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Alec Marsh. *Ezra Pound*. London: Reaktion Books, 2011. 247pp.

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Undoubtedly, Ezra Pound was, and continues to be, one of the most influential and controversial poets in all of literature. As the subject of such superlatives, Pound has inspired many writers to contribute to the long list of biographies and critical investigations of his work. Due to the sheer number of studies devoted to him, it takes a distinct and original focus or agenda for a particular book on Pound to stand out amidst such company. In his new biography of Pound, though, Alec Marsh actually accomplishes that task by simply recognising and addressing the most popular conceptions of, and questions about, the poet.

As the President of The Ezra Pound Society and the author of *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson*, Marsh is especially well-suited to tackle the thorny issues surrounding Pound's racial and political viewpoints and situate them within Pound's poetry and their broader historical context. In his telling of Pound's life, Marsh carefully pinpoints the origins and traces the developments of Pound's economic and anti-Semitic opinions. Specifically, Marsh notes that the poet's father, Homer, worked as an assayer at the Philadelphia Mint "literally making money" and, as a result, the young Pound became "highly conscious of money – not of wealth, but money itself" (14-15). Marsh also keenly observes that Pound's early interest in the substance, meaning and value of money, also focused upon the same issues as the "abstruse questions of sign, symbol and referent [that] are the very stuff of literary

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theory" (15). Thus, by highlighting the similarities between the poet's two would-be obsessions, Marsh identifies how Pound could so easily conflate those interests later in life.

Rather than identifying Pound's anti-Semitic opinions as developing, solely, out of his economic theories, Marsh uniquely argues that Pound's negativity towards Jewish people may have originated as a defence mechanism. Marsh recounts that while waiting to first meet Pound, Wyndham Lewis and his company decided that, due to his surname, Pound must be of Jewish decent. Marsh believes that association and the type of class-consciousness it reveals may have sparked Pound's bigotry. He suggests that because "[t]here is no trace of [anti-Semitism] in his upbringing, or his private writings until his attempt – with mixed success – to enter English society" that "Pound began to fitfully emit anti-Jewish remarks in his writing […] as a way of indicating to his readers that he himself was not Jewish" (56). Far from the result of simply conflating Jews with bad banking practices, then, Pound's anti-Semitism may have originated, like most prejudices, from a deep-rooted adolescent fear of not being accepted by the in-crowd.

Throughout the remainder of his book, Marsh traces these threads of fixation in Pound's personality as they developed and coalesced in his mind and work. While Marsh does not fail to detail some of the more salacious aspects of Pound's life, he locates the origins of Pound's obsessions and weaves them together in such a way that one may comprehend, but not excuse, Pound's associations with anti-Semitism and Fascism. For instance, Marsh cleanly delineates the way in which Pound's early Imagist poetry, which avoided rhetoric in favour of a precisely-worded and direct treatment of the "thing," led to an interest in Asian poetics and the teachings of Confucius (51, 64-6). By urging one to look inward and determine the exact definitions of words as a means to create order in one's life and country, Confucius offered Pound an ethical program rooted in the same principles as Pound's poetic theories. Marsh posits that this

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Confucian world view, based on precise categories and clear boundaries, lied at the heart of Pound's later racist tendencies, which included, among other unfortunate stances, a belief in a racial hierarchy and a strong opposition to miscegenation (194-5).

Marsh also offers a succinct and understandable explanation of how Pound's economic theories and Jeffersonian politics led to his ardent support of Mussolini and Italian fascism. According to Marsh, Pound correctly discerned that in a capitalist economy the cost of production consistently outweighs the purchasing power created by that production and, as a result, capitalist states often turn to war as a means to consume their unused product (119). In fascism, Pound found a system of government that attempted to invert that process by having the capital actually work for the state (125-6). Moreover, Pound also viewed Mussolini as a man of action like Jefferson who would fight for the rights of the individual state, but would also ignore those rights if he thought it was in favour of the greater good (127). Ultimately, then, Pound believed that in Mussolini and fascism he had located the politician and government that might adopt his economic theories and, eventually, rid the world of war (128-9). These concerns became the focus of Pound's poetry and, by isolating and connecting them, Marsh does more than simply help one understand the man, he helps one understand the poetry.

Compared to most other Pound biographies, Marsh's book is a quick and easy read; recommended for the general reader or even the graduate student who desires a familiarity with, but not an exhaustive study of, Pound and his work. In fact, at less than 250 pages, Marsh's book makes the relationships between Pound's obsessions and his poetry more obvious than other more in-depth biographies. Apart from stating that Pound first contacted James Joyce while soliciting contributions for *The Catholic Anthology* rather than for *Des Imagistes* (29), everything else rings true and speaks to the great amount of care and research put forth by the

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author. In fact, other than those difficult questions about Pound, the most salient aspect of the book is Marsh's obvious care for, and disappointment in, his subject. For some, Marsh's personal struggle to understand and explain, but not apologise for, Pound may seem distracting in a biography. Others, however, may find Marsh's simultaneous love and revulsion for Pound both commendable and typical of anyone who has tried to understand the complexities behind the man. Ultimately, Marsh's biography provides the essential materials and information needed to answer those ever-present questions about Pound, but, in doing so, also complicates them further and leaves one both understanding more and convinced of less.