

Hugh Kenner. *THE POUND ERA*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973 (1971), xiv, 606 pp. \$5.95, paperback.

In his "Acknowledgements" to *The Pound Era* Kenner tells us that "this book was planned as an X-ray moving picture of how our epoch was extricated from the fin de siècle" (p. xi). As its title indicates, *The Pound Era* is not merely a biography of the poet, as was Noel Stock's cut and dried *Life of Ezra Pound* (New York, 1970); it is simultaneously a cultural history, a portrayal of an era with all its intellectual currents and the titanic figures of the arts and letters of our century. As a simulation of a motion picture, the book is a stunning success in adopting certain cinematographic techniques such as flashbacks, close-ups, dynamic cuttings, and fade-outs, with the key light unmistakably focused on Ezra Pound. The author also acknowledges at the outset that he, belonging to the third Pound-taught generation, owes the poet its testimony. The reader, therefore, should be forewarned by this that even though the book's treatment of Pound may be as penetrating as the X-ray, the light under which the subject is scrutinized cannot be totally objective, despite the author's intellectual honesty.

The physical format of the book is almost as weighty as its subject matter. In the 606 pages there are 54 illustrations, including the Sappho parchment, the "horse" ideogram, and signed stone column of San Zeno in Verona, and Gaudier's marble hieratic head of Pound, to name but a few. These are indications of the author's vast research on a variety of subjects, and of the scope and cultural radius of Pound's life that the book attempts to encompass. There are thirty-one chapters divided into three parts: Part One, "Toward the Vortex," consists of fourteen chapters; Part Two, "Interregnum," has only three short chapters; Part Three, "Toward Now," comprises again fourteen chapters. Despite its tripartite divisions, which suggest a chronologic


order, the content gives one the impression of a montage — a proliferation of topics, people, places, histories, anecdotes, theories, and speculations, held together by the author's dynamic manipulation, as in one of Eisenstein's films.

Alongside the full portrait of Ezra Pound, with its many "luminous details" about his early lyrics as well as about his *Cantos*, are individual profiles of literary and artistic giants: T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, W. Lewis, Gaudier-Brzeska, William Carlos Williams, etc., with Henry James leading the pageant. The Pound era may be likened to a Vortex — the Vortex is indeed a recurrent image in the book — which is "a circulation with a still center: a system of energies drawing in whatever comes near" (p. 239). In reading the book one is aware of the orchestration of figures, artifacts, ideas of past and present, East and West, whirling across the pages, drawn together into the "Pound Vortex."

Pound once said, "Every man has the right to have his ideas examined one at a time" (*Impact*, p. 210). One of the ideas that constantly rushes through the radiant node of the "Pound Vortex" in this book seems to be that which the poet derived from what Kenner calls the "Persistent East," more specifically, that which he borrowed or adopted from China. This specific aspect of Pound is recognized by Kenner more acutely perhaps than by any other Poundian critic. And he draws the reader's attention to it early in the book:

They say, among the many things they say, that some thousand years before Trojans founded Rome a scholar named Tsang-kié was commanded by his emperor to invent Writing, and took his inspiration from bird tracks in the fluvial sand, by whose print we know what songs were heard here. Whence men write today as birds' feet do, in little clustered lines. (p. 14)

After this brief introductory remark on the mythological origin of Chinese writing, Kenner takes great pains to analyze the

etymology of the ideogram  *ling*, which appears in *Cantos* 85 and 104. Unless one is curious enough to check the notes at the back of the book to find out that Kenner has his sources of information from Wai-lim Yip's letter to him and from L. Weiger's *Chinese Character*, one cannot but marvel at Kenner's recondit knowledge of Chinese. What is more, the reader is further informed:

. . . and out of all the *lings* that chime through Chinese speech, and mean in different tones and contexts a multitude of unrelated things, you have designated the *ling* which means the spirit or energy of a being, in harmony with the invisible and by ritual drawing down beneficence: we may say, *sensibility*. It is used of the work of poets, denoting their reach into the realm of the natural (and the drops look like mouths; hence Pound's "under the cloud/the three voices" 104/740: 766) . . . . (p. 15)

