

Politics, Poetry and Ezra Pound

Written by Revd David William Parry

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Political concepts can be overwhelming. Often, they have an oceanic allure beyond themselves. Indeed, structural narratives surrounding ethical insights may easily transform into a siren song whereby incautious navigators are enticed to their own destruction.[1] All meaning, of course, even those arguments sandbagging the Modernist enterprise itself occasionally dam the languages of Identity and Time altogether. Unforeseen blockages, no doubt, albeit the type of reductive clotting which reduces social innovation, along with agreed cultural inheritance, into caricatures of themselves. Thence, with these wary caveats recognised, it remains fair to say Ezra Pound's (1885–1972) haunted life and elative oeuvre still demand careful attention from poets and political scientists alike. Especially so, once Western democratic failure, otherwise known as the abattoirs of World Wars I and II, are honestly recollected.[2] Accompanied, as these almost unimaginable atrocities were, by the subsequent reactions of bewildered Youth across our Occidental world. Anyhow, it remains noteworthy that their tragic (but explicit) disenchantment with permissive 'advancement' led to an appropriation of distant cultures as a radical critique of 'liberal' ineptitude. A position Pound championed through a series of dazzling literary strategies, although this very discourse currently casts dark, ironic, shadows across the turbulent waters of his promethean originality.

Obviously, the above conceded, politics and poetry have seldom been strangers. Frankly, from ages immemorial, gleeman masquerading as bards have entertained, perplexed, entranced, as well as flattered, vested interests with drunken romances regarding their potential significance and unending greatness. Exemplified, perhaps, by the exquisite skills of the Roman social lyricist Horace (65–8 BC); a performer whose exceedingly well-crafted public reflections on psychological frustration and divinising triumph won him a very special place at the Court of Augustus Caesar (63 BC–AD 14). An attainment implying politicised poetry has always exerted an uncanny influence over the elite due to its adulation of temporal power and its arcane hints at the archetypal web within which these antagonists were themselves caught. Every extra signifier delineating the reason why this genre alone has leave to express forbidden tribal taboos and previously unspoken scruples. A dangerous liberty, nonetheless, driven by intoxicating lexicons offering besotted audiences a forum wherein this type of versification can have unexpectedly persuasive effects.

So elaborated, Pound's years on our Angel Isle of England occurred during the early 20th century. Overall, a period gifting opportunities for his employment as a foreign editor with several American magazines abroad.[3] And as such, he both 'discovered' and 'assisted' in the aesthetic formation of formidable contemporaries like Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), James Joyce (1882–1941), Robert Frost (1874–1963) and T.S. Eliot (1888–1965). Each collaboration contextualising Pound's comment to William Carlos Williams (1883–1963) that 'London, deah old Lunden, is the place for poesy', as well as explaining his subsequent creative enrichment.[4] A debonair accomplishment, however, rejecting notions of poetry as versified moral essays prevalent among Edwardian scribes. Instead, Pound wanted individual aesthetic experiences to become his textual focus. In other words, every single factual episode to operate as a veritable camera obscura through which raw data could be grasped by songlike semiosis. Moreover, a process unrepentantly reducing imaginative concepts into a functional 'mechanism' whereby art was practically manufactured. Either way, friends recalled Pound spending his mornings in the British Museum Reading Room, while taking lunch afterwards at the Vienna Café on Oxford Street. His bohemian lifestyle prompting Ford Madox Ford (1873–1939) to write:

Ezra ... would approach with the step of a dancer, making passes with a cane at an imaginary opponent. He would

Politics, Poetry and Ezra Pound

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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. (Ford in Moody, 2007: 113)

