

HISTORICIZING MODERNISM

**EZRA
POUND'S
ADAMS CANTOS**

DAVID TEN EYCK

BLOOMSBURY

Historicizing Modernism

Series Editors: Matthew Feldman, Senior Lecturer in Twentieth Century History, University of Northampton, UK; and Erik Tønning, Director, Modernism and Christianity Project, University of Bergen, UK

Assistant Editor: Paul Jackson, Senior Lecturer in History, University of Northampton, UK

Editorial Board

Professor Chris Ackerley, Department of English, University of Otago, New Zealand; Professor Ron Bush, St John's College, University of Oxford, UK; Dr Finn Fordham, Department of English, Royal Holloway, UK; Professor Steven Matthews, Department of English, Oxford Brookes University, UK; Dr Mark Nixon, Department of English, University of Reading, UK; Professor Shane Weller, Department of Comparative Literature, The University of Kent, UK; and Professor Janet Wilson, University of Northampton, UK.

Historicizing Modernism challenges traditional literary interpretations by taking an empirical approach to modernist writing: a direct response to new documentary sources made available over the last decade.

Informed by archival research, and working beyond the usual European/American avant-garde 1900–45 parameters the series reassesses established images of modernist writers by developing fresh views of intellectual backgrounds and working methods.

Series Titles:

The Autobiographies of Mina Loy, Sandeep Parmar

Great War Modernisms and The New Age Magazine, Paul Jackson

Katherine Mansfield and Literary Modernism, Edited by Janet Wilson, Gerri Kimber and Susan Reid

Reframing Yeats, Charles Ivan Armstrong

Samuel Beckett and Arnold Geulincx, David Ducker

Samuel Beckett and Science, Chris Ackerley

Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks Than Kicks', John Pilling

Samuel Beckett's German Diaries 1936–1937, Mark Nixon

Praise for *Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos*

'This illuminating study of Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos (62 to 71 of Pound's Cantos) offers a tour de force of careful literary-historical scholarship, adroit reading, and lucid explication... This robustly researched book is a must for Pound scholars, and it can also be read profitably by those wishing to gain acquaintance with Pound's poetics in the [Cantos](#) and the main lines of Pound's middle years.'

Miranda B. Hickman, Associate Professor of English, McGill University, Canada

'Subtly engaged in Pound's larger literary and cultural project of the 1930s, Ten Eyck deftly brings readers afresh to these underappreciated poems, illuminating Pound's own reading of John Adams, his process of composition, and his development of "a documentary method" of poetic writing—one of the most radical elements of [The Cantos](#). Ten Eyck's greatest contribution, however, is his convincing insistence that we engage these poems and their politics literarily, and his teaching us how to do so.'

Catherine E. Paul, Professor of English, Clemson University, USA

'...David Ten Eyck offers a careful and lucid analysis of Pound's interest in John Adams, which crystallize in the Adams Cantos. By giving us fine close readings, and by looking at these Cantos in the context of Pound's life and development of his political and social views, Ten Eyck successfully counters the general negative critical reception of this part of Pound's magnum opus, also in terms of its poetic quality. He convincingly demonstrates how Pound's use of the Adams material is a new development in his "historical method" and in the textual evolution of the poem, making his study an indispensable tool for any reader of Pound's work.'

Peter Liebrechts, Leiden University, The Netherlands

'David Ten Eyck's book provides an invaluable service to scholarship in its scrupulous adumbration of famously difficult modernist verse. Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos elaborates the "documentary method" at work in Pound's epic, tracing its development from the Malatesta Cantos of the 1920s to its fullest expression in the inscrutable poems dealing with the political thought and milieu of John Adams, composed swiftly in the lengthening European shadows of World War Two. Ten Eyck accomplishes a rare thing by showing how Pound's methods of citation transform from conventional (if dense) literary reference to what Peter Nicholls calls "an autonomous and continuous discourse." In doing so, Ten Eyck unlocks a hitherto oblique dimension of Pound's "poem containing history." The book is a lesson in How to Read: it performs a material hermeneutics carefully calibrated to a deep and judicious awareness of seemingly intransigent poetic materials and underlying documentary evidence. More than bringing the archive into the text – though surely the book does a deft job of this – Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos reinvigorates our understanding of Pound's own aspiration to write a poem that would function as a cultural repository, a textual place "where memory liveth." '

Mark Byron, University of Sydney, Australia

Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos

David Ten Eyck

B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

175 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10010
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

First published 2012

© David Ten Eyck, 2012

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

David Ten Eyck has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury Academic or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-6235-6612-8

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ten Eyck, David.

Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos / David Ten Eyck.

p. cm. – (Historicizing modernism)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4411-0049-8 (hardcover) – ISBN 978-1-4411-8841-0 (ebook (pdf)) 1. Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972. Cantos. I. Title.

PS3531.O82C2975 2012

811'.52–dc23

2012029492

[Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN](#)

Contents

[Series Editor's Preface](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Abbreviations](#)

[Notes on the Text](#)

[Introduction: Ezra Pound's 'Adams Paideuma'](#)

[1 The Genesis and Composition of the Adams Cantos](#)

[2 'Including History': The Evolution of Ezra Pound's Documentary Method in the 1920s and 1930s](#)

[3 Reading the Adams Cantos](#)

[4 The Representation of History and Law in the Adams Cantos](#)

[5 The Adams Cantos and Ezra Pound's Social Criticism of the 1930s and 1940s](#)

[6 The Continuing Importance of the 'Adams Paideuma' in Ezra Pound's Late Cantos](#)

Appendices:

[A A Selection of Pound's College Notes on Colonial and Revolutionary America](#)

[B Pound's 1931 Reading Notes for the *Works of John Adams*](#)

[C Tables of Reference in Pound's Copies of the *Works of John Adams*](#)

[D 'Confucio Totalitario'](#)

[E Unpublished Material on John Adams and the American Revolution from the *Thrones Poetry Notebook*](#)

[Notes](#)

[Bibliography](#)

[Index of Works by Pound](#)

[Index](#)

Series Editor's Preface

This book series is devoted to the analysis of late-nineteenth to twentieth century literary Modernism within its historical context. *Historicizing Modernism* thus stresses empirical accuracy and the value of primary sources (such as letters, diaries, notes, drafts, marginalia or other archival deposits) in developing monographs, scholarly editions and edited collections on Modernist authors and their texts. This may take a number of forms, such as manuscript study and annotated volumes; archival editions and genetic criticism; as well as mappings of interrelated historical milieus or ideas. To date, no book series has laid claim to this interdisciplinary, source-based territory for modern literature. Correspondingly, one burgeoning sub-discipline of Modernism, Beckett Studies, features heavily here as a metonymy for the opportunities presented by manuscript research more widely. While an additional range of 'canonical' authors will be covered here, this series also highlights the centrality of supposedly 'minor' or occluded figures, not least in helping to establish broader intellectual genealogies of Modernist writing. Furthermore, while the series will be weighted towards the English-speaking world, studies of non-Anglophone Modernists whose writings are ripe for archivally-based exploration shall also be included here.

