

1991

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Recommended Citation

Paideuma 20.1 & 2 (Spring & Fall 1991): 77-88.

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ROBERT SPOO

POUND'S CAVALCANTI AND CRAVENS' CARDUCCI

Ezra Pound's friendship with the American pianist Margaret Cravens has long been a mystery. Apart from biographers' speculations and gossip, little information about their relationship has been available, and our relative ignorance of the larger terrain of Pound's career in the pre-1914 years has made research into such topics doubly frustrating. But the material in *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens: A Tragic Friendship, 1910-1912* (Duke University Press, 1988)--some forty letters from Pound to Cravens, along with correspondence of Dorothy Shakespear, Walter Rummel and others--will dispel a good bit of the mystery, while introducing new enigmas for scholars to try their detective skills on.¹

Pound met Margaret Lanier Cravens in Paris in March 1910 while on a visit to his friend Walter Rummel, the American pianist and composer. Cravens' piano studies had taken her from her home in Madison, Indiana to various parts of America and Europe, and finally to Paris in 1907, where she established herself not far from where Rummel lived in Passy. Introduced to each other by Rummel, Pound and Cravens became instant friends and kept up a regular correspondence during the next two years. The friendship ended suddenly when, exhausted by her increasingly aimless expatriation and

1. Omar Pound and Robert Spoo, eds., *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens: A Tragic Friendship, 1910-1912* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1988). The letters of Pound and Cravens, together with peripheral correspondence, are now at the Lilly Library, Indiana University. For the most part, scholarship has mentioned Cravens only in passing. For accurate dates and information relating to her, see *Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespear: Their Letters 1909-1914*, eds. Omar Pound and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1984) 96-97, 105-06, 108, 110, 118, 121. Noel Stock's biography of Pound contains a brief, inaccurate reference to her (*The Life of Ezra Pound* [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970] 97). John Tytell's *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano* (New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1987) mentions her briefly (67, 78-79) and mixes fact with romantic speculation about the disastrous result of Pound's 'dropping' her. (It is by no means certain that there even was a romance.) More reliable and informative is Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988) 155, 180-81, 194. Barbara Guest's *Herself Defined: The Poet H.D. and Her World* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1984) touches on H.D.'s friendship with Cravens but includes some unsupported conjecture (48-50). A useful discussion of Pound and Cravens is Martha Ullman West's "Lady With Poet: Margaret Cravens and Ezra Pound" (*Helix* [Australia], Nos. 13/14 [1983] 15-22).

frustrated by lack of progress in her studies, Cravens committed suicide on June 1, 1912, a few days after her thirty-first birthday. There were many contributing factors, and the complex circumstances surrounding this event are explored at length in *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens*. This essay will focus on a dimension of their relationship that could only be touched on in the book: Cravens' enthusiasm for the poetry of the Italian Nobel laureate Giosuè Carducci (d. 1907), an enthusiasm that had an impact on Pound's writing; and her role as confidante and consultant during Pound's work on *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti*.

In late March 1910, just as Pound was preparing to leave Paris for Italy (where he would encounter Lake Garda and Sirmione for the first time), he received a letter from Margaret Cravens accompanied by a loan of her copy of Giosuè Carducci's *Poesie 1850-1900* (Bologna, 1909). Since Pound was in Paris for only two days and spending much of his time with Walter Rummel, Cravens' gesture came as a surprise, based as it was on a very brief acquaintance, possibly only a single meeting. He sent her a note of thanks before he left Paris. Writing her again from Sirmione on March 30, Pound acknowledged receipt of "a Carducci" (Carducci's *Poesie*, the same edition Cravens had lent him in Paris), which she had evidently now purchased for him and mailed to Poste Restante, Verona. On April 19 he wrote to her:

I have been reading or trying to read your friend Carducci. I find beauty, & perfect literary culture, but he seems cold or more exactly, he lacks intensity, concentration. Here am I more or less drowned in beauty, but it isn't the lake, or the hills, or even — almost even the olive trees, but the four red leaves of the poppy that are the *poetry* simply because they go beyond themselves & mean Andalusia & the court yard at Cordova. I dont—pardon me—but I dont believe Carducci ever got to understand that sort of thing. (*Ezra Pound-Margaret Cravens* 27)

Alluding to details remembered from his visit to Spain in 1906, Pound is advocating a conception of poetic beauty sharply different from Carducci's. The phrase "the lake, or the hills, or even . . . the olive trees" is almost certainly a reference to a Carducci sonnet that Cravens admired intensely, "Peregrino del ciel, garrulo a volo," which contains the lines,

Then when your wing pauses on sunlit hills
white with marble and brown with olive groves
descending to a sea in the Apennines . . . (my translation)

(Quando l'ala soffermi a' poggi lieti
 Che digradano al mar da l'Apennino
 Bianchi di marmi e bruni d'oliveti . . . [Carducci *Poesie* 13])

In place of this type of landscape description with its *belezza* spread over a broad canvas, Pound urges "the four red leaves of the poppy that are the *poetry* simply because they go beyond themselves & *mean* Andalusia." Here is an early, concise statement of what Pound would come to label Imagism two or three years later. "Don't be descriptive," he wrote in "A Few Don'ts" in 1913. "Remember that the painter can describe a landscape much better than you can, and that he has to know a deal more about it" (*LE* 6). The "four red leaves of the poppy" are not description, painterly or otherwise, but an "Image," "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" (*LE* 4). The poppy leaves "mean" or mediate meaning by reducing discursive rhetoric to a single telling feature which, in Pound's view, evokes a quintessentially Spanish scene more successfully than Carducci's more comprehensive picture captures the hills of Italy. The telescoping of nature into a small luminous detail—a leaf or a petal—later became a feature of some of Pound's most characteristic Imagist poems: "In a Station of the Metro," "Gentildonna," "Liu Ch'e," "Ts'ai Chi'h," "Alba," and others.

In the same letter of April 19, Pound compares Carducci unfavorably with Giacomo Leopardi, whose poem "Her Monument, the Image Cut Thereon" he translated and published in *Canzoni* (1911). He also asserts that Carducci "doesn't compare with the big Victorians," and concludes, "Exquisite writing, ma poesia? No, not quite—except here and there—ma freddo" (27-8). Pound added a very similar view of Carducci to the proof sheets of *The Spirit of Romance* which he was correcting in Sirmione at exactly this time. In the chapter on Camoens, he refers to "that modern Italian whose beautiful cold intellect we, outside of Italy, are so slow in praising," and, by way of example, translates two lines from a sonnet occurring eight pages after "Peregrino del ciel" in his edition of Carducci's *Poesie* (*Spirit* 221). He goes on in *The Spirit of Romance* to say, "The practical failure of Carducci to get a hearing outside the most cultured and fastidious circles of Italy is a striking proof that poetry is something more than exquisite thought" (222). In the first edition of *The Spirit of Romance* these observations appeared at the very end of the chapter on Camoens, partly in a

footnote, which suggests that they were added at the proof stage and the compositor just managed to squeeze them in. The reason for the inclusion of these remarks is clear: Margaret Cravens had just alerted Pound to a poetic voice representing a counter-example within the tradition he valued, and he couldn't resist adducing it as an exception that proved his rule.

Apparently in response to Cravens' next letter (her side of the correspondence has not survived), Pound tempered his position on Carducci somewhat, conceding that "a reader who made up more or less for what C. is not would undoubtedly make him effective, for he is undeniably fine in his management of sound" (31; letter of April 25, 1910). Again, Pound is willing to admit Carducci's skill but refuses to grant him emotional concentration or the skillful irony he finds in Leopardi, who "in his outrageous & splendid parody the 'Paralipomeni' does the same sort of thing with a laugh in his sleeve" (31).²

