

A Lesson Half-Learned

Stan Smith

“Yeats said to me that if they knew what we thought, they’d do away with us. They want their poets dead.” Ezra Pound took no pains to conceal what he thought and, sure enough, found himself at the age of sixty in the death-cells at Pisa—open-air cages, exposed to the elements, with only a pup-tent for shelter—facing the possibility of execution for treason as a result of his war-time broadcasts on Italian radio in support of Mussolini, Hitler and fascism. Heymann’s study¹ attempts to chart the precise evolution which led him there, and thence to thirteen years in St Elizabeth’s Mental Asylum, medically diagnosed at his trial as a man “afflicted with a paranoid state of psychotic proportions,” and judged “of unsound mind” by a jury which took three minutes to reach its verdict.

Perhaps this is the significant phrase. Yeat’s remark was romantic braggadocio: for “do away” we should substitute “put away”. Pound’s treatment, after the initial atrocities of the Pisan cage, which induced an arguably long-imminent nervous breakdown, was “lenient” enough, in conventional terms—as if the authorities had almost conspired to avoid the embarrassment of a political trial for a man with such an international reputation and such influential friends. And to see Pound’s beliefs as a *logical* development from his starting-point was too risky an option in the war-ravaged Europe of 1945, where already former fascists were being rehabilitated to prop up the administration of the occupied zones, and fend off the risk of communist takeovers. In a sense, Pound’s prosecutors accepted the same argument adduced by the Bollingen Foundation when, in 1949, it justified its \$1000 award for *The Pisan Cantos*, the fruit of Pound’s captivity, by distinguishing between the achievement of the poetry and the disgrace of the man: “to admit other considerations...would destroy the significance of the award and...deny the validity of the objective perception of value on which civilised society must rest.”

It is not a distinction Pound would have made himself, resting as it does on an assumption of the fundamental irresponsibility of the artist to anything except his art. Pound’s broadcasts were made precisely because he believed in the inseparability of his social and aesthetic responsibilities. When, in 1943, he followed the

¹ Ezra Pound: *The Last Rower, a Political Profile*, by C. David Heymann, *Faber & Faber* London, 1976, 372 pp. £5.95.

retreating fascist regime north, to Salo, it was, as Heymann says, because he believed that "His first duty was to educate the still educable masses" in the superiority of fascism over bourgeois democracy and (as he wrote in an article, one of many, in 1945) over "that form of economy praised by the usurocracy and eulogised by the dirty *Times* of London, by Lippmann and other filthy Jews, covered with excrement." He was, in his own mind, simply doing his duty as an artist, fulfilling that claim made for "the damned and despised *litterati*" years before, in *How to Read*:

When their work goes rotten...when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, e.g. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive and bloated, the whole machinery of social and individual thought and order goes to pot. This is a lesson of history, and a lesson not yet half learned.

His admiration for Mussolini expresses the same moral-aesthetic pre-occupation: "Mussolini speaking very clearly four or five words at a time, with a pause, quite a long pause, between phrases, to let it sink in...The more one examines the Milan Speech the more one is reminded of Brancusi, the stone blocks from which no error emerges, from whatever angle one looks at them." (He might almost be describing the typographical lay-out of the *Cantos*). Mussolini's "continuing artistic and political revolution", he wrote, had the "material and immediate effect" of "grain, swamp-drainage, restorations, and, I am ready to add off my own bat, AN AWAKENED INTELLIGENCE in the nation and a new LANGUAGE in the debates in the Chamber." Similar pre-occupations are proclaimed in some of his finest verse, as, notably, in the *Usura Cantos*:

With usura hath no man a house of good stone
each block cut smooth and well fitting
that design might cover their face....
with usura the line grows thick
with usura is no clear demarcation
and no man can find site for his dwelling....

And these lucid expositions coexist with such "slushy and inexact, or excessive and bloated" mouthings as *Canto* 91:

Democracies electing their sewage
till there is no clear thought about holiness
a dung flow from 1913
and, in this, their kikery functioned Marx, Freud and
the American beaneries
Filth under filth....

Not only coexist, but are structurally integrated, not just by

theme (“clear thought”) but by image and allusion and echo, with some of the finest writing:

Thus the light rains, thus pours, *e lo soleils plovil*
The liquid and rushing crystal
beneath the knees of the gods.