A key aim of such historicizing is to reach beyond the familiar rhetoric of intellectual and artistic 'autonomy' employed by many Modernists and their critical commentators. Such rhetorical moves can and should themselves be historically situated and reintegrated into the complex continuum of individual literary practices. This emphasis upon the contested self-definitions of Modernist writers, thinkers and critics may, in turn, prompt various reconsiderations of the boundaries delimiting the concept 'Modernism' itself. Similarly, the very notion of 'historicizing' Modernism remains debatable, and this series by no means discourages more theoretically-informed approaches. On the contrary, the editors believe that the historical specificity encouraged by *Historicizing Modernism* may inspire a range of fundamental critiques along the way.

Matthew Feldman

Erik Tønning

[Acknowledgements](#)

This study draws on archival research carried out intermittently over a period of more than ten years, relating primarily to Pound's Adams Cantos, but also involving several other sections of [The Cantos](#). Over the course of these years my work has been supported and enriched by the contributions of numerous friends and colleagues. I am grateful to have the opportunity to recognise the most important of these debts here.

This book builds upon my doctoral thesis, entitled 'The Development and Composition of Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos', which was written under the supervision of Professor Ronald Bush at Oxford University. Ronald Bush's guidance during my years as a doctoral student and the exchanges I have had with him since that time have been crucial in opening many of the avenues of investigation that are explored in these pages. His critical incisiveness, scholarly rigour and collegial generosity have been a model to me in my own work, and I am deeply grateful for his guidance and friendship, both in the context of the present study and in that of an ongoing editorial project on Pound's [Pisan Cantos](#).

I am likewise grateful to Professors Jeri Johnson and Peter Nicholls, who acted as examiners for my doctoral thesis, and whose comments were invaluable to me as I set about revising and expanding upon my thesis. I am indebted as well to St Anne's College and Worcester College, at Oxford University, for the generous financial assistance they made available to me during my doctoral studies.

The majority of the archival research on which this study is based was done at Yale University's Beinecke Library, and I would like to thank Nancy Kuhl and the rest of the Beinecke's staff for the knowledgeable assistance and friendly service they have provided over the years. My thanks also go to the staff at Indiana University's Lilly Library, at the Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections at the University of Toledo, Ohio and at Harvard University's Houghton Library. I am likewise grateful to Faber and Faber for allowing me to consult their editorial and production files.

During my work on this book I have benefited enormously from the spirit of collegial exchange that exists within the community of Ezra Pound scholars. My debts to fellow Pound scholars are far too numerous to acknowledge in full. Particular thanks go to Anderson Araujo and Bernard Dew, for the precious friendship and stimulating conversations about all things Poundian that we have shared over the years; to Michael Biondi, David Moody and Stephen Wilson for their astute readings of the Adams Cantos and for the generosity with which they have shared their insights into these poems; to Richard Parker, Helen Carr and the London Cantos Reading Group, who offered me the chance to present a portion of this project at one of their meetings; to Mark Byron, David Cappella, John Elek, Peter Liebrechts, Alec Marsh and Catherine Paul, for the insights they have offered into Pound's poetry in conversation and in correspondence; and to the organizers of the biannual International Ezra Pound Conference, particularly Walter Baumann, John Gery and William Pratt. These conferences have offered me a venue where I was able to present aspects of this project and to benefit from valuable exchanges with Pound scholars from around the world. I am likewise grateful to the editorial team at [Paideuma](#), who have remained so firmly committed to the dissemination of Pound scholarship over the years. Part of the final chapter of this book is based on an article originally published in [Paideuma](#)'s special issue on 'Ezra Pound and American Identity' in 2005, under the direction of Hugh Witemeyer.

Like all students of Ezra Pound, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the Pound family and to Pound's publishers. Mary de Rachewiltz's inspirational support for the study and transmission of Ezra

Pound's work has been invaluable to generations of Pound scholars. Without her generosity, and the generosity of the Pound Estate, in making available documentary materials, studies such as mine would not be possible. Likewise, the care and devotion with which New Directions in New York and Faber and Faber in London have managed their stewardship of Pound's work has been indispensable in bringing this project to fruition.

I would also like to thank Laura Murray, Colleen Coalter and the editorial team at Bloomsbury for their patient and devoted work in seeing this project into print. I am grateful to Matthew Feldman and Erik Tønning for their commitment to the 'Historicizing Modernism' series, which provides an invaluable forum for highly focused archival studies such as this.

Finally, on a personal level, I am very deeply grateful to my family for the support and loving encouragement that they have offered me over the course of my years of work on Pound's poetry, and for the sacrifices they have made so that I might visit archives, attend conferences and devote long hours to research. To my wife Stéphanie, my children Marie, Elliot and Arthur, and my parents Jim and Vernica, my most heartfelt thanks – neither this book, nor much else, would have been possible without you.

Abbreviations

Works by Pound

- ABCR [*ABC of Reading*](#). 1934. New York: New Directions, 1960.
- C [*The Cantos*](#). Thirteenth printing. New York: New Directions, 1995. All references to *The Cantos* are followed by the Canto number and page number in this edition, separated by a slash. For example: (C, 62/341).
- CEP [*The Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*](#), ed. Michael John King. New York: New Directions, 1976.
- CON [*Confucius: The Unwobbling Pivot, The Great Digest, The Analects*](#). New York: New Directions, 1951.
- EPCF [*Ezra Pound's Chinese Friends*](#), ed. Zhaoming Qian. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- EPCP [*Ezra Pound's Poetry and Prose, Contributions to Periodicals*](#), ed. Lea Baechler, A. Walton Litz and James Longenbach, 11 vols. New York: Garland, 1991. References to this text are followed by volume and page number.
- EPEC [*Ezra Pound's Economic Correspondence*](#), ed. Roxana Preda. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.
- EP/GHT [*"Dear Uncle George": The Correspondence between Ezra Pound and Congressman Tinkham of Massachusetts*](#), ed. Philip J. Burns. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1996.
- EP/JI [*Letters to Ibbotson, 1935–1952*](#), ed. Vittoria I. Mondolfo and Margaret Hurley. Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1979.
- EP/ORA [*I Cease Not to Yowl: Ezra Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti*](#), ed. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Leon Surette. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998.
- EP/PARENTS [*Ezra Pound to His Parents, Letters 1895–1929*](#), ed. Mary de Rachewiltz, A. David Moody and Joanna Moody. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- EP/SN [*One Must Not Go Altogether with the Tide: The Letters of Ezra Pound and Stanley Nott*](#), ed. Miranda B. Hickman. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.
- GB [*Gaudier-Brzeska*](#). 1916. New York: New Directions, 1974.
- GK [*Guide to Kulchur*](#). New York: New Directions, 1970.
- J/M [*Jefferson and/or Mussolini*](#). 1935. New York: Liveright, 1970.
- LE [*Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*](#), ed. T. S. Eliot. New York: New Directions, 1976.
- MA [*Machine Art & Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years*](#), ed. Maria Luisa Ardizzone. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
- P [*Personae, The Shorter Poems*](#), ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz. New York: New Directions, 1990.
- SL [*Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*](#), ed. D. D. Paige. New York: New Directions, 1971.
- SP [*Selected Prose, 1909–1965*](#), ed. William Cookson. New York: New Directions, 1973.

