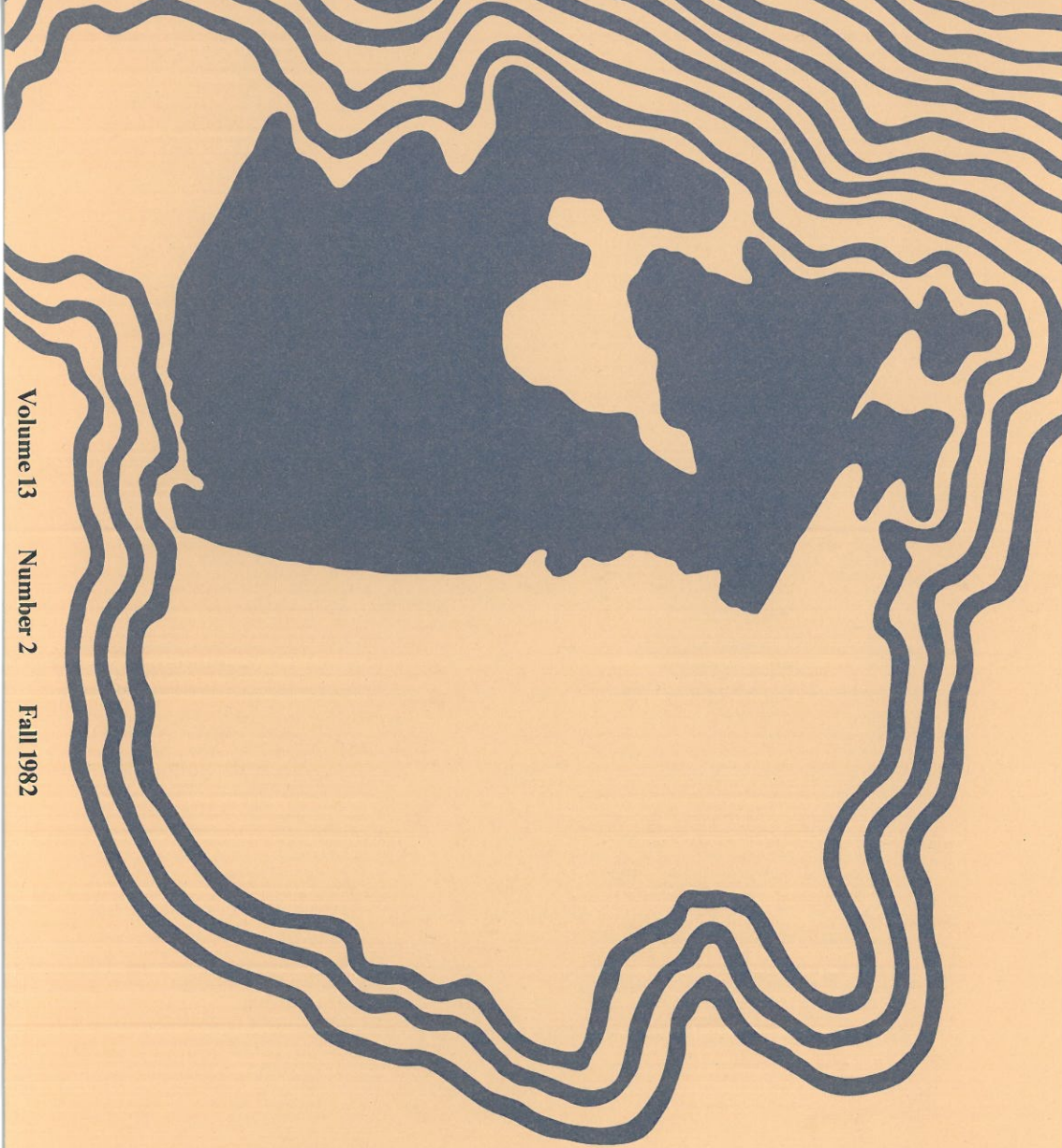


The Canadian Review



Volume 13 Number 2 Fall 1982

of American Studies

More on Pound

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Wendy Stallard Flory. *Ezra Pound and The Cantos: A Record of Struggle*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980. 321 pp.

Forrest Read. *'76: One World and The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981. 476 pp.

Carroll F. Terrell. *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980. Volume I (Cantos 1-71). 362 pp.

