

Ezra Pound in Rimini

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Abstract In 1922 Ezra Pound went to Rimini, Italy, in order to study the story of Malatestas. He carried out precise research about Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta and his attempt to create an independent Seignory all over Central Italy in the XV century A.D., forerunning Cesare Borgia's projects. At last, Pound wrote his four *Malatesta Cantos* (VIII-XI). In 1944, when Rimini was bombed, he expressed his deepest sympathy for that martyr town. Some of these data have been analysed by a recent critical edition of Pound's *Draft of XXX Cantos*, published by Prof. Bacigalupo.

Keywords Ezra Pound, Sigismondo Pandolfo Malatesta, Malatesta Temple, George Gemisthus Pletho, Rimini, Romagna

he was already famous as a poet and a philologist; he had read Dante and appreciated the *Divine Comedy* very much. The stories of Malatesta Da Verucchio (1212-1312), nicknamed «the Old Mastiff»; ⁴ Paolo Malatesta's unfortunate love for Francesca Da Rimini (his brother Gianciotto's bride); ⁵ the glory of Sigismondo Pandolfo (1417-1468), the man who dared to build in Rimini a pagan Temple in honour of his family and of his lover Isotta Degli Atti too – all those things impressed deeply on Pound's imagination. In Rimini, he found the real scenery of Malatesta's literary saga. That's why he decided to write the four *Malatesta Cantos* (VIII-XI in this volume), published by Thomas Stearns Eliot in 1923.

3. Pound in Malatesta Temple: Gemisthus' Sepulchre

Sigismondo Malatesta – «the Wolf of Rimini», whose portrait painted by Piero Della Francesca is still visible on the right side of his Temple – became a myth in Pound's passionate mind. The poet used to call him «*Sidg*». ⁶ Needless to say, Pound fell in love with Rimini. Sigismondo's Malatesta Temple was his academy. Among those Greek marbles – taken, or perhaps stolen, from Ravenna and Fano – the poet born in Hailey, Idaho reconstructed the spirit of Italian Renaissance. Inside that temple, he discovered Leon Battista Alberti's theory of

1. Introduction: Ezra Pound and Romagna

Let's praise Massimo Bacigalupo ¹ – whose parents Giuseppe and Frieda were Pound's close friends in Rapallo, Italy – for his latest work: a new edition with English text, Italian translation, introduction and thorough commentary of Pound's *Draft of XXX Cantos*. ² This book published in Parma is not only intended for the Italian public. Its important introductions (pp. 5-32), notes (337-352), Pound's biography (353-364), selected literature (365-372) and rich indexes (373-384) are useful implements for Poundian scholars all over the world.

In another book of his, Bacigalupo investigated Pound's devotion for Rapallo. ³ Our aim in this paper is studying Pound's love for Romagna and especially Rimini.

2. The Making of Pound's *Malatesta Cantos*

When Pound went to Rimini for the very first time in 1922,

¹ The author is Professor of English and Chief of Department in the State University of Genoa, Italy.

² Bacigalupo [1] («Poeti della Fenice», pp. 384, € 28,00).

³ Bacigalupo [2].

⁴ Dante, *Inferno*, XXVII 46-48 [4]. He was a noble Ghibelline who passed to the Guelphs' side, proving himself to be a very good instance of what was to be called afterwards «Machiavelli's ethics».

⁵ «Old Mastiff's» sons were – among the others – Malatestino (d. 1317), nicknamed the «Purblind» and loathed by Dante himself (*Inferno*, XXVII 46; XXVIII 76-90) [4]; Gianciotto (ca. 1240-1304), the «Cripple»; Paolo (1246-1285), the «Fair». According to an old tale, Paolo was sent to Ravenna in order to marry young Francesca da Polenta by proxy, on behalf of his brother Gianciotto. The unfortunate girl loved the «Fair» Paolo at first sight. Only many days later, Francesca knew her real husband was Gianciotto, the «Cripple».

