

EZRA POUND RECONSIDERED

ALAN NEAME

EZRA POUND was born in the Middle West in 1885: he came to Europe in 1908: he was at the height of his fame in the 'thirties with the publication of successive volumes of his title-less epic poem known as *The Cantos*: in 1945 he disappeared from the public eye. This is what happened. From the late 'twenties Ezra Pound had been in sympathy with the régime in Italy, seeing in Mussolini a practical philosopher after his own heart, 'ordering', 'building', 'draining swamps', 'renewing the empire': a creative ruler comparable to his other heroes, Thomas Jefferson, Pietro-Leopoldo of Tuscany, Sigismondo Malatesta, and the Great Emperors and Divine Sages of ancient China. In 1939, having spent seventeen years in Italy, he returned to the United States to warn the American people against Roosevelt's policy, unsuccessfully urging them to reject it before it led them into war. Back in Italy in 1940, but before Italy had entered the war, he began a series of broadcasts on Rome Radio against Roosevelt, and American 'usurocracy'. After the declaration of war, he continued the broadcasts with increasing animus; was indicted as a traitor; in 1945 was taken into detention by the invading United States army, and imprisoned alone in a barbed-wire cage in a military prison at Pisa. In this cage, which according to reports available, offered no protection at all, he spent two months, being then sixty years old, exposed to the variations of the Italian climate and to the ill-treatment of the negro guards who used to while away their time tormenting him with their bayonets. When his health began to give way under the strain he was removed to the frugal luxury of a tent. In November 1945 he was flown to Washington for trial, was declared unfit to plead, and in January 1946 certified insane and confined in a criminal lunatic asylum where he has been for the last six years.

To the question: why was he not executed as a traitor? there is no answer except that he had a narrow escape. To the question: is he insane? there is the evidence of the *Pisan Cantos*, written in the 'glasshouse' tent and published in 1949; a wide correspondence, vivid, witty and prompt; and high-powered literary and musica.

activity, of which he is the active inspiration, in America, England and Italy.

Among the most recent of Mr Pound's works to appear in England is *An Introduction to the Economic Nature of the United States* originally published in Italian during the war in 1944. It is the first of a projected series of seven *Money Pamphlets*¹ the purpose of which is 'to present to the public the evidence in the much discussed case of Ezra Pound. This material has never been readily accessible to the English reader.' Two others now available are reprints: *Social Credit: An Impact* (1935), and *What is Money For?* (1939); the remaining four, which are still in preparation, were written and published in Italy between the years 1942-1944, and include the titles: *America, Roosevelt, and the Causes of the Present War* and *Selected Radio Speeches*.

The three pamphlets at present available define with an impetuous simplicity the theories that were so largely contributory to Mr Pound's present unhappy position, and will be of great interest to anyone with a taste for disentangling fact from the prejudices which have inevitably been aroused in patriotic and unpatriotic breasts. I say simplicity, because Mr Pound's works, though nearly all bearing his hallmark of impetuosity, have sometimes confounded the uninitiated readers worse than a confrontation with the Sybilline Oracles or the mysterious treatises of the Cabbalists. But here there are no such perplexities: his thesis is comprehended under three simple headings:

- i. Economic systems should exist for the people, not the people for the economic system.
- ii. The State ought to control economic life *in the interests* of the people.
- iii. (a) Money is not intrinsically valuable, but is only a measure of exchange.
 - (b) There must be the *right* amount of money in circulation.
 - (c) Money must not be secured against that which is non-transferable: i.e. land and work, but against the *abundance of Nature*, and human productivity.

