

*Ezra Pound &
William Carlos Williams*

*The University of Pennsylvania
Conference Papers*

Daniel Hoffman, Editor

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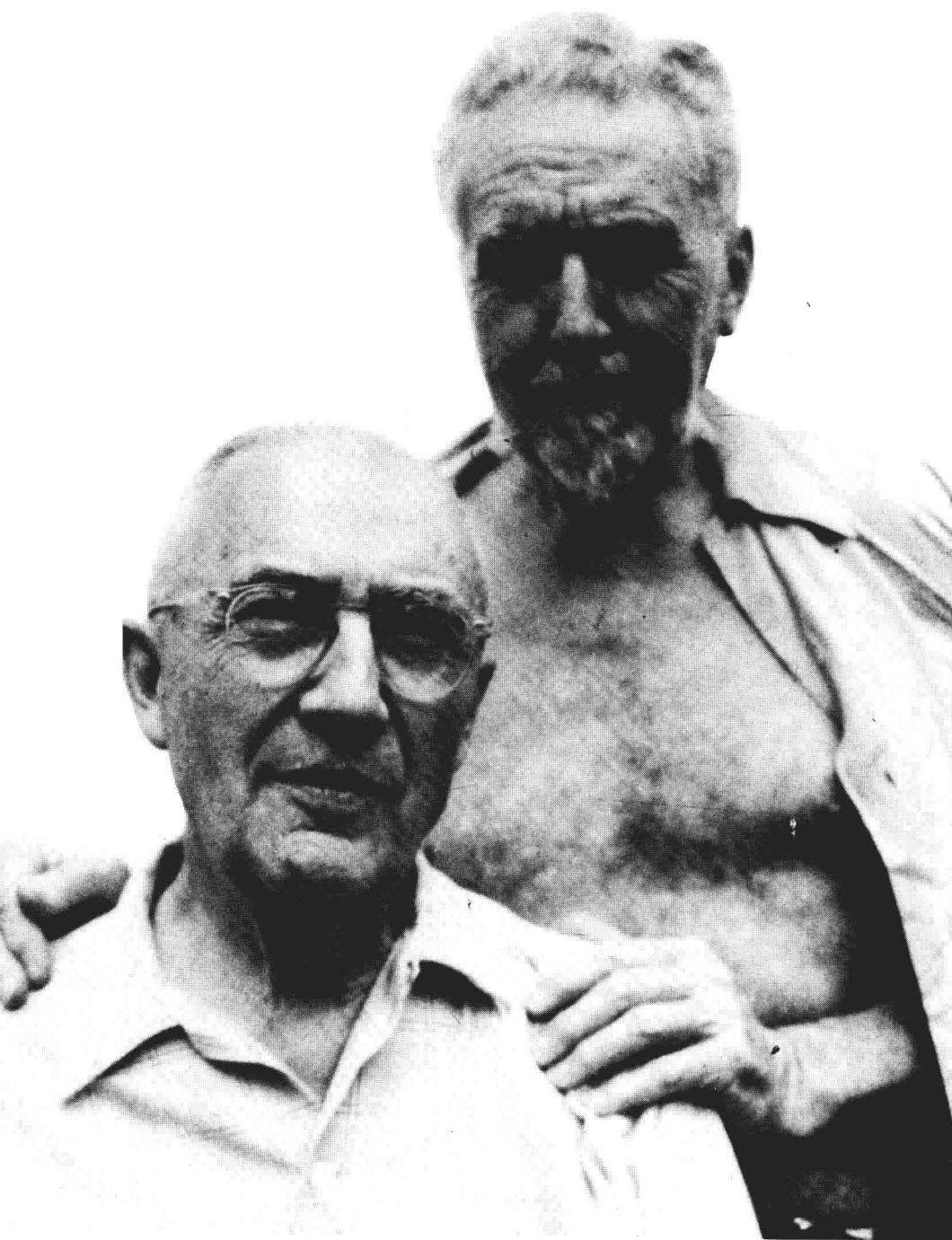
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Ezra Pound & William Carlos Williams



