

Poetical and Political: Ezra Pound as an Exilic Intellectual

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ABSTRACT: In his “The Teacher’s Mission” (1934), Pound defines the artists as “the antennae of the race” and “the voltmeters and steam-gauges of the nation’s intellectual life. They are the registering instruments, and if they falsify their reports there is no measure to the harm that they do” (Pound 1968, p.58 [1]). Pound trusts art and artists’ power not only to descry, but also to cure social evils that are rooted in politics and economic; forbye, artists and intellectuals have a public role to speak truth to power and to spotlight social evils for the sake of a socio-cultural reform. Sixty years later, Edward W. Said speaks of the public role of the intellectual and characterizes the intellectual as “exile and marginal, ... and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power” (Said 1994, p.xvi [2]). Said’s vision of the public role of the intellectual in addition to his perception of the humanist intellectual as exile and marginal unlocked the door for this current study which aims at traveling back in time to read the American Modernist poet, and critic Ezra Pound as a Saidian exilic intellectual, an outsider, and a disturber of the status quo. Via examining selected poems composed by Pound at different stages of his life, this article intends to explore Pound’s stance as a self-exiled intellectual and a “nay-sayer” who straddles a critical, detached locus from where he proves capable of examining and criticizing not only his native culture, but also the host ones.

KEY WORDS:Edward Said, Ezra Pound, Exilic Intellectual, “nay sayer”, Public Role.

I. INTRODUCTION

Exile is one of the saddest fates. In premodern times banishment was a particularly dreadful punishment since it not only meant years of aimless wandering away from family and familiar places, but also meant being a sort of permanent outcast, someone who never felt at home, and was always at odds with the environment, inconsolable about the past, bitter about the present and the future. (Said 1994, p.47 [2])

Being himself an exilic intellectual, an outsider “who never felt at home”, the Palestinian American secular critic, intellectual, activist, and transformative thinker Edward Said (1935-2003) has transformed his own sense of physical exile into an articulate perspective of exile, into a philosophical and political position as well as into a metaphorical condition. In his book, *Representations of the Intellectual: the Reith Lectures*, Said (1994) bestows his vision of the public role of the intellectual as “an outsider” who does not “adjust to domesticity or to humdrum routine” (Said 1994, p.17 [2]). He categorizes intellectuals into “insiders” and “outsiders”, the “yea-sayers” those uncritical intellectuals “who belong fully to the society as it is, who flourish in it without an overwhelming sense of dissonance or dissent”, while the “outsiders” are those who Said identifies as detached intellectuals, secular critics, and “nay-sayer[s]” (Said 1994, p.52 [2]). According to Said, the margin is where “nay-sayers” favor to stand since they are radical and critical figures who are constantly at odds with their society; forbye, haunted by that boundless sense of restlessness and of “being unsettled, and unsettling others” never being fully adjusted and “therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, power and honors are concerned” (Said 1994, p.53 [2]). Commencing from Said’s vision of the “exilic intellectual” as a universal public figure “whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), ... someone who cannot easily be coopted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’etre* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said 1994, p.11[2]), this article intends to read the American Modernist poet and controversial critic Ezra Pound (1885-1972) as an “exilic intellectual” in a Saidian sense. Exploring selected poems written by Pound at different stages of his life, the article will traverse Pound’s stance as a self-exiled intellectual, a “nay-sayer” who straddles a critical detached locus from where he examines not only his native country but also the host ones.

II. Poetry & Politics: A Journey into Self Exile

Starting from Hailey, Idaho, Pound's initial motherland, Pound has been exposed to various homes and multi cultures. He has been destined to travel from one state to the other within the borders of America. Accompanying his family from Indiana, Philadelphia, to Washington DC then to several European cities, from Venice, Rapallo, Paris, London, to Rome, where each place and space Pound straddled have mushroomed that baffling sense of restlessness; he grows up as a "shipwrecked person who learn how to live in a certain sense *with* the land but not *on* it" (Said 1994, p.59 [2]). The countless voyages that Pound embarked on instilled within his self an admiration of European culture, "absorption with first-hand research and incorporation of European life in his poetry" (Nadel 2007, p.2 [3]). However, the far he roams around the world, the more his dissent with his own homeland grows bitter as he witnesses the process through which his country converts from the old rural America into a growing destructive power (Stock 1964, p.2 [4]). Yet, despite all his somatic voyages, Pound has been a rooted man whose restless mind and turbulent soul never experienced serenity but constant love and fierce loyalty to home.

