'My Music is Your Disharmony': 1908–14

Venice struck me as an agreeable place....I announced an intention to return.

(Pound, Indiscretions)

Preceded by Proust and followed by Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound arrived in Venice in April 1908. That same year, Hugo von Hofmannsthal published an essay about a late summer stop in the dreamlike and alluring city, while Claude Monet settled for two-and-a-half months to paint. That same summer, Rilke sat in Paris and wrote three poems about the world Ruskin called 'the amphibious city.' Pound arrived in Venice after stops in Gibraltar, Tangiers, Cadiz and Seville. The trip across had been stormy but his characteristic restlessness took on a lyrical tone: 'here today & on the wind tomorrow' he wrote his mother from Gibraltar (Am Rt 192). He at first thought his trip to Europe would be brief, an exit not an exile from America, but he would not return for two years.

Landing in Gibraltar, Pound unexpectedly re-connected with Yusuf Benamore met on his trip with Aunt Frank ten years earlier, and may have gotten involved with some minor money exchange as an autobiographical statement noted: ‘1908 landed in Gibraltar with 80 dollars and lived on the interest for some time’ (Auto 19). He briefly acted as a tour guide around Spain for an American family but after ten days returned to Gibraltar and took a boat to Genoa, continuing by train to Venice, arriving at the end of the month. Venice, however, was expensive, Pound recalling in Canto III sitting on the Dogana (Custom House) steps because the ‘gondolas cost too much, that year’ to tour (III 11). In Venice, he moved about from the San Vio Quarter, where he lived over a bakery near the Academy Bridge, to 942 calle dei Frati, described in Canto LXXVI (482) where remembering also becomes a text. ‘Dove sta
memoria' ('where memory liveth'), alluding to Donna mi prega by Cavalcanti, forms the refrain in a Canto that with Canto XVII are perhaps the best guides to Pound's early Venetian life (LXXVI/477). From calle dei Frati he had a view of the Grand Canal and the Giudecca Quarter; next to him was the garden of the San Trovaso Church. Near a gondola repair shop cited in Canto XVII, the out-of-the-way location, far from the tourists, was 'a fit abode for a poet. Stage setting at least correct' as he wrote to Mary Moore (SCb 93).

In this cultural milieu, Pound renewed his poetic imagination and sense of artistic purpose, overcoming his distress from the Crawfordsville incident. With understatement, he wrote in Indiscretions that Venice was 'an excellent place to come to from Crawfordsville, Indiana' (Ind 5). Freed from midwestern provincialism and Philadelphia gossip, Pound discovered that Venice encouraged new artistic confidence which his early poems, 'Alma Sol Veneziae' and 'San Vio,' record. Venice, his new locus vivendi, would remain his center throughout his life.

But Pound was eager to draw attention to his work. At his own expense, he made arrangements with a printer, A. Antonini, to prepare his first collection, A Lume Spento. One hundred and fifty copies of the paperbound book appeared in July 1908. Checking proof, however, created doubts and he momentarily considered throwing the pages into the canal (LXXVI/480). He had earlier tried to publish the volume with Thomas Bird Mosher of Maine, but was unsuccessful; now, the 72-page work (including misprints) would display his early efforts and be available for readers not only in Europe but the US. As the book was being printed, Pound told his parents with characteristic bravado that an 'American reprint has got to be worked by kicking up such a hell of a row with genuine and faked reviews that Scribner or somebody can be brought to see the sense of making a reprint. I shall write a few myself and get someone to sign em' (Gallup 4). This didn't work and no American edition appeared until 1965. While he waited for the book, Pound wrote two short stories that he thought he could sell to Smart Set. Entitled 'La Dogesa's Necklace,' and 'Genoa,' and written as first person monologues, they do not survive. He did admit to his parents, however, that he had no talent for fiction and found the form too mechanical.

Kitty Heyman arrived in Venice in June on a recital tour of Europe and Pound was quick to join her, announcing that he would act as her manager; he held a press conference for her and assisted her with details concerning her Venetian performance. He even considered joining her for her Paris and London concerts, but settled, instead, for a poem – 'Nel Biancheggiar' – about the effect of her Venice performance which