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Preface

What historian of literature would have had the wit to choose, as the venue for so Promethean an act as the re-making of American poetry in the twentieth century, the campus of a stodgy and genteel old university? Or, as the actors in such an emblematic blaze of rebellion, two young fellows active in college theatricals and on the fencing squad? Whatever concatenation of circumstances, personal and cultural, was required for such a departure from the doldrums of verses from Arcady as decorated the respectable magazines of the 1890s and 1900s, those circumstances found each other on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, where, in the Spring of 1906, Ezra Pound received the degree of Master of Arts and William Carlos Williams was awarded the doctor of medicine.

Seventy-five years later, this anniversary was taken as an opportunity both to celebrate the invention, in a dormitory on the Old Quad, of modernism in twentieth-century poetry, and to honor the two alumni who so acutely anticipated the great changes in method and in style the new century would require. Under the sponsorship of The Writing Program, Department of English, a day-long Pound-Williams Conference was held in the Rare Book Room of the Van Pelt Library on 25 April 1981. It seemed appropriate to invite Hugh Kenner, the chief expositor of the poetry of Ezra Pound, author of *The Pound Era* and many other works elucidating modernist literature, to open the proceedings with his lecture, "Poets at the Blackboard." Wendy Stallard Flory, Assistant Professor in the University of Pennsylvania English Department, spoke on "The Pound Problem." In the afternoon Denise Levertov, the most accomplished poet to have had the benefit of William Carlos Williams' example, gave a close reading of one of his poems; and the long-time friend and publisher

of both poets, James Laughlin, read excerpts from their correspondence with him and spoke of his own experience as a young poet taking instruction in Rapallo from the faculty of one at Pound's "Ezuversity."

x This modest program stirred far greater interest than its organizer had foreseen. Featured before the event in the *New York Times* with interviews of all the participants, it attracted some 120 attenders from two dozen institutions as far afield as Maine and Oregon. The proceedings, taped by the Philadelphia public radio station, WHYY-FM, were edited to an hour-long program and have since been released to National Public Radio. A more permanent version of the conference seemed called for. Augmenting the four conference papers with studies of our two alumni poets by scholars trained in the reading of modern poetry at the University of Pennsylvania would further attest to the hospitality on this campus to contemporary writing—an attitude quite different from what Pound and Williams experienced here three-quarters of a century ago. Among the contributors to this volume, Ronald Bush is a graduate of this university's College of Arts and Sciences; Michael F. Harper came to Pennsylvania from England as a Thouron Fellow, taking both his undergraduate and doctoral degrees. Paul Christensen and Theodora R. Graham received their doctorates from the university. Emily Mitchell Wallace is a former member of the Department of English. Neda M. Westlake holds a Ph.D. in American Civilization from Pennsylvania. To my regret, two other distinguished scholars from this university were not free to join us in this celebratory project: Dean Joel Conarroe, then Executive Director of the Modern Language Association and Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of *William Carlos Williams' Paterson*; and Stuart Y. McDougal, chairman of the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, whose book, *Pound and the Troubadour Tradition*, was his dissertation at Pennsylvania.

I asked each contributor to prepare an essay on the subject of his choice. By a serendipity I had not foreseen, the resulting ten papers formed a pattern which conscious design could scarcely have bettered. Hugh Kenner gives an intuitive and convincing interpretation of the probable effects of their education at Pennsylvania upon the sensibilities, styles, and forms the two poets would later develop. We are left to reflect how often does a fixed curriculum or a hidebound instructional philosophy move its recipients by indirections toward expressions incomprehensible to, and censured by, their staid mentors. Kenner finds, in the scribblings left at day's end on a classroom

blackboard, the possible sources and models for the content and structure of the *Cantos*, and in the disciplines of clinical observation and taxonomic description the training most useful to the kinds of poems Dr. Williams would write. To complement this essay, Emily Mitchell Wallace, whose early articles have long been primary sources of our knowledge of the poets' college days, has now deepened and extended her research into this period of their lives, re-creating their excitement and the ferment of their development at the university.