Pound and Said share an intertwined conception of the intellectual and his role as an outsider and a "naysayer" who never "respond[s] to the logic of the conventional but to the audacity of daring, and to representing change, to moving on, not standing still" (Said 1994, p.64 [2]). Poetry for Pound was not just an avocation but the substratum of his criticism, activism, and politics. Reading Pound and his poetry, one can observe that for Pound exile has been a secret space of creativity *par excellence* and of resistance to social, religious, and economic restrictions at home. Those who read Said and Pound can notice that both intellectuals see exile as an "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 2000, p.18 [5]). However, for Pound exile never meant a complete spiritual detachment from America and this comes to be significantly addressed in one stanza from his 1913 poem "From Chebar" where he recites:

Before you were, America!
I did not begin with you,
I do not end with you, America....

Oh I can see you,
I with the maps to aid me,
I can see the coast and the forest
And the corn-yellow plains and the hills,
The domed sky and the jagged,

The plainsmen and men of the cities....
I have seen the dawn mist
Move in the yellow grain,
I have seen the daubed purple sunset;
You may ignore me, you may keep me in exile,
You may assail me with negations, or you
 May keep me, a while, well hidden,
But I am after you and before you,
And above all, I do not accede.... (Pound 1965, pp.269-270 [6])

Despite the fact that Pound's "From Chebar" has been read by many scholars as a poem that "mingles a Biblical rhythm with the prophetic strain of Walt Whitman" and Pound himself as "taking the role of a Biblical prophet" (King 1976, p.xii [7]), this article discerns that this particular part of the poem enjoys the seeming advantage of entailing no explanation about its sentiments where Pound's exiled and ignited soul addresses America as if speaking to its mate. Foreseeing Pound's cumulative sense of nostalgia while reading through these lines, one can reckon that America is personified as a daring young lady whose irresistible charm and beauty has deserted her loyal beloved while pushing him towards an insupportable exile. Speaking of all the things that drives him to fall in her love, its "coast and the forest", "the corn-yellow plains and the hills" and even "The domed sky and the jagged" and needless to append its being home. However, it seems that every single spot on her body his exile has turned it to be unapproachable. That exilic space permitted Pound to gander his homeland with the lover's eye and to lament the decadent state that America is experiencing at the time. From a distance, Pound glances at America's "domed sky" and all its capricious moods, the "dawn mist" and "the daubed purple sunset"; yet, despite all the love and the loyalty that he preserves towards her, this loyal lover has been rewarded with desertion and banishment. America accosts his endearment and devotion with belligerent negation. Yet, after all, America will always be the only beloved that Pound will never abandon or betray as he recites, "But I am after you and before you, And above all, I do not accede..." (Pound 1965, p.270 [6]).

Disenchanted with the American academic life, Pound decides to move to Europe in 1908. His self-imposed exile begins with his trip to Venice where he has been attempting to liberate and alienate himself from American provincialism, “he was confident that time in Europe... would let him develop an art that would dismantle accepted notions of the aesthetic” (Paul 2016, p.20 [8]). Venice was a departing spot from where Pound begins his voyages all around Europe beginning from London where he has been working as a secretary for William Butler Yeats (Nadel 2007, p.10 [3]). During his residency in London, Pound starts reading and translating Chinese and Japanese poetry, yet what marks this period as a significant phase in Pound’s exile is his passionate and active readings through Confucianism as a religion and a philosophy. He appreciates the Chinese philosopher Confucius who “possessed a correct understanding of human nature and thus demonstrated a genuine concern with the agency of the human subject” (Lan 2005, p.4[9]). Pound perceives Confucianism as a humanistic philosophical system, which accentuates individual and governmental ethics, championing social and familial relationships, as well as justice, equity, and equality (Lan 2005, p.8 [9]). As Feng Lan (2005) clarifies in his book *Ezra Pound and Confucianism* that:

Pound’s convictions about Confucian values at this juncture rested on his discovery in Confucianism of precepts that provided new hope for dealing with social issues generated by Western capitalist society. Among these issues were the tension between modern individual and the cultural tradition, the formation of the nation-state, natural environment, crisis of spiritual beliefs, and so on. (Lan 2005, p.10 [9])

