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PORTRAIT OF A SCHOLAR

RICHARD DEAN TAYLOR

An Interview with Roxana Preda



RP — You've had a most eventful and international career — from the US to Japan, to Africa, and then Germany. How did those moves interweave with your interests in literature?

RT — That's a long story and the influences went both ways. I grew up with *The National Geographic*, and especially loved the maps and exotic photos. Then too there were radio broadcasts of *The Saturday Matinée at the Metropolitan*. My mother was aghast, and wanted me to go out and play team sports. She was also more Catholic than the pope, and I had a full dose of spectacular ritual, symbolic liturgy and sensuous music — from plainchant to requiem masses. It's no wonder that I became more interested in drama and poetry than prose fiction. My imposed faith began to unravel at the age of fourteen — The problem was mindless obedience to concepts of outdated morality and practices, such as Confession, which I could no longer believe in.

Even before university I had read a lot; mostly from the modern English canon, French and Russian authors, as well as Greek and Roman classics. I was also interested in Indian and East Asian religions and read Sanskrit epics as well as Buddhist texts — especially Zen Koans. At boarding school I was in the same class as Edward Said and already knew that it was impossible to understand another culture's literature without being intimate with its history and mindset. I still agree with the basic tenets of *Orientalism* and,

especially, his view of Beethoven's late style.

Joining the US Navy was a compromise I made with my father. He wanted me to have a military career and long before graduation from high school flourished an appointment to West Point. He had pulled strings for his own end, but was also a kind and understanding man. I argued that I might not be happy as a trained killer and needed an alternative career to fall back on. I muddled through Naval Officer Training -- C's all the way. My major was English/American Literature and I did do fairly well at that. As to the Navy, it gave me time to read. First on a radar picket ship out of Newport, Rhode Island then Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The cultural mix in Honolulu was exciting and I discovered Yeats on the beach at Waikiki. He had never even been mentioned at my University and I was trying to fill in *lacunae* imposed by a mediocre education. I found the poetry moving, especially the later, erotic and angry work -- and *A Vision*, fascinating because of its obvious battiness.

The transfer to Vietnam was accidental. I was in charge of a division of radar men and our remit was to patrol within the Arctic Circle and report suspicious flights out of Russia heading towards the US. One night, on mid-watch, we tracked an object larger and flying faster than anything imaginable. I woke up the captain, who alone could push the panic button. He went ballistic and screamed down the wire that what I had seen couldn't possibly be real and that I was deliberately trying to scupper his career. Later I realized that it must have been a satellite launch and not dangerous.

That night, however I couldn't sleep and next day wrote to the Navy Department, offering to extend my tour of duty by a year if I were re-assigned to shore duty in East Asia. An extra year didn't matter to me then, and I could save more money to put myself through graduate school. That was in 1958 and I then became an Education Advisor at the South Vietnamese Naval Academy. At twenty-three I could hardly advise anybody about anything. But living there was amazing. The culture was richer than I could fathom, and the politics -- both American and Vietnamese -- disgustingly perverse. Nya Trang was governed from Saigon by day and from Hanoi by night. The people paid taxes to both sides in order to save themselves. The puppet government in Saigon was a dictatorship, and America looked only to its own interests. It was the people who suffered then, and later -- much, much more.

I read on the beach and had my own jeep, which made it possible to explore the countryside and see how real people lived. It also meant that I could travel through Cambodia, Thailand, and India as well as Hong Kong.

After that I went for an MA in England under Frank Kermode, who was one of the greatest. My thesis had to do with Symbolist images and their roots in the Mystical-Occult Revival *à fin de siècle*. I used the poetry of Æ¹ and Yeats's plays as exemplars.

RP -- What was the particular attraction that Noh held for you?

RT -- Yeats's dance plays puzzled me. His abrupt shift in sensibility and structure didn't really make sense. He claimed the influence of Noh, as Pound was then editing the Fenollosa manuscripts while they lived together at Stone Cottage. The plays he subsequently wrote seemed to be more influenced by the ideals of European Art Theatre, especially Maeterlink's disguised fairy tales and Madam Blavatsky's theosophy.

I needed a job and took an offer to teach at the American (High) School in Tokyo, which allowed me to visit various Noh theaters at least once or twice a week. The intention was simply an exercise in comparative literature, and it gave me space to read up on cultural history and classical Japanese and Chinese literature -- as well as the latest criticism. On seeing the first few performances I was enthralled. It's the most consummate dramatic art imaginable. European opera can't hold a candle to it, not even the extravagance of Wagner. Instead of a distanced observation, Noh offers a meditation on heroic conduct -- not a narrative -- as well as philosophic and spiritual insight which can only be perceived in imagination. An interior experience, not exterior.

