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Paul Blackburn

DAS KENNERBUCH¹

MR. KENNER'S shepherding of Pound's poetry through the mountainous country of modern criticism seems, in many ways, as condescending to the poetry as the journey is imaginary. He puts a mouthful of teeth in those moth-eaten wolves, journalism and education, and that other pack of elderly puppies who run with what he calls "the upper-middle-brow literary press," and then proceeds to beat them off. I find such a defense irrelevant. Why spend two pages pointing out that certain numerous dunderheads consider the *Cantos* obscure? We know that. We've been through it. We go through it in any serious discussion of the poem involving more than three or four people. The backwind piping, "Why can't he say what he means in plain English?" will pipe when Mr. Kenner and I are both fertilizer. And if someone breaks it down to his basic English vocabulary: "O, is that *all*? Why couldn't he say it then, just say it?" They don't have teeth.

"Commentators have hitherto been too much obsessed with identifying Pound's materials (p. 191)." He could have finished the sentence—"to the exclusion of any thinking whatever about form or technique or the materials, or what follows from them, what they lead to." It would have made, then, a fairer indictment. As it is, no one, really, has done the requisite labor, even of identification.

Mr. Kenner himself has done the most on record, i.e., all the needed reading of Pound's own works. His work shows not only in the extensive quotations, but in the fact that his most cogent arguments are restatements of Pound's own emphases. Most of his thinking was already done for him. He needed mostly the con-

¹ *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, by Hugh Kenner. New York: New Directions, 1951. 342 pp. \$4.00.

viction that he would find his evidence, and that done, he had only to report his findings. The chief value, then, is to the dunderheads, and, as anthology, to those too hog-lazy to do their own reading.

I cannot seem to get past this point of the man's deprecatory attitude conjoined with a too-simple discipleship. Such condescension as, "It gets more and more obvious that only Eliot's frequent tributes to the mentor and *miglior fabbro* have kept Pound's stock on the exchange at all (p. 26)." Damned poor comment for the poetry. Or, if taken as comment on the current state of public literary opinion, again, why waste time on the dunderheads? Spend your honest effort positively, do the honest work, educate from the top, when there is any. Kung says: "You can't take *all* the dirt out of the ground before you plant seed."

To stop kicking for a moment, let me point out that Mr. Kenner's anthology of Pound's prose from the point of its bearing on the procedures of the *Cantos*, and his statement of that qualification, is an honest and useful labor of exegesis. The schemata in Appendix 3 will prove handy gimmicks for the student *after* he has done the reading of the *Cantos*, and Mr. Kenner does well to place them in an appendix. My recommendations for good work in the book would include Appendix 2, and chapters 15, 17, 19 and 24. When he is working on technical organization in the *Cantos* as related to earlier technical developments, he is most sound, working close to his materials (i.e., when he stays away from compound-complex sentences replete with parentheses). One paragraph in Chapter 12 (p. 99) sent me back to the refreshing simplicity of the *Cantos* for nearly two weeks.

The clarity of the man's writing, as well as the quality of his ideas, is extremely uneven. His analogy of good film-technique with ideogram is useful for that one insight, if not ridden to death. But he can arrive at such low points as, "Audible song is not of the essence of poetry" (p. 205), and in his otherwise very

decent Chapter 19, in connection with the poet and the poetic act, he gets himself into this mess: "That in him which makes poetry is that faculty of the soul which manipulates the personality and orders experience." In contrast to such abominations, one will find such concise and understandable definitions as, "A metaphor pegs out the limits of an action with four terms, only two of which need to be named (p. 204)." And in Chapter 17, recommended above, there is the very useful listing of poem and line in the Loeb text of Propertius, following Pound's use of the text in his *Homage*.

In Chapter 26, on the "mud and light" contrast of imagery and the function of dissociation, nearly seven of the nine and one-half pages consist of juxtaposed quotations from the *Cantos*. This is as close as Mr. Kenner comes to facing the question of content, the implications of Pound's materials. Mr. Pound's case for the honorable intelligence as against the material cunning of usurers; his insistence on definition and exactitude as against muddle, the deliberate obscuring of facts and downright mendacity; these, his strongest and most criticized positions, are set out with some of the least disagreeable, most digestible quotations as could be found to gloss the problem. Pound's alignment with light and clarity are clearly drawn, but without facing the economic and social axes of his criticism, and the conclusions these entail.