Other works

- HGC Joseph Anne Marie Moyriac de Mailla, [*Histoire Générale de la Chine, ou Annales de cet Empire*](#), 11 vols. Paris: Ph.-D. Pierres & Clousier, 1777–85. References to this text are followed by volume and page number.
- WJA John Adams, *Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1850–56. References to this text are followed by volume and page number.

Library archives

- EPP, BEINECKE Ezra Pound Papers (YCAL MSS 43), Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. All references to material in this collection are followed by box, folder and (where appropriate) page numbers. For example: (EPP, Beinecke, 72, 3212, p. 6).
- FABER Material held in the Production and Editorial Files at Faber and Faber's offices in London.
- LILLY Pound MSS. III, The Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
- ORP, BEINECKE Olga Rudge Papers (YCAL MSS 54), Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. All references to material in this collection are followed by box, folder and (where appropriate) page numbers. For example: (ORP, Beinecke, 9, 223, p. 1).
- TOLEDO Ezra Pound's annotated set of the *Works of John Adams*, which is housed at the Ward M. Canaday Center for Special Collections at the University of Toledo, Ohio. All references to Pound's copy of the *Works* are followed by volume and page number. For example: (Toledo IV, 407).

Notes on the Text

In all cases where Pound's manuscripts or typescripts are quoted, no attempt has been made to standardise spelling or punctuation and the abbreviation *sic* has not been used. Editorial interpolations and explanations have been placed within square brackets. In instances where Pound's handwriting is difficult to decipher, leaving some doubt as to the appropriate reading, the text in question has been placed in square brackets with a question mark. In instances where there is serious doubt about the appropriate reading, the word 'illegible' has been placed in square brackets in place of the indecipherable text.

All translations from foreign languages are those of the author unless otherwise specified.

All previously unpublished material by Ezra Pound: Copyright © 2012 by Mary de Rachewiltz and the Estate of Omar S. Pound. Used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation, agents. All published material by Ezra Pound used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

Introduction

Ezra Pound's 'Adams *Paideuma*'

Although they are centrally located within Ezra Pound's career and intersect with crucial developments in his reflections on history, government and poetic form, the Adams Cantos have received a proportionately small amount of critical attention. Unconvinced by the section's radically source-based poetics and put off by Pound's close involvement with Fascist politics at the time of its composition, even many of the most sympathetic readers of *The Cantos* have been inclined to minimise the importance of these poems. The trajectory of Pound's career in the late 1930s and 1940s is not uncommonly described in terms of failure and recovery. In this vision, the Adams Cantos represent a poetic dead-end from which Pound freed himself only after World War II, when he radically transformed his poetic procedures as he wrote *The Pisan Cantos*. George Kearns puts forward such a view, for example, when he characterises the Adams Cantos as being 'written rapidly, [at a time] when Pound was most distracted by political propaganda' (Kearns 1989, 44), before going on to suggest that the *Pisan Cantos* 'transformed a floundering poem [that might otherwise] well appear today merely a curiosity of literary modernism' (*ibid.*, 45).

While disagreement as to the poetic merits of the Adams Cantos will continue, it must be recognised that these poems offer crucial insights into formal strategies and thematic concerns that have broad relevance for Pound's career. They help to clarify evolutions in the way he handled historical documents, in the relationship between his poetry and his politics, and in his handling of American subject matter. An attentive reading of this sequence is likewise essential if one is to appreciate the growing importance of Pound's reflections on government and on the legal framework of the state to his work on *The Cantos*.

In keeping with the goals of the 'Historicizing Modernism' series, the central purpose of this book is to make available archival material and to elucidate historical contexts that will allow readers to return to the Adams Cantos with a fuller understanding of how the sequence was composed and of how it relates to the broader sweep of Pound's career. It is the author's hope that by doing so it will also cause certain readers to reflect anew on Pound's poetic accomplishment in the Adams Cantos. But even where this is not the case, it is hoped that by rigorously situating the Adams Cantos within their historical and archival context, this work of literary-historical scholarship will give a new impetus to discussions of the poetry that Pound wrote in the late 1930s.

* * *

Ezra Pound composed the ten John Adams Cantos (62–71) very quickly, at the end of 1938 and over the first few months of 1939. They were written as the second part of a twenty-canto diptych, together with the ten Chinese History Cantos (52–61). These ten earlier cantos had begun with an evocation of seasonal rhythms, based upon the *Li Ki* (the *Book of Rites*), before offering a condensed narration of Chinese history from 2837 BC to AD 1736. Collectively, the Chinese History Cantos and the Adams Cantos were entitled *Cantos LII–LXXI* and published in 1940 by Faber and Faber in Europe and by New Directions in the United States.

Pound's basic goal in writing these twenty cantos was to offer an extended engagement with historical records, focusing on the question of what constituted good government. The Chinese Cantos introduced a continuous historical narrative into *The Cantos*, which had hitherto been characterised by

rapid shifts from one historical moment to another, while the Adams Cantos represented by far Pound's most extensive treatment of American subject matter to date.¹ Both groups of cantos employed new poetic strategies, a fact which Pound drew to Faber executive F.V. Morley's attention in a 1939 letter, telling him, 'you are gettin something NEW in the Cantos; not merely more of the same. Trust at least two advances in mode will be perceptible by you and the PSM [Eliot]' (Surette 1979, 146–7). The primary advance of which Pound spoke was the method of extended citation of material from a single text, which is used as the source for a whole block of cantos: Joseph de Mailla's eleven-volume *Histoire Générale de la Chine* for the Chinese History Cantos and the ten-volume *Life and Works of John Adams* for the Adams Cantos. The poetry of *Cantos LII–LXXI* thus depends upon Pound's ability to achieve an extreme condensation of the essential ideas and actions presented in these source-texts, while relating them in a language that speaks to a twentieth-century audience. It is likely that the highly condensed form he achieved in these cantos was another of the advances of which he spoke to Morley, and he drew attention to this aspect of his writing in the blurb he prepared for the dust jacket of the first edition of *Cantos LII–LXXI*: 'Poetry: the WORKS, action or process. The German "dichten" meaning to condense.'

