"With usura hath no man a house of good stone" (Pound, Canto 45): An Interview with Leon Surette

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f I HAT LEON SURETTE has been writing for more than four decades primarily about Ezra Pound (1885–1972), the American poet, may seem unusual and surprising—but this "scholarly monomania" may be attributed to the fact that Pound continues to be a controversial figure and a paradigmatically difficult modernist poet. For instance, while the United States was at war with Italy and the Holocaust was being perpetrated, Pound made broadcasts over Rome Radio denouncing President Roosevelt, encouraging American soldiers not to fight, and raving about Jewish conspiracies and the role of banks in having started the war. In the suppressed-until-1982 Italian Canto 73, Pound pays homage to a young Italian girl's sacrifice of her life in leading a company of Canadian soldiers into a minefield to their deaths—as Charles Olson later said, "Here we [Americans] were listening not only to a fascist, but the ENEMY!" Indeed, there is overwhelming, and tragic, evidence for what Tim Redman has called "the frightening aspects of [Pound's] allegiances." Of course, trying to find excuses for Pound's scandalous behaviour is indefensible; however, does it follow from this, as some critics and readers have insisted, that his work, including especially The Cantos, his magnum opus, is infected with his repugnant views to such an extent that it should be expunged from

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Inte(re)view.indd 273 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

the canon altogether? This is a question asked by Pound's sympathizers, detractors, and those who aspire to remain objective alike. This is a question, as well, that Dr Surette has asked several times and which he has approached from a number of different angles.

Pound may be known best in some circles for his role in such important movements as Imagism or Vorticism and for his discovering and/or championing of several modernist writers, including James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, and H.D.; however, his reputation rests on *The Cantos*, his "poem including history," an 818-page-long poem whose composition occupied him for approximately fifty years. Massimo Bacigalupo calls Pound's "epic" the "sacred poem of the Nazi-Fascist millennium"; indeed, the poem may be (and has been) viewed as an authoritarian summing up of the most abject twentieth-century ideologies and prejudices; yet this is also a text committed to a radical ideological openness and also the poem most responsible for the unprecedented blossoming in American (but also world) literature of formally innovative, open, and open-ended poetry. This is a poetry that questions received notions of poetic form through its radically modernist, abrupt, paratactic techniques of disconnectedness and discontinuity, visual experimentation, textual heterogeneity, and undigested quality. Pound is largely responsible for making possible the innovations of successive generations of American poets, from the Projectivist group, to the Objectivists, to the language poetry of Charles Bernstein, and so on. And so, a case may be made that this poet who in 1945 was indicted for giving aid and comfort to the Kingdom of Italy and its then allies in the war against the United States is also—arguably—the poet who, before, during, and after his twelve and a half years of forceful confinement at the St Elizabeths Hospital for the criminally insane in Washington, D.C., influenced the development of twentieth-century poetry more than any other single person. And so, he may—after all—merit the attention lavished on his work by critics like Dr Surette.

It is this poem that Leon Surette has invested a whole academic career at trying to make sense of and, in doing so, has found himself traversing some rather esoteric and difficult terrain. Dr Surette received his PhD from the University of Toronto in 1969. His dissertation's title was "The City in the Cantos of Ezra Pound: A Study of a Modern Epic"; it was supervised by Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye. He taught for a brief period at UBC before accepting a position at UWO in 1970, spending the next thirty-three years teaching undergraduate and graduate courses there. He retired in the summer of 2004.

274 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 274 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

During his very productive career, Dr Surette published dozens of articles and five books. His criticism deals primarily with Pound but also modern British literature, poetry and fiction, literary history, literature and religion, literature and philosophy, and literary theory and criticism. His first book, A Light from Eleusis: A Study of Ezra Pound's Cantos (Clarendon Press, 1979), is a biography, as it were, of the poem; it reads *The Cantos* as a "failed epic" and its mythos as a reinterpretation of Odysseus' descent in light of the Eleusinian mystery ritual, thus bridging Dante's dream vision of the paradisal world with the Homeric wanderings to the underworld. Written before any of the currently available companions to *The Cantos*, it is remarkable for its erudition as well for its clear and convincing reading of what is surely the most difficult poem written in the twentieth century. The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, and the Occult (McGill-Queen's, 1993) succeeds in making available to readers a version of the intellectual history of modernism previously ignored or suppressed: rejecting both, on the one hand, postmodernist and theoretical characterizations of modernism as positivistic and absolutist and, on the other, New Critical characterizations of modernism as skeptical and relativistic, it traces the roots of aesthetic modernism in the occult tradition. Pound and Purgatory: From Economic Radicalism to Anti-Semitism (University of Illinois Press, 1999) constitutes the main focus of the interview that follows—let me only say about it that, first, the book received the 2000 Ezra Pound Book Award and, second, that this award is deserved since Dr Surette succeeds in offering the final word on Pound and economics, an excruciatingly difficult topic but one with which Pound readers must come to terms. Dr Surette has also co-edited *Literary Modernism and the* Occult Tradition (NPF 1996), a collection of essays on the occult affinities of several modernist writers, and I Cease Not to Yowl: Ezra Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti (University of Illinois Press, 1998), one of Pound's most important correspondences. He is currently completing a monograph tentatively entitled *Eliot and Stevens: Two Harvard Poets*.

