



PROJECT MUSE®

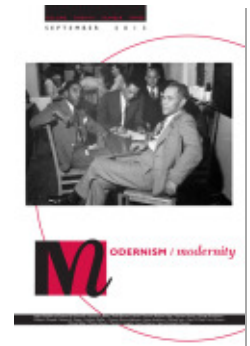
Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos by David Ten Eyck (review)

Sean Pryor

Modernism/modernity, Volume 20, Number 3, September 2013, pp.
615-617 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mod.2013.0090>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/525187>

clear reporting of events in temporal sequence. At the level of the *récit* (or *sjužet*, the order of events presented), impressionism disturbs temporal sequence and makes difficult a coherent reconstruction of the *histoire* (or *fabula*, the sequence of events in temporal order). Hawkes compares Ford's impressionistic plots to Conrad's in *The Secret Agent* (1907) and to their collaborative novel *The Inheritors* (1901). These novels "rel[y] less on plot's ability to provide shape and structure within a narrative than on the very tenuousness and fragility of our attempts to impose interpretive order onto a life which 'does not narrate'" (98).

While the first two chapters focus on Ford's novels up to the brink of the First World War, the final two chapters consider Ford's postwar writings. These chapters link destabilized narrative coherence to the traumatic experience of war and a desire to shape these events into a meaningful form. The third chapter examines Ford's first attempt to write about the war in his memoir *No Enemy* (1929), written in 1919 but not published until ten years later. The book is oddly structured, blurring the line between fiction and nonfiction by presenting Ford's experiences through an alter-ego named Gringoire and a narrator who refers to himself as the Compiler and who often interrupts and comments on Gringoire's story. The memoir sets up a tension between "the Compiler's efforts to structure the text and Gringoire's resistance to his endeavours" (107), a tension that captures Ford's struggle to give narrative form to his war experiences. Hawkes compares Ford's memoir to a few of the most famous war books, including Sassoon's three volumes of George Sherston memoirs (1928–36) and Graves's *Good-Bye to All That* (1929), both of which also blur the line between fiction and nonfiction, though less disruptively than Ford's memoir does.

The fourth chapter examines Ford's four-volume novel *Parade's End* (1924–28) in relation to Richard Aldington's *Death of a Hero* (1929) and Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918). All three writers, Hawkes argues, express a desire for omniscience in the midst of the confusion of war and the symptoms of shell shock, an omniscience that would give narrative shape and meaning to experience during wartime. But their narratives undermine any notion of omniscience, instead presenting frustrated desires for knowledge through limited and fractured perspectives.

Hawkes's study is most effective when grappling with the compelling oddities of Ford's narratives through close textual analysis, situating his own readings in relation to intriguing debates within the history of Ford criticism. His comparisons to other "misfit moderns" are not only apt but also bring welcome attention to often-neglected works. The narrative theory, especially Hawkes's account of Woloch, at times seems overly simplified, giving the impression that the nineteenth-century novel that Ford rejects always follows a particular pattern. The historical dimension of the argument, particularly in the earlier chapters, can also seem too generalized with multiple variations on the theme of the uncertainties of modernity. Hawkes's treatment of the relationship between the traumatic events of the First World War and their impact on narrative is more effective. Despite these quibbles, Hawkes offers a valuable addition to Ford criticism and to modernist criticism in general by virtue of his strong emphasis on the narrative practices of misfit moderns and on those practices' destabilizing effects.

Ezra Pound's *Adams Cantos*. David Ten Eyck. London: Bloomsbury, 2012. Pp. xiii + 228. \$120.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Sean Pryor, University of New South Wales

On September 30, 1938, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy signed the famous Munich Agreement, putting an end to the crisis over the Sudetenland and staving off another European

616 war—or so it seemed. Sometime in early October, or perhaps even a little beforehand, Ezra Pound finished drafting ten new cantos, not on the escalating tensions of contemporary Europe, but on the history of China from 2837 BC to AD 1736. At the end of that October, the Chinese finally surrendered Wuhan to the Japanese after the longest battle in the Second Sino-Japanese War, but Pound turned from China to America, beginning a new sequence of ten cantos on the second president of the United States, John Adams. The Chinese Cantos and the Adams Cantos appeared together in 1940 as *Cantos LII–LXXI*, and they can seem hopelessly removed from the most urgent concerns of the day. They have also seemed to many readers a hopeless failure: dull exercises in a documentary poetics, most of their lines being culled, respectively, from Joseph de Mailla's eleven-volume *Histoire Générale de la Chine* and from Charles Francis Adams's ten-volume edition of *The Life and Works of John Adams*.

One of the most impressive features of David Ten Eyck's excellent book on the Adams Cantos is that it shows how these problems are inseparable and so encourages a re-evaluation of both the poetry's aesthetic merit and its historical significance. As Ten Eyck demonstrates, the Adams Cantos extend the documentary method of the famous Malatesta Cantos (Cantos VIII–XI), so that rather than incorporating historical texts into a larger narrative or field of poetic materials, a single historical text itself provides the poem's narrative or map. Figure becomes ground. But at the same time the Adams Cantos are not merely a digest of *The Life and Works*, and their object is not simply the historical truth of John Adams, the myriad complications of his life and contacts. Instead, their object is what Pound called the "Adams *paideuma*": a nexus of ideas about the natural, ethical, legal, and economic foundations of a just state. The gamble of Pound's ideogrammic method is that this universal will emerge from the particulars he selects from *The Life and Works*, reframing and in many instances reinterpreting those extracts in the process. And at this level, as poetry that seeks actively to present a notion of constructive effort towards the good society, the Adams Cantos are urgently concerned with the crises of their own time.

