A Box for Wilfrid Blunt

LUCY McDIARMID

There is a very prominent account in the Times *this morning of the poets presentation to me, which makes it look like a really important event and so it seems to be regarded. All this is very curious considering that I have not published a line of verse for the last dozen years nor has my name been mentioned anywhere in connection with poetry.*

—Wilfrid Blunt, 20 January 1914 (Blunt Papers)

ALTHOUGH WILFRID SCAWEN BLUNT (1840–1922) HAD THIRTY-eight lovers in forty-eight years (1862–1910) and would be considered a serious amorist by most standards, he saw one naked woman he did not like.[1] She was carved in Pentelican marble, ornamenting a side of the box of poems presented as a formal tribute to Blunt on 18 January 1914 (fig. 1). To the authors of those poems (W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, T. Sturge Moore, F. S. Flint, Victor Plarr), Blunt was polite, friendly, and hospitable, giving them dinner and tea at Newbuildings Place, his Sussex house, on a bitterly cold winter day (fig. 2). He never met the designer of the box, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, who had completed this container for the poems just in time for the presentation. But Blunt disliked the woman, referring to the design as "a

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FIG. 1
Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, coffer for Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, 1914. Marble, 4½ × 10⅜ × 4⅞ in. (11.4 × 26.3 × 12.2 cm). Private collection. Photographs by Evelyn Silber.

fantastic Futurist bas relief of a naked Egyptian woman," and he turned that surface to the wall after the poets left. He also disliked the poems inside her: it was difficult to recognize in them, he wrote the next day, "anything but word puzzles" (Blunt Papers, 19 Jan. 1914).

Blunt had much to say about the occasion but did not confide to his diary any interpretation of the ritual created in his honor, what it might mean when six male poets place poems in a box dominated visually by a naked female and then present the box to an older male who is a notorious philanderer. Clearly, the ritual affirmed several affiliations: one among the young men, one between the older man and the group of younger men, and one between all the men and womankind in her sexual aspect. Although the event was designed to honor Blunt for his

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