

Introduction

It is always tempting just to ignore Ezra Pound. Pound, though, would not sit still for that, and neither should we. As Leonard W. Doob puts it, in his introduction to the poet's wartime radio broadcasts, "If Pound was not always totally accepted, at least he was unavoidably there" (ix). Wearing the various but inescapably interrelated hats of poet, scholar, cultural advocate, and fascist apologist, Pound has famously been the shibboleth at the center of modernist studies. By the account of some literary scholars (Hugh Kenner, Christine Brooke-Rose), he is believed to be central to the story of the time, and by others (Helen Vendler, Harold Bloom) to be a myth or a fraud perpetrated upon cultural history, a name that can only be whispered in New Haven to this day.¹ "No consensus on Pound's reputation has yet emerged," Ira B. Nadel writes, "but the very debate is credit to the activist poetics Pound promoted. Poets do not observe, he insisted: they engage with social and political change."²

Pound was at once a brilliant poet, resolute mentor, and extraordinary promoter of the arts. And, yet, according to some at the time and others today, he could also be a spiteful counselor and, at worst, a type of intellectual charlatan.³ However one understands Pound, he was, at the very least, a very different voice at the onset of a very different generation of artists, intellectuals, and students. Our book makes the claim that this "unavoidable" presence is as true for Pound's pedagogical methods as it is for Pound's modernist aesthetic. Even T. S. Eliot could make such a claim in his introduction to Pound's *Literary Essays*, where he would write that Pound "has always been, first and foremost, a teacher and campaigner" (xii).⁴ Pound's instruction reveals much about literature and culture in general, as well as his own unmistakable sense of the literary marketplace early in the century. But it is the lessons *of* Pound alongside the lessons *by* him that

show, in a way we might otherwise ignore, the tenuous relationship between our generally altruistic educational intentions and what is often a precarious process of ideological indoctrination. As he wrote in *ABC of Reading* (and might have reminded even himself on more than one occasion), “The teacher or lecturer is a danger. He very seldom recognizes his nature or his position” (83). If Pound could be said to be a dangerous mentor—in both the positive and negative senses of pushing his disciples to imagine previously unheard-of possibilities for what he called “Kulchur”—then he also could be said to be a troublemaker of a student. As he wrote, “I fought every university regulation and every professor who tried to make me learn anything except this, or who bothered me with ‘requirements’ for degrees” (Stock 34).

Many readers of Pound—writers and critics both—have pointed out how the poetry itself functioned as a type of pedagogy. Hugh Kenner, for one, called Pound a “poet at the blackboard.”⁵ Despite a few recent efforts to recognize the pedagogical Pound—such as Gail McDonald’s excellent *Learning to Be Modern* (1993)⁶ and Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle’s diverse collection *Ezra Pound and Education* (2012)—recent scholarship on Pound has mostly focused on the question of how we ought to weigh his poetry against his fascist speeches and writing, and this seems to be a topic ever of relevance.⁷ Those aspects of his life cannot—must not—ever be ignored, but they might be importantly recontextualized in light of his educational impulses, which anticipate contemporary trends in higher education generally and in the humanities specifically.

Pound’s pedagogical concerns were oriented in different temporal directions. He wanted to preserve the cultural treasures of the past for future generations, and he was also concerned with ongoing institutional tendencies, which were harmfully affecting the teaching and intellectual work of humanists and scholars in literary studies. This was true for his day, and it is perhaps even more true for us today. Recent calls to reform higher education on both the left and the right, as well as the growth of massive open online courses (MOOCs) and vocational colleges, show how Pound’s early concerns about faceless, detached, and unaware academic settings remain prevalent in vastly different political circles. A university system that had no awareness of or interest in how the energy of contemporary life was rooted in a vibrant historical soil was of no appeal to Pound, and he was wary of social systems that were motivated by economic rather than humanistic decisions. Looking back from the twenty-first century, we might be alarmed, as Pound would have been, by the growing investment of both

governmental and business interests in education, which seem to reduce and compartmentalize the disciplines. Much is now at stake, and much of the present and future decisions are not even moderately informed by those people who day-in-and-day-out spend their time in the classroom. Pointing to the 2006 Spellings Commission Report, Steven G. Yao and Michael Coyle note that in “the context of a contemporary ideological environment in which the federal government has sought to assert more direct control over higher education in the United States, and where state governments call for the dissolution of Boards of Trustees and advocate running state university systems directly from the statehouse, a renewed consideration of one of America’s great cultural and pedagogical iconoclasts seems all the more timely and pressing” (xxiv).