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The remaining essays comprise, for each poet, a close reading of a single poem, a consideration of his aesthetic premises, and a biographical study. These are followed by James Laughlin's reminiscences and his sharing of his letters from Pound and Williams.

Of course there is an irony, which we savor, in holding our conference in just such a library as Dr. Williams advises, in *Paterson*, Book III, to be set afire, for the Rare Book Collection now contains all of Williams' and Pound's published works, many of their letters, and some of their manuscripts and memorabilia. (Williams' books are his own copies, given to the University of Pennsylvania after his death by Mrs. Williams, no doubt in acknowledgment of the university's having presented her husband with an honorary degree in 1952). Our volume concludes with a *catalogue raisonn  * of these Pound and Williams holdings, prepared by the Rare Book Curator, Neda M. Westlake and the University Archivist, Francis James Dallett.

If, as Williams purges the language of the encrustations of its past, our holdings might stay him from burning down Van Pelt, it cannot be denied that were any library back in 1906 a cabinet of philological curiosities it must have been this one—or rather its predecessor in the Furness Building across the campus. In those days, the Pennsylvania English Department was renowned for its work in linguistic and historical scholarship; the Variorum Shakespeare had been undertaken here, and Professor Felix Schelling, the chairman with whom Pound had a correspondence extending many years after his graduation, was a prominent Shakespearean scholar. His colleagues industriously compiled bibliographies and studies investigating the historical and biographical circumstances in which the great and not-so-great works of English literature had been written. But no one on that faculty was ready to accept, much less understand, the new kind of poetry that Pound and Williams felt in their nerves and marrow to be necessary, were their art to tell the truth.

Consequently the University of Pennsylvania has had rather a bad press among critics and historians of the movement Pound and Williams helped to found.

From our perspective the Pennsylvania faculty of 1902-6 seems blinded by gentility to what was thrust before its eyes. Yet contemporary experience may confirm that historical scholars of the Renaissance are not by definition among those most attuned to the need for innovations in contemporary poetic style. Professor Schelling could understandably be impatient with the unbiddable student in the back row who refused to accept the academic disciplines of the department; the historical and philological approaches to English literature that Pound felt so stultifying were in fact innovations that Schelling only some fifteen years earlier had succeeded in organizing into a university department accredited to give graduate degrees. Besides, Schelling doubtless saw himself personally as well as professionally identified with culture in ways that Pound seemed determined to undermine, for Schelling's family as well as himself embodied the institutional acceptance of European traditions. His father had founded the St. Louis Conservatory of Music; his brother Ernest was an acclaimed composer and conductor. To be a Prometheus requires a Titan against whom to rebel; Pound may well have been lucky in his antagonist.

Such a rebellion is as ambivalent as that against one's father, and it is touching that for years after leaving Penn Pound kept seeking his old teacher's approval and acceptance. This was predictably unforthcoming to the ex-student who could never suppress his urge to *épater les bourgeois*, to "wound respectability, sentiment and decency"; gestures forgivable if "buoyed up with wit," but in Pound's work "not always so buoyed," as Schelling wrote, reviewing *Poems* (1922) in a Philadelphia newspaper. Pound's need for Schelling's approval is emblematic of his uneasy relationship with the academy. While kicking and screaming against his professors' lack of critical interest in what they taught, Pound, as Hugh Kenner shows, was nonetheless well introduced by them to the literature of the classical world and medieval romance in which his imagination participated for the rest of his life in ways of which they could not have dreamed.

Despite his and Williams' being approached over the years by many scholars, including several contributors to the present volume, for information about their own work, neither poet changed his notion of the American university as a philistine museum. Once they left the campus, they never came back. Pound did not wait for the academy to catch up with him; he founded his own academy in which he was professor of everything to a student body of acolytes who made the pilgrimage to Rapallo. If the University of Pennsylvania was in Pound's and Williams' day an unwilling and unwitting mother of the muses,

it can be said that should they, or their shades, turn up nowadays they would find that not only has the English Department been teaching their work (and that of their contemporaries and successor poets) for many years, but poets themselves are no longer regarded here as idlers and pariahs. The kind of support for young writers which Pound unavailingly urged Schelling to institute is now offered them at Pennsylvania.

