

The Politics of Ezra Pound: Many Errors, a Little Rightness

By Chuck Guilford

“Many Errors, a Little Rightness,” the phrase is Pound’s. It comes from Canto and suggests that Pound himself was aware, toward the end, of the extent to which he had become ensnared in the nets of his own delusions and errors. In 1967 when Pound was 82 years old and living in Italy, he was visited by the poet Allen Ginsberg, who recently visited his birthplace here in Hailey. At that time Pound told the younger poet, “The intention was bad--that’s the trouble--anything I’ve done has been an accident--any good has been spoiled by my intentions--the preoccupation with stupid and irrelevant things.” And a few minutes later, “but my worst mistake was the stupid suburban prejudice of anti-Semitism, all along, that spoiled everything” (Hyde 271). And yet, for all that, error, which Pound himself acknowledged, in order to fully understand the man, we must also look at the rightness, that is to say, at the wholeness of the picture, and I think when we do, we may come to terms with, learn from, the paradoxes and oppositions that are so much a part of the man and his work.

To do that, it helps to have a sense of context. Pound was born here in Hailey and perhaps retained some Idaho’s characteristics--a respect for hard work and plain-spoken bluntness--even after growing up in the East and spending most of his adulthood abroad. A prodigious scholar and master of many languages, he was also a spiritual visionary. We sometimes hear it said of our Native American peoples that they believe the world is alive and sacred and holy, that we two-footed ones are brothers and sisters with the four-foots and with the birds of the sky and the fishes of the sea. Pound, too, saw the world as sacred and enchanted. His religion might be called animist or pantheist or pagan. For him, the myths of Ancient Greece, the tales of Zeus and Hera, Aphrodite and Hermes, Odysseus and Circe, were not just

quaint stories but profoundly evocative imaginative pathways into the spirit world, much as tales of Coyote and Bear might be to a Native American.

Yet Pound lived in a violent and terrifying time. Like many writers of the early twentieth century, he was cynical and disillusioned with the society he lived in. He was disturbed by poverty and pollution and greed--by the horrors of World War I and by the growing disparities between the upper and lower classes. He helped his friend and fellow expatriate T.S. Eliot revise *The Wasteland*, and his own "Hugh Selwyn Maubely" shows that he shared much of Eliot's unhappiness with the directions of modern society. While Pound's friend Possum managed to find hope and solace in Anglo Catholicism, Pound attempted a more difficult and idiosyncratic synthesis of beliefs, creeds, and theories. If his spirituality was closely linked with the Paganism of ancient Greece, in terms of personal conduct and political order, Pound looked to the East, to Confucianism where he found balance, continuity, harmony, respect for tradition. Pound was also, and this more than anything may have been his undoing, interested in economics. He believed that many of the ills of modern European civilization were due to runaway capitalism, which he believed to be usurious, exploitative, destructive of true human and natural value, substituting cash values for spiritual ones, turning nature and humans into mere resources and consumers. He rejected the alternative of Marxism as too dogmatic, collectivist, and artistically repressive. In his search for other answers, he ran upon the writings of Major C. H. Douglas and Silvio Gessell. Often referred to as "Social Credit theory," these ideas stressed that currency was a primary cause of economic ill health. Social creditors believed that the true wealth of a nation lay not in bullion or banknotes, both of which were of

little intrinsic value, but in the natural bounty of a land and its people. Money was best seen as a tool for distributing and exchanging goods and services. The problem was that as currency began to take on a life of its own, it acted to constrict rather than aid distribution. In an idea much like Marx's theory of surplus value, Douglas explained how traditional capitalist methods of finance and capitalization assure that workers will never have enough money to fully afford the goods they produce, because much of that needed money is being paid out as dividends to investors, or as interest to financiers and bankers. What remains to pay workers can never equal the full cost of producing the product, and therefore, since this "excess value" is being hoarded and kept out of circulation, the money available for consumption will always fall short of that needed to purchase the total goods and services produced. Hence, bottlenecks. Hence the existence of shortages amidst plenty. Hence the need for foreign markets, the need to dump wheat or rice abroad while Americans are hungry.

It is this "siphoning off" and hoarding of hoarding of money that bothered Pound so much. He believed it to be socially unhealthy and in a literal sense "unnatural." It was unhealthy in that a potato farmer, a cobbler, or a talented artist might work hard every day, making valuable contributions to the social good and yet be barely able to afford the necessities of life, while others who performed no useful service, lived in luxury and sucked money from these workers in the form of dividends and interest. The system was "unnatural" in that it assigned to money a level of value that had no intrinsic connection with materials, with work, and with imagination, which Pound believed were the true measure of value. Once true value is presumed to lie in money rather than in nature, in labor, in craft, a twisted and inverted value structure becomes inevitable. Land is not valued for its beauty or bounty but because it is a good

investment. A shoemaker is not valued for the quality of his work but because he can produce a highly marketable commodity. A work of art is not valued because of the beauty and vision that inhere in it, but because it can become a solid gold best selling blockbuster.

