Geographies of Politics, Geographies of Literature: Ezra Pound and Italian Modernism

DAVID BARNES

Queen Mary, University of London

Ezra Pound’s commitment to Italian Fascism has been the subject of much critical debate. What has received less attention is the influence of Italian literary modernist culture(s) on his poetic project, in particular on the *Cantos*. This paper discusses Pound’s response to Italy and Italian culture firstly by examining his engagement with the work of the Victorian poet Robert Browning. By showing the ways in which Pound viewed Browning’s version of Italian history as limited in its scope, the paper demonstrates how the groundwork was laid for an interest in the more ‘vigorous’ literary cultures of Italian modernism, particularly those associated with Gabriele D’Annunzio and Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. D’Annunzio’s and Marinetti’s forging of a modern, nationalistic literature was, this paper suggests, an important step on the way towards Pound’s whole-hearted adoption of Fascist politics. A detailed examination of Pound’s poetry, political prose and correspondence shows how the American poet’s engagement with these Italian figures can be seen to rest on the crossroads of aesthetic and political spheres.

KEYWORDS Fascist/Fascism, modernist/modernism, Italy/Italian, nationalist/nationalism

In 1944, Ezra Pound produced two poems in Italian; the first featured the ghost of the recently deceased Futurist writer Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, keen to avenge the Axis defeat at the battle of El Alamein. The second appeared to celebrate a terrorist attack on a group of Allied Canadian soldiers by an Italian Fascist peasant girl, and ended with a paean to the boys and girls who ‘portan’ il nero’ (‘wear the black [shirt]’, *Canto* 73: 435). In the ten years leading up to this work — the violent culmination of Pound’s interest in Italian Fascism — the American poet had become increasingly engaged in the cultural politics of life under the Mussolini regime. Throughout the 1930s, Pound conducted a lively correspondence with...
F.T. Marinetti on questions of aesthetics; in 1936 they exchanged letters about the modernist architecture of Antonio Sant’Elia, and Marinetti ended the exchange with an exclamation of ‘Glory to Antonio Sant’Elia, Glory to Fascist Italy well constructed by Benito Mussolini’ (Ezra Pound Papers; my translation). Since the 1920s, Pound had also maintained an interest in the radical nationalist literature of the poet and proto-Fascist adventurer Gabriele D’Annunzio.

Pound’s trajectory reflects not only a move towards Fascist politics and radical nationalism, but is demonstrative of an increased engagement with Italian modernism and its practitioners. In the figures of D’Annunzio and Marinetti, Pound had discovered a brand of modernism that was radically engaged with politics and nation. Placing an increasing emphasis on the idea of the artist as political activist, Pound saw in the proto-Fascist irredentism of D’Annunzio and the futuristic Fascism of Marinetti new possibilities for modernist writing; possibilities that he invested with more and more potential as his faith in the Fascist project grew. Pound had begun his pilgrimage in Italy as a disciple of the Victorians, of figures such as Robert Browning. Yet he began to see the need to transform this ‘literary Italy’ into a place of political engagement. In his engagement in the early Cantos with Browning’s long poem Sordello, Pound began to formulate a new, politically engaged relationship with Italy, a relationship that began to crystallize alongside his reading of D’Annunzio and Marinetti and his involvement with Fascist politics.

In Venice with Robert Browning

Pound’s engagement with the Victorian poet Robert Browning (and particularly his long poem Sordello) was a crucial stage in his quest to find the poetic language appropriate for the Cantos’ interest in material history. In other words, ‘his prolonged encounter with Browning’ (and, by extension, with Browning’s ‘version’ of Italy) forced Pound to evaluate questions of historical accuracy, material truth, and the place of the ‘poetic persona’ (Gibson, 1995: 81). Pound’s apparent confidence in dealing with the historical geographies of the Cantos is born out of his response to Browning’s halting indecisiveness in Sordello: the frustrated and uncertain appearance of Verona and Venice in Browning’s poem are to be replaced by an aesthetic that moves easily between space and time. In Pound’s own words, ‘Ghosts move about me/ Patched with histories’ (Three Cantos I). What Pound gains from the struggle with Browning — ‘the man who discovered Italy for our time’ (Pound, 1991: 120) — is an increasing sense of the importance of political topography.

