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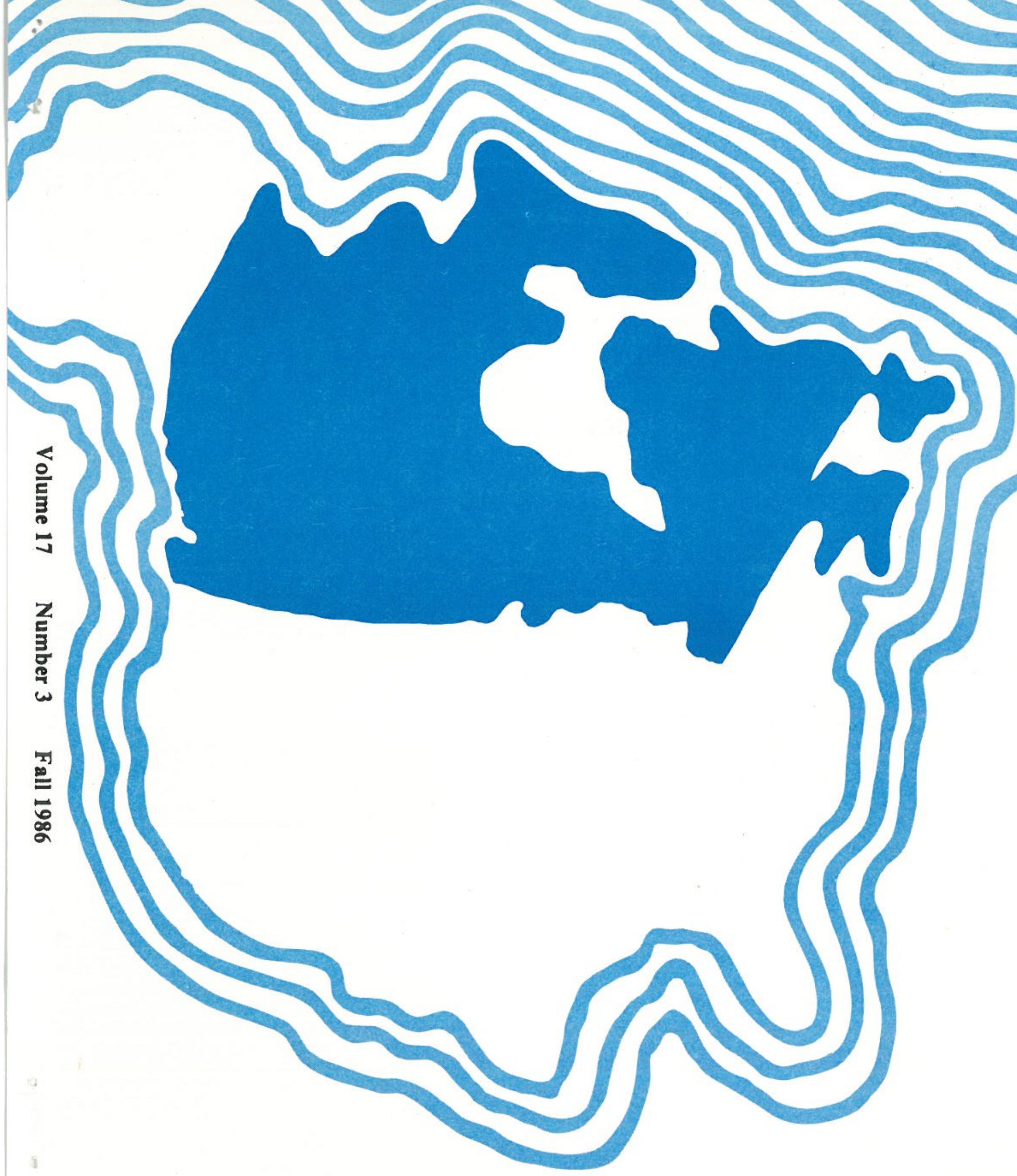

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Books on Pound from University Microfilms International

Stephen J. Adams

Jo Brantley Berryman. *Circe's Craft: Ezra Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly."* Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983.

Guy Davenport. *Cities on Hills: A Study of I-XXX of Ezra Pound's Cantos.* Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983

Peter D'Epiro. *A Touch of Rhetoric: Ezra Pound's Malatesta Cantos.* Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983.