The interview which follows was conducted over the internet. After securing his agreement to do the interview during the Modernist Studies Association meetings in Vancouver in late October 2004, I sent to Dr Surette via email a sequence of questions, allowing a few days for him to think about them and send back his answers. Twice following the initial email I sent sets of a few questions which, I thought, came out of Dr Surette's answers. The text of Dr Surette's answers has been edited only slightly in an attempt to allow his own voice to come through.

Inter(re)view | **275**

Inte(re)view.indd 275 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

Interview with Leon Surette—Completed on 5 January 2005

DT In 2000, *Pound and Purgatory: From Economic Radicalism to Anti-Semitism* (1999) was awarded the second annual book prize for the best critical book on Ezra Pound published in the previous year. The first Ezra Pound book award went to Alec Marsh's *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson* (1998). Both books deal with economics. Does this say anything about the state of Pound (and perhaps of Modernist) studies?

LS I suppose it indicates a degree of maturity in Modernist studies insofar as the taboo subject of the right-wing political posture of modernist writers can be discussed in a manner that is not purely polemical. I think it also reflects—somewhat inconsistently—an increasingly left-wing ideological cast to literary studies generally. This apparent contradiction is resolved, I think, when one remembers that the boutique radicalism so much in vogue valorizes what is commonly called "subversiveness." Hence any radicalism comes in for some degree of approval so long as it is opposed to the perceived status quo of free enterprise capitalism. It is perhaps worth mentioning that the same blurring of ideological postures was exploited by Hitler's party, which was called "National Socialism," to disguise its alliance with industrialists and bankers.

DT You begin your "Preface" to *Pound in Purgatory* with this: "It is a matter of mild embarrassment to me that this is the third monograph I have produced in which Ezra Pound is the sole or principal figure" (ix). What exactly do you mean? Do you really mean—as you go on to suggest later on in the same paragraph—that the source of your embarrassment is the fact that earlier accounts have "loose threads" which you have felt a need to fix?

LS No. I was just alluding to the apparent narrowness of my interests. Most scholars cast their net rather wider so far as principal authors are concerned. However, I was drawn to study Pound in the first place because of the apparent scope of his own ambition—to write a modern epic worthy to stand alongside Dante's *Commedia*, and perhaps even Homer's primary epics. (Pound did not admire such secondary epics as Virgil's *Aeneid* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*.) The broad scope of Pound's ambition has led me into the study of European and American history, continental literatures, classical literature, secret histories, and economic theory. I have found

276 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 276 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

these excursions outside strictly literary studies to be rewarding in two ways. They have expanded my own horizons and have contributed (I hope) to a deeper understanding of the literature, politics, and cultural developments of the twentieth century. In short, Pound's eclecticism has been a sort of rabbit that has kept me running after it for forty years. That long duration suggests that I do not have the speed of a greyhound.

DT Speaking about Pound's "epic ambition" points directly to your title. As anybody who has read his magnum opus knows, one of Pound's models for the structure of *The Cantos* is Dante. Is this what your title points to? Or is one to assume that there is a more complex rationale for your choice?

LS Certainly the title, *Pound in Purgatory*, inevitably invokes Dante's Commedia, but I was thinking rather more of Pound's suffering than of the alleged parallel between The Cantos and Dante's Commedia. One reviewer complained that by putting Pound in Purgatory instead of Hell, I was implying that he was absolved of his sins. That was an interpretation I had not anticipated. Foremost in my mind was the sense that the world events that Pound and his contemporaries witnessed were so much worse than the optimistic scenario that America and Europe had painted for themselves and the world through World Fairs and political punditry from the London Exhibition of 1851 (and the copycat Paris Exhibition of 1855) until the catastrophe of World War I. The Great War was followed by political uncertainty, economic collapse, and ultimately another disastrous war. Such an experience is purgatorial in the sense that in the midst of suffering one still has a glimpse of an unreachable paradise. Perhaps it was careless of me, but the idea of absolution was the furthest from my mind.

Pound—like so many of his contemporaries—had imagined himself to be on the verge of the establishment of an earthly paradise through technology's capacity to banish poverty and control disease. (More than fifty years younger than Pound, I confess to have grown up with the same optimism in the immediate post-war era of the Fifties.) Pound thought it was the artist's role to celebrate the dawning of such a new age by articulating the cultural corollary it required. That he had such an ambition is confirmed by the anecdote he told Donald Hall, the *Paris Review* interviewer, when asked in 1962 if he was "stuck" with *The Cantos*. In the anecdote a child is drawing a picture, and, when asked what it represents, he replies, "God." The adult interlocutor protests that nobody knows what God looks like. The child replies, "They will when I get through." Pound

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Inter(re)view | **277**

Inte(re)view.indd 277 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

conceded that such confidence was no longer obtainable—implying that he had once had such confidence.