Whilst Browning’s engagement with Italian history and politics is significant, Browning’s involvement in historico-political topography in Sordello and other works is hampered by the problem of the poetic persona. Indeed Browning tells us, in his 1863 letter to Joseph Mulrand, that the ‘historical decoration’ of Sordello is only important in as much as it provides a ‘background’ to the poet’s emotional life: ‘my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study’ (Poetical Works II: 194). This problem, argues Mary Ellis Gibson, is what Pound is working through in Three Cantos. It is only in the Cantos proper that ‘the effort to yoke political geography to the immortal gods’ becomes the central fact of Pound’s poetic ambition; only then does ‘spirit of place’ become imbued with live political,
historical and spiritual significance for Pound (Gibson, 1995: 87). Pound needed to find an appropriate language for this renewed encounter with Italy, leading him towards the political modernism of the Italians D’Annunzio and Marinetti. Whilst remaining in the tradition of the Anglo-American literary traveller to Italy, Pound was engaged on a quest to find a fresh, politically engaged way of relating to the country.

Pound’s experience of the city of Venice in *Three Cantos* is mediated through his prolonged struggle with Browning, the ghost of whose version of the city he is trying to exorcise:

> Your ‘palace step’? My stone seat was the Dogana’s curb,
> And there were not ‘those girls’, there was one flare, one face.
> ‘Twas all I ever saw, but it was real […]
> And I can no more say what shape it was […]
> But she was young, too young.
> True, it was Venice,
> And at Florian’s and under the north arcade
> I have seen other faces, and had my rolls for breakfast, for that matter;
> So, for what it’s worth, I have the background
> And you had a background […] (*Three Cantos* I, quoted in Bush, 1976: 56)

Browning serves here as an artistic antagonist; Pound reactively shapes his poetry in contrast to the Victorian master. When it comes to Venice, Pound intends that his version of the city be extricated from the one Browning had presented in his long poem *Sordello* (1840). ‘Hang it all, there can be but one *Sordello!*’, Pound begins the *Three Cantos* by exclaiming; the whole sweep of the poetry that follows is a work of detachment, of differentiating himself from this great antecedent. Browning, ‘the man who found Italy’, to Pound’s mind not only discovered the country as a destination of cultural tourism, but was also involved in painstakingly digging up its past. In Pound’s imagination, therefore, history, literature and a certain kind of ‘highbrow’ tourism are interacting around the figure of Browning. It seems that Pound’s declaration, ‘I have the background/ And you had a background’, has several potential meanings. Browning had indeed talked of needing a ‘background’ to his poetry. But of course, with the image of consuming rolls at Florian’s, another kind of ‘background’ is suggested — a social background of cultured tourism, of informed leisure.

Pound was uncomfortable with a simplistic touristic reception of Venice, and this discomfort seems connected with the need to portray his own travel experience as one differentiated from the herd. In his ‘Indiscretions’ of 1920, it is seen in the need to elevate himself above the crassness of the tourists moving across a Venetian square whom, he writes, exemplify ‘human cliché’ (*Indiscretions*’ 5), and as early as 1910 he had written to Margaret Cravens from San Vio to say ‘I’m in my own part of Venice — not the San Marco-Tedesco [German]-Touristo side’ (Pound, 1988: 36). When it comes to Browning, this need to differentiate is shown in the way Pound depicts Venice. By way of contrast with Browning’s ‘ruined palace-step’ (III, 676 *Poems* I: 216), Pound pictures a Venice where he sits on the ‘Dogana’s curb’ (in the original *Lustra* draft, ‘the Dogana’s *vulgarest* curb’ quoted in Terrell, 1993: 8 [my italics]). Pound, struggling with Browning’s version of *Sordello* and with Browning
himself, creates a vision of Venice that is strongly material. While Pound evokes a city of customs houses and ‘rolls for breakfast’, Browning’s descriptions of Venice in *Sordello* are of a city poised between the elements:

[...] a type
Of Life — ‘twixt blue and blue extends, a stripe,
As Life, the somewhat, hangs ‘twixt naught and naught:
Tis Venice and ‘tis Life [...] (III, 723–6, 217)

Here, life is seen as fragile — lying between ‘naught and naught’ — as Venice is precariously balanced between sea and sky.

