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“Lest some little thing of the real world should intrude itself:”
Ezra Pound’s Dream City in Collision with the Real

Squeezed between a thin exposition on the love affairs of Alexander Pope and an editorial on the negative effects of college reading lists on the reading habits of graduates, Ezra Pound’s travel essay, “Burgos: A Dream City of Old Castile,” was published in the October 1906 issue of *Book News Monthly*. His second article for the magazine, this was Pound’s first published foray into the popular literature of cross-cultural travel and the description of a journey. “Am doing Burgos,” he writes to his father a few days after his departure from that city, “with an Arthur Symons-Kipling effect but I don’t suppose Mr. C [Carlos Tracy Chester] will be able to use it.”¹ Mr. Chester, co-editor at *Book News Monthly*, was able to use it, and Pound entered the glossy world of the magazine with a travelogue that blended the solipsistic wanderlust of Arthur Symons with the clear, Kiplingesque analytical critique, characteristic of empire management and high-minded, gentlemanly journalism. But this cognitive mapping, to borrow a concept from Fredric Jameson, does not limit itself to a style of representing. The Symons-Kipling effect, representing structures of power embedded in the style and aesthetics of the representation of place, also represent a desire, on Pound’s part, to subsume place into aesthetics. Pound’s travel essay represents place as an imaginary cultural map, but it is in an unsteady relationship to the restless, often catastrophic material of the real world. Although

¹ “Paris June 15, 1906,” The Ezra Pound Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

the material space of Burgos is metaphorized to a dream state, Burgos remains more than a dream; its materials colliding with the poet's visionary impulses. And, from this collision, a new, highly protective reflex emerges—one that will become central to Pound's aesthetics of place.

The reflex was a response to aggravating political circumstances in 1906. In May of that year, Pound crossed the Atlantic on the SS *Konig Albert*, arriving in Cordoba and later Madrid for a summer of research on Lope de Vega and Catholic morality plays.² But his project was frequently derailed by chaos in the streets. On May 9th, he writes to William Carlos Williams from the main railway hub at Alcazar de San Juan, that he had to leave Cordoba at 2AM,

because the citizens of that part of the ancient city which lies most remote from civilization took offense at my keeping dry in a black rain coat instead of a pink umbrella and showed their displeasure by throwing ancient vegetables and fragments of pavement at me.

In another letter, he concedes that should not have been traveling in “that part of the ancient city” without a guide—but claims that any guide would have been useless. In order to be rid of the pestering children, he gave one a cigarette, a mistake that prompted “5000 others” to approach. Refusing to give out any more, he replied to their “cinco centavos?” in a Spanish mangled with Italianisms, “cinco diabolos—vaya al diablo.” Upon which, he was chased down with rotten vegetables and bits of pavement, narrowly escaping on a late-night train. Humorous as this episode might

² *The American Roots of Ezra Pound*, J.J. Wilhelm (New York 1985), 145-8. Wilhelm contends that Pound started from Gibraltar—but a letter written to William Carlos Williams on a paper with the letterhead of Hotel Bristol, Genoa, suggests that Pound first stopped in Italy, before continuing onward to Gibraltar and then Spain. Additionally, the route of the “dampfer *Konig Albert*” stopped only at New York City, Naples, and Genoa. Pound Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

be, it nonetheless demonstrates a situation in which access to cultural sites is fiercely controlled by local forces in violent opposition to extra-local others. Although the ancientness of the place is the feature valued by the extra-local traveler, it is also the material which is hurled back at him, on account of his presumption to exclude the inhabitants of that place from his experience of it.

Pound goes onward to Madrid where another, much more serious incident further precipitates Pound's response to the conflict between the imaginary spaces



and the material conditions of these places.³ On May 31, while observing an excited crowd at the celebrations for the marriage of Spanish King Alfonso XIII to Scottish-

³ This clipping and the one that follows are from the Pound Papers at the Beinecke Library, Yale University. All images in this text are reproduced for academic purposes; if you are the copyright holder to any image included here, please contact the author: edgareduardogarcia@gmail.com.

born Princess Victoria Eugenie of Battenburg, Pound witnessed the attempted regicide by Catalan anarchist Mateu Morral. Dropping a bomb on the royal procession from a balcony, Morral injured and killed several bystanders, in addition to a horse. Later that day, Pound wrote a letter to Mr. Chester, in which he admits that it is “rather hard to describe the anachronistic pageantry just after the report of the bomb throwing.”⁴ His ability to write in the wake of devastating political events is shut down. He goes on to describe a fantastic wish that the anarchists would be given an island to themselves, so that they could neither harm anybody but themselves nor benefit from the order of a society which they only care to destroy.⁵ The unrealistic dream of segmenting the people of the world in such a way that conflicts would be isolated to party-specific islands, as appealing as it might be even