Unsurprisingly, therefore, Pound enjoyed a certain notoriety among the great and the gay. Culminating, it could be said, with his introduction to the novelist Olivia Shakespear (1863–1938) at a literary salon in 1909, along with her daughter Dorothy (1886–1973) — the latter eventually becoming his good lady wife. Assuredly, it was through Olivia Shakespear that Pound met W.B. Yeats (1865–1939); a man who Pound upheld as the greatest poet alive.[5] What is more, Pound was thereafter presented to a glittering array of talents including the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891–1915), the artist Wyndham Lewis (1882–1957) and the poet T.E. Hulme (1883–1917). Every connection abetted by the American heiress Margaret Lanier Cravens (1881–1912) acting on Pound's behalf. A selfless undertaking on her part allowing the *Personae* collection to evolve into the first of his works meeting with commercial success. Undeniably, its favourable reception even spurred one critic to state that this work was 'full of human passion and natural magic'. Anyway, another twenty seven poems speedily appeared under the title of *Exultations*. A master stroke possibly linked to the fact Pound relocated to new rooms in Church Walk, off Kensington High Street.

Tellingly, Pound regularly spent teatime with the curator and poet Laurence Binyon (1869–1943) at the British Museum. A man who awoke his sensibilities to East Asian workmanship and literary traditions. Various visitors' books suggesting Pound was frequently ensconced in the Print Room to examine Japanese ukiyo-e paintings inscribed with *waka* verse; a genre of profoundly terse poetics expressed through rigid conventions, which significantly contributed to Pound's own 'Imagist' compositions.[6] Additionally, his private literary flourishing compelled a somewhat loose poetic association of 'Imagists' (concerned solely with language and presentation) to arise. Each figurative practitioner aiming at tight linguistic lucidity: a fight, somewhat contrarily, against the perceived excesses of romanticism, rhetoric, or any over-use of irrelevant adjectives. Beheld thuswise, three principles emerged from their ruminations:

1. The direct treatment of a 'thing' whether subjective or objective.
2. A resistance to 'unnecessary' words in any text whatsoever.
3. An insistence that compositions adopt sequences similar to musical phrases, although not the rhythm of a metronome.

Unquestionably, following these guidelines, descriptions deemed superfluous were to be flagrantly avoided, along with any convoluted morphology apprehended as guilty of 'clouding' imagery by mixing concrete concerns with abstruse conjecture. In this regard, Pound wrote that phenomenal objects were always 'adequate symbols' of themselves, whilst poets should 'go in fear of abstractions'. Advice given betwixt stipulations to never re-tell in mediocre verse something already conveyed by good prose. Consequently, Pound's resounding 'make it new' mantra manifestly referred to a blend of cultural modes; never slavish mimicry, or indirect copying. Besides, as Richard Aldington (1892–1962) unequivocally demonstrated, specific Suzuki Harunobu (1725–1770) prints can easily be matched against particular stanzas penned by Pound in his quest to write haiku-like English language verses throughout this decade.

On the level of socio-aesthetics, Pound's determination to undermine received convention by unveiling a succession of significant moments, rather than weaving beautiful tales, progressed into a truly rebellious counter-cultural assault. His brazen 'devices', adapting each stanza into a type of alphabetical appliance. One could say, a veritable war machine 'made of words' delivering a 'measurable' effect on every potential reader. Also deciphering, possibly, why the French critic René Taupin (1905–1981) remained sceptical that Imagism was anything other than 'A few poets who were for a certain time in agreement on a small number of important principles'. With this somewhat cutting remark in mind, Pound's ideogrammic method unmistakably engaged with Ernest Fenollosa's (1853–1908) work. Especially, it can be argued, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*; a volume edited by Pound following the author's death. Undoubtedly, Pound's account of this hieroglyphic procedure inside *The ABC of Reading*, outlined his personal understanding of the way Chinese pictographs were formed and put into the practice of beautification. For instance, the figure 'East' (東) is quintessentially a superposition of the characters for 'tree' (木) and 'sun' (日). That is, a concentrated picture of the sun tangled in a tree's branches. Going further, Pound indicates how such encoded systematics build poetic concepts from tangible events. Ergo, the (abstract) idea of 'red' could be

Politics, Poetry and Ezra Pound

Written by Revd David William Parry

represented by juxtaposing object correspondences:

ROSE CHERRY IRON RUST FLAMINGO

Grasped in this manner, his 1910 *L'Art* verse takes on a new light:

Green arsenic smeared on an egg-white cloth,
Crushed strawberries! Come, let us feast our eyes.