DT Again in your Preface you remark that in response to a suggestion made by Alec Marsh—who, as already mentioned earlier, himself has written a book on Pound's (and William Carlos Williams's) economics—you decided to put aside your sabbatical project and take up the one which resulted in *Pound in Purgatory*. Could you comment on this?

LS The project which I had proposed for my sabbatical year (my last one prior to retirement) was a comparative study of Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot. I am still engaged in that project and hope to bring it to completion within 2005. Alec Marsh prompted me to cobble together Pound in Purgatory out of papers and articles I had published. He did so in two ways. After we met at, I think, the MSA conference in Philadelphia, he sent me the draft of his study, subsequently published as Money and Modernity. I noticed that he had not read any of the articles I had published on Pound's economics in Canadian journals. That omission led me to the conclusion that my work in that area had not reached the scholarly community. Secondly, when he did read those works on my prompting, he was kind enough to suggest that they should be made more available—hence Pound in Purgatory. Characteristically, I was not content to merely assemble achieved publications but added the information Demetres Tryphonopoulos and I had made available in our edition of Pound's letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti (I Cease not to Yowl: Ezra Pound's Letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti [University of Illinois Press, 1998]), and new research in other unexamined correspondences.

DT In the opening two sentences of your Introduction you point out the "fact" that despite all the work done on Pound's Fascism and anti-Semitism, "there is still no consensus on how they fit into his work as a whole or how they relate to his economic radicalism" (2)—and one could add here, perhaps, to his aesthetic theory and practice. I am sure that in writing these two sentences you were thinking about many full-length books and articles, including Tim Redman's fine book *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge UP, 1991) and Robert Casillo's more problematic *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (Northwestern UP, 1988).

278 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 278 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

LS Well, there are several other books that focus on Pound's economics, and perforce deal with his political views. I don't want to list them, but I think there must be at least a dozen. And, of course, virtually every discussion of Pound published in the last thirty years must adopt some posture toward his economics, his politics, and their relation to his poetry. Some are dated, some are excessively polemical, and others are evasive. Perhaps the most important figure in the latter category is the late Hugh Kenner, who throughout his distinguished career attempted to sweep those aspects of Pound's work under the carpet. His strategy was ultimately abandoned under the pressure of evidence, and the generational shift of scholars toward more left-wing political postures. For those younger scholars, Pound was often a convenient whipping boy. An easier target than his friend, T. S. Eliot, and one less thoroughly canonized. The "younger" scholars (now well into middle age), who I like to think of as the children of the American adventure in Vietnam, have mounted a concerted attack on modernism generally, conceiving of it as little more than a handmaiden to Fascism and Nazism. There is no question that both those political movements belong to the history of twentieth-century modernism, just as Communism belongs to the history of nineteenth-century industrialism and imperialism. However, it is sloppy thinking to suppose that coincidence, or even affinity, can be construed as identity. Perhaps the most striking piece of evidence that separates aesthetic modernism from Fascism and Nazism is the latter's antipathy to it. (Of course, Communism was equally antipathetic to the modernist aesthetic, spurning the enthusiastic Kandinsky and all other Russian modernists.)

DT You have been writing about Pound for over four decades. Could you describe the ways in which the study of Pound—especially of *The Cantos*—has changed over the years—let's say between the time in mid-1975 when you were writing *A Light from Eleusis: A Study of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (Clarendon Press, 1979) to the kinds of Pound scholarship appearing in the first few years of the twenty-first century?

LS I have answered this question in part in the previous comment. Firstly, I should admit that *A Light from Eleusis* took much longer to write than the few years you allow it. It took many years because of the necessity to do a great deal of basic spadework so as to know what particular cantos were in fact about. But as to the change in academic fashion ... I grew up in academe in the heyday of New Criticism whose most salient principle was that the autonomy of the relation between reader and text was sac-

