

Ezra Pound revisited

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ONE OF THE BRIGHT PROSPECTS OF MY GOING

to Italy was to be able to see Ezra Pound again. In the fall of 1966 my spirit was somewhat dampened by a letter from Mr. James Laughlin, who informed me that "the latest news on Ezra is not too cheerful." Pound apparently had to go into a clinic for treatment of a deepened chronic depression.

During my first six months in Italy, no one I met in connection with my research on Poundian criticism seemed to have seen him recently. Professor Carlo Izzo, Pound's first Italian translator, admitted that he never tried to contact Pound since their break years ago. Professor Luciano Anceschi, who was the first to focus Italian critical attention on Pound's poetics, said the poet had become very much withdrawn, and he doubted if Pound would see me at all. Professor Alfredo Rizzardi, whose translation of the *Pisan Cantos* and some early poems of Pound have apparently influenced present day Italian poetry, mentioned that Pound had declined his invitation to a special literary function in the poet's honor, and that he had not seen Pound since 1954 in Washington, D.C. And no one seemed to know exactly where he was at the moment—Genoa, Merano, Rome, Venice, or Rapallo.

I was about to give up hope when I met Pound's Italian publisher, Mr. Vanni Schei-

weller, through whom I was able to talk to Pound's daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz of Schloss Brunenburg, presently the most diligent translator of her father's works. At last I had located Pound. After several moves and a recent trip to Switzerland, he was back in Rapallo (rather, up the hills near Rapallo).

I wrote to Pound, expressing my desire to see him, and quoting presumptuously a line from Confucius: "To have friends coming to visit from long distance, isn't that a pleasure?" I was invited to Rapallo.

I went on March 21, almost the same time of year that I saw Pound for the first time fifteen years ago, except that instead of the gloomy overcast Washington sky I was accompanied by a cheerful morning sun. I left Florence at 7 a.m., arriving at Rapallo around 10:30 a.m. A half-hour taxi ride up the winding road brought me in front of a solitary, modest two-storyed house nestled in citrus trees, overlooking the "green clear and blue clear" of the Rapallo Bay.

Pound was resting on his couch when I entered his study. He wore a fawn brown jacket, dark brown slacks, a blueish-grey shirt, and a saffron tie. His once red hair and beard were all white now. It was a neat, small room. One could take it in at a glance: an uncovered typewriter on a desk by the window;

a couple of bookcases containing mostly his own works; a small table by his couch on which lay a copy of the *Book of Change* in Italian translation, a huge magnifying glass, and a sheet of paper with several lines in Pound's rather surprisingly neat and small handwriting. Next to the table was a straight-backed arm-chair.

I shook Pound's hand, expressing my delight at seeing him again after so many years and so many changes. He looked at me intently for an instant and asked pointedly, "And what have you done with yourself all these years?" I tried to shift his attention to more productive people such as Hugh Kenner, Alfredo Rizzardi, Charles Olson and Zukofsky. Pound answered my questions as to when he saw them last (and corrected my faulty pronunciation of Zukofsky), but he refused to comment on their works. Failing to engage his interest with these names, I reminded him of Eliot's 1952 visit to him, during which I was the only one privileged to be present. At the mention of Eliot he fell into deep silence, his eyes gazing into a distance as if recalling that specific scene, which has remained untarnished in my memory all these years:

When I arrived at St. Elizabeth's that Saturday afternoon in June at three (I was the only one among Pound's regular callers allowed to visit on that special occasion, but had been told to come no earlier than three so that he and Eliot could have an hour of privacy "to squabble"), I found the two poets sitting under a shady oak on the hospital grounds. Pound, as usual, was in his reclining canvas chair between two long benches; Eliot was sitting to his right. Their conversation was temporarily interrupted by my intrusion. Pound

introduced me to his famous guest as "Wheat. ear" (grain), derived, he explained from the ideograph of my Chinese name, Chih-ying. Not knowing Chinese, Eliot was impressed, or, seemingly so, by the Chinese sound uttered it Pound's sing-song manner, and remarked that it had the onomatopoeic quality of the chirping of the wheatear (bird!).

With the ignorance and timidity proper of a Chinese school girl, I sat on the bench opposite Eliot and tried to digest all their remark: Their conversation resumed, mostly reminiscing of their London days. Once Pound jeered Eliot for calling Rupert Brooks "the best of Georgians." The younger poet defended himself by saying, "But 'the best' is qualified by the word 'Georgians!'" And he countercharges Pound's writing an introduction to Lionel Johnson. I was amazed, as a matter of course, at the swift interchange of intellectual currents, and was especially fascinated by the contrasting manners of expression of the two obviously different personalities.

