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## *Introduction*

*Ira B. Nadel*

Most of the stuff I write does not pretend to make itself intelligible to anyone who has not done a certain quite large amount of reading.<sup>1</sup>

Ezra Pound, who published his first poem in 1902 and his last in 1969, understood the necessity of context. The range, volume, and arcane nature of his material, as impressive as it was immense, required background which he expected of his readers. Initially, this meant knowledge of the Provençal poets, Dante, Confucius, and a healthy dose of Greek and Latin, as well as Chinese and American history. As editor, translator, anthologist, essayist, and poet, he anticipated that his readers would understand as well the sources, allusions, and origins of his work. The complex of materials was part of being modern.

Pound worked hard to educate his peers who recognized his skills. T.S. Eliot called him “*il miglior fabbro*,” “the better craftsman.” James Joyce declared he was “a miracle of ebullency, gusto and help.” Yeats recalled that to “talk over a poem with him” was “like getting you to put a sentence into dialect. All becomes clear and natural.” He redirected the poetry of Yeats, discovered Robert Frost, and promoted H.D. He edited *The Waste Land*, oversaw the publication of *Ulysses*, and created new movements like Imagism and Vorticism. Wyndham Lewis summed him up as the “demon pantechinon driver, busy with removal of the old world into new quarters.”

But to understand Pound, it is necessary to understand the context of his work and life. That is precisely what this volume presents – the placement of his career within the social, political, historical, and literary developments of his period, one that ranges from the Georgian Revival in poetry to postmodern theory. The Boer War ended the year of his first publication and Richard M. Nixon became President in his last. Braque and Picasso painted their first Cubist paintings the year Pound published his first book (1908) and Andy Warhol painted his “Campbell Soup Cans II” series in the

year of Pound's last publication (1969). Pound's writing encompasses two world wars, the birth of nations, and a dramatic shift in sexual attitudes. Women got the vote, and men got to the moon. Nationalism competed with empire as print culture found new methods of dissemination.

Pound's work in many ways represents a shorthanded cultural history of civilization. It begins with a revival of the classical past through Homer and then the Roman poet Propertius, before turning to Renaissance figures, notably the *condottiere* and patron of Rimini, Sigismondo Malatesta. Then, after an engagement with American leaders like John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, he addresses the economic policy of "Social Credit" and the social policies of fascism. But he also paid attention to the East, through his encounter with Chinese poetry, Japanese drama, and Confucian thought. So convincing was his understanding of Chinese poetry that in 1928 T.S. Eliot famously wrote that "Chinese poetry, as we know it today, is something invented by Ezra Pound" (*SPS*, xvii). What appealed so strongly to Pound was the Confucian discipline "*to call people and things by their names . . . to see that the terminology was exact*" (*GK*, 16). Pound reaches widely and broadly using global culture as his canvas. It is no surprise that the title of his 1938 prose volume, *Guide to Kulchur*, means *all* cultures.

Pound's work also represents a history of modernist publishing. From periodical and newspaper publication of his poetry, he moved to little magazines and then limited edition presses like John Rodker (London) or the Hours Press (Paris). He found that these elite outlets concentrated on small print runs of physically attractive, well-designed, expensive volumes which enlarged the distinctive, avant-garde nature of his work. But as social and economic ideas became more prominent in his work, he wanted greater access to readers. By the 1930s he began to publish with more prominent university and literary trade presses: the University of Washington Press, Faber and Faber, Farrar & Rinehart and then New Directions. Later in his career, he turned to publishers of a more political character, notably Stanley Nott in the UK and Henry Regnery in America. As a poet, political/economic writer, and frequent contributor to magazines and newspapers, Pound chose publishers who reflected his independent approaches. And whether it was Elkin Mathews in London, Nancy Cunard in Paris, Giovanni Scheiwiller in Milan, or James Laughlin in New York, Pound directed, cajoled, and at times interfered with the production of his volumes. In his essay on Pound and publishing in this volume, Gregory Barnhisel reviews the evolution of Pound and his publishers, emphasizing the tenuous balance between his artistic interests and commercial desires.