⁶ Bacigalupo [1], 102-104, 122, 128. As a matter of fact, ancient documents concerning Sigismondo nickname him «*Sigi*»: cfr. Bacigalupo [1], 114-115.

classical architecture.⁷ Pound's lifelong interest in esoteric sciences⁸ felt at ease as he studied all those magic, cabalistic, and alchemistic symbols adorning the sepulchre of George Gemisthus Pletho (ca. 1355-1452), the Neoplatonic philosopher who was a specialist of natural magic and a sort of wizard himself.⁹ Not by chance, in 1460 Pope Pius II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) excommunicated Sigismondo and commented: «He built a noble temple in Rimini, yet filling it with so many pagan works of art, that it looked like a temple of infidels worshipping daemons, rather than a Christian church dedicated to St. Francis» (the translation is ours).¹⁰

4. Pound's Working Hypothesis: Sigismondo as Cesare Borgia's Forerunner

During his stay in Romagna, Pound made friends with Averardo Marchetti, owner of *Rimini Palace Hotel* (where the poet lived) and especially with Manlio Torquato Dazzi, the learned librarian of *Biblioteca Malatestiana* in Cesena (where the poet consulted ancient documents about Sigismondo). There Pound formulated his working hypothesis: about fifty years before Cesare Borgia or Borja – the notorious Duke of Valentinois, whose life inspired Machiavelli's *The Prince* – Sigismondo had the same project, trying to create an independent Seignory in Central Italy. As

⁷ Alberti (1404-1472) was an eminent scholar of Xenophon and Vitruvius (cfr. Bacigalupo [1], 106-107). On Sigismondo's commission, he erected a Temple whose classical style was a celebration of Greek art and Roman architecture. On its façade, he reproduced Augustus' Arch, Tiberius' Bridge (both built in Rimini in the I century A.D.) and the patterns of an ancient Greek temple, trying to show that Sigismondo's age was a sort of synthesis between Greek and Roman era.

⁸ We might quote as an instance the mix of Egyptian hieroglyphics, Chinese ideograms and ancient Greek characters in Pound's *Canto* XCIII [6-7], and also the use of the Greek phrase **ΦΘΕΓΓΩΜΕΘΑ ΘΑΣΣΩΝ** (*phtheggometha thasson*) as a sort of magic spell in *Canto* XLVIII [6-7].

⁹ Pletho, whose Greek name was **ΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΣ ΓΕΜΙΣΤΟΣ ΠΛΗΘΩΝ**, went to Italy – together with the Byzantine emperor John VIII Palaeologus and with Cardinal Bessarion – in order to attend the Council of Florence, aiming at a reunion of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches. He died in Mystras, Peloponnese. A dozen years after the fall of Constantinople, Sigismondo went to Greece, stole his remains and interred them into his Temple in Rimini, so that Pletho might rest in peace among free people. Nowadays, Pletho's marble coffin is on the right side of Malatesta Temple.

¹⁰ «*Aedificauit tamen nobile templum Arimini in honorem Diui Francisci, uerum ita gentilibus operibus impleuit, ut non tam Christianorum, quam infidelium daemones adorantium templum esse uideretur*» (Pius II, *Commentarii*, II 92 [5], quoted by Pound: cfr. Bacigalupo [1], 112-113, 118-119).

Cesare Borgia's forerunner, he was a loser, but – as Pound himself used to say – «the best loser in all history». Moreover, he was not only a famous *condottiere*, but also a Maecenas: a great patron of artists. In order to prove his well-founded working hypothesis, Pound began to travel all over Romagna and Tuscany, looking for Sigismondo's traces in his ancient battlefields. His personal chauffeur was *Ernie*, that is to say, his friend Ernest Hemingway (Bacigalupo [1], 174-175).

5. Pound's Sympathy for «Rimini Burnt»

Twenty years later, in September 1944, Anglo-American «pattern bombings» nearly destroyed Rimini. At that time, Pound was composing his *Canto LXXII* (in Italian) and wished to mention the town he loved, writing (vv. 107-111): «Rimini arsa e Forli distrutta, chi vedrà più il sepolcro di Gemisto che tanto savio fu, se pur fu greco? Giù son gli archi e combusti i muri del letto arcano della divina Ixotta».¹¹ Also in his *Canto LXXIII* (in Italian), Pound alluded to that, writing (v. 24): «dove era il Tempio della bella Ixotta».¹²

Fortunately, Malatesta Temple hadn't been destroyed, but only damaged in its façade. See *Pisan Canto LXXX*, v. 147 (in English):¹³ «and the front of the Tempio, Rimini».

On the contrary, Augustus' Arch had been crushed up.¹⁴

¹¹ Text by Bacigalupo [3]. Our translation:

«Rimini burnt and Forli destroyed – who'll see any more the sepulchre of Gemisthus, who was so wise, though he was a Greek man? Down are the archs and burnt are the walls of heavenly Ixotta's mysterious *thalamus*»

(in Italian, these verses are hendecasyllables in Dante's style. Note that *Ixotta* isn't *Iseult*, but *Isotta Degli Atti*, Sigismondo's lover). V. 109 is not clear, indeed. Bacigalupo [3], 12 n. 20, explains: «E. Pound's preference of the Roman way to the Greek way, of the state to the "irresponsible" individual, is strongly suggested by his comment on Gemisthus' wisdom». No doubt the poet preferred Greek culture to Latin one. Another possible explanation is the following: «Pletho was such a wise man – supposing he was a man, not a supernatural being». As a matter of fact, many contemporaries (including Sigismondo himself) deemed Pletho to be a sort of supernatural being.