Pound's vehement insistence that Carducci was "fine in his management of sound" but ultimately "freddo" was partly due to the high standard set by Guido Cavalcanti, whose poetry Pound was beginning to translate in a systematic way at this time. "Than Guido Cavalcanti," he wrote in his Introduction to *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* (1912), "no psychologist of the emotions is more keen in his understanding, more precise in his expression; we have in him no rhetoric, but always a true delineation" (Anderson 12). David Anderson, in his edition of the Cavalcanti translations, suggests that "the idea of translating all, or nearly all, of Cavalcanti's poetry apparently occurred to Pound in April of 1910, while he was staying at Sirmione" (xiii). He may have begun the project even earlier, however, for he wrote Margaret Cravens from America on July 6, 1910: "I don't know whether I wrote you that I'd translated 35 sonnets of Guido Cavalcanti into blank verse, & that my next splash will be the 'Sonnets & Ballate of G. C.'" (47). This indicates that Pound had at least a rough draft of *all* the sonnets for the *Guido* volume long before August 1910, when, as Anderson explains, "he had ten sonnets ready, either for submission to a periodical or as a sample for a publisher that might be interested in a book-length collection" (xiii). That he originally translated the sonnets "into blank verse" suggests either that he wanted to establish a complete set of working drafts first and leave the

2. The reference is to Giacomo Leopardi's *I Paralipomeni della Batracomiomachia* (1842), which Pound later quoted in "The Approach to Paris" (*New Age*, 13 [October 2, 1913]) in discussing Laurent Tailhade's parodies of old authors.

fitting of rhymes for later on, or that he initially intended to diverge totally from the much-praised mellifluousness of Dante Gabriel Rossetti's rendering of Cavalcanti's poems.

The latter ambition seems to have been the one that motivated Pound, though in the end he settled on a compromise with the Rossetti tradition, with the result that rhyme-schemes in the final version are frequently loose and impressionistic, reflecting their early blank-verse incarnation. He wrote in the Introduction to *Guido*: "That there might be less interposed between the reader and Guido, it was my first intention to print only his poems and an unrhymed gloze. This has not been practicable. I cannot trust the reader to read the Italian for the music after he has read the English for the sense" (Anderson 19). As in all his translations, Pound was concerned "to bring over the qualities of Guido's rhythm, not line for line, but to embody in the whole of my English some trace of that power which implies the man" (Anderson 19). He restated this intention, explicitly dissociating his effort from Rossetti's, in his reply to a November 1912 review of *Guido* in the *Times Literary Supplement*: "I thought I had made clear in my preface that my endeavour was not to display skill in versification but to present the vivid personality of Guido Cavalcanti."³ The issue at stake for Pound was not sound but *sense*, not the production or reproduction of euphony but the resuscitation of a personality whose work revealed a felicitous and salutary balance of emotion and intellect. Blank verse was admirably suited to the presentation of an individual mind, as Shakespeare's soliloquies and Browning's dramatic monologues demonstrated; Pound's later addition of rhymes was, as he claimed, only a concession to readers' expectations.

Pound was often misunderstood as a translator, of course. His *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, published seven years after *Guido*, was attacked on similar grounds of cacophony and lack of decorum. But in both cases the decorum from which he was deviating was not that of the original author--Pound's whole aim was to capture the spirit of the writer and his age--but rather the more parochial decorum established by recent poets and translators. Pound wanted to 'sound' like the mind of Cavalcanti, not the voice of Rossetti. In this, his practice as translator resembles the historiographic method of *palingenesis*, as advocated by B. G. Niebuhr, Michelet, Carlyle, and other

3. *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 569 (December 1912) 562. Quoted in Anderson xviii.

nineteenth-century historians. The attempt to 'resurrect' the past--whether an individual mind or the folk spirit of a whole culture--is a crucial aspect of Pound's poetic historiography, as it was of Browning's before him (in *Sordello*, for example).⁴

Pound had great expectations for his Cavalcanti translations from the start, as he explained to Margaret Cravens in the same letter of July 6, 1910: "[*Guido*] intends to be the most important contribution to English-Italian Belles lettres since Symonds translation of *Mike. Angelos Sonnets*" (47). Pound cannily avoids reference to Rossetti here, mentioning instead John Addington Symonds, who published his translations from the sonnets of Michelangelo and Tommaso Campanella in 1878. In *The Spirit of Romance* Pound included three of these poems, two addressed to Dante and one to Vittoria Colonna, remarking that "Michael Agnolo is against the spirit of the time. He preferred Dante to Bembo. In him survive the Middle Ages" (238).