Ron Thomas. *The Latin Masks of Ezra Pound.* Ann Arbor: UMI, 1983.

The UMI series has rapidly become familiar to students of modern literature. We can be grateful for a publishing venture that will release doctoral dissertations to public view in book form. We may grumble about the price tags, but we are grateful. These books represent, presumably, the best work on Pound by younger academics. In this case, however, the buyer is warned to be selective, for these four books, presented with the blessings of series editor A. Walton Litz and Pound consultant George Bornstein, are an uneven lot.

Two of them, Davenport's and Berryman's, bid to be major contributions to Pound scholarship, ambitious and erudite; but Berryman's monograph is flawed in a most exasperating way. The other two are more specialized: D'Epiro on the Malatesta cantos is mainly a manuscript study, and as such is a necessary, if necessarily tedious, look at a pivotal section of Pound's major work. Thomas, on the other hand, in what promises to be a lively summary of Pound's Latin interests, is strangled by a perverse thesis.

To begin with the best, Davenport's *Cities on Hills* concentrates on the first installment of thirty cantos. The author, since writing this Harvard dissertation, has gained a sizable reputation not only as critic (*The Geography of the Imagination*) but as author of fictions (*Da Vinci's Bicycle*) and illustrator (Hugh Kenner's *The Counterfeiters* and *The Stoic Comedians*). The present book—conventional for Davenport if not for a dissertation—begins with an

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exposition of Poundian themes, followed by sequential commentary on the first thirty cantos. This commentary is more than foot-noting: it identifies (insofar as possible) the nexus of each canto as a unit, demonstrating in a practical way the synthesizing imagination through which the poem must be read. It becomes, then, despite all the disagreements any reader will have about specifics, one of the best available introductions to *The Cantos*.

Davenport rides no polemical thesis: *The Cantos* are, he says, "about the emergence of our civilized state in various cultures, the progress into one success or another...and the decline of these achieved moments" (p. vii). This unobjectionable idea is developed in ways that rise above ordinary exegesis. Davenport deploys a formidable classical scholarship. His allusions gracefully comprehend Pound's own, and extend further to pertinent authors like Addington Symonds and Jean Seznec. He urges the importance of Pound's economics (without subscribing to Pound's program). Along the way he offers many valuable readings: one of the best on the *Ur*-cantos; informative comments on Pound's English, Divus' Latin, and Homer's Greek in Canto I, plus a clarification of the "Argicida" crux; and so on. Moreover, he is not above providing convenient aids, like a chronology of Malatesta's career.

Most characteristically, however, Davenport allows himself speculative and challengeable digressions. His proposed line from Blake to Ruskin to Pound, for example, rests on little evidence; yet the surprising parallels between *Fors Clavigera* and *The Cantos* reopen the issue of a direct Ruskin-Pound connection in a compelling way. Davenport's speculative voice has thus survived the writing of a doctorate. This kind of book inevitably contains much that a reader will discard: Davenport's "controlling metaphors" in the first three cantos (Periplus, Vortex, Taishan) strike me as less useful than the conventional Descent-Metamorphosis formulation, especially since the presence of Taishan in Canto III depends on a single reference to "cedars." But differences of this sort, however frequent, simply show that Davenport can be provocative, that he takes academic risks, that he has a gift, like Kenner's, of explaining without explaining away.

One minor complaint: this book is a revision of a 1961 dissertation published in 1983, but no account is given of the revisions. One wonders why the long delay, and how the author's views of Pound have evolved. This is particularly true in the conclusion, which strikes surprisingly discordant notes: "it is not the surface unfamiliarities which mar the poem...but the inner complexities of unsuccessful juxtapositions within ideograms" (p. 253); "Pound's erudition is as fake as that of Poe's" (p. 255); "reduced to a law Pound's strategy is this: In every subject to be treated, choose the matter which most perversely exemplifies it" (p. 257). These opinions are tenable (the second as wildest hyperbole), but they do not grow out of the book, so one wonders if they are the afterthoughts of 1983 or of two decades earlier.[1]

Peter D'Epiro's *A Touch of Rhetoric* focuses more intensively on the four Malatesta cantos. These poems have received much commentary because—

aside from their merits—they mark a breakthrough not only in Pound's development but in the development of modern poetry. As Michael Bernstein has argued, these cantos first demonstrated that the modernist epic is able "to absorb large chunks of factual data in its own texture...without ceasing to be poetry."[2] Pound's labors of composition involved the creation of a new poetic method. They instigated the modernist documentary long poem.

