

On the Road: Ezra Pound's Poetry of Place

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Essay

Pound's Problem

Early in his *A Walking Tour in Southern France* (henceforth *WTSTF*), Ezra Pound writes "I had set out upon this book with numerous ideas, but the road had cured me of them" (33). The statement encapsulates not only Pound's response to place but also his development as a writer, a siren of cultural change, and a social observer. More importantly, his remark suggests a methodology of engagement that is critical and inquisitive as he seeks to unite the experiential with the imagined. For Pound, place becomes a contested site between the theoretical and geographical. This intersection effects a kind of topographical allegory reflected in *WTSTF* and his poetry.

Pound's lifetime of travel defines his biography, although the actual record is frequently overstated. His life as a literary Baedeker ranging from Idaho and Pennsylvania to New York and Indiana—and then Italy, England, France, America again and finally Italy—has been well documented.¹ A Pound Gazetteer would be large and encompassing, involving actual and mythical lands. He also traveled via his texts to countries he never saw, notably China and Japan. Places, languages, and cultures in these lands defined an important element of his writing from *Cathy* to *The Cantos*. But Pound is less a traveling poet than a poet seeking a place, a site that would station him and provide a compass from which to survey world literature and culture. The Tempio Malatestiano is one of

¹See Carpenter, *passim*, as well as Nadel 19-31. Also see Katz, "Travel," *passim*.

those places, Rapallo and Pisa are others.

These places are not permanent. Pound sought permanence but never found it. Whether it was Philadelphia, Crawfordsville, Indiana, Venice, London, Paris or Rapallo, Pound never stayed. His life was nomadic, a constant search for roots confronted by the need to move on—sometimes against his will (as his arrest, Pisan detention, US trial and incarceration at St. Elizabeths in Washington illustrates). He tried to unite his experience with his imagination, often writing about departure, change, and movement. His poetic concerns were frequently focused on recovery, whether of Homer, Propertius, or the Troubadours. His version of "The Seafarer," a poem about travel and loss, rendered from Anglo-Saxon to English, is one example. "Mauberley," concerning his departure from London, is another.

For Pound, place is always in motion: "Could write the whole U.S. history (American hist) along line of family migration" he writes in a letter (*Selected Letters* 322). Yet his pursuit of place is always in search of making the transitory permanent, a seemingly insupportable task with accident always intervening:

I was wondering how I should extricate myself from Tarascon and prepare myself, or my canvas for a new place if you will [. . .] but my train comfortably derailed a part of itself and I found myself at some junction or other [but] twenty miles of mountain air, & of conversation with the curé of X washed free my mind of its preoccupation.
(*WTSF* 72)

What was the impact of such mobility on his writing? How did Pound the pilgrim and traveler respond to place, shaping it at the same time it shaped him?

Pound's restlessness and feeling of uprootedness created a wish for permanence. Place, and even its absence, extended by his awareness of impermanence, played a role in his cultural and literary formation. He knew where he could live but not where he could stay. Contextualizing Pound's restless search for place is Hannah Arendt in the *Origins of Totalitarianism*. She remarks that what was unprecedented about the condition of European refugees was "not the loss of a home, but the impossibility of finding a new one [. . .]. This moreover [. . .] was not a problem of space but of

political organization" (Arendt 293-294). Displacement is not only about the loss of a place but the struggle to *make* a place in the world, what I would call the Poundian dilemma.

This condition may explain Pound's occupation with place. Like James, Whistler, Stein, and even Eliot, Pound had departed America, but unlike them, he found no place to settle. London and Paris, home to those expatriates, did not satisfy Pound. The impossibility of finding a new place unsettles the artist as much as the refugee, resulting in a constant quest for home. The discursive valorization of cultural landscapes is how Pound represents place, and the way his versions of place formulate or reformulate political ideologies and national or international identities supports his moral geography. The constructed nature of place is Pound's subject. His texts perform a double function, embedding themselves in the cultural of place and simultaneously critiquing its politics and representation. He undertook his 1912 walking tour to experience the world of the Troubadours, seeing it through spatial terms at the same time he criticized its royal politics and romance.