⁴ “Madrid May 31, '06,” Pound Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

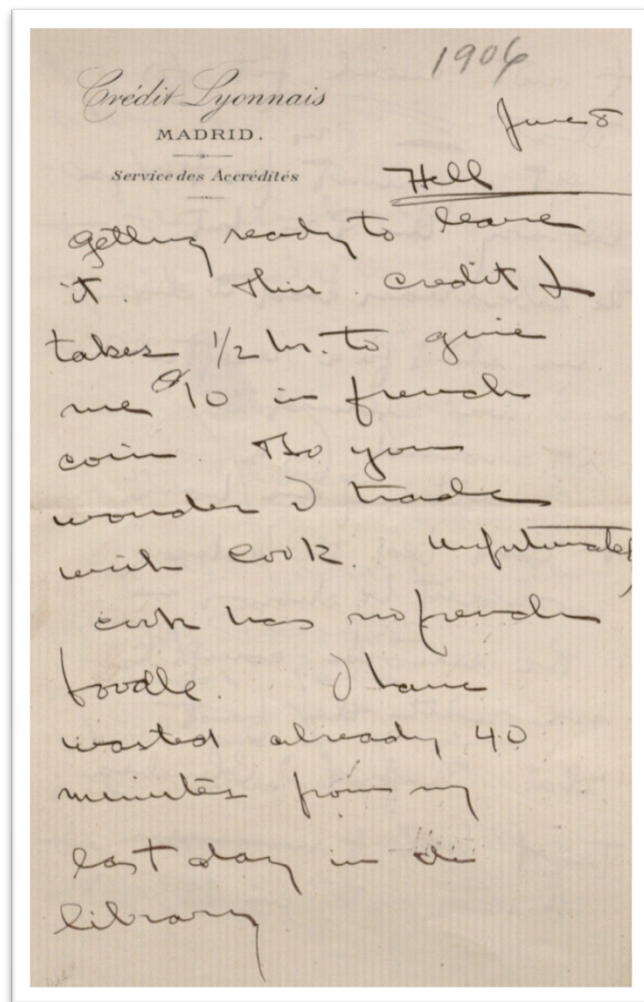
⁵ Ibid.

today, only reveals a political time-space that, for Pound, is viewed through the lens of an idealized geography. And, as events continue to rupture the ideality of Pound's geography, he reveals that his cognitive reflex to these environmental disruptions is flight to ever more elaborate dream-spaces. In his travel notes for the trip through Spain, he writes, "Spain is hell for anyone who wants to do anything now. Except perhaps to drink in color with artistically dreamy vision."⁶

In a letter postmarked from Madrid on June 8, Pound reiterates his thoughts on Spain to his father:

HELL
Getting ready to
leave it
...
Damn. I go to Paris
tonight. 1st stop
Burgos. Second
Paris. Will see if I
can get more done at
the square which
there this place fit
only to loaf in and
not well fit for that
[sic].⁷

The day-long stop in Burgos would become the material for Pound's most visionary response to the political disturbances that he experienced in Spain, synthesizing the materials of the place into a dream world.