This fragility is not confined to Browning’s depictions of the watery city of Venice. Browning’s version of Sordello’s Verona is also self-consciously precarious. This is signified by the repeated, frustrated gesture of appearance: ‘Appears Verona [...]’ (I, 11–12, 151), ‘Then, appear,/ Verona!’ (I, 59–60, 152), ‘Its outline, kindles at the core, appears/ Verona’ (I, 77–8, 152). It takes Browning three attempts before his projected Italian city can take its place in the poem. But Pound writes: ‘I walk Verona. (I am here in England.)/ I see Can Grande. (Can see whom you will)’ (*Three Cantos* I: 54). There is ease, arrogance even, in the way the materiality of Italy is evoked despite Pound’s geographical dislocation: ‘I walk Verona [...] /I see Can Grande’. Pound is working across geographical and temporal boundaries, placing himself in the medieval Verona of the city’s Scaliger rulers. What is suggested here is that the modern poet ‘can see whom [or what]’ he wills. Not only is this poet able to picture Verona, he can actually occupy it.

This movement towards a more ‘live’, political genius loci requires Pound to overcome Browning’s vision of Italy. The published versions of *Cantos* I–III eliminate most of the pained struggle with Browning to present [Italian] places ‘patched with histories’ (*Three Cantos* I: 54). The 1925 published version of the *Draft of XVI Cantos* presents a far more complex and confident web of allusion:

I sat on the Dogana’s steps
For the gondolas cost too much, that year,
And there were not ‘those girls’, there was one face,
And the Buccentoro twenty yards off, howling ‘Stretti’,
And the lit cross-beams, that year, in the Morosini,
And peacocks in Koré’s house, or there may have been.

(*Canto* III: 11)

The ghost of Browning here remains only in the trace of *Sordello* in the line ‘And there were not “those girls”; gone is the continuous conversation Pound seems to be having with the Victorian poet in *Three Cantos*. ‘Your “palace step”/ My stone seat was the Dogana’s curb’ has been replaced with the simple line, ‘I sat on the Dogana’s steps’, and any mention of Florian’s and having a ‘background’ have completely disappeared. Instead, there is a burgeoning economic consciousness (‘the gondolas cost too much, that year’) and an increasingly powerful rhythmic sense: for example, in the listing repetition of ‘And [...] /And [...] /And [...]’ and the subtle prosody demonstrated by Pound’s echoing of ‘lit cross-beams’ and ‘Morosini’. Pound’s poetry is growing both in literary sophistication and in socio-political awareness.
Enter D’Annunzio

That socio-political awareness is, I suggest, reflected in Pound’s quotation of the proto-Fascist military adventurer and poet Gabriele D’Annunzio in Canto III. The final line of the passage quoted above — ‘and peacocks in Kore’s house, or there may have been’ — derives from D’Annunzio’s experimental novella Notturno. D’Annunzio’s text describes the house of Kore as being inhabited by white peacocks (‘la casa di Core e abitata dai pavoni bianchi’; D’Annunzio, 1921: 443), a line Pound also quotes in his 1922 review of Notturno for The Dial magazine.

D’Annunzio became increasingly important for Pound as an example of the ‘poet-hero’, a figure whose ‘modernism’ was also marked by a series of military stunts and expeditions for the cause of radical Italian nationalism. Further to Pound’s approving review of D’Annunzio’s book, the poet later engaged in a series of letters with Ernest Hemingway, where both men praised the activism and energy of the ‘Principe di Monte Nevosa’ (Baker, 1985: 114).

The title of D’Annunzio’s novel — Notturno — means nocturne, a night fantasy associated with nineteenth-century classical music (Chopin and Liszt are particularly linked with the form). Notturno is a series of fevered dream-images, which merge in and out of the ‘reality’ of D’Annunzio’s own subjective experience as a casualty of the war holed up in Venice. Yet these images or visions are increasingly shaped around a sort of redemptive nationalistic consciousness. D’Annunzio is alienated and in a kind of spiritual exile. Yet the blindness, pain and alienation caused by the war is channelled in the novella into quasi-religious ecstasies of nationalism. In the passage below, for instance, D’Annunzio observes a crowd in the narrow Venetian streets:

Faces faces faces, all the passions of all the faces through my wounded eye, innumerably, like hot sand through the fist. No one stops. But I recognise them.

Is it not the enormous Roman crowd in May, in the evening at the Campidoglio? Enormous, fluctuating, howling.

I feel my pallor burn like a white flame. There is no longer anything of me in me. It is as if I were the demon of that turmoil, the genius of the free nation.

