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Richard Sieburth, ed., *A Walking Tour in Southern France: Ezra Pound Among the Troubadours*

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ROBERT SPOO

A Walking Tour in Southern France: Ezra Pound Among the Troubadours, *edited by Richard Sieburth. New Directions, 1992.*
xxiii + 123 pages. \$22.95 (USA), \$27.99 (Canada) cloth

Anyone who has been to the Beinecke Library at Yale and seen the three folders containing Ezra Pound's notes from his 1912 walking tour can appreciate the editorial feat that Richard Sieburth has performed. Sieburth's description of the notes as "a virtually impenetrable jumble" (viii) is no exaggeration. I have tried several times to follow Pound's footprints through this scrappy paper trail of notebooks, detached sheets, interleaved hotel stationery, and other hastily improvised oddments, only to abandon all hope of reconstructing a sequence. If there had ever been an order to these materials, I concluded, it had long ago crumbled, like some of the old castles of the Midi, into a Cantosque collage of *spezzato* images and observations, or what "Near Perigord" refers to as a "broken bundle of mirrors." Pound's sense of the past as a ragbag that occasionally lets spill a luminous detail is all too faithfully imaged in this heap of archival shards.

Sieburth's solution was simple and enviably romantic: to retrace the itinerary of the summer of 1912 by travelling the route himself. He discovered in the process that "in almost every case the actual details of observed geography clarified the most puzzling cruxes of the manuscript" (viii). This "pedestrian" philology neatly mirrored the poet's own quest, for Pound too had gone to troubadour country in search of topography and history that would substantiate and enrich the puzzling texts that had come to fascinate him. This edition contains a clear reading text of Pound's manuscript, which Sieburth has divided into sections that clarify the poet's progress ("Poitiers," "Angoulême," "Claix and Blanzac," "Chalais," and so forth) and annotated with details from history, geography, medieval literature, and Pound's own writings. Sieburth's introduction is a skillful weaving of biographical information and thoughtful commentary on the implications of Pound's tour and the ideas that motivated it.

The editor also includes two fragments from "Gironde," the prose narrative that Pound tried to pull together from his walking tour notes and eventually abandoned (or did not preserve), along with appendices that reprint the essay "Troubadours: Their Sorts and Conditions" (first published in the *Quarterly Review* in 1913) and three poems that grew out of the 1912 notes, "The Gypsy," "Provincia Deserta," and "Near Perigord." The volume is generously illustrated with picture postcards from Pound's 1919 walking tour in southern France (though the quality of reproduction is disappointing).

If the surviving fragments of "Gironde" are any indication of the original whole, I am not particularly sorry that Pound suppressed it. The prose is wooden, self-conscious, unconvinced and unconvincing. Ford Madox Hueffer, who a year earlier had rolled on the floor in derision of the poems of *Canzoni*, told Pound that "Gironde" was as bad as Robert Louis Stevenson, and this verdict eroded the young man's already waning confidence in his project. But the prose of *A Walking Tour* has an entirely different feel. Fresh, alert, and quirky, it has the pawky immediacy of Pound's quasi-autobiographical *Indiscretions* (1920) without the slapstick irony and crackerbarrel wit with which he carefully distanced himself from the personae of that work. "I had set out upon this book with numerous ideas," Pound writes in *A Walking Tour*, "but the road had cured me of them. There is this difference, I think, between a townsman & a man doing something or going somewhere in the open, namely that the townsman has his head full of abstractions" (33-34). Yet Pound's goal was not merely to stuff his head with real objects picked up along the way but "to realize conditions" (31), a radically historical ambition that informed much of his thinking, early and late, about the troubadours. (He frequently used the word "conditions" in his attempts to recapture the Provençal past.)

Pound's historical imagination grew as he trod the roads of southern France. Haunted by a sense of the past as an abode of departed spirits, he wrote of a "land . . . thick with ghosts" (35) and mentioned a man from Sarlat who "dealt likewise in garments for the dead," from whom "I gathered the remaining history of Hautefort" (28). These formulations look forward to the historiography of the Ur-Cantos of 1917, wherein Pound declares that "Ghosts move about me / Patched with histories," and to the final version of canto 1 with its throng of spirits prefiguring the historical resurrections of later cantos.

But in 1912 troubadour country was not yet for Pound the *paysage moralisé*, the repository of historical and political exempla, that it would become for him when he revisited it in 1919. In 1912 he merely noted in passing that the stronghold of Beaucaire was a "[s]hell-rest destroyed by Richelieu in disgusting feud / just enough rooms left - to be fascinating" (71). By 1919, Richelieu's destruction of Beaucaire seemed to him a symbol of the state's central power and its depredations upon culture, a condition he denounced in a series of articles, "Pastiche: The Regional," which he dispatched to the *New Age* as he tramped the roads of Provence.

Particularly striking in *A Walking Tour* is the quickness of Pound's visual reflexes, the almost painterly verve of recorded observations: "hence I wind down the gently shelving rd. to the needle-like spine of Chapelle Auzac where the valley grows long & blue again" (35). He describes the Dordogne river as "a band of bluish metal with rippled chevrons in the shallows" (39). The notes end abruptly with verbal snapshots of the city of Clermont and its environs: "the mist clots about the trees in the valley / the gt. drops of mtn. rain break thru the heat about me / The smoky Clermont was not a bad sight itself with the sun above it" (77). The chastened tempo of these observations, emanating from a sympathetically seeing "I," anticipates the quietly reverential rhythms of *The Pisan Cantos*, wherein Pound would again testify to a natural world that confers unexpected blessings.

Pound's walking tour was in reality two tours: a small loop that took him from Poitiers down to Périgueux and up to Limoges, and a larger swing that began in Uzerche, meandered down to the Pyrenees, and then hooked up towards Montpellier, Nîmes and points north. The break between these two legs of the journey was caused by the suicide in Paris of Pound's patroness Margaret Cravens, news of which caught up with him in Limoges some six days after the incident. My one significant criticism of Sieburth's work is his treatment of Pound's friendship with Cravens, which he describes as a "romantic friendship," an "*amitié amoureuse*," and a "triangle" (109-110). Although these assertions help buttress an intriguing thesis about Pound's "cult of Amor" and his symbolic transference to *A Walking Tour* of a "complex web" of personal relationships, there is in fact little evidence for Sieburth's interpretation of the friendship, certainly not enough to warrant the darkly suggestive phrase, "Pound's fatally equivocal dealings with Margaret

Cravens" (xiv). Cravens's suicide had several *known* contributing factors, but insensitive dalliance on Pound's part has not been established as one of these (though it was conjectured by puzzled contemporaries in search of a motive), and it cannot be responsibly asserted by the biographer. (Pound and Cravens were introduced to each other in March 1910, incidentally, not "March 1911," as Sieburth claims [109]. This foreshortening of their acquaintance gives color to a dubious suggestion that Pound was cynically "cultivating" Cravens in the weeks before her death [xi].)

But Sieburth has done a remarkable job of retrieving Pound's manuscript from archival chaos and giving us an important glimpse of the young poet in an unusual setting. *A Walking Tour* makes readily available a text that must be set alongside Pound's other Provençal writings—the translations, poems, and essays. Sieburth's introduction and notes allow the darting, jagged impressions of this latter-day troubadour to radiate out into other texts and contexts, Poundian and otherwise. That the editor himself became a troubadour to gather the limbs of the manuscript is only one of the felicities of this volume in which all roads lead to Provence.