “first, in the degree of ellipsis employed; second in the strangeness of the vast majority of the names and things that the poet finds worth transcribing. It is obvious that if the poet had wanted to be ‘clear’ and ‘coherent,’ he could have been; but if he chose not to be, what irritating ulterior motive could he have had? Perhaps exactly that: *to irritate*.”¹¹ This is not the only crime Pound has been accused of committing in *Thrones*. The noted Donald Davie considered much of *Thrones* to be a tiring and crushing “bore.” George Kearns concurs, asserting as he does that “the *Thrones* cantos are largely ineffective as poetry, and no amount of extracurricular reading will help.”¹² Thus it seems fair to say that critical love is in severely short supply when it comes to *Thrones*.

Perhaps too often, dedicated readers and critics have also moved to underwrite this seemingly unloved collection’s supposed impenetrability by suggesting that an increasingly diminished Pound was no longer able to maintain poetic balance or control when it came time to sit down and write. Ira B. Nadel, for one, posits that *Thrones* “veers off into its own multiple directions and may be the least successful section of *The Cantos*, although it possesses moments of individual brilliance.” In Nadel’s unsympathetic reckoning, “the abbreviated material of *Thrones* constantly prevents clarity.”¹³

¹⁰ Peter Nicholls, “‘2 doits to a boodle’: Reckoning with *Thrones*,” *Textual Practice* 18.2 (2004), 233.

¹¹ Daniel Perelman, “Alexander Del Mar in *The Cantos*: A Printout of the Sources,” *Paideuma* 1.2 (1972), 161–162.

¹² George Kearns, *Guide to Ezra Pound’s Selected Cantos* (Folkstone: Dawson and Sons, 1980), 223.

¹³ Ira B. Nadel, *Ezra Pound: A Literary Life* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 180.

Massimo Bacigalupo is also quick to register his sense of profound dissatisfaction with the “confusion of unassimilated data” that he finds scattered throughout the pages of *Thrones*. Bacigalupo attempts to dissociate what he perceives as the counterproductive “idiosyncrasy and obscurity” of *Thrones* from the earlier, relatively conceptually ordered sections of *The Cantos*. Couching his critique in language redolent of disorder and irreversible fragmentation, Bacigalupo goes to great lengths when demonstrating that one can hardly speak of “canto” in connection with the verse found in this particular collection, “which is all the time approaching silence, the unrelated rock splinter.”¹⁴ The thirteen commentaries contained in the present volume strive incisively to productively complicate and indeed revise critical assertions such as these. Whether taken individually or read together, they demonstrate, contra longstanding critical consensus, that this demanding and difficult collection of poems in fact speaks volumes.

But why a series of focused commentaries on the cantos comprising *Thrones*? To put the question another way: what is it exactly that the commentary format has to offer readers interested in, to borrow a phrase, the difficult and occasionally problematic late verse of Ezra Pound? What is it exactly that an extended critical commentary can provide that, say, a regular scholarly essay cannot when it comes time to—as the previously cited Peter Nicholls once put it—reckon with *Thrones*. Mark Byron’s account of the technographic qualities of *The Cantos* is especially useful at this juncture. Pound’s modernist epic “presents the materiality of diverse texts on its surface: multiple poetic genres and modes, parliamentary speeches, Papal encyclicals, ancient Chinese bone inscriptions, imperial decrees, epistles, hymns, and musical scores—all in an array of languages and scripts, and complemented by textual apparatus as citations, glosses, and annotations.” Notice in particular the emphasis placed in this quotation on the various sorts of writerly apparatuses deployed throughout *The Cantos*. Are we not in some very specific respects dealing with a major poetic work that foregrounds the very idea of the commentary as an aesthetic—and critical—mode? Byron thinks so. “The poem emulates the forms and techniques of the texts upon which it draws,” he states, “engaging

¹⁴ Massimo Bacigalupo, *The Forméd Trace: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980), 487, 330.

