

## THE MODERNISM OF EZRA POUND

# THE MODERNISM OF EZRA POUND

*The Science of Poetry*

Martin A. Kayman

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MACMILLAN

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# Preface

Since Hugh Kenner inaugurated modern Pound criticism with *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1951), well over seventy major studies of the poet have been published in English, not to mention the thousands of specialised articles and doctoral dissertations in near-constant production. With the centenary in 1985, one can expect further proliferation. To come upon the public with yet another work requires *some* sort of justification other than evangelical zeal or the personal conviction of illumination.

The general justification for the enormous activity of the 'Pound industry' is most certainly not a massive popular interest in Pound. Rather perhaps the opposite: the need felt by scholars to express Pound's objective importance for the writing of poetry, for literary history and theory to an audience who continue to recognise his significance but who are disinclined by his apparent esotericism to read him, or about him.

This phenomenon would be of immediate interest only to a sociology of literary studies did it not indicate something about Pound's work itself, and were it not symptomatic of the relations between literary modernism in general and the modern reading public. The paradox of Pound's reputation as an important modernist – much praised and studied 'professionally', but little read in popular terms – points not only to his notorious (and often, in the event, overrated) 'difficulty', but specifies that difficulty in terms of his simultaneous centrality and eccentricity in relation to modern literary culture, the idiosyncratic place in a literary tradition Pound made for himself by a calculated distance from the mainstream, yet from which he continues to exercise a major influence on the writing of, and about, poetry.

At the outset of his career, Pound displays the conviction that poetry was losing its seriousness for the modern audience in an increasingly disadvantaged competition with other discursive and aesthetic practices. As severe as he felt the crisis was, so radical had to be the restatement of the art which would reinstitute its seriousness. In order to launch a modern poetry which would not be a second-rate

philosophy, painting, music or narrative in verse, Pound felt himself forced to dislocate the poetic tradition which, according to him, was responsible for the crisis, and to construct a new beginning against orthodoxy.

If Pound has some responsibility for the apparently deliberate obscurity of the resources and techniques of much modernist verse, it is not from a spirit of perversity. His difficulty may be viewed rather as a reflection of the radical nature of his gesture, corresponding to the extremity of the crisis and the radicality of his ambition: no less than a much-needed renaissance for poetry. Thus what is experienced by the reader as difficulty or obscurity in Pound is most often a consequence of his heterodox eccentricity: his going to the margins in order to relocate poetry in the centre.

The problems of complexity and innovation consequent on this radicality against inherited convention are then in large part responsible for the proliferation of explanatory material about the poet, his work and his ideas. Of this exegesis, explication and popularisation there is more than enough, and the present text does not mean to offer itself as yet another revision of Poundian theory, let alone another interpretation of the thematic unity (or not) of the work. For this, the classics of Pound scholarship are quite sufficient. This book not only has nothing as such to add to their explanations and the fund of Poundian information they contain, but also cannot help – and would not seek to avoid – its dependence on them.

Yet I encounter in these indispensable texts a major problem: the manner in which, as Ian F. A. Bell has recently argued in *Critic as Scientist: The Modernist Poetics of Ezra Pound* (London: Methuen, 1981), their explications and popularisations tend to reproduce the lines and values of Pound's own discourse. For example, Hugh Kenner's use of Buckminster Fuller's 'knot' theory, and Donald Davie's 'forma' or 'ontwerp' (adapted from Pound himself and from Allen Upward, respectively) may both paraphrase principles of Poundian technique (in this case, the 'vortex'), but they are not instruments for its analysis. The reader ends up elucidated but not necessarily wiser.

In this way, the creation of a school of Poundian criticism characterised by such repetitions – which itself contributes to the sealing-off of Pound's eccentricity – may be seen as a further consequence of that eccentricity. Given the nature of his deliberate dislocation from the conventional tradition, it is to an extent inevitable that explications of Pound's work should have problems in translating

it into more familiar theoretical concepts and so characteristically end up exhibiting a tendency to a sympathetic esotericism.

So it is that Pound's own radical exclusion of such traditional elements as Descartes, Kant, Marx and Freud, and its loyal repetition in the explicators who seek to honour his self-defined difference, has not only failed to relocate Pound in a tradition other than his own, but has also kept his work for a long time immune from critical traditions which have otherwise dominated areas of literary theory.

However, since the mid 1970s, and especially since the founding of the British (now International) Ezra Pound Conference at the University of Sheffield in 1976, a new generation of largely European scholars have begun to introduce new strategies for reading into the area of Pound studies in such a way that Pound is beginning to be discussed and analysed in terms less of his own making and increasingly in relation to major theoretical developments of our period. See, in particular, the essays collected in *Ezra Pound: Tactics for Reading*, ed. Ian Bell (London: Vision, 1982), and *Ezra Pound and History*, ed. Marianne Korn (Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1985), as well as the monographs by the editors themselves, Ian Bell's *Critic as Scientist* and Marianne Korn's *Ezra Pound: Purpose/Form/Meaning* (London: Pembrooke Press, 1983).

Such an exercise is not of course entirely new, nor have all such attempts to make Pound answer to the sort of questions which have for some time been directed at writers such as James Joyce and Paul Valéry, for example, avoided their predecessors' traps of inappropriate and reductive readings of the continually recalcitrant and unorthodox Poundian paradigm. The problem continues to be that of respecting the specificity of the paradigm whilst making its analysis intelligible to historical and theoretical debate. However, this new scholarship, distinguished by its more thorough knowledge of Pound's work and its greater theoretical sophistication, is, to my mind, pulling Pound out of his ghetto and into a context which enables us to discuss his position in relation to modernism as a whole without having either to reduce Pound to the status of an inconvenient eccentric or, alternatively, to subordinate modernism to his figure – as in Hugh Kenner's symptomatic title for his study of modernism, *The Pound Era* (London: Faber, 1975).

It is in this sense that the present work claims its (always relative) originality, locating itself very much in the recent context of Pound studies. I should thus like gratefully to acknowledge my debt to my colleagues at the Ezra Pound Conference. In trying to combine

historical and formal analysis of the Poundian discourse and to relate it to central issues of modernism, I am far from abnegating Pound's centrality. The text remains concerned to establish his importance as a modernist, representative of a tradition that he himself propagated. However, I pose the question of Pound's significance not only in terms of his achievement and influence, but also in terms of the sorts of theoretical questions that are posed by the very attempt to *read* Pound. It seems to me, in short, that the difficulty and inconvenience of Pound's work is related to the fact that the act of reading him in itself demands reflections and, more importantly, *decisions* about the nature of the poetic text and its relations to the discourses that surround it, threaten it, and may be used to justify it.

In my own experience, I have always found that the primary question that picking up a book by Pound effectively poses strikes at a decisive crisis of modernism: the relation between art and politics – a question that we cannot help putting in personal terms: how comes it that we enjoy or value the poetry of a fascist? My first, introductory chapter seeks to sketch Pound's importance with particular reference to this question and its centrality in Pound and for us, as readers.

The body of the text analyses Pound's modernist techniques, centred on the theory and practice of metaphor which he developed in his formative years in London (1908–20), prior to embarking on *The Cantos*, and which were intended to resolve the crisis of the rupture between the poet and his inheritance and the poet and his audience which may be seen as characteristic of the predicament of the modern poet.

Thus the second chapter concentrates on the first central moment of crystallisation of Pound's poetics of metaphor in the practice and history of Imagisme. Here I attempt an analysis and theorisation of the poetic technique of the Image in relation to the critical problem it seeks to resolve. At the same time, I seek to show the political effects of Imagiste techniques in the production of history: in this case, the history of Imagisme as a literary movement itself.

The most important constant in this period of the formation of Pound's poetic theory is the use of a scientific discourse to mediate the technical project and to present the role of the poet in the contemporary world, by modernising his aesthetic function in scientific terms. My analysis of this discourse is indebted and complementary to that of Ian Bell, and tries to show in what way this discourse parallels and is informed by the contemporary scientific discourse of empirio-criticism (also known as phenomenism).

An analysis of the second major crystallisation of Pound's poetics, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1919–20), shows, at the theoretical level, how Pound's theory corresponds to what we might call a phenomenalist theory of language. Identifying the paradigm in this way enables us to revise the orthodox Poundian criticism, which is perceived as symptomatic of the epistemological closure that such a poetic implies. Once again this is not to detract from Pound's importance but to relocate its terms: a reflection not of a contemporary scientific reality, but of a specific and in itself considerably influential scientific discourse about reality.

In a work of this sort, it is not possible to provide any kind of complete account of *The Cantos*, but it is important to demonstrate the consequences of this poetic in practice. Thus, in Chapter 4, I analyse a selection of metaphorical strategies as we find them conveying important values in *The Cantos*.

A central element which emerges in the discussion of Imagisme and Pound's metaphorical technique in his earlier poems and in *The Cantos*, as much as in his use of scientific discourse and in *The Chinese Written Character*, is the pursuit of primitive linguistic energies and a theory of myth as the basis for a poetic project expressed not in mystical but in scientific terms. In the analysis of poetic technique in some elements of *The Cantos*, I seek to relate the metapoetics of myth in technical and theoretical terms to more local devices of Pound's 'objective' poetics of phenomenism.

This leads into the final chapter, where I try once more to relate my argument about Pound to larger questions of modernism. Pound's attempt to regenerate poetry by a return to primitive linguistic and mythic energies and his justification of this in terms of a revolutionary scientific reality is seen as not only typical but also exemplary of many modernist projects. The text concludes with a critique of this specific project, using Pound's courageous and rigorous confrontation of the aesthetic and the political in the field of poetry and the authoritarian consequences of his historically conditioned options as both the justification of his importance and the starting-point for a reassessment of the modernist crisis.

Some of the material presented here has appeared in different forms in papers for the International Ezra Pound Conference (1981, 1982), in articles in *Paideuma* (Maine), *Biblos* (Coimbra, Portugal) and the *Revista da Universidade de Coimbra*, and in *Ezra Pound: Tactics for*

*Reading*, ed. Ian Bell, and my own *Alguns dos nossos melhores poetas são fascistas: uma introdução a Ezra Pound* (Coimbra: Fenda Edições, 1981).

The text has a somewhat long history, which is in effect the story of its debts: first, to my doctoral supervisor, David Howard, and to the colleagues at the University of York who helped at the time, especially in the areas of literary theory and epistemology: Geoffrey Wall, Baudoin Jourdan and Michael Hay; secondly, to my colleagues at the University of Coimbra, whose constant feedback to my lectures and classes on Pound advanced my thinking considerably; thirdly, as I have already indicated to my colleagues at the Ezra Pound Conference, and particularly to Ian Bell, Eric Mottram, Marianne Korn and Stephen Wilson. Naturally, all errors are mine, despite their best efforts to correct them.

M. A. K.

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# A Note on the Text

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