The critical heritage of the Adams Cantos

Few of Pound's readers, however, have been prepared to go along with his belief that *Cantos LII–LXXI* constituted an 'advance' over what had gone before. Randall Jarrell's review of the book in *The New Republic* is illustrative of the dismay with which it was received even by those closest to Pound and most sympathetic to his poetics:

I had thought of Ezra Pound as the one thing constant in this fleeting world. Continents sank under the sea, empires fell: Vienna fell, Canton fell, Warsaw fell: the unmoved sage sat on at Rapallo, like Idiosyncrasy on a monument – the warm Italian breeze bore out over a universe of cretins his condemnations and invective, his economic panaceas, his *wd*'s and *cd*'s and *shd*'s, his American slang unparalleled outside the pages of an English novel. But as Hitler says, *there are no more islands*: Mr. Pound has deteriorated with the world. *Cantos LII–LXXI* contains the dullest and prosiest poetry that he has ever written. These cantos are so bad that they would not seem his at all, if they were not so exactly like the very worst portions of the old ones. Mr. Pound has become himself to the ∞th degree, his day-dream is at last absolute. One sees implicit in every page: '*Le droit, c'est moi*'. Prejudice, whim, idiosyncrasy, have been hypostatized into a universal imperative. Mr. Pound is obviously one of the most talented poets of our time; yet these cantos are almost unreadable. (Erkkila 2011, 268–9)

Jarrell's damning assessment touches on many of the features of the sequence that have baffled and infuriated generations of Pound's readers. It is worth quickly summarising these criticisms before proceeding.

Most basically, numerous readers have criticised the Adams Cantos for their lack of clarity in the presentation of their protagonist's life and times. Pound's source for these cantos, the *Works of John Adams*, is not arranged chronologically, like de Mailla's *Histoire Générale de la Chine*. Rather, it organises Adams's writings by genre. Volume one is a biography of John Adams, mostly written by his grandson Charles Francis Adams, the editor of the *Works*. Volumes two and three contain John Adams's diary and autobiographical writings. Volumes three to six contain his political writings, while volumes seven to ten contain his state papers and correspondence. The correspondence is itself

divided into two parts: the official correspondence, which is contained in volumes seven and eight and the first part of volume nine, and the private correspondence, which fills the remainder of volume nine and all of volume ten. Since the *Works* are so organised, Pound's decision to proceed through them sequentially means that 'his presentation does not result in a single linear chronological account of the career of John Adams' (Sanders 1975, 19).²

In the Chinese History Cantos, Pound was at pains to emphasise the chronological sequence to which his exposition of nearly 5,000 years of Chinese history adheres. Italicised dates appear at regular intervals in the margins of these cantos, enabling the reader to position herself within a historical space that exists independently from Pound's source. Likewise, the names of individual emperors and of imperial dynasties are generally capitalised in these cantos, so as to insist on the process of dynastic rise and fall that constitutes their most basic subject matter. In the Adams Cantos, however, Pound's decision to adhere to the structure of his source at the expense of chronology means that his readers must make a considerable effort simply to recognise and respond to the historical subject matter of the sequence. Nor is this task rendered any easier by Pound's decision to minimise the importance of some of the most widely familiar events of John Adams's life and times, such as his presidency or the military history of the American Revolution.

It is ironic that one of Pound's stated goals in writing the Adams Cantos should have been to clearly define the terminology necessary to achieve well-ordered government. For while these poems repeatedly insist on the importance of being 'clear / as to definitions' (C, 67/387), many readers have judged them unfavourably precisely because they seem to lack such clarity themselves. Donald Davie, for example, concluded his account of the section in his influential study [*Ezra Pound: Poet as Sculptor*](#) by claiming that

Pound's cuts and compressions and juxtapositions make a non-sensical hurly-burly of Adams's life, a life that was harried indeed but admirably purposeful. Adams's politicking was not senseless and desperate like Sigismundo Malatesta's. And indeed Pound knows this. Yet his method, ruinously wasteful and repeatedly arbitrary, blurs all distinctions. (Davie 1965, 163)

Humphrey Carpenter, writing twenty years after Davie, drew an unfavourable comparison between the Chinese History Cantos and the Adams Cantos on the grounds that while in the former 'the reader has a vague idea of what is going on [, the latter] are three-quarters opaque' (Carpenter 1988, 572). To explain this opaqueness Carpenter points specifically to Pound's management of his source:

Ezra rushed through the ten-volume Charles Francis Adams edition of the John Adams *Works* (1850–56) – as he had done with the de Mailla – picking out incidents from Adams's life and activities that caught his eye, and transposing them into the Cantos. However, whereas de Mailla presented his Chinese information chronologically, the Adams *Works* were organised differently, with the material divided according to sources. Hard as it is to believe, Ezra simply ignored this, and put his chosen quotations into the Cantos in the order in which they happened to appear in the *Works*. In consequence he made complete nonsense of Adams's life. (*Ibid.*, 573)

A second line of criticism against the Adams Cantos has been formulated by readers with a taste for lyrical poetry, or at least with the inclination to judge a poet's achievement on the basis of the originality of his or her writing. For such readers *Cantos LII–LXXI* offered very little. The review of the volume that Louise Bogan wrote for the *New Yorker* neatly summarises the frustration of readers who admired Pound's lyrical abilities, but were uninspired by his attempts to achieve a poetic mode based on the extreme condensation of seemingly obscure documents, all derived from a single source.

