

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association
for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)


Documentary Editing, Association for

9-1999

Ezra Pound: The Genius in the Bughouse: Review of "*I Cease Not to Yowl*": *Ezra Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti*, ed. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette.

Peter Buitenhuis
Simon Fraser University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit>

 Part of the [Digital Humanities Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), and the [Technical and Professional Writing Commons](#)

Buitenhuis, Peter, "Ezra Pound: The Genius in the Bughouse: Review of "*I Cease Not to Yowl*": *Ezra Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti*, ed. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette." (1999). *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)*. 528.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/docedit/528>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Documentary Editing, Association for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Documentary Editing: Journal of the Association for Documentary Editing (1979-2011)* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Ezra Pound: The Genius in the Bughouse

PETER BUITENHUIS

"I Cease Not to Yowl": Ezra Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti, ed. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998. xxviii, 327 pp. \$34.95, ISBN 0-252-02410-9.

In Norman Holmes Pearson's modern American poetry graduate seminar at Yale, students were required to take one of Ezra Pound's cantos and write a detailed explication. I chose Canto L—at first sight a fairly straightforward one but, on closer examination, as difficult and complex in allusion and structure as most of the others. I discussed some of my problems with the canto with Professor Pearson in the course of my researches. He said: "Why don't you go to Washington and talk to Ezra himself?"

I remember being so astonished at the suggestion that I could only gasp, and stammer, "You m-m-mean he can actually *receive* people in the asylum and talk to them?"

"Not only receive people," answered Pearson, "and talk to them. He really welcomes all kinds of visitors!"

So I duly wrote to Pound at St. Elizabeths Hospital and received a cordial letter from him, welcoming a visit and giving date and time. It would have been, as I remember, the spring of 1953 or '54, and Pound was allowed at that time an alcove in one of the wards of the supposedly incurably insane to receive his guests.

I had a friend in Washington with whom I stayed for the visit. He was an economist with the U.S. government, but strongly interested in literature. He asked to come on the visit with me, and I, rather reluctantly, agreed. I showed Pound's letter to the guard at the main entrance, and we were escorted through some locked doors to his ward. The last door opened onto a scene of indescribable noise, confusion, and stench. A dozen radio and TV sets were blaring away. Men were lying in beds, or on the floor in foetal positions, some in a pool of their own urine and

stinking of excrement. In the middle of this bedlam, behind a curtain that offered little barrier to the noise and smell, was Ezra, lying on a chaise longue. Also in the alcove was a woman who turned out to be Pound's wife, Dorothy Shakespeare. My friend and I took the two remaining chairs and introduced ourselves.

Bringing my economist friend turned out to be a sad mistake, as Pound immediately launched upon a dissertation about economics and the stupidities of current government policies. I never did get to ask about my problems with Canto L because our hour was soon up, and the next visitor—a Chinese student—was ushered in. Pound, in fact, had a constant stream of visitors to his chaise-longue side.

I mention this personal encounter because in this volume of letters from Pound to Olivia Rossetti Agresti, mostly written from St. Elizabeths, there is not a single mention of the conditions under which he was living. He had been confined to the hospital in January 1946 after being adjudged by psychiatrists "eccentric, querulous, and egocentric," and unfit to stand trial for treason as a consequence of broadcasting over Rome radio during the war. For a year, he was housed in a barred cell in the criminal ward, then released to a general ward, and finally, toward the end of his imprisonment in 1958, allowed a private room and the freedom of the hospital garden.

Pound endured this incarceration with a stoicism and serenity little short of miraculous. He was allowed access to writing materials and books and, later on, unlimited visitors, and he maintained a voluminous correspondence. His visits were like impromptu seminars or, more often, monologues, during which he kept up a ceaseless flow of ideas and homilies.