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Pound, of course, promoted others, from T.S. Eliot and Joyce to Robert Frost and Louis Zukofsky. His active role in shaping, if not defining, modernism has been often told but cannot be overlooked. His energetic support and encouragement of others remains indisputable, from editing *The Waste Land* to ensuring that Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* appeared in *The Egoist*. His Bel Esprit project of March 1922, where thirty people would each pledge £10 per year to T.S. Eliot, providing a guaranteed income of £300, was only one of many such efforts to turn patronage into a public effort. It collapsed but not his desire to aid others, even proposing to Mussolini in the summer of 1923 that Il Duce adopt a program of cultural patronage outlined and organized by Pound.<sup>2</sup>

Pound strenuously worked to see that new writers received the attention they deserved, while for older writers like Yeats he redirected their style. The importance of this activity was crucial, as Hemingway acknowledged in 1925. Pound, he said, "tries to advance the fortunes, both material and artistic, of his friends . . . he defends them when they are attacked, he gets them into magazines and out of jail [and] gets publishers to take their books" (in *CCEP*, 22). He offered aesthetic advice, technical expertise, and practical support. Yeats, H.D., Eliot, and Joyce were the immediate beneficiaries but Wyndham Lewis, Basil Bunting, and Louis Zukofsky also benefited from his innovations and energy.

Editing anthologies was another means of getting people read, especially newer poets. *Des Imagistes* (1914) and *Active Anthology* (1933) are two examples of how he continued with the traditional form and yet transformed it into a vehicle for original, if not unorthodox, voices. *Blast* and *Exile*, his two magazines, were similarly part of a modernist tradition yet very different in conception and content from other periodicals.

Imagism, vorticism, the ideogram, Greek, Chinese, comparative literature – Pound's shaping of the modern was as much the repeated effort to "make it new" as it was to reignite the past. Through his writings on the troubadours, Arnaut Daniel, Dante, and Cavalcanti, he showed their importance for modernity. Similarly with Confucius and Propertius. The work of Hugh Kenner and Marjorie Perloff in restating Pound's critical influence in making the modern, even within the recent context of redefining the term, underlines the significance of his actions.<sup>3</sup> Pound valued the experimental and the new, claiming in 1913 that "any work of art which is not a beginning, an invention, a discovery is of little worth" ("How I Began," *EPEW*, 211).

Pound was nothing if not inquisitive. With his kind of Yankee confidence, he strode into the literary world of London, then Paris, to find out

what was going on: “Ford in the afternoons and Yeats in the evenings” was his *modus operandi*, which he aggressively pursued (*PE*, 81; *SL*, 296). Such intellectual swaggering quickly transferred to his literary work: from researching the troubadours to studying economics, he claimed expertise in all – as well as in Greek, Latin, Chinese, Confucius, and Italian politics. More often he was right and not right, claiming that his Anglo Saxon “Seafarer” (1911) or Latin-based “Homage to Sextus Propertius” (1919) were, and were not, translations. Critics, of course, often and vocally disagreed. But he disregarded them.

His poetry, notably *The Cantos*, incorporated numerous historical and foreign sources, sometimes impeding its literary development and narrative unity. Social thought, historical incidents, and economic theory soon dominated his long poem, published in nine volumes over a fifty-two year period, its first periodical publication in 1917. The use of documents and other non-literary materials began to dominate the text until his imprisonment in Pisa where, without recourse to texts other than Confucius, he concentrated on his own past to shape his poetry through a formidable personal style. St. Elizabeths meant a return to books (he borrowed frequently from the Library of Congress) and continued engagement with translation and creativity, resulting in two additional titles for *The Cantos* – *Section: Rock-Drill* (1955) and *Thrones* (1959). *Drafts & Fragments* (1969), the final volume of the work ended, although it did not complete, his modern epic.

Such productivity took place within a sphere of consistent political, economic, historical, and personal conflict. Pound the journalist, teacher, editor, and broadcaster competed with Pound the poet, each identity or “persona” connecting in fractious ways with the other. For Pound, while differences may exist in genre, differences within his ideas did not. The social role of literature, for example, a reflection of economic and political conditions, was constant. Literature, he felt, had a duty to the state (*LE*, 21). At one point in Rapallo, he posted precepts on a wall for the people to follow, mixing politics with Confucius. One read: “When the archer misses the bull’s eye, the cause of the error is within himself.”<sup>4</sup> Conversely, one who knew little of economics or social progress could not know much about the process and content of poetry.

