



European journal of American studies Reviews 2018-3

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13478>

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Wit Pietrzak, « Michael Kindellan, *The Late Cantos of Ezra Pound: Composition, Revision, Publication*, and Andrew S. Gross, *The Pound Reaction: Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature* », *European journal of American studies* [Online], Reviews 2018-3, Online since 07 January 2019, connection on 05 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/13478>

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Michael Kindellan, *The Late Cantos of Ezra Pound: Composition, Revision, Publication*, and Andrew S. Gross, *The Pound Reaction: Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature*

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- 1 1. Michael Kindellan, *The Late Cantos of Ezra Pound: Composition, Revision, Publication*
- 2 2. Andrew S. Gross, *The Pound Reaction: Liberalism and Lyricism in Midcentury American Literature*
- 3 London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. Pp. 288. ISBN: 9781474258753
- 4 Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2015. Pp. 262. ISBN-13: 978-3825364700
- 5 Wit Pietrzak
- 6 Pound's work continues to excite and trouble, which finds its confirmation in the critical attention given to his life and work. This is no doubt down to the fact that more of his ample correspondence has been published over the past decade, including the illuminating letters to his parents spanning the period between 1895 and 1929 and the 1934-39 correspondence with Stanley Nott. The steady increase in the Pound archive's availability notwithstanding, there remains a wealth of manuscript material scattered in libraries the world over. What is more, Pound's influence as poet and critic is traced to the writers openly affiliated with him but also those playing a satellite role. It is in this context that the last three years have brought two excellent monographs, which are located in two quite distinct though not unrelated provinces of Pound criticism. Michael Kindellan's *The Late Cantos of Ezra Pound* focuses on *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*, probing meticulously the archives in search for manuscripts of the *Cantos* under discussion. On

the other hand, Andrew S. Gross's *The Pound Reaction* treats Pound, the fact of him receiving the Bollingen prize for *The Pisan Cantos*, as a starting ground for considering a number of responses, poetic as well as personal, to Pound's fascism and anti-semitism in relation to his poetry. Though their merits could not be different, both *The Late Cantos* and *The Pound Reaction* are thorough studies that aim to make significant new inroads into the well-trodden territory of Pound criticism.

- 7 Kindellan states his purpose at the outset: "I am interested in how and why his disdain for what he once called 'scholar-sheep' is not just complementary to, but constitutive of, the verse that comprises *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*" (3-4). To this end, Kindellan explores Pound's notion of "the redundancy of interpretation" (11) which he strived for in his late *Cantos* but also in his various pronouncements on poetry in essays and mainly his correspondence. Pound's desire for a single, unified meaning behind words is a mainstay of his poetic technique, at least since 1913 and certainly following his work on Ernest Fenollosa's manuscripts, particularly his "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry." Kindellan does reference the link between Pound's late poetics and the mid-war birth of the "ideogrammic method" (see Kindellan 36-38, 77) even though it seems that for the issues he touches on throughout the study, a more sustained discussion of the continuity of Pound's perception of poetry would enhance his argument and give it an air of comprehensiveness it at times lacks, relying as it does on a fairly isolated discussion of *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*. While this is his declared purpose, a more diachronic approach to ideas that Pound clearly labored on throughout his mature years could nothing but add to the whole.
- 8 With that being said, Kindellan is beautifully painstaking in probing Pound's writings of the post-war period, paying special attention to his notebooks for *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*. A lot of the material he discusses finds its way into print for the first time and in itself this makes *The Late Cantos* a superb repository of information. Trivia or crucial news, Kindellan gathers a staggering amount of archival work into a coherent study that states in no uncertain terms that *The Cantos* is not a poem of indeterminacy but of a stable coherent meaning, which will only be delivered once the whole is completed, a foregone hope on Pound's part that Kindellan is quick to point out. Being a product of Pound's "linguistic idealism" (Kindellan 20-21), *The Cantos*, and the late section in particular, speaks against philology with its attention to diachronic detail and institutional apparatus overseeing accuracy of the rendition of ancient texts. For Kindellan, *The Cantos* is resistant to philological accuracy and (sometimes consciously and sometimes not) flaunts free treatment of the source material, often downright misappropriating it, in order to emphasize the importance not of the text's meaning-making potential but the poet's intention in conveying the unified meaning he has in mind: "the epistemological ideal Pound imagines in *The Cantos* is post-hermeneutic: beyond interpretation, an examination of meaning after the language that conveys it. 'T'aint wot a man sez but wot he means..." (Kindellan 40, emphasis in original). The quote from Pound used to corroborate the point just made is one of many instances where Kindellan enlists the poet's very own support for the book's argument. Kindellan quotes from Pound amply and deservedly, stressing the unmistakable jargon employed by the poet. But behind the merry inflections of spelling and neologistic penchant, both hallmarks of Pound's personal and public writing, there is a crucial thesis unravelling here in that Kindellan sees a connection between Pound's deploration of philology and his championing of fascism on ethical as much as aesthetic grounds.

