

ruary 1989, than Timothy Brennan. But behind the occasionally facile tones of armchair identification with the oppressed stands a serious and subtle study not only of Rushdie himself but also of the paradoxes embodied in and experienced by the Third-World intellectual, who may not be the agent best equipped to solve the problem of our "still being unable to conceive of the colonial as even having a voice that matters" (166).

Given the interest of this book, and the wide circulation that its timeliness should guarantee, Macmillan might have expended a little more editorial energy in proofing it. Typographical mistakes, including a spelling error on prominent display on the back cover, and subject-verb disagreements create redundant non-Rushdian mystery. Within three pages we are told that Rushdie's family "moved to Pakistan only slightly more than ten years ago" (142) and that Pakistan is "where his family had moved from Bombay in 1964" (145). One trusts that inattention to scholarly detail has become neither an anti-colonial, nor Third-World cosmopolitan, nor postmodern virtue.

KEITH WILSON

Humphrey Carpenter. *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound*. London and Boston: Faber, 1988. pp. 1005. \$40.00.

Interpretations of, commentaries on, and, of course, critical assessments of Pound's work have increased exponentially over the last few years, and to many people, the inevitable question is, Why? Why Pound, and why the increased interest now? Is Pound more amenable to the ultra-theoretical approaches to literature that have proliferated of late? Have we "discovered" that Pound has more to offer than we previously thought? Is it that critical studies come in waves, and that the tide is in once again for Pound? More cynically, is it because Pound's poetry is so obscure that any interpretation can be foisted off on us? Or, more cynically still, is Pound simply the sort of author that many an assistant professor can milk for tenure?

If Pound's very confusing works puzzle critics immensely, his hectic and controversial life challenges biographers not a whit less. Biographers of Pound, like his critics, are sharply divided. On the one hand, there are enthusiasts who believe almost everything Pound said about himself or about his poetry. Noel Stock's influential biography (*The Life of Ezra Pound*, 1970) is close to that. A disciple of Pound, Stock rarely challenges Pound's claims. On the other hand, sceptics, such as C. David Haymann (*The Last Rower*, 1976) and E. Fuller Torrey (*The Roots of Treason*, 1984), treat almost every word of Pound's as a trap. Humphrey Carpenter is well aware of the near impossibility of his task: "So agile and slippery a creature cannot be

caught by predetermined methods. Again and again one seems to have him by the tail, only to find that he has merely cast off another skin and slipped away, leaving one clutching just a persona or mask" (xii). Careful of the traps that Pound most certainly did lay, and adding new materials previously suppressed by Pound's relatives, enthusiasts, or enemies, Carpenter does a balanced job of showing the complexity of the Pound problem, even if he does not quite solve it. For instance, the abundant fresh information Carpenter supplies on Pound's mistress, Olga Rudge, and their daughter, Mary de Rache-wiltz — material Stock had to omit because his book had to be approved by Pound's wife, Dorothy — closes a gap in Pound's life and offers some new clues to his poetry. By mastering the Niagara of facts which comprise Pound's life, Carpenter succeeds in taming the choleric and evasive character that has eluded many an earlier biographer.

The central task Carpenter sets himself, however, is not to present only the details of Pound's life, but as much as possible to correlate biographical facts with Pound's literary works, and thus help the reader to some understanding of the "bizarre" nature of Pound's poetry and scholarship. This task almost changes his work into a critical biography and considerably lengthens the book. But his efforts, I think, are well worth it.

*A Serious Character* is divided into five parts, each part corresponding to a major phase of Pound's life and also to a major phase of his literary development. The first part covers 1885 to 1908 when Pound left America for Europe. In terms of his literary career, this was a period of searching and trying out different poetic voices. And try out voices he certainly did in his early poems, from the voice of a Villon persona to that of a rebellious Bohemian. The second part concerns his London years, 1908-20. This was a turbulent and explosive period for Pound, whose ceaseless energy and interests led him in one direction after another. The old aesthete suddenly turned into an imagist and later a vorticist; and the scholar of troubadour literature also dipped into the study and translation of Chinese poetry and ideograms. Part Three starts with the Pounds moving to Paris (and later to Italy) in 1920 and ends with Pound's arrest in 1945 on charges of treason for making anti-American broadcasts on Radio Rome during World War II. Apart from helping to inaugurate and to promote modernist poetry and peddling C. H. Douglas's economic theory of social credit, writing and publishing the *Cantos* was Pound's most significant literary activity during this period. 1945 to 1958, covered in Part Four, shows Pound struggling with legal problems and later with incarceration in the St. Elizabeth Mental Hospital. Confucianism and economic theory became his near obsession. Many pilgrims to St. Elizabeth in Washington, D.C., during this period remembered — often to their dismay — his lectures on these subjects.

