

Le Testament: An Opera by Ezra Pound

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REFLECTIONS ON POUND'S OPERAS

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For the first time in the history of Pound studies, and more than eighty years after the Paris premiere of *Le Testament*, the Pound community is in a position to assess the music, thanks to the work of Margaret Fisher and Bob Hughes. Their work has involved not only mounting performances, but also the meticulous editing and publishing of scores with detailed commentary. My own contemplation of Pound's music dates back to 1970, when Murray Schafer gave me access to material in his possession, which, apart from the prose, was limited to a copy of the Antheil MS of *Le Testament* and his own pencil transcript of numbers from the *Cavalcanti* opera in short score. Nothing from the Catullus/Sappho opera had surfaced at that time.

Now the documents are public, so it is time that Pound's music should be integrated into the sum of his creative effort, not hived off into a separate unrelated place. As a step in this direction, I wish to raise some of the nagging questions about Pound's artistic decisions and pose some tentative answers. The questions, bluntly phrased, are these:

1/ Why did Pound devote so much energy to musical composition? After all, he tried other creative adventures—and gave them up: piano, bassoon, sculpture, novel writing, play writing, cabinet-making. . . . Only composition absorbed him so obsessively over an extended period of time.

2/ Why didn't he set his own poetry to music?¹

3/ Why did he fix his sights on "opera" – and not some more attainable literary-musical genre like song, the song cycle, monodrama, melodrama . . . ?

¹ Save for an unfinished sketch for *Sestina Altaforte*, published in *Complete Violin Works of Ezra Pound* (Robert Hughes, ed., Emeryville CA: Second Evening Art, 2004), 32–37; 90–99.

4/ What caused him to set the poems of François Villon, rather than the troubadours? Villon, however great, is not notably *melopoeic*. Why did he then turn to Cavalcanti? To Catullus and Sappho?

5/ Why did he so suddenly abandon the unfinished *Collis O Heliconii* and his long-standing obsession with musical composition?

6/ Did he in fact abandon musical composition altogether? Or was this effort continued in some form during the St Elizabeths years?

Pound arrived at opera through the rather improbable avenue of the troubadours, whose art exhibited, he said, the most perfect combination of "motz el son." The earliest reference to his ambition as a composer dates back as far as 1910, or shortly after publication of the 1909 *Personae*, when he was persuading Grace Lovat Fraser to try out his settings of troubadour and Italian texts. "He told me of his experiments in improvising a vocal line, neither quite speech nor quite song, but a fusion of both which would completely fit the rhythm of the verse."² Her account recalls both Yeats's experiments with the psalter and Pound's later writing in *Le Testament*. At this stage, Pound's genre was song, with no hint of the operas to come. William Atheling's reviews in the *New Age* were disproportionately concerned with the song repertoire, as opposed to opera or instrumental music.³

Two points need to be underlined: First, the reconstruction of actual troubadour music was at that time—and still is—highly conjectural. We have notations, but no one knows with any certainty how they really sounded. Pound realized this when he described troubadour song in Canto 20 "as of the nightingale too far off to be heard." On the other hand, he clung to the idea of its recoverability, insisting, for example, that every university should employ singers expert in Provençal, singers "who understand the

² Grace Lovat Fraser, *In the Days of My Youth* (London: Cassell, 1970), 126. Fraser was a noted actress of the period; her memoir seems to have been overlooked by Pound's biographers. The two were introduced by Katherine Ruth Heyman; her memories of Pound fill pages 123 to 144.

³ Pound used the pen name William Atheling to sign his reviews for the London weekly *New Age* (1917–1921). The collected reviews are published in *Ezra Pound and Music*, R. Murray Schafer, ed. (New York: New Directions, 1977).

meanings of words."⁴ Still, the conjectural nature of this art left Pound's imagination wide open to speculation.

Secondly, given this freedom, Pound's ideal of song was not simple lyric transparency. Drawing on the Provençal distinction between *trobar clar* and *trobar clus*, he wrote that the complex songs of Arnaut Daniel "must be conceived and approached as ritual": "Good art as the high mass is good art."⁵ On the other hand, as he realized even in 1910, this art may not have "come over the footlights."⁶ In this concern for putting over the complexities of text in oral performance lie Pound's eventual solutions in stylized, minimized stage presentation, modeled after Noh or Greek tragedy, his instructions that the singers of *Le Testament* remain stationary, and use a minimum of gesture.⁷

Long ago, Noel Stock complained that Pound "never succeeded in writing a song of the highest quality, a lyric wholly 'singable.'"⁸ As debatable as this assertion is, remember that Pound understood "lyric" in the pre-Gutenberg sense of words written to be set to music. Lyric is also the genre that is best suited to the expression of personal emotions. Why did Pound not, then, try to write his own lyrics for music, à la Thomas Campion? Why did he turn to Villon and Cavalcanti?

A facile answer is that he offered his settings as "criticism via music"⁹ of these poets. This is true to a degree: musical setting is an alternative to prose criticism, or to the arduous task of trying to translate *melopoeia*. As he remarked in the *ABC of Reading*, being unable to translate, he was "reduced" to musical setting.¹⁰ But the obsessive energy that Pound spent on musical composition over a period of thirteen or more years points not to mere literary criticism but to original creation. My conclusion is that Pound turned to opera not just as an excuse to compose music, but in an effort to create a particular kind of lyric

⁴ "How to Read" (1929), in *Literary Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 39.

⁵ "Psychology and Troubadours," *Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 89.

⁶ "Proença," *Spirit of Romance* 53.

⁷ The distinguished Renaissance historian Wallace Ferguson told me that Yves Tinayre, who created the role of Villon's Heaulmière in 1926, sang in recital many years later from an absolutely and memorably rigid posture.

⁸ Noel Stock, *Ezra Pound: Poet in Exile* (London: Manchester University Press, 1964), 97-98.

⁹ "Dateline" (1934), *Literary Essays* 74.

¹⁰ *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 104.

drama; that he turned to Villon, and later to Cavalcanti, Catullus and Sappho, because he found in them adequate personae for his own personal emotions—personal emotions that did not fit comfortably into the epic fabric of *The Cantos*.

When Pound arrived in Paris in 1920, he was questioned by the *Paris Herald* about his plans: He intended to “devote himself to the study of 12th-century music,” he said, and by the way, he was “also writing a long poem.”¹¹ The comment points not only to his continued interest in troubadour song, but to his division of purpose. If we take Pound’s remark with full seriousness, we face two questions: First, how significant is this bifurcation between working on troubadour song and working on *The Cantos*? And why did troubadour songs get displaced by a Villon opera?

The first can be framed as a question of genre: an antithesis between lyric and epic. The epic persona, the “dominant voice” of *The Cantos*, in the words of Michael André Bernstein, must “not bear the trace of a single sensibility; instead, it will function as a spokesman for values generally acknowledged as significant for communal stability and social well-being,” “the voice of the community’s heritage ‘telling itself.’”¹² The genre of *The Cantos*, for all its ragbag capaciousness, dictates certain subordinations and exclusions. This demand for an epic persona who is a model citizen – who can say without apology *civis Romanus sum*—is obviously not an exact fit either with Pound or with his Cantos voice; but it does point to his concentration on impersonality and objective history. Thus every reader on reaching the Pisan Cantos records a feeling of relief, when Pound appears in person and, in Hugh Kenner’s words, welcomes “all of himself that he had excluded for so long—ever since London.”¹³ Excluded perhaps from *The Cantos*—but not from the operas.

Why he chose to project this lyric impulse on stage in the form of opera is another issue. Pound had plenty of experience in London of both opera and song recital. He did not make an absolute distinction between the two. Once, in a very peculiar formulation, he

¹¹ Cited in Noel Stock, *The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 236.

¹² Michael André Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 14.

¹³ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 474.

defines opera as “combining orchestra with songs.”¹⁴ In one sense, *Le Testament* is a kind of staged song cycle—the stage providing the ritual frame for the lyric—since there are characters and events, but no unified cause-and-effect plot. Pound’s desire was to unite stage presentation with the very highest kind of *trobar clus* lyric poetry—but with quality of the poetry foremost, as it hardly ever is in opera or even in verse drama. As he noted in *The Spirit of Romance*, “it is very difficult to write good poetry, and because the dramatist has so many other means at his command, he usually relapses into inferior poetry.” This was less true in the days of Shakespeare and Lope de Vega, perhaps, “when the paraphernalia of the stage were less complicated.”¹⁵ But now, with the advances of stage machinery in the interest of theatrical realism? And in opera, with the additional distraction of music?

In a letter of April 1920 to Agnes Bedford, he reveals that he is already thinking in terms of an opera with enormously minimized musical and theatrical distraction:

Sat through *Pelléas* the other evening and am encouraged— encouraged to tear up the whole bloomin’ era of harmony and do the thing if necessary on two tins and washboard. Anything rather than that mush of hysteria, Scandanavia strained through Belgium plus French Schwärmerei. Probably just as well I have to make this first swash without any instruments at hand. VERY much encouraged by the *Pelléas*, ignorance having no further terrors if that DAMN thing is the result of what is called musical knowledge.

[Have you seen Cocteau’s *Cock and Harlequin*? Pub. By Egoist 3/6. Considerable sense.]

I haven’t been able to exclude violins altogether; and I suppose there will eventually be a few chords in the damn thing. Fortunately Satie’s *Socrate* is damn dull (and people endure it). . . .¹⁶

¹⁴ *Ezra Pound and Music* 439.

¹⁵ *Spirit of Romance* 180.

¹⁶ Letter to Agnes Bedford dated April [?] 1921, in *The Letters of Ezra Pound 1907–1941*, D.D. Paige, ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1950), 167.

Both *Pelléas* and *Socrate* were efforts at prosodization as composition, setting French texts syllabically in a kind of continuous semi-melodic recitative. *Pelléas* was fully staged opera, of course, and *Socrate* was being performed both privately in a piano reduction, and publicly in its orchestrated version.¹⁷ Neither offered what Pound was looking for.

But an even larger question is why Pound turned from “the study of 12th-century music” to the 15th-century François Villon?¹⁸ Pound had plenty of troubadour legend to draw on for a plot. Their art was a summit of lyric *melopoeia*. Villon, on the other hand, is described in *The Spirit of Romance* as “destitute of imagination; he is almost destitute of art;” he accepts the forms of verse “unquestioningly,” and is never singled out for *melopoeia*. Rather, he “carries on another Provençal tradition, that of unvarnished, intimate speech.”¹⁹ His presence in *The Cantos* is minimal at best—nothing until three words in Canto 45.

Given Pound’s assessment of Villon’s art, approaching *Le Testament* purely as literary criticism through music is likewise puzzling. It had once seemed overwhelmingly obvious to me and to others that Pound’s primary interest was in minute exactitude in setting Villon’s words prosodically. The only complete score was in George Antheil’s painstaking phonometric notation. Pound’s music does not seem to pursue broad characterization, and the fussy rhythms destroy all periodicity of melody. Certainly the novelty of this experiment is notable; and Pound’s drafts show that once he had “selected” the pitches for his melodies, they remained stable, while he fussed with the rhythmic notation. But there are arguments for looking past the innovative appearance of Antheil’s score. When singers found the rhythms notated by Antheil impossible to perform, Pound obliged by simplifying them. Working on his own composing *Cavalcanti*, Pound’s rhythmic notation is relatively conventional. Incidentally, Walter Rummel’s musical setting of Pound’s own “The Return,” which he praised as the best

¹⁷ See Alan Gillmor, *Erik Satie* (Boston: Twayne, 1988), 217–218.

¹⁸ The 1901 play by Justin H. McCarthy *If I Were King*, which was enormously popular for many years, presented Villon as a swashbuckling hero who saves France. McCarthy’s fantasy was turned into musical form in Rudolf Friml’s *The Vagabond King* (1925), which had successful runs on Broadway and in London’s West End and was first filmed in 1930. See William Everett, *Rudolf Friml* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 56–72.

¹⁹ All quotes are from *Spirit of Romance* 171, 170, 167, respectively.

criticism of that metrically fascinating poem, shows no trace of prosodized setting.²⁰ Pound's purposes in turning to the poetry of Villon were greater, then, than simply setting words with minute exactitude.

It is more productive, perhaps, to see Pound's preoccupation with Villon something of a personal identification. Pound's Villon is the outsider, the exile, the *iron*, the voice of a counterculture. The two early "Villonauds"—which look forward the first and last numbers of *Le Testament*—show him in this light. And Pound ventriloquizes Villon's voice in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," in "I'an trentiesme"—or "trentuniesme"—de son eage": Mauberley, who is half Pound, is marginalized, rejected and left behind.

The Villonauds belong to the open road period of "Cino" and the Carman-Hovey Vagabondia poems, and Pound's essay on Villon in *The Spirit of Romance* draws significant comparisons with Whitman. Both poets are singers of the Self. But Villon is superior, because he "never forgets his fascinating, revolting self"; he is "the only poet without illusions." "What he sees, he writes." "In Villon, filth is filth, crime is crime They are not considered as strange delights accessible only to adventurous spirits." "If, however, he sings the song of himself, he is free from that horrible air of rectitude with which Whitman rejoices in being Whitman." "Whitman, having decided that it is disgraceful to be ashamed, rejoices in having attained nudity." It is through the persona of Villon, then, that Pound can put off the Whitmanic "optimism and breadth of vision," the pretense that he is "conferring a philanthropic benefit on the race by recording his own self-complacency."²¹ He can put off the Whitmanic program of establishing himself as the representative voice of the Republic. "Villon's greatness is that he unconsciously proclaims man's divine right to be himself, the only one of the so-called 'rights of man' that is not an artificial product" (emphasis added).²² In the persona of Villon, Pound set aside the collective epic voice and sang as if for himself. The Villon of the opera voices only elegiac verses, while the bawdiness is distributed among the other characters.

²⁰ Rummel's "The Return" begins and ends pianissimo, rising to a fortissimo on the climactic "Haie! Haie!" The song was published separately by Augener in 1913. Pound's comment appears in "Notice to Men of Letters," *This Quarter* I (Fall 1925), 245. See also Charles Timbrell, *Prince of Virtuosos: A Life of Walter Rummel, American Pianist* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2005).

²¹ *Spirit of Romance* 168–173.

²² *Spirit of Romance* 176.

The scene of *Le Testament* is bounded by the brothel and the gallows. Villon speaks with the voice of jaded animal sexuality: "Passion he knows and satiety he knows, and never does he forget their relation."²³ He speaks as well through the female voice of the Heaulmière: "His own life was so nearly that of his wasted amouress that his voice is at one with hers."²⁴ Fisher's notion that Pound's three operas form a "love trilogy" is convincing. But it needs some qualification. There is little indication that Pound thought of composing a second opera before E.A.F. Harding suggested it in 1931.²⁵ On the other hand, in *The Spirit of Romance* he had already drawn the contrast between Villon and Dante: If Villon knows that "the lower pleasures lead to no satisfaction," Dante—and Cavalcanti, too—know "that there are supernormal pleasures, enjoyable by man through the mind."²⁶ It has not escaped attention that the two central characters, and Catullus as well—a sometime antagonist of Julius Caesar himself—are flamboyant, superior personalities who are exiles and critics of authority.

I have written elsewhere of Pound's concept for the staging of *Le Testament*, drawn from what he understood of the conventions of Japanese Noh and Greek tragedy.²⁷ For *Le Testament* he calls for masks, and suggests that the characters remain on stage at all times, completely immobile, and move only when speaking: they cease moving and become theoretically invisible when they go out of action. Although Fisher has drawn in great detail his designing of *Cavalcanti* for radio broadcast, I have always assumed (perhaps incorrectly) that his ideas for putting *Cavalcanti* on the stage were similar. In each case, however, there is a sense of personal identification with the protagonist. In each case, there is a primary impulse to place the masterwork of lyric on stage where it can be approached as ritual. And since both *Le Testament* and *Cavalcanti* culminate in a supernatural manifestation, there is good reason to suspect that Pound turned to

²³ *Spirit of Romance* 173.

²⁴ *Spirit of Romance* 175.

²⁵ On the operas as a "love trilogy," see *Ego Scriptor Cantilenae, The Music of Ezra Pound, Other Minds* audio CD 1005-2 with booklet (San Francisco 2003), 29; and Fisher, *Ezra Pound's Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931-1933* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 154. See the latter, Chapter 4, for information on E. A. F. Harding, Pound's BBC producer, and the opera *Cavalcanti*.

²⁶ *Spirit of Romance* 177.

²⁷ "Pound in the Theatre: The Dramatic Background of Pound's Operas," in Leon Surette and Demetres Tryphonopoulos, eds., *Literary Modernism and the Occult Tradition* (Orono ME: National Poetry Foundation), 147-162.

Catullus and Sappho not only because of the prosodic challenge of setting true quantities, but because he hoped to stage some kind of Eleusianian *hieros gamos* or sacred marriage to complete his ascending erotic trilogy. In Fisher's words, the culmination of the operatic love trilogy would portend "the creation of an earthly paradise in which coition would again be upheld as a sacrament, and the gods in their plurality again would appear on the radar of human perception."²⁸

In 1932, Pound "was composing daily," completing the "Collis" aria in August 1932. But then "after 1933 or 1934 Pound appears to have stopped composing."²⁹ Fisher argues possible internal causes for abandoning the Catullus opera—problems with the lacuna in manuscripts, or conflicting interpretations of the epithalamium. I am more inclined to see external causes—Pound's disappointment with the BBC, or his involvement with other activities. Nineteen thirty-four saw publication of the *ABC of Reading, Make It New*, and *Eleven New Cantos*. It was a peak year for the Rapallo concert series, which came to an end with the departure of Gerhart Münch (June 1935), who participated in 33 of the 35 concerts; serious work on Vivaldi began in 1936. Meanwhile, Pound's increasing economic fixation took a nasty anti-semitic turn in the early months of 1934.³⁰ Pound's involvement with music continued—but not his composing—until all was curtailed by the War and the confinement at St Elizabeths.

But not curtailed altogether. If Pound's two translations of Sophocles do not qualify as his fourth and fifth operas, there is a strong family likeness. Carey Perloff makes a strong case for Pound's trans-gendered identification with Elektra in his posthumously published translation of that play. And Pound even made a start on composing his own music for the choruses of his *Women of Trachis*.³¹ As always, he drew parallels between Greek drama and Japanese Noh, dedicating *The Women of Trachis* to Kitasono Katue,

²⁸ Margaret Fisher, *The Recovery of Ezra Pound's Third Opera: Collis O Heliconii, settings of poems by Catullus and Sappho* (Emeryville CA: Second Evening Art, 2005), 7.

²⁹ *Ego Scriptor Cantilenae* 29.

³⁰ Together with violinist Olga Rudge, Pound produced a chamber concert series in his adopted city, Rapallo, Italy from June 1933 to March 1939. For more information, see *Ezra Pound and Music* 321–449. On Pound's anti-semitism, see Leon Surette, *Pound in Purgatory: From Economic Radicalism to Anti-Semitism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 242.

³¹ Fisher, *The Recovery of Ezra Pound's Third Opera*, xv, note 14.

inviting him to “take it to the Minoru if they can be persuaded to add to their repertoire.” This play—conventionally regarded as the least satisfactory of Sophocles’ seven extant tragedies—is praised by Pound as “the highest peak of Greek sensibility registered in any of the plays that have come down to us,” the one “nearest the original form of the God-Dance.”³² The story of a mortal but semi-divine hero torn between two women who love him, and whom he loves in return—a hero whose love has turned to agony—the biographical application to Pound has been irresistible. But Pound’s esteem for the play turns on his reading of Herakles’ illumination—a reading supported by many classicists but disputed by others:

Come at it that way, my boy, what

SPLENDOUR,

IT ALL COHERES.

According to Pound’s stage directions, Herakles “turns his face from the audience, then sits erect, facing them without the mask of agony; the revealed make-up is that of solar serenity.”³³ Herakles in this play achieves the serenity, the entrance into the Arcanum that Pound may have intended for his Catullus opera.

For decades readers have assumed that Pound, when he turned to writing *The Cantos*, set aside all other creative work, or else absorbed it into his great epic. Now it appears that there is a parallel body of dramatic work outside *The Cantos*, almost continuous in its production from circa 1920 to the early St Elizabeths years.

³² *Women of Trachis: A Version by Ezra Pound* (Sophocles), (New York: New Directions, 1985), 3.

³³ *Women of Trachis* 50.