- 9 Institutional care to carry on the tradition of texts into the future, by archival maintenance and translation, misses the pedagogical aspect of tradition, which was dear to Pound and to his philosopher of choice, Confucius. Why poetry matters is because it conveys the best thinking in the best language. What this means, therefore, is that the poet's vision is superior to any philological dream of accuracy. Once complete, *The Cantos* were to embody just such coherence, order and so be an ethical statement for the world to come. For Pound, no accuracy would have been needed then, and so philological meticulousness would have proven pointless, as no sources would have had to be consulted: *The Cantos* would have been a new culture's central statement, much like the *Analects*. Kindellan puts it aptly when he states that Pound desires "a centripetal reading event wherein *The Cantos* is positioned at the center, an organizational force like the magnet arranging its iron filings" (152). While in itself, his thesis is nothing out of the ordinary in Pound criticism, Kindellan's canvassing of the Pound manuscripts gives the idea new strength. What is more, he notes what has so far been generally papered over, pointing out that Pound's project is directly opposed to that of Roland Barthes (his death of the author would have been anathema to Pound, who asserts the primacy of the author's intention over the text's reception) and Jacques Derrida (*différance* is just the sort of increment on a text's meaning that Pound sets out to combat). Even though it is a brief part of Kindellan's argument, it allots a clear spot to Pound in the firmament of modern letters. It is also a point that, albeit cursorily, connects Kindellan's monograph to Gross's *The Pound Reaction*.
- 10 Gross is keen to look into Pound not centripetally, like Kindellan does in full agreement with his source material, digging ever more deeply into the poet's archive, but centrifugally, as a cultural, literary and political phenomenon that has vitally affected of post-war literary scene, especially in the US. For Gross, Pound's winning of the Bollingen prize "was the decisive moment in the crystallization of a liberal aesthetic that would play a brief but important role in postwar culture, especially in American universities, through the late 1960s" (9). Having first discussed the hearsay, some of which quite paranoid, some oscillating around the truth, Gross goes on to claim that by granting the award to Pound the US academia, all the notables from T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden all the way to Archibald MacLeish included, made a ruse toward "bringing together high modernism – widely if wrongly assumed to be reactionary – and liberalism. The argument it hit upon – the liberal aesthetic – stressed the allegedly apolitical nature of lyrical poetry, elevated to the status of representative art" (11). MacLeish is given a prominent place here due to his lengthy *Poetry and Opinion*, in which he explained why giving Pound, a traitor and mental asylum inmate, the award marked the important transition point in the development of the modern-day democratic state. Gross then goes on to discuss various critics and academics who responded to Pound's Bollingen, suggesting that poetry is a personal statement and as such does not yield to political estimation.
- 11 Gross takes the reaction to the Bollingen scandal as a token of the inception of liberal aesthetic that valorized lyrical individualism and sees the change in viewing Pound's work in a more politically-inflected light in the latter 1960s and onwards as sparked by a more culturally-situated approach to literature that he dubs lyricism of identity. Gross is thorough in his discussion of poets and critics who responded to Pound, beginning with Karl Shapiro, who was the only dissenting voice on the Bollingen committee, claiming that as a Jew he could not vote to give the award to an anti-Semite, going on with Auden, less-known poet Peter Viereck (whose father was a convicted Nazi agent, and who in the

late 1940s became a well-known advocate of conservatism), Katherine Anne Porter (a novelist and member on the Bollingen committee) and Leslie Fiedler (a critic with whom Porter had a scuffle), all the way to John Berryman. Gross traces the responses, polemical and poetic to Pound and the indigestible combo of fascism and antisemitism. Gross is at his best when his attention is on the detail, like in the Auden chapter in which Gross shows that “The Age of Anxiety” focuses not on individuals “but their roles in the collective” (105), thus indicating that “the job of poetry is to convert crowds of experiences, feelings, and memories – and the rhymes and rhythms that are the linguistic correlates of memory – into communities of meaning” (119). By contrast it is when he generalizes on “cultural continuities” (Gross 35), like the rise and disappearance of what he terms liberal aesthetic, that his argument strikes as too sweeping, too wide in its treatment of complex aesthetic and cultural changes. Liberal aesthetic, a perception of poetry as a personal statement, was no doubt a major factor behind awarding the Bollingen prize to Pound on the assumption, expressed for example by Otto Matthiessen in his introduction to *The Oxford Book of American Verse*, that *The Pisan Cantos* “demonstrate that out of the aberration of his Fascist politic, he has at least experienced suffering and learned humility” (qtd. in Gross 15); and yet, it seems problematic to accept that view that liberal aesthetic yielded to a broader and culturally-aware critical program when one recalls the heyday of neopragmatist readings of American verse in the 1980s and 1990s, like those in Richard Poirier’s *Poetry and Pragmatism* or the literary criticism of Richard Rorty. These are by no means charges of negligence on Gross’s part. His case is strong enough to resist such stabs. What this goes to show is that paying too much attention to periodization, to how and when certain critical views, or aesthetic for that matter, came into prominence and when they vanished must always be a futile endeavor. Pointing toward Berryman’s agonizing over Jewishness and the extent of the Jewish tragedy and how his *Dream Songs* speak to Pound’s work promises to extend and nuance our understanding of the fate of poetry in the twentieth century. Throughout his monograph Gross does just that, exercising his critical insight keenly and diligently.

- 12 Both *The Late Cantos* and *The Pound Reaction* return our attention to what we have long understood but may have forgotten of late: the greatest minds of a generation may be able to teach us about the world around us, even though they themselves are not impervious to the same faults and stumbles that beset us all. Pound’s work lasts, the Alps on the horizon of poetic but also cultural and political history of modernity, as do his faults and stumbles, quite incredibly filtered into his poem. Kindellan and Gross fastidiously retrace Pound’s paths, pointing us to views and vistas previously buried under the many avalanches that *The Cantos*, and the history of their reception, have initiated.