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Why is it that Pound, whose style aimed at immediate and unequivocal significations, should still generate controversial readings? Take *Homage to Sextus Propertius*: Is this an effort at translation, a cadenza on themes by the Roman poet, or an original poem in which Pound assumes the persona of Propertius as a mask? Now, sixty years after its publication, Ronald Bush, considering its alternative interpretations, must ask, "What is the subject that so absorbed Pound that he forgot his existence for the sake of giving it life?" The freedom Pound took with Propertius' text, the ways he interpolated allusions to his own time and circumstances into his adaptation, the intensifications of feeling evoked by the rhythms and structure of this poem are all measures of Pound's originality. Bush finds the "controlling motif and . . . deepest emotional unity" in the *Homage* to be "an affirmation of the life force, figured in images of life interwoven by natural energy." This poem "proclaims the power of imagination rooted in desire to marry self and world, and to redeem the self from a fragmented and ghostly existence." Adopting the persona of Propertius, Pound "displays the spiritual lineaments of Orpheus, the divinity who descended into death and returned, who was dismembered and yet continued to sing, and who singing established harmony in the cosmos."

Few poets in our time have had such artistic courage and ambition, have dared to attempt such heroic reconciliations through poetry, or have felt the necessity of making such broad repudiations of traditional modes of thought. In his essay, "The Revolution of the Word," Michael Harper re-examines the bases and methods of Pound's Imagism and of his reliance on the linguistic theories of Fenollosa. Pound, like Fenollosa, assumed that experience is directly known without the intermediation of language; that scientific induction, from "concretely known particulars," is the method of poetry; and that this method could be used "to generate an ethics and an economics that could redeem society from its errors." It is the mistakenness of these beliefs, Harper maintains, that is the key to much that is baffling about Pound's work and his program. These beliefs "explain why

the *Cantos* are the way they are—Images juxtaposed with neither narrative nor commentary to connect them, since their significance . . . is supposedly there on the page if you will only LOOK at it.” His reliance on this epistemology with its assumption that language has no part in creating experience, only in recording it, “explains Pound’s dogmatism and both the dedication and the violence with which he entered the political arena; for if the poem was the scientific induction he believed it to be, its conclusions were a solid foundation for action.” Pound’s commitment to a flawed epistemology thus leads, Harper suggests, to “the anti-Semitism, the scurrilous rhetoric, the Rome Broadcasts, Mussolini and Pisa.”

All who admire Pound’s work are necessarily perplexed by what Wendy Flory has termed “the Pound Problem.” It would be beyond our deserts were our geniuses all to leave us not only the bequests of their writings but the flawless examples of their personal character. Shakespeare seems such a one, possibly because we know so little of his life; but then, what makes Shakespeare Shakespeare is the vision of possibilities embodied in the characters he created, and the ways he has made it inescapable that we judge them. The Pound problem begins—as Eliot put it—with his imagining Hell as for other people. In this, and in his choice of victims, he is not unique; we accept the genius of Voltaire and of Shelley, the stature of Eliot and of Henry Adams, though each held anti-Semitic views and wrote them into some of his works. With Pound the problem is exacerbated by the violence of his diatribes, the moral crudeness of his unexamined opinions. In a man whose tolerance for literary rubbish was absolute zero, uncritical acceptance of such canards as the alleged “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” seems surprising. We must ask why he is able, indeed eager, to accept the accusations that the Jews comprised a worldwide network of money-manipulators and munitions-mongers responsible for the death of culture in the Western World.