Inter(re)view | 279

Inte(re)view.indd 279 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

rosanct and should not be disturbed or troubled by external information about extra-textual matters such as things and events to which the poem might be thought to refer, least of all events in the author's life. Kenner read The Cantos in this spirit. His reading was brilliant because he was a powerful intellect and knew enough generally to fill in some of the lacunae. It was also highly selective, rendering the poem the kind of lyrical epic that Pound had claimed it was. Anyone who took the trouble to read the poem with enough information—as I attempted to do—could see that it was no such thing but was—as Pound also claimed—"a poem including history." History is vast—especially since Pound proposed to include Europe, America, and China (mercifully excluding Africa, South America, and South Asia)—and life is short. So the history in *The Cantos* could not be evidential but only exemplary. (I'm not sure that Pound understood the distinction.) An exemplary history is tolerable when the events are distant in time or place. It becomes tricky when they are near in time and place—as they became with the world-wide depression, the rise of Fascism, and global war. Pound made the wrong choices in the thirties and, unable to doubt his own genius, stubbornly stuck with them for the rest of his life. Kennerian attention to Pound—exemplified by Carroll Terrell's journal, Paideuma: A Journal of Ezra Pound Scholarship and his Companion to the Cantos—was hagiographic. It encouraged two sorts of responses. On the one hand, we had inquisitorial studies such as Robert Castillo's. On the other hand, it encourages neglect. Pound's work has always been threatened with the fate of being relegated to a fringe group of quirky (and politically suspect) admirers—rather like the fate of Blake (whom Pound ignored) or Browning (whom Pound admired). Kenner was unable to do for Pound what Northrop Frye had done for Blake. Blake now has an assured place in undergraduate teaching. Pound seldom appears as more than a footnote about Imagism. He still awaits his Frye, as does Browning. I don't know if I have truly addressed your question.

DT Just a moment ago you spoke of "the necessity to do a great deal of basic spade work so as to know what particular cantos were in fact about." Indeed, at the time you were writing your dissertation—directed if I remember correctly by Marshall McLuhan and Northrop Frye—and later when you were working on *A Light from Eleusis*, there was no such thing as Carroll F. Terrell's two volume *A Companion to The Cantos* which he published between 1980 and 1984 (or the plethora or articles full of explication and exegesis that appeared over the years in *Paideuma*, a journal edited by Terrell for nearly three decades). I myself can't imagine writing on Pound

280 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 280 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

without such a compendium in the same way that I can't imagine writing a book on paper and typing it up afterwards. Can you comment?

LS I don't know if I would have been interested in working on Pound if Terrell's Companion had existed when I chose The Cantos for my dissertation subject. The appeal for me was the opacity of the poem. I thought of Pound as one of the three giants of English Modernism—Eliot, Joyce, and Pound. Joyce's two great works—*Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*—had been published serially without the explanatory key that rendered the factitious schema which governed their organization. Eliot's The Waste Land, in contrast, had provided the interpretive key—the Grail Legend—at the time of publication. I was confident that there was some analogous interpretive key which would unlock the secrets of *The Cantos*—which, it should be remembered, was still allegedly in progress as I was writing in the late sixties. In fact, I brought the just-published Drafts & Fragments to my defence in anticipation of questions about it. Of course, no such questions were forthcoming. I was a very naive graduate student. To return to The Cantos, I was not far into the study before I realized that no key analogous to the Odyssey or the Grail Legend existed, though I thought I had found some iterative patterns that were helpful—notably those adumbrated in the palingenetic rites of Eleusis. As to writing on paper, and typing up afterwards, I never did that. I wisely took typing in Grade 10 instead of Latin and have never regretted it. So I compose on the typewriter (or keyboard now)—as did both Eliot and Pound. I did come up with a useful practice. I typed only one paragraph on a page. That way I could shuffle and/or discard pages without retyping. At the end of the day, university departments would fund typing of the final draft in those days—though that always introduced new errors. Life was slower then.

DT Could you elaborate on what you mean by the "palingenetic rites of Eleusis"? And perhaps if you wish to comment on what seems to be a popular cultural phenomenon these days, what is happening with the "rising psychic tide" in our times or the efflorescence of books (and, of course, more than books) on the wisdom tradition—such as Tom Harpur's recent theological best-seller *The Pagan Christ* or Dan Brown's enormously successful novel *The Da Vinci Code*, to mention but two such books?

LS An Eleusinian initiate was "born again." "Palingenesis" means "backward birth," that is a return to the astral realm from which we came "trailing clouds of glory" as Wordsworth put it in "Intimations of Immortality."

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Inter(re)view | 281

Inte(re)view.indd 281 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

Charismatic Christians have very similar beliefs to those of the pagan world where dogma did not exist and revelation was personal and largely devoid of doctrine. I have read *The Pagan Christ* but not *The Da Vinci* Code. Harpur argues that the Roman ecclesia corrupted a much more ancient religion that was just that sort of charismatic revelation available to all. Such a belief was widespread in Europe in the late nineteenth century, and Pound was exposed to it through the British Theosophist, G. R. S. Mead. The Da Vinci Code, which I have not read, mines some of the same dubious sources that Mead and Harpur exploit. One difficulty with such scenarios is that it ignores the Jewish and Rabbinic aspect of Christianity. It is primarily in Hebraic sources that early Christianity found its dogmatic aspect, whereas its ritual is largely pagan in provenance, and its ecclesiastical organization is purely Roman. The Protestant Reformation sought to purge Christianity of its pagan and Roman elements and released the charismatic (that is, a personal revelation) aspect of paganism. Harpur is happy with that result and attempts to show that the Christian churches have corrupted the genuine revelation available to all.