Reading through Chinese and Japanese philosophy and classical literature not only enriches the political views of Pound, but also stimulates his artistic creativity. No doubt that from the very beginning of his literary oeuvre, Pound has been known of swimming against the tide. He appears as somebody who has a different vision of the world in general and of poetry in particular; he has never felt satisfied with confining himself and his poetry to traditional monotonous forms of writing. He views poetry with a revolutionary and liberating lens which inspires him to cross all cultural borders to delve in Chinese and Japanese classical literatures and philosophies; to mingle various arts, traditions, histories, and languages to provide Western and European worlds with his two revolutionary literary movements Imagism and Vorticism.

Looking and reading America from his exile as well as being influenced by Confucius’ socio-political philosophy, Pound witnesses American civilization, American politics, and American cultural seclusion from Europe with a more critical but never cynical eye. His poetry crosses all assigned cultural and political confines to tackle more philosophical and humanistic discourses where he speaks of America that has converted into a morally and spiritually decayed civilization driven by a blind thrust towards power and dominance as well as has been encaptivated by its pride and rancorous sense of nationalism. This idea has been present through the lines of Pound’s “Another Bit and an Offer” as he declaims:

I see by the morning papers
That America’s sturdy sons
Have started a investigation
Of the making of guns.

The morning paper tells me
They have asked the senate to guess
Whether Mr. Dupont and the gun-sharks
Have influence with the press.

I sit alone in the twilight
After my work is done
And wonder if my day’s three and eight-pence
Would count on the price of a gun.

Was I started wrong as a kiddie,
And would my old man have been smarter
To send me to work in Vickers
Instead of being a carter? (Pound 1965, p.288 [6])

Satire not cynicism what marks the voice of Pound’s speaker who is portrayed as a stereotypical American “sturdy-son” who grows up trusting whatever his conformist eyes read in the morning newspapers and simply believing whatever he is informed. Sitting “alone in the twilight” with a mind that has nothing to do except

unquestioning the government and its leaders; capable only of bowing and robotically accepting that inexorable poverty and dominant *status quos* since he has been hoodwinked to abide to whatever that dogmatic regime declares as right or wrong. Mockery visits the third and the fourth stanzas that carry an acerbic criticism of American politics and culture that impregnates contagious diseases; a country that upholds a police government and an entire system of socio-political inequality and immorality where even the poor are measuring their self-assurance and veneration through their ability of being wealthy, owning weapons, and proving their unwavering jingoism. Despite his mocking and irascible tone in “Another Bit and an Offer”, Pound envisions a possible future change about the future of American civilization and of its political leadership.

As a Saidian exilic and humanist intellectual, Pound never undertakes or views things simply as they are, “but as they have come to be that way. [He] look[s] at the situations as contingent, not as inevitable, [he] looks at them as the result of a series of historical choices made by men and women, as facts of society made by human beings, and not as natural or God-given, therefore unchangeable, permanent, or irreversible” (Said 1994, p.61 [2]). Pound’s stance as an outsider enables him to observe the world through a pellucid critical eye. His exilic mind and being empower him to denounce what he views as “America’s essential problem – the Constitution (and thus the United States) being threatened by an unequal and morally corrupt financial system perpetuated by greedy, usurious financiers” (Paul 2016, p.212 [8]). Consequently, Pound hankers a radical movement and a drastic change towards a more “evenhanded monetary structure” that is unrestricted by the biased “usurious financiers” (Trevathan 2015, p.61 [10]).

In his epitaph to Canto XLV “With Usura”, Pound (1995) refers to “Usury” as “a charge for the use of purchasing power levied without regard to production; often without regard to the possibilities of production” (Pound 1995, p.230). This idea is addressed as well in his 1919 poem “Octave”, which follows the tradition of the Italian sonnets and can be considered as part of Pound’s “anti-usury poetry”. As Pound recites:

Fine songs, fair songs, these golden usuries
Her beauty earns as but just increment,
And they do speak with a most ill intent
Who say they give when they pay debtor's fees?