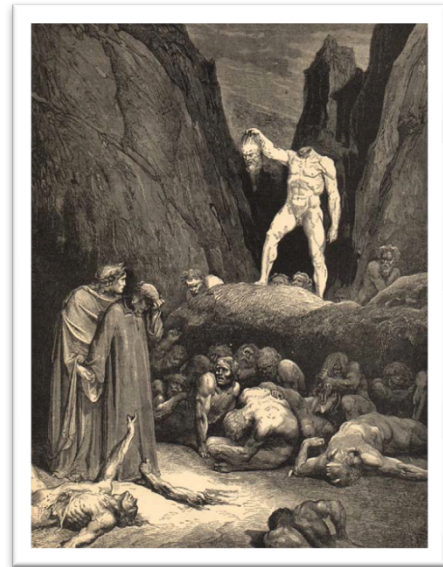
⁶ "Spain [travel notes]," *ibid.*

⁷ "June 8," *ibid.* Image, *ibid.*

The main conceit of “Burgos: A Dream City of Old Castile” is that Pound enters Burgos in a dream state, through which he can experience the Spanish town in the presence of its most famous denizen, el Cid Campeador, the eponymous hero of the medieval Spanish epic. Like el Cid, who begins his saga of exile and redemption by spending a night outside Burgos with his men, camped on the “arenal,” his head on the sandy earth,⁸ Pound begins his tale by entering “with a representative body of the *populacho* that slumbered.” “I spent a night,” he writes, “next to the earth.” But Pound is not on the earth; rather, he is soaring just above it in an overnight train car. And, in describing that train ride through the night, he adds another layer of metaphorization to the imbricate dream-geography of the essay. Along with the “*populacho*,” there was:

a brother from Segovia that opened his mouth but once, and then only to assure the inquiring head of a would-be fellow-compartmenter that “we already stood eleven,” which we manifestly did not. The head disappeared, however, and we rumbled drowsily along, past the tombs of the Escorial, and into the night.⁹

Rumbling past the tombs of dead kings, queens, princes, and princesses, outside the royal residence northwest of Madrid, the drowsy scene of the disembodied head of a traveler

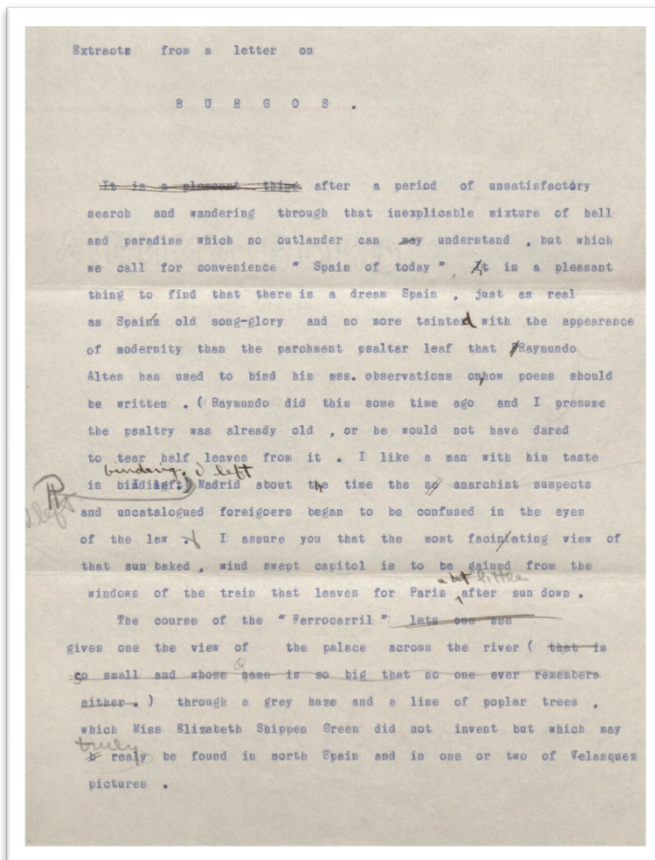


⁸ *Poema del Cid*, “Cantar del Destierro,” (Madrid 1967), lines 55-64.

⁹ “Burgos: A Dream City of Old Castle,” *Book News Monthly*, XXV, no. 2 (Oct 1906), 91-94. The famous image is Gustave Doré’s, from *Dante Alighieri’s Inferno from the Original by Dante Alighieri and Illustrated with the Designs of Gustave Doré* (New York, 1890).

trying to find a place to rest replicates Dante's encounter in hell with the belligerent troubadour Bertran de Born, who carries his severed head in hand like a lantern which gives no light.¹⁰ The intertextual geography of the essay spatializes several medieval Romance epics into a dreamscape of old Spain. In this dreamscape, Burgos arises like the mountain of Purgatory between hell and heaven. This is plainly laid out in the essay's opening paragraph:

After a period of unsatisfactory search and wandering through that inexplicable mixture of hell and paradise which no outlander can understand, but which for convenience we call "Spain of to-day," it is a pleasant thing to find that there is a dream Spain, just as real as Spain's old song-glory, and no more tainted with the appearance of modernity than a time-stained parchment psalter leaf.¹¹



It is worth remembering that in Dante's theological geography, Purgatory is the afterworld most similar to Earth, in that it is a temporary state, a place of transitions, a restorative stop on the way to ultimate peace and salvation. Pound's day-long stop in "dream Spain" is likewise

¹⁰ *La Divina Commedia*, "Inferno," Canto XXVIII, lines 118-135.