Unlike a crop of potatoes or a pair of shoes, which have a distinct lifespan, money goes on forever. A potato rots. A pair of shoes wears out. But a dollar endures. And in fact grows, earns interest. We may think it humorous and eccentric that Imelda Marcos had hundreds of pairs of shoes. “What would she ever do with them?” we wonder. But we don’t think it humorous that she had millions of dollars stashed away. We don’t ask what she will do with those dollars. And most of us will probably allow that J. R. Simplot is smart to sell his potatoes to McDonald’s for cash, which he can keep in the bank or invest, whereas if he just kept the potatoes . . . well, what a stink. Silvio Gessell was troubled by this tendency of money to endure and increase and accumulate in the hands of a few, and so he proposed a sort of temporary money, a money that would expire. It’s an interesting notion, money that would exist only briefly like daffodils or plum blossoms. Imagine that the dollars you earned this morning would be good for two years. During that time you could buy anything you wanted, but at the end of that time, the money would be worthless paper. How would your life be different? Gessell--and also Pound--believed most people would spend their money, thus aiding in the transfer of goods and services. Great art works, fertile land, comfortable dwellings--these would become the repositories of wealth, and they would belong to those whose labors and talents contributed most to the general welfare of society. Well, so far as I know, this theory has never been fully tested, just once for a brief period in Wörgel, Austria, during the 1930’s. But even so, it seems to have crystallized in Pound’s mind a belief that a great key to attaining social justice was the need to

break up the huge concentrations of wealth, held in the form of currency by international banking cartels that knew no higher allegiance than their own self interest, which was always measured in monetary terms and attained by manipulating markets, exchange rates, and interest rates. This is what Pound meant by Usury, not strictly moneylending, but avarice, the obsession with accumulating vast quantities of money, only to beget still more money, and when he wanted to personify the enemy, he reached deep into the European past--and into his own prejudiced past--for the image of the Shylock, the Jew.

Those of us who have grown up in this country, and especially those who lived through World War II--or perhaps like me have a parent who fought in it--those who are aware of the nightmare of the Holocaust, may find it hard to imagine how Pound could have broadcast anti-American messages over Italian radio during the war years, especially since these messages, while often rambling and confused, were also strongly anti-Semitic. Pound believed the Allies, especially Roosevelt and Churchill, were owned by these international cartels, run by "international Jewry." Living in Italy, he watched the rise of Mussolini throughout the thirties. He believed "Muss," or "The Boss," as he liked to call him (yes, this was pre-Bruce Springsteen) was a man of action who genuinely cared about the welfare of his country. He equated him with Thomas Jefferson as a champion of agrarianism. Mussolini drained the swamps, creating an increased water supply and more arable land. He had battled the decadent Italian aristocracy, and Pound believed he would also stand up to the international bankers, munitions makers, and moneylenders, drive them from the temple, so to speak. In 1933, Pound met Mussolini, gave him a copy of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*, of which Muss. is reported to have said, "*Ma questo . . . è divertante.*" "But this . . . is amusing." Pound was flattered, we might say "snowed," into

believing Mussolini genuinely cared about the arts, and perhaps most importantly, into believing Muss. took the poet and his economic ideas seriously--as no one in London or Washington would.

So, I think it's here that the story becomes tragic--in this tangled web of brilliance and naïveté, of noble intent and petty prejudice, of beautiful high art and bungling propaganda. Bitterly disillusioned with his homeland, feeling that he had no direct influence on American thought or policy, Pound reached for the platform he could obtain, and with his natural bent toward self-dramatization and his vitriolic diatribes against stupidity, greed, and laziness, he plunged ever deeper into his own incoherent outrage. As early as the mid thirties, James Joyce, whose work Pound had helped advance and for whom Pound had once bought a pair of good shoes, to replace his old sneakers, began to think him obsessed. According to Lewis Hyde, Joyce, visiting Paris in 1935 thought "Pound was 'mad' and felt 'genuinely frightened of him.'" Afraid to be alone with him, Joyce invited Hemingway to go with them to dinner; Hemingway found him 'erratic,' 'distracted. Later T. S. Eliot also concluded that his friend had become unbalanced ('megalomania'), as did Pound's daughter, Mary ('his own tongue was tricking him, running away with him, leading him into excess, away from his pivot, into blind spots')" (245).

After the war, Pound was charged with treason, taken prisoner, and kept in a small metal cage at Pisa. Here, in the most appalling circumstance, he wrote some of his most beautiful and moving poetry. The *Pisan Cantos*, though charged with pain and anguish, have the delicate stillness of a storm just passed, of a reawakening to sunlight on water, to the small beauties and little kindnesses of people in adverse conditions. This is especially evident in the beautiful and haunting "Canto LXXXI," with its refrain, "Pull down thy vanity." In the end, for a variety of

reasons, Pound was not tried for treason, but instead was diagnosed insane and placed in St. Elizabeth's hospital in Washington DC from 1946 to 1958. Upon his release, he returned to Italy. The poems of this time have a quiet air of resignation and acceptance, tinged with regret, a reaching for the great crystal of light, an attempt to transcend and step beyond the trials and heartaches, the horror and pain that characterized so much of his later life. That he came at this point to acknowledge the extent to which his work had been ruined by his shallow and ill-tempered prejudice may help us to grant his wish to be forgiven, but whether or not we consider that necessary, possible, or even desirable, I believe it's a good thing that we are here tonight in Pound's birthplace to honor what he in his better moments was trying to tell us, and also to understand how a man gifted with such talent, energy, and compassion could so lose his balance. Surely both of these are worthy purposes that can ennoble and enrich us and this community, while offering Ezra Pound the measure of tribute that he deserves.