Pound's Spatial Practices

Is it possible to identify Pound's spatial practices? Several approaches drawn from cultural geography might help, approaches linked by the projection of social value and cultural meaning upon geographical phenomena and processes. One method unites identity, place and history, uncovering geographies of nationhood and the spaces of modernity. Pound exhibits this method in the Malatesta Cantos where the historical shaping of place confirms ideas of nationhood. Visiting Rimini left him with the lasting physical and imaginative energy of the power of Malatesta expressed through the Tempio Malatestiano and its history. The America of John Adams expressed in *The Cantos* via the Adams letters, the China of Confucius again found in *The Cantos* and the Italy of Mussolini in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* became instrumental locales in the definition of Pound's concept of national and cultural space. Place forms and reforms an individual as well as a society: Pound's radio broadcasts made from Rome during the war, for example, transformed him from poet to ideologue, giving cause for his subsequent arrest, trial, and imprisonment.

Geographies of transformation provide a second treatment of place. This concentrates on the differing spatialities of the worlds

Pound encountered, actual and imaginative. His China is as vibrant as his descriptions of London or the Italian countryside. Specific political and ideological contexts that condition geographical change itself—something Pound was alert to as early as Mauberley—also formulate his idea of place, as do what theorists call spaces of discipline (for example, the Tempio Malatestiano or Mussolini's Italy) and geographies of punishment (Pisa, St. Elizabeths).

A third approach is the nexus between nature/culture: how Pound presents or reads the natural world as an expression of cultural exchange. This would include ecological as well as social interpretations of place as an ideologically contested representation of nature and landscape. It appears in some of his earliest work, notably "Hilda's Book" and works like his "Canzoni," one of which begins "Heart mine, art mine, whose embraces / Clasp but wind that past thee bloweth?" But the heart "is half afraid / For the fragrance on him laid" (*Poems* 135). In his review essay "Hudson: Poet Strayed into Science," Pound criticizes society's disregard for nature. He counters this by declaring that "despite the gnats and mosquitoes, we would all perform the voyage [to South America] for the sake of meeting a puma."

Geographical practices, including concepts of mapping, would be a fourth approach to Pound's spatial performance. This includes the representation of public places and the geographies of commodity connections, as well as the dissemination of geographical knowledge and its cultural and political influence. The initial impetus for Pound's 1912 walking tour was historical and experiential: to somehow recreate what the Troubadours felt and saw. But it quickly became part of a larger project to identify the politics of place (consider his frequent references to battles, loves, and strategies, both public and private) while locating the place of writing, a setting for its production.

Pound constantly searches for somewhere to write, an act of political as well as physical importance. This is the art of inscribing space, the landscape. In this Derridian or grammatological scheme, place is the condition of the possibility for writing. Place creates a textual "somewhere" for Pound, often a self-conscious precondition for writing.² As he states at the opening of *A Walking*

²For a fuller discussion see Casey 311.

Tour, "here am I, then, in the mother city [Poitiers] laying about me with irrational and emotional discriminations, violating all Hueffer's canons and principles of prose" (*WTSF* 3). But what is the next step and, more importantly, in which direction?