I call him bankrupt in the courts of song
Who hath her gold to eye and pays her not,
Defaulter do I call the knave who hath got
Her silver in his heart, and doth her wrong. (Pound 2003, p.144 [11])

These lines speak the mind of a humanist intellectual and a “nay-sayer”, who tends to bluntly express his condemnation of a corrupted “usurious” banking system where the only people benefiting from such a system are the morally bankrupt bank shareholders who are exploiting and manipulating the populace, generating poverty, and augmenting crimes amongst the masses. Pound believes that the First and the Second World Wars were ensued because of an “international usury” that triggered not only a decline of human ethics but also a decay of artistic aesthetics. As Ert. Gibran Van (1994) pens it down in his article “Empty Air: Ezra Pound’s World War Two Radio Broadcasts” that:

The very existence of the palsied shadow of usura...could be traced to the poor organization of distribution: capital was stagnating in the banks; the consumer lacked purchasing power; monopolies thrived; and credit was accorded to specific individuals and interest charged on it so that banks and lending institutions were creating money ‘*ex nihil*’. (Van 1994, p.57 [12])

Current “shadow of usura” that haunted America at the time in addition to other socio-political currents during that time never abandon the exilic Poundian mind that was inept of taking things for granted. Every single piece of Pound’s anti-usury poetry speaks the bitter satirical language of its humanist composer who is not only attacking and condemning America’s economic and social systems but also its political debauched regime.

“Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” is another piece written in 1920 that sounds as a direct attack towards both the usurious banking system as well as the politicians who encourage and promote the idea of the so-called great wars that generate nothing but human and cultural demolition, as Pound writes:

walked eye-deep in hell
believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving
came home, home to a lie,
home to many deceits,
home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places.
Daring as never before, wastage as never before. (Pound 2003, p.550 [11])

A furious lamentation and eulogy of the war's dead who were tricked and lulled by the "old lies and new infamy"; those young soldiers who "Died some *pro patria, non dulce non et decor*". Pound's poem depicts the "Young blood and high blood, / fair cheeks, and fine bodies" that had been deceived and immolated "for a botched civilization". This poem was born out of Pound's belief of the futility of war along with that growing trust of the fact that wars have been proposed and instigated for private gains by authoritative international economic welfares and not for the sake of social benefits or human liberation.

On the other hand, the time that Pound spent in Italy as an exile after leaving London grants him the opportunity to witness the emergence of the Italian Risorgimento as well as the beginning of a new promising political social Fascist regime headed by Benito Mussolini. To elaborate a bit on Pound's perception of the ideal Fascist state and of Mussolini, one can note that according to Pound, Mussolini appears as a socialist and an influential leader who has much to share with the Chinese philosopher Confucius and other precedent political figures whom Pound intensely admires such as John Adams and Thomas Jefferson; the two prominent leaders of the American Revolution who fought for democracy, independence, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Dasenbrock 1988, p.506 [13]). Many of those political figures Pound identifies as socialist leaders who have the welfare of their nations at heart, fighting and struggling to construct a culturally enriched democracy and a better place for their people with the kind of socio-political and economic stability within which all arts could prosper and flourish.

Furthermore, considerable amount of Pound's poems, such as "The Malatesta Cantos" (1923), "The Jefferson Cantos" (1934), "The Pisan Cantos" (1948), in addition to his prose series *ABC of Economics* (1933), *ABC of Reading* (1934), *Social Credit: An Impact* (1935), *Patria Mia* and *Jefferson or/and Mussolini L'idea Statale Fascism As I Have Seen It* (1936), *A Guide to Kulchur* (1938) and other literatures that Pound wrote between the 1920s and the 1930s echoed Pound's reverence of Confucius, Adams, Jefferson, and Mussolini. He regards Mussolini as a promising socialist leader who might endure the task of Jefferson and Adams. Furthermore, Pound admires the way that Mussolini was able to integrate culture with economics and Politics, as well as power with intelligence. Note, for instance, how in *Jefferson or/and Mussolini L'idea Statale Fascism As I Have Seen It* (1936), Pound speaks about Mussolini saying "we find Mussolini putting the dots on the 'I's". That is to say, finding the unassailable formula" (Pound 1936, p.xii [14]). In this work, Pound expresses his admiration of Mussolini's leadership in post-WWI Italy comparing him to Jefferson and his leadership in post-revolutionary America; he envisions in both leaders the characteristics of good statesmen, political philosophers, and men of action. However, Pound's unchallenged support of Mussolini and Fascism costs him a lot, since he was branded as an extremist and tagged as a traitor of his people because of his support to and collaboration with America's direct enemy.

