Correspondence

A Reply to John Lauber's "Pound's *Cantos*: A Fascist Epic"

DAVID MURRAY

John Lauber's uncompromising and detailed recital of Fascist elements in the *Cantos* was perhaps a useful corrective to the rather mealy-mouthed approach still to be found in Pound criticism, but it is one thing to point to instances of Fascism, and quite another to describe the prevailing ideology of the poem as Fascist, and the poem itself as a Fascist epic. It is not that a view loses its political implications or accountability once it is in a poem – becoming poetic truth rather than any other sort – rather that in Lauber's reading of the *Cantos* the many other strands of the poem seem to be subsumed under a Fascist label, and suffer a sort of guilt-by-association. It seems only fair to separate out some of those strands again, and also to look at the form of the *Cantos* in this light – something Lauber fails to do, apart from the undeveloped term "epic."

Put simply, the problem of definition has been whether the use of Mussolini and some of his ideas in a context of Confucian, Jeffersonian, medieval scholastic and other thought means that Pound is (mistakenly) seeing Mussolini as a continuation of those traditions – in which case the ideology of the *Cantos* is Confucian, etc., and the Fascism is a localized and temporary misjudgment – or whether the use of Confucius and others is seen to be a (wilful) misreading of other traditions to buttress a Fascist ideology. Lauber's argument broadly follows the second line, of course, but the poem is diverse enough in materials and, crucially, complex enough in its methods of presentation, to resist this sort of simplification. To illustrate, I want to take up two related issues from Lauber: the word "totalitarian," and the question of non-rational presentation of material in the *Cantos*. Since these are issues relevant not only to Pound but to much of modern American poetry, they deserve more careful treatment than Lauber gives them.

Lauber seems to use totalitarian as interchangeable with Fascist and Pound himself does use the word in connection with Mussolini, but he equally often connects it with societies and ways of thinking found in the past. As Lauber points out, Pound sees Confucian China and Confucian thought, for instance, as not just authoritarian but totalitarian. What Pound means by the word, though, is not what Lauber has in mind. A *minimal* definition of totalitarianism – "the extension of permanent government control over the totality of social life"

David Murray is Lecturer in American Studies, University of Nottingham. John Lauber's "Pound's *Cantos*: a Fascist Epic" appeared in the *Journal of American Studies*, 12: 1 (April 1978), 3–21. John Lauber is Professor of English at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, T6G 2E1.

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(*Dictionary of Social Sciences*) – would mean the term applied to at least some aspects of many past societies, but the word *is* more commonly used now, as by Lauber, to apply to a specifically modern phenomenon (see for instance H. Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*; C. Friedrich and Z. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* for this view). The additional aspects of totalitarianism found in the second usage are the role of technology in persuasion and control, mass as opposed to class, and the use of irrationality. When Pound uses the word he is attracted first and foremost by the idea of the *totality* of social life rather than the mechanisms of social control, and his concern relates to that widespread interest in cultures and societies as holistic, reflected in the growth of anthropology. It is worth following up the anthropological context to clarify this fine but important distinction between Pound's use of totalitarian and Lauber's.

Much has been made of the influence of the pioneering work in comparative mythology on Pound's generation, but just as important as the mythic patterns suggested was the vision opened up of society as an organic and totally interrelating system. The earlier tradition of collecting, comparing and tracing origins, with its emphasis on the evolution of cultures, was replaced by what came later to be called a structural-functional approach. This method offered, in an age of compartmentalization and fragmentation, a view of societies as " totalitarian " in the sense Pound uses it, and also a method of exploring and demonstrating that totality. Instead of being " explained " by the tracing of its origins, any element of a culture was seen to be given its meaning by its function, or its context in the society. Pound's use of Leo Frobenius is instructive here, in that although Frobenius's theories have a strong racial and historicist component, and in fact do link easily with Fascism, Pound chooses to stress the *method* in Frobenius: " From nineteenth-century philology, relegating everything to separate compartments . . . Frobenius advanced to Kulturmorphologie." [1] One aspect of a society can be inferred from another because it makes up a whole, and Pound's use of Frobenius's *paideuma* to describe an integrated set of values and practices is close to the current anthropological use of culture. Pound was uneasy with the word culture, partly because of the possibilities of confusion with " high " culture demonstrated in Eliot's use of the word, and partly because he rejected the implications of *Kultur* – culture as racially based.[2]