But controversy, of course, swirled around him, most notably in his economic views, his support of fascism, his anti-Semitism, and his relentless critique of America’s policies during and after the Second World War. For the first, he opposed any economic system that suggested capitalistic free enterprise, which he believed only led to its supreme evil, usury. Social Credit was the only answer. For the second, he upheld Mussolini and his

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accomplishments in Italy from the 1920s until his death. For the third, he held the Jews responsible for exorbitant banking practices, war, and social inequality. For the fourth, he blamed Roosevelt for America's foolhardy liberal policies and decision to fight in Europe and then Japan.

His 1943 indictment for treason, renewed after his arrest and then return to the USA in 1945, increased his intolerance and disgust with America, although not his identity as an American. His radio broadcasts, in fact, stressed his Americanness and valuation of American history. It would "make any young man more American," he claimed, "if he sticks to seein' American history FIRST before swallowin' exotic perversions."<sup>5</sup> His broadcasts, however, created public intolerance of his ideas, which in turn diminished the importance and acceptance of his work. Winning the Bollingen Prize for poetry in 1949, awarded by the Library of Congress, only intensified his vilification. The *New York Times* headline of February 20, 1949 stated this clearly: "Pound in Mental Clinic, Wins Prize For Poetry Penned in Treason Cell." His award was an insult and outrage to the American people.

In the midst of these controversies Pound had a hero: Mussolini. Il Duce, preceded by the military lord of Rimini, Malatesta, demonstrated that right thinking and economic reform could support the arts and forward culture. Pound's enthusiasm for Mussolini, strengthened by a private meeting with him in 1933, only reinforced support for his leadership and fascism, which Pound understood as a form of cultural patronage. Pound's promotion of fascism came from his faith in the public function and utility of art, updating Shelley's belief that poets are the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Pound believed that the artist's mission was to change the world and could guide political action: "the artist is always too far ahead of any revolution, or reaction . . . for his vote to have any immediate result . . . [but] the party that follows him wins" (*EPCP*, IV: 379–80).

Pound's fascism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Americanism naturally impeded the reception of his work, and this has persisted to this day. Several essays in the collection address these issues, notably those by Serenella Zanotti, Alex Houen, and Emily Wallace.<sup>6</sup> No consensus on Pound's reputation has yet emerged, but the very debate is credit to the activist poetics Pound promoted. Poets do not observe, he insisted: they engage with social and political change.

Despite his polarizing politics, Pound's influence upon modern poetry and poetic style remains. "Use no superfluous words, no adjective which does not reveal something," is only one of his many declarations reviving, if not revolutionizing, writing (*LE*, 4). "Precise terminology is the first implement, dish and container," he later wrote in Canto XCIX/731. In rejecting

the rhetorical embellishments of the late Victorians and Georgians, turning instead to the “cut direct” method he observed in Gaudier-Brzeska and expressed through Imagism, Pound renewed the language of poetry for his time. Parataxis and fragmentation became the new “formula.” In “A Retrospect” (1918) he predicted a poetry which would be “harder and saner.” Rhetoric would not be the source of its force but energy, directness (*LE*, 12). The objective presentation of material would be the goal, rejecting symbolist, expressionist, or romantic forms. The Chinese ideogram was one way to achieve this because it “*means* the thing or the action or the situation, or quality germane to the several things that it pictures” (*ABCR*, 21). Poetry was to be made “as much like granite as it can be . . . austere, direct, free from emotional slither” (*LE*, 12).

