Review of A Poem Containing History: Textual Studies in the Cantos, edited by Lawrence S. Rainey

Michael Keller, South Dakota State University

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No major work of modernist literature reveals so intensely conflicted a relation to the public, simultaneously spurning and courting it, as Ezra Pound's *Cantos*. At the age of twenty, when he was captivated by the exclusionary poetics of the coterie, Pound nonetheless declared his ambition to write a "forty-year epic," a poem, he would claim later, "containing history"--a people's history, "the tale of the tribe." As the poem evolved over the last fifty-five years of Pound's life, however, it grew ever more erudite, ever more removed from its public aspirations, until it confronted even the most devoted scholars with a mass of obscure references, cryptic "facts," and fractured narratives. As Pound himself lamented in 1919, only two years after the first three cantos had appeared in *Poetry*: "I suspect my 'Cantos' are getting too too too abstruse and obscure for human consumption." ¹ Despite moments of assurance and bravado, this suspicion would haunt Pound increasingly throughout his career.

Collected in *A Poem Containing History* are nine essays by prominent Pound scholars that consider the editorial and interpretive quandaries such difficulties and doubts occasion. Several are somewhat limited in scope and import, but included are significant contributions by Jerome McGann, Lawrence Rainey, Ronald Bush, and Peter Stoicheff--all four of which present previously undiscussed archival materials that cast new light upon the intractable problems facing efforts to prepare a critical edition of *The Cantos*. All nine essays, however, rightly acknowledge that these problems extend beyond the difficulty of determining the author's final intentions and thus appropriately focus on "the conditions that shaped the work's production and transmission, . . . the historical usages that many agents (including the author) have made of the work-to-be as it crossed their paths" (8). Transmission, especially, "looms large, shaping the materials that [Pound] locates, molding the uses that he makes of them, and inflecting his later attempts to reappropriate his own writings from earlier years" (8-9). This perspective, a strength of the volume overall, contributes substantially to our understanding of the special problems inherent in editing a poem that was composed over the period of half a century and that acquired its shape through a labyrinthine publishing history that frustrates even the most persistent efforts to comprehend it. Individual cantos appeared in more than two dozen journals in seven countries; groups of two, eleven, sixteen, and thirty appeared in deluxe editions; and
nine separate commercial volumes were issued between 1933 and 1968, each successively incorporated into newly expanded collected editions which were published in Paris, London, New York, and Milan. So vast and dispersed was this activity, Rainey notes in his "Introduction," that "no library in the world, including the library that houses Pound's own papers, holds all the journals and volumes in which The Cantos were gradually issued" (3).

Examining practices that surfaced early in this history, Jerome McGann reveals codes of signification embedded in the decorative graphics of the deluxe editions of A Draft of XVI. Cantos (1925), A Draft of the Cantos 17-27 (1928), and A Draft of XXX Cantos (1930)--all of which preceded publication of the first trade editions. Yet because the latter have failed to preserve these features (decorative capitals and illustrations), the readers of these texts encounter an appreciably different poem. Missing are the allusions to Pre-Raphaelitism and to the books issued by William Morris's Kelmscott Press, which "were meant to recall that historical moment when a newly discovered tool of mechanical reproduction--the printing press--had not yet become an engine of cultural alienation" (42). Even more important, Pound uses these allusions to look back further still "to the Renaissance revolution in printing," a gesture that [End Page 169] accords with "topics he raises and pursues at the work's linguistic levels" (43). Such examples effectively illustrate McGann's chief theoretical concerns: that "the problem of editing the Cantos becomes at one and the same time a problem of interpreting the work" (56); and "that the meaning of works committed into language is carried at the bibliographical as well as the linguistic level" (57).

Sharing these concerns, the essays by Lawrence Rainey and Ronald Bush extend them into the realm of ideology, Pound's initial and final encounters with fascism, specifically. Rainey exhaustively shows, for instance, how apparent errors in Pound's transcription of several words from two lines in Canto 10 not only disclose his sources, but also reveal Pound to be sympathetic to the romantic reinterpretation of the life of their subject, the fifteenth-century Riminese ruler Sigismondo Malatesta. Known best for sponsoring the reconstruction of the church of San Francesco, Malatesta became for Pound a symbol of political will and cultural patronage--the precursor of Mussolini, who assumes power just before Pound begins to research and draft this canto. So convinced is Pound of the affinity between the two leaders--one Mussolini himself encouraged (his own biographer had previously published a biography of Malatesta)--that on several occasions he attempts to meet Mussolini to discuss the regime's cultural program and, on another, to solicit Mussolini as a contributor to the Transatlantic Review. Such evidence overturns the prevailing assumption that Pound takes interest in fascism only much later, and only as a result of the economic and political crises of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In his reading of a series of manuscripts drafts from the Pisan Cantos (1948), Bush also challenges received views, successfully demonstrating that the "perception that the Pisan Cantos were confessions wrung out of a repentant fascist" (169) simplifies a far more complex and compelling tale. Based on the chronology of manuscripts, Bush suggests that this elegaic phase precedes a final stage of revisions in which Pound affirms his loyalties to fascism. Thereafter, the poem "vibrate[s] in a different way" (201), combining the elegaic and political--a tension that
leaves the Pisan sequence especially "indeterminate" and subject to "contradictory interpretations" (205).

A more severe indeterminacy, however, pervades Drafts & Fragments (1968). As Peter Stoicheff engagingly recounts, this final installment of The Cantos might never have been published at all had not Pound's publisher, James Laughlin, had to rush it into print to protect the copyright against a pirated edition mimeographed and distributed in New York City. By this time, however, Pound's interest in the fate of his poem had languished, leaving others to divine his intentions or to supply their own. The results, predictably, have been disastrous. In effect, The Cantos is a poem with no ending or, rather, a poem that has appeared with three different endings since 1972. Furthermore, one of the endings, the notorious Canto 120, contains lines written by Pound but not in the order in which he formerly published them (as a version of Canto 115). Truly, as Stoicheff suggests, "Drafts & Fragments is a vivid display of the historical dimension of text production and its consequences for interpretation" (227). Stoicheff's claim accurately describes A Poem Containing History as well, a volume that will advance scholars' thinking about what issues should inform a critical edition despite the very real, perhaps insuperable obstacles that stand in its way.

Michael Keller
South Dakota State University

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