Anthony Woodward. *Ezra Pound and the Pisan Cantos*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980. 128 pp.

These four books on Pound's *Cantos* are an ill-assorted lot. One, Carroll F. Terrell's *Companion*, is the single most important aid toward an understanding of this daunting text yet published, and it should be in the hands of every serious reader. I shall save it for last. The three critical books all have their limitations, though the most successful—Anthony Woodward on *The Pisan Cantos*—is a pleasure to read. The most curious thing about these three books is the way in which their value varies in inverse proportion to their authors' reputation, pretension and garrulity.

The name of the late Forrest Read has been familiar to Pound scholars for many years as author of pioneering articles and editor of the collection *Pound/Joyce* (1967). He is the only one of the present critics to have made major contributions to Terrell's *Companion*. So the inanity of his enormous book comes as a shock.

Not that the shock was unprepared. Read first advanced his thesis in a 1978 *Paideuma* article, on which occasion *Paideuma*'s editor, Terrell, felt bound to editorialize: Forrest Read, he said, "is as completely conversant with the text of *The Cantos* as anyone other than Pound ever was," but "personally I believe his whole thesis . . . is ingenious but complete nonsense."¹ Sadly, I can only agree.

Read, in his first six chapters, proposes that Pound had a complete but cryptic plan for his *Cantos* from the start: this plan involved a complicated

system of correspondences between the projected 100 or 120 sections and the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution (with Bill of Rights), the symbols in the Great Seal of the United States, and as well a mysterious calendar published anonymously in the *Little Review* in 1922. He presses these correspondences and others in elaborate detail, much of it numerological, that is hard to follow exactly. Indeed, it is hard to say whether Read's ideas are more cranky or his prose more crabbed. A sample:

we may note the special application of the formula "ONE, ten, eleven, *chi con me* & *tan?*" to *XVI Cantos* and therefore also to the epitome for the whole poem. "ONE" refers to *I* as an archetype. *I-IV* is not referred to in the formula. "Ten" refers to *I-X*, in which *I* has become a first. For a coda "eleven" extends "ten" in its own terms (the fourth of four Malatesta cantos, *XI*). "Chi con me" (who's with me?) shifts to the personal for the American *XII*. The ideogram for *dawn* refers to the hopeful Chinese *XIII*. . . . (p. 109)

Obviously, the burden of proof for such an argument, so silly on the surface, rests with Read himself. But I will be surprised if his evidence convinces anyone. One could quibble endlessly about details—his way of wiggling numbers (thirteen sometimes equals ten), or his fantastic equation of the Great Seal with the card suits in Canto 88 ("the heart symbolizes the sun-vision, the diamond symbolizes the Mount built on the shield... the club symbolizes the constellation, and the spade symbolizes the shield on the Eagle's breast," p. 36). But the assumptions are wrong from the start.

To begin, Read must foster a myth of Pound's "reticence about his poetry" (p. ix). Now, I can hardly name a poet whose hints, public and private, are more fully recorded; and I find it impossible to believe that Pound, frustrated by years of incomprehension, kept the key to his masterwork to himself. What he did say, in fact, was "I haven't an Aquinas map; Aquinas *not valid now*"²—a familiar remark whose omission from this book verges on the dishonest. Although Pound's devotion to the Constitution (at least in later years) is well known, Read cites none of Pound's references, nor any to the Declaration, that demonstrates a shred of structural interest. He produces no evidence whatever that Pound bothered about the Great Seal. And his "discovery" of an early reference to the *Little Review* calendar proves only that he who seeks will find. No, Read's researches must be relegated to the same shelf with the Shakespearean cryptoanalysts and the writings of Erich von Däniken.

This, then, is an unsafe book in the hands of any but experienced Poundians. But what can they get out of it? Alas, little. The thesis once rejected, the fourteen chapters that survey *The Cantos* contain page after page of unmeaning. Canto I, for instance, is finally revealed to have an American theme. How? Because the ship of Odysseus, with its hull, mast, tiller, oars and sail, "manifests the Eagle [of the Great Seal] erect from tail to head and borne by legs and wings." Elpenor, who "sums up the Declaration's argument against the past in a present declaration of independence for the future," represents none other than Tom Paine: "Elp-" equals Ezra Loomis Pound,

“-pen-” equals Paine, and “-or” equals “gold” or “oar.” On this basis, naturally, “Avernus” must be Mount Vernon, home of Paine’s enemy George Washington (pp. 110-18). And so on. One can only pity the mind that delights in such discoveries. Read’s vast knowledge of Pound is everywhere in evidence, everywhere wasted. His book is a tragedy of aberrant learning.