Pound's letters to Cravens contain a veritable running account of his work on *Guido*. On July 19, 1910, he wrote from Swarthmore, Pennsylvania that he was "still gloriously engaged in fitting the ghost of Cavalcanti with an English 'shirt an' pants'" (48) and on August 11, writing from New York, he remarked that the translations had "arrived at the point where one must go slowly" (51). (It was around this time that he prepared the ten sonnets which may have been intended as a sample for publishers, as Anderson suggests.) On October 11, still in New York, he wrote Cravens that "my life consists of 'Guido' and interruptions," and offered to dedicate the volume to her when it was complete (52). By this gesture he hoped to repay her for the generous financial support she had been providing since he left Paris (this support continued until her death, and is documented in detail in *Ezra Pound and Margaret Cravens*). Apparently she reacted against this idea at once, for in his letter of November 2 he replied that "if I dont dedicate my edition of *Guido* to you--to whom shall it be dedicated," and then resolved to "give the sonnets to Violet Hunt if you prefer--but many will thereby be scandalized" (54-55). Violet Hunt was the journalist, novelist and literary hostess who in 1909 began an affair with Ford Madox Hueffer which lasted nearly ten years. Since Hueffer was still married, the appearance of the two on a dedication page would "scandalize" many people, but Pound

4. On *palingenesis* in history-writing, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 64, 79.

took the risk anyway and the dedication in the Boston edition runs: "As much of this book as is mine I send to my friends Violet and Ford Maddox [sic] Hueffer."

In the same letter of November 2, Pound commented that "the introduction to Guido still hangs fire," but on November 27 he wrote that "Guido has gone to be judged by his inferiors" (60). The Introduction to the 1912 edition bears the dateline "November 15, 1910," which nestles neatly between these two letters, but *Guido* had a more complicated history between that time and April 1912 when it finally saw publication. That history is obscure and difficult to trace, but one thing is clear: Margaret Cravens assisted with *Guido* at a late stage, just as she had done, though more indirectly, with *The Spirit of Romance*.

On September 29, 1911, Pound wrote her from London that "I've had a few more proofs of the 'Guido' at last. They're publishing it at \$2 instead of one, so that the royalties will mount up rather well if anybody is fool enough to pay such a price for it" (90). On October 9 he wrote, "Guido received. I'd have howled other wise" (96), indicating that he had sent the late-September batch of proofs on to Paris for her inspection. About a month later he wrote that "I'm sending a very messy set of Guido proofs" (98), which suggests that he also sent her corrected proofs. In the same letter he remarked, "I'm proof-correcting the preface to 'Guido' which is badly written with spots of respectable thought in it. Mes hommages. I will get on with it." "Mes hommages" implies that Cravens was somehow responsible for "spots of respectable thought." In remarks prepared in 1929 for a volume of his collected prose, Pound claimed that the "preface" to *Guido* was "finished in Margaret Cravens's apartment in Paris in the spring of 1911."⁵ It is clear, then, that work on the volume continued long after Pound submitted it to the publisher in November 1910, and clear too that he reworked the Introduction, perhaps with help from Cravens, when he was in Paris from March until May 1911.