But you asked me to comment on "the efflorescence of books on the wisdom tradition." I see it as a consequence of the decline of Christianity, the dominant religion in the West for two millenia. I think Eliot was right in "Burnt Norton" when he alleged "human kind / Cannot bear very much reality." When belief in the stories told in the Gospels is lost, people do not turn to reason as the Enlightenment thinkers thought they would. Instead they turn to superstition, to "alternate belief systems." Of course, for the rationalist all religion is superstition. But we can still distinguish between beliefs that are neither systematic, nor even coherent, and religious doctrines that have been honed and refined over generations—even though founded on extra-rational grounds.

I should add that the phenomenon to which you refer is largely confined to North America, the home of religious freedom, and the principal generator of new religions in recent history. Mormonism, Seventh Day Adventism, Theosophy, Christian Science, and Jehovah's Witnesses all have originated or flourished in the United States. And I believe that Canada and the United States are the only societies where evangelists can successfully set up shop and sell their own road to salvation without any credentials or church affiliation.

DT Your mention of Eliot reminds me that Eliot appears in the subtitle of one of your books which deals with what I would call "intellectual history" and has an interesting title: *The Birth of Modernism: Ezra Pound, W.B.*

282 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 282 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and the Occult (McGill-Queen's UP, 1993). Everyone knows, of course, about Yeats's association with various occult groups, including the Order of the Golden Dawn, and many people know of Pound's early interest in the work of such occultists and the theosophist scholar G. R. Mead and fellow imagist Allen Upward. But why include in your subtitle the "orthodox" Eliot? I guess I have several other questions here as well: Should we look for modernism's origins in occultism? Are all major high modernists either occultists or at least interested in occultism? Feel free to address one or more of these rather general questions—or better yet, you could describe what it is that *The Birth of Modernism* is about!

LS The Birth of Modernism is about the provenance of the modernist aesthetic in a strain of thought and belief that I have labelled "occult," by which I mean the belief in a hidden or occluded sense or meaning of the arts that is nonetheless manifest to the enlightened reader. I call this general mode "the double hermeneutic," involving a manifest, exoteric, or literal sense and meaning which hides a latent, esoteric, or symbolic sense from the hoi polloi. I argued that this view of aesthetic expression was endemic in all varieties of aesthetic activity but confined my discussion to literature. Everyone agrees that Blake and Yeats at least practise the double hermeneutic and that their hidden meanings are esoteric. It is self-evident that Freud and Jung also apply the double hermeneutic to dreams and cultural products. It is also clear that English modernist writers Joyce, Pound, and Eliot—at least the early Eliot—as well as Yeats employ a rhetoric that requires a great deal of work on the part of the reader to penetrate its meaning. This "difficulty" of Modernist writing, I argued, is at least an echo of the more mystical practices of Blake, Yeats, and the Symbolists.

The bulk of my discussion is concerned with Pound, for I argue that Pound belongs with Blake and Yeats as a writer whose hidden meaning is esoteric, and not just a secondary symbolic sense such as literary critics routinely locate in all sorts of purely secular literature. I included Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a transitional or marginal text, balanced between the esoteric and the merely symbolic. The Anglican Eliot practised a rhetoric that was symbolic, that is, the secondary or symbolic meanings of his works are available to all Christians—though no doubt opaque to those ignorant of Christian symbology. Clearly no such interpretive resource is available for *The Waste Land*, part of whose message is the interpretive chaos in which Western civilization found itself with the collapse of Christian faith in Europe and the consequent disarray of cultural symbolism. At

Inter(re)view | 283

Inte(re)view.indd 283 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

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the same time, the poem is indebted to the central belief of the European occult that there is a permanent cultural symbolism of which Christianity is merely a fragment.

This belief is caught by the title of one of G. R. S. Mead's many publications, *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*. Mead was a theosophist who broke with Annie Bezant's theosophical organization over a sex scandal. He was also the editor at Quest, where Pound, Evelyn Underhill, and others published. Pound met his future wife, Dorothy Shakespear at the Kensington meetings of Mead's branch of the theosophical society where she was a regular attender with her mother, Yeats's sometime lover.

In sum, the argument of *The Birth of Modernism* is to affirm the relevance of occult rhetorical practice and beliefs to the modernist aesthetic—a relevance that has been sorely neglected and extends to painting, music, and architecture. A secondary component of the book was to sort out those who participated fully in an esoteric belief—like Yeats, Strinberg, Pound, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Jung—and those who merely adopted the rhetorical or interpretive strategy of the double hermeneutic—like Joyce, Picasso, Eliot, and Freud.

DT In talking earlier about how *Pound in Purgatory* came about, you mention that your research involved reading "other unexamined correspondences [that is, in addition to the Pound-Agresti correspondence]." This reminds me of the following: In conversation I once innocently asked a young scholar who had just finished a book on Pound—a book I had not read at the time—what he thought of the Pound holdings at the Beinecke Library at Yale—where as you know so very well the majority of the manuscripts comprising the Pound archive are housed. He shocked me by responding that he had not visited Yale nor needed to since his work on Pound was theoretical. Could you comment on this? Or perhaps you could tell me a little about your own book's "genesis."