Wendy Stallard Flory’s study, scholarship of a less eccentric kind, again tackles *The Cantos in extenso*, and with some rewards. This is a book long needed, an effort to untangle the autobiographical threads in the poem; so, encouraged by Flory’s useful contributions to *Paideuma*, I looked forward to reading it. Unfortunately, here is an exact reversal of Forrest Read’s case: a potentially illuminating thesis obscured by not being worked vigorously enough.

Only a dogmatic anti-biographer would reject the thesis out of hand: *The Cantos*, Flory declares, are an “epic autobiography” belonging to “an intermediate genre that falls between the *Odyssey* or the *Commedia* and *The Prelude*, sharing aspects of both.” (I will not pause to nag about Dante’s presence in the *Commedia*.) But this truth has been hidden—by critics diverting attention defensively from Pound’s political behavior, by new critical scruples, but mainly by an inherent “emotional evasiveness” in Pound’s own personality. His great campaign against usury, in this view, was also a flight from personal feelings. But the ordeal of Pisa forced Pound to confront himself, and thereafter “he was never able to pretend to himself that any point he had reached was satisfactory” (pp. 1-5).

The thesis yields results, but they are disconcertingly scattered. After the interesting issue of genre evaporates in the opening pages, Flory is left to vacillate between dogged pursuit of Pound’s autobiographical references, open and covert, and a broader area of “personal feeling,” the mystery of Pound’s “emotional evasiveness.” That this is a mystery I agree, and it deserves more than the critical evasiveness it has gotten. Flory deserves credit just for forcing the question—but she falls short of solving it.

Her first chapter gives a simple overview of themes; it is good on Pound’s neoplatonism but scarcely forwards the thesis. The second chapter places blame for Pound’s “evasiveness” almost exclusively on fellow vorticists Wyndham Lewis and Henri Gaudier. These are only two relationships among many, and they seem rather late in Pound’s life to be emotionally formative (he already had a model for Lewis’ “enemy” posture in Whistler). Furthermore, Flory’s psychological assumptions are nebulous: although she tries to sidestep (her purpose is not “to decide why Pound was this way, but to notice that he was,” p. 56), she speaks of Pound’s “almost slavish attachment to attitudes of his friends” (p. 58) and enlists concepts like “authoritarianism” *in vacuo* (p. 65). Her view of the impact of Gaudier’s death rests on a speculation of Charles Olson’s (which I have always been inclined to accept), yet she offers no evidence beyond a coincidence of dates, with a conclusion (more plausible

than Forrest Read's) that Elpenor stands for Gaudier. From this she divagates: Canto 51 contains an "indirect reminder of the First World War: 'Fifth element; mud; said Napoleon.' Gaudier is clearly in Pound's mind..." (p. 93).³

The three chapters that survey *The Cantos*, however, suffer less from paratactic leaps of fancy than from sheer irrelevance. There is no principle of exclusion. Too many pages are neither related to the argument nor have the excuse of fresh information. For Pound's biography, Flory draws heavily from the memoirs of Mary de Rachewiltz, but conveys none of the feel of Pound's experience contained in that remarkable book.⁴ Flory allots twenty pages to the dynastic cantos, with feeble justification: the Adams cantos are "personal" because they allow the reader "to come to know Adams much more intimately than any of the rulers of China" (p. 169). Elsewhere, she dwells on the *Usura* canto as the "most heartfelt" in its sequence, in an important sense the "most personal." Stretching key terms like this renders them meaningless, and the final effect of so much digressive commentary is to make *The Cantos* seem much less autobiographical than they really are.

Despite these weaknesses, specialists will find areas of interest here. Best, perhaps, are the discussions of Pound's sexual themes in the light of his life. Given his veiled affair with Bride Scratton, his divided love for his wife and Olga Rudge, it is hard to deny that Pound had "a very personal reason for wanting to consider both the dangerous consequences and the irresistible nature of adultery" (p. 113). This approach works well, for instance, with Canto 4 or Canto 39 (where Circe is apparently Olga). True, Flory produces no new facts, and her documentation is often distressingly slender; still, the whole poem gains an added human dimension from this angle of vision. Another positive feature is Flory's exploration of visual arts in *The Cantos*, particularly Pound's use of Blake as well as several early Renaissance frescoes. These passages stand wholly outside the main argument, but they are original and persuasive.⁵ Two other points of interest are an unpublished alternative ending for *The Cantos*, and an appendix of specific annotations.