Wendy Flory attempts to place the poet’s obliquity in appropriate contexts. She takes pains to disentangle several strands of anti-Semitic feeling which differ in source, provenience, and intensity. Tracing the prevalence of cultural stereotypes in the community in which Pound grew up, she distinguishes between its negative attitude to Jews (among its other targets of social and business discrimination) and the much more vicious manifestations of anti-Semitism in Germany later in the century. Pound has been wrongly castigated as endorsing Hitler’s policies, whereas in fact he had little interest in Hitler or in Germany; Mussolini was the axis leader he endorsed, and Mussolini’s Italy was less harsh toward its Jews. Flory reminds us that Il Duce

had many admirers in this country before the attack on Ethiopia revealed the brutality and moral squalor of the Fascist state—but not to Pound, who continued to believe that Mussolini was a gifted, noble leader whom he might convert to the economic program of social credit which alone could prevent another world war. It was because Pound could not bring himself to recognize that his faith in and hopes for Il Duce were baseless, Flory maintains, that he needed a scapegoat to protect himself from the truth he would not face.

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Harper's delineation of Pound's epistemology proposes one possible cause for Pound's anti-Semitism. Flory's examination of his background and his capacity for self-delusion offers others. These essays, as well as recent explorations of the subject elsewhere, should help make possible an understanding of the grave flaws in the human sympathies and thought of this poet whose work is motivated by high ideals. I would like to suggest several other considerations which may merit further investigation.

Three factors in Pound's personality coalesced to make inescapable this fixation, as well as his seemingly unquestioned faith in Mussolini as a wise and just prince. One is Pound's attraction to power, another his delusions about his own role as a savior of the world, and the third is his misconception of the processes of historical change.

Pound's heroes are on the one hand the bringers of order—Confucius, Li Po—and on the other violent, rebellious, and charismatic men like Sigismundo Malatesta, Bertran de Born, El Cid. We may infer Pound's fascination with power and his relish in its exercise from the vigor and intensity of his entrepreneurial activities on behalf of the writers and artists in whose work he believed. Mussolini must have seemed to him—as to many another—a forceful, charismatic, widely-learned bringer of peace and stability to the fragmented country which had been the seat of Western culture. Dennis Mack Smith's biography *Mussolini* (1982) shows how tawdry was the truth behind this facade. But Pound never peered behind it. For it was his tragic misfortune to assume that if only Il Duce, or Senator Borah, would listen to *him* and enact social credit in Italy or the United States, he, Ezra Pound, would stop war from happening.

It is a tragic paradox that Pound, whose command and reconstruction of the literatures of the European and Oriental past is among the chief embodiments in our time of the literary consciousness of history, should have been so woefully self-misled about the sources, processes, and complexities of historical change. Pound no doubt extrapolated from his own experience in changing literary sensibility by promulgating the fiats of a new movement

(whether Imagism, Vorticism, or the more complex prolegomena of his critical writing generally). This readily led him to confuse his ability to enlist a few talented friends in cleansing the Augean stables of poetry with the gathering of forces by which governments and economic systems are overthrown or transformed. In ways that must be retraced and analyzed with care, Pound drifted, or was carried along by the flood of his feelings, from convictions that civilization itself was endangered because the arts had been perverted to his attempts to correct the conditions responsible for this artistic and moral decay. In the Romantic tradition of Shelley, Ruskin, and Morris, Pound undertook the reformation of the life from which art is nourished. So far, a noble purpose. But in the process he somehow proved vulnerable to the cruel baiting of anti-Semitism, the conspiratorial theory which places all blame for the world's ills on a source outside the self and denies the humanity of other people.

There is an unhappy congruence between Pound's notion of how he could manipulate history by persuading a few key leaders to adopt social credit and his diagnosis that what had betrayed Western civilization was the cabal of a few financiers and munitions-mongers, most of whom were Jews. There was of course a virulent popular press in many countries maintaining the same false explanations for the sufferings of the twentieth century. Such are the paranoid fantasies of frightened, desperate, and dangerous men who lust for simplistic answers to complex questions. The role of intellect in the understanding of complexity is abandoned or perverted by such unequivocal placing of blame. If the scapegoat bears the blame, his denouncer is rendered blameless.