This is fine. But like Pound, the subject of his discourse, Kenner does not stop at the literary or linguistic level in his explanation. In the same paragraph where he shows Pound mistaking the pictograph of three rain drops for three mouths (hence "the three voices"), he also delves into contemporary world politics and editorializes:

China had lost hold of *ling* and fallen to barbarian ideologies, Chiang's western or Mao's Stalinist, according to your system of disapprovals ... . At first he [Pound] thought the poet Mao possessed *ling*, but before long Mao's men were harassing Confucians. In the State Department a few miles from the poet's cell the winning side had persuasive American spokesmen." (p. 15)

I quote at length here, because this is one of the many instances which exemplifies Kenner's mode and method of presentation throughout the book. It shows that Kenner's over-reaching, associative mind is in a way very much like the "vibrating mind of Pound"; moreover, his writing is at times as arcane and cryptic, not caring whether he loses his audience in his labyrinth of thought ("Thought is a labyrinth," p. 561). Most of his readers probably know such international personages as Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Tse-tung without having their names fully spelt out, but "poet Mao" is certainly not so easily identified to be "Chairman Mao"; the "persuasive American spokesmen" for the "winning side," without being specified, are certainly unidentifiable, at least to me.

Ezra Pound has been to many "sacred places" which are recorded in the *Cantos* and are illustrated and mapped out in Kenner's book (p. 345). But Taishan (the sacred mountain of Confucius) appeared only in Pound's mind's eye under the glaring Pisan skies, when he was caged in the DTC camp near Pisa. Pound never visited China, but the raw material with which he sculptured *Cathay* was brought to him by way of Japan and London through the work of Ernest E. Fenollosa. Even more vital than the material for *Cathay* to Pound's literary career was Fenollosa's essay on "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," which had become his *Ars Poetica*. The Chinese ideogram that so fascinated Fenollosa, confirmed for Pound his early literary theory of Vorticism and later gave birth to his "ideogrammic methods," is comparable to the Vortex, a patterned energy. And the Vortex is further likened by Kenner to Buckminster Fuller's knot, which is a patterned integrity (p. 145). Kenner's X-ray vision detects persistent patterns, parallels, and wave-links of great minds and ideas:

An American mind, brought to ideographs by an art historian of Spanish Descent [Fenollosa] who had been exposed to Transcendentalism, derived Vorticism, the *Cantos*, and an "ideogrammic method" that modifies our sense of what Chinese can be." (p. 162)

Parallels, paradigms, affinities and antitheses (cf. "Mao or Presumption," pp. 289-298), but the "persistent East" seems to loom large on Kenner's canvas of *The Pound Era*. Of interest to me most are the chapters, "The Invention of China," (pp. 196-222) and "Inventing Confucius" (pp. 445-459). Since Pound had long been dubbed "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time" by T. S. Eliot, because of his translation or "translucence" of *Cathay*, I am neither impressed nor depressed by such titles used by Kenner, which are neither inventive nor new. What is new, however, is his extensive research in his reappraisal of Pound's creativeness in his translations: Kenner had the good fortune to examine the original notebooks of Fenollosa; part of which have been reproduced as illustrations of how the raw material looked before Pound transformed it into poetry. But Kenner does not rest on being informative alone; he interprets and instructs:

*Cathay* has more instructive deviations to exhibit; the ones to which Pound was driven when the notes sagged. On one occasion we can follow him as he virtually invents a poem, an accretion of small deflections steering melancholy toward metaphysics, and the poet, unguided, conniving. (p. 207)

More often than not, he turns Pound's errors of translation into strokes of genius. If he occasionally admits that Pound's inaccuracies "are what are normally called mistranslations, in one case grotesque mistranslation," in the same breath he also tells us that "they are deflections undertaken with open eyes ... . It is a question, purely and simply, of taking all necessary measures to protect the course of a poem, which having begun as it did (and brilliantly) could only finish in accordance with the mood of its beginning" (p. 213). It is in instances like this that the label "The Invention of China" is truly justifiable.