‘We are given,’ Bogan complains:

the atmosphere of American Colonial laundry bills and old promissory notes. Pound’s early ability to open up gaps in his narration, through which we saw tranquil sea and landscapes and lovely, cool forms of antique beauty, has totally disappeared. The only asides are scatological ones, of an extremely childish and petulant kind, and a few yelps of pure race hatred. (Erkkila 2011, 268)

Readers seeking the formal and metrical innovation so evident in earlier cantos, or at least some effort to weave the new material together with the thematic strands of the first fifty-one cantos, also had reason to be frustrated with *Cantos LII–LXXI*. Thus, Peter Makin summarised his dissatisfaction with the sequence by claiming that it

fails to have emotive shape for two reasons. Long stretches are obscure, in a sense properly applicable to poetry: they do not impart enough ‘information’ through channels available to poetry (denotative, metrical, of image) to create emotional direction. Second, elsewhere the emotion generated is too uniform in nature. (Makin 1985, 212)

More basically, Pound’s apparent lack of effort to create connections between the new cantos and what had gone before are pointed out by readers such as Humphrey Carpenter and Ira Nadel.³

Finally, numerous appraisals of *Cantos LII–LXXI* have focused on the biographical context within which these poems were produced, pointing out that the late 1930s and early 1940s were a period of hyperactivity for Pound, as well as being a time that was heavily marked by his political propaganda in favour of Italian Fascism and by the most distasteful expressions of his anti-Semitism. A simple survey of the scope of Pound’s activities in the six-year period from 1937 to 1943 lends credence to the idea that Pound was overworked in these years and that he became artistically careless as a result. In addition to writing *Guide to Kulchur* (1937) and *Cantos LII–LXXI* (1940), and overseeing the publication of *The Fifth Decad of Cantos* (1937), Pound published well over a hundred articles on politics, economics and culture in a variety of magazines over these years and completed pre-publication drafts of numerous other such articles that were never printed for one reason or another.⁴ He delivered over a hundred speeches on Rome Radio and most likely also wrote several more, which were delivered by other speakers.⁵ He wrote well over 1,000 letters to more than a hundred different correspondents, almost all of which transcend the private sphere and seek to further the artistic, economic and political projects with which he was occupied.⁶ In addition to this literary and political activity, Pound organised yearly concerts in Rapallo and, with his companion Olga Rudge, sponsored the reproduction of manuscripts of Vivaldi’s music, promoting the composer’s reputation within musical circles. Finally, he travelled extensively within Italy during this time and made two long trips abroad, to England in 1938 and to the United States in 1939. The latter was made expressly for political purposes, as Pound hoped to obtain interviews with government officials in Washington in order to persuade them against involving the United States in an eventual European war.⁷

Pound cuts the figure in these years of a man working himself to the point of exhaustion, spreading his considerable energy and talent over an impossibly wide field, and in the process compromising the technical care that characterises his finest poetry and losing the ability to make measured judgements on political, economic and cultural matters. Many of his activities at this time suggest a dangerously inflated sense of his own abilities and of their relevance to world affairs. In writing *Guide to Kulchur*, for example, he believed he had produced ‘a universal history of all human Kulchur or whatever, in approx[imately] 70,000 words’ (*EP/JI*, 71). His use of the radio to speak directly to a mass audience,

in the belief that he was giving ‘the young men of England and America ... [material] to build their souls, or at least their minds for tomorrow’ (Carpenter 1988, 590) bespeaks a similar loss of perspective in his estimation of the impact he might hope to have on world affairs. The same may be said of his efforts to meet with heads of state such as Roosevelt and Mussolini in order to convince them of the justice of his political and economic views.

Cantos LII–LXXI was written in the midst of this hyperactivity, and Pound clearly saw it as a book that would further the political and economic agenda he was pursuing by other means at the time. He even went so far as to send a copy of the book to Mussolini, telling him in the accompanying letter:

I hope I have done some useful work, especially in condensing some historical facts in my CANTOS 52/71.

The book is accordingly hardly neutral and my editors have cancelled the name Rothschild from the first page. (Zapponi 1976, 53)

Given this situation, it is unsurprising that many of Pound’s readers have been moved to draw connections between the perceived flaws of these cantos and Pound’s other activities at the time they were composed. Having offered a biographical sketch of these years of Pound’s life, for example, Humphrey Carpenter declares that:

[i]n the John Adams Cantos we encounter a mind in chaos. Ezra purports to give Adams to us as an example of pragmatic wisdom, an embodiment of Confucian ethics. But he actually presents a frighteningly candid picture of his own intellect. (Carpenter 1988, 573)

Reflecting more sympathetically on this period of Pound’s career, David Moody is moved to associate it with his later admission: ‘[t]hat [he] lost [his] center / fighting the world’ (C, 117 et seq./816; Moody 1992, 80). Even Hugh Kenner seeks to qualify the shortcomings of *Cantos LII–LXXI* along these lines, commenting that by the late 1930s ‘the *Cantos* ... had used up much of their capital, and were confronting material the author had not known for very long’ (Kenner 1971, 433). While Massimo Bacigalupo, foregrounding the political dimension of what Pound had done in *Cantos LII–LXXI*, reads the section as a misguided attempt to transform [The Cantos](#) into an organ of Fascist propaganda; to marry his unfolding epic to the fate of Mussolini’s *régime*:

[Pound] set his hand in 1938 to compartments third and fourth of the middle cantos, *China-John-Adams* – and produced a glaring example of regime art, or of what we could call ‘fascist realism’. (Bacigalupo 1980, 98)

The lasting importance of Pound’s Adams [paideuma](#)

In spite of the predominately negative responses they have received over the years, the Adams Cantos remain a vitally important part of Pound’s *oeuvre*. It is worth noting that Pound’s own view of what he had accomplished in *Cantos LII–LXXI* was unfailingly positive. He wrote to Agnes Bedford in 1939 that these newly completed cantos were:

a progress on the earlier ones
tenny rate somfink different. (Carpenter 1988, 569)

And there is no evidence that his estimate of the section ever changed in the years following World War II. When he attempted to describe the structure of [The Cantos](#) during the later stages of his work

on the poem, he consistently stressed the central importance of *Cantos LII–LXXI*. An explanation that he offered to James Laughlin in 1953, for instance, spoke in terms of the poem having three major subdivisions:

A. Dominated by the emotions.

B. Constructive effort – Chinese Emperors and Adams, putting order into things.

C. The domination of benevolence. Theme in Canto 90. Cf. the thrones of Dante's 'Paradiso'.

(*Ibid.*, 812)

Pound's daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, has recently echoed this assessment of the role that the Adams Cantos play in the structure of *The Cantos*, stressing that '[c]ontrary to accepted opinion, Cantos LXII–LXXI, the *Adams Cantos*, are to my mind the mandrel, the axial center that holds Pound's epic together' (de Rachewiltz 2011, 266).

The selections that Pound made for *Selected Cantos* in 1965 (the volume was published in 1967 by Faber and Faber and in 1970 by New Directions) are likewise a reminder of the importance he continued to attribute to *Cantos LII–LXXI* in his later years.⁸ He was at pains, in this book, to represent equally each section of *The Cantos*, and he reserved twenty of its 110 pages for the Chinese History Cantos and Adams Cantos (only slightly less than the proportion given in the actual text). In making his selections from the *Pisan Cantos* he also chose passages that reinforce key motifs of the Adams Cantos, notably electing to reproduce Canto 84 in its entirety, with its concluding panegyric to John Adams: 'John Adams, the Brothers Adam / there is our norm of spirit / ... whereto we may pay our / homage' (C, 84/554).