My perseverance over thirty years, my love and worship for Italy the Beautiful, the courage of my solitude, the song in the desert, my contempt for obscurity and vituperation, the patience of my waiting, the restlessness of my exile, are transformed for me into a single mass of incandescent force. The whole past flows together toward the whole future. I live my Credo at last, in spirit and blood. I am no longer intoxicated with myself, but with all of my race.

Faces faces faces, shaped in the smouldering flesh, printed in the blood-red fire.

(D’Annunzio, 1993: 228)

The Venetian faces here become transformed into Roman faces clamouring for war in May at the Campidoglio. Of course, modernist texts often depict the image of the street face; Pound’s own ‘In a Station of the Metro’ with its ‘faces in the crowd’ is a prime example. The urban experience, represented supremely in the metro station, is one of anonymity — of many faces, but no communion. Yet in this passage of D’Annunzio’s, the feeling is transformed into that of a proto-Fascist mass sharing a mystical experience of nationalism. Note that the metaphors that D’Annunzio
uses — hot sand, burning, white flames — merge Catholic iconography and sexual suggestion. Reminiscent of the ‘burning burning burning’ of Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, it is resolved not in sexual release or religious epiphany, but in nationalistic fervour: ‘I am no longer intoxicated with myself, but with all of my race’. In the words of Pericles Lewis, who has worked on the relationship between modernism and nationalism, D’Annunzio is concerned with ‘the quest for a moment of pure authenticity in which the present-day self can achieve unity with the self as it has been formed through a lifetime of personal experiences and a long history of national conflicts’ (Lewis, 2000: 176).

Pound looked to the modernist nationalism of D’Annunzio to imbue his writing with a renewed energy, a political edge that would lend his poetry a radical power. In D’Annunzio’s work, self and nation, politics and poetics are indistinct concepts, blending one into another. D’Annunzio’s identification with Christ in *Notturno* — bandaged, wounded — is also a kind of identification with the whole suffering Italian body after the First World War. D’Annunzio’s blinding in one eye thus stands for all the losses of unknown soldiers, for the whole of what came to be known in Fascist circles as the *vittoria mutilata*, the mutilated victory. And like Christ after his three days in the tomb, D’Annunzio and Italy are, we infer, to be resurrected, redeemed. *Notturno* was written between 1916 and 1921. In this period, D’Annunzio was involved not only in the First World War but also in the intervention at Fiume where he pressed for the redemption to Italy of the lands to the east of Trieste that belonged to Yugoslavia.

D’Annunzio had considered himself an honorary Venetian nationalist; his First World War fighter-plane was decorated with a ferocious looking lion of St Mark and his flying squadron was called ‘La Serenissima’, the name suggesting the old Venetian empire. Their motto, invented by the poet, was *Iterum rugit leo* (‘the lion roars again’) and they used Venice as a base for their bombing expeditions into Austria. D’Annunzio also decorated his villa on Lake Garda, the ‘Vittoriale’ (where he would die in 1938), with encrusted lions of St Mark. Indeed, D’Annunzio personified much of what was to become known as *venezianità*: a new, revived ‘Venetian-ness’, imperialistic and military in its outlook. Furthermore, his *irredentismo adriatico* — his desire to claim back for Italy the former Venetian possessions of the Adriatic — placed him on the side of an Italian nationalism that put Venice at the heart of its cultural and political project. Thus, as John Pemble has argued, D’Annunzio’s Venice was not a crumbling city of ‘exhaustion and decay’, but one of ‘resurrection and renewal’: ‘quintessentially Italian and quintessentially modern’, holding the ‘promise of power and prestige’. The Venice that attracted D’Annunzio was thus ‘not elegiac but heroic’ (Pemble, 2005: 46–7).

For Pound too, the city continued to stand for contemporary politics and action; Pound recorded Venice as being the site of his first encounter with Fascism, noting the ‘line of black shirts’ in Piazza San Marco (*Jefferson and or Mussolini*: 50). In the *Pisan Cantos* of the 1940s, Venice is associated with the Mussolini regime, and with the figure of the Fascist finance minister Count Volpi (whom Pound praises for his ‘energy’, LXXVI: 475). Pound also approves of the regime architect Eugenio Miozzi’s rebuilt Accademia Bridge across the Grand Canal: ‘the new bridge of the Era’ (LXXVI: 474).
Certainly Pound’s interest in D’Annunzio seems to come as much from a political as a literary standpoint. Pound looked to D’Annunzio as a symbol of the re-emerging might of Italy. In his ‘Paris Letter’ in the literary journal The Dial, Pound addresses himself to the ‘decadence’ and ‘enervation’ of contemporary London and Paris, which he contrasts with ‘a reawakening Italy’. This comparison is strengthened by Pound’s move, in his review of current writing at the end of the letter, from the languid literature of Proust and Martin du Gard to Notturno:

One turns from the indisputable enervation of Paris to D’Annunzio’s Notturno, I think with relief. At any rate one finds the Italian readable. In the fury of Fiume, in the general bewilderment of manifestos, aeroplanes, bombs, fascisti, et cetera, together with memories of vast verbal emprise, one had forgotten — if one ever had — a critical estimate of the ‘poet hero’ as a writer.

(Pound, 1922: 552–3)

Rebecca Beasley makes the connection between Pound’s estimation of D’Annunzio the ‘poet-hero’ here and his references earlier in the ‘letter’ to Sigismundo di Malatesta, another one of Pound’s Italian ‘heroes’ (Beasley, 2007: 197). In Pound’s mind Sigismondo, like D’Annunzio, stood at the crossroads of politics and art, as both patron and military leader. In his ‘bombarded Venice’, and in the ‘fury of Fiume’, the Italian poet exemplified the synthesis of the political-military and the artistic consciousness. The timing of Pound’s paean to D’Annunzio is also, as Beasley comments, crucial, for the ‘Paris letter’ was dated ‘October 1922’. Beasley writes: ‘Pound wrote this advertisement for a reawakening Italy and the poet who had since been adopted as a fascist-hero in the month of Mussolini’s March on Rome’ (2007: 198).

Certainly by 1928 (in his essay on Guido Cavalcanti) Pound was referring to D’Annunzio as ‘Nostro Gabriele’: ‘solitary, superficially eccentric, but with a surprisingly sound standard of values’. D’Annunzio, as the ‘only living author who has ever taken a city or held up the diplomatic crapule at the point of machine-guns’ was ‘in a position to speak with more authority than a batch of neuraurasthenic incompetents or of writers who [...] are [...] incapable of action’ (Pound, 1954: 192). Essential to Pound was D’Annunzio’s claim not to be a ‘mere poet’, but an artist: ‘Tutte le manifestazioni della vita e tutte le manifestazioni dell’intelligenza mi attraggono egualmente’, ‘All manifestations of life and all manifestations of intelligence are equally attractive’, D’Annunzio had written (quoted in Pemble, 2005: 47). This led to an increasing military consciousness, and an emphasis on the idea of the fighting artist, a figure that Pound found extremely attractive. Pound saw Sigismundo in this light, as he would later F.T. Marinetti and the Duce himself.

Connections between D’Annunzio and Fascism are strong, if more complex than popularly imagined. In Venice D’Annunzio was certainly a crucial figure for the development of political movements associated with Fascism. The poet’s close collaborator in the Fiume campaign, Pietro Marsich, was among the founders of the Venetian fascio di combattimento, and the fascio honoured D’Annunzio as its first patron. The Italian historian Mario Isnenghi suggests that in contrast to the later focus on Duce-worship, Venice’s early Fascist groups were ‘D’Annunzian’ (dannunziano) rather than ‘Mussolinian’ (mussoliniano) in their tone (Isnenghi, 2002: 243–4).
D’Annunzio and the Rock Drill

In Canto 93 of *Section: Rock Drill* (poems written in the 1950s whilst Pound was in the psychiatric institution St Elizabeth’s Hospital) D’Annunzio appears twice in quick succession, first in a quotation from one of D’Annunzio’s plays, *La Nave*, and then as an orator:

‘mai tardi […]
‘per l’ignoto’
and the soul’s job? (Ocellus)
‘Renew’ …
& there is no doubt that D’Annunzio
could move the crowd in a theatre
or that the stone rose in Brescia,
Amphion!