It seems both easy and difficult to imagine what Pound would have made of the current state of the humanities and, even more specifically, of literary studies. There is a lot of overlap between his critiques and anger at out-of-touch professors who know much about their specialty and not as much about its social relevance or, moreover, about why their idiosyncratic work ought to matter to twenty-year-olds seeking jobs in a marketplace that has a very different valuing system than, say, a medievalist with a red pen. Universities, often called by Pound “beaneries,” would continually come under indictment, as would many of the scholarly methods employed in those spaces.⁸ Pound would not have been partial to what, today, is called “Theory” (especially as much of it derives from what he saw as the contaminated minds of thinkers like Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud), though we may guess that he would have been charmed by its early guises.⁹ (This would not be too far afield from the experiences Pound had with his many modernist “isms” in the first few decades of the twentieth century.) He also, without any contradiction here, would have railed against the “historicist turn” in literary studies, much of which he would have seen as a repackaged incarnation of the scholarly philology he learned to detest at school.

Although he might not find many self-acknowledging theoretical neighbors, Pound is, at heart, a manner of humanist. In a 1912 article he published in the *New Age* (one to which we return later), Pound writes, “Our life is, in so far as it is worth living, made up in great part of things indefinite, impalpable; and it is precisely because the arts present us these things that we—humanity—cannot get on without the arts” (*NA* 10.13:298). “Knowledge,” he later writes in his *Guide to Kulchur*, “is to know man” (98), and teaching others means rousing them into wanting to know man too: “I suspect that the error in educational systems has been the cutting

off of learning from appetite” (98). Pound knew that a college was most successful when both the students and teachers wanted to be there. Moreover, being a part of a humanistic global “kulchur” did not mean merely being well educated institutionally. His *Guide* preambles with the following: “This book is not written for the over-fed. It is written for men who have not been able to afford an university education or for young men, whether or not threatened with universities, who want to know more at the age of fifty than I know today . . .” (6). Worthy intentions notwithstanding, as can be the problematic case with much humanism, the proprietor here assumes that others share his knowledge and expectations of what a human ought to entail. Pound, for his part, was a master of sharing his knowledge, and nothing significant remained out of his ken: “Russia is not a civilized nation” (158), “Mussolini a great man” (105), and “For fish, try Taormina” (113).

What follows in the next five chapters are the various guises of Ezra Pound, “Super Schoolmaster.” This epithet (the book’s title) comes from a review of one of Pound’s books in *The Dial*, in which the reviewer, one of the editors of the magazine, situated Pound this way in his concluding paragraph: “Is nobody aware that a contemporary writer is actually giving a course on the Comparative Literature of the Present, that a first rate literary man, a poet, with the rarest gift for translation, is bothering to teach school?”¹⁰ Pound was a revolutionary schoolmaster in vastly different ways. His unwavering advocacy for “comparative” methods in education heralds the rise in academia of interdisciplinary programs and collaborative fields today. He wanted to study and teach people about popular periodicals because he understood their ideological relationship to social life. Culture was not a dusty collection of books and magazines; it was living, breathing, tied into the very fabric of contemporary being.¹¹ And the beauty of it all was not to be found in the methods of his teachers—that mired study of insignificant detail and “endless pondering over some utterly unanswerable question of textual criticism.”¹² Instead, Pound would later propose his own version of “the grisly roots of ideas that are in action,” which, following a correspondence with the ethnographer Leo Frobenius, he would come to call the “Paideuma” (*Guide to Kulchur* 58). Different from the *Zeitgeist* (“the tints of mental air and the idées reçues”), the “Paideuma” (etymologically linked to teaching and education [Gr.]) allowed Pound to go right to the core of a historical moment. This would become not only a scholarly method but also a pedagogical one.

At a time when the prejudices of many in academia insisted that all cultural values stemmed entirely from the West, he turned Eastward, intro-

ducing poets and philosophers to audiences who otherwise would never have learned about them. He individually mentored aspiring writers he admired, even giving a lot of his time to teach those whose talents he doubted.¹³ In terms of academic institutions, he was shocked “that it took ideas an appallingly long time to filter through to the population,” telling a professor at the University of Pennsylvania that there was a “Time Lag, between real culture and that TAUGHT” (Carpenter 522). Hence, he campaigned for the inclusion of contemporary writers and artists—as both objects of study and potential faculty members—in colleges because they knew how art could still animate the souls of the young.¹⁴ In this, he anticipates the precipitous rise of creative writing programs in the United States, even though he was none too keen on their institutionalization. His literary criticism and cultural essays, his mentorship of other writers, and his promotion of the arts in both small journals and more extensive primers were all means by which the poet Pound could act as the professor he believed he could be. Indeed, as early as thirty years ago, the writer and publisher of *New Directions* press, James Laughlin, was explaining how Pound’s oeuvre was, in the end, a pedagogical method. “Pound was a born a teacher,” Laughlin writes, noting that a “great teacher presents verities and compares them so that students can judge for themselves” (34, 35).¹⁵ Pound’s pedagogy, for Laughlin, reached students widely in the guises of introductory books, edited anthologies, literary reviews, editorial work with journals, literary networking, translations, manifestoes, dreams of future colleges, and the “‘tutorial’ of his letters—instructions that reached hundreds of students, voluntary or involuntary” (50).¹⁶