But what was the nature of this assistance? Possibly she helped as a linguistic consultant, since she had an enviable command of Italian and Italian poetry and had lived in Italy for two years before coming to Paris. It is difficult to tell from the Introduction to *Guido* which "spots" she may have had a hand in, but one item hints strongly of her influence. Defending his

5. Yale University, Ezra Pound Center, "Collected Prose I." Quoted in Anderson xiii-xiv.

adoption of certain textual readings of Cavalcanti, Pound declares (referring to the sonnet "Chi è questa che ven, ch'ogn'om la mira"), "I consider Carducci and Arnone blasphemous in accepting the reading *E fa di claritate tremar l'are* instead of following those *mss.* which read *E fa di clarità l'aer tremare*" (Anderson 19). Two separate works are alluded to here. Nicola Arnone's well-known critical edition of the *Rime di Guido Cavalcanti* (Firenze: Sansoni) was published in 1881. The Carducci reference is more obscure, nowadays at least, but Pound evidently means *Antica lirica italiana: canzonette, canzoni, sonnetti dei secoli XIII-XV* (Firenze: Sansoni), edited by Carducci and published in 1907. This wide-ranging anthology, containing no critical apparatus, offers 22 poems by Cavalcanti, all of them sonnets, including "Chi è questa che ven, ch'ogn'om la mira," which has the reading to which Pound objects ("E fa tremar di claritate l'are").⁶

"Chi è questa" was an especially important poem for Pound. He had already translated it twice before it appeared in *Guido*--first in *The Spirit of Romance* and again in *Provença*, also published in 1910. He produced a fourth version of it in *Guido Cavalcanti Rime* (1932). In each, the line "E fa di clarità l'aer tremare" receives special attention, appearing variously as "Who makes the whole air tremulous with light," "Who makes the air one trembling clarity," and "And makyng the air to tremble with a bright clearnesse" (Anderson 43, 45, 46). (The *Provença* version is more experimental, rendering the line periphrastically: "Who is she coming with a light upon her / Not born of suns that with the day's end end?" [Anderson 44].) Pound was intrigued by the special metaphysics of light in the love poetry of Cavalcanti and other poets of the period, and employed an elaborate light conceit in his own poem "To Guido Cavalcanti" (first published in *Provença*). Similarly, "Ballatetta" (a copy of which he sent to Margaret Cravens on November 2, 1910) is a strange blend of imagery from Cavalcanti and the Gospel according to John: "The light became her grace and dwelt among / Blind eyes and shadows that are formed as men" (CEP 147). ("Ballatetta" was first published in *Canzoni* [1911]).

It is likely that the reference to Carducci in Pound's Introduction to *Guido* was supplied by Cravens, and that this

6. Arnone and Carducci both accept "E fa tremar di claritate l'are," as Pound indicates, but Pound misquotes this reading as "E fa di claritate tremar l'are." He referred to Carducci's edition again, once more without mentioning the title, in his notes to the proposed "Complete Works of Guido Cavalcanti" (Anderson 263).

was one of the "spots of respectable thought" (or scholarly erudition) he owed to her. *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* was published by Small, Maynard in Boston in April 1912, and the author's copies, which Pound wanted sent to his father, were accidentally mailed to London, and arrived there in late May. Dorothy Shakespear immediately dispatched a copy to Margaret Cravens in Paris, presumably at Pound's request (see *Ezra Pound-Dorothy Shakespear* 105-108). Cravens probably received it a day or two before she died on Saturday, June 1, 1912.

Shortly after being informed of the suicide, Margaret's aunt, Drusilla Lanier Cravens, left Madison, Indiana for Paris and arrived there about the middle of June. She quickly sought out Ezra Pound as someone who had been especially close to her niece. At first suspicious of the flamboyant young poet, she soon began to like and trust him, and after returning to the States, corresponded with him off and on for years. Writing from Madison on August 16, 1912, she begged Pound "not to forget the promised translations of the Carducci verses, the first in that Complete volume which is yours. Any translations however imperfect will be grateful to me. I have an idea that that poem . . . made a deep impression on Margaret" (*Ezra Pound-Margaret Cravens* 126). The first poem after prefatory verses in Carducci's *Poesia* (the volume that Cravens sent Pound in Sirmione) is the sonnet "Peregrino del ciel, garrulo a volo," whose descriptions of natural beauty Pound had implicitly criticized in his letter to Cravens back in April 1910. On September 17, 1912, Pound wrote Dorothy Shakespear, "Have translated a sonnet of Carducci's," but he did not mention why or for whom (*Ezra Pound-Dorothy Shakespear* 158).