textual history and bibliography as means for preserving and transmitting precious cultural cargo.”¹⁵ Byron’s comment about the way in which the poem mimics its priceless intellectual, artistic, and social freight in order to keep that freight fresh and in perfect working order is particularly strikingly. It brings to mind an idea Pound put down on paper in 1929. In his estimation, “one of the diseases of contemporary thought (and probably running back 100 years of more) is due to the loss of making commentaries. I mean marginal commentaries on important texts.”¹⁶ Pound’s assertion did not see the light of day at the time. Happily, however, it can now be found in a number of different places—including an earlier issue of this very journal. It is the first of three extracts that I want to spend a little more time with here. The two others, both of which are taken from *Thrones*, are addressed by commentaries in this edition of *Glossator*. The second of these passages features in a recent literary biography of Pound. Alec Marsh reminds us that the two sections of *The Cantos* that Pound composed whilst living under lock and key in St. Elizabeths

were not very well received. Usually read together, and drafted in a continuous flow across dozens of notebooks, the two books are generally seen as desperate lunges towards Paradise, as repetitive, uneven—at times impenetrable. These late poems show the effects of Pound’s incarceration. They rely heavily on the poet’s wide and eccentric reading; the world filters in via his correspondence and reactions to newspapers of the ward’s blaring TV. They feature works no one has ever heard of—and that seems to be part of the point.¹⁷

The final quote I have in mind belongs to Pound and is taken from the middle of poem that sits at the very start of *Thrones*:

¹⁵ Mark Byron, “Bibliographic Technography: Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* as Philological Machine,” in *Writing, Medium, Machine: Modern Technographies*, ed. Sean Pryor and David Trotter (London: Open Humanities Press, 2016), 153.

¹⁶ Cited in Ira B. Nadel, “Visualizing History: Pound and the Chinese Cantos” in *A Poem Containing History: Textual Studies in The Cantos*, ed. Lawrence S. Rainey (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 1997), 151.

¹⁷ Alec Marsh, *Ezra Pound* (Reaktion Books: London Books, 2011), 189.

*If we never write anything save what is already
understood, the field of understanding will never be
extended. One demands the right, now and again,
to write for a few people with special interests
and whose curiosity reaches into greater detail.*

(XCVI/679)¹⁸

What we have here is—in Pound’s estimation at least—“a refinement of language” (XCVI/673). How, though, does this italicised and indented block of continuous prose, which stands out like a veritable sore textual thumb amidst the clusters of Greek phrases and Chinese ideograms that surround it on the printed page, speak to the two passages mentioned above? What, moreover, does any of this have to do with the aforementioned idea of the commentary as a critical mode?

We need to read the three passages in relation. Each seems, a in certain way, to be concerned with the issue and possibility of comprehension. We see this most clearly in the passage culled from the first canto to feature in *Thrones*. What, though, are we to make of Pound’s forthright take on the importance of “understanding” in this particular specimen? How, for instance, are we to reconcile Pound’s assertion concerning extended notions of comprehension and understanding with his remark about writing primarily for select groups of people with “special interests” and opinions? How, too, are we to reconcile the declaration contained in the extract above with the argument expounded by Alec Marsh in his biographical account of the original poetry that Pound produced whilst at St. Elizabeths? Recall, here, the manner in which Marsh draws attention to the fact that Pound’s creative output during this period was, in a very real sense, self-consciously and perhaps even defiantly impenetrable. Is it possible to reconcile these almost diametrically opposed points of view? The diverse and invigorating range of critical pieces that come after this introduction lead me to state with confidence that it is indeed possible to do so. And this is where that previously cited remark about the importance of the commentary comes into play. Following the lead established by Pound as far back as 1929, I want now to draw to a close by suggesting that it is the

¹⁸ All quotations are taken from the fifteenth printing of *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996) and are cited by canto and page number in the form (canto/page).

precisely the exemplary and flexible model of the critical commentary that allows us not only to more fully appreciate the important—if marginal, often eccentric, and sometimes deeply problematic—primary and secondary texts deployed and referred to throughout this late instalment of *The Cantos*. I want also to suggest that the commentary model affords us with a vital means with which to come to a better understanding of this difficult collection of unfairly neglected poems as a whole, demonstrating in turn that—despite the inevitable damage wrought by the passing of time—the light does still, in the famous words of the man himself, “sing eternal” (CXV/814).

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