D'Epiro's subject, then, is important, though his approach through sources and drafts remains of interest mainly to specialists. But when the drafts of a writer like Pound exist, they must be examined, and Pound's Malatesta papers at the Beinecke amount to "well over 700 pages" (p. xxiii). In his first two chapters, D'Epiro deftly traces the poet's struggle. Pound, working mainly from printed sources like Yriarte, completed his first draft in January 1923; a month later, he set out through Italy, visiting archives at the Vatican, Florence, Cesena and Rimini, examining manuscript sources (including Broglio's important chronicles), and completely revised his first version.

In these scholarly chapters, D'Epiro draws critical conclusions cautiously and therefore convincingly. He analyzes Pound's rhetorical problem of presenting his hero in a favorable light—in the face of historical tradition and contrary evidence, not to mention anti-military sentiments after the Great War. He describes Pound's principles of selection and arrangement. Most impressively, he traces the emergence of Pound's distinctive narrative voice, with a gradual suppression of direct comment and an "increasing emphasis on the risible" (p. 53). D'Epiro's third chapter, concentrating on this voice and the "deflated epic style," is the best critical contribution of the book.

Sadly, a fourth chapter on Pound's "Malatesta mystique" does little but rework familiar phrases about the "outsider" and the "factive personality." This is a pity because, apart from wasting one-fourth of a small book, D'Epiro evades some genuinely relevant issues. Studying the drafts, he dismisses matters of lineation and spacing—matters that enormously complicate textual study but involve an essential part of the poetic sign. In terms of literary history, he does not trace the process that turned a figure wicked enough to scandalize Burckhardt into a model of esthetic amoralism (see Wilde's *Dorian Gray*, ch. 11) and then into Pound's factive hero. Though he discusses Pound's heroic ideal, he does little with Isotta and the erotic. Most regrettably, he adds nothing to our scant knowledge of Gemisthus Plethon, so catalytic a presence in Pound's version of Renaissance-making.

But D'Epiro's silences are admirable—gaps in his history for things he does not know—compared with the maddening certainties of Ron Thomas and Jo Brantley Berryman. Thomas' *Latin Masks of Ezra Pound* devotes five chapters to Pound's uses of Virgil, Catullus, Propertius, Ovid and Horace. The material has not been neglected by scholars, but neither has it had systematic treatment. Thomas, alas, spoils his subject through sheer rigidity

of mind; preoccupied with moral issues and Pound's eventual fascism, Thomas swallows quite a few party lines himself.

He enunciates his thesis clearly: "Virgil was Pound's poetic father whom the son could not love freely and fully without disobeying. This he did by running successively with the wrong crowd: Catullus, Propertius, and Ovid.... Events [compelled] Pound to seek partial reconciliation with uncle Horace rather than with father Virgil.... and thus my conclusion represents a consideration of a reunion that never occurred" (pp. xiv-xv). Thomas invokes Harold Bloom only once by name, but throughout he adopts the anxiety theory as established Truth. This results in the artificial schema of his thesis, and directs talk toward Pound's pathology rather than his poetry. In one poem, we are told, Pound "almost too candidly... confessed his love for the past" (p. 65). In the fragmentary last cantos, Pound concedes "his own inability to discover at last himself" (p. 116).

Still, a Bloomian approach to Pound, however debatable, is not a silly undertaking. Bloom's theories deserve testing, and they have gained a certain currency. One may wonder in passing why Virgil appears as the threatening father while Homer does not (or Dante, or whoever); but there is another concealed party line that damages Thomas' book far more irreparably than that of Bloom. It is hinted in Thomas' label for Catullus, Propertius and Ovid as "the wrong crowd."

