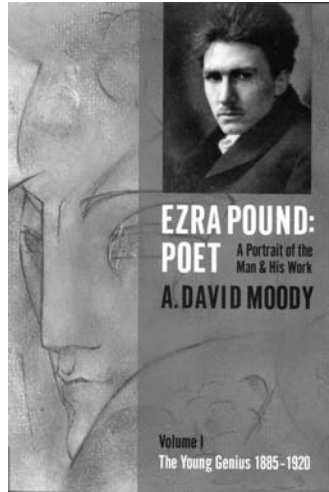


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Getting a Little Distance

A review of *Ezra Pound as Poet* by A. David Moody,
Oxford University Press, 2007.



It seems to me that our culture has a rather unhealthy interest in the character defects of the famous. Perhaps it is the fascination of watching the great fall from the pedestal we have put them on, or a repressed desire to see that they do, in fact, have feet of clay. It goes without saying that this applies to the modern day heroes of pop culture, but in fact it also applies to literary figures. Ask anyone who has ever studied Ezra Pound what they know about him, and rather than focusing on his various achievements, you will immediately get the more sordid details of his life – his anti-Semitism, the years he spent in Saint Elizabeth’s asylum, the time he spent incarcerated in the D.T.C. following the second world war, and his avowed admiration for Mussolini will surely top the list. Almost as an afterthought you might hear something about the fact that he helped a few writers get their start, and won an award or two somewhere along the way.

Yet ask these same people about Dante, Chaucer, or any number of other well-known writers, and the focus is almost certainly entirely upon their literary achievements. Chaucer, for example, is identified with the *Canterbury Tales*, despite the fact

that he was, among other things, a thief. So why does Pound get short shrift? It is simply a matter of distance.

A few years ago, Tim Redman, a noted Pound scholar, suggested that the “central problem of any Pound biography must certainly be the events surrounding his indictment... and arrest ... for ‘radio treason’.” Redman wrote those words in 1991, and six years later Lawrence Rainey observed that Pound biographies had become “almost an annual event.” While Rainey was overstating matters somewhat, he was not too far off the mark; there was considerable interest in the life of this controversial artist. For the most part, Redman’s assessment of the situation held true: the vast majority of these accounts of this difficult poet, while valuable additions to scholarship, nevertheless paid as much attention to the more sensational aspects of his life as they did to his poetic achievements.

Not so with A. David Moody’s *Ezra Pound: Poet*. It would seem that we finally have enough distance from the less than pleasant details of Pound’s life to consider him as the artist he was, rather than merely as a fascist, traitor, and anti-Semite. This is not to suggest that Moody overlooks these aspects of Pound’s character, but rather that he does not let them colour every aspect of the book. *Ezra Pound: Poet* reads more like an exhaustively researched, well-written biography, and less like reactionary journalism. As the title suggests, Moody deals with Pound the poet, and not Pound the enemy of the state. Yet this valuable addition to Pound scholarship is not merely an appreciation of his work; it is an invaluable tool that helps to explore the poet’s contradictions and complexities.

Part of the problem that people face when dealing with Ezra Pound is the expectations that the poet seems to have of his readers. His longest and most difficult work is of course *The Cantos*. This lengthy poem – Pound’s life work – engenders as much confusion and admiration as does the poet himself. Some critics consider it his crowning achievement, while others dismiss it as unreadable gibberish. Part of the problem that people face is that it is a demanding work drawing upon classical mythology, writers ancient and modern, obscure references to people, places,

and works of art unknown to many modern readers. Couple this with the fact that Pound found English too limiting, and incorporated French, German, Spanish, Egyptian hieroglyphs, Provençal, Italian, Chinese, Arabic, Latin, and Greek into the poem as well, and it is easy to understand why many readers are overwhelmed by the poem. In any case, Pound apparently expected his readers to be every bit as well read and erudite as he was. It is a very difficult poem.

In *Ezra Pound: Poet*, Moody gives us Pound from his childhood to about 1920, and at the same time effortlessly moves from Pound the young man to Pound the poet. For example, his treatment of the much discussed “Hugh Selwyn Mauberly” moves from details of Pound’s life to the poem and back again with such ease that it is difficult to separate the poet from the poetry. Instead of being confusing, this has the advantage of helping this difficult, semi-autobiographical poem come to life in a way that typical academic considerations are unable to do. This approach is uniquely well suited to Pound, as you would be hard pressed to find a poet, modern or otherwise, whose life is as thoroughly enmeshed with his work.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this biography is the portrait of Pound as a driven young man. At the age of fifteen Pound told his father “I want to write before I die the greatest poems that have ever been written.” From that early age, this young man did everything in his power to achieve that goal. We given Pound as a blunt, outspoken student who does not hesitate to confront and dismiss teachers whom considers out of date obstacles to the creation of art appropriate for the modern era; as a generous friend who constantly appeals to patrons for the financial support of other artists; and as an expatriate who deserts his homeland in order to seek out W. B. Yeats. As Moody ends this first volume, we see Pound as the center of a powerful movement in the arts, dismissing the conventional poetry of the 19th century as being wholly inappropriate for the modern era, while championing the work of Joyce, Williams, Eliot, and a host of other writers who would go on to become the giants of the 20th century.

The most tantalizing aspect of this book is the place where Moody leaves us. By 1920 Pound had begun to work in earnest on *The Cantos*, and Moody shows us the path that Pound chooses to take. Although by this time relatively few Cantos had been worked on, it is clear that Pound saw this poem as his life's work, and that he intended it be revolutionary in every sense of the word. Moody's treatment of *The Cantos*, even at this early stage, whets the reader's appetite for what is to come in *Ezra Pound: Poet* Volume II.

It is safe to say that this biography is to be considered required reading for Pound scholars, but it is engaging enough to be of interest to those who have at some point in the past picked up a copy of *The Cantos* only to later put it on the shelf next to their copy of *Finnegan's Wake* to gather dust. Pound's poetry is difficult, but as Moody demonstrates in this biography, it is worth the effort.