Later I wrote two Noh plays in traditional structure and style -- one based on a classic British novel, the other Nigerian. The point I was trying to make was that classic literature from whatever culture can be expressed in Noh form. No one reads them. Factoids always prevail. Everyone believes what they want to. Poundistas insist that the poems in *Cathay* were translated by Pound, and the texts in *Noh, or Accomplishment* are copper bottomed representations of that art. Both Yeats's and Pound's plays are hybrids; inaccurate assimilations.

After Japan a friend helped me find a job in Sierra Leone. With a first degree in America and others in England, I was unemployable. The only thing I could aspire to was becoming Bishop of Bulawayo. Freetown was an eye-opener. Another culture, and those were the heady days of interest in African literature. I read up as much as I could, but didn't really master the subject until a later stint in Nigeria. Sierra Leone was a great experience, culturally -- and I felt very much at home there. When teaching at Dartmouth College a year or so later, I introduced African Literature as a subject and offered my first seminar on Pound's *Cantos*.

America in the late '60s was difficult to cope with. Partying and sexual freedom were liberating, as was the Civil Rights Movement, but the stultifying, social conformism and horrors of the Vietnam war were not. I had Feds in my office pretending to be credit agents and expecting me to grass on colleagues and students. I had, after all, had top-secret clearance as a ship-board cryptographer and they, naturally, assumed that I was on their

side. I wasn't. They threatened, and it was necessary to move on.



Another friend helped me to a job in Nigeria. That began badly. When I walked into the interview at Ife the Vice Chancellor rose in obvious consternation, and said: But I thought you were African-American. The answer to that was pretty obvious. Yoruba-land, however, turned out to be a wonderful experience. We lived there for eight years. My wife and I didn't have much to do with expatriate circles, but lived as closely as possible among African friends. We went to parties, danced a lot and ate ethnic food. Best of all were invitations to various rituals in rural communities. The students were fascinating although somewhat deracinated, and I ended up knowing more about their traditional cultures than they did. It was all about teaching African literature and the differences in structure, style, and world-view, from those of traditional works in English. I loved it all.

The move to Germany was simply realistic. By then infrastructure in Nigeria had broken down. We often lived without running water, electric power came and went — mostly went. Food was not easily available: I grew vegetables in the garden and raised rabbits. We had always, per force, made our own pasta and bread, but it got to the point where you could only get a sack of flour with a bribe and then had to sift the worms out. Finding petrol was a nightmare, and we lived on a fantasy campus miles away from town. More importantly our sons were ready for higher education and needed better opportunities if they were ever going to have a future in the wider world.

Again a friend helped me to the Chair at Bayreuth. The newly founded university was interested in establishing African studies — for political reasons rather than academic. They wanted someone who could do both English and African literature. The German education system doesn't admit of multiple specialties. The establishment had to take on an outsider even though they were reluctant to do so. Interdisciplinary studies was said to be the name of the game, but that game was never played. Africa does not have an undifferentiated culture. Anthropologists and linguists interested in East Africa are, by nature, not about to work closely with colleagues involved with West African writing and culture. Nor were they willing. Such a medieval system of education, excellent as it is, sets its face against co-operation between/among *Lehrstühle* [departments]. Each Chair defends its own realm and guards frontiers jealously.

RP — How did you come to study Pound?

RT -- Escaping Yeats. By then I had had twenty years and ten thousand hours of involvement. There was nothing more to be said. Even my wife complained that she couldn't bear to hear another word about WB. Pound was a natural follow up. Germany seemed the best place to find support for textual criticism. Unfortunately I over-estimated almost everything. For years I managed research in both areas, but in the end concentrated on Pound. *The Cantos* was a mountain that had to be climbed/conquered and the text needed to be restored.

In 1979 I began collecting material for a Variorum Cantos and initially worked on a mainframe computer. At one point a sample edition of "Three Cantos" was mocked-up for print publication. Now the goal is hypertext presentation online. To this end a recent mock-up is available on [my website](#). Actually, it is an introduction to the separate publication of the annals, but includes a demonstration of what a Variorum, in its ultimate realization and at various levels, might look like:

base text	(1975/[6] ed. which replaced the F&F text]
variant readings with bibliographical sources	(abbreviated)
relevant annals entries	(documentation from correspondence)
bibliography of witnesses collated	(for each canto)
<i>stemma</i>	(for individual cantos)

RP -- When did you realize that the print medium was unsuitable for the *Variorum*?