New critical practices have generated new readings of Pound. Cultural studies, new historicism, feminism, psychological criticism, gender studies, deconstructionism, and textual criticism have all contributed to this process. And yet, interpretative methods of the past also shape our reading of Pound today. In the act of reading Pound we, like the method Malatesta used in assessing strategies of battle, evaluate the present in terms of the past to determine the future; similarly, in reading Pound one must do so in light of *his* sources and influences. Pound’s actions within *The Cantos* – interpreting events as signs for telling the future – anticipate reader-response to text, reading, and history within the work. Events read through history, as Malatesta understands them, parallel reader-reaction to the unexpected structure and language of the work. Exposed to apparently random events in the work, events which contradict conventions of narrative unity and sequence, the reader must recapitulate the action or movement enacted within the text by Pound and translate it into an interpretative act in light of history presented (1) by the text itself and (2) through a shared background of knowledge established by context. The historical discourse of *The Cantos*, partly expressed through its constant citations which disrupt narrative and thematic continuity, requires contextual understanding, while the poem simultaneously undermines accepted notions of referentiality and representation. The final lines of the last canto in *Thrones* embodies this via language through its incorporation of English, Greek, Italian, and French (cix/794). Pound himself relied on context to read his own poem, telling his Italian publisher in 1956, for example, that one cannot read the final cantos until one has read and understood the earlier.

Context is crucial for understanding *The Cantos* and Pound’s other works. Contextual studies, the framing of a work within subjects beyond the

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text such as translation, journalism, the visual arts, the Orient, and travel – all represented in this volume – provide the grid for reading Pound’s poetry. The current collection also reinterprets Pound’s relationship to America, as well as to women and economics, supplemented by discussions of his influence, archives, and education.

Contextual studies shifts the line of interpretation from the text to its frame. It explores the ways external elements, whether they be events, geography, or personal incidents, contribute to a work’s poetic identity. Boundaries between event, time, and the text overlap, as context assists in identifying the strategies of the text employed by the poet. Indeed, establishing the social, historical, personal, and generic context of Pound’s work is the fundamental goal of *Ezra Pound in Context*. The central focus is the analysis of the interrelationships that exist between the events recounted in the works, the narratives themselves, and the situations in which the narratives were constructed. Individual chapters study these connections by combining a close formal analysis of the texts with an examination of the relationship between Pound and a particular subject, to illustrate the ways he accomplishes the “telling.” Narrative action in time and place, past and present, might be another focus of this approach.

A work of art cannot be understood in isolation from the contexts in which it is created. This is the basic principle of contextual studies, which tracks how historical, social, political, and economic codes from a culture embed themselves in a text. Cultural studies might be the broad rubric but context is the immediate focus. The cultural genealogy of a text might be another aspect of this approach, as demonstrated by this sentence: “Five months after Mussolini had assumed power with the March on Rome on 20 March 1923, Ezra Pound found himself in Rimini, where he had come to reexamine the manuscript of Gaspere Broglio’s memoirs, along with other materials related to Sigismondo Malatesta.”<sup>7</sup> A frame for understanding Pound’s writing the *Malatesta Cantos* immediately becomes clear. Identity, one of the major motifs of *The Cantos* and concerns of modernism, may best be studied through the contextual nature of the poem.

Three sections divide *Ezra Pound in Context*. Part I, “Biography and works,” addresses his prose criticism and poetics, as well as his letters, radio broadcasts, and relationship with, and criticism of, the law. Other topics in this opening section consider economics, archives, and textual criticism, all three crucial to evaluating his work, yet all three posing complex issues of assessment. His role as editor and anthologist, an activity he maintained throughout his life, is also explored. Part II, “Historical and cultural context,” situates Pound in varying geographic and intellectual worlds



beginning with America and continuing in Venice, Provence, London, Paris, Rapallo, Pisa, and Rome. It then examines his use of the classics, and the development of concepts like imagism and vorticism, before considering music, the visual arts, education, “little magazines,” and publishing. Dante and Confucius are also discussed, as well as fascism, gender, and race. One chapter analyzes Pound’s anti-Semitism; another deals with Pound’s influence on the making of modernism.

“Critical reception,” the final section, addresses the challenges of the fluctuating response to his work, divided into three periods: before Paris (1908–20), before Pisa (1920–45), and after Pisa (1945–72). A final chapter, on his influence, examines the legacy of his work on new generations of writers. How we evaluate Pound is a further concern of the volume, especially in the context of European and American cultures and their influence on *The Cantos*.