The poet, this poet, as economic and social reformer, is a dilemma all of us must face eventually. It must be faced before it can be worked. The problem cannot be ignored, nor will any uncritical swallowing of the man's facts and theories do. And it is useless and ignorant to abuse him, simply. There is more than one madhouse in Washington these days. The simple exposition, mostly by quotation, of Pound's position, is by no means satisfactory. What, after all, is the very point of the Confucian translations, if not probity in government? "Equity is the treasure of

states." One cannot avoid implications. Mr. Kenner manages. But his not facing it for you is not your problem, reader. You must face it for yourself. I am not, personally, hopeful.

At the end of Chapter 28, there is a footnote on Pound's ellipses which is worth keeping in mind.

In his chapter entitled *Great Bass*, Mr. Kenner has collected quotations staking out Pound's theory of the same name. He quotes from the prefaces to the early *Cavalcanti* and the *Antheil* volumes, and from one of the three sections where the subject is discussed in *Kulchur*. On these he makes his strongest play to prove major form. I think he drives it too far. I think the play is stronger than is indicated by the quotations given. His position is certainly weakened by Pound's properly tentative unquoted statements (*Guide to Kulchur*, p. 235). I would like, at this point, to quote Mr. Kenner at some length, to show exactly how hard he drives his imperatives in this "proof":

In a poem the images persist for transversal or intersection in the reader's apprehension, in modalities governed by adroit rhythmic recall or imagistic analogy. For the poet and/or the reader of poetry, it means that the secret of major form consists in the *precise* adjustment of the intervals between disparate or recurrent themes or items or rhythms (p. 280; my italics).

'Any given rhythm implies about it a complete musical form.' The apparition of Elpenor in Canto I implies certain concomitants, the time for which is not 'right away.' To generalize the case of Elpenor *immediately* in terms of the other lost seamen of that voyage, in terms of the human wreckage of all enterprises, would not only crowd the poem too much, it would suggest far too simple relationships, for example, an insoluble dilemma for the Odyssean figures of the world, a Hamlet's impasse bulking the cost too large to justify any action. For the proper tragic stasis and the inhibition of irrelevant responses, these implications must be postponed for a definite interval, other material must be interposed, we must contemplate other dimensions of the factive personality (Malatesta, the Cid) other sacrifices (Cabestan's heart and the lady's suicide), other debacles (World War), leaders who betray as distinguished from leaders who involve their train

in necessary attrition (Cantos XIV-XV), other modalities of order (Zagreus, Nerea, Kung). It demands, precisely, the interposition of nineteen cantos containing just these and no other materials, just so disposed (p. 282).

Etcetera. It is just too much. One more beam in the total structure is involved. Pound's timing in the poem is unmatched by a similar quality in any other modern exhibit. But this post-facto analysis is too rigid in its claims and demands. The poem is not being written by mathematical formulae. The point would seem to me to be that, wherever a theme is repeated, it follows, connects with the preceding material, and leads to, in turn, what follows it. The techniques of these transitions and juxtapositions are clearly enough discussed elsewhere in the book. The "steady patterns" are noted at the beginning of this same chapter. Why not stick with that instead of trying to prove major form by too insistently strong analogy to Pound's musical theories? The better Renaissance thinkers and architects, and before them, certainly, Sordello and Daniel, knew: Form follows Function. Nothing but putting an arch *WHERE* it holds up the building. Design is not ornamentation, etc. Again, a subject which Pound has dilated on in divers places. It is Kenner's imperative insistence I object to on this point.

To go back to Mr. Kenner's book as anthology (see pp. 33-35 and the paragraph introducing the bibliography), on the organizational level alone, it shows far too-simple a discipleship, which has led him to undertake a project in a fashion beyond his powers of language and discernment. With such material and good advice, the book should have been a superb study. I am sorry to report it not so. Any student will find it useful, as I have indicated; and thanks to Pound and the extensive quotation, it can be exhilarating to read. But in the end, Pound stands quite alone, covered with glory and praise and omniscience, but quite alone and really unqualified. The poetry remains.