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**Review Article**  
**Pound/Zukofsky**

The central importance of Ezra Pound for modern poetic practise is beyond dispute, even if one is unsympathetic to his work. His is a seminal enterprise for the work of both North American and European writers of today and necessarily figures prominently in any discussion of modern poetics. It does seem strange, however, that his work has been largely avoided by the new wave of continental criticism and its North American offshoots. The business of Pound criticism has been left to an increasingly large body of exegetical acolytes. Most of the scholars working on Pound now epitomize exactly the critical approaches that have been put into question by the methodological upheavals of the last few years. Yet the rain of orthodox Pound criticism continues to fall, its sheer force and volume seeming to sweep away any possibility of methodological self-doubt; and the complexities and inherent contradictions of the *Cantos* keep on leading the critics into ever more swamp-like tracts.

A particularly damp specimen of this criticism is Wendy Flory's recent *Ezra Pound and the Cantos: A Record of Struggle*<sup>1</sup> which falls into the morass precisely in attempting to rescue Pound from *his* morass. Flory's thesis, reflected in the book's title, is that the *Cantos'* flaws result from Pound's life-long struggle with a fear of self-revelation, but that the poem begins to be successful at those points where the author's "deepest feelings and intimate experiences" (p. 46) come through to inform the work. Encouraged by what she sees as the successful parts of the poem (like the "Pisan Cantos"), and to liberate Pound from his awful fear, Flory engages herself in a series of largely conjectural readings of parts of the poem in reference to particular details in Pound's life. In this way she intends to endow the poem with a strength and a lucidity which Pound's own problems prevented him from bestowing upon his work. Indeed, Flory claims a unity to the *Cantos* which, she says, is present even though Pound himself never

saw it. In effect, her project comes over as an arrogant and peremptory nursing of Pound the man through his own life and poetry, protecting it and him from their peculiar defaults and blindnesses. An especially pathetic example of this is Flory's claim that Pound's better nature was seduced and led astray by the pernicious influence of Wyndham Lewis, and that, had it not been for Lewis, Pound's innate sensitivity and gentleness would have overcome his penchant for violent polemic and his inclination to totalitarian thought.

Subsisting beneath Flory's project is the highly questionable assumption that a properly complicit (sympathetic) reader can distinguish Pound's better intentions and can read them through the poem, especially if versed in the details of Pound's personal life. Not least of the demerits of such a critical approach is that it presumes the existence of the man Ezra Pound as a fixed subject, hypothetically capable of transferring the truth of his existence to the reader according to his skill with language (which thus becomes entirely an instrument in the process of signification). That such a subject is a purely legalistic or conventional construct, or that language itself might exceed his intentions does not occur to Flory or to most Pound critics. This illusion of a full and uncontradictory subject controlling language and its representations might well have been deflated by modern thought, yet it continues to sponsor the critical project of rescuing Pound from his own struggle—a project which thus often takes the form of privileging the 'lyrical' parts of the *Cantos* (notably the "Pisan Cantos") at the expense of the flawed remainder. Typical of this approach is Flory's claim that in the "Pisan Cantos" Pound "learned to free himself from his compulsive objectivity and to rediscover his compassion, self-doubt, humility, contrition and kindness" (p. 182). Despite the fact that this list of sentimental qualities is always accompanied, even in these lyric sections, by Pound's continued conviction of his own rectitude and worth, this remains the orthodox view. Its conclusion is stated by Anthony Woodward in his short book, *Ezra Pound and the Pisan Cantos*,<sup>2</sup> when he states that the Pisan sections constitute within the *Cantos* an "inner core of silence and light. The true Pound" (p. 48). There the subjectivist impulse is valued because it supposedly transcends those difficult areas that Pound saw fit to deal with in his poem—politics, history, ideology, economics and communication. The critics are happy to attach to this transcendence as a way out of those murkier areas of the work.

According to Woodward the "Pisan Cantos" are achieved and even great because of this return to the time-honored literary values of the tradition: he even tends to see Pound as a sort of belated Romantic. There is a point on this count: Pound's notion of language can be

readily considered as the offspring of the Romantic theory of the symbol out of a neo-Platonic philosophy of truth. This book might have made a significant break with orthodox Pound scholarship by extending that insight to a critique of Pound's Romanticism. But it is fairly obvious that what is most at stake in this book is the author's own overt nostalgia for the genius of poetic language rescuing eternal verities from the extenuating run of history. I might generalize here and say that a similar nostalgia pervades much Pound criticism and does nothing so much as reflect the critics' own flailing struggles with the practice of modernism: Pound remains the ideal focus for such discomfited readers because, although he helps build the laboratory of modernism, he continually reverts to the values and tensions of the subjective drama which has constituted hallowed literary ground on which humanist values are cultivated. Throughout his writing he promulgates the concomitant ideology of the privileged author who is in control of both reality and language, and who attempts to convey to the reader all those truths which he can grasp but which might not have been equally self-evident to the reader. And that ideology is echoed in the criticism, which is to say that Pound is generally treated by critics who share his nostalgias, if not his politics.