For complex historical reasons Christendom for centuries carried this supposition of the guilt of others. The medieval Church's ban on usury had left it to Jews to lend money to finance the Christians' wars—which is not of course the same thing as fomenting those wars. In Pound's day allegations of a supranational web of Jewish warmongers were in the air, a foul popular supposition which Pound tragically seized upon to allay his own inner confusions. Another factor possibly affecting Pound's views may derive from the distinctions between Hebraism and Hellenism suggested by Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy*. Pound's exalting of Hellenistic impulses may exacerbate his readiness to vilify the contemporary representatives of repressive Mosaic law.

Underlying all such speculations is the question of Pound's sanity, on which there can probably be no informed agreement. I do not suggest that only insane persons hold the antisocial views found in

Pound's broadcasts and occasionally in the *Cantos*, but it is likely that were Pound's pathology fully comprehended, his predisposition to the ideas described above could be better understood. The diagnosis of Pound as insane by Dr. Winfred Overholser, chief physician at St. Elizabeths, has been vigorously attacked by Dr. E. Fuller Torrey (*Psychiatry Today*, November 1981). The principal target of this investigation is not Pound, however, but Overholser, who allegedly falsified Pound's records. Some of Torrey's evidence seems based on the verbal testimony of subordinate physicians, now deceased. Literary critics are unequipped to deal in forensic psychiatry, and a layman cannot presume to settle the matter. But one can surely identify features of Pound's personality which, whether or not conformable to a legal definition of insanity, demonstrate extreme egotism, inordinate detachment from reality, paranoia, all leading to his uncritical acceptance of anti-Semitism, his folly in making broadcasts for Italian state radio in wartime, and his consequent sufferings.

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William Carlos Williams was, like Pound, an inveterate theorist of his own innovative poetic processes. One result of his vigorous self-definitions has been that unwary readers have tended to reduce the range and effect of his poetry to the formulas he set forth to justify and defend his innovations. Of all of his pronouncements none has more frequently been misapplied in this way than the line, repeated in *Paterson*, "No ideas but in things." Denise Levertov reminds us that for Williams, "the imagination does not reject its own sensory origins but illuminates them, and connects them with intellectual and intuitive experience," thus opening to the poem—and to the reader—the ideas that are in things. She demonstrates this openness to experience, including its intellectual implications, by analysis of a significant and ambitious poem of Williams' which has somehow not attracted much comment. "A Morning Imagination of Russia," written in 1927, just ten years after the Russian Revolution, dramatizes the response to that cataclysmic experience of an imagined intellectual, now a member of a rural soviet. "He recognizes that a great price has been paid, and will perhaps be further exacted. But what has been gained is precisely what he had desired: touch itself . . . without which all is dull, hopeless, ashen." Williams' fable requires a revolution for the intellectual to be in touch with his society; this may be read not only as expressing the hopes of the American avant-garde for the Russian experiment, but also as a paradigm of his own struggles to revolutionize American poetry in the 1920s.

Paul Christensen takes up Williams' revolutionary poetics a decade

later, when, finding himself limited by the static requirements of Objectivism, Williams felt the danger that "the poem enclosed too little too well." Instead, "A deeper, truer measure would have to include the whole poet in its formal symmetry, in which his ragings and desires, his dreams, his fantasies, would be bound into the form of the poem in a way that gave both freedom and participation in the design." What liberated Williams in his search for such a measure was the influence upon him of the exiled European intelligentsia, "German Gestalt psychologists . . . , European physicists, biologists, mathematicians, social scientists (the Frankfurt School in particular), Marxists, the Bauhaus architects . . . a culture of revolutionaries who had fought their various state authorities and had been punished for their daring visions . . . challenged American artists to express themselves with equal freedom and convictions. Here was the 'other' stream of thought that was merging with American culture to create a new zeitgeist at mid-century." (In the ferment of this revolutionary milieu Williams felt the need and found the means to merge the influences of European surrealism with the rhythms of American jazz; from the dialectic of native and international influences he synthesized his variable measure, his triadic structure so open to experience and meaning. Where in 1927 he had applied his own achieved style to revolutionary materials, now during and after the war years he absorbed revolutionary energies into his style, applied, in *Paterson*, to the American experience his life was rooted in.