¹¹ "Burgos: A Dream City of Old Castle," *Book News Monthly*, XXV, no. 2 (Oct 1906), 91-94. Pictured here is Pound's original typescript for the essay, stored in the Pound Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

positioned on a continuum with a far end extending into poesis and myth, and the opposite end flying away from the political disturbances and the violence in the streets that he had experienced in his trip.

But the impelling end of Pound's "dream Spain," the "pleasant thing to find" after the "period of unsatisfactory search and wandering," is not in absolute opposition to the materials of Pound's world. In describing a palace seen through the dreamy, gray haze and the line of poplar trees, which he saw from the train as it left Madrid, he compares the vision to the *art-nouveau* illustrations of popular magazine artist, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and the depictions of landscape in the background of the paintings of royalty by Diego Velázquez, which he had seen at the Prado (the dreamy city can be seen in the cloudy background of both works):¹²



¹² The image on the left is Shippen Green's "The Journey," published in *Harper's*, Vol. 108, No. 5 (New York 1903). The image on the right is Velázquez' "Retrato Ecuestre de Felipe III."

And, later in the essay, he claims that el Cid's subterfuge of pawning a chest of sand said to be filled with gold to the Jews was in fact the "the record of the first successful deal of this bandit Cassie Chadwick," the Canadian con-artist who defrauded several U.S. banks by claiming to be Andrew Carnegie's illegitimate daughter and heiress. Blending popular American figures and folk celebrities into a dream vision of Spain, which is supposed to be "no more tainted with the appearance of modernity than a time-stained parchment psalter leaf," would seem to be a contradiction in the terms of Pound's dream. The vision couples local and transnational figures with the fluidity characteristic of his later works, especially the Cantos, but the problem is that this horizontal, trans-scalar cultural field is hardly "[un]tainted with the appearance of modernity." The palimpsest of Burgos that arises, like a mountain of Purgatory from the pit of hell, is rather a reactive beautification of the collision of local and extra-local, or international, forces. It is, as he puts it, "just as real as Spain's old song-glory," a statement that requires a concession that old song-glory is a real thing in order to admit that Spain, that is Pound's "dream Spain," was a real experience. "Just as," the leveling comparative of degree of equivalence, flattens out incompatibility and every difference between the Spain of Romance epics, Pound's "dream Spain," and the historical, modernizing Spain of 1906. But, in subsuming the latter Spain into his dream, Pound not only subordinates reality in order to project his vision for the reader, he must additionally defend his vision from the pesky beast of modernity, which frequently pops up as if to swallow the narrative.

In his miniature tome, *The Five Paradoxes of Modernity*, Antoine Compagnon identifies an artistic reflex that was precipitated by the need for *avant-garde* artists of the early 20c to reconcile the contradictory impulses of affirming their ‘newness’ while negating that history is moving forward. As a result, a narrative was created that valued art as dialectic of purification: the artist’s job was to find new ways to reveal that, which had always been there.¹³ The paradox, however, is that as soon as

the new way was discovered, its identification as an advance from tradition reified the tradition, conventionalized the creation, and privileged whatever would come next. Modern aesthetics was always trailing just behind life in



modernity. Ezra Pound’s narrative in *Burgos* similarly attempts to draw out a dream from the chaos of modern life, but does so by pulling a modernistic palimpsest from the Spanish town. Modernity, in other words, controls the conventions of Pound’s

¹³ *The 5 Paradoxes of Modernity*, trans. Frankin Philip (New York 1994), 38-9.

dreamscape from the outset.¹⁴ As he climbs the hillcrest sloping upward to Burgos' north-west, "taken up," as he puts it in Dantescan geography, "into a very high mountain," he experiences the terraces of an imagined *Paradiso*. But reality irrupts in so far as these terraces were the lines of defense scarped into the hill wall by Napoleon's besieged army in 1812:¹⁵



¹⁴ The illustration on the previous page is by Massimo Tosi and was accessed at http://www.worldofdante.org/purgatory1_detail.html on March 25, 2010.

¹⁵ The image is taken from Charles J. Esdaile's "The Castle at Burgos: A Preliminary Report," accessed at peninsularwar200.org/burgoscastlereport.pdf on March 25, 2010. The image on the next page, which shows again the defensive scarping of the hillsides by the French army in the Peninsular War, is Josep Bernat Flaugier's "Escena de la Guerra del Francès," accessed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Escena_de_la_Guerra_del_Franc%C3%A8s.jpg on March 25, 2010.