Ply over ply, this glitter of water.... (*Canto IV*)

As Heymann says, “Ultimately, there is no explaining away—no need to explain away—such passages as these. They are simply there, ‘right in the middle of the poetry’”. In poet and poetry alike, excellence and obscenity are inseparable—aspects of the same problematic, not to be ignored. Not so long ago, there was a rather slick formula on the literary Left for dealing with the supposedly hypothetical question of “good fascist art”, insofar as it is good, the argument went, it cannot be fascist, for to be fascist means to lack the sympathies, the moral and intellectual integrity, the broad humane perspectives, required to produce great art. “Moral” of course is no longer a fashionable word in a literary criticism which has abandoned Leavis for Althusser and the rarefaction of “scientific” analysis. But the problem remains, and Pound is its litmus test. Can we say that when he rants (“Filth under filth”) he rants as a fascist, and his content overwhelms his form, whereas when he writes great poetry (“Ply over ply”) his form affirms a quality which transcends the personal obsession?

We can only break out of this circular and specious logic by making more fundamental discriminations within the fascist problematic itself. For fascism was not a “pure” doctrine, but a deeply contradictory amalgam of ideas, the momentary reconciliation of profound social antagonisms. It is not enough to say, as Heymann does, that Pound was essentially “an old-fashioned agrarian populist who had outlived himself and the bulk of his generation”, seduced into a temporary alignment with fascism by his own eccentric and ruthless intellectual consistency. Pound was in some respects certainly a small-town boy from the mid-west who believed he’d found, in the “Social Credit” theories of Major Douglas, the alcahest. His lobbying of Mussolini and his ministers with ideas of monetary reform (what he called “Volitionist Economics”) reveals a familiar autodidactic megalomania. (He was dismissed by one of them as “a pleasant enough madman”). But Pound’s cranky, myopic innocence—the *idees fixes* of a parochial fanaticism—was merely a context for his later development. His grandfather, whose lumber company issued its own paper scrip (“a note against ‘merchandise and lumber’”), Pound wrote to Mussolini, “in practice...a ‘certificate of work done’”) had been a campaigner for the Greenback party, whose

“mixture of agrarian and labor groups”, Heymann observes, “corresponded to the poet’s ideal of an agrarian-guild craftsman economy. In this sense Ezra Pound had never abandoned the frontier.” Such populist movements, at the turn of the century, already contained in embryo the ambiguities of a mature fascism, as can be deduced from Pollack’s study *The Populist Response to Industrial America*, combining a frenzied hatred of federal bureaucracy, the finance houses and big trusts with a frequent anti-semitism and an equivocal attitude towards organised labour—sometimes using it, in a cautious alliance, at other times shrinking from its revolutionary potential. The rhetoric of such movements expresses the anti-capitalism of the small capitalist, the resentment of entrepreneur, farmer and petty-bourgeois against the centralised and nationwide agencies that shape their destinies. With the Great War, bringing in its wake first Bolshevism and proletarian revolution and then their almost universal defeat, the provisional alliance of such groups with labour could not survive, and populism underwent the mutation from radical to reactionary forms that carried such men as Mussolini and Hitler from socialist to fascist politics—defections to be repeated recurrently throughout the following two decades. Pound’s outrageous collocation of Jeffersonian federalism with the dynamics of the Blackshirts in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* thus contains a nugget of historical truth: fascism was the escape-hatch for a frightened, insecure petty-bourgeoisie whose opening to the Left had been closed by the concerted defeats of proletarian revolution. An ascendant working-class could have led such strata towards socialism; in defeat, it offered only decades of ineffectual struggle and deepening immiseration.

This shift, not of ideas but of emphasis, can be charted fairly accurately in Pound’s work. In 1922, the year of Mussolini’s March on Rome, Pound could still write with brilliant acuity of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, with its “ubiquitous” Jewish hero—

He has presented Ireland under British domination, a picture so veridic that a ninth rate coward like Shaw (G.B.) dare not even look it in the face. By extension he has presented the whole occident under the domination of capital.

The same essay shows Pound already looking towards a wilful aristocracy of strong men capable of ruling through “the public utility of accurate language”—“the succinct J Caesar, or the lucid Macchiavelli, or the author of the Code Napoleon, or Thomas Jefferson, to cite a local example.” And “Jefferson was perhaps the last American official to have any general sense of civilisation.”

Pound insisted at his trial on his long-sighted patriotism, and the transcripts of his broadcasts reveal the same conviction: My job, as I see it, is to save what's left of America and to help keep up some sort of civilisation somewhere or other. Ezra Pound speaking from Europe for the American heritage. F.D.R. is below the biological level at which the concept of honor enters the mind.