Further information on this subject, and on practically every other subject under heaven, from the poetic symbolism of Chinese characters to the late Mr Ernest Hemingway, may be found in a

¹ Peter Russell, London 1950, all at 2s. 6d; except *Selected Radio Speeches*: 3s. 6d.

volume of Mr Pound's selected Letters² covering the years 1907-1941. The principal treasure of this collection is the correspondence between Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in 1921 over the draft of *The Waste Land*. Fortunately Mr Eliot's side of the correspondence is also included, and the relationship between the two poets at that time is apparent from their modes of address: Mr Pound, to whom the completed work was dedicated, indites his letter: *Filio dilecto mihi*; the younger poet replies: *Cher maître*. In later letters to the same, Mr Pound begins: *Waal, naow, me deer protopheriius*. From this, no doubt, the idiom of many of the letters may be deduced; but, for good measure, and for the delicious title of the work, I cannot resist quoting from a recent Italian treatise on this very subject: *Palinsesti del Protoumanesimo Poetico Americano* by Luciano Anceschi:³

...*La parola scritta, così sembra portare ancora in se non so ch  luce acuta della parola pronunciata ad alta voce, non so ch  gloria, ch  autorit , nelle variazioni degli umori, felice o irritata...* —I know not what glory, what authority... it is a splendid passage and splendidly true. The critic adverts further to *cadenze sottolineate, e simboli, e riferimenti celati* and ends his period with a triumphant *e, ad ogni ripresa, sempre diversamente illuminati*. It is a passage that the author of the Letters would certainly appreciate.

The variety in the Letters may well leave the reader gasping. Opening the book at random I find, in juxtaposition, a verse letter to James Joyce, entitled: 'Ballade of the most gallant Mulligan, Senator in ordinary / and the frivolous milkwench of Hogan'; a letter to Miss Amy Lowell containing scarcely more than the astounding sentence: 'Auw shucks! dearie, ain't you the hell-roarer, ain't you the kuss'; and a third, to Harriet Monroe, editrix of *Poetry*, on the difference between Judaism and Christianity.

Mr Pound's views on Christianity are illuminating. He was brought up 'in American school and sunday (sic) school. Took the stuff for granted, and at one time with great seriousness, but becoming enraged to frenzy at the noise of the church bells (Protestant) of Kensington, W.8', he began to question the teaching he had received, read Trollope, observed the 'porcine physiognomy of other parsons' and became an anti-clerical.

² *The Letters of Ezra Pound*, ed. by D. D. Paige. (Faber; 25s.)

³ *Estratta da Letteratura Arte Contemporanea*, Firenze, 1950.

Later, having found no evidence of 'any health or cleanliness in British religion'—and indeed I do not recommend any Protestant of sensibility to read what Mr Pound has to say of the Puritan sects—he conceived it might be possible to restart a more wholesome Christianity in the Templo Malatestiana at Rimini. 'Country priest not the least disturbed that I should be making my farewells *solo ai elefanti*. Namely that I had come in for friendly word with the stone elephants and not after altar furniture. Still further sign of enlightenment from old nun in hospital: E.P. not catholic. No, thank heaven! NOT protestant, not jew, but accepted greek deities. "Zè tutta un religione" (said the old nun). Oh well it's all a religion.'

Poundian experts maintain that he was speaking of aesthetics.

In the matter of revealed religion he is commendably cautious. 'When you don't understand it, let it alone. This is the copy-book maxim whereagainst sin prose philosophers, though it is explicit in Kung on spirits.'⁴

The reference is to the Sayings of Confucius (*Kung-fu-tse*). 'The Master never talked of prodigies, record-breakings, natural phenomena or spirits.'⁵

'Tzu-Kung (one of Confucius's disciples) said: *Our Master's views on culture and the outward manifestations of goodness, we are permitted to hear; but about the original nature of Man and the ways of Heaven he will tell us nothing at all.*'⁶

