

A Biographical Solution

Ezra Pound, Italy and The Cantos, Massimo Bacigalupo (346pp, Clemson University Press)

In 'Impounding Pound's Milestone', a 1970 essay reprinted in *The Old Poetries and the New* (University of Michigan, 1981), Richard Kostelanetz reminds us that '[t]he technique of *The Cantos* is derived fundamentally from collage', but later opines that:

the overall stance of *The Cantos* is haughty, the perspective impersonal, the vision all-encompassing, the voices various, the form open-ended, the syntax more notational and associational than linear or syllogistic, the rhythm irregular, the metaphors elaborate, the observations condensed, the diction quite formal, the relation between the parts elliptical, and the sensibility awesomely erudite.

For someone who struggles with *The Cantos*, as poetry, perhaps because of this haughtiness, the elaborate metaphors, or the erudition, not to mention the issues of Pound's fascism and his expectations of readers, *Ezra Pound, Italy and The Cantos* seemed like a godsend. According to the blurb it is 'an exciting account of Ezra Pound awakening to the beauty of Italy', which for someone unable to go to Italy at the moment thanks to Corona virus seemed apt as well as a human approach.

Bacigalupo starts well, explaining that 'Pound thought of *The Cantos* as a container, an encyclopaedia'. Fair enough, although I've always thought encyclopaedias explain whereas Pound often confuses, misquotes and expects his readers to know Mandarin, mythology, Confucian philosophy, French, Latin, Hebrew and to understand all manner of obscure allusions. Bacigalupo himself says 'How can one expect to like what one does not understand, or read a poem in which words occur of no certain meaning or pronunciation?' As a counter to this problem a biographical solution is suggested: 'we can afford to be unashamedly if carefully biographical and read the poem as notes on things and people seen and heard'.

Again, all well and good, though rather surprising in an academic book. It relatively quickly becomes clear, however, that this is a collection of 'occasional pieces' now turned into book chapters, which are not interested in persuading readers such as me to like or understand *The Cantos*, nor explain very much at all. Indeed, it seems a given that any reader of this book will know Pound's poem sequence inside out, and understand its relation to, at the very least, Dante. It is as though Pound's personality, his odd love life, and his education and attitude justify anything and everything, including his fascism and anti-Semitism, both of which are pretty much ignored here, or brushed aside as an unfortunate part of Pound's personality.

This is to ignore the content of Pound's work, both on racist and political grounds, but also as poetry. Yes, there are moments of wonder, original poetic images and some profound ideas in Pound's work, some superb poetry, but in the main it is clumsy and impenetrable, a jigsaw puzzle to be solved in a way that, say, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Olson's *Maximus* are not. (Kostelanetz notes that '*The Cantos* continually flirt with sheer incoherence.') It is the musicality and words of Eliot that capture the reader of *The Waste Land*, not the authorial notes (which we all know were a kind of joke written at the insistence of a publisher), just as Olson catches us up in word play, geography and characterization in his great work, something that the explanations and notes of Butterick's *Guide* diminishes through its literal explanations. And the same would apply to more contemporary authors of long works such as Allen Fisher, Robert Sheppard and Rachel Blau DuPlessis: their work speaks for itself without endless explication and notes.

So, although there are chapters in *Ezra Pound, Italy and The Cantos* which certainly humanise Pound and offer some understanding of his writing, there is also much that seems assumptive, irrelevant or simply too personal. It turns out that Bacigalupo is not only one of the foremost Pound scholars, but that his parents knew Pound and he grew up to become a friend. This, rather than the poetry, seems to be why he is willing to ignore the politics and racism, and the mistranslations and misunderstandings which he discusses: Bacigalupo is under Pound's spell. His book is at times enjoyably un-academic and personal, but he does not seem willing to act upon or respond to his criticisms of Pound, nor indeed answer any of the questions he raises about the construction and content of *The Cantos*. In popular parlance he is a fanboy, even when it seems intellectually impossible for him to be so.

So, have I been persuaded about Pound? No, his work remains obtuse, confusing, politically unpleasant and often incomprehensible, with only odd forays into poetry. (Many of these moments are gathered up in the succinct Faber selection edited and introduced by Thom Gunn). As someone interested in long poems and sequences *The Cantos* will, of course, remain in view and on my bookshelf, and I would not wish to deny Pound his place in the history of poetry: his chain of influence and association is astonishing, and also surprisingly widespread. I would however agree with Kostelanetz that 'some of this circuitous intellectual influence has been lamentable, because neither Pound's thought nor his poetry are especially wise.'

Reading this book has made me re-read Pound, which in turn has reminded of what Dan Beachy-Quick says in *Of Silence and Song*, which I am re-reading at the moment:

An apocryphal fragment written down by Pseudo-Plato and attributed to Homer speaks to this issue: 'He knew a lot of things, but knew them all badly.'

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