Anthony Woodward's *Ezra Pound and The Pisan Cantos* first struck me as a superfluous book. The author, previously unknown to me, advances no startling thesis nor uncovers new facts. He offers only Anthony Woodward reading cantos—enough to make an unpretentious short study "that aims to bring Pound closer to the educated reader" (p. 1). And for all Wendy Flory's appeal to experience, or Forrest Read's erudition, Woodward's elegant prose communicates more of Pound's poetic qualities than either.

Two ideas inform Woodward's reading. One, elaborated in greater detail elsewhere by George Bornstein,⁶ is that Pound is more a "romantic" than the anti-romantic he thought he was: Woodward's view is temperate, never a device for derogating Pound's originality. The other is that for "all the frantic correspondence with politicians and economists, the 'Ez sez' articles, the explosive didacticism," the true Pound resides in an "inner core of silence

and of light" (p. 48); the didacticism may have been necessary to Pound, "the needful grain of sand that produced the authentic pearl of contemplation" (p. 17), but the "real Pound" is the contemplative. Woodward thus allies himself with that school of Pound criticism bent on extracting lyrical nuggets from their surrounding impurities: in general, the approach has limited usefulness, but with *The Pisan Cantos* the limitations are not severe.

The value of Woodward's book lies not in its views but in its ability to convey how Pound's poetry feels. *The Cantos*, surely, are ripe for some systematic "reader response" criticism; but Woodward reads without theoretical trappings in a straightforward pedagogical manner. "Disregarding for the moment subtleties concerning cultural 'layering,'" he asks, "what is our immediate and relatively naive response to Canto 1?" He finds not a cryptically coded allegory, nor a coy autobiography, but a mastery of tone, of vocal inflection:

The poet is not saying, "I, Pound, poet of the twentieth century, claim for myself the substance of such and such visions of sacramental rituals." He is saying, "I, Pound, poet of the twentieth century, am re-enacting these things as if I were Odysseus...thereby hoping to evoke in you, modern reader, intimations of the sacred and the mythic, but in a tone that erects a subtle barrier—the barrier of our mutual self-conscious modernity that knows itself distant from something that is desirable...." (pp. 9-10)

On every page, we find evidence of Woodward's gift for describing the "delicate cadences and syntactic hesitations which suggest a mind moving timorously, chastely, towards some rather weird spiritual perception"; he appreciates Pound's mantric phrases, like "plura diafana," that seem "like gestures towards an unattained certitude and serenity" (pp. 84-85).

Underlying all this is a message for professional Poundians. Are we not "taking Pound with the wrong kind of seriousness when we engage too pertinaciously in...source-hunting?" (p. 83). Woodward does not undervalue source-hunting—he exploits it with gratitude—but criticism goes astray, he remarks, "by implying that the poetry is important on account of what it says rather than on account of the manner of its telling" (p. 98). His book is a healthy reminder that the sources are ancillary, and a demonstration of what needs saying beyond them.

The mighty task of source-hunting has moved forward in recent years under the leadership of Carroll F. Terrell, who has now reconsolidated the collective effort of many scholars in his *Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*. This work supercedes the *Annotated Index to the Cantos* (1957), long the desk-top ally of Pound students. The *Companion* brings annotations up to date, corrects errors, identifies sources and greatly expands information found in the *Index*. Volume 2 will be even more enterprising, covering sections beyond Canto 84 where the *Index* stopped.

Terrell's *Companion* abandons the alphabetical format of the *Index* in favor of canto-by-canto notes. This is much more convenient, saving as it does flipping through pages and hunting out glosses not keyed to proper names.

The trade-off is that one can no longer answer certain questions (Which canto was it Poggio made that remark? Do *The Cantos* ever mention Machiavelli?) But these sacrifices are small. Terrell also scales down the cross-referencing of the *Index*, making it less exhaustive but more usefully directive.