LS That young person's response highlights the affinity between Theory and New Criticism. Both eschew information in favour of opinion. There is no need to be informed if you are only interested in retailing your—or, more likely, revered authorities'—opinion. Though Theory does not sanctify the intimate relation between critic and text, it shares New Critical contempt for information that would aid in interpretation of the text. Instead it "interrogates" the text so that it will reveal its dirty secrets. The theorist puts it up against the wall, so to speak, and probes it with cattle prods. Archival resources count for no more in such a procedure than

284 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 284 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

do the suspect's protestations of innocence or ignorance in an interrogation. There are, however, salient differences between Theory and New Criticism—most notably the former's willingness to import biographical information into its condemnations. In addition, Theory descends from Marxist critical theory, while New Criticism descends from Arnoldian cultural theory. For the Marxist, bourgeois culture is designed to instill a false consciousness in its consumers so as to preserve the status quo. The task of the Marxist critic is to expose this nefarious plot. Arnold agrees but thinks it is a good thing to preserve the status quo, which he perceives to be under threat from the demise of Christianity. For him literature and the arts must fill the gap, bridge the abyss, and withstand the onslaught of chaos. The New Critics—especially the American Agrarian folks—modified the Arnoldian scheme. Instead of literature functioning as a secular religion, it would enable the modern citizen to live in a world without certainties, by turning her into a ironist, someone who could entertain conflicting and even contradictory opinions at one and the same time. Richard Rorty is the last New Critic.

As to the genesis of my own work, I think I have already said enough about that. I would add one observation. My motivation is always hermeneutic. I want to know what the author is trying to tell me. Only when I think I have a handle on that will I ask *why* he wants to tell me that particular thing. New Criticism and Theory are equally hermeneutic. The former is primarily interested in sorting works into those that instantiate an ironic agnosticism about everything, and those—unapproved—works that do not. In short, the New Critic is primarily interested in canon formation. The latter is exclusively interested in *why* the author wants to say. The theorist reads off the *what* from the *why*.

DT All this talk about the affinity between Theory and New Criticism reminds me that your interests are not as narrow as it would appear to someone reading this interview who did not know anything else about you. I know that you have written on theory, that you are interested in Canadian literature and have written a few influential essays in the area, and that you have been involved with the American Society for Aesthetics and the Canadian Association of Aesthetics, of which—if I remember correctly—you served as President for a couple of years. Could you discuss in passing these interests? In what way are these interests (or are not) connected with your main scholarly interests?

Inter(re)view | 285

Inte(re)view.indd 285 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

LS In my view there are two components to literary studies which might be characterized as "analytic" and "encyclopaedic." Most of my published work falls within the "encyclopaedic" component—something that used to be called "scholarship," that is, the marshalling of information about the provenance, reception, and context of literary works. The "analytic" component is what used to be called "poetics," or "criticism." It is the articulation of principles which govern the interpretation of texts, including the role and relevance of the sort of information gathered by the encyclopaedic component. When the so-called "theory" vogue began in North American literary studies—roughly in the mid-seventies—I thought it represented an opportunity to address the inadequacies of the dominant interpretive modes of the day—New Criticism and Archetypalism. It turned out that "theory" meant a particular interpretive mode that Paul Ricoeur aptly labelled "a hermeneutic of suspicion."

I wrote a monograph outlining a complete interpretive scheme but found that neither philosophical readers nor literary ones were interested, so it has mouldered on floppy disks. Ten or so years of activity in the American and Canadian societies for aesthetics convinced me that there was no potential audience for what I had to say, so I have reluctantly shelved that line of work. My one modest success in that vein was the coining of the term "topocentrism" to describe a dominant strain of CanLit criticism deriving from Northrop Frye's argument that our literature expresses a "garrison mentality" battened down against a circumambient wilderness.

DT Getting back to *Pound in Purgatory* ... Your argument goes a long way toward establishing and "proving beyond any doubt" that Pound was both a Fascist and an anti-Semite. Was this inevitable? Was he always an anti-Semite? Does his earlier "history" lead inevitably to his being or becoming an anti-Semite?

LS Nothing in human affairs is inevitable. Like virtually all individuals in Europe or North America who engaged in aesthetic activities who were born in the 1880s or '90s, Pound regarded the social and cultural status quo as sclerotic and oppressive. "Modernism" as it came to be called was essentially a reaction to the sexual prudery and hypocrisy, the economic and class boundaries, and the cultural exclusivity that characterized European and North American civilization in the formative years of "the men of 1914," as Wyndham Lewis dubbed them.

