

Introduction

When I first began work on this study, I was fortunate enough to have at my disposal two superb research libraries, one at Duke and one at Chapel Hill. But neither collection, I soon discovered, included a hard copy of Ezra Pound's *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* – an eclectic and disturbing text that was central to Pound, crucial to my understanding of him, but little known outside Poundian circles and often marginalized within them. Eventually, as dumb luck would have it, I stumbled upon a copy in the political science section of a local used-book store whose main holdings, it seemed, were in gardening and science fiction. It would be easy, of course, to overread the politics of this curious little episode, but let me suggest that the eventual conclusions we might reach about its significance would likely reproduce one of the two dominant modes of Pound criticism in the past forty years: the conspiracy theory, which imagines that the traditional Pound industry has engaged in a more or less conscious suppression of the embarrassingly political Pound (who is distilled in texts like *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*), the better to defend the supposedly autonomous work of the poet; and the autonomy-of-art theory of those who would so conspire.

My characterization of the situation is obviously schematic, but it serves to illustrate my larger point: that critics who would engage Pound's work find themselves framed from the outset by a kind of critical cold war, one that forces them into something resembling the role of Marc Antony at the funeral in *Julius Caesar*. Over the years, Pound critics have come too often to *either bury or praise him*, to constitute him by turns either as a Fascist and anti-Semite in his very fiber and genesis or as a literary genius whose “true” self (the self that produced the stalwart poetry of high modernism) can somehow be separated from the disturbing and sometimes revolting political and racial proclamations of the sort we find in Pound's later prose and in his Rome Radio speeches.¹

If I have just glanced synoptically at the theoretical oversimplification

of this all-too-habitual condition of Pound studies, then let me be a bit clearer about its critically disabling consequences. A politically engaged criticism of Pound would, by definition, need to move beyond this displacement of broad economic, social, and ideological problems onto Pound, the unique – and therefore romanticized – subject of admiration or revulsion. It is here, at this juncture and against this pressing critical necessity, that the either-orist imperative so often at work in Pound studies exerts its institutionally powerful and politically disabling force. If we want to come to terms with the ideological character of Pound's cultural project, then we need to explore precisely what is ideological about it: its internally contradictory, fractured, and self-conflicted nature,² its capacity to appeal in some respects even as it repels in others.

In practical terms, the central contradiction that a political reading of Pound needs to engage is that his palpable attractions – his early defense of individual and cultural difference in the face of economic Taylorization and cultural commodification, and his recognition that problems of aesthetics are at once fully social and even, finally, economic – are inextricably wedded to his reprehensible obsessions. And to do justice to that complexity we must work, in turn, to avoid making one of those dimensions of Pound a mere epiphenomenon, a mere negative moment, of the other. Only then can we provide an adequate picture of Pound's literary ideology in its full range and power, instead of a caricature of it. And only then can we begin to dispel the critically facile and politically naive impression that once we have unmasked Pound's ideological failures or declared them beside the aesthetic point, we have once again made the world safe for literary democracy. For my purposes here, we need to recognize that Ezra Pound's literary ideology has at least as much in common with Ralph Waldo Emerson's brand of American individualism as it does with Benito Mussolini's Italian fascism, and we need to realize at the same time that this is not necessarily good news. Pound's liberationist Emersonian side cannot be separated from his authoritarian fascist side: That, it seems to me, is the disturbing and instructive political point that the polarization of Pound studies so often mitigates against.

As I have already suggested, it is not my intention here to replace that polarization – or the differences kept too neatly separate by it – with my own totalizing structure. Instead, I want to reframe those differences (between the “good” and “bad” Pound, a “bad” Pound and a “good” Emerson, and even, indirectly, between American romanticism and modernism) within a larger literary ideology inscribed in Emerson's work and reproduced in striking detail, but with important differences, in the cultural project of Ezra Pound. This is not to suggest, of course, that there is some sort of monolithic American literary ideology that is

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immune in its totalizing grandeur to the concrete determinations of class, race, gender, ethnicity, and other historical contingencies. Such a reading would describe not the truth of the literary ideology at work here (not, in other words, the historical and material conditions that make it possible to think that ideology in the first place) but rather the unchanging, imaginary content which that ideology would have us believe. It *is* to suggest, however, that in both bodies of writing we find a powerful ideological structure that can accommodate and indeed make use of historical, cultural, and individual differences, if only to politically recontain and disarm them by reconstituting them in light of some overarching principle (Emerson's "Reason" or "Oversoul," say, or Pound's Confucian "way") by which the *value* of those differences is determined.

