

The Book as Artefact

Historicizing Ezra Pound's First Thirty Cantos

George Bornstein

In a passage meditating the best way of recuperating Troubadour texts, Ezra Pound wrote: “There are three ways of ‘going back,’ of feeling as well as knowing about the troubadours, first, by way of the music, second, by way of the land, third, by way of the books themselves, for a manuscript on vellum has a sort of life and personality which no work of the press attains.”¹ Original sources often indicate not only “personality” but also historical placement, as Pound himself both knew and demonstrated in his persistent archival labor. And while a “work of the press” lacked some of the stimuli and information of a manuscript on vellum, early printed forms of texts could still yield thicker description than more recent “reprints”, which was one reason that Pound reached back to Aldus and Wechel among other renaissance printers. Closer to his own time, from Morris onward a fine-press tradition in England created artful first editions superior in design and richer in information than subsequent commercial incarnations. That particularly characterised work by Elkin Matthews in Vigo Street, John Lane at the Bodley Head, and Lolly Yeats at the Cuala Press in Ireland. In his ongoing war with commercial publishers, Pound often experimented with such venues, especially in the 1910s and 1920s. They offered him both financial and artistic advantages, with a freer hand to exploit the material form of the text to carry additional levels of meaning. Most often those levels pertained to history and allowed Pound not only to add historical dimensions to the text but, even more importantly, to have the text act out its own historical contentions and to anchor it firmly in the events surrounding its own production. Nowhere was that more true than with the early forms of the first thirty cantos.

¹ Ezra Pound, *A Walking Tour in Southern France: Ezra Pound Among the Troubadours*, ed. Richard Sieburth (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 84.