That generation had experienced the birth of what Max Nanny called the "electric age." Radio, the automobile, the fast steamship, the aircraft,

286 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 286 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

the electrification of urban areas, the emancipation of women were all general developments that seemed to justify a belief that a new age was dawning. Pound came to London in 1909 determined to be part of the heralded new age and promptly began writing for a journal called *The New* Age. There he came into contact with a circle that included W.B. Yeats, which thought the new age would be a spiritual re-awakening and not the technological utopia that Marinetti and the Futurists celebrated in advance. For that circle, the bloodbath of World War I was a herald of the death of the old regime, a changing of tincture, as Yeats put it in A Vision. For others that disastrous conflict buried any belief in the perfectibility of man that they had retained from the Enlightenment. Those individuals read Eliot's The Waste Land as a lament for their naive optimism and despair of the future. Pound is as responsible for the tenor of that poem as is Eliot himself, but he felt no despair and continued to compose his epic of the new age. He established himself in Paris where all the literary and artistic luminaries and wannabes congregated in the twenties.

Unhappy in Paris—perhaps because he was overshadowed by Joyce, Hemingway, and even Gertrude Stein-Pound established himself in Rapallo, an inexpensive resort town on the Italian Riviera in 1925. Mussolini's March on Rome happened to coincide with Pound's move but did not motivate it. Indeed, Pound showed little interest in Mussolini or any other political figure until the World Wide Depression of the Thirties persuaded him that direct action had to be taken if the new age his poem heralded were to come about. The rest was perhaps predictable, if not inevitable. Unaccountably—from Pound's perspective—world leaders would not heed his advice on how to fix the problem. Only one world leader provided him an audience—Benito Mussolini. That was enough. The "revolutionary simpleton," as Wyndham Lewis affectionately dubbed him, immediately fell into Mussolini's camp and followed him wherever he went. That Pound was so gullible, and so lacking in the milk of human kindness, is no excuse, but neither is it evidence that his earlier views and practices inevitably led him to Fascism and anti-Semitism.

DT I have always wondered how those who resist your argument regarding Pound's Fascism and anti-Semitism get along with you or with someone like the U.S.-educated Italian scholar Massimo Bacigalupo! One phrase that has always stayed in my mind is one you quote in your book. Here is a quotation from your book in which you are quoting Bacigalupo: "Though I would not endorse Massimo Bacigalupo's very harsh judgment in the preface to *The Formèd Trace* that *The Cantos* 'belong in those shops that

I meant what I said. Pound in Purgatory demonstrates that Pound, and to some extent his epic, The Cantos, hold and express Fascist ideology.

Inter(re)view | 287

Inte(re)view.indd 287 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

I meant what I said. Pound in Purgatory demonstrates that Pound, and to some extent his epic, The Cantos, hold and express Fascist ideology.

sell swastikas and recordings of Mussolini's speeches, this study does lend support to that view (x)" (7). I suppose there are two parts to this question—the second being what it is exactly that you mean in the sentence from your book I have quoted.

LS With the odd exception, most Pound scholars tolerate me reluctantly and do their best to ignore my publications, when they do not review them negatively. Hugh Kenner was a spectacular example. He and I had met at conferences, and he had been gracious and amiable until I published *The Birth of Modernism*. After that he would get up from a table and leave if I offered to join the group. On the other hand, so far as I know, he never attacked my work in print. I never learned exactly what my offence was, but I believe it was exposing the "religious" or occult motivation behind *The Cantos* and behind Pound's entire literary career. I must say, to her credit, Pound's daughter, Mary de Rachelwitz, has always been supportive of my work, despite my failure to accord her father the uncritical adulation that she hears from so many of the regulars at the biennial Pound conferences. Within Canada I have been entirely ignored until now.

As to what I meant by the remark you cite. I meant what I said. Pound in Purgatory demonstrates that Pound, and to some extent his epic, The Cantos, hold and express Fascist ideology. To this day, Pound is the best known and most admired English language poet of the twentieth century in Italy. It must be remembered that for the Italians the choice has, for a very long time, been between Fascism and Communism. The pluralist and permissive notions of liberal democracy have never had a constituency in Italy, and still do not, despite lip service designed to palliate the Americans and northern Europeans. Pound's ideological posture still resonates with the Italians, as of course, does his celebration of Italian history, culture, and art. And, it should be remembered that the racism that is so identified with Nazism was not native to Italy. Certainly Mussolini did enact racial laws on the prompting of the Germans and did ship Jews to concentration camps—despite the rosy picture of Italian innocence portrayed in Roberto Benign's movie, *Life is Beautiful*. It is not his anti-Semitism and conspiracy theories that attract Pound to the Italians but his cultural and political posture—the idea of a society characterized by a homogeneous culture and a consensual political regime. For my money, such a society is neither possible nor attractive, but it is not inherently Fascist or Nazi—even though it is an ideal the Fascist and Nazis both held. The American constitution and the assimilative model of the "melting pot" are designed to produce just

288 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 288 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

such a society, as is the French constitution, which makes anyone born in France a French citizen regardless of race, religion, or gender.