*(Canto 93: 130–135, 643–4)*

The quotation ‘mai tardi […] per l’ignoto’ is a fragment of ‘non e mai tardi per tentare l’ignoto, (‘it is never too late to try the unknown’). In its original context the quotation from D’Annunzio’s *La Nave* (written in 1905 and first produced in 1907) refers to a (perhaps mythical) endeavour by the earliest Venetians to recover the body of St Mark from Alexandria — which they succeeded in doing, according to legend, by hiding the body underneath a protective layer of pork meat to deter the Muslim authorities. As a play, *La Nave* rewards endeavour, ingenuity and nationalistic fervour; it stands between theatre and politics, ending with a quasi-religious moment of mass excitement:

Alleluia!
Cristo regna!
Signor nostro, redimi l’Adriatico
Libera alle tue genti l’Adriatico!
Patria ai Veneti tutto l’Adriatico!

Alleluia!
Christ reigns!
Lord, redeem the Adriatic
Free for your people the Adriatic!
Return to the Venetians the whole Adriatic!

*(D’Annunzio, 1929: 288–9; my translation)*

This ecstatic moment conflates the situation of early Venice with the contemporary Italian political context and acts as a spur for a new *irredentismo adriatico* (Adriatic irredentism) — a returning to Italy of Italian lands now in Croatia and Slovenia. The play, as Nancy R. Cirillo has commented, laid the ground for D’Annunzio’s actual intervention in the Fiume crisis of 1919–20 (Cirillo, 1987: 1191–2). Why is Pound quoting D’Annunzio in this *Canto?* *Canto* 93 evokes a paradisal, sylvan scene, with hints of an erotic subtext:

not yet […]! Not yet!
do not awaken.
The trees sleep, and the stags, and the grass;
The boughs sleep unmoving. *(125–9, 643)*
This chorus, ‘do not awaken’, seems to be an echo of the biblical love poem, the Song of Songs: ‘I adjure you, o daughters of Jerusalem/ By the roes, and by the hinds of the field/ That ye stir not up, nor awake love,/ Until it please’. Placing that theme in counterpoint with D’Annunzio’s ‘never too late’ may reveal two voices here, one urging (erotic) action, the other advising constraint. If Wendy Flory is right about the poem being a paean to Pound’s muse — and possibly mistress — Sherri Martinelli, then love here is a specific and a personal possibility (Flory, 1980: 243).

Yet the D’Annunzio quotation connects this erotic vortex to performative, radical politics. For D’Annunzio such concerns were inseparable; the play La Nave, as with much of D’Annunzio’s work, is as concerned with sexuality as with ideology. Or rather, the two are inextricably bound together, as in the figure of Stelio Effrena in the novel Il Fuoco who is — in Nancy Cirillo’s words — both a ‘fiery political leader and inexhaustible sexual athlete’ (1987: 1189), an almost clichéd signifier of virility.

Pound ends up with a D’Annunzio who can ‘move the crowd in a theatre’. But the ‘crowd’ here suggests the crowd of the streets and piazzas who heard D’Annunzio’s oratory. The theatre then, becomes the theatre of politics; the crowd moves as the stone rises in Brescia and as Amphion, the son of Zeus, creates the stone wall around Thebes by playing his lyre. This, then, suggests the place of the ‘poet/hero’ as the artist who can move mountains or stones. But given the context of Pound’s confinement and the fall and failure of Fascism, this moment of political ‘renewal’ or action is left only as a possibility. This is not to say that these political references are to be viewed as nostalgic. Peter Nicholls, convincingly, sees the Pisan Cantos (written in the 1940s) as ‘desiring through their own inscription to reactivate the traces of the Fascist past that Pound leaves scattered throughout the poetry’ (Nicholls, 1984: 172).

Similarly, there is none of the much-vaunted ‘humility’ here which is sometimes a commonplace of critical approaches to the later Cantos. Instead, the wreckage of Fascism, with its demagogues, is internalized, becoming a kind of hieroglyph, standing for action (erotic, military or artistic) and political renewal at the same time.