My point, then, is not that Emerson is an important and unrecognized "influence" on Pound.³ Nor am I arguing that Pound's unexpected linkage with Emerson diminishes his relations to the many different figures in American history and culture with whom he felt common cause (Thomas Jefferson, the Adamses, Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren, Walt Whitman, and Henry James are the most storied examples). The Pound/Emerson connection does not compete with these other prominent and important influences, because, in a fundamental sense, it encompasses and comprehends them.

What I mean by this may be clarified by reference to a recent representative reading of Pound's relationship with two of his more illustrious American forebears: Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Those relations changed, of course, and as Reed Way Dasenbrock had recently argued, Pound's shift in focus and admiration from Jefferson to Adams in the 1930s is politically symptomatic of his deepening infatuation with Italian fascism, and specifically with Benito Mussolini.⁴ According to Dasenbrock, when Jefferson appears in the middle cantos, he is admired as representative of *virtù*, of the ethical fortitude, intellectual energy, and pragmatic innovation that must be embodied in the man of state if the republic is to fend off the corruption that always accompanies commerce.⁵ Adams, on the other hand, comes to supplant Jefferson in Pound's political concerns more and more as the decade of the thirties wears on – chiefly, Dasenbrock argues, because Pound becomes more interested during this period in the techniques, mechanisms, and pragmatics of government. Increasingly, Pound found not Jefferson's ethical example but Adams's constitutional theorization (and specifically his insistence on the strong, single leader) a more promising means of ensuring that the state would not succumb to the debasements of oligarchy.⁶

But the more fundamental point here, it seems to me, is that Pound's interest in both strategies is driven by his dedication above all else to the

sanctity of the individual, whom such principles and techniques are meant to serve in the first place and who constitutes their *raison d'être*. Pound's abiding concern with the individual, in other words, is what the Russian formalists would call "the motivation of the device" for his interest in Jefferson and Adams. After all, Jeffersonian innovation is not a good in and of itself – indeed, it might well be a recipe for anarchy – nor is the political machinery of Adams, which constitutes for Pound just so much legalistic scaffolding if not erected for ethically defensible purposes. The strategies of both Jefferson and Adams, in other words, are just that – strategies. They are secondary phenomena built atop a more fundamental commitment to an ideologically prior form of individualism that it is their duty to support and help realize.⁷

So I am not so much questioning the importance in Pound's work of acknowledged American influences such as Jefferson's agrarian ideal or Adams's more aristocratic concern with political stability as I am reframing them. And in any case, it is important to remind ourselves in the course of that reframing that whatever Pound himself may have thought about his inheritance of those principles and ideals, it is only a part of the story, and in many ways the least dependable part. It is perfectly possible, in other words, that Pound is an indifferent critic of Pound. The same might be said, too, of our other subject, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson felt little affinity for Jacksonianism. Indeed, some of his most bitter criticism is reserved for what he called "this rank, rabble party, this Jacksonism of the country."⁸ But, as Michael T. Gilmore has shown, his social critique is nevertheless thoroughly enmeshed in Jacksonianism's most fundamental ideological characteristic: Both "wanted to preserve the virtues of a simple agrarian republic without sacrificing the rewards and conveniences of modern capitalism."⁹

My central point, then, is that Pound's connection with Emerson must be viewed not as a relationship of conscious affinity, admiration, or influence but as one of *ideological* kinship in a broad cultural logic whose operations extend far beyond the ability of the individual to master them by personal fiat or disarm them by soul-searching and self-reflection. It is in this sense that Pound's relation to Emerson encompasses and comprehends his relations to Adams, Jefferson, and other freely acknowledged sources. And it is from this vantage that we can see how Pound's more familiar political and cultural inheritances were motivated from the very outset of his career by an individualism whose radical, all-or-nothing character is quintessentially Emersonian.

Part of what marks Pound's individualism as Emersonian is its sheer intensity, but it is also something more, something built into its very structure. In both writers, those overarching principles ensuring the sanctity of individual difference have nothing to do, it turns out, with

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the individual; indeed, they are utterly *other than* the self, and their power resides in the fact that they are not contingent upon all of those things (gender, race, regional upbringing, and so on) that we usually associate with distinctive selfhood. For Emerson and for Pound, the paradoxical fact about individual difference – the very engine of their social critique and the origin and end of their cultural politics – is that the individual can ascend to the pinnacle of selfhood only by disappearing at the very moment of its attainment.