Confucius did not meddle with metaphysics: his life was spent in regulating 'practical' affairs. Now Pound has very pertinently remarked that 'Confucius we receive as wisdom. The greek philosophers have been served up as highbrows',⁷ and in the matter of revelation he follows his beloved Sage, and 'tells us nothing at all'. His views on the 'culture and the outward manifestations of goodness' of the Catholic Church, we are however, permitted to hear. Consequently when we read such startling dicta as: 'Again I repeat: I could be quite a "good Catholic" IF they would let me pick my own saints and theologians',⁸ we should be wrong to suppose that he is protesting against the Faith, or that he is even referring to it. He is speaking of Catholic economics; and the saints and theologians envisaged are Saint Ambrose and Saint Antoninus of Florence. Saint Ambrose he

⁴ *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 127. ⁵ *Analects*, VII, 20. ⁶ *ibid.*, V, 12. ⁷ *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 23. ⁸ *ibid.*, p. 189.

especially venerates for his successful efforts to 'govern', and for his fulminations against corrupt monopolists:

Captans annonam maledictus in plebe sit:

a phrase that appears englished in the Cantos:

Hoggers of harvest, cursed among the people.

Saint Antoninus he reveres for his canons against usury—which Pound holds to be the ruin of the century. To these Fathers he adds perhaps unexpectedly Scotus Erigena, on the strength of his maxim:

Authority springs from right reason.

This he takes to mean that where there is *good economic law*, as in the days of Saint Antoninus, there is the duty to obey; and from Saint Ambrose to Saint Antoninus good economic law did obtain. So he argues that on the teaching of these three thinkers 'one might construct a decent philosophy, not merely a philosophism'.⁹ While the Church proclaimed its economy of the Just Price, *ali* was well. But '*the Church declined, as a force social, as a force intellectual, when its hierarchy ceased to believe [its] own dogma.*'¹⁰ Impious as this may seem, it is as well to recall that he does not write of Faith but of economic principles. The argument proceeds then, that not very long after Saint Antoninus, 'the hierarchy ceased to *obey/observe its own economic canons*'; with the need of loans for the rebuilding of St Peter's and the ever-increasing shortage of coin, the Christian conscience became less resistant to the temptations of usury; consequently when the challenge came, 'Leo X didn't take Luther's thought as a serious matter: he did not expect others to do so': nor did he perceive its economic corollaries.¹¹ And in the ensuing upheaval 'the canonical prohibition against usury disappeared. Polite society did not consider usury as Dante did, that is, damned to the same circle of Hell as the sodomites, both acting against the potential abundance of nature.'¹² After that calamity all is dark until the days of Cardinal Antonelli and Cavour; then the repute of the *Catholica* begins to revive; *Quadragesimo Anno* and the other economic passages from the Encyclicals are said to have 'put the Church on the map for thousands of people who had and have "no religion". These few pages of honesty... etc., etc.'¹³

Brickbats and bouquets are handed out in all directions; but in

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 76. ¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 27. ¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 75. ¹² *Introd.: Econ. Nature of U.S.*, p. 14. ¹³ *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 76.

fairness one must say that for every reference to the Angelic Doctor in terms such as these: 'Not that I want to prove Aquinas wrong; I merely think him unsound', or 'Grosseteste was a serious character. Albert de la Magna was an intellect... Aquinas lacked faith': there are half a dozen passages directed against the so-called Reform in terms much stronger than the one I quote: 'A defect, among others, of puritanism, or of protestantism or of Calvin the damned, *and* Luther and all the rest of these blighters.....'.¹⁴ For every demand for the rehabilitation of Erigena, there are appalling diatribes against 'Baxter, the swine who sold his king and his church to the usurers'.

It is significant that whenever Pound talks of the Church, he means the Church: and it is some consolation to hear him say at last:

'This much I believe to be also true: there is more civilisation lying around unused in the crannies, zenanas, interstices of that dusty and Baroque fabric than in all the other institutions of the occident.'

To which, since the Americans are not likely ever to release him from his captivity, we can but reply:

'...All our wit
And reading brings us to a truer sense
Of sorrow.—In the eternal church, sir,
I do hope we shall not part thus.'

¹⁴ *Jefferson &/or Mussolini*, p. 44.