The reminders of the Napoleonic Wars, widely recognized as the first modern war of a global scale, again disturb the narrative as the Dante-like traveler recounts the artifacts revealed to him on his voyage: “I was shown postern wickets and old stone cannon balls, deep wells and secret stairs.” Pound’s dream geography is disintegrated by the traces of a gruesome, international conflict and still he struggles to wrap the experience in the restorative shroud of a dream.



Reaching for something akin to what Dante in Purgatory termed ‘active’ religion, Pound’s descriptions of the religious sites at Burgos value the immediate, transfixing quality of elemental forces experienced at the sites. The wonder of the cathedral of Burgos is the unobstructed “light of the Spanish morning... [the] white crown of God’s sunlight” that streams upon worshippers in “homage of noonday.” Dante’s concept of valuing the living strength of religious experience is reworked by Pound to value the religious experience of live moments—especially those channeled by aesthetic appreciation of geo-hierophany. Following from this, he calls the “Golden Stairway of the High Door” in the cathedral a cunning “bit of witchery,” comparable to the “Diana statue in the “Brut,” ‘whither came all the wonder-crafty men.’” Cribbing a passage from Layamon’s *Brut*, Pound elides the rather suggestive lines that follow:

iwiten of þan þincge:
 þat weren to comende.
 Sheo ha wolde cuþe:
 mid tockne and swesene:
 wan iweren a-slepe.¹⁶

Desiring to know of the things that are to come, the wonder-crafty men receive revelations from Diana in their dreams while they sleep. A wonder-crafty man in his own right, Pound weaves together his own multi-traditional poetic bit of witchery: incorporating the Christian cathedral space into a Middle English Romance epic about the mythical Trojan founder of England, wherein priests pay homage to the Roman goddess Diana, as recounted by an American traveler in old Castile. The tightly controlled collision of multiple poetic referents, deployed as a “bit of witchery” meant to activate a sacred experience of the elements for the reader, is itself a kind of prolepsis in poesis, anticipating the aesthetic of Pound’s later work, especially *The Cantos*.

Pound’s dreamscape, in this early iteration, maps culture but finds that culture, in its material existence resists visionary mapping. The city of Burgos can never be mere dream. While the poet fortifies his vision with the work of poetic production, the material reality of modernity collides more intensely with the boundaries of the poet’s Burgos “of old song glory” and of the rising mountain of Purgatory. In such a collision, the poet tightens the referential field, compressing his metaphors and the dream vision, as if to streamline an advance in a battle against the modern world. Paradoxically, this move precipitates the entry of modernity’s

¹⁶ *Layamon’s Brut, or Chronicle of Britain; A Poetical Semi-Saxon Paraphrase of The Brut of Wace*, Vol. I, ed. Sir Frederic Madden (London 1847), lines 1155-1160.

materials into the advance and the poet is left reaching for hierophany in an experience of the elements of the natural environment, the raw strength of life.

Thirty-nine years later, he recounts the early experience in Spain from a U.S. Army detention facility north of Pisa:

Zeus lies in Ceres' bosom
 Taishan is attended of loves
 Under Cythera, before sunrise
 And he said: "Hay aqui mucho catolicismo—(sounded
 catolithismo)
 y muy poco reliHion"
 and he said: "Yo creo que los reyes desaparecen"
 (Kings will, I think, disappear)
 That was Padre Jose Elizondo
 In 1906. . .¹⁷

Whereas the poet had to leave Burgos in the protective veil of a siesta, here, the poet is awake in the pre-dawn hour. The place is sublimated to pure vision and yet the poet is not asleep. Mt. Taishan, unlike Mt. Purgatory, is a physical reality *and* a context for the visionary impulse of a poet amid geopolitical collision. Pound once remarked that he "began the Cantos about 1904."¹⁸ Dating the genesis of his monumental work to his time at Hamilton College, where he began piecing together the cultural field that would obsess him for the rest of his life, we might date the earliest iteration of the project to the summer of 1906. In any manner, we might gain a greater sense of Pound's poetics of place, or even place as poetics, by considering his great poem as, in various aspects, a modified dream vision.

¹⁷ *The Cantos* (New York, 1970), 81: lines 1-9.

¹⁸ Quoted in Peter Ackroyd, *Ezra Pound and his World* (New York, 1980), 12.