It is clear that what Pound called his 'Adams *paideuma*' (C, 256) – or, to use the language he employed in *Guide to Kulchur*, his poetic rendering of 'the gristly roots of ideas' (GK, 58) that were put into constructive action by John Adams – retained great value for him over the two and a half decades during which he continued to work on *The Cantos*.⁹ Thematically, the Adams Cantos remained associated in his mind with the notion of constructive effort, directed at laying down the ethical and legal foundations of a just state. This remained one of the major thematic strands of the late cantos and, as will be shown in Chapter 6 of this study, Pound frequently thought back to what he had done in the Adams Cantos as he sought to elaborate on this theme over the course of the 1950s and early 1960s. In terms of poetic form, Pound remained convinced of the advances he had achieved in *Cantos LII–LXXI*. He continued to make substantial use of the technique of extended citation from a single source in both *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*, albeit never on anything approaching the same scale as what he had done in *Cantos LII–LXXI*.¹⁰ This poetic strategy allowed him to directly and rapidly present what he considered to be the essential features of a given text or historical moment. The succession of swift juxtapositions generated by this mode of writing imparts energy to the poetry and encourages the reader to assume an active role, making connections between the fragments of the source text from which the poem is composed and arriving at an understanding of the basic subject of the source material in the process.¹¹ This poetic method constrains Pound to work within the space predefined by his source, employing the language of that text wherever possible. Yet it would be a mistake to think that this limits the poetic value of his writing. The method that Pound employed in the Adams Cantos, and in numerous cantos from *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*, simply meant that his creative energy was channelled into the mediation of a pre-existing text for the contemporary reader, rather than into original composition. The value of such poetry resides in Pound's ability to select and effectively juxtapose material from his source, while acting upon the language of that source so as to bring it to life for readers of his own time.

These qualities of the Adams Cantos are too often ignored, and if they go unappreciated it is difficult to respond to much of what Pound sought to do in *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*. It is therefore important that readers of *The Cantos* approach the Adams Cantos not merely as a way to better understand Pound's handling of American subject matter or his efforts to inscribe his political and economic commitments of the late 1930s into his epic, but that they also seek to engage poetically with this sequence. Efforts have already been made to lay down the critical groundwork for such engagement. The poetic merits of Pound's technique of selecting and juxtaposing textual fragments from the *Works of John Adams* have, for example, been very usefully described by David Moody in his essay 'Composition in the Adams Cantos'. Here Moody employs a musical metaphor to encourage readers to re-evaluate Pound's accomplishment in the Adams Cantos. He compares the textual fragments that Pound culled from the *Works* and juxtaposed in his poem to notes that are related to one another as they would be in a musical sequence. Moody demonstrates how such a reading strategy might be applied to a fourteen-line passage from Canto 66, which he sees as

[a] practical demonstration of how to relate verbal impressions, partly visual, partly aural, partly referring to common knowledge and experience, as if they were indeed the notes and phrases of a purely musical composition – a sonata, say, rather than a full symphony. It is as if Pound had been using Adams's diary as a set or series of possible effects, from which the next 'right' note or phrase had to be selected in order. (Moody 1992, 85)

Contemporary comments that William Carlos Williams made about Pound's ability to carry the common language of the day into his verse, even as he engaged with the historical record, likewise help clarify the nature of Pound's poetic achievement in the Adams Cantos. In two letters that Williams wrote to James Laughlin in 1940, soon after having read *Cantos LII–LXXI*, he at once expressed his impatience with the economic, historical and political substance of Pound's poetry, and his admiration for the excellence of its language. 'It all revealed itself to me yesterday when I was reading his new Cantos, "Chinese Numbers" I calls it', Williams told Laughlin.

He doesn't know a damn thing about China, the Chinese, or the language... . But in spite of it all, he's a good poet. I had to acknowledge it as I read along in the Chinese abacus frame of his enumerating verse. It had charm, it had sweep, it had even childish innocence written all over it. He thinks he's being terribly profound, frowningly serious, and all he's doing is building blocks, and it's lovely. (Laughlin 1987, 116)

In a second letter, written the same week, Williams elaborated at length on what he meant:

All that is necessary to feel Pound's excellence in [his] use of language, is to read the work of others, from whom I particularly and prominently exclude e.e. cummings. In the use of language, Pound and Cummings are beyond doubt, the two most distinguished American poets of today. It is the bringing over of the language of the day to the serious purposes of the poet, that is the difficult thing. Both of these men have evolved that ability to a high degree. Two faulty alternatives are escaped in the achievement of this distinction: there are plenty, who use the language well, fully as well as Pound, but for trivial purposes either in journalism, fiction, or even verse. I mean the usual stroking of the meter without penetration, where anything of momentous significance is instinctively avoided; there are, on the other hand, poets of considerable seriousness, who simply do not know what language is and unconsciously load their compositions with the minute anachronisms, as many as dead hairs on a mangy dog... . It is

impossible to praise Pound's lines. The terms for such praise are lacking. There ain't none. You've got to read the line and feel first, then grasp through experience in its full significance, how the language makes the verse live. It lives. Even such uncompromising cataloguing as his Chinese kings, princes and other rulers, do live and become affecting under his treatment. It is the language, and the language only, that makes this true. (*Ibid.*, 117–18)

Following the publication of the [Pisan Cantos](#) in 1948, Williams again reflected on the uniqueness of Pound's handling of language in an essay entitled 'The Later Pound', which was written in 1950, but remained unpublished until 1973. Here he reaffirmed his basic judgement of Pound's accomplishment in the Chinese and John Adams Cantos, and sought to find the 'terms of praise' he had declared lacking in his letter to Laughlin a decade earlier. In the process he suggested an essential poetic similarity between *Cantos LII–LXXI* and [The Pisan Cantos](#) that few other readers of Pound have been prepared to recognise. 'The greatness of Ezra Pound,' Williams asserts,

lies not, as he grows older, in his esteemed 'romantic passages', but in the common text of his *Cantos* – the excellence of the fabric, the language of woof and warp, all through. It is the fineness, the subtlety, the warmth and the strength of the *material* that gives the distinction – awkward in some ways as the use of that figure must remain. For we are not speaking of cloth, but of a fabric of words whose essence, comparable to woven thread, is time...

