

POUND AND HENRY JAMES'S "SMALL BOY" PERSONA

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Nowhere else but in aristocratic London, Ezra Pound cultivated an American, either "half-savage" or more refined, public pose. His photographs of the time tell us so. One thinks of Coburn's defiant portrait in a dressing gown à la Whistler (or à la Mauberley), or of a number of informal snapshots showing his "cowboy" and Whitmanesque young man-about-town casual attire for his morning errands in the immediate neighborhoods of Church Walk, Kensington. That was the twofold "poet's outfit" which he replaced with a "tuxedo," or dinner jacket (again à la Whistler), for his evening lectures (Carpenter 129).

Such was Pound's London inner/public persona. Whistler, rather than the too richly elegant, Italianate John Singer Sargent so beloved by Henry James, was the model for the new provincial American artist in the metropolis of that era. Like Whistler and James, Pound too was an exile. As a matter of fact, he came to Europe from a very diversified assemblage of parts of America: the West, New England (through his forbears), New York, and Philadelphia. Yet, at that time in London, he felt, in mind

and spirit, somewhat closer to the charming and witty American Whistler than to anyone else. Whistler, with his straw Yankee hat, “extraordinary long cane,” and an “American accent larded with French expressions” (MacDonald 9), always playing with character and appearance both in life and work, could offer Pound a distinctive outfit: natively outspoken, sometimes informal and bohemian or otherwise – according to the opportunity – dandyish. Eventually, one may also ask, what sort of voice this new adventurer from the provinces was going to or planning to develop?¹

It is well known that by those still Edwardian 1910s Pound was an intimate of an older British generation which included Yeats, Blunt, Hewlett, Ford Madox Hueffer and many others, while devoting his studies to Cavalcanti, Fenollosa, Propertius, and Provençal “personae” à la Browning. But he had also reached London just in time to hear echoes of the last snippets of James’s “wonderful” conversation:

we should have known that it was going on somewhere. The massive head, the slow uplift of the hand, *gli occhi onesti e tardi*, the long sentences piling themselves up in elaborate phrase after phrase, the lightning incision, the pauses, the slightly shaking admonitory gesture with its “wu-a-wait a little, wait a little, something will come”; blague and benignity and the wait of so many years’ careful, incessant labour of minute observation always there to enrich the talk. I had heard it but seldom, yet it is all unforgettable. (LE 295)

As canto 7 further testifies, “unforgettable” was the tone of James’s voice, “drinking the tone of things.” If in 1912 Whistler had been nine years dead,² Henry James was still there, living at the Reform Club. Pound had the great opportunity to hear the sound of the Master’s voice: his “colloquial” American idiom; his knowledge of two continents; his efforts to make them “understand each other”; his painful choice in the end of standing on the “side of civilization” against “Armageddon, the conflict” (LE 297) as his “last public act”.³

While Alving Langton Coburn⁴ was taking those Whistle-rian photographs at Church Walk, James was in fact interrogating his past in a dim Chelsea room, and dictating to Miss Bosanquet, out of a "throb of romance" (*Autobiography* 42), his memories of a son and a brother, of a little boy who had played and eaten "peaches" in the lower Fifth Avenue. This is how, after his last visit to America,⁵ *A Small Boy and Others*, the first volume of his autobiographies, came to the light and was published in 1913. In that book, Leon Edel claims, James's "memories found shape and rhythm in the resonances of his style. One hears the personal voice in every line of *A Small Boy and Others*; by degrees what is built up for us is the development of an artistic sensibility and the growth of an imagination" (672). A "literary portraiture" James termed the method he had been applying to himself, the very method he had earlier used for such figures as Hawthorne, Turgenev, and William Wetmore Story (*Autobiography*, Dupee xi). A "supreme portraiture" (PD 8), is what Pound in *Indiscretions* called *A Small Boy and Others*.