Pound and futurist Fascism: F.T. Marinetti

However, it is in Pound’s relationship with the poet and artist F.T. Marinetti that we can most clearly see the nature of the relationship between politics and art in Pound’s Italian engagements. Pound’s early dismissal of the Futurist impresario during the Vorticist period (the Vorticist Manifesto had written off Marinetti’s aesthetic as a ‘hullo-bulloo about motorcars’, Kolocotroni et al., 1998: 292) was replaced in the 1930s by a keen interest in Marinetti as a representative of radical, Fascist modernism. Marinetti appears twice in Pound’s Cantos: first in the Italian Canto 72, where his ghost appears wanting to inhabit Pound’s body so he can continue fighting in the Second World War (the poem was written in 1944). His second inscription is in Canto XCII of Section: Rock Drill where, again, he is mentioned in a military context: ‘And ministri went to the fighting line/ As did old Marinetti’ (56–7: 635). Both citations refer to Marinetti’s enthusiastic journey to the front line in the Second World War despite his advanced years.
Pound had developed a lively correspondence with the Futurist writer in the 1930s, and met him several times. Intriguingly, one of the figures they discussed in their letters was D’Annunzio. It seems the two men were becoming simultaneous in Pound’s mind as dual representatives of the type of the ‘poet/hero’. Marinetti himself had begun with an attitude of scorn towards the work of D’Annunzio; to Marinetti, the earlier writer’s work represented the rot of ‘passeism’. At the beginning of his career, Marinetti considered D’Annunzio a peddler of ‘the sickly, nostalgic poetry of [...] memory’ (Marinetti, 1972: 68), and consigned him to a moment that had passed: the age of decadence. Yet Marinetti’s later work seems to return to D’Annunzian tropes; his unfinished ‘aeropoem’,4 *Venezianella e Studentaccio* (1944), with its central female personification of Venice, echoes D’Annunzio’s great Venetian works like *Il Fuoco* and *Notturno*. Here, in the words of Giuso Baldissone, a ‘transfigured Venice’ (1992: 136) acts as both Futurist mythos and romantic dream — an ‘amorous Futurism’ (1992: 131). Could this work of ‘aeropoesia’, which Marinetti was writing when he died, have been inspired by his correspondence with Pound?

‘Aeropittura’, if not ‘aeropoesia’, is the subject of some correspondence between Marinetti and Pound, correspondence that can be traced through the unpublished Pound papers in the Beinecke Library, Yale. There is a note, dated 2 May 1941, where Pound mentions the art form. Marinetti first devised the concept in 1928; it is associated, disturbingly, with the glorification of aerial war from the time of Abyssinia, through the Spanish Civil War, and into the Second World War. In the ‘aeropoem’ *Venezianella e Studentaccio*, Venezianella, an idealized Venice in female form, appears in an aircraft; Marinetti’s imagery is a self-conscious fusion of Futurist technophilia and spiritual iconography.

The traffic of letters between Marinetti and Pound may well have helped to crystallise Marinetti’s thought on ‘aeropoetic’ artforms. In his note on ‘aeropittura’, Pound writes: ‘io non vedo “UN motto” che servirebbe, vedo LO SPAZIO fra DUE motti’ (‘I don’t see “ONE motto” which would serve [work], I see THE SPACE between TWO mottos’; Ezra Pound Papers, my translation). He then describes an imagined ‘space’ between the writings of the Romantic poet Giacomo Leopardi and those of Gabriele D’Annunzio, ‘con tutto cio che s’implice nella distanza, distanza d’epoca, distanza fra elegia di Leopardi ed il superbo intuito profetico di G D Annunzio’ (‘with all that is implied in the distance, a distance of epoch, a distance between the elegy of Leopardi and the superb, prophetic intuition of G D Annunzio’; Ezra Pound Papers; my translation).

After these thoughts, he asks Marinetti whether he remembers the first staging of D’Annunzio’s *La Nave* in Venice in 1908. It is possible that Pound attended the play when he moved to Venice from the United States in the same year. What appears to be suggested in Pound’s comment about the ‘space between two mottos’ is the idea of a distance between the pessimistic, nineteenth-century nationalism of Leopardi — an elegiac nationalism ultimately unrealisable — and D’Annunzio’s spiritualized, proto-Fascist nationalism. The particular phrase of Leopardi’s that Pound cites is ‘ma la gloria non vedo’ (‘but I do not see the glory’ — a favourite phrase of Pound’s), lines taken from Leopardi’s great nationalist poem, ‘All’ Italia’. The poem describes a ruinous space marked by crumbling buildings, the ‘towers of our ancestors’ (‘torri degli avi nostri’, *Canti* 5). Leopardi, then, can ‘see’ the decaying ruins, but not the ‘glory’; in other words, what is missing is a radical power and vital energy.
Italian literary modernism influenced both Pound's poetic and political ‘selves’. Providing models of experimental literary practice that were at the same time a working-out of Italian nationalism’s struggle to find its modern voice, D’Annunzio and Marinetti provided Pound with the possibility of new (and disturbing) forms of literature that influenced the poet’s work in the 1940s. Both Pound’s Radio Rome broadcasts to the United States of 1941–3 and the Italian Cantos of 1944 are experimental, modernist — involving strange leaps in time, many voices, and a keen sense of prosody — and Fascist. What they inherit from Marinetti, D’Annunzio and others is a sense of literature as combat. The drives of modernist experimentation — its energy and vitalism — become in this nexus virtually indistinguishable from the auratic power of renewed, militaristic nationalism. Thus the possibilities of Italian military revival, expansion and renewed national identity, the march of the Fascist New Europe and its ‘purifying’ aims exist within the texts as modes of literary power. It is significant that one of the first of the radio broadcasts (whose dissemination ultimately led to Pound’s arrest on charges of treason) was spurred on by the death of James Joyce. The text of that speech, meandering between literature and politics, argues that there is a continuity between the modernist vanguard represented by Joyce, Pound, Wyndham Lewis and Eliot, and the Fascist/National Socialist Europe. Pound explicitly suggests that the great work of avant-garde experiment — of writers he calls ‘LIVE men’ — is being given an ‘opening’ by Fascist Italy: ‘You tie me down by one foot in Rapallo, and block every other opening, and for the sake of God’s light, they open me up this air. Who does? ROME does!’ (1948: 3).