RT -- After the publication of the *Variorum Edition of 'Three Cantos'*. That was in 1991. It was meant to document a proposal for a DFG (German Research Council) grant. A so-called friend, Manfred Pfister, turned the application down, claiming that he couldn't read or understand its printed version. More intelligent and persistent colleagues both could and did. If you want research to be accepted, you have to play down to the lowest common denominator. Hypertext was the only way to go, but that costs big money. For a while I thought I had the support of Cambridge University Press, but that backfired rather badly. Their computer expert simply wouldn't co-operate. Now in retirement I have no way to get grants. Programmers and any number of dogsbodies are needed both to design and encode thousands and thousands of links. I can't do it on my own. I'm too old now and too tired.

RP -- What is the present state of the project?

RT -- Limbo. I'm re-editing. Especially the Annals, and hope to put them on a separate website sometime soon. There is hope, however. It's like the history of that essay on meter

in *The Cantos*, “Soundscape.”² I had to pay a programmer out of my own pocket to produce the strange diacritics. That didn’t come cheaply. I also paid to have the formatting of the complete *Annals* normalized. Quite a few research assistants typed in the entries and I checked them all, letter by letter, but each used different formatting procedures. Straightening that out cost a bomb. Then too, my wife is in a state of advanced dementia and after a stroke, half paralyzed. I don’t have much disposable income.

The Introduction to the proposed *Annals* website includes a demonstration of hypertext presentation for those fourteen lines from Canto IV that I published in *Paideuma* many years ago.³ Of course I had to pay out of pocket. It was designed by Alexander Pestell. Perhaps that software can be extended to the whole project. A young colleague, my literary heir, and executor, Michael Kindellan, is prepared to finish the project as co-editor after I crash.

RP -- I know you especially value the 1975 Faber edition of *The Cantos* and base the *Variorum* on it. If Faber had the better text why didn’t ND take it over?



RT -- Actually the F&F edition is dated 1976, and I set no great store by that edition: even less by the ‘corrected’ version ND put out in 1973. For the purpose of collation any significant text will do. There is a great difference between choosing a base text for collation and a copy text for editing. My only thought was that it was the first unified edition and variants from it would emphasize the superiority of the F&F. J. Laughlin, whom I have always greatly admired, did Pound a disservice when editing the poem(s) arbitrarily -- one might even say whimsically. That’s another story, and a very complicated one.

Laughlin knew perfectly well that the F&F version was more faithful than ND’s, and his first plan was to have a single edition, taking sheets from England, and publishing in America under his imprint. In a letter to Eva Hesse he wrote that on consulting Washington, he found that ND and Pound himself, would forfeit US copyright. Now we’re saddled with an even worse botch than before.

RP -- If you were to write another essay, what would it be?

RT -- Actually I’m writing one now. Having lived with *The Cantos* for thirty-five years, I do have ideas of the shape and character that a rationalized edition might take. Considering

the history of creation and publication, there are a number of questions to be addressed.

* The physical constraints of print publication, hidebound traditions of publishers and capitalist economics, not to mention printer's errors and gross editorial interference. The disparate activities and aims among those who appointed themselves to correct *The Cantos* is a major issue.

* Mis-transcriptions from then contemporary -- now outdated -- sources, and creative intervention in order to establish a revised reading according to Pound's own lights, as well as conjuring up quotations from memory, must be acknowledged. Do the "mistakes" matter, and what constitutes a "mistake"?

* Respect for the author's original intentions as documented in existing correspondence and his stated corrections -- most of which were intentionally ignored.

It's all a long haul.

NOTES

1. Æ – symbole de plume used by George William Russell, (1867-1935), Irish poet, editor, painter and theosophist. (*Ed.*)

2. "Soundscape" is a recent essay by Richard Taylor to be found on his personal website: <http://www.richard-dean-taylor.de> (*Ed.*)

3. "Editing the Variorum Cantos: Process and Policy." *Paideuma: A Journal Devoted to Ezra Pound Scholarship* 31.1-3 (2002): 311-34 (*Ed.*).

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[Go to the Proto-Variorum \(2015\)](#)

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PUBLICATION PROFILE IN POUND STUDIES

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