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Olson, Paul A., "The Bollingen Controversy Ten Years After: Criticism and Content" (1959). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 149.

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The Bollingen Controversy Ten Years After: Criticism and Content

PAUL A. OLSON

TEN years after the Bollingen controversy we have a book collecting major documents from that fight. From the perspective of ten years, one sees the affair more in the light of common day, but the issues still do not bore. The book (William Van O'Connor and Edward Stone, *A Casebook on Ezra Pound*) is said to be designed to make college freshmen write term papers on Pound. Consequently, the major correspondents in the 1948-49 quarrel are almost all represented: Barrett, Auden, Orwell, Shapiro, Viereck, Robert Gorham Davis, Tate; bits and pieces of evidence concerned with Pound's early career, his radio speeches, his stay at Pisa, and his confinement in and release from St. Elizabeths are included. So far as its overt purpose goes, the book seems likely to fail. Freshman students do not, I think, read Pound, and their sensitivity to any of the beauties of a criticism of his poetry is likely to be inhibited. Yet, it is refreshing, in these staid days when new critics are acquiring history and historical scholars are turning critic, when most of us crawl between heaven and earth picking up what fads we can, to read of those ampler times when critics were angry and poetry prizes seemed part of an international conspiracy. Since the 1948 essays repeat one another, one is tempted simply to title them: MacLeish, fulsome; Orwell, honest; Tate, dangerous; Robert Gorham Davis, unbelievable; Viereck, true in a lopsided way. The essays perhaps tell us more about the critics than the poem *or* the issues; the poem was hard and recently published, the issues, great.

The questions the Bollingen controversy raised will not lie still ten years after:

1. To what degree was the poet sane?
2. To what degree was he guilty of treason?
3. Do the *Pisan Cantos* constitute a considerable poetic achievement?
4. What about the poet's duty to society?

The first of these is a psychological question which the psychologists will eventually answer, I suppose; in view of the conflicting reports of the various psychiatrists who analyzed Pound, one wonders to what extent the language of ordinary psychology is adequate to the description of our culture's extraordinary citizens. The second question will be handled

by the legal historians after the first is answered. The examination of the third and fourth is the concern of this review.

The Cantos and Sentimentality: The awarding of a prize to the *Pisan Cantos* for their poetic achievement gave rise to the well-known charges that their poetic achievement as poetic achievement is marred by anti-Semitism, Fascism, and incoherence. I should like to treat these charges not as they relate to a general critical evaluation of the later *Cantos* but as critical issues and prolegomena to literary judgment. The first charge, that of anti-Semitism, produced enough woolly thinking on both sides: on the side of Barrett and Viereck who asked, "How far is it possible, in a lyric poem, to transform vicious and ugly matter into beautiful poetry?": on the side of Tate who argued that the artist's concern for the health of the language, for the medium as medium, is so unique as almost to relieve him of other obligations. But surely the question for Barrett and Viereck does not concern lyric poems which may or may not be fictive but non-fictive poems: "How far is it possible in a non-fictive poem . . . ?" And surely Tate could only hold his position so long as he holds that the *Cantos* have no subject matter, that they are about nothing. Once the poem comes to be about something, once it ceases to be a style manual and becomes the moral treatise that Pound's more recent and more accurate critics have shown us that it is, then the health of its own language may be questioned: whether it is true or not 'true, accurate or inaccurate, just or unjust. It may be true that such questions are irrelevant to many poems (*I Had a Little Nut Tree*), but certainly they may legitimately be asked of a poem which is not fictive, which sets down historical facts or supposed historical facts in order to persuade us to take a political and moral position. This the *Pisan Cantos* do.

During the controversy, passages in the *Cantos* were condemned as anti-Semitic in Hitler's sense or condoned as pleasantly anti-Semitic in Shylock's sense. Both analogies were more rhetorical than logical. Pound's fear is of a distant and blank-faced Jewish conspiracy, corrupting the counsels of government, creeping through the corridors of international finance, and corroding the cultural commerce of western society. The fear could evaporate when Pound was in the close presence of such a Jew as Louis Zukorsky; even in the *Pisan* poems the fear did not prevent the poet from recording a grudging admiration for certain of "the Hebrew scriptures." To say that this is not Hitler's attitude is not to say that it is responsible and rational. Nor, on the other hand, could Pound have given us a Shylock. Shylock is a fictive character, living in an "as if" world, according to a reprehensible but understandable "as if" code; Shakespeare's interest in Shylock is mimetic, and because his

eye is on the psychology of his character, he is not simply a stage Jew. Pound's poetry, on the other hand, does not pretend to bring before us an "as if" world. Such lines as "Petain defended Verdun/while Blum was defending a bidet" pretend to be true and they are simply lies, lies of the kind which made Plato kick out the poets. Fictions are the stuff of poetry, not lies.

Ultimately Pound's anti-Semitic lines fail aesthetically by reason of their sadistic sentimentality; their appeal is nothing more nor less than an appeal to primitive stock emotion, and this is very much a matter of style: "The yidd is a stimulant . . . David rex, the prime s. o. b." Contrast this with Shylock. Notice the word choice. At the point where Pound is most irresponsible as a thinker, he is also least successful as a poet. Here he turns from the just emotion to the stock, from the particular universal to the generalized, from the visualized and comprehended to the misty and muddy. At such points, the poem is kinetic rather than mimetic. Though the critics who said that the poem is bad because the poet was bad were befuddled, the choosing of words is also a moral action and poems too may be morally judged. If one were, at one time, to say that certain passages of the *Cantos* are immoral because anti-Semitic and at another time to say of the same passages that they are poor poetry because they call on stock emotions, he would, in a sense, be repeating himself; in both cases, he would be saying that the language of the poem is bad because the poem fails to know whereof it speaks, because it substitutes superstition for imaginative comprehension.

