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"I wish he would explain his explanation":  
 Authorial Explication in Wallace Stevens  
 and Ezra Pound

"I wish... that he wd. explain his explanation" - Ezra Pound quoted from memory Byron towards the end of *Guide to Kulchur*, after a few particularly intense and fanciful pages called "The Promised Land". "That was in another country", he went on, "and a different connection, but I admit that the foregoing pp. are as obscure as anything in my poetry" (Pound 1938, 295). Actually, the country was the same, for the "Dedication" of *Don Juan* was written in Venice in 1818, and *Guide to Kulchur* in Rapallo 119 years later; and the connection was similar, for Byron was speaking of Coleridge's "explaining metaphysics to the nation", and Pound attempts in "The Promised Land" to explain (obscurely) his own metaphysics, and in fact goes on to put it in a nutshell: "I mean or imply that certain truth exists. Certain colours exist in nature though great painters have striven vainly [...] Truth is not untrue'd by reason of our failing to fix it on paper."

Pound's is a naturalistic world, based on the assumption that there is something out there which it is the poet's business to communicate. But it is difficult to explain, and explanations of such truths will be difficult. So the approach to "The Promised Land" ends with a reflection on the means of expression, just as the *Cantos* end with a reflection on their own writing-block: "it coheres all right / even if my notes do not cohere."<sup>1</sup> This is really a more emotional repetition of the statement in *Kulchur*: "I mean or imply that certain truth exists ... Truth is not untrue'd by reason of our failing to fix it on paper".

It is a favorite pastime for critics, to turn up examples of parallel statements in prose and verse by a given poet, that presumably cast light upon each other, or tell us something about the occasion of a poem. For example, M.H. Abrams quotes in the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* John Keats's letter of September 1819: "I never liked stubble fields so much as now - Aye, better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm" (Abrams 844). The quotation occurs in an introductory footnote for "To Autumn":

Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?  
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,  
 While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,  
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue...

The relationship between the two statements here is self-explanatory, though a consideration of the difference between the casual observation of the letter and the elevated music of the poetry opens up the entire question of Keats's style, and a question of content. Can two statements say the same thing in such vastly different ways? Some would even say that the elevation in the verse is factitious, and that the naked perception of the stubble-fields in the letter is more spontaneous and more genuine. This really amounts to asking: What is poetry and why does one write it?

The young Wallace Stevens remarked that "It is a great pleasure to seize an impression and lock it up in words: you feel as if you had it safe forever" (Stevens 1977, 48). He also said, famously, that "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (Stevens 1957, 176). The latter (and later) statement concentrates on present satisfaction, leaving the sense of getting a job done only implicit. In fact in a late poem Stevens appeared to deny the desire to preserve the moment:

It was not important that they survive.  
 What mattered was that they should bear  
 Some lineament or character,  
 Some affluence, if only half-perceived,  
 In the poverty of their words,  
 Of the planet of which they were part.<sup>2</sup>

While denying the importance of survival of the written word, Stevens still spoke of representation of events and phenomena (the planet), and representation implies survival. Here I would like to call attention to the surprising agreement of Stevens with Pound (in a common self-depreciatory mood) in pointing to the objective world and slighting the written word: "Truth is not untrue'd by reason of our failing to fix it on paper". Both are very much concerned with "getting the world right". A comparative reading of "The Planet on the Table" and Pound's final Cantos would be illuminating.

Stevens's poetry is often glossed with references to the essays in *The Necessary Angel* and to his letters, chiefly in connection with poetic theory, the subject of much of the poetry. A direct parallel between an impression and a poem, as in Keats, is possibly less easy to come by. Here however is an example. He wrote on 3 October 1952 to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn:

This morning I walked around in the park here for almost an hour before coming to the office and felt as blank as one of the ponds which in the weather at this time of year are motionless. But perhaps it was the blankness that made me enjoy it so much. (Stevens 1966, 762)

On 12 November 1952 Stevens sent to *The Nation* a group of poems, among them "The Plain Sense of Things", which describes the same scene as the letter:

After the leaves have fallen, we return  
To a plain sense of things ...

It is difficult even to choose an adjective  
For this blank cold, this sadness without cause ...

Yet the absence of the imagination had  
Itself to be imagined. The great pond,  
The plain sense of it, without reflections, leaves,  
Mud, water like dirty glass, expressing silence

Of a sort, silence of a rat come out to see,  
The great pond and its waste of the lilies, all this  
Had to be imagined as an inevitable knowledge,  
Required, as a necessity requires. (*Collected Poems* 502-03)

The poem gives us more natural detail and a heavier theoretical apparatus than the letter, developing the theme of the consolations of philosophy, of the sovereign act of the imagination. The letter goes more quickly to the heart of the matter by speaking of the enjoyment of blankness. As for Keats, the relation between the two statements could be compared to that of a sketch to the finished painting. With several painters, for example Ingres, modern taste sometimes prefers the sketch to the solemnity of the final work.

Ezra Pound rarely if ever gave information on his walks and more mundane doings to his correspondents. His communications mostly relate to his reading, or comment on current events, sometimes bringing in anecdotes and references from memory. Still, since he wrote his letters and essays concurrently with his poetry, the former often function as a running commentary on the latter. Given Pound's insistence on concentration, the more expanded versions of the same statements are often to be found in the correspondence, rather than in the poetry. The sketch in this case is more expansive than the final painting. For example in a letter to Clark Emery dated 16 October 1954, from St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, Pound writes:

Incidentally John Ad to Rush in 1811 anticipates Gesell and is five years ahead of Jeff's approach from the other, or AN other angle.

A decent Biddle (Alex) printed some "Old Fanuly Letters" whether to avoid family suspicion I dunno, nothing on cover to indicate that they are Adams to Rush.<sup>3</sup>

Canto 94, written late September of the same year, begins impenetrably, yet memorably:

"Brederode"

(to Rush, Ap 4. 1790)

" treaties of commerce only,

Blue jay, my blue jay

that she should take wing in the night...

Mr Adal11s saw thru the bank hoax...

& the Medici failed from accepting too many deposits.

Alex ... , a respectable

or at least meritorius Biddle,

alive 1890

"& consequently the corruption of history"

J.A. to Rush

18 'leven 8 (*Cantos* 653-54)

In the poem Pound alternates quotation, inevitably opaque, with unambiguous generalisation ("Adams saw thru the bank hoax"), but fails to make explicit the relation between Alexander Biddle and the quoted Adams-Rush letters, as he was to do some days later in the letter to Emery. He throws us into the deep waters of his fragmentary history, and as it were challenges us to sink or swim. But probably only a John Adams expert could discover the source in the innocuously titled *Old Family Letters*. While denouncing "the corruption of history", and implying in his letter that the Adams-Rush exchange was too sensational and had to be hidden away, Pound continues to hide it away. The champion of a conspiratorial interpretation of history, Pound couldn't but be himself a conspirator. This, by the way, is the point about the Dutchman Brederode, mentioned by Adams in connection with the excessive reputation of Washington: "Brederode did more in the Dutch Revolution than William 1st Prince of Orange. Yet Brederode is forgotten and William (is called) the Savior, Deliverer and Founder" (Terrell 570). Pound is saying rather cryptically that what Brederode is to Holland, Adams is to the U.S. - lost leaders, like Pound himself. It is also worth noting that the implicit negative reference to other Biddles (Nicholas of the Bank War, and probably US Attorney General Francis Biddle, who indicted Pound in 1943) passes unchanged from poetry to letter or viceversa: the *Cantos* are Pound's conversation, "the theatre, the record, of flux of consciousness".<sup>4</sup>

So far I have spoken of parallel statements, to be found in Keats as in Stevens and Pound, with possibly the interesting difference that in Pound the poetry is more condensed than the prose, in accordance with his poetics, while with the others the opposite is the case - the poetry develops a germ that is recorded more briefly in a letter. However, there is one kind of parallel statement where the process of expansion is comparable in Pound and Stevens, and that is the overt explication by the author of a

given work or passage. Interestingly, we have a lot of authorial explications by Stevens, and very few by Pound. This is because Stevens's poetry has more of the character of the finished product, compact and self-contained, something that one can talk about and around, while with Pound the poem is not the well-shaped urn, but, as he often told us, a Vortex, where it is difficult even to begin to ask questions, for everything leads to something else. Besides, while Stevens was very patient, at least as a letter-writer, with well-meaning enquirers and translators, and provided detailed glosses on some of his most famous and obscure poems, Pound was usually impatient, thinking of the next job and postponing revision and correction and clarification (which he occasionally mentioned) until it was too late. Here again, however, I would like to point out that Stevens too suggested several times that he was much more interested in what he was going to write than in what he had written. So both men were similarly concerned with Making It New, rather than with dwelling on what was behind them.

Authorial explication seems to be a modern phenomenon. We only have to think of *Ulysses* with its tables and *The Waste Land* with its notes. But then one remembers Dante's letter to Cangrande, explaining the four levels of interpretation to be applied to the *Commedia*:

... istius operis non est simplex sensus, ymo dici potest polisemos, hoc est plurimum sensuum; nam primus sensus est qui habetur per litteram, alius est qui habetur per significata per litteram. Et primus dicitur litteralis, secundus vero allegoricus sive moralis sive anagogicus. (Alighieri 438)

Perhaps the similarity is not coincidental, for Joyce and Eliot were, like Pound, much concerned with the Middle Ages and Dante. But Stevens wasn't, except in his playful use of Ursula and the like (*Collected Poems* 21). Still, he seems to have been naturally inclined to coded writing, and did use to a certain degree private symbolism, so that in some of his work he may well be the most obscure of modernists.

What status does authorial explication have? Stevens was quite willing to accept readers' responses as authoritative, and made frequent disclaimers about the value of his paraphrases.

"What I intended," he wrote a correspondent in 1941, "is nothing". And went on:

A critic would never be free to speak his own mind if it was permissible for the poet to say that he intended something else. A poet, or any writer, must be held to what he put down on the page. This does not mean that, if the critic happens to know the intention of the poet, it is not legitimate for him to make use of it, but it does mean that, if he does not happen to know, it is not of the slightest consequence that he should know, even if what he says the poem means is just the reverse of what the poet intended it to mean. The basis of criticism is the work, not the hidden intention of the writer.<sup>5</sup>

Stevens gets to the center of the issue with a lawyer's instinct, and he is right of course. Yet how many of us read through his 890-page *Letters* for clues to his poems, and are thankful, even at this late date, for a statement such as the following, about that perennial conundrum, "The Emperor of Ice-Cream":

the true sense of *Let be befinale of seem* is let being become the conclusion or denouement of appearing to be: in short, iccream is an absolute good. The poem is obviously not about iccream, but about being as distinguished from seeming to be.<sup>6</sup>

This is enlightening - up to a point. In fact, one may want to respond, with Byron (and Pound): "I wish he would explain his Explanation".

In this matter of authorial explication, I believe we have learned to take all the help we can get, that is we do not disqualify a reading only because it is the writer's own, as we would have done in the days of the Intentional Fallacy. We know that no word will be the last, that all statements are provisional, may mean the opposite of what they say. But this radical doubt is just as pertinent to the statements within a text. For example, when Stevens in "The Plain Sense of Things" presents "this sadness without a cause", the bleakness of the fall weather in Hartford, as a victory of the imagination, is he just consoling himself by vindicating the pleasures of asceticism? The question is not irrelevant, for Stevens suggests as much when he says that his act of imagination is "an

inevitable knowledge, / Required, as a necessity requires." One must survive, so one makes up a consolatory version of the event that one has to face. Stevens, we remember, had no patience with people who condemned escapism.<sup>7</sup> So I would say that our attitude to authorial explication has become wary but open, just like our present attitude to biographical interpretation. We have become less sure of what constitutes literature, where the well-shaped urn finishes and the fallacy begins. We have all been drawn into the Vortex.

Unlike Stevens, Pound had little patience, as I have said, when questioned about his work, and was apt to throw out cryptic comments that have misled generations of critics. A famous instance is his remark about *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* in a letter to Thomas E. Connolly: "The worst muddle they make is in failing to see that Mauberley buried E.P. in the first poem; gets rid of all his troublesome energies".<sup>8</sup> This has been understood, by Connolly and others, to mean that the *character* Mauberley is the speaker of the first poem, though the title unambiguously tells us that this is "E.P."s (not Mauberley's) "Ode pour l'election de son sepulchre": "For three years, out of key with his time...". Pound, who was puzzled by the monumentalization of the Eliotic *Mauberley* at the expense of the *Cantos* and *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, a marvellous poem, was only pointing out that the *poem* *Mauberley* buries (figuratively) "E.P." at the very start. The idea that Mauberley should be the speaker never even occurred to him. Once again, authorial interpretations are in themselves needful of interpretations. At best, they answer a problem with another problem.

So we don't have for Pound the long letters of self-enquiry in which Stevens tries to puzzle together an explication for the benefit of critic or translator. However it is true that in writing to translators Pound did provide detailed suggestions, and a very interesting area of study would be the translation of the *Cantos* that he worked on in collaboration with his daughter. It may be that Pound rarely had correspondents who were curious and persistent and sensitive enough to conduct a discussion of his poetry. When in the 1950s Clark Emery was writing *Ideas in Action*, one of the first and still among the best studies of the

*Cantos*, Pound went over his typescript with extreme care, even pointing out typos - and came up with such characteristic comments as the following: "why bugger up a good blue-jay, for example, by making it a SYMBOL of some bloody thing ELSE?".<sup>9</sup> Compare this with Stevens's "imagined pine, imagined jay",<sup>10</sup> and the reference to blue jays in Canto 94, quoted above.

If Pound did not explain the *Cantos* at any length, he did occasionally give readings of them, especially in the St. Elizabeth's years, when he would hold forth to his acolytes during visiting hours. One of his protégés at the time was a painter, Sheri Martinelli, whose work Pound admired to the extent of having his Milan publisher, Vanni Scheiwiller, issue (at Pound's expense) a booklet of reproductions of her art under the title *La Martinelli* (1956), with his own appreciative introduction. To Scheiwiller, who did not care for Martinelli, he justified it as explication of his own work: "There is more about my *Cantos* in ten of these reproductions than in all the prose comment yet written".<sup>11</sup> In fact, Pound was both paternal and flirtatious with his pretty and strange visitor, and the sudden reappearance of love as a dominant motif in the St. Elizabeth's *Cantos*, especially the beautiful second part of *Rock-Drill*, is surely connected with this involvement. It is not difficult to recognize Martinelli in the Sibylla and Ra-Set and Leucothea that are praised for their compassion and their bikinis in some moving and amusing passages: "Sibylla, / from under the rubble heap / m'elevasti / from the dulled edge beyond pain, / m'elevasti. ...".<sup>12</sup> For the incarcerated poet, the relationship with the unpredictable flower-child Martinelli was an unexpected godsend, and he proceeded very thriftily to put it to poetic use.

After *Rock-Drill* was published in 1955, Pound read it at least once to his visitors, providing a running commentary, especially on foreign words that American bohemians could not be expected to understand. Sheri Martinelli dutifully made notes in her copy of *Rock-Drill*, adding a few drawings of "Maestro". These notes have been preserved, and provide the only complete authorial commentary we have on a section of *Cantos*, though of course not everything is glossed. Sometimes a disturbance occurs, and the annotator gives up, as in this note for Canto 88 (dated 24 January 1958): "Kathy is here

today. She's a fake. Cdn't make any damn notes because Grampa starts bellowin' & roarin' & showing off for the cunts who listen & DONT hear & who beam & dont love ought but self."<sup>13</sup> Sibling rivalry is common in interpretative communities.

The notes are a commentary at second hand, as recorded by a faithful disciple, yet they fill in a good number of blanks, and allow us to see what Pound thought he was saying or wanted to suggest. For example, *Rock-Drill* is notorious for its deluge of Chinese characters, which (as we all know) are taken by Pound as ideograms, pictures of things. In the poem, however, he does not always say what he wants us to read in a given character. In the Martinelli notes we find that several of these come from the *I Ching*, a little-studied source for the *Cantos*; we also discover some improper innuendos. "Jen" (elsewhere glossed by Pound as man with erect penis) appears twice on the second page of the sequence." But it is news to this reader that the character for heart "hsin" (Canto 87), is also phallic: "Granpa sez this 'is cock and balls but dictionary sez heart.' Grampa would"! This throws quite a bit of light on the previous lines:

Mohamedans will remain - naturally - unconverted  
If you remove houris from Paradise  
as to hsin

I suppose the Chinese sound *hsin* may also playfully echo our Western concept of sin ("So much for sin!"). The passage continues listing the kind of connections that Pound likes to posit tentatively:

In short, the cosmos continues  
and there is an observation somewhere in Morrison,  
leading to Remy?  
Bombs fell, but not quite on Sant'Ambrogio.  
Baccin said: I planted that  
tree, and *that* tree (ulivi) <sup>15</sup>

Since Morrison's dictionary is made up, as the *Companion to the Cantos* tells us, of "6 quarto volumes", it would be hard to find the "observation" Pound is referring to even if we knew what it was about. The reference becomes a little less opaque with



a flirtatious mood may have told her that she was meant in a given line, to humor her.

Canto 90 begins, like perhaps the majority of Cantos, with a quotation that has puzzled critics: "From the colour the nature / & by the nature the sign!" Martinelli, after writing at the beginning of this, the first St. Elizabeth's love-Canto, "Sheri's Cantos", thereby as it were appropriating the sequence, notes that the quotation comes "from S.M.'s early letters". She herself wrote the words! On the other hand, the *Companion to the Cantos* tells us that the lines refer to the doctrine of signatures. I personally would favor the more intimate interpretation. The muse herself speaks.

A few lines on, the fountain of poetry on Parnassus, near Delphi, makes a propitious appearance:

Castalia is the name of that fount in the hill's fold,  
 the sea below,  
                   narrow beach  
 Templum aedificans, not yet marble,  
                   "Amphion!"  
 And from the San Ku [...]
   
       to the room in Poitiers where one can stand  
                   casting no shadow  
 That is Sagetrieb,  
                   that is tradition.

In reference to Castalia, Martinelli notes: "a vision dear Green Eyes had of her" - where Green Eyes is Pound, who may very well have told "her" that this was the import. Whatever we make of the note, it is worth pointing out that a "fount in the hill's fold" is in itself enough to suggest woman and sex. I have noted elsewhere that Pound was also thinking of Henry James's *The Sacred Fount*, of which he was one of the few admirers;<sup>18</sup> a Pound-Martinelli note refers us also to "Boethius, Consolations of Philosophy". In Boethius's imprisonment, and consolatory vision of Philosophy as a woman, Pound may well have seen an image of his own plight. The feminine image of the fold is then spliced by Pound with the masculine "Templum aedificans" which Martinelli herself later glossed as an explicit reference to phallic erection: "Templum aedificans, not yet marble". I quote from this later gloss (1960),

which seeks to recapture the very moment of poetic origin that the critic is always pursuing:

now let us begin... we are on the lawn of St. Liz... under that great tree, an Elm, I believe...

birds & squirrels are around us - two blue-egyptian blue posts are to our right.. Merlin is sitting in a lawn chair..he wears a green sun-shade cap of crossed bands over his silvery gold copper hair..he is 1/2 naked... the sun causes him to become bedew'd - it is wet and delicious...

his mer-maid is sitting on a fawn-coloured coat "the deer skin" ... at his left side...

Merlin is of the opinion... that when he erects his love god... the crops will be good that year...

erection.. and rising ...

his poem then... is in the act of

everything is rising... within it...<sup>10</sup>

If this is a dream, it integrates significantly the powerful dream of Cantos 90-95, with its elaborate make-believe and its serendipitous return to adolescent love-play. In the unlikely setting of a D.C. hospital for the criminally insane, Pound was once again in touch with the deepest sources, personal and cultural, of his poetry.

A final word about the heresy of authorial explication. We know from Peter Brazeau about the time Elder Olson, of the University of Chicago, asked Stevens about Rouge-Fatima in "Academic Discourse at Havana". After correcting Olson's pronunciation (it should be Fàtima, not Fatima), Stevens said "He had originally intended to put in something like Helen of Troy but decided the poor girl was overworked, especially in poetry, and so he thought of another beautiful woman". Olson persisted: "That's fine, but what about the rouge?" "Oh," said Stevens, "that's just to dress her up a bit" (Brazeau 210).

If we turn to another lady, this time invented by Pound, Ra-Set of Canto 91, we find a similar comment in the Martinelli notes: "A name that came to him from the air". And a few lines above:



1 Canto 116 (Pound 1995, 817). This edition will be subsequently referred to as *Cantos*.

2 "The Planet on the Table" (Stevens 1954, 532-33). This edition will be subsequently referred to as *Collected Poems*.

3 University of Miami Library. Reprinted by permission of University of Miami Library. Quotations from unpublished writings of Ezra Pound are copyright (c) 1997 by Omar S. Pound and Mary de Rachewiltz.

4 Allen Ginsberg to Ezra Pound, c. 1967, as reported by Michael Reck, "A Conversation between Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsberg", *Evergreen Review* 57 (June 1968). Quoted in Sullivan 354.

5 Stevens 1966, 390 (June 3, 1941).

6 Stevens 1966, 341 (June 1, 1939).

7 See for example Stevens 1951, 30. Compare comments on the Ivory Tower in Stevens 1966, 403.

8 Quoted in Connolly 59. (this is a review of John J. Espey, *Ezra Pound's Mauberley*). The letter cited by Connolly is written in the persona of Dorothy Pound, and begins: "Dear Dr Connolly E.P. asks me to deal with your troubles as follows: The worst muddle..." The typing however seems to be Pound's. In the same letter, of which Professor Connolly kindly sent me a copy, Pound writes, with reference to line 3 of *Mauberley's* "Envoi": "thou: book". Students of the critical history of the poem will be thankful for the tip.

9 Letter of 13 February 1953. University of Miami Library. Reprinted by permission of University of Miami Library.

10 "The Man with the Blue Guitar", final line (*Collected Poems* 184).

11 Letter to Vanni Scheiwiller, 23 November 1955, quoted in Bacigalupo 1990, 186.

12 Ezra Pound, Canto 90 (*Cantos* 606). On the Pound-Martinelli relationship see H.D., *End to Torment* (Doolittle 1979), and the Italian edition I prepared (Doolittle 1994), which includes Pound's own account of the affair. Martinelli (ca. 1919-1996) was also friendly with William Gaddis, Anatole Broyard (Gates 69-70), Allen Ginsberg, and Charles Bukowski. Of Irish background, she took her name from her first husband, an Italian-American artist.

13 I am grateful to the late Sheri Martinelli for showing me her copy of *Rock-Drill* and allowing me to quote from her notes.

14 Pound, Canto 85 (*Cantos* 564).

15 Pound, Canto 87 (*Cantos* 593).

16 *Paradiso* III 105. Pound quotes this passage in Italian in "The Promised Land" chapter of *Guide to Kulchur*, discussed above.

17 According to a "visitor" quoted in Torrey 241, "A few of his closest disciples or helpers could come almost anytime, AM, PM or evening". This is unsubstantiated, and it would indeed be surprising that visitors should have been allowed without restrictions into a criminal institution. Torrey's spiteful book is largely a denunciation of Pound and of Winfred Overholser, the humane and influential director of St. Elizabeth's Hospital, who are presented as conspiring together to fool the public with the fable of Pound's insanity.

18 Bacigalupo 1980, 266; 1981, 311.

19 Sheri Martinelli, "The TAO of Canto 90..." Stencil sent to Clark Emery with a letter postmarked August 13, 1960. University of Miami Library. Reprinted by permission of University of Miami Library. Emery commented wittily on his epistular relation with Pound

and Martinelli in the poem "St. Elizabeths", *The Carrell: Journal of the Friends of the University of Miami Library* 21 (1983): 14-16.

20 Jose-Maria de Heredia's sonnet "Antoine et Cléopâtre", as first pointed out by George Dekker (105).

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