Disappointed in the physical character of Poitiers, he quickly evaluates it as a "place of exploit and defiance, a town of fourteen exits" (*WTSF* 6). But he comes to understand himself more clearly: "I come to feel rather than see . . . I would rather know the precise nature of a thing than find an apt or even an irrefutable definition" (*WTSF* 7). And as he develops a stronger self-identity, he travels lighter. Objecting to the burden of ownership—it ties one down irrevocably—he writes that he "struggled for years to own nothing that [one] can't pack in a suitcase," complaining that he "never really got it down to less than *two* cases. Which is a *nuisance* and really a stigma of poverty. Given adequate purchasing power one cd. *own* less" (*Selected Letters* 279). Travel and the road open things up for Pound. As he writes at the end "Provincia Deserta," "I have walked over these roads; / I have thought of them living" (*Poems* 299).³

Pound's geometry—the word literally means earth (*geo*) measurement (*metria*)—originates in place and the gestures he makes to survey it. In each of the places he visits or resides, he measures the world by experience and imagination; in short, he measures by his writing. But he both stays and goes, remembers and creates. The danger of exile or separation from home is forgetfulness, and Pound's project is to remember. At Rimini he recreates the world of Malatesta, at Pisa the world of London. Psychologically, this is part of the dream to return which became

³Modernist mobility, of course, is nothing new. Henry Adams motored through France for his research on Mt. St. Michel and Chartres. Gertrude Stein loved to travel by car through similar countryside. Anticipating such adventurers was Ben Jonson, who in 1618 took a walking tour from London to Edinburgh. Johnson and Boswell famously toured the Hebrides in 1773. Dickens's wanderings about London were a well-known Victorian event, as much as Thoreau's daily walks between Walden Pond and Concord. Benjamin's *flâneur*, his walking about Paris, and his own perambulations for his arcades project is another. The French Situationists identified the *dérive*, or the drift, as the contemporary version of the urban wandering experience.

increasingly important to Pound. At one point late in his life he not only wanted to return to America but to Hailey, Idaho, possibly to be buried there (Carpenter 900-901).

Conclusion

One of the curiosities of Pound's journeying, however, is that he often gets lost. Several times during his walking tour, he cannot find his way. At one point between Perigord and Excideuil, he loses his way on the serpentine roads around the hamlet of Blisset-Born. But a chance encounter with a worker leads him to another contradictory space, an "inn with out a sign" (*WTSF* 23). Later, walking southeast from Sarlat, he again loses his way and only a postman, also met by chance, sets him off in the direction of his goal, Gourdon (*WTSF* 40). These moments are moments of discovery, however, not of panic. Diversions, digressions, detours, danger, and delays are part of the process which he would re-encounter during his 450-mile walking and train trip in September 1943 from Rome to Gais to visit Mary during the outset of the Allied invasion of Italy from the south and the invasion of German troops from the north (Carpenter 626-629). Similar moments of deferred or lost destinations occur throughout *The Cantos*.

Pound's walking tour in France is less a topographical guide than a poetic biography of sites and events containing impressions, thoughts, and experiences. Pound never left a place behind; he always carried it with him, whether it was his pseudo-cowboy manner from his Idaho origins, his brash American/East Coast ways, or the eucalyptus pip he pocketed when taken away by Italian partisans. As much as possible, Pound carried place with him and within him, either in his two suitcases or his imagination. This becomes clear near the end of his French sojourn when he asks

The last diverting day of my travels? Perhaps because my
mind was already before me, already full of London &
Paris. —Not that I was tired of vagabondage for once
caught, the fever returns & I had already planned another
excursion & peribasis.

(*WTSF* 76)⁴

⁴By "peribasis" Pound may mean around or about a center or foundation, or it might be his variant spelling of "parabasis," a choral ode

Narratives, acts of creation, tell of things in place and how things occupy or come to acquire place. By its nature, narrative appropriates space for its own objects. As a result, if one cannot find stability of space and place in the "real" world of experience, then one can resort to a fictional landscape to provide a surrogate geography. For Pound, this fact means that ultimately, his home became the text, an important Judaic concept. As George Steiner has shown, the exile of the Jews meant that only texts like the Torah, Talmud or Midrash could remain permanent and portable sanctuaries. Existence for the Jews was scribal, the text the instrument of exilic survival. It was the same for Pound.

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in ancient Greek drama addressed to the audience and often independent of the action of the play.