Although still roughly chronological in scope, our book is organized thematically, following different aspects of Pound the schoolmaster. Readers looking for enumerated lists of Pound’s “best teaching practices” will be at a loss here. Rather than provide such detached bullet points, each chapter in its own way tries to get at the “luminous detail”—that tidbit of cultural history that goes right to the core of the matter—of a specifically Poundian pedagogy. We begin the first chapter early on, recounting Pound’s early experiences as a student—looking at why he developed such a distaste for the way that literature was read and taught—and then examining his brief foray into teaching at an academic institution. These early experiences at school were formative for him as a poet, scholar, and teacher. And, while he easily made the material his own, he was never able to adjust or reform the institution in a way that suited his needs. Although he would continually look for opportunities to be awarded graduate degrees he thought were owed

to him, he mostly broke ties with American universities. His “instruction,” therefore, needed to find new outlets if he was going to challenge the philological way of reading he had been taught. Our second chapter examines Pound’s “New Method in Scholarship” by considering *The Spirit of Romance* (a book that sprang from Pound’s first lectures) alongside his pieces in *The New Age* called *I Gather the Limbs of Osiris*. In these works, Pound presents what will become his “comparative” method, elucidating for the scholar and pedagogue new phrases such as his “resembling unlikeness” and his more well-known “luminous detail,” likened by Pound in *I Gather . . .* to that which “governed knowledge as the switchboard the electric circuit.”

Our third chapter follows Pound’s pedagogical criticism by considering the poet’s incursions into comparative education. While his books *Pavannes and Divisions*, *Instigations*, and *How to Read* were intellectually expansive instructional texts on culture meant for larger, mostly nonacademic audiences, he also retained the hope that they could lay the groundwork for future curricular studies.¹⁷ This is no less the case for Pound’s literary anthologies. If the “luminous detail” was akin to a cultural vortex or switchboard, then the anthological arrangement of poems and translations became, for Pound, a vast circuitry, dynamic yet held together by a common center. Jumping ahead a few years, the third chapter concludes by considering Pound’s engagement with Eastern culture in light of his and Marcella Spann’s (his protégé and muse) anthology *Confucius to Cummings*, which shows just how international Pound’s comparative method could be. To educate the masses on a global scale, Pound would also work with numerous small subscription periodicals (writing, editing, and promoting other writers). The fourth chapter details such avenues through which Pound could both promote the new arts and save literary tradition from the dusty halls of academe. (This chapter is a revision and amplification of a chapter in Clifford Wulfman and Robert Scholes’s *Modernism in the Magazines*.)

It would have been difficult, in the early part of the century, to predict Pound’s precipitous movement into economic/political theory and subsequent wartime radio broadcasts, but, looking back from today, it is easy to see—given his views and personality—how he got there. Our fifth chapter tries to negotiate how the poet-propagandist, who by this time might be considered one of the worst possible role models for a teacher, might, beyond all the hateful rhetoric, still have something valuable to impart. This chapter details the road Pound took to the broadcasts, to the cage in a prisoner-of-war camp, and finally to St. Elizabeths psychiatric hospital, which are all now inescapable aspects of his story. Rather than

list the instances of pedagogy throughout the *Cantos*, we focus on one moment—one “luminous detail”—that sheds a great light on the difficult history.¹⁸ Here we proceed with the faith, as Pound confesses toward the very end of his *Cantos*, that “it coheres all right,” even if the poet’s notes do not. If the *Cantos* “cohered” the way Pound thought the world did, they wouldn’t be worth reading, and the learning experience—the struggle, the insights, the labor—would be empty. Poetry is what challenges, not what is—perhaps that is the great lesson of Pound’s aesthetic pedagogy, even if he didn’t always remember it.

At St. Elizabeths, Pound still fancied himself a schoolmaster, but he was, in Leon Surette’s words, “incompetent as a teacher and propagandist of economic theory” (*Pound in Purgatory* 138). Pound was never one to apologize, and even many of his postwar teachings (informal ones to disciples who visited him at the hospital) betray not altogether dangerous motives but the sense that the schoolmaster had contented himself reciting his old lectures. The opposite endeavor—looking *reflexively* at the ways in which art and knowledge, creativity and tradition continually reproduce the world around us—seems the better pedagogical practice for today, and, excluding conspiratorial economic theories (granted, a big exclusion), was one Pound continually endorsed.¹⁹ Still, it is important to understand why and how the “school” of Pound was so instrumental in shaping our cultural attitudes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and in seeing, upon reflection, different possibilities for the future. After all, many of Pound’s students were unwitting, and their rebelliousness against their “Super Schoolmaster” laid the grounds for new methods and deeper relationships yet to be explored. Pound contradicted himself often, penned letters a hundred years ago as kids send text messages today, and would have found a home for himself nowadays on the AM dial. We do not know whether or not Ezra Pound would enjoy this book. We can only offer that, as for everything else, he would have had something to say about it, and it would have been instructive.