¹² Text by Bacigalupo [3]. Our translation:

«Where the Tempio of beautiful Ixotta used to stand»

(here too, *Ixotta* is *Isotta Degli Atti*; also this verse is a hendecasyllable in Dante's style).

¹³ Pound's *Opera Omnia* [6-7] consist of 117 *Cantos* (some of which are fragmentary). *Cantos* LXXIV-LXXXIV are entitled *Pisan*, because the poet composed them in detention in Pisa.

¹⁴ It was reconstructed completely by Riminese archaeologists in the post-war period.

In the same *Pisan Canto LXXX*, Pound didn't fail to mention it (vv. 306 s.):

«Rimini,
where is, *or was*, an arch of Augustus».

As a matter of fact, Rimini was a martyr town in World War II. German soldiers retreating mined Tiberius' Bridge too, but – in spite of all their efforts – it didn't fall down. Nowadays, a *Golden Book* in Malatesta Temple, near Gemisthus' sepulchre, bears the names of Riminese citizens who gave their lives for their beloved city. But their true epitaph had been written by Pound himself in *Canto LXXIII* (in Italian), vv. 51-53:

«Gloria della patria! Gloria! Gloria
morir per la patria nella Romagna!
Morti non morti son».¹⁵

In 1967 – when American «pattern bombings» were burning Vietnam – the poet Allen Ginsberg met Pound and said: «You showed us the way [...]. You showed us who takes advantage of war» (Bacigalupo [1], 29).¹⁶ Ginsberg's compliment is very precious, insofar as it comes from a poet whose political ideas were completely unlike and even contrary to Pound's ones.

6. Pound's Fable: God's Creation of the Romagnolo Man

Bacigalupo's book [1] outlines the sketch of a «*poeta filologo*» (p. 11) who not only loved Rapallo and Venice (where he died in 1972), but also Romagna and its inhabitants. At the beginning of *Canto XXVIII*, Pound quoted an old tale, according to which the last man the Almighty Lord created was the *Romagnolo* man. The Eternal God made it with dirty mud, and the new-born creature blasphemed his Creator by saying: «Here I am, you bloody hangman!»¹⁷

7. Pound's Enigma: Who Are the Three Most Beautiful Ladies in the World?

That was Ezra Pound: a *poëta doctus* whose verses were full of literary echoes and allusions. Sometimes his love for enigmas and riddles was so strong, that his poetry is scarcely understandable. Let's quote *Canto VIII* as an instance (Bacigalupo [1], 90-91). The poet mentions three names: «who hath not Helen for peer

Yseut nor Batsabe».

Who are they? The three most beautiful ladies in world history: Helen, the peerless beauty of classical times (the war of Troy was fought for her sake); *Yseut* or *Iseult*, the most beautiful woman in the Middle Ages (loved by king Mark and knight Tristan too) – but what about «Batsabe»?

This name is missing in Bacigalupo's rich indexes [1]. The poet found it in an ancient manuscript written by Sigismondo himself. «Batsabe» (in Latin *Bethsabee*) is *Bathsheba*, the most beautiful lady in the Old Testament. Her story is told in *II Sam.* 11-12. She was Uriah's wife, but when king David saw her bathing, he fell in love and married her after Uriah's death. She gave him a son: Solomon the Great.

8. Conclusion: from Malatesta to Mussolini

To sum up: Bacigalupo's «gran commento»¹⁸ of *A Draft of XXX Cantos* [1] restores the icon of a great American poet who came to Romagna in order to find Malatesta's vestiges – too bad he found also Mussolini.

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¹⁵ Text by Bacigalupo [3]. Our translation:

«Glory of their native land! Glory! The glory
of dying for one's land in Romagna!
The dead are not all dead».

¹⁶ Not by chance, Pound's *Pisan Canto LXXVIII* [6-7] ended with the following words: «There are no righteous wars».

¹⁷ The original phrase in *Romagnolo* dialect was: «*A sò iquè mè, ciò, boja d'è Sgnòr!*» (cfr. Bacigalupo [1], 302-303, 350: Pound's source was Aldo Spallicci, a Republican politician and a member of the Italian Parliament).

¹⁸ Dante, *Inferno*, IV 144 [4].