Occasionally they paused for me to join in the conversation. And with Pound's encouragement ("Don't you have any questions for the Reverend? Here is your chance."), I managed to ask a few questions. To my request for his comment on Williams' poetry, Eliot replied quietly, "I haven't read much of him. Not that I have anything against him; I just don't understand him." To this Pound roared in agreement. To my hint that he might have been influenced by Taoism, Eliot said without surprise, "If I am, at least I was not aware of it." Pound, however, was greatly amused by my rash observation, and shouted to Eliot, "That's what's wrong with you, Possum: a Tao-zer!"

When the visiting hour was over, Eliot took

Pound's hand in both of his to say good-bye. Turning to me he extended an invitation to look him up if I ever chanced to visit London. Pound interrupted and said to me, "But you will never get through his six female secretaries!"

I finally came out of my reverie; Pound was yet deep in thought. To break the long silence I asked the first question that came to mind.

On the wall of the *ingresso* hung an oil portrait of a little girl with beautiful long hair. I asked if it were of his granddaughter. No, it was his daughter Mary as a young girl; his granddaughter, Pound told me, is now seventeen. His grandson had been to Harvard but is back at the University of Bologna. To my inquiry about his son he said, "The last I heard he was in London."

And at my request he signed my volumes of *Rock Drill* and *Thrones*. I commented on the happy choice of his Chinese name, which appears on the title page of *Thrones* in the form of a Chinese seal, to which he said humbly and with candour, "It is a rather presumptuous name."

The name consists of three ideographs: *Pao* En *Te*,¹ a Chinese translation of "Pound," and its overall meaning is "Guardian of Grace and Virtue." According to the Poundian ideographic analysis, the first ideograph *Pao* is a picture of a "man" standing by a "tree in fruition"; the second ideograph *En*, "cause" or *raison d'être* above the "heart"; and the third ideograph *Te*, "man governs his ac-

tions by looking straight into his own heart." I had suggested to him, in the past, another Chinese name consisting of two ideographs, *Pang Te*^e (also a close transliteration of "Pound"). The second character is identical to the third of Pound's own, but the first ideograph *Pang* is actually a stylized picture of a "dragon under a roof or cover," thus an imprisoned dragon (the conventional meaning however is "huge" or "confusion,") which I thought was rather appropriate in view of Pound's confinement at the time. The Chinese name of his own choice is not only more serious and dignified but also suggests, at least to me, an ultimate synthesis of Christian (divine grace) and Confucian (moral excellence) concepts.

At last I confronted Pound with the most urgent question on my mind — the grand finale of the *Cantos*, if there is going to be one. Yes, he is still working on it. But he has not progressed very far beyond Canto ii5 ; his eyes are bothering him. I suggested that perhaps he should use his own Chinese quatrain for summation. "I don't know," he said meekly, "there is too much uncertainty . . ." His voice trailed off — surprising for a man who used to be so sure of everything.

His Chinese poem I referred to contains sixteen ideograms, each charged with multiple Confucian ideals and implications. It was sent to me for comment during our early correspondence before we met. My own knowledge of Pound's idea of Confucian beliefs and his use of the ideograms at the time was too limited to offer the intelligent comment expected by Pound. I have found out since much more what he intended to say in those sixteen ideograms, but the poem has never appeared in print.

(1) A O 69
{ 6Q? (1-6-Q-?)

(2) 龐德

Perhaps the ideal vision embodied in that Chinese poem has been blurred by current confusion; perhaps Confucianism has failed to provide the answers; perhaps the man of action with his strong Confucian conviction, thwarted and disillusioned by the world around him, has finally withdrawn into his private world of contemplation. All his life Pound had fought against war and poverty in the name of humanity instead of personal gain. If he erred, he erred in good faith, and he had suffered more than any self-styled prophet ever did in his own land except for one. It seems to me that his Confucian phase is over now, and he has entered into a Taoist phase of quietude, like a calm after a tempest.

Before lunch we went for a walk as far as the little church of San Pantaleo, a mile or so away from the house of the poet. Pound paused only at my request of taking some pictures. As he stood there in the bright sunlight, against the backdrop of the heavenly blue

above the deeper blue of the sea below, I was reminded of a Taoistic poem by Li Po, which is an apt description of Pound's present environment and state of mind :

When asked why do I perch on the green hill,
I only smile and care not answer.
The fallen flowers sail away with flowing waters;
My world here is beyond the world of man.

Lunch gave me the pleasure and opportunity to observe Pound's unfailing consideration for others and his healthy appetite; the only thing he did not partake of was the table wine. And that day he did not take his usual afternoon rest. Finally I bade my generous and gracious hosts good-bye around 4 p.m. in front of the train station.

Later, on the train, as I watched the splendor of the late afternoon sun through the window, I was suddenly seized with a numb melancholy, for "Sunset like grasshopper flying beyond the horizon" was approaching....