Pound uses the almost inevitable organic metaphors to describe a society unified at all levels, and its prime example is Confucian China. Confucian thought pervades the society (root and branch images) and unifies it, and Pound saw the Confucian collection of Odes as an expression of that integration: " Kung is modern in his interest in folk-lore. All this Frazer-Frobenius research is Confucian." [3] What unites anthropology and Confucius here is the view offered of a unified sensibility, and Eliot's remarks on Lévy-Bruhl (also read by Pound) testify to a similar attraction in Eliot to anthropology's working assumptions.[4] For what we see – and dismiss – as nostalgic or idealistic longing for

[1] Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 297.

[2] Ezra Pound, *Impact* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1960), pp. 6, 168.

[3] Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (originally pub. 1938, London: Peter Owen, 1966), p. 272.

[4] T. S. Eliot, review of Clement C. J. Webb, *Group Theories of Religion and the Religion of the Individual*, in *International Journal of Ethics*, **27** (Oct. 1916), pp. 115–17.

an organic and totally integrated – a totalitarian, in Pound's sense – society in many of the conservative writers of this century is, ironically, built into the very methodology of many of the most ambitious anthropological approaches. Tylor's remark in *Primitive Culture* (1871), in justification of the linking of apparently incongruous materials, that " If law is anywhere it is everywhere," reappears, for instance, as prefatory epigraph in Lévi-Strauss' *Les Structures Elémentaires de la Parenté* (1949).

I am suggesting, then, that for Pound the word totalitarian was broader in meaning than for Lauber, and while the general idea of society as an integrated and organic whole was easily adaptable to Fascism, it was also part of a more pervasive interest in ways of thinking and behaving which were non-rational. The " savage mind " was not necessarily something to be grown out of, but an indication of fundamental modes of thought. This leads to my second closely-connected area of disagreement with Lauber, which is the issue of non-logical presentation.

Pound's method of ideogrammic juxtaposition is criticized by Lauber, who makes the distinction between the ideogrammic method and " reasoned argument " which, as he says, Pound tends to dismiss as Aristotelian and syllogistic. Pound himself makes the distinction quite clearly. He proposes Confucius as superior to Aristotle " by totalitarian instinct. His thought is never something scaled off the surface of facts. It is root volition branching out." Aristotle's virtues are limited to " the explicitness that is literally the unfoldedness," which is " registered better in the Greek syntax." [5] Here again is the word totalitarian, and Lauber argues that there is a direct connection between Pound's ideogrammic method and Fascism. He argues that the *Cantos* " present a closed system " and sees " an identity (in both attitude and method) between the world of the *Cantos* and the world of Fascist ideology and propaganda." It is true that there are passages where Pound purports to be demonstrating a *causal* link, showing that X is the single and efficient cause of Y, where simple juxtaposition of details is totally inadequate. Clearly, some materials, and the relationships between them, need analysis – that " unfoldedness " which Pound sees in Aristotle – rather than synthesis. In particular, the nineteenth-century historicist elements in Pound, with their stress on direct linear and causal connections, demand more detailed and careful proof than Pound's method allows, and here Lauber's objections are valid.

This is not the whole of the poem, though, and to call it a " closed system " is to ignore the presence of Pound in the poem and the way the poem incorporates the changes in his circumstances, reading and attitudes. The idea of the *periplus* is crucial here, in that it is in tension with the assertion of any completed schema or unity, and this tension between being driven where the winds direct, being subject to change and history, and recognizing, if only in fragments, an underlying unity, runs throughout the poem.

The broader issue, though, is basically that of non-discursive, non-logical ideogrammic juxtaposition versus discursive, rational, linear presentation, and Lauber is not the first to suggest that the former relates to irrational and reactionary politics better than the latter. Part of the reaction against Modernism in

[5] Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, p. 279.