As a scholar, Thomas accepts as Truth a peculiarly undiluted form of British public school classicism. He knows well that this is precisely the mind-set that Pound attacked in his "Propertius," but he is not moved: Virgil is the model for epic, Horace for lyric. The canon is ordained. This doubtless explains why the book ignores unapproved authors that interested Pound—why there is no chapter on the Renaissance Latinists, nor even a mention of the "Pervigilium Veneris." Instead, there is a background of tut-tutting that accompanies judgments everywhere: astonishment that Catullus could be ranked higher as metrist and lyricist than Horace (p. 21); dismissal of Gavin Douglas' *Aeneid* as interesting only to "the translator intrigued by his Scottish dialect" (p. 12); apology for a Propertian mistranslation on textual grounds, without considering why the more recent text is automatically preferable to the one Pound used (p. 41). This reflex disparagement of earlier work, incidentally, also shapes Thomas' reading of Pound's development: he passes along received opinions that "early" is bad, "later" is good; "aestheticism" and "nineties" are dirty words.

Finally, Thomas pursues a third party line—a covert one that he knows of and reveals in his conclusion: Pound's failure to "find himself" poetically and personally results from his failure to grow from pagan *eros* to Christian *agape*. Again, this is not an impossible view; the problem is Thomas' smug airs. He refuses to allow any value in Pound's views as alternative, critique or corrective to Christian teaching. His purpose all along has been "to emphasize the

deficiency in [Pound's] Hellenic approach to reality" (p. 145). He is bent on blaming Pound for not being a Christian. At one point, Thomas compares Pound's opinions on love and politics with Plato's: "Plato, at least, had an excuse," he remarks. "He knew neither about Judeo-Christian love nor about American representative government." But Pound should have known better (p. 113). This is nothing but the old Calvinist chestnut that Truth, once revealed, must be embraced at peril of damnation. It sits strangely in a scholarly discourse.

Thomas' rhetorical intent is so bound up with his individual analyses that they cannot be disentangled. So he loses his opportunity to rectify the shameful critical history of Pound's "Propertius," one of his finest and most transparent works which critics have made into something problematical and obscure.[3] Thomas is content to use the poem as evidence for Pound's shortage of "*caritas*" (p. 58).

Jo Brantley Berryman's *Circe's Craft* likewise misses an opportunity. This is the work of one who knows Pound well and sympathetically; its 187 pages devoted to a single poem, developing beyond J.J. Espey's earlier monograph, are meticulously researched. As an interpretation of "Mauberley," however, it falls victim to that poem's twisted critical history. It insists on seeing the text, at least the first part of it, through the conventions of dramatic monologue, raising irrelevant questions about the "speaker" of the poems, and it attempts to clarify previous confusions (many of them broadcast by Donald Davie, the thesis supervisor)[4] by pressing a rigid formula for the "carefully controlled point of view" (p. xii). Luckily, Berryman's genuine scholarship is more easily separable than Thomas' from her dogmatism, and much of value remains.

Berryman posits that "Mauberley" falls into two distinct parts: "the first twelve poems of the sequence, from the 'Ode' through Poem XII, are meant to be regarded as spoken solely by the fictional Mauberley. The poems from 'Envoi' to the end of the sequence, including the final 'Medallion,' I believe to be written from Pound's own point of view" (p. xii). She later concedes (quoting Davie) that "it is not easy to discover within the poetry itself" that the speaker of poems II through XII is Mauberley, not Pound (p. 33); but her characteristic proof is the normal appeal to Pound's sources and his prose. She pursues this method with admirable diligence, if not admirable results, and so her book is at least usable as a digest of *possibly* relevant glosses. For example, on the phrase "sublime in the old sense," Berryman first cites Pound's recommendation of Longinus, follows with Burke's eighteenth-century treatise thereon, appealing as well to Samuel Holt Monk's classic study *The Sublime*, all counterpointed against further citations from Pound's prose.

Yet the logic running through these six pages is arresting. Berryman's thesis obliges her to prove that the speaker, Mauberley, is "for" the sublime, and thus Pound must ironically be "against" it. She therefore passes quickly from Longinus (whom Pound once recommended) to Burke (whom Pound most

likely never read). Burke advocated obscurity as a means of heightening poetic passions and cited Milton as example: Berryman counters with Pound in favor of precision and against Milton. Monk's book is drawn in mainly because one sentence relates the sublime to "the impressionism and imagism and other tendencies of painting and poetry that have come to birth in our time" (p. 9). This sweeping remark about modernism in general becomes evidence that critics have peristently confused Pound's esthetic theories with those he opposed.