By this time, in Pound’s reasoning, all good writers are in some sense Fascist writers. Joyce’s Ulysses, for example, ‘cooked up and served the unmitigated god damn stink of the decaying usury era’ (Pound, 1948: 6). In other words, Joyce’s book becomes a proto-Fascist attack on liberal-democratic, bourgeois capitalism, a warning about the decay wrought by corrupted economics:

Oh it can’t happen here, you say: meaning it cant happen in the US of America. Oh CAN’T it happen in the US of America, with TWO million tartar shock troops already THAAR in Manhatten, all there in the nation’s ECONOMIC center or capital. (1948: 9)

That Pound’s digression on literature can end with a paranoiac, anti-Semitic rant (for ‘tartar shock troops’, read Jews) should not surprise. His rhetoric has collapsed all literary categories — and all his previous literary experimentation and promotion work — into the narrow confines of the Fascist project. Here we can recover a reading of Pound’s work that is fully grounded in its Italian context. This is the poet as Fascist artist; only by understanding Pound in his relation to the politics of Italian modernism will we be able to decipher Pound’s experiments in radical writing in the 1940s and beyond.

Notes

1 It is important to note here both Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s support for the nineteenth-century Risorgimento (‘re-awakening’) struggle, the diverse movements for national autonomy at work in Italy. In Barrett Browning’s ‘Casa Guidi Windows’, the poet laments an ‘Italy enchained’ by foreign occupation (1910: 241); and in Robert Browning’s ‘The Italian in England’, Browning focuses, sympathetically, on a nationalist fugitive from Lombardy.
‘Aeropoesia’ or ‘aeropoetry’ was developed by Marinetti concomitantly with his interest in areopittura, or artistic depictions of (usually military) aircraft. The ‘aeropoem’ form can be seen as early as 1912, in Marinetti’s *The Pope’s Monoplane*, a ‘Political Novel in Free Verse’. The language of the poem is at once militaristic and nationalistic: ‘All of Italy’s grenades together,/ bleeding of a burning club,/ spinning whirlwind of backs on backs!’ (2002: 49–50). At the time of Marinetti’s correspondence with Pound, the Futurist impresario was developing areopoesia as part of a ‘total’ political theatre, involving cinema, radio and electric light shows (Maramai, 2009: 80–81).

By 1938, Pound had become interested in a theory that modern-day Ashkenazi Jews were largely descendents of Central Asian converts to Judaism. In July 1938, he wrote to the Jewish poet Louis Zukofsky asking: ‘Do you pussnly [personally] favour being a sem/ [semit] or a Tartar?’ (Pound, 1987: 194).

References


Pound, E. 1948. ‘If This be Treason . . .’. Siena: Olga Rudge.


**Notes on contributor**

David Barnes completed a PhD at Queen Mary, University of London (awarded in 2009) on the historical contexts of John Ruskin’s and Ezra Pound’s depictions of Venice. His articles have appeared in *Comparative Literature* and the *Journal of Modern Literature*, and he has also reviewed for the *Times Literary Supplement* and the *Times Higher Educational Supplement*.

Email: david22barnes@aol.com