However, the critics who talk about anti-Semitism as if it were the main subject of the *Pisan Cantos* do them another and equal injustice. They ignore Pound's conception of the organic relationship between nature and the civilizations which rise out of it; they ignore his statement of the psychology of creation and love; they neglect his conception of the tragedy of the peasant and the great man; indeed, they blot the main substance of the poem and the finer figures of its song.

The Cantos and Fascist belief: Those who justified the *Cantos* on the ground that technique is all, that the poems are valid on "art for art's sake" grounds, those gentle Poundians of whom Viereck speaks (such as Edith Sitwell), emasculate the poem to keep the prettiness of the poetry. Such critics deny Pound what, since 1920, he has wished most to be: a moralist and political prophet. Moreover, quite apart from what the poet wants to be, the position, for all its honorable lineage, is invalid on simple logical grounds. A poem is not an abstract pattern of sights or sounds. It is made up of words; these words are put together in sentences that mean something, that record a fictive or real event, that praise or blame, that directly or indirectly persuade. The fact that words are ar-

ranged on the page according to a rhythmic principle rather than according to the necessities of typography does not make them susceptible to criteria of truth, logical validity, or morality which are different from those to which we normally subject prose. As with prose, if the poet presents us with history, we ask if it is true; if he presents us with fiction, we ask if it is probable; if he presents us with belief, we ask if it is tenable as realized in the poem. If Pound tells us that Mussolini's antagonists hoped to "sell their country for half a million" (Canto LXXX), then the truth of this must be examined since it is entered as historical evidence designed to make us believe in a political program. Pound's history should not be compared with Dante's, for, while Pound's history pretends to be factual in a factual poem, Dante's is typological in a fictive poem. Dante's Manfred exhibits to us a sample of late-repentant behavior; if Manfred did not actually repent, it makes no difference to the ultimate meaning of the poem since it is his kind of behavior in relation to Dante's ethical vision which is important. On the other hand, Pound's poetry is based on a "*naturale dimostramento*" which requires that Mussolini should have been just the Mussolini whom he presents. Otherwise his poem fails to persuade when it deals with Mussolini. Pound tells us "there is no Sordello but my Sordello." Historical accuracy is everything in the later *Cantos* because theirs is a poetry which gives us *facts* designed to compel *belief*.

The incoherence of the Cantos: The opponents of the award, in their weakest argument, attacked the poem as incoherent. This incoherence was then presented as evidence for Pound's madness, or, in some cases, Pound's madness was presented as evidence that the poem must be incoherent. That Pound in his personal conversation tends to ramble is supported not only by the later essays in this volume but also by other reports of people who have talked with him in recent years. That such a habit of mind may, given suitable techniques, be transformed into poetry where the varied themes blend together into a kind of music of subject matter Pound has admirably demonstrated. His ideogrammatic technique makes an aesthetic virtue of a conversational vice or, better, forms a discipline congenial with his private undiscipline. That what was seen as incoherent ten years ago does not so seem now is the result of a decade's labor by such Poundians as Hugh Kenner and Sister Bernetta Quinn and the authors of the *Annotated Index*. However, even if we now can read the poem as a unity, its structural rationale is not yet particularly obvious. Indeed, the concept of structure which undergirds a whole series of twentieth-century long poems—*The Waste Land*, *The Bridge*, *Paterson*,

The Revolving Mirror—still lacks precise definition. The place to end would be Aristotle and the place to begin would probably be with modern conceptions of cause and coherence.

Responsibilities: Ultimately, of course, the 1948 quarrels became the source of an altogether healthy dialogue concerning the responsibilities of the poet to society. In varying degrees both sides held that a poet *sui generis* has some special responsibility to "society" or some special freedom from responsibility. Such romantic heresy only arises in a society where the artist is no longer the old and accepted man in the marketplace but the green-eyed shaman of the misty moors. It may not be idle to suggest that, as a man, a poet can only be held responsible in the measure that others are held responsible, that as a poet he is ideally responsible primarily for giving an accurate report: for the precision of his language, the accuracy of his facts if they be presented as facts, for his fidelity to his vision and his refusal to surrender to the sentimental, for the psychological penetration which informs whatever moral vision he mediates, and for the humor which softens his justified acerbities.

But in our society it is difficult to say in what sense any poet is responsible, for our society, holding people to be products, cannot also hold them responsible. It recognizes few obligations which do not issue from politeness and self-interest. Ultimately, I suppose a modern poet is responsible only to those people in his audience who hold themselves—and so also him—responsible. Only such an audience is worth the seriousness, the seriousness of comedy even. I suspect that poets of the likes of Pound demand critics of the likes of Dr. Johnson who never separate the moral and the aesthetic, whose trembling sensitivity does not hinder their spotting darned foolishness, whose quarrel with a part of a poem does not prevent them from recognizing the greatness of the whole if it be truly great, and, most of all, who are not fooled by an organic theory of poetry into believing that the judicial critic capable of separating the good from the bad in a poem and rendering both justice is so old-fashioned as to be worthless to all the present purposes of criticism.