Britain, for instance, has been in these terms, and Donald Davie, for one, has seen an unbroken " development from imagism in poetry to fascism in politics." The development is unbroken for Davie because " It is impossible not to see a connection between the laws of syntax and the laws of society." [6] Davie is not alone in asserting this connection, but it need not imply that the subverting of syntax leads to Fascism. Many modern writers, for instance, would argue, from the same premise, that the undermining of the structures of society by changes in the structure of language would lead to a liberation from social controls which would be beneficial, and see the insistence on at least some forms of rationality as repressive. To label all movements towards the non-rational use of language as politically Fascist is surely to use a very blunt weapon. One of the main pieces of evidence for the connection would seem to be found in T. E. Hulme. His political views link easily with Fascism, and his distinction between " intensive " and " extensive manifolds " parallels closely Pound's distinction between Confucian and Aristotelian thought, but in this distinction between two modes of experience Hulme is only making more explicit assumptions inherent in much nineteenth-century poetic practice, as Frank Kermode has shown in *Romantic Image*. Imagism is distinctive in its emphasis on the intensive manifold to the exclusion of any " unfoldedness," and in its stress on fusion and synthesis in one instant of time it implies the overcoming of sequence, and of time, which Joseph Frank characterizes as the attempt at " spatial form."

This concern with synthesis, the denial of sequence and time has often been seen to be accompanied by a conservative political stance, both in the Modernist writers, and in New Criticism which takes over many of the critical assumptions of Modernism, but there is a crucial distinction between conservative and Fascist, as I have suggested in examining the idea of totalitarian, and this is my main disagreement with Lauber. In addition, he makes too easy an equation between non-rational modes of thought and Fascism. He promises to look at *how* the poem expresses a Fascist ideology, but he doesn't do this. His article is least convincing in this area, and the reason is that the poem in its overall form and local method does *not* express that ideology.

John Lauber Replies

I do not believe that David Murray has refuted my arguments; rather, he has ignored most of them. The best answer to him, then, is my original essay. If that does not convince the reader that there is indeed a consistent, coherent, Fascistic ideological core to the *Cantos*, no summary of my arguments is likely to do so. However, it may be worthwhile to take issue with him on a few points which seem to demonstrate a misunderstanding either of my paper or of the nature of Fascism.

" When Pound uses the word [totalitarian] he is attracted . . . by the idea of the *totality* of social life, rather than the mechanisms of social control," writes

[6] Donald Davie, *Purity of Diction in English Verse* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), p. 99.

Murray. But so were Hitler and Mussolini! Fascism did not win the support of the German and Italian peoples by offering concentration camps; it offered just this "totality" – "*Ein Volk, ein Reich, ein Fuhrer.*" The concentration camps and other "means of social control" were required in order to achieve that goal. Obviously, too, one does not have to be a Fascist to support such an ideal. But Fascist ideology was a synthesis of materials drawn from many sources, and to demonstrate that some of its components, taken individually, were harmless or even respectable, is irrelevant to the question of whether the *Cantos* are Fascistic.

Obviously, as Murray states, there is a distinction between conservatism and totalitarianism. It is well illustrated by the contrast between Eliot's *Idea of a Christian Society* and Pound's *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, between Eliot's *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* and Pound's *Guide to Kulchur*, between *Four Quartets* and the *Cantos*. Eliot does not offer a paranoid reading of history (Pound sees *all* of modern history since the founding of the Bank of England in 1690 as a conspiracy of usurers against the common good); in spite of occasional passages of rather nasty anti-semitism, Eliot does not seriously propose that the Jewish usurer is the chief enemy of civilization; Eliot does not confuse aesthetic and political action to the extent of viewing the leader as an artist shaping his people according to his own vision; Eliot does not praise the virtue of hardness (a moral-political-aesthetic criterion for Pound).

As for irrationality, it seems to me that deliberate irrationality in political thought and action is always dangerous, and that irrationality as an aesthetic principle becomes dangerous as soon as it is transferred to the political realm. (See, for example, the career of Marinetti, the Futurist and extreme aesthetic irrationalist of the period just before World War I, who became one of the earliest Fascists.) I am aware that "many modern writers would argue . . . that the undermining of structures by changes in the structure of language would lead to a liberation from social controls which would be beneficial," but I do not accept those arguments. This century has seen a great deal of social and political irrationality and none of it has led to liberation.

I do not believe, then, that Pound can be classified and dismissed as an innocuous "conservative"; I continue to believe that the *Cantos* are Fascistic and that they constitute an epic according to Pound's own definition of "epic" as a poem containing history, and that it is therefore proper to describe them as a Fascist epic. Finally, I do not mean to imply that every detail or every line is Fascist; I would never argue that the Cantos are *that* coherent!