During this period, Pound's position as a self-exile begins to take another form. This time his exile is no more metaphorical but actual exile *par excellence*. In addition to his "Cantos", Pound begins to contribute to many periodicals on both sides of the Atlantic such as *New Masses*, *The Dial*, *Poetry*, *The New Age*, and *The New Review* all of which were among the most acclaimed and wide-read cultural and political journals of the twentieth century. Significantly, the year 1927 marked Pound's launching of his own monthly periodical *The Exile* where he published an assembly of political satires and bitter critiques of current American and European political systems (Tryphonopoulos and Adams 2005, p.113[15]). Besides, his official job as a broadcaster at Rome Public Radio, where the talks that advocate Mussolini and Fascism occupy a great share of his broadcasting, moved the American government to label him as a traitor and to put him into trial that ends with twelve years of imprisonment (Paul 2016, p.239 [8]). As L. S. C. Bristow (1992) mentions in his article "God, my god, you folks are DUMB!!!: Pound's Rome Radio Broadcasts" that many of Pound's broadcasts which have been monitored by the BBC and by the Princeton Listening Center between October 1941 and July 1943 have been "monitored more or less systematically by the Federal Broadcast Intelligence Service of the Federal Communications Commission; on the basis of the service's reports Pound was indicted for treason in 1943" (Bristow 1992, p.18 [16]).

III. Conclusion

Reading all of this about Pound proves the fact that Pound's exilic life has been unorthodox where he performs as a troublemaker "who do not toe the party line" (Said 1994, p.59 [2]). Pound's support of fascism instigates the reader's curiosity to investigate the exilic mind of a poet who never felt satisfied with his country's current situation neither the socio-political nor the cultural. For a writer like Pound, who lived in Italy during this period and "himself had argued for the importance of the arts", Fascism and "Mussolini's projects were immensely appealing" (Paul 2016, p.1 [8]). He appreciates "the Fascist regime's use of culture to foment Italian national identity" (Paul 2016, p.2 [8]). He respects the vigorous role that intellectuals play throughout this period of cultural, social, and political revitalization, as Catherine E. Paul (2016) argues that:

By 1932.... The Fascist regime employed artists and intellectuals in the work of revitalizing national culture, incorporating some of the avant-garde projects of cultural rebirth of the previous decades. In so doing, artists and

intellectuals were transformed from outliers to state agents. An art critic... could have tremendous influence in this new regime... artistic production coming together under the umbrella of the Fascist state was tremendously influential. (Paul 2016, p.79 [8])

The Italian Risorgimento stimulates Pound's thrust and quest for an American and a Western Renaissance. A vision that roots back to Pound's belief in western civilizations' lack of essential principles and ethics that are compulsory for the construction and the advancement of a highly enlightened civilization. For Pound, this new Risorgimento must begin with having an "ideal leader" who can perform social reformation through the "the recognition of citizens' individuality...the deliberate fostering of arts... in addition to the maintenance of [social], political and economic stability" (Cornelius 2015, p. 9 [17]). Furthermore, the role of the intellectual in modern societies dominates great space of Pound's exilic mind. His poetry and satirical prose speak of the uncivilized America, a space where arts do not occupy a lawful but inert and marginal position, artists and intellectuals are not performing actively as they are doing in the Italian Renaissance. This marginalization and deterioration of art and artists go back to the lack of patronage, to the fact that artists came to be forced to compromise their honesty and to bow down to the public taste to earn a living (Cornelius 2015, p. 71 [17]). Pound speaks of ethical and aesthetical decadence in a civilization where artists and intellectuals are no more siding with the oppressed, the marginalized, or the silenced, but speak for the benefit of the oppressor and the tyrant. For Pound, the humanist intellectual and the exilic critic, poetry has never been a mere reform of art but a formula or an entire world through which he can express his criticisms and satires as well as a great battlefield where he can fight against all the ills of the modern societies, and the tyrannies that have been imposed upon the oppressed masses. The marginalization of literature and its role, Modern American and English abusive economic and banking systems, the so-called democracy, the Capitalist and Marxist regimes that endorse and instigate wars and destruction, all are factors that haunt and irritate the exilic mind and being of Ezra Pound until the last moment of his life.

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