(Pound in Lewis, 2010: 13)

Yet, despite a number of women writers becoming major Imagist authors, those volcanic wartime years erupting between 1914 and 1917 exsanguinated innovation, flair, and aesthetic transformation — alongside most people's belief in anything apart from political critique.

So, irrepressibly conflicted, Pound lost faith in constitutional government and democratic debate. Furthermore, he started to blame this unprecedented slaughterhouse of human souls on pernicious usury and an increasingly unaccountable Western Capitalism. Each 'revelation' propelling his relocation to Italy as a country outside the bellicose Anglophone world. Nevertheless, continental history was itself starting to drown amid the swelling, reactionary, tides of Fascism. A popular maelstrom escorted by a flood of crypto-traditionalist voices finally washing Pound into the arms of Benito Mussolini's (1883–1945) authoritarian regime. What is more, this cascading need for civic 'recovery' engulfed Pound to the extent he exhibited support for Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) as the antithesis of egalitarianism. Undoubtedly then, Pound's ethical jaundice permitted him to write for publications owned by the British fascist Sir Oswald Mosley (1896–1980), whilst he seemed unaware that Nazi Germany intended to take ghoulish steps far above dictatorial suppression onto the existentially arid shores of a bloodthirsty racism. Hence, Pound's avant-garde poetics were steadily tainted through hundreds of radio broadcasts criticising Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945), the United States and Jewish culture generally. Dubious activities resulting in his well-publicised 1945 arrest on charges of treason when American forces finally liberated Italy from Fascist despotism. Subsequently, Pound spent months as a detainee in a US military camp situated near Pisa. Patently, a physically challenging stretch involving three weeks inside a 6-by-6-foot outdoor steel cage. Looking back, biographical commentators claimed it was plainly this stark experience that triggered Pound's mental breakdown; at the same time as causing him to reflect, 'the raft broke and the waters went over me'. Thusly, the following year he was diagnosed as unfit to stand trial and incarcerated in St. Elizabeths psychiatric hospital near Washington, D.C., for approximately 12 years. Every diminution further tarnishing Imagism, while concurrently imploding Pound's ingenious rubrics for future generations.

Reaching tentative closure, it is imperative to remember there comes a point at which poetry stops. A circuitous confession running throughout this article — from its initial paddling amid the surging waves of ideological notions, through to these final jottings. A juncture whereat sympathy becomes apology and conceptualism changes into the pragmatic. Unarguably, any analysis therefrom signals the disastrous consequences of divorcing ideas of Identity from their benevolent psychological base, paralleled by nightmarish scenarios separating historical propositions from their evolutionary flow forward. Worded differently, the gushing ebb of Pound's idealistic brilliancy, supplemented by the grim pneumatics chaperoning despair, ended in personal tragedy. An unpalatable truth, no doubt, although its embrace clarifies evidence confirming political resolution is never discovered collectively, or individually, through autocratic forms of governance. Atop of which, Pound's pessimistic diagnosis of Western democratic failings will neither be unravelled by ethnic bias, or prejudicial market restraint, nor unthinkingly disassembling industrialised armaments. Rather, democratically accountable oversight, public tolerance and unfettered liberty remain the hallmarks of any authentic civilization. Parameters, once missing, quickly permitting unplanned drifts through treacherous breakers beyond lectures on structural finance, or the compelling need for educational benchmarks, to the types of cultural initiative discussed face-to-face with the likes of Mussolini:[7] a gambit discouraged by Hemingway from the beginning, despite being an incident decoding Pound's puzzling proclamation that he had never met anyone who grasped his ideas as quickly as 'the boss' to all and sundry.