It's with a sigh of relief, then, that one turns to an entirely different work on Pound, Alan Durant's *Ezra Pound: Identity in Crisis*.<sup>3</sup> This is the only available book that even attempts to regard Pound from the perspective of current critical thought, and it throws a pretty solid lifeline across the swamps. Durant comes at Pound with a critical apparatus (along with his own rigor and insight into it) whose immanent sophistication is all that we probably have at present capable of dealing with the problems of Pound's work. That apparatus is almost exclusively drawn from the work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and it serves Durant to initiate what the subtitle of his book proposes—a fundamental reassessment of the poet and his work.

It must be said immediately that Lacan's suggestive theories do not, for the most part, provoke the kind of psycho-biographical analysis that even Freud himself ventured; rather, they explore the ways in which the structure of language is linked to the structure of the unconscious in the very constitution of our discourse. Lacan's re-reading of Freud moves emphasis from the notion of the unconscious as a thesaurus of repressed content, to a conception of it as the mobile pool of signifiers that have to be excluded from any conscious utterance, but whose articulation is nevertheless re-presented in all organized discourse. This latter idea of the unconscious is the basis for a critique of intentionality and presumed possession of meaning in Pound; it is here, obviously, that Durant radically challenges all pre-

vious criticism of Pound. Whereas Pound and his critics share the empiricist assumption that language is a mere instrument of communication in the control of a whole and homogeneous subject, Durant's effort is to explicate the problems with language, communication, politics and the self into which such an assumption necessarily leads Pound. Durant offers convincing arguments for the necessity of explaining the way in which the subject is brought, or called into place in the symbolic world through the process of signification; he then goes on to a thorough investigation of all the topics in Pound's work that the criticism has spent so much time coming to terms with. He deals, for example, especially carefully with Pound's espousal of Fenollosa's theory of poetic language, and places that theory firmly in the path of traditional metaphysical speculation where language is always a matter of the subject's control, where the subject always knows what he is saying and where, consequently, the very materiality of language suffers neglect.

The complexity and ambitious orbit of Durant's analyses are always matched by the logical necessity of his arguments, and his explanations of the terms of Lacanian theory are more lucid and helpful than any I have seen before. Indeed, the book functions as an excellent introduction to that theory, quite apart from what it has to tell us about Pound. If I had any criticism of the book, it would concern some of Durant's readings of parts of the *Cantos* themselves. His method is to read numerous short passages by way of subverting Pound's ferocious attempts at maintaining a hold on a language that is supposed to master truth and reality and at confirming the poet's coherence and control (of himself, not least). Durant's investigations of Pound's prose and poetry usually attempt to explicate the failures of suppression of the unconscious that is necessary to uphold Pound's extreme desire for authorial control; these investigations work well. Sometimes, however, Durant is led into what might be called catachrestical readings (often of single words) which come across as willful and contrived in comparison to other more spectacular but unforced readings. This, nonetheless, seems to me not at all a serious flaw in what remains a highly elaborated critique of Pound and his work, a book that should either drown Pound studies altogether or rescue them for a new lease of life.

Durant's arguments and his attack on Pound's position have frequent recourse to Lacan's explication of the two structuring poles of linguistic utterance: metaphor and metonymy. Lacan's theory (crudely reduced here) accredits metaphor with the function of halting the metonymic flow of signifier to signifier in the interests of a fixed meaning or signified. The endless potentiality of signifiers is the condi-

tion of unconscious desire and is repressed by metaphoric intervention in order that conventionalized discourse may function. Writing which enjoins the free play of signifiers would thus constitute a transgression of the assumptions of the unary subject and of our political and social institutions to which such a subject necessarily lends his plenitude. Although Durant's work is the unique critical attempt at undermining those legalistic certainties in Pound's practice, a powerful project of the same order has been in process for the last half century in the work of Louis Zukofsky.

Zukofsky's long poem, *A*, in twenty-four parts (begun in 1928 and completed in 1974) has finally been collected into one volume.<sup>4</sup> The poem was initially conceived within Pound's shadow and its first few parts reflect the influence of the *Cantos* in their diction and organization. It is perhaps this fact, and Zukofsky's long and often troubled friendship with Pound, that accounts for his posthumous adoption by *Paideuma*, the journal for Pound studies. That journal has now opened its pages to exegetical notes on *A*, anticipating Hugh Kenner's blurb for the complete edition: "they will still be elucidating (*A*) in the 22nd century." Now, too, there is a collection of essays, gathered by the editor of *Paideuma* and entitled *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, this book does very little toward elucidation of the poem itself, but provides instead a testament to Zukofsky's life and work. It consists mostly of eulogies and reminiscences about the man, although there are several useful essays on the work itself—notably by Don Byrd on the Zukofsky canon, Harold Schlimmel's discussion of Zukofsky's Jewish concerns, and Peter Quartermain's reading of "A-9." There is, too, an extended and annotated bibliography of the seventy or so articles and reviews written about Zukofsky in the last two decades (before which his work attracted little or no attention): many of the articles in that list are reprinted in the present collection.