*Ezra Pound in Context* pays attention, as well, to reformulations of Pound’s relationship to the key figures who composed his poetic constellation and intellectual agenda. It considers the ways in which earlier poets, and his contemporaries, plus their cultures, influenced his writing. Pound understood poetry as the outgrowth of a tradition and an age. “It took two centuries of Provence and one of Tuscany to develop the media of Dante’s masterwork,” and “it took the latinists of the Renaissance, and the Pleiade, and his own age of painted speech to prepare Shakespeare his tools,” he wrote in 1913 (*LE*, 9–10).

From the beginning, Pound broadcast his ideas in didactic, powerful ways with a manner equally insistent and declamatory: “give me a bed, a bowl of soup and a microphone” he declaimed (*EPCP*, x: 245). He was relentlessly instructive in publishing works with titles like *How to Read*, or the *ABC of Economics*. His energy and impatience demanded this form of communication, the Rome Radio broadcasts of the 1940s extensions of a style he initiated in his earliest prose.

Despite his intransigent political and economic views, Pound’s influence was lasting. He may in fact be largely responsible for innovations in modern American poetry, from the Projectivists to the Objectivists and L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets. *The Cantos* demonstrated the possibility of a radical ideological openness, even if it had lengthy, undigested, and discontinuous sections displaying an unfocused textual heteroglossia.

But to study Pound is to discover how criticism, scholarship, biography, and bibliography constantly revise received ideas and accepted attitudes as they uncover innovative interpretations and adjust to new facts. This is synergistic and energizing for students and scholars of Pound, as the



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work in this volume attests. Pound excites, poetically and intellectually. Clarity is all and his definiteness is bracing: "The poet's job is to *define* and yet again define till the detail of surface is in accord with the root in justice" (*SL*, 366). One cannot be passive reading a poet who reveres the irascible and admonishes all to "cut direct" (*SL*, III; *GB*, 19). "To break the pentameter," he reminds us, "that was the first heave" (LXXXI/538). Pound's response to the conflicts he confronted (and often generated) constitute what Baudelaire called "the heroism of modern life."<sup>8</sup> But context remains essential to understand Pound the artist and the critic. Pound himself recognized this. In *Patria Mia* he wrote, "it is not enough that the artist have impulse, he must be in a position to know what has been done and what is yet to do" (*PM*, 53). The same is true for Pound's readers.

## NOTES

- 1 Ezra Pound to Viola Baxter Jordan, October 12, 1907, in "Letters to Viola Baxter Jordan," *Paideuma* I.I. (1972): 108.
- 2 See Lawrence W. Rainey, *The Institutions of Modernism, Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 109.
- 3 See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971); Marjorie Perloff, "Pound/Stevens, Whose Era?" in *Dance of the Intellect, Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 1–32. On redefining modernism see, among others, Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Lawrence Rainey, *The Institutions of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature and Other Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); David Bradshaw and Kevin J.H. Dettmar, eds., *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006); Michael H. Whitworth, ed., *Modernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007); Peter Childs, *Modernism*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2008).
- 4 Anne Conover, *Olga Rudge & Ezra Pound, "What Thou Lov'st Well"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 218–19.
- 5 *EPS*, 121. In the same broadcast of May 9, 1942, he added that he could write "a whole American history by implication stikin' to unknown folks" but that the "WAR" has been the same war fought by "John Adams, Jefferson, Van Buren . . . Abe Lincoln, V.P. Johnson, my Grand dad. All fighting the kiki-fied usurers" (*EPS*, 121).
- 6 For earlier treatments of these subjects see Robert Casillo, *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988) and Charles Bernstein, "Pounding Fascism," in *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press,

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1992), plus "Pound and The Poetry of Today," in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and "Rereading Pound," Poetics List Serve (Spring 1996): <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/Bernstein/essays/poundbern.html>. Also important are Marjorie Perloff's posting on the same list serve under the title "Pound and Fascism" and Wendy Flory, "Pound and Anti-Semitism," *CCEP*, 284–300.

7 Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism*, 128.

8 Charles Baudelaire, "Salon of 1846," in *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Francis Frascina *et al.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 53.