Part Five follows the last phase of the poet's life, his release from the mental hospital and his life in Italy from 1958 to 1972. During this period, Pound became increasingly skeptical of the value of his work and came to regret his anti-semitic propaganda.

Long but not boring, detailed but not redundant, Carpenter's book is one that both the layman and the specialist can read with interest and profit. Carpenter, who has also published biographical studies of C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and W. H. Auden, is an excellent, and very humorous, storyteller. Proceeding from Carpenter's pen, episodes in Pound's life read like the history of Joseph Andrews. The title of the book, incidentally, is a piece of gentle irony, for in the eyes of many of Pound's acquaintances and contemporaries, Pound was anything but a serious character. In daily life, Pound is seen not as a serious character but as an eccentric, frantic, and almost comic figure. In terms of the academic standards of literary scholarship, standards which Pound scorned, Pound can hardly be considered a serious character either. His "scholarship" is filled with rash mistakes and ill-considered "judgment calls." The title applies quite literally in one sense, however: Pound took himself and his work very seriously, at least until the last few years of his life. William Carlos Williams wrote in his answer to a newspaper symposium: "Ezra Pound is one of the most competent poets in our language. . . . He is also, it must be confessed, the biggest damn fool and faker in the business. You can't allow yourself to be too serious about a person like that" (697).

If his scholarship is not admired by many, his keen interest and tenacious efforts in absorbing different cultures and languages should be. While his interpretations and assessment of oriental culture and poetry are often one-sided and of doubtful value today, his genuine efforts and interest in understanding and translating Chinese poetry and Confucianism have won him some well-deserved respect. He was, Hemingway decided, "sincere in his mistakes." Ezra's mistakes were a crucial part of his achievement; William Carlos Williams said, "He doesn't know a damn thing about China. . . . That's what makes him an expert."

Pound writes behind masks (*Persona*, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*), and is notorious for creating new poetic theories (with fantastic names such as "vorticism") but not sticking to these theories himself. When he is self-contradictory in his theory and practice, Carpenter does not spare the rod in exposing such embarrassing and even damaging discrepancies. Here, for instance, is one chosen at random: "In 1936 [Ezra Pound] drew up a manifesto demanding clearer terminology in the public discussion of economic issues; yet it was couched in such obfuscating and idiosyncratic language as to be scarcely comprehensible. . . . Eliot wrote to Ezra: 'I dont mind printing things I

disagree with . . . But I do worry about printing what I dont [sic] understand'" (505-06).

Nor is Carpenter afraid to offer his own interpretations of some of Pound's most difficult poems. Nor should he be afraid, as his critical summaries show that he is familiar with contemporary criticism of Pound. Only in a few rare moments does Carpenter seem to follow the crowd and praise Pound for making his poems almost totally incomprehensible. In describing one of the "Pisan Cantos," Canto LXXIX, he says that the fragments of the poem "ha[ve] few discernible meanings (though some are attractive enough in themselves)." What attracts the bewildered author is left to the reader to ponder.

Pound is certainly an influential figure in our age. Many of his correspondents, including T. S. Eliot, unconsciously adopted a Poundian tone, vocabulary, and spelling in their correspondence with Pound. Some scholars, after studying Pound's ideogrammic method, which came to mean juxtaposing random materials without bothering to supply connections, began themselves to write ideogrammically. (Hugh Kenner's *The Pound Era*, for example, though a book of value, reads like an ideogram). But as much as I, a native of mainland China, like ideograms, we can all be glad that Carpenter was not taken in by Pound on that one, and did not write this biography in ideograms. Even delicious obscurity should have its limits.

FAN SHEN

Mary Bittner Wiseman. *The Ecstasies of Roland Barthes*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989. pp. xvii, 204. \$51.95; \$18.50 pb.

This book belongs to a monograph series on critics of the twentieth century, edited by Christopher Norris. Mary Bittner Wiseman ably fulfils the interdisciplinary objectives of the series by treating Barthes's *oeuvre* as a philosophical project rather than as literary criticism, although Barthes's work is best known within the narrow boundaries of university departments of literature. She attempts a larger assessment of Barthes's contribution to twentieth-century thought within the contexts of the contemporary French reception of Hegel and Sartre, the historical concept of modernism, and human subjectivity.

Even so, a certain amount of technical exposition of semiology and structural linguistics is unavoidable in her book, since Barthes bases his larger philosophical claims on an analysis of Saussurean theories of the sign. For Barthes, as well as for many other literary intellectuals, modern linguistics and semiotics lead to a basic philosophical shift from an expressionist vocabulary, which views literary style as an act of personal commitment as in *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), to a critical discourse that participates directly in figurative playfulness