In Emerson's corpus this strange and powerful form of individualism finds its supreme expression in what is probably its most famous appearance (or disappearance) in American literature, in the "transparent eyeball" passage in *Nature*, where Emerson imagines it with maximum compression: "I am nothing; I see all." In Pound, it finds a different, more restrained voice in his invocation, in Canto XIII, of the Confucian shibboleth "each in his nature." Here, as in Emerson, the self achieves true selfhood only by becoming transparent to – subject to – the enduring laws and rhythms of a larger natural and ethical totality. What separates Emerson's fully realized self from the monomania of, say, Melville's Ahab is that the Emersonian self has become "part or parcel of God." In the same way, what prevents Pound's Confucian imperative from serving as *carte blanche* for rampant egoism and anarchy is that the subject can have his nature only if nature has him. "His nature," it turns out, is not "his" at all. We can all possess different things (our natures, our selves) only if we all possess – or more precisely are *possessed by* – the same thing: Emerson's God or Spirit, Pound's Confucian "way."

If all of this sounds familiar, it should, for it describes nothing other than the central organizing structure of the economic and ideological totality of Pound's and Emerson's America: private property. It is this structure that provides the conditions of possibility – the social "logic of content," to borrow Fredric Jameson's phrase – for the radical individualism of Pound's and Emerson's "American literary ideology." I have given it that name in my title because that ideological structure seems to me so remarkably pervasive in American culture that it is nearly invisible. Although I cannot pursue that argument in any convincing way here, it is worth noting that many of our most exciting and persuasive critics have found the structuring force of the logic of property at work in many different registers in American culture: Wai-chee Dimock in Herman Melville's "poetics of individualism"; Walter Benn Michaels in "the logic of naturalism"; Carolyn Porter in "the plight of the participant observer" in Emerson, Henry James, and others; Michael T. Gilmore in the canonical works of American romanticism; and Houston A. Baker, Jr., in what he calls the "fundamental, 'subtextual' dimension of Afro-American discourse," that is, the "fully *commercial* view" found

in the slave narratives of Frederick Douglass and many others, where the structure of oppression at work in the logic of property is unmasked when the self, ironically and tragically, tries to wrest *private* ownership of itself away from another.¹⁰

My argument, then, is that the radical individualism of both Pound and Emerson reproduces the structure and contradictions of private property in conceiving self-realization in terms of the logic of self-possession, that is, in essentially, if sometimes obliquely, Lockean terms. What makes their cultural projects distinctively and, as it were, normatively American, however, is how relentlessly they push the structure of Lockean self-ownership to its conceptual and ideological limits. In their emphatic insistence upon the central value of the autonomous, inalienable property of self, Pound and Emerson map, as few others have, the ideological attractions and dangers of radical individualism. They articulate what we might well think of as the idealistic and dangerous American perfection of Lockean liberalism.¹¹

We can sharpen our sense of the specificity of this kind of individualism in Pound and Emerson by briefly contrasting it with another famous literary expression of American individualism, namely, Walt Whitman's. Even though Whitman's democratic impulses (if not his rather more proletarian ones) are shared by Pound and Emerson, the Whitmanian self is, structurally speaking, a *decentered* subjectivity fundamentally at odds with the self-possession of Emersonian self-reliance and Poundian *virtù*. The "Myself" of Whitman's *Song*, Larzer Ziff writes, is "clearly close kin to Emerson's Me," but for Whitman "the same all-dominant individual is far more social. His kingdom includes nature but it is finally a kingdom peopled with fellow men," a "swarming collectivity."¹² The Whitmanian self is partner to what Donald Pease has called a "mass logic" in which "the masses free or 'untie' the individual from bondage to his own person," so that he "both completes himself, hence knows perfect liberty, and experiences himself completed by everything else, hence knows democratic equality."¹³

The Whitmanian self, in other words, is clearly *other*-reliant in a way that is intrinsically antithetical to the individualism of Emerson and Pound. In this connection we need only contrast Whitman's "man-en-masse" and "body electric" with Emerson's many proverbial characterizations of self-reliance (and with the biting critiques of the Jacksonian crowd which that doctrine generated). And as for Pound, he may have acknowledged his bonds to Whitman when he allowed in 1909 that "the vital part of my message, taken from the sap and fibre of America, is the same as his." But he nevertheless found Whitman "an exceedingly nauseating pill" whose "crudity is an exceeding [*sic*] great stench"¹⁴ because his poetry was driven too much by "his time and his people" and too

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little by the *virtù*, the centered individuality, which might organize that social and historical content into the sort of poetry that Pound himself wanted to write, poetry of precision and discrimination.