Politics, Poetry and Ezra Pound

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Lamentably, this recounted, Pound's one and only meeting with Il Duce had the aftereffect of cementing his conversion to the 'political faith' of Fascism. However, unlike Horace before Augustus, Pound's encounter with this dictator befuddled his already inebriated American sensibilities to the saddening extent he compared Mussolini's political acumen with that of Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826). Be that as it may, the importance of Pound's contributions to the arts and the revitalisation of poetry have rightly been acclaimed, although by the 1950s critics chorused there is no greater contemporary writer who was 'less read than Ezra Pound'. To be fair, Pound never sought, or had, a wide readership. His extravagant use of unconventional poetic materials tended to baffle even sympathetic readers, while his technical virtuosity frequently perplexed other poets. A problem merely exacerbated by the desperation colouring his political outpourings. Inferring, when all said and done, Pound's devotion to those muses maintaining aesthetic standards in the midst of ferocious adversity, had little option other than ending in a cacophony of scathing denunciations.

Still, social fantasy withers artistry, whilst human beings are much more complex than violent animals requiring a strong master. Verities remaining accurate despite the most brutal conflicts remoulding historical periods wherein political extremity seemed to offer the only viable solution. Hard political realities, it could be said, disclosing why perpetual controversy envelops Pound's career and justifies Hemingway's defensive opinion that 'The best of Pound's writing — and it is in the *Cantos* — will last as long as there is any literature'. An utterance commending his poetry, if not the man himself. Ultimately, this discerned, contemporary readers should be aware that a sophisticated scribbler such as Pound is uniquely privileged to peer beneath the veneers of mundane circumstance into a numinous realm inhering our empirical sphere. Each eyeshot of which characterises Imagism as practised by Pound — in the sense he unendingly attempted to 'capture' isolated events in order to unveil essential attributes about their nature. All in all, one of the many 'luminous details' ushering his admirers behind a politics borne from grief into balladries of transcendence. Taken together, a posture yielding those intuitions necessary to understand the enduring appeal of Pound's trailblazing poetic corpus.

Notes

[1] I am fully aware Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) claimed 'All great ideas are dangerous', whereas it could also be argued that nowadays Anglo-American political discourse operates as an ersatz religion.

[2] It is pertinent to recall that Ezra Pound lived through both world wars.

[3] An American eventually seduced by the alleged assurances of European political heritage, not to mention the ruthless promises of an uncompromising Modernism, Pound was actually the only child of humble New World stock in the form of Homer Loomis Pound (1858–1942) and Isabel Weston (1860–1948).

[4] Opinion varies about the steady transmutation of Pound's writing style, even though he always reacted against the decorative flourishes found in Edwardian writing, saying poetry should strip writing down to the 'barest essence'.

[5] Yeats was an Irish Nationalist, who sought a species of traditional lifestyle articulated through poems such as 'The Fisherman'.

[6] Imagism as a poetic enterprise in early 20th-century Anglo-American poetry favoured a precision in depiction, as well as clear, sharp language. Indeed, it has been described as the most influential movement in English poetry since the Pre-Raphaelites.

[7] By this time, however, Pound was of the mind that physically meeting *Il Duce* — having earlier sent him a copy of *Cantos XXX* — would elucidate his own contribution to political debate. It almost goes without saying this proved a bad choice on his part, whilst Mussolini brushed aside the *Cantos* as merely '*divertente*' (entertaining).

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Politics, Poetry and Ezra Pound

Written by Revd David William Parry

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Revd David William Parry is an award-winning theatre director, producer, author, poet and Valentinian priest. He gained his BA in Religious Studies from King's College London, and MA in Pastoral Theology from Heythrop College, University of London. Currently, he is completing his D. Philos at Aarhus University, as well as his fourth book, *Catholic Libertarianism: Essaying Giordano Bruno's Ideal*. His published works include two poetry-sagas, *Caliban's Redemption*, and *The Grammar of Witchcraft*, while his main theatrical performances, as Director, comprise *The Botanist Monsieur Jordan* and *The Sorcerer-Dervish Mastali Shah*; *Shakespeare: A Comedy in Ten Scenes, both Serious and Tragic*; as well as *Shakespeare Tonight*. His work often explores the interplay between religion and conceptualist theatre, with a particular focus on unlimited semiosis in morality dramas.