Paterson thus reflects a revolutionary aesthetic, one which greatly extended the possibilities for what the poem may include. One controversial extension is Williams' use of almost unedited and unaltered letters to himself by other persons. Most notable of these is a series of impassioned and self-searching letters from the poet Marcia Nardi, whose correspondence appears over the signature "Cress" in Williams' poem. Until now there has been speculation but little information about either the relationship between them or Williams' intentions in using Nardi's correspondence in such a prominent way in his most ambitious work. Theodora Graham has traced the personal and artistic strands of this rather strained relationship between an older and a younger poet in an essay which tells us much about the ways that Williams conceived of and constructed *Paterson*.

It is fitting that our tribute to Pound and Williams should conclude with James Laughlin's reminiscences and his sharing of letters from the two poets he befriended and published for over forty years. Laughlin, Director of New Directions Publishing Company, tells how

as a young poet he dropped out of Harvard to attend Pound's "Ezuversity" in Rapallo, and, at Pound's urging, on his return to this country began to publish the master and his friend Bill Williams. Pound's correspondence is informal, given to idiosyncratic spellings and sudden lapses into dialect, interspersing serious discussions with light jingles, haranguing "Jas." to publish this, propagandize that, follow up a casual contact with Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands with a copy of Pound on Confucius, and so on—an unending and disjunctive series of admonitions, outbursts, jokes, and statements of principle from an affectionate guru. "Williams," Laughlin observes, "was very different"; one had "a more placid relationship" with him. "He almost never found fault." Where Pound's letters leap from one subject to another, Williams makes extended comments, giving coherent exposition of his views on publishing, on the qualities of his friend Pound, and on his dismay at the influence of T. S. Eliot on American poetry.

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These "gists and piths" reveal the personal presence of both poets. Their letters also make inescapable the inference that both were blessed in their publisher, who stuck by them when their work was read only by a tiny coterie of the faithful. Nor were they unaware of their good fortune—on receiving word that Laughlin would publish one of his novels, Williams addressed his friend as "Dear God"!

While their letters in the university collections are not, with one exception, major sources, all contribute new details to the biographical background of both poets. The largest run of correspondence is the set of seventy-six letters, dated between 1907 and 1959, to Mary Moore, the dedicatee of Pound's *Personae* ("if she wants it"), an early love who remained his friend. Pound's intermittent contacts with the University of Pennsylvania are reflected in his letters to Felix Schelling, Roy F. Nichols, the University of Pennsylvania Press, and Robert E. Spiller; Williams' in his to E. Sculley Bradley and John C. Miller. Other letters deal with a range of literary topics: Pound writes to May Sinclair, James T. Farrell, Henry Bamford Parkes and Arnold Gingrich; and Williams corresponds with Burton Roscoe and Waldo Frank. All of these letters are summarized in Neda Westlake's inventory. Material in the University Archives provides additional views of the poets while in college—including several of the photographs accompanying Emily Wallace's essay in the present volume.

Among the letters and manuscripts given the Library by Mrs. Williams was a small snapshot showing William Carlos Williams, seated, looking gravely at the camera, while behind him, unbuttoned shirt cavalierly thrown over his shoulders, stands Ezra Pound, grizzled

Preface

and indomitable. This is a contact print of a photograph by Richard Avedon, who was present when, after his release from St. Elizabeths in 1958, Pound on his way to take ship for his last exile in Italy stopped off in Rutherford to visit Bill and Flossie Williams. It was the last time they saw each other. That photograph of their last reunion, along with others of the poets as collegians costumed for roles in plays and in fencing attire, is reproduced in this book, as part of our tribute to them.

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DANIEL HOFFMAN