An equally important change is the apparatus added for each canto: sources, background and a guide to exegeses. Sources are pinpointed with all the authority one would expect. More surprising in its usefulness is the "background" matter: here truly is a lifetime reading plan for students of the Eziversity, a reminder that in studying Pound, unlike so many authors, one's interests are never narrowing but always expanding.

The guide to exegeses is, almost necessarily, less satisfactory. Terrell cites the standard monographs, plus articles in *Paideuma* and the ground-breaking *Analyst*, but he pays little attention to periodical literature elsewhere. He omits, for example, Thomas H. Jackson on Malatesta, Thomas Clark on Canto 53, Leon Surette on John Adams....⁷ The gloss on Canto 36 seems especially thin, missing even an excellent *Paideuma* article on Cavalcanti, not to mention Pound's own edition of Cavalcanti's poems, or the one monograph in English.⁸ But the pursuit of critical exegesis is arduous and secondary in importance, so it is perhaps better left to the hoped-for Variorum of future years.

The annotations themselves offer a sensible editorial compromise between bare facts (so often in the *Index* not those relevant to the passage in question) and unabashed interpretation. Consider Tiberius in Canto 38: the *Index* merely verifies name and dates; Terrell adds that Pound "sees him as an intellectual" because he drained marshes, and cites a sentence from Pound's prose in evidence. The besetting danger, of course, is prescriptive interpretation which, given the authority of the *Companion*, threatens to petrify into critical dogma. But Pound scholars have never been shy about challenging the *Index*, and there is small likelihood they will behave differently toward the *Companion*. With this understanding, Terrell summarizes disputed cases, like the maddening So-Shu of Canto 2, and offers discreet interpretive suggestions elsewhere.

Collating Terrell's notes with my own, I find very little to challenge, mostly omissions of relevant facts: "Birth of a Nation" in Canto 19 is "unidentified," though presumably it is D. W. Griffith's silent film classic; Glaucus, in Canto 39, might have been glossed with Pound's early "Idyll of Glaucus"; Chigi, in Canto 42, is identified, but the importance of this family name in Pound's personal life is not mentioned. Perhaps the most uncharacteristic note is to the phrase "All Esimo" in Canto 28, which Terrell soberly labels a misprint for "All'Esimio," but which strikes me as a Poundian bilingual joke. But since most of my notes are additions rather than corrections, and considering the pressures of space, I think it is foolish to complain of the few things the *Companion* leaves out when it contains so much.

No one now disputes that Pound's readers need such an aid as this *Companion*, and I would guess even Pound might be secretly pleased with the book Terrell has made. As a student of romance philology, Pound was accustomed to reading the works of ancient masters in scholarly editions encrusted with commentary, and I do not doubt that he envisioned a like fate for his own poem. Terrell's work will be the reference point for all such commentary in future. Pound, in a famous phrase, defined epic as "a poem containing history." He might have called it "a poem containing history—with footnotes."

Notes

¹"Bulletin Board," *Paideuma*, 7 (Spring/Fall 1978), 353.

²*The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York, 1950), Letter 355, p. 323.

³For a more cogent view of interaction among the Vorticists (including Eliot and Joyce), see Timothy Materer, *Vortex: Pound, Eliot, and Lewis* (Ithaca, 1979).

⁴*Discretions* (Boston, 1971).

⁵Flory's suggested source for the lotophagoi of Canto 20 does not seem incompatible with my own suggestion in "The Soundscape of *The Cantos*," *Humanities Association Review*, 28 (1977), 151-66.

⁶*The Postromantic Consciousness of Ezra Pound* (Victoria, B.C., 1977).

⁷Thomas H. Jackson, "The Adventures of Messire Wronghead," *ELH*, 32 (1965), 238-55; Thomas Clark, "The Formal Structure of Pound's *Cantos*," *East-West Review*, 1 (1964-65), 97-144; Leon Surette, "Ezra Pound's John Adams: An American Odyssey," *Prospects*, 2 (1976), 483-95.

⁸Georg M. Gugelberger, "The Secularization of 'Love' to a Poetic Metaphor: Cavalcanti, Center of Pound's Medievalism," *Paideuma*, 2 (1973), 159-74; J. E. Shaw, *Guido Cavalcanti's Theory of Love* (Toronto, 1949). I would add Frederick Goldin's lucid summary in *German and Italian Lyrics of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1973), pp. 298-311.