The fact seems to be that James, who was writing "now in the voice of his father and his brother" (Edel 672), was to the "provincial" Pound the "*donnée*" (LE 304) he needed at the right moment of his literary and American "education." It was a discovery and a consolidation of his strong national consciousness in the metropolitan, albeit by then decaying, London of his time:

And the great labour, this labour of translation, of making America intelligible, of making it possible for individuals to meet across national borders. I think half the American idiom is recorded in Henry James' writing, and whole decades of American life that otherwise would have been utterly lost, wasted, rotting in the unhermetic jars of bad writing, of inaccurate writing. No English reader will ever know how good are his New York and his New England; no one who does not see his grandmother's friends in

the pages of the American books.

The whole great assaying and weighing, the research for the significance of nationality, French, English, American. (LE 296)

James put America “on the map,” giving “us a real past, a real background” (LE 302, 312), Pound tells readers of the *Little Review* in 1918. And he did so by retrieving from the “ragbag of memory” (*Autobiography* 41) lost pages of American idiom and life, “true terms and happy values” (3), “our ‘social’ tone” (40), the “good” old New York “atmosphere,” or “the New York garb of the period,” a garb that was, as James remembered it, “an immense attestation of liberty” (42). Quite possibly, through James, Pound too found that he could contribute to putting America on the “map” with his own childhood memories of “old New York.”

Thus, after his perceptive reading of James’s complete works (without overlooking his limitations and “defects”)⁶ for the *The Little Review* “Henry James Number” (1918), he felt that he could for once become a *prosateur* himself and recapture the tale of America where James had left it off. *Indiscretions* (1920, 1923) was ambitiously (and mockingly) meant to fulfil such a purpose in order to mark a step further in the James rather than Joyce tradition, and assess valuable criteria for the benefit of the new generation of American writers. Consequently, regretting, like James, a lost time (childhood, origin, pre-Civil War America), and questing for “our peculiar heritage” (LE 302), in his autobiographical piece Pound sometimes adopts the “small boy” mask and language (his own and his own “father’s” language), in the attempt to recreate the lost flavor of a post-Jamesian American “era of unmixed motives” (PD 8).

The manuscript of *Indiscretions* was created in Venice in the wake of Henry James writing there the New York Edition “charming Venetian preface” (LE 312) to *The Portrait of a Lady*. Rather than writing, James was actually reconstructing

the painstaking process of writing that "portrait." James tells us of the "'literary effort'" (*Art of the Novel* 41) he put in that adventure, in search, from his Riva degli Schiavoni "windows" fronting the lagoon, of "some right suggestion, of some better phrase, of the next happy twist of my subject, the next true touch for my canvas" (40). As it happens, *Indiscretions* appears to be conceived as "the next happy twist" of James's "subject," a "happy twist" in the story of America. Hence, Pound's own retrieving of some lost good pages of "dated" (PD 9) atmospheres: his own "old New York" along with his father's and grandfather's West.

I said also "mockingly." Doubtless, Pound knows both James's merits and his shortcomings.⁷ Yet, the first two pages of his own "small boy" autobiography – his own starting out from a much humbler and less expensive Venetian room with a view – do try to follow James's rhythm, his complex hypotactic phrasing, his piling up of elaborate sentences, ending up, however, solely with a parodic rendition of James's excellent American prose. This is no wonder, since, it is worth recalling, in 1918 the "supreme portraiture" of *A Small Boy and Others* sounds to Pound in fact "disgusting." The first "three pages are enough," he argues, "to put one off Henry James once and for all, damn badly written, atrocious vocabulary" (LE 328). As a consequence, he offers to his readers his own indiscreet, desecrating imitation, deviously meant to show that Pound cannot be a *prosateur* à la James. This is why, after his mimicking homage to the great master, he turns to a more personal tone of voice, re-enacting (or re-phrasing) the stories of the family (the Weston-Pound-Loomis stories), heard as a very young boy through his grandmother's and his father's voice, into a fascinating paratactic – apparently (notice: only apparently) extremely elementary – demotic tale, or tall tale.

Actually, *Indiscretions* may rather be taken as a "twice-told tale" à la Hawthorne. Apart from James and from more

complex questions of style, tone and language, there are several clues that in constructing his *revue* Pound had in mind also the model of Hawthorne's "The Custom-House." One need only think of the incipit of both sketches,⁸ and of the fact that *Indiscretions* is written by a "persona" who looks from the picturesque roofs of Venice at the "Dogana steps" on the opposite side of the Canal. But this would be another story.

