

Notes on Robert Lowell's Proleptic Elegy with "Il Miglior Fabbro"

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The speaker in Robert Lowell's "Ezra Pound" refuses to "enstar" the literary blacksmith.¹ Yet he offers to buttress the *corpo lasso* of the poet with extemporaneous inscriptions of dialogic communion (Virgil 23).² This poem is not an "elegy," but it is elegiac. Here are the opening lines:

Horizontal on a deckchair in the ward
of the criminal mad.... A man without shoestrings clawing
the Social Credit broadside from your table, you saying,
"... here with a black suit and black briefcase; in the brief,
an abomination, Possums' *homage* to Milton." (1-5)

A solemnly mournful yet ironic bathos characterizes the action in these shapes, sighs and signs of woe. The unwinding adjective "Horizontal" shows that Pound is no longer the erect figure we see in E. O. Hoppé's portrait, taken in 1918. Upon viewing the photograph, notice that Pound's head is upturned, and his gaze looks *into* the viewer—imperious, intrusive and yet luridly piteous. The pose bristles with nauseating pretention and invidious smugness. But Lowell's Pound is supine and no longer has the nerve to proclaim that "Artists are the antennae of the race" (Pound, *ABC* 73).

Here, Pound is not "out of key with his time," as the speaker laments in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*: he is out of key with everything—full stop (1). Pound will never reach the vertical again. Thus, Lowell's sonnet is proleptic, because it anticipates the thunderous silence to come. The enervated body of the poet "on a deckchair" reflects the contrite tone towards the end of the *Cantos*, where Pound's "persona" says that "I have tried to write Paradise . . . Let those I love try to forgive / what I have made" (Pound, "Notes for CXVII et seq" 25, 32-33). Lowell's poem neither exonerates nor does it mute Pound's muttering melodies of remorse and regret. The poet's use of ellipses adds a fading and flickering yet palpable weight of fatigue and dispirit, which is at odds with the act of "normal" mourning (Freud 243). This elegiac acknowledgement is a condemned celebration, but the paean proceeds. Lowell's use of aposiopesis mimics the bathetic fall from the promise of "Paradise" to an appeal for "forgiveness" in Pound's fragmented Canto. The image of the "man without shoestrings" suggests that he cannot die with a "bang" of suicide, but must dissolve with a "whimper" (Eliot, *Hollow Men* V.31; Pound, Canto 74). The reference to the "Social Credit broadside" (Pound often wrote his *Cantos* on broadsheets) humiliates the poet, whose "economics, Fascist sympathies, and anti-Semitic rhetoric [often] continue to shadow the poet's reputation" (Perloff).³

Still, these haunting shadows neither obscure nor occlude the elegiac act. The grammatical epistrophe of the present participles "clawing" and "saying" express the paradox between Pound's political reputation and his poetic status with Lowell. Eliot's nickname, "Possum," is an ironic commemoration within an ironic commemoration. Pound elegizes Eliot the friend not Eliot the icon of modernism. However, the italics of "*homage*" intimate criticism of Eliot's terminal views on Milton, showing that even the dead Eliot cannot escape Pound's red pen.

Lowell's elegiac integrity persists in the following five lines:

Then sprung; Rapallo, and the decade gone;
And three years later, Eliot dead, you saying,
"Who's left alive to understand my jokes?
My old brother in the arts . . . besides, he was a smash of a
Poet." (6-10)

The phrase "Then sprung" corresponds to the opening of *The Cantos*: "And then went down," which describes Odysseus' descent into hell (Pound, Canto 1.1). If the comparison of cultural overlaying, or "ply on ply" as Pound puts it, is taken seriously, then "sprung" is an ironic synonym for "down," despite the verb/adverb discrepancy. Yes, Pound has "sprung" up from the "ward / of the criminal mad" to his beloved Rapallo in Italy, but his endeavor for "Paradise" lay in ruins: the cultural enterprise is over. It is odd here that Lowell does not mention his own "spells in mental hospital[s]," but the omission conveys a pervasive inclusion of modernist anxiety (Lowell 13). Just as the two poets are linguistically intimate, so are they in the hospital together, talking, doing and making an elegy. The uncompromising adjective "gone" is charged with loss and melancholia. The commas and semicolons nettle the tempo into terse and telegraphic bits of information, intensifying the pace of time registered, but not lived—time used up, yet not used. The phrase "Eliot dead" denies the towering reputation of the poet, even though Pound re-christens Eliot as "Possum," and Lowell's speaker does not reenact the intimate pattern of anointment. The phrase is too confined within its commas to indicate any sort of beatification. Pound's remark, "he was a smash of a poet," is almost a throwaway line, but it is just as melancholic as Pound's personal question: "Who's left alive to understand my jokes?" Pound is rendered incommunicable.

Contrary to W. H. Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Lowell's poem digs up and disseminates the intimate exchanges between the two poets. The final lines read, "You showed me your blotched, bent hands, saying, 'Worms. / Then I talked that nonsense about Jews on the Rome / wireless, Olga knew it was shit, and still loved me'" (10-12). The act of Pound showing his decaying hands to Lowell amounts to a piano self-elegy, and is thus another elegy within an elegy. The horrifyingly laconic "Worms" claims Pound's death before his actual demise. The echoing of the melancholic self-reproach and remorse for his *Ente Italiana Audizione* radio broadcasts, which amount to perfidious prattle, shows that Lowell refuses to scatter his literary icon upon the cosmos.⁴ Instead, the poets dine upon one other in a banquet, or Eucharist, of linguistic fellowship. They are torn asunder as they are paradoxically decanted into each other.

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¹ In "Eclogue V," Virgil's Menalcas promises to "enstar Daphnis" (52). Milton and Shelley express elegiac continuity in the "stellafication" of the poet: Milton's *Lycidas* has "sunk low but mounted high" (*Lycidas* 172). In Shelley, the "soul of Adonais, like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are" (*Adonais* 494-95). But Lowell's poet tumbles upon a recliner to engage in stuttering hush.

² Pound's collapsing anatomy is a shadow of the pilgrim's "weary body" from Canto I of Dante's *Inferno* (28). Lowell's poem casts a half-projected, dim silhouette.

³ But Perloff argues that “Sieburth’s Pound is, above all, a passionate maker of lyric poems. A confirmed aesthete, dedicated scholar, collector of great poetry of other cultures, and obsessive translator, Pound emerges from this volume as Eliot’s *il miglior fabbro*, learnedly and single-handedly transforming the map of Anglo-American poetry so as to include the troubadours and Guido Cavalcanti, Sophocles and Sextus Propertius, the Japanese Noh and the Confucian *Ta Hsiao*, *The Great Digest*.” Lowell’s Pound is not the icon in Sieburth, but the veneration is just as palpable.

⁴ Richard Sieburth contends that Pound’s pro-fascist speeches in Rome were “so incoherent that Italian officials suspected he might be a double agent communicating a secret code” (xi).