All told, there is not much in this book that will help the reader with the poem itself (although he will be provided with ample peripheral material). Surely the attempt to assimilate Pound to Zukofsky, who can write something like

....voiced, once unheard  
 earth beginning idola of years  
 that love well forget late.  
 History's best emptied of names'  
 impertinence met on the ways...(A, p. 511),

is itself something of an idolum and an impertinence—not least because Zukofsky's poem, even as glimpsed above, is implicitly inscribed against Pound's *Cantos*.

The difference in the two poetries is summed up, for me, by Zukofsky's berating of Pound in a letter because "you no longer bother to weigh each word you handle, translate etc. The damn foreigner you say I am has more respect for English than you have."<sup>6</sup> It is exactly in this respect for poetic language itself that Zukofsky seems to me to take his importance—and a certain pre-eminence in relation to Pound. The *Cantos* can be seen as the narrative of Pound's failed attempts to marshal language, to turn it into the mere vehicle for the conveyance of the author's special truths; *A*, on the other hand, works its way through that imposing Poundian stance towards poetic language and attempts to explore precisely the metonymic possibilities of utterance. What happens, I think, in the composition of *A*, is that Zukofsky becomes aware of Pound's repressive circumscription of language (a result of his essentially metaphoric technique), and begins to direct his own poem away from that, toward a poetics that privileges the very materiality of language and encourages the metonymic run of signifiers. Again, Zukofsky notes the differences between the two poetries when he says that poetic language is "too volatile for legal restraint" (*A*, p. 395). The exuberance of linguistic potential will never cede to the man who wants to own language, or who asserts legal rights of the controlling subject upon it.

Alien to Pound altogether would be Roland Barthes' notion that modern writing now experiences the necessity of substituting "language itself for the person who...had been supposed to be its owner";<sup>7</sup> yet this is quite clearly the point of engagement for Zukofsky's work where the impossibility of reducing meaning to the status of a commodity (to be passed from author to reader as in the traditional hierarchy) is squarely confronted. In such a confrontation between language and the author, it is (to paraphrase Barthes) the author who dies: the flow of metonymy always threatens the imperial control of the author. Thus, one of Zukofsky's most powerful lyrical sections begins, "It is I who have died" (*A*, p. 389).

This crucial difference between the two poets allows little room for the continued drafting of Zukofsky into the Poundian ethos. Even at more overt thematic levels Zukofsky can be seen working at a revision, precisely, of Pound's work: his poem begins by talking of the American Depression (a point on which Pound, for all his vociferousness on economic matters, is silent); *A* has been completed, the epic journey—unlike Pound's—ends up at home (which is represented by the music that Zukofsky's wife arranges for "A-24"); against the fascist voices of the *Cantos*, *A* deals with Marx, Veblen and even Stalin; and instead of the viciously polarized political world of Pound's vision, Zukofsky proposes to talk of *harmony*, to write

in favour  
of all  
the world  
restored to  
the people (*A*, p. 424).

No thorough appreciation of Zukofsky has yet been attempted but it seems clear to me, with the complete *A* now to hand for the first time, that Zukofsky's work is ready to take its place as an essential text in the study of modern writing—and from that position it may well incidentally provoke a more satisfying appraisal of Pound's dangerously influential work.

#### NOTES

1. *Ezra Pound and the Cantos: A Record of Struggle*, by Wendy Stallard Flory. New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980. PP. xv, 321, \$20.
2. *Ezra Pound and the Pisan Cantos*, by Anthony Woodward. London, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1980. PP. xi, 128. £7.95.
3. *Ezra Pound: Identity in Crisis*, by Alan Durant. Brighton, England, Harvester Press, 1981. Pp. x, 206. £18.50.
4. *A*, by Louis Zukofsky. Berkeley, California UP, 1980. Pp. 296. \$9.95, paper.
5. *Louis Zukofsky: Man and Poet*, edited by Carroll F. Terrell. Orono, Maine, National Poetry Foundation Inc., 1979. \$12.95, paper.
6. Quoted in *Catalogue of the Zukofsky Collection*, HRC, Austin, Texas, by Marcella Booth, p. 245.
7. *Image/Music/Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. London, 1977. p. 143.