It is the time, the way the words are joined in the common line, common in the sense that the tissues of music are joined or, as one might speak of the book of common prayer, the general text. The ripening has been not in the passages usually picked out but rather in the superb passages (of nonsense, if you will) between. There his ear is shown at its best – joining phrases to time as it has not been done in the prosody of recent periods. Time is the pure element of Pound's success – here he is unsurpassed – a quality that makes most other contemporary verse sound juvenile by comparison. It is an adult occupation and rouses, consequently, the resentment and derision of children. (Williams 1973, 124)

* * *

In spite of the largely hostile critical response with which they have met, the Adams Cantos do, in fact, have an important place in the story of Ezra Pound's effort to compose 'a poem including history', and they are themselves a far more substantial and complex poetic achievement than is often recognised. The aim of this book is to promote a fuller critical understanding of these poems – in terms of the lessons they can teach about Pound's reflections on politics, economics and American history in the late 1930s, in terms of their relation to evolutions in his compositional method and in terms of their intrinsic poetic value. Archival material that makes possible a fuller understanding of the historical context of the Adams Cantos is foregrounded throughout.

Although they are only one part of *Cantos LII–LXXI*, together with the Chinese History Cantos, the focus of this book remains squarely on the Adams Cantos. The Chinese History Cantos are addressed only when parallels between the two sections have been deemed useful for a fuller understanding of the Adams Cantos.¹² It is true that these two sections of [The Cantos](#) mirror each other in important ways, and that they complement one another within the structure of *Cantos LII–LXXI*. Yet they also draw upon two very different strands of Pound's intellectual heritage, to which it would be difficult to do justice in a single monograph. Moreover, the Adams Cantos generally provide more striking examples of Pound's source-based poetics in *Cantos LII–LXXI*, since he transcribed material directly from his source as he composed them, whereas his use of a French source for the Chinese History

Cantos meant that he engaged in translation and paraphrase as he composed those poems.

The opening chapter of this book focuses on the genesis and composition of the Adams Cantos. Beginning with Pound's first serious encounter with revolutionary America as a student at the University of Pennsylvania, it goes on to record his later readings of Adams's *Works* and traces the manner in which Pound composed the Adams Cantos, in an effort to clarify points about which there is some confusion. Chapter 2 places the Adams Cantos within the context of the evolution of the documentary strategies that Pound used to include historical subject matter in *The Cantos*. It draws on archival material to study Pound's compositional practice in the most well-known documentary cantos, beginning with the Malatesta Cantos (1923) and moving chronologically through a consideration of the Venetian Cantos (1928), the Jefferson-Adams Cantos (1934) and the Chinese and John Adams Cantos (1940).¹³ Chapter 3 engages with Pound's poetic achievement in the Adams Cantos, exploring reading strategies for these poems and examining the far-reaching complex of ideas that Pound associated with the 'Adams *paideuma*'. Chapter 4 deals specifically with Pound's representation of history and the law in the Adams Cantos, engaging with the difficulties posed by his didacticism and his attempt to use poetry as a means of understanding history. Chapter 5 places the Adams Cantos within the context of Pound's social criticism of the 1930s. While in no way proposing a complete overview of this vast topic, the chapter seeks to clarify the connections that exist between the Adams Cantos and Pound's writing on social, economic and political subjects during the late 1930s and early 1940s. Finally, Chapter 6 points out the continued importance of John Adams and of early American history to Pound's writing of the 1950s, most notably in the Coke Cantos (107–109).

The Appendices make available previously unpublished archival material that will enable readers to more fully historicise Pound's achievement in the Adams Cantos. Appendices A, B and C offer transcriptions of notes which Pound took on the American Revolution and on the *Works of John Adams*. Appendix A consists of notes which Pound took on the American Revolution during his time as a student at the University of Pennsylvania. While these notes do not deal specifically with John Adams, they foreshadow some of the major themes of the Adams Cantos in interesting ways. Appendices B and C make available the notes and tables of reference that Pound made as he read through the *Works of John Adams*, first in Paris in 1931, then as he was composing the Adams Cantos in Rapallo in 1938 and 1939. Appendix D offers a transcription of an unpublished Italian essay entitled 'Confucio Totalitario', that Pound most likely wrote in 1943. This essay helps to clarify certain key concepts of the Adams Cantos, particularly Pound's understanding of the Confucian doctrine of the 'right naming of things', which is encapsulated in the *chêng ming* characters (正名). Appendix E offers a transcription of an unused passage from the *Thrones* poetry notebook, which relates to John Adams and the American Revolution, and which Pound composed together with the Coke Cantos, at the end of 1957 and in the first months of 1958.

The Genesis and Composition of the Adams Cantos

One of the most frequent complaints made about the Adams Cantos is that Pound composed them in a rushed and careless manner, possessing only sketchy knowledge of his source. Many critical accounts begin by emphasising the speed at which the section was written, often accompanying such observations with remarks about Pound's frenetic activity of the late 1930s and his desire to respond to the growing international crisis of the time.¹ The critical consensus is that it took Pound between five and eight weeks to compose the Adams Cantos, during the winter of 1938 to 1939. Richard Sieburth's statement that 'the two hundred-page instalment of ... the Chinese and Adams Cantos was written in only six months (the Adams portion in a mere five weeks)' is typical in this regard (Sieburth 2003, xxiv).² Nor, given the Adams Cantos's predominantly negative image, should it be surprising that such compositional speed is sometimes used as evidence that these cantos were ill planned and sloppily executed. Humphrey Carpenter, for example, comments on the composition of the Adams Cantos that 'Ezra rushed through the ten-volume Charles Francis Adams edition of the *John Adams Works* (1850–6) ... rather than looking for any special catch' (Carpenter 1988, 573). Peter Makin questions the seriousness of Pound's engagement with the *Works of John Adams* by commenting that 'the Adams part was in rough typescript by February 1939, though Pound in January 1937 had not yet clapped eyes on the source of that part' (Makin 1985, 212). In other accounts, Pound is variously described as skimming rapidly through his source, as making light markings in his set of the *Works* and as leaving the pages in extended portions of the text uncut as he skipped them entirely.

As a result of this critical heritage, the most commonly held image of the Adams Cantos's composition is that of Pound rushing into an ill-considered engagement with material he was not equipped to handle effectively. Such a vision makes it very difficult to adequately position these poems within their poetic, historical and intellectual context. The first step in arriving at a fuller appreciation of the Adams Cantos is therefore to clarify the sequence's compositional history, on the basis of archival evidence, so as to set right certain factual errors and so as to make other assertions appear in a fuller light.