DT I have a few more questions about *Pound and Purgatory*. The importance of *Pound and Purgatory* may be measured by the fact that it attracted quite a bit of attention and complex reactions. On the one hand it received the NPF award for best Pound critical study in 1999; on the other hand, not everyone was willing to agree with your findings or conclusions. Jonathan P. Gill, one of the contributors to the "Ezra Pound Discussion List of the University of Maine" complained that you paid too little attention to the American roots of Pound's economic radicalism and anti-Semitism. What do you make about some of this complaint?

LS Pound himself was anxious to manufacture American roots for his economic and political opinions—largely for polemical purposes. But the chronology is clear. He had no articulated economic opinions before he encountered the ideas of Major Douglas at the offices of *The New Age* in Cursitor Street, London, England. American scholars are incredibly insular and cannot imagine that any American cerebellum can be corrupted by foreign ideas. Some even think the language they speak is an autochthonous American growth. It is, however, true that it was an article in an American publication—*Liberation*, the organ of the Silver Shirts of America, a copycat American Fascist organization—that finally persuaded Pound in 1934 of the existence of a Jewish conspiracy to control the world. While that might count as an American origin for his racial prejudices, it does not support Gill's view that he brought his conspiracy theories with him on the boat to Southampton in 1909.

DT The title of your final chapter is "From Rome to Washington." Anyone who is familiar with the trajectory of Pound's life and intellectual development will understand in a certain way, but in your opening sentence you tell your reader that "The title of this chapter is a little cryptic" (261). Could you please decipher your chapter title for me?

LS Pound lived in Italy from 1925 or thereabouts until his arrest in 1945. During the war, he broadcast radio talks from Rome in which he attempted to persuade American GIs of the futility of the war. Those broadcasts led to his indictment for treason and eventual incarceration at St Elisabeths Hospital for the Insane on the grounds that he was unfit to stand trial. St Elisabeths is in Washington, D.C. Hence "From Rome to Washington."

Inter(re)view | 289

Inte(re)view.indd 289 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

However, the move was merely physical. Pound remained loyal to Rome, that is to Mussolini and his Fascist vision for Italy. This loyalty is evident in his letters to Olivia Rossetti Agresti from St Elisabeths which you and I published in 1998 as *I Cease not to Yowl*.

DT I hope it is not too late to ask you a more straightforward question about *Pound in Purgatory:* I know that the book offers a wide perspective on economic theory in general and Pound's misguided notions about economics in particular—but what do you think is the main thread or theme of your book?

LS The main thread was to document the development of Pound's economic views and political affiliations. I thought such a project of interest not just for an understanding of Pound's career but also for an understanding of the shape of our recent cultural and ideological past. One of the glaring deficiencies of contemporary academic debate in literary studies is the neglect of historical context. What I tried to show in *Pound* in Purgatory was that a well-meaning and intelligent individual could easily fail to discriminate between virtue and vice, between indifference and malignity, between wisdom and foolishness. The kind of judgement that Gill makes is based on three assumptions: 1) that our contemporary perspective on events must have been apparent to individuals a lifetime ago, 2) that the dominant prejudices of one's own set are beyond question or challenge—largely because they are tacit, and 3) those beliefs and prejudices once adopted in childhood are immune to environmental influences. I should add, that I was careful to insist that nothing I wrote was exculpatory of Pound's "error." Even though some of those who shared Pound's economic views did embrace Fascism, Nazism, or anti-Semitism, still others saw the evil of Fascism and Nazism and the vicious absurdity of belief in a Jewish conspiracy. Pound did not.

DT I started this conversation with the statement that your book won the NPF award for best critical study in 1999. Would you care to comment on your book's critical reception?

LS It received two or three very nice reviews but was not reviewed in any prominent places such as the *Times Literary Supplement* or *The New York Times*, and has sold few copies—though apparently enough to justify a paper edition. I find far more people have read *Birth of Modernism* than

290 | *Tryphonopoulos and Surette*

Inte(re)view.indd 290 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

have read *Pound in Purgatory*. Of course, it is more general and has been out six years longer.

DT This is a question I have asked already—perhaps a couple of times already: Do you see yourself doing another Pound book? Or a way of asking the same question might be this: Given the dozens of academic books on Pound, what is it that still needs to be dealt with or what direction do you see Poundian studies taking in the near future?

LS I have the makings of another Pound book in papers I have read but never published, and some I have published, as well as other research which has not been uttered. The topic of these papers is Pound's "scholarship," that is, his engagement with texts that formed his intellectual constellation. No one has looked at that aspect of his career as a story, though most of his reading has been mined as "sources." My interest is not to annotate his prose and poetry but, rather, to trace his intellectual development as an eccentric autodidact. I would, of course, leave out his economic "education."

Inter(re)view | 291

Inte(re)view.indd 291 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM

Inte(re)view.indd 292 2/21/2007, 8:43 AM