Was he mad? Obsessive, certainly. My own experience confirmed that once he got on to a topic that gripped him, he could not let it go. These letters confirm that sense. In epistolary form, however, his ideas and opinions tend to come in short bursts, like machine-gun fire. For example:

Peter Buitenhuis is professor emeritus at Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. He has taught at Yale, the University of Toronto, and McGill, and has published books on Henry James, Hawthorne, writers and propaganda in the Great War, and several Canadian writers.

I shd/ like to arouse ORA'S interest in history/
in biology/ in Luther Burbank, [&]in eugenics/
did you ever hear of a guy named Murray/
aetatiti/ 81 two years ago/ dunno if still alive/
Congress and the governor of western state/
Nice Marco Polo stamp on yr/ epizl. Tell 'em
to do one for the Noh players this august. This is
a bit of connection.

Connection is the key word here, and in many of the letters. It is what Pound strove for endlessly. He did the same in the cantos which, like the letters, are gnomic and allusive. It is no wonder that the editors took thirteen years to bring them finally to publication. They are extensively—not to say exhaustively—annotated, for there still remain references that the editors have been unable to track down.

In many ways Olivia Rossetti Agresti (ORA), resident in Italy, was Pound's ideal correspondent. She was the daughter of William Michael Rossetti and was thus brought up in the midst of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to which Pound had many connections. One of her cousins was Ford Madox Ford, a close friend, early mentor, and publisher of Pound's work. As a young girl, Agresti helped publish and print an anarchist journal. She subsequently became a translator and secretary to David Lubin, the Jewish idealist and reformer, who was one of the early progenitors of the League of Nations. She was also a supporter of Mussolini's policies but later disapproved of his adoption of Nazi racist tactics. Indeed, the source of the greatest contention between the correspondents was Pound's virulent and all-embracing anti-Semitism. Having converted to Roman Catholicism, Agresti was also opposed to Pound's anti-Christian and, in particular, anti-Catholic views.

Leon Surette is quite right when he comments in his introduction: "Many will find these letters painful reading." One cannot read too many of Pound's letters to Agresti without feeling somewhat nauseated. He detested Roosevelt and Churchill, referring to the former as "Oozenstink," "sow-bellied ape," and "Roostenstein"; to the latter as "Weinstein Kirkeberg," "W.C." and "Winston of Clowning Street"; and to them collectively as a "dung-hill." He implied, fantastically, that both had Jewish ancestry and was convinced that they were strongly influenced, if not controlled, by international Jewry.

Pound cannot say enough about the pernicious influence of the Jews on civilization, mainly through usury, but also through the promotion of armaments and war, the degradation of the political process, control of the press,

and even direction of the drug trade. He also attacks Jewry for corrupting religion and, in turn, spawning Christianity, which he called "one of the worst hoaxes." He attacked the Catholic Church because, he alleged, it was dominated by what Pound refers to as the "Fattyman," which perpetrated "a mass of hoakum" on its gullible members. All in all, Pound invented conspiracy theories of gigantic dimensions.

On the side of the angels for Pound were such luminaries as Mussolini, Senator McCarthy, Westbrook Pegler, Father Coughlin, and John Frederick Kasper, the notorious white supremacist. Pound even went so far as to defend Hitler, who, he thought, had been much misunderstood. Pound did concede, however, that Hitler went a bit mad in the last six months of his life—a view supported by the recently advanced theory that Hitler was a victim of Parkinson's disease.

Is it worth, then, paying attention to the letters of this right-wing nutcase, this ultimate paranoid? Strangely enough, yes. Without doubt, Pound was one of the most learned men of his generation, whose imagination, although often outrunning sense, soared to the stars, and whose weird *weltanschauung* was the foundation for that amazing modernist epic, *The Cantos*. Moreover, the letters are full of wonderfully inventive Joycean puns and word coinages that are entertaining even when Pound is at his most offensive.