What I intend to highlight, instead, is the relation of *A Small Boy and Others* to the *Cantos*, and in particular to canto 74. In fact, in a wellknown, nostalgic and pathetic passage of that canto, fragmentary excerpts from both *A Small Boy and Others* and *Indiscretions* are capable of interesting intertextual reverberations.

I especially would like to refer to the lines addressed to the lost old New York, the "brown-stone" Manhattan with its "remains of the old South," and the 42nd St. "tunnel" of Pound's childhood. That landscape is retrieved in the bitter Pisan air through the memory of what he had already so humorously narrated in *Indiscretions*. Hence, the domestic "perdute ombre" taking new life: Monsieur Fouquet and Mr. Quackenbush, old Francis Train and the family Connecticut hero, Joseph Wadsworth, great-aunt Frank and – more concealed – great-uncle Ezra. The passage ends with young Ezra's first sight of Europe in 1898: quite relevantly, of Washington Irving's lost gardens of "Al Hambra."⁹ All this is called "refinement, pride of tradition, alabaster / Towers of Pisa / (alabaster, not ivory)" (74/467).

However, in his Pisan recollection of such a personal "periplum" Pound focuses for a brief moment on a very disquieting exposure: a disturbing small figure, almost a painter's sub-sketch, relegated in a secondary corner of his great canvas. It is a brush stroke which is meant to contrast altogether with the foregrounded discourse. Such seems to be at the microlevel the function in canto 74 of the New York "market" scene, introducing the man throwing a knife:

or a fellow throwing a knife in the market
 past baskets and bushels of peaches
 at \$ 1. the bushel

(74/467)

These lines – a small boy's remembrance of an "unmixed" cultural milieu – are indeed culled from *Indiscretions*. They condense a passage in which along with the New York of his own childhood, Pound recalls Henry James's New York of more or less thirty years before:

The New York "wharves," which H. J. records as heaped with watermelons and bushel-baskets of peaches, must have been not too unlike the old fruit market and other seemingly endless "Covent Gardens" on the west side "down town," to which I was taken by my Great Uncle, and, after his death, by my Great Aunt in the search for advantageous provisions. I remember a man throwing a large jack-knife some fifty feet after a fleeing male figure. The incident was unique so far as I was concerned, but seemed to arouse no curiosity among the by-standers. (PD 9-10)

The last sentence is quite charged with meaning. Clearly, the downtown scene has changed by the early Nineties without the innocent boy having realized the change: "the incident was unique so far as I was concerned." Remarkably: "unique," either with respect to the fact that Pound's point of view is that of a small boy or otherwise because New York was no longer a small, untainted place. Suddenly, the distinguished world of "refinement, pride of tradition," or of James's "finer civility" (LE 329) appears to be gone: no "curiosity" among the "anonymous" – possibly "alien" – bystanders. The American scene had in the meantime acquired a different flavor.

Hawthorne, while looking from the "front windows" of the Custom-House with its "flight of wide granite steps" (295),¹⁰ had noticed how things had changed in his own

native town. Her “wharves,” once “bustling” with “commercial life” (294), were then, in 1846, crumbling “to ruin” (296). To his disappointment, “old Salem” had disappeared. As it happens, this particular Salem picture serves Pound’s reader well to acknowledge that the New York ““wharves”” (in quotation marks) of Henry James, recalled in *Indiscretions*, are not James’s (who doesn’t mention them in *A Small Boy*) but, indeed, Hawthorne’s “wharves.” With this double set of citations Pound is evidently creating a sort of family romance of disappointments, which gets lost in canto 74, where more poignant than the New York/Salem “wharves” is the fruit “market,” once so similar to other “Covent Gardens.” This is an annotation that, like the disturbing flash sketch of the man throwing a knife, remains not fully graspable if the reader does not refer once again to the “small boy” of Henry James, depicted on the very downtown spot Pound is somewhat intertextually evoking. In fact, in a passage of *A Small Boy and Others* James describes that market of the Fifties as a sort of mythical “garden”:

I should wrong the whole impression if I didn’t figure it first and foremost as that of some succulent comucopia. What did the stacked boxes and baskets of our youth represent but the boundless fruitage of that more bucolic age of the American world, and what was after all of so strong an assault as the rankness of such harvest? Where is that fruitage now, where in particular are the peaches *d’antan*? where the mounds of Isabella grapes and Seckel pears in the sticky sweetness of which our childhood seems to have steeped? . . . and bushels of peaches in particular, peaches big and peaches small, peaches white and peaches yellow, played a part in life from which they have somehow been deposed; every garden, almost every bush and the very boys’ pockets grew them; they were “cut up” and eaten with cream at every meal. . . Above all the public heaps of them, the high-piled receptacles at every turn, touched the street as with a sort of southern plenty; the note of the rejected and scattered fragments, the memory of the slippery skins and rinds and kernels with which the old dislocated flags

were bestrown, is itself endeared to me and contributes a further pictorial grace. We ate every thing by those days by the bushel and the barrel, as from stores that were infinite; we handled watermelons as freely as cocoanuts, and the amount of stomach-ache involved was negligible in the general Eden-like consciousness. (42)

James's edenic peaches grew in "the very boys' pockets" as if they were coins, nickels, money, indeed. Along with other details, also the persona of *Indiscretions* remembers "bushels of peaches" in the New York of the Nineties, but they were already different peaches, bound to reappear twenty years later. As Ron Bush quite rightly maintains, in canto 74 these are "illustrations of the way 'certain images be formed in the mind / to remain there' (466), sustaining Pound's endurance" (171) at Pisa.¹¹

However, here there seems to be something more at play than merely "memory" and "endurance." In that segment from canto 74 there is a recharging of the childhood memories we know from *Indiscretions*; there is a hidden emphasis on the myth of America as a "cornucopia"; a special emphasis on James's "boundless fruitage of that more bucolic age of the American world"; on the "Eden-like consciousness" dramatically at odds with the Pisan atmosphere.

Also for Hawthorne the "spell" of old Salem "survives, and just as powerfully as if the native spot were an earthly paradise" (301). Eventually, peaches, wharves, customhouses, are bound to fall, to rot and crumble into ruins. Additionally, "every Custom-House officer must be supposed to fall" as well (304). Due to political reasons (the "rotatory system"), Hawthorne was dismissed from his office in the end: "Neither the front nor the back entrance of the Custom-House opens on the road to Paradise" (304).¹²

Canto 74, rather than *Indiscretions*, is Pound's bitter and brilliant answer to Hawthorne's and James's last question: "Where is that fruitage now, where in particular are the

peaches *d'antan?*” A question that easily leads us to “où sont les heures of that year / Mr James...” of canto 74 or to the Prado in canto 80; or even to Prufrock’s question and hesitation: “Do I dare to eat a peach?” – a line that has always bothered me!¹³

At Pisa there are no Covent Gardens. That fruitage survives in a lapsed “fruit market” (beauty “in the market place”), and its cost is clearly stated: “\$ 1. the bushel,” a cost the small boy of *Indiscretions* could not (or would not) perhaps remember. Money, the cost of money, versus the not yet wasted cornucopian free abundance (“plenty”) and the “benefits of the gods” (PD 42) is inevitably what Pound remembers at Pisa.

James and Whistler had envisioned the fall of America. In canto 74 that fall is embodied in the man with the jack-knife and in the cost of peaches. In the *Pisan Cantos* then Pound’s small boy persona is rehearsed in order to depict the withdrawal of America from the first, primordial covenant with the American people: the exile from paradise. Nathaniel Hawthorne and his “dogana” give us an early glint of that fracture.

Even if with Whistler, Sargent, and James, America had doubtless found a place on the “map,” it must be acknowledged as well that the “small boy” voices were being erased from the American map. As for those who kept on stubbornly appearing time and again, it should be hardly surprising that they were to be finally unattended: the voices of Huck Finn, Nick Adam, Ike McCaslin, Holden Caulfield, and Ezra Pound.