Apologizing for her slowness in replying, Drusilla Cravens wrote Pound on November 3, 1912, that she was "truly grateful" for the "Carducci interpretation." "It--the original had evidently impressed Margaret years ago--in 1906 I think when in Florence--and what a deep sad meaning the verses have--as hopeless and mystical as sad!" (131). Pound's translation of "Peregrino del ciel, garrulo a volo" was never published, and the descendants of Drusilla Cravens have been unable to locate the manuscript. In order to give a rough idea of the poem, I offer my own unrhymed translation:

Wanderer of the sky, chattering in flight
 you flee the stormy seasons;
 you see the Nile and our transplanted roses

but never change address when you change climates.

If ever you feel pain in your tiny breast
for the distant cherished things,
if fertile soil or the intervening sea
has not yet won your heart from the first nest,

Then when your wing pauses on sunlit hills
white with marble and brown with olive groves
descending to a sea in the Apennines,

Look for a house in the valley and a little garden,
and if the new owner does not shoo you off,
give greetings in my name, o wanderer.

Peregrino del ciel, garrulo a volo
Tu fuggi innanzi a le stagion nembose,
E vedi il Nilo e nostre itale rose,
Né muti stanza perché muti polo:

Se pur de le lontane amate cose
Cape ne' vostri angusti petti il duolo,
Né mai flutto inframesso o pingue suolo
Oblío del primo nido in cor ti pose;

Quando l'ala soffermi a' poggi lieti
Che digradano al mar da l'Apennino
Bianchi di marmi e bruni d'oliveti,

Una casa a la valle ed un giardino
Cerca, e, se 'l nuovo possessor no 'l vieti,
Salutali in mio nome, o peregrino. (Carducci *Poesie* 13)

In this sustained apostrophe to a swallow--the "wander of the sky"--the homesick poet asks it to give his greetings to the house and garden of his birthplace, imagining that the bird must miss the "distant cherished things" ("le lontane amate cose") of its own nest. It is easy to see why Drusilla Cravens wanted a translation of the poem: it evoked, to use her words, the "deep sad meaning" of her niece's long sojourn in Europe. Carducci's lines were important to Margaret herself and must have expressed for her something of her own experience as an expatriate--a sense of wandering, of pilgrimage without destination, of talent and sensitivity released but also threatened by flight from the storms of home and self. For Margaret Cravens, the Old World did not provide an answer to the problem of growing up in America; the very fact that an

admired poem about home thoughts from abroad should be written in the language of the adopted world reflects the division within the American artist/intellectual which she felt so strongly. Pound and H.D. found ways of living with this internal fissure, though they too struggled with it mightily and often. When Pound translated Carducci's poem and sent it to Drusilla Cravens, he was, in a sense, re-uniting Margaret with herself and her origins. It was an act of linguistic rapprochement standing in for a cultural reconciliation no committed expatriate could actually undertake. Considered in this light, the expatriate fascination with translating might be seen as an attempt not only to reach out to a rich, wise, fostering tradition, but also to build a bridge back to the familiar, rejected culture--a new, and subtle, way to pay old debts.

In *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* Pound eschewed ornament in order that the personality of the translator might remain concealed behind the mind of the author--an act of altruism in the sense of deference to the *other*. Margaret Cravens played a similar role in relation to Pound, helping to motivate and invigorate his art through financial and intellectual contributions, but insisting on invisibility throughout. Her suicide itself, while calling attention to her own thwarted individuality, was the ultimate act of self-divestiture, a paradoxical voicing of voicelessness. Yet in Pound's comments on Carducci in *The Spirit of Romance* and in his preface to *Guido*, Cravens' voice can be faintly heard suggesting, debating, and moderating ideas. What has remained a silent partnership for so long is now just audible above the hum and buzz of the intervening decades.

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