What haunted him was a profound sense of betrayal: the old, federalised America was small and beautiful—"Boston was once an American city; that was when it was about the size of Rapallo". But it is no longer "the domination of capital"—a systemic evil—which he attacks, but "usurocracy"—an alien, personalised conspiracy that *distorts* that system—the lies put out by "Mr Squirmy and Mr Slime" from "every one of the Jew radios of Schenectady, New York and Boston", which have created and sustain megalopolis. Pound's patriotism is for a mythical homeland enshrined in the "ply over ply" of paradisaical moments in the *Cantos*, where the landscapes of America, Italy and the Orient constitute a kind of visionary palimpsest, charged with the accumulated wisdom of the ages.

The populist elements recur throughout his work: in *Canto 74* he speaks of Mussolini's fall as "The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders"; in one of his last letters to the Italian Minister of Popular Culture, in 1944, he insists "The monopolists betrayed Fascism; they were ready to sell the country down the river." But there is another determinant of his vision, equally American in its vehemence.

Coming to Europe in 1908 from a teaching job in Indiana ("the sixth circle of desolation") Pound deliberately turned his back on a philistine continent, Whitman's United States, whose "crudity is an exceeding great stench." From the beginning fascinated by the old stately aristocratic forms—Provençal poetry, Japanese Noh plays, "Attic grace" and Propertian "savage indignation at pomp and official stupidity"—his ambition was always "to have gathered from the air a live tradition" to set against the "great stench" of America. (One might ask if this was anything more than a refined version of the mid-westerner who can be seen buying "his" clan tartan any day in Edinburgh's Prince's Street). Pound came to claim a birthright America denied him; in the process, he necessarily assumed the antinomian self-righteousness of an unacknowledged and excluded elite, an unshakable faith in his own "inner light". Italy for him, like Paris and London and Provence before it became the spiritual home of the "live tradition", its past everywhere apparent in the present, as time is

laid “ply over ply” in the *Cantos*. And here, with fascism, came a *Risorgimento* which confirmed his deepest convictions. His articles in 1944 for the newspaper *Il Popolo* reiterate all his earlier principles:

The Fascist dictum was defined years ago; we believe in the freedom to express an opinion on the part of those qualified to hold an opinion....

Do you believe in law? Very well, but remember the eternal law of nature; the strong shall dominate the weak....

It is the traditional arrogance of the deracine bohemian, scornful of the class which produced him, its demeaning contiguity and compromising claims on his loyalty. In reaction, he aligns himself with a timeless excellence, just as, in the *Cantos*, sequence and distance are compacted and overthrown in a mind out of key with its time. The young Pound found in Vorticism the aestheticization of reality, the cult of hard edges and dynamic energies, the aristocratic anti-humanism, which were to shape both his poetic and political beliefs. But again, this was no mere personal discovery, but the trajectory of a class. In his rejection of the philistinism and timidity of the petty-bourgeoisie, Pound remained ironically typical of that class, which found, in the glamorous melodrama of fascism, a similar intoxication and excitement, the thrill of living out its own dangerous impulses and denying its own deepest anxieties.

It is here that Heymann’s book is most disappointing. It is a useful compendium, particularly of Pound’s broadcasts and letters to fascist politicians, all of which Heymann was able to cull from FBI archives, in the wake of Elliot Richardson’s post-Watergate ruling on the citizen’s right of access under the Freedom of Information Act. But the book rarely rises above the journalistic implications of its subtitle: it is a “profile”, with all the limiting superficiality that implies. Nevertheless, Heymann offers enough insights into Pound’s career to suggest that he is capable of writing that much more difficult book, which would interpret Pound’s politics, and his writings, not as a private phenomenon, but as a *symptomatic* destiny, in an era when the western intelligentsia was collectively drawn to authoritarian and irrationalist allegiance of one kind or another. The attraction of both fascism and stalinism (Pound admired Stalin almost as much as Mussolini) tells us a great deal about the social ambivalence of the petty-bourgeois intellectual between the two wars: about his yearning for community and wholeness and his contradictory elitism and self-regard—a paradox which transcends the formulaic differences of Left and Right, and explains an Auden as much as a Pound. This is not to

collapse fascism and stalinism into a single, indistinguishable "totalitarianism", either as ideology or social practice, or to question the sincerity of the commitments on either side, but merely to suggest that similar men, from the same class, were attracted to one cause or the other for what in the end were essentially similar, socially determined reasons. Here, surely, lies the continuing fascination of Pound. For a "political profile" would not finally be a parable of personal aberration and redeeming genius, but the analysis of the contradictions of an epoch. In this sense, it may be that Pound's lesson, for our own generation, is a lesson as yet still only half learned.

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