Notes

¹ Pound's annotations on the "provincial" consciousness of James sound interesting today: "Attempting to view the jungle of the work as a whole, one notes that, despite whatever cosmopolitan upbringing Henry James may have had, as witness *A Small Boy's Memoirs* and *Notes of a Son and Brother*, he nevertheless began in *French Poets and Novelists* with a provincial attitude from which it took him a long time to work free. Secondly, we see various phases of the 'style' of his presentation or circumambience" (LE 303). This is why to *A Small Boy and Others* he definitively prefers *The Middle Years*, since the latter "is a tale of the great adventure; for, putting aside a few simple adventures, sentimental, phallic, Nimrodic, the remaining great adventure is precisely the approach to the Metropolis; for the provincial of our race the specific approach to London, and no subject surely could more heighten the pitch of writing than that the treated approach should be that of the greatest writer of our time and of our own particular language" (331).

² The one, and only, meeting of Pound with James must have occurred in 1912: "About the first week of February Pound met Henry James in a London drawing-room. They do not seem to have engaged in much conversation but 'glared at one another,' he told his family, 'across the same carpet'" (Stock 158).

³ LE 295. In 1912 there had been the famous Tate Exhibition of Whistler, reviewed by Pound for *The New Age*. Significantly, James and Whistler are joined together in a quite moving diptych: "I have taken deep delight in the novels of Mr. Henry James, I have gathered from the loan exhibit of Whistler's paintings now at the Tate (September 1912), more courage for living than I have gathered from the Canal Bill or from any other manifest American energy whatsoever. // And thereanent I have written some bad poetry and burst into several incoherent conversations, endeavouring to explain what that exhibit means to the American artist" (VA 1).

⁴ Years earlier Coburn – he himself an exile in London – had contributed to the New York Edition with photographs of New York. See what Pound has to say on the subject in his "Introduction" to Vittorugo Contino's *Spots and Dots (The Pisan Cantos)*, ed. Gianfranco Ivancich (Venezia, 1970).

⁵ Remarkably, at the very time of Pound's last trip home in 1910-11.

⁶ LE 338. Cfr.: “Henry James was aware of the spherical form of the planet, and susceptible to a given situation, and to the tone and tonality of persons as perhaps no other author in all literature. The victim and the votary of the ‘scene’, he had no very great narrative sense, or at the least, he attained the narrative faculty but *per aspera*, through very great striving” (298-99).

⁷ He even dares advancing a terrible truth: that James’s novels “show him, all through his life, possessed of the worst possible taste in pictures” (LE 307)!

⁸ Notably, the “autobiographical impulse,” and the view from the “window.”

⁹ Among Irving’s Spanish works probably “The Student from Salamanca” may have fascinated the young Pound. In that short story there is a charming description of the gardens of Alhambra: the fountains and the “Court of the lions,” where “poetry and architecture merge together.” Pound may have also found there a first mention of Apollonius of Tyana.

¹⁰ A “delightful prologue” (*Hawthorne* 95), James calls the autobiographical “The Custom House,” “Introductory” to *The Scarlet Letter*.

¹¹ See Bush on the new conclusion to a longer canto 74: “The first consequence of Pound’s overview necessarily involved a revised conclusion to canto 74. Redrafting Pound gives his New York and Spanish memories (notebook pages 66-69) pride of place. So he reinserts the lines about Francis Train ‘on the pavement in his plain wooden chair’ and the ones about ‘Al Hambra, the lion court and el / mirador de la reina Lindaraja’ (467) nearer to the end of the canto, where they now stand” (170-71).

¹² See *Indiscretions* on the troubles brought about forty years later by the reformation of the “Civil Service” and political “rotatory” system (PD 32-3). The Customhouse surveyor functions gave Hawthorne “leisure” and a salary, James writes, but made him stop writing. Hawthorne himself intimates “that it was a very good thing for him, mentally and morally, when his term of service expired – or rather when he was removed from office by the operation of that wonderful ‘rotatory’ system which his countrymen had invented for the administration of their affairs” (*Hawthorne* 95). Hawthorne is much more explicit on the subject (303-04), sounding very close to the “political arguments” circulating in the

Weston-Pound household depicted in *Indiscretions*.

¹³ Except for the fact that the last word rhymes with "beach" a then with "each to each": three times in succession.

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