Whitman's "mass logic," then, throws into relief the structural specificity and ideological kinship of Pound and Emerson's individualism. But to identify that kinship as "ideological" is not by any means to say that the critiques generated by their version of individualism were not rhetorically powerful, socially volatile, and potentially dangerous to the status quo. It is to say, however, that the Lockean individualist basis of those social critiques operates as an ideological "strategy of containment"¹⁵ serving to disarm and delimit their full economic and political implications by recasting what are properly issues of fundamental economic and political structure into problems of ethics and personal conduct.¹⁶ Thus, both writers reproduce on the level of the subject the basic economic structure (in this case, private property) that organizes the kind of society against which their social critiques rebelled in the first place. And this is how ideology performs its political work, by providing a safe staging ground for democratic debate and pluralist critique, while at the same time siphoning off potentially revolutionary discontent and discord.¹⁷

Within that space of containment, though, the ideology of radical individualism in Pound and Emerson ranged freely and often tempestuously between the polar extremes of democracy and elitism, libertarianism and authoritarianism. From beginning to end, both explored, plumbed, but never abandoned those extremes, and in neither one do we find a clearly sustained and coherent development away from a democratic position and toward a more consolidated elitist one (or vice versa). We should not be surprised, I think, to discover this sort of instability in the individualism of Pound and Emerson; indeed, the fundamental point here *is* that very instability. A subject that is conceived on the Lockean model (the internal contradictions of which are only intensified by what I have called its American extension and perfection) is bound to be extremely unstable, as unstable, in fact, as private property itself, that strange entity which is riven by, indeed *constituted* by, contradiction, because it is both a concrete object with a use value and yet merely a vehicle for the abstract exchange value it bears. Like private property under capitalism, the Emersonian or Poundian self is sovereign and inalienable and yet is threatened at every moment with alienation and effacement. After all, as Frank Lentricchia points out, private property "is property only if it *is* alienable."¹⁸

It is in this sense, then – and not in their overt beliefs, attitudes, or preferences – that Pound and Emerson are genealogically bound by a shared ideology. At the same time, however, it is important to remember

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that ideological structures predispose and delimit, but do not wholly determine in advance, their effects in practice. The same ideological formation may produce (to use Kenneth Burke's appropriately inelegant formulation) very different "unintended by-products," and we must pay attention to "how the particular choice of materials and methods in which to embody the ideal gives rise to conditions somewhat at variance with the spirit of the ideal."¹⁹ This is surely the case with Pound's growing endorsement of fascist state power in the thirties, which is nevertheless driven by an intense Jeffersonian desire to protect the individual against rampant corruption and exploitation by the powers of international finance.²⁰ And it is just as surely wrong, as one recent critic has reminded us, to conflate "Emerson's commitment to the appropriation of nature with its future applications by corporate trusts or land-grabbing expansionists."²¹

For my purposes here, this means that we need not feel compelled to argue *either* that Pound and Emerson are both fascists *or* that neither is simply because they both reproduce the ideology I will be investigating in the following pages. As even casual readers of Pound and Emerson will know, that ideology leads to very different (and sometimes very real) political consequences in these two writers. It does so in large part for a reason that is fully on the surface of both bodies of work yet is easy to overlook: Pound and Emerson, as we shall see, adhere to conceptions of praxis and the value of action that could not be more different. What Pound called the "volitionist" imperative of his later ethics and economics led him to actualize the disturbing possibilities for practice contained in the ideology of Emerson but held in check by the latter's fiercely idealist impatience with social and political programs of any kind. We must not only allow that difference between Pound and Emerson, I think, but invite it, because only by doing so can we begin to understand the possibilities and dangers of practice contained in our cultural hopes and aesthetic ideals. Only by doing so can we begin to trace the full range of those very different orbits that unexpectedly encircle the same ideological firmament, expansive and yet familiar.