But what about "Inventing Confucius?" Did Pound really invent Confucius as he did *Cathay*? Definitely not. If anything, Pound took his Confucius dead seriously, whether his sources were M. G. Pauthier or Legge. When he declared in 1934 "I believe the Ta Hio" in answer to Eliot's query, "What does Mr. Pound believe," he was not fabricating a Confucius (or Kung) after his own image; rather he was converted to Confucianism, which to him was "the real *paideuma*" (p. 507).

Kenner tells us, "What Confucius was saying we had best leave to the Confucians" (p. 450), forgetting, however, that Pound himself was in Kenner's own words an "eminent Confucian" (p. 504). Had Kenner paid as much attention to what Confucius said as Pound did, he would have recognized that Pound was merely translating a line from the *Confucian Analects verbatim* when he put down "the sage delighteth in water" (Canto 83). If this sentiment uttered two millenia ago suggests any Taoist impulses, we must remember that Confucius did seek *tao* from Lao-tze, the founder of Taoism in its pristine form, which is to

be differentiated from the superstitious "Taozers" that both the Confucians and Neo-Confucians and Pound rejected.

I have no objection to Kenner's enthusiasm over Pound's "transetymology" (to borrow a term invented by Achilles Fang), or his admiration for the poet's "magnificent misreading" (p. 459). But I believe whatever Pound got out of his understanding of Confucius was real. Of that bit of truth Pound must not be deprived. After all, it was the Confucian balance which saved him from losing his mind or inner equilibrium during the ordeals in the DTC camp in Pisa, in the mental institute in Washington, D. C., and through the labyrinth of misdirections that finally reached what Kenner calls "The Last Vortex." And the last Vortex of Pound's creative act was his translation of the Confucian Odes, *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* (Cambridge, 1954). By the strength of this feat, "the inventor of Chinese poetry" was transformed into a "Confucian poet." Even Kenner admits that the *Anthology* is "in part 'a poem including history,' in part the corpus of tested wisdom Kung and Mencius drew on as Socrates drew on Homer, in part the variegated *paideuma* sprung from the folk and millennially active in China" (p. 520).

On the whole, *The Pound Era* is a monumental achievement which culminates Kenner's long series of critical activity heralded by *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1951) and is followed by other critical works on Wyndham Lewis (1954), James Joyce (1956), T. S. Eliot (1959, 1969), Samuel Beckett (1961, 1968), and, most recently, Buckminster Fuller (1973). It is a *tour de force* of contemporary letters, almost a prose counterpart of *The Cantos*. Whether or not one subscribes to Kenner's attitude toward Pound, or agrees entirely with his critical opinions, one cannot fail to acknowledge the contribution of *The Pound Era* as a storehouse of information on Pound's life and works in particular, and on the cultural life of the Western World in general. As such it should be welcomed by all Pound scholars and by all students of modern literature.

One major drawback perhaps is the author's great erudition, which might be a little intimidating to the uninitiated or the less informed. To be sure, he explains at great length the creative mind of the poet, he unravels certain idiosyncratic knots in *The Cantos* as well as in some of the early poems, and he provides information and "luminous details" to fill in the gaps in the lives of Pound and his coterie. However, the fare is often a little too rich for the ordinary diet.

Back in the fall of 1970, I had an occasion to lunch with one of the editors of the University of California Press. During our conversation, the editor referred to Kenner's book (still in press) as "caviar to the general." Now, having had the opportunity to read it *in toto*, I can fully appreciate the aptness of this description. Like caviar, *The Pound Era* appeals to the cultivated palate only. However, the publication of this paperback edition is a proof that perhaps literary taste can be cultivated after all.