The Pound-Agresti letters give readers the best guide yet to the economic, social, aesthetic, and political thinking behind the cantos, for he used Agresti as a sounding-board for trying out and justifying these ideas, often in the face of her reasoned and coherent opposition. Steeped in the theories of the founder of Social Credit, Major Douglas, the monetary reformer Silvio Gesell, and the monetary historian Alexander Del Mar, Pound was advocating a complete overhaul of western political and economic systems. He called for a representative body that would be made up of the various trades and professions, an administration that would be responsible for the control of money instead of the banks, and agricultural policies which would ensure that producers would be adequately supported and remunerated for their efforts. This was in many ways a more complex iteration of the nineteenth-century American populism that Pound inherited from his father and other relations. Pound passionately believed that under such a political and economic system usury—that destroyer of real wealth—would be eliminated and the arts would flourish, as in the great days of the Chinese emperors and the Italian Renaissance.

Pound pushed these ideas on Agresti because, being

in the “bughouse,” as he called it, he had little access to the sources that would promote his views, although even then a cohort of supporters like Hugh Kenner, Norman Holmes Pearson, and Giovanni Giovannini, a professor at the Catholic University in Washington, were trying with some success to aid his efforts to publish in various periodicals.

A consistent theme in these letters is Pound’s attempts not only to convince Agresti of the soundness of his views but also to get her to enlist her many friends and acquaintances to his cause. The letters are also filled with reports of his various other contacts with people of his persuasion and, more frequently, his complaints that these friends and acquaintances were not combining to form a political and ideological force. He was convinced, like any evangelist, that once his ideas had taken root and there was a substantial minority on his side, he could change the world and restore it to political, fiscal, and artistic health. Part of his program was to vilify the perfidious British and the sluggish French as well as his complacent fellow Americans. On the other hand, he belabored the “woptalians” who he believed, largely because of their great past, could be most easily persuaded to see the light.

The more I read in this collection, the more I came to see that Pound regarded himself as the center—the unwobbling pivot—of sound thought and belief, while the majority of mankind wallowed in delusion. He alone was sane and the rest of the world (with a few exceptions) mad. This helped explain for me why he could remain so serene and unmoved in that loud and stinking ward of St. Elizabeths.

When finally freed from the bughouse and allowed to return to Italy, he found that Olivia Rossetti Agresti was in sore need of money. He generously proposed to Professor Giovannini that he edit the correspondence if he could persuade his university to buy it. The letters proved too expensive for the Catholic University (or perhaps the administration had some knowledge of their virulent anti-Catholicism). The correspondence was subsequently acquired by the Yale library, and Agresti received six hundred dollars in payment. Giovannini never proceeded with his edition, and it was not until Leon Surette came across the letters a quarter of a century later that plans were laid for editing and publication.

This edition includes about 75 percent of the Pound letters and a few of Agresti’s responses from the Beinecke collection at Yale, with also a few from the New York Public Library. The editors assert that they did not exclude letters that would place Pound in an unfavorable light. They left out only those which repeat letters included or which

contain lists of Pound’s responses to various books. Each Pound letter is printed in its entirety, without corrections to typos, grammatical errors, or misspellings. Handwritten additions to the largely typed letters have been included in brackets. The idiosyncrasies of Pound’s style have been faithfully recorded.

Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos, who teaches at the University of New Brunswick, and Leon Surette, who teaches at the University of Western Ontario, have tried to steer a middle course in their annotations between excessive explanation for the scholar and insufficient assistance for the general reader. They have erred, if anything, on the side of excess. Otherwise, their scholarly methods seem irreproachable, with the puzzling exception that they have chosen to index the collection not by page number but by letter number. Since many of the letters cover several pages, this makes tracing down references and allusions unnecessarily difficult.

Altogether, this is a valuable addition to the growing printed record of the most influential and controversial poet of the modernist era.

ADE Council Seeks Nominations for Distinguished Service Award

The Distinguished Service Award recognizes outstanding recent service to the ADE and to the field of documentary editing. Recipients of the award are selected by the ADE Council, which may make one or more awards annually. ADE members are urged to submit nominations for the Council’s consideration. Address nominations to Leslie Rowland, Freedmen and Southern Society Project, Department of History, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742; or, via e-mail, LR20@u.umd.edu.