In the first four chapters, I focus primarily on Pound's career through the period 1917–1918, when he sought to establish his vision of a culture that would respect "the peripheries of the individual" and would enable the self to maintain what Emerson, in an apocalyptic moment for American culture, had called "an original relation to the universe." Pound found the defense of individual difference put into exemplary cultural practice not in Emerson, however, but in the stylistic rigor of Henry James, whom Pound praised for his hatred of oppression and his "continuing labor for individual freedom." Interestingly enough though,

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James traced *his* own sense of individual difference back to Emerson, whose visits to the James household Henry vividly remembered, and whose “independent and original way” was to find even more forceful expression in the later, pragmatist career of Henry’s brother, William. The Jameses, then, serve as a bridge spanning the years and stylistic differences between Pound and Emerson, and they serve for my purposes to locate Pound not as a modernist so much as the inheritor of a very American lineage of individualist cultural practice. It was that lineage which would be maintained in Pound’s reviews of Robert Frost, another writer of difference whom Pound in London vigorously “boomed,” as he put it, despite his own most deeply ingrained tastes and preferences. In doing so, Pound made good on his central claim for the role of “The Serious Artist”: that he always works toward “a recognition of differences, of the right of differences to exist, of interest in finding things different.”

Like Emerson both early and late, who recognized that “the machine unmans the user” by turning “the whole man” into a mere appendage of his productive means (or the American Scholar into a “bookworm”), Pound’s early social critique was in open revolt against capitalist modernity’s tendency to view the self as a spectral abstraction, as a merely economic agent – as “a unit,” Pound wrote in “Provincialism the Enemy,” “a piece of the machine.” We tend to forget that Pound was born only three years after Emerson’s death; it is just as easy to overlook how much continuity exists between Emerson’s economic moment and Pound’s own. Because of the extremely rapid and unimpeded development of assembly-line capitalism in mid-nineteenth-century New England, Emerson was able to glimpse, before the fact as it were, the alienating productive matrix of modernism that Pound would later confront in its fully developed form. For the early Pound, as for Marx before him and Antonio Gramsci after him, the Taylorization and commodification of capitalist society threatened the very vitality and potency of the individual and aimed to turn the self into a desexualized deformation, a “gelded ant.” Against the materialism of Marx and Gramsci, however, and in tandem with the idealism of his ideological ancestor Emerson, Pound believed that the answer to those structures of oppression and alienation lay not in collective economic transformation but rather within the individual who could somehow escape his or her economic determinations by holding fast to the vital realm of culture, the realm of freedom.

From the very outset of his career, however, Pound would encounter a system of *literary* production that seemed a frighteningly direct expression of this imperious economic base and that tempered his humanist idealism with the unmistakably material constraints he confronted every

day in his attempt to establish himself as a poet and critic. Extending Emerson's incisive critique of conformity in "The American Scholar," and voicing what Emerson had called "the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire," Pound identified in the big American magazines (*Harper's*, the *Atlantic*) and in anthologies like Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* a "system of publishing control" that promoted conformity in the writer and the writer's products and economically enforced that conformity in the literary marketplace. What Pound called "the style of 1880" may have been good for the magazine business, but it was an anathema to a culture of individual difference and social change.

In these terms, Pound's Imagist project must be viewed as an intervention, indirectly but fully political, against the deadening abstraction of capitalist economy and its cultural expressions. Like his modernist ideological counterpart Theodor Adorno (who sought to reaffirm "the preponderance of the object" in the face of abstract exchange value and the "identity principle," which was its privileged conceptual form), Pound in his Imagism wanted to free the self by restoring the world of concrete objects to a kind of complexity that defied cultural formulas and automated convention. In essays like "Vorticism" and "The New Sculpture," Pound made it clear that the fully liberated individual could be an individual only by letting the other be other.

But true to his ideological inheritance (which would become clear in his fitful attempts to reconcile Imagism's premium on "objectivity" with the primary freedom of the artist), Pound believed that the power to renovate and restore the world of the object, and so liberate individual vision, finally lay with the self's power to rise above, if only it would, those very forces of the literary market whose constraining power Pound had analyzed so compellingly in his early prose. "Emotion," he maintained, is the "organizer of form" and could by sheer internal pressure liberate the world of things. And when we ask of him, as we must, what organizes emotion? his answer – it is wholly Emersonian in structure and impulse – can only be: the self and only the self, lest its generative political promise, its destructuring "*whim*" (as Emerson called it in "Self-Reliance"), be lost.

Finally, however, this ethical idealism – and its politically disabling refusal to subject the self to collective structures and alliances of any kind – may be seen as an ideological expression of a more properly political problem: the tendency, in Emerson, Pound, William James, and many another, to figure the self in terms that reproduce the language, structure, and contradictions of private property. From the very outset of his career, in "I gather the Limbs of Osiris," "Patria Mia," and "The Serious Artist," Pound would argue that the "donative" artist can give to his