While Pound hardly possessed (or claimed to possess) expert knowledge of early American history or of John Adams's life, for instance, it appears, when the relevant documents are gathered, that he devoted at least as much time to a consideration of these topics as he did to the subject matter from which he fashioned more highly considered cantos, like the Malatesta or the Siena Bank Cantos. Likewise, the speed at which the Adams Cantos were composed should be considered in relation to Pound's compositional practice elsewhere. Indeed, it was typical for him to write quickly, taking time to work through problems before he set about composing, then producing a manuscript with remarkable speed and assurance. Speed of composition is as often a characteristic of his most widely praised works as it is of his less appreciated productions. The *Pisan Cantos*, for example, were themselves composed over a period of only four months after having been contemplated for a number of years – a fact that should not be obscured by the more remarkable circumstances surrounding the composition of that sequence.³ *Guide to Kulchur*, the major work that immediately preceded *Cantos LII–LXXI*, was likewise written with striking speed, its 370 pages being composed in four months, between February and May 1937 (*SL*, 288, 294).⁴ Pound refers explicitly to the methodological choices that made possible such swift composition near the beginning of this book, advertising them

as a quality of his project:

In the main, I am to write this new *Vade Mecum* without opening other volumes, I am to put down so far as possible only what has resisted the erosion of time, and forgetfulness. And to this there is material stringency. (*GK*, 33)

If Pound was able to compose [*Guide to Kulchur*](#) so quickly, in other words, it was because he was in active possession of a body of knowledge, and also of a methodology that allowed him to relate this knowledge efficiently to his reader. Speed, in this conception, becomes synonymous with the direct statement of ideas that are in action, or ‘intended to “go into action”’ (*ibid.*, 34); or, to paraphrase the statement that Pound made on the dust-jacket of *Cantos LII–LXXI*, with a conception of poetry as ‘the WORKS, action or process’.

Such statements, taken together with the way Pound worked elsewhere, make it difficult to associate the speed of the Adams *Cantos*’s composition with simple carelessness. To meaningfully evaluate the way he wrote these poems, it is rather necessary to examine the process by which he came to know John Adams, to identify those aspects of this figure’s life and times that had come to have ‘material stringency’ for Pound by the late 1930s, and to describe the compositional strategies that allowed him to give poetic form to Adams’s *Works*.

‘Two principles of human progress’: Pound’s college notes on the American Revolution

Pound’s first meaningful encounter with early American history came at the University of Pennsylvania in the 1901 to 1902 academic year, when he took classes with the historian Herman Vandenburg Ames. Pound’s biographers agree on the influence Ames exerted on Pound at this early stage in his education. Noel Stock comments, for example, that Pound’s ‘curiosity regarding history [was] mildly stirred by Professor Ames’ during his time at the University of Pennsylvania’s College of Liberal Arts (Stock 1964, 8), while David Moody points to the archival evidence of Pound’s interest in American history at this time:

That [Pound interested] himself in American history is attested by a dense sheaf of notes now in the Beinecke archive. Moreover, at least one of his teachers in this subject, the distinguished historian Herman Vandenberg Ames, allowed that even ‘cantankerous’ young Pound ‘might have a legitimate curiosity.’ (Moody 2007, 15)

Pound took three American history classes during his time as an undergraduate at Pennsylvania: ‘The Civil War and Reconstruction’, ‘Foreign Relations of the United States’ and ‘American Colonial History’.⁵ He retained a fondness for Ames, continuing to mention him in letters that he wrote to his parents even after leaving Pennsylvania.⁶ The notes that Pound took in his classes are indeed copious, bearing witness to a deep interest in the subject that must have provided a foundation for his later reflections on American history. The most important of these notes for the Adams *Cantos* relate to the course Pound took on American colonial history. They are incomplete, and if they have survived at all it is probably only because Pound later used the reverse sides of several leaves to take notes on Joseph Bédier’s text of *Tristan et Iseut*. Pound preserved his notes on Bédier’s *Tristan* in their entirety, and with them thirteen pages of his college notes on early American history. These pages are preserved with the Ezra Pound Papers at the Beinecke Library, in a folder labelled ‘Tristan of Bedier’ (EPP,

Beinecke, 88, 3742). The six pages of these notes that relate most directly to the material covered in the Adams Cantos are transcribed in Appendix A.

For the most part, this material consists of reading notes on two texts relating to revolutionary America: John Fiske's two-volume study, *The American Revolution* (1891) and, especially, Albert Bushnell Hart's *Formation of the Union, 1750–1829* (1892). Hart was part of the first generation of professional American historians, and the general editor of the monumental twenty-six-volume American Nation series. He and his colleagues in this series adopted an essentially Whiggish outlook, describing a steady progress towards greater individual liberty and an essential convergence between the fundamental principals of British and American constitutional law.² Though Pound's reading was confined to specific extracts from these books (probably assigned reading for his classes), it is clear that he found much to his liking in Hart's portrayal of colonial and revolutionary America. He notably copied an extended passage from Hart's *Formation of the Union* which presents the American Revolution in terms of '2 principles of human progress'. In Hart's opinion, the Revolution constituted an act of resistance against the arbitrary exercise of power by the British Parliament; a view that accords well with that of John Adams. The '[r]eal cause of Am Rev.,' Pound copied from Hart, was

not to be found in List of Grievances.

The Revolution was right because it represented 2 principles of human progress.

Am^m grew in importance + felt indignant at having their trade interfered with by men over the sea.

2 principles

right of individual to profits of his own industry

Rev. a resistance to arbitrary power.

Colonists represented same principles as the minority in Eng.

Arbitrary power was that of Parliament at this time in Eng. when the king virtually ruled Parliament + thus threatened Popular Government. (EPP, Beinecke, 88, 3742, p. 21)

Elsewhere in these college notes, Pound remarked on the attitude towards law in the American colonies (copying Hart's statements about the 'Anglo-Saxon race' being attached to the 'supremacy of Law', for instance). He made note of Hart's observations on the economic causes of the American Revolution ('taxes not a matter of Right but a gift of the people'). The distinction between Charter colonies, proprietary colonies and Royal colonies caught his attention, as did the conditions for individual suffrage in colonial America. And as he read, Pound took substantial notes on the legal basis for 'English Controll of Colonies'. He notably copied Hart's summary of this situation, which outlines the legal basis of the arguments that John Adams made in favour of the Revolution, as developed at length in the Adams Cantos:

Cols. subject to Eng. law

Crown originally had title to all land

Parl. didn't legislate for separate colonies till after 1765.

Controll of King through Lords of Trade. (EPP, Beinecke, 88, 3742, p. 12)

It would, of course, be going too far to claim that the work Pound did on American history within the context of a university class at the age of 16 had any direct influence on poetry that he wrote almost forty years later. It is nonetheless worth remembering the historical background that Pound received as part of his formal education. Before he was ever exposed to the writings of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and other statesmen of eighteenth-century America, he was well versed in the historical events of this period. He was also in possession of a basic belief that the American Revolution played a role