Berryman is prepared for objections. There is no guarantee, she admits, that "sublime" in the poem carries this precise meaning. But this, of course, is the point. The speaker of the poem is using imprecise terminology, *ergo* he cannot be Pound (who is quoted on "precise definition"). Such a way of reading poetry cannot be sophistication but sophistry. There are enough convolutions of irony and personal meanings in "Mauberley" without multiplying them tenfold.

This sophistry typifies Berryman's first four chapters. The speaker of "Yeux Glauques" must be Mauberley, not Pound, because he is more interested in the lives of the Pre-Raphaelites than in their art; yet Pound, despite certain statements, is everywhere concerned with the treatment of artists by society. Berryman's citations again and again are uncritical, selective, torn from context or irrelevant to the passage at hand. This appears most baldly, perhaps, in her interpretation of the anti-war poems, IV and V. These two must be assigned to the fictitious Mauberley, not to Pound. Berryman accomplishes this by an astonishing argument. She first appeals to Ian F.A. Bell's suggestion, plausible enough, that the rhetorical anaphora of poem IV derives from Edgar Lee Masters'"The Hill," opening poem of *The Spoon River Anthology*. She then comes armed with citations to show that by the time of "Mauberley" Pound's early enthusiasm for Masters had soured. The reader, therefore, should divine that the metrical and rhetorical form is ironic, and thus the speaker cannot be Pound. Such casuistry—in the face of World War I— raises grave doubts about the critic's sensibility.

All this said, however, there is value in these chapters. The glosses often are relevant, even when deductions are suspect. Particularly on the proper names, Berryman quickly supplies whatever Pound said about Piero della Francesca or Pisanello—or tells us that he nowhere else mentions Luini. Valuable too are the illustrations reproducing a Pisanello medal, the "*eau-forte par Jacquemart*," engraved portraits of Messalina, a sample Luini, and two plates from Reinach's *Apollo*; Berryman's remarks on these items are informative. Also noteworthy is an appendix reproducing the typescript of the poem.

Most paradoxically, the last two chapters, both concentrating primarily on "Medallion," perform the service of removing that poem from Mauberley's mouth, where so many critics have placed it, to Pound's—where it belongs.

"Envoi" and "Medallion" are thus both poems by Pound, both describing the same scene, neither one ironic. The difference is that "Envoi" exemplifies that kind of poetry where music "seems as if it were just bursting into speech," while "Medallion" is like painting or sculpture "just coming over into speech" (p. 144).

The whole confusion about the speakers in "Mauberley" is, I am convinced, a red herring that has thrown too many readers off the track too long. The idea that the poem has anything to do with dramatic monologue has endured despite the absence of the most salient feature of that genre, the grammatical first person.[5] A reading that places the entire sequence within the poetic voice of Pound is both simpler and more complex than Berryman's: simpler by eliminating the specious sleuthing after fictitious personae, and more complex by returning the well-modulated intonations to the poet addressing a serious subject. There seems no way to harmonize these two approaches. Perhaps Berryman's book will terminate the persona argument by reducing it to absurdity. If her construction of the poem persists, however, the effect of this book, for all its learning, will be pernicious.

Notes

[1] This perspective is partly supplied by Davenport's essays on Pound in *The Geography of the Imagination* (San Francisco, 1981).

[2] *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton, 1980), p. 40.

[3] An exception is Ronald Bush's contribution to Ian F.A. Bell, ed., *Ezra Pound: Tactics for Reading* (London, 1982).

[4] See "Ezra Pound's 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,'" in Boris Ford, ed., *The Modern Age*, vol. 7 of the Pelican Guide to English Literature (Harmondsworth, 1961). Davie, two years after Berryman's thesis, formally disowned this article. See *Pound* (Glasgow, 1975), p. 52.

[5] First-person pronouns do appear in five poems (III, VII, IX, XII and "Envoi"), but third person predominates by far.