Ten Eyck's study is grounded in meticulous attention to the historical record, detailing Pound's long-standing interest in Adams, from classes he took at the University of Pennsylvania in 1902 to unpublished materials drafted for his last finished volume *Thrones* (1959). When Ten Eyck turns to the archive in order to trace the composition of the Adams Cantos—from Pound's first markings in his copy of *The Life and Works*, through successive drafts, to the final poem—the results are consistently illuminating. We find not hasty and confused jottings that assume the reader will fill in the blanks (a customary view of these poems), but the deliberate removal of attributions, glosses, and other explanatory materials, and the construction of new formal and thematic relations. To an extent that previous criticism has rarely recognized, the poem becomes an object in its own right. Building on this archival material, Ten Eyck's account of the development of Pound's documentary poetics involves a lucid meditation on the interpretative dilemmas that the Adams Cantos pose. What sort of reading does this poetry invite? (Or, better, what contradictory readings?) How does it reconfigure accepted notions of historical truth, of material documents, and of didactic poetry? What does the journey from *A Draft of XXX Cantos* to the late cantos look like when the Adams Cantos are taken to be more than a regrettable anomaly?

In this way, the introduction and the first three chapters of *Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos* examine Pound's interest in John Adams, the compositional history of the poems, the history of their reception, and their technical innovations. The final three chapters turn to broader issues: the representation of history and law in the Adams Cantos, the relation between this poetry and Pound's social criticism of the 1930s and 1940s (from his support for Italian fascism to his commitment to Confucianism), and the significance of the Adams *paideuma* for the late cantos. Ten Eyck thus moves ably across a range of critical approaches, from close textual analysis, through questions of literary history, to a text's engagement with its historical moment. In each case, Ten Eyck's criticism is a model of rigorous scholarship and clear, methodical argument. Finally, the book's appendices helpfully reproduce Pound's college notes on American history, notes he took

while reading *The Life and Works* in Paris in 1931, summary tables he later drew up in his own copy of *The Life and Works*, an unpublished essay on Confucius from 1943, and the material on Adams from Pound's notebook for *Thrones*.

In comparison with the cantos that came before and after, especially *The Pisan Cantos*, the Adams Cantos have been the victim not only of misunderstanding but also of sheer neglect. Without insisting that they are always as successful as the best of Pound's other work, Ten Eyck shows that they are much more successful, and much more interesting, than they can seem. As such, *Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos* represents an invaluable contribution to Pound studies. The book also opens up new opportunities for thinking about the poetry of the 1930s, modernist poetry more generally, and the histories of found poetry and documentary poetics. W. C. Williams was one of the few who enjoyed *Cantos LII–LXXI* when it appeared, and so *Patterson* (1946–1958) is an obvious comparison, but how do Pound's innovations compare to the documentary methods of Charles Reznikoff in *Testimony* (1934) or *Holocaust* (1975)? Since for the most part Pound produced the Adams Cantos by cutting a single text, Ten Eyck suggestively compares them to the erasure poetry of Jen Bervin, and one could extend the comparison to a poem like Ronald Johnson's *RADIO S* (1977). The Adams Cantos might emerge from these and other new contexts, building on Ten Eyck's admirable study, looking much more significant than many of Pound's most committed admirers have allowed.

***From Kafka to Sebald: Modernism and Narrative Form.* Sabine Wilke, ed. London: Continuum, 2012. Pp. xxii + 184. \$110.00 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Ben Hutchinson, University of Kent

The essays collected in this volume seek to analyze examples of German-language modernist fiction from a range of narrative perspectives. Tending notably to a psychoanalytic model of literary theory, they are particularly interested in the ways in which twentieth-century literature constructs—or deconstructs—the authorial self. While the volume arguably lacks overall coherence, a number of the individual contributions ask sophisticated questions of complex texts.

Including essays by some of the leading American Germanists, the collection opens with two pieces on Franz Kafka. Stanley Corngold's thoughtful contribution considers the notion of what he terms “Kafka-memes” in *The Castle*, presenting them as a key component of the “hermeneutic allure” of Kafka's work (12). For Corngold, it is these “memes”—epistemological leitmotifs that both stabilize and destabilize the reading experience—that create the loose, impressionistic structure of the novel; their recurrence, he argues, produces a “vertigo of indetermination, a perfect *ritardando*, not yet a message: and *that* is the message” (18). By way of example, Corngold suggests that this deferred meaning finds expression in the counterfactuals and conditionals of Kafka's slippery syntax: what, he asks, is the cognitive force of Kafka's similes?

Imke Meyer, like Corngold, is aware of the hermeneutic trap of reading Kafka too allegorically, as though his texts could be interpreted once and for all if only the reader were clever enough. Yet her contribution nonetheless argues that “The Hunger Artist” can be read “as an allegory of the performative contradictions of bourgeois subject construction” (29), as an exposition of the ways in which “the subject . . . must consume itself in the very process of its constitution” (39). This aporia of the incommensurability of the bourgeois subject/artist resonates through many of the subsequent essays.

In the second section of the volume, Jens Rieckmann approaches late Hofmannsthal through the prism of Walter Kappacher's novel *Der Fliegenpalast* (2009). Kappacher's elegant reconstruction of Hofmannsthal's creative crisis in 1924 revolves around the conflict between artist and