

SPECIAL ESSAY

Modernism

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"miracle of five intelligent visitors / such a gathering possible OUTSIDE a bughouse?" wrote Ezra Pound to Olivia Rossetti Agresti from St. Elizabeths Hospital. In Rome, Via Ciro Menotti 36, the old lady did her best. She offered tea on Sunday afternoon. Her "gathering" consisted of three contemporaries: her sister Helen, usually accompanied by her daughter Imogen Dennis, Luigi Villari, Cammillo Pellizzi and a young couple in their twenties. ORA's voice, lined with transparent irony when speaking of "isms," used to quote her uncle, the "Pre-Rafaelite" Dante Gabriel Rossetti: "I am no *Ite*, I am a Poet." Thus teaching the young to "sort out the animals," i.e., learn the names and the dates of the founders and of participants in various movements, as well as examine their motives and productions.

Pound has been known as the founder of Imagism and Vorticism, though he soon went his own way. He was spared being linked to Futurism, but not other next door isms, such as Fascism and racism. However, he always took responsibility for his own words: *ego scriptor* and "Ezra Pound speaking."

In recent years scholars and critics more and more often refer to him as the founder of Modernism. So it's time to distinguish between modernism and modernity which "... inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve" (cf. Joshua Clover, "A form adequate to history," *Paideuma* 37: 325). A number of books such as Michael North's *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth-Century Literature* (Oxford University Press 1994), *Modernism and Copyright: Modernist Literature and Culture*, edited by Paul K. Saint-Amour (Oxford University Press 2010) and *Modernism in the Magazines* by Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman are enlightening. The latter is especially so

Editor's note: An invited essay inspired by *Modernism in the Magazines: An Introduction*, by **Robert Scholes** and **Clifford Wulfman**. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010. 340pp. \$40.00 cloth. ISBN: 9780300142044.

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since in the appendix, *Studies in Contemporary Mentality*, Pound is allowed to speak for himself. The book opens with three epigraphs, two quotations from letters to James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis and one from *Make It New*, with the incisive statement: "You can't know an era merely by knowing its best" (p. 1). It might equally be said: by knowing its worst, let alone when speaking of a poet or even of a political movement and a country. There are sharp pointers to two essential books for the serious reader: Donald Gallup's *Ezra Pound: A Bibliography* (University of Virginia Press 1983) and David Moody's *Ezra Pound: Poet: A Portrait of the Man and His Work; Volume 1, The Young Genius 1885-1920* (Oxford University Press 2007).

Pound says that we advance by discrimination and by practicing the virtue of precision.

The authors of *Modernism in the Magazines* are not afraid of calling Pound an "elitist." Though the tensions may remain insoluble, the elitist must include also the pluralist. In PRAEFATIO AD LECTOREM ELECTUM, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910: 6) he said: "[. . .] many dead men are our grandchildren's contemporaries." Note the ELECTUM. Half a century later, in *Thrones* (Canto XCVI: 679) there's one of the very rare footnotes: "If we never write anything

save what is already understood, the field of understanding will never be extended. One demands the right, now and again, to write for a few people whose special interests and whose curiosity reaches into greater detail." The *Cantos* may still be waiting for a contemporary reader, "the pyramid builder,/ waiting there to be born" (CXIII: 808). And always a good *Concordance* will be the best guide to the Epic that includes economics.

But let's not stray from the Collection of Little Magazines with their roster of advertisements—a kind of *sottisier*, which reads like a detective novel. A somewhat different jesting is to be found in Sigismundo Malatesta, talking to his steward:

"And one day he said: Henry, you can have it,/ On condition, you can have it: for four months/You'll stand any reasonable joke that I play on you, / And you can joke back/ provided you don't get too ornry." (XI: 52).

Could the little booklet *SUPERMAN*, published by Constable & Co., Ltd, London 1934, edited by Ephraim Pundit, have been a late redress ?

One of the pleasures Scholes and Wulfman offer is the highlighting of the hilarious "*hirsuta et pexa*" game, the rough and the smooth, Pound played with the various magazines, contrasting the aim of the one to the other, "Making no compromise with the public taste" (p. 13). While ferociously attacking the contemporary British mentality, he divides the audiences and the aims of the periodicals into five categories, somewhat with tongue in cheek, from those channelling thought to those designed to stop thought altogether.

A triumphant 23-year-old wrote to his parents from Venice in 1908: "Sound the trumpet, let zipp the drum & swatt the big bassoon. It pays to advertise." His first book of poems, *A Lume Spento*, had just been published—at his own expense—ergo also the art of advertising had to be practiced to achieve distribution, and fame.

In London, as the WWI years dragged on and a "cold and bitter" wind blew across the country, the weariness of the job, writing to pay the rent, despite the banter, is clearly readable between the lines. The let-ups

appear in *Blast*: "I cling to the spar. . . . Cowardly editors threaten: 'If I dare'. . . . Then they will have my guts; They will cut down my wage,—" etc., July 1915. . .

As late as 1959, in a BBC interview, one can hear him lament "they don't get the IRONY." When a young man sets out to build a "*paradiso terrestre*," to achieve the possible, he must perforce skim over large territories, looking at coast lines, bounding in periplum, making mistakes, yet willing to "correct it with cheerfulness." By the time he came to rely on the principles of Confucius, the *Unwobbling Pivot*, the enemy had been identified in *das Leihkapital*. It was time to be serious. In ? *Versus Camouflage, January 10, 1918* (p. 322) one senses the stress of the war and the awareness that

"Anyone can run to excesses,/ It is easy to shoot past the mark,

It is hard to stand firm in the middle" (XIII: 59).

Yet when asked in 1965 to contribute to the T.S.Eliot "Memorial" in *The Sewanee Review*, after paying the high homage: "His was the true Dantescan voice —" he asked: "Who is there now for me to share a joke with?"

Both Modernists in excelsis may at times have fallen prey to identity politics or religion, but that's when they most teased each other. While Pound went on feeding cats or stranded artists, his friend the Possum wrote *The Book of Practical Cats*, (now I am being catty: Eliot as Chief Editor at Fabers having previously refused, because it would not sell, Br'er Rabbit's translation of his 12-year-old daughter's "Gais: The Beauties of the Tyrol").

"Don't lose your sense of humor" is the best advice I've ever had, and from my mother at that. Have present-day Modernists kept theirs or have they succumbed to the vulgarity of materialism hatching violence? The two Masters have stated "In my end is my beginning" and "Things have ends and beginnings." Modernism may by now be *passé*. Only high Poetry keeps the beginnings alive, sets forever keel to brakers, renews itself with every sun.

All isms can be considered stepping stones across the great river of Art, ever flowing,

never the same water, reflecting the landscape, carrying the jetsam and flotsam (two words that bring to mind e.e.cummings, is he a modernist? He undoubtedly had a sense of humor as well as a sense of Tradition).

They all need Kindergarten, was Pound's constant complaint at St. Liz. When he returned to Italy, his complaint was: they expect me to be a telephone directory. Whether this has any relevance to the different educational systems or different mind sets, is an open question. One thing experience dictates: the enjoyment with the *sottisier* will be greater after having digested the *Cantos*.

Chancing on "a lonely De Gama doubling an uncharted cape" (Blackwoods, 23 August 1917:229 will make you smile—aha, already then. . .and in Canto VII: De Gama wore striped pants in Africa. A whole lesson in detail to be learned. Or from other such names that were not familiar before one had to look them up for the "detail" in their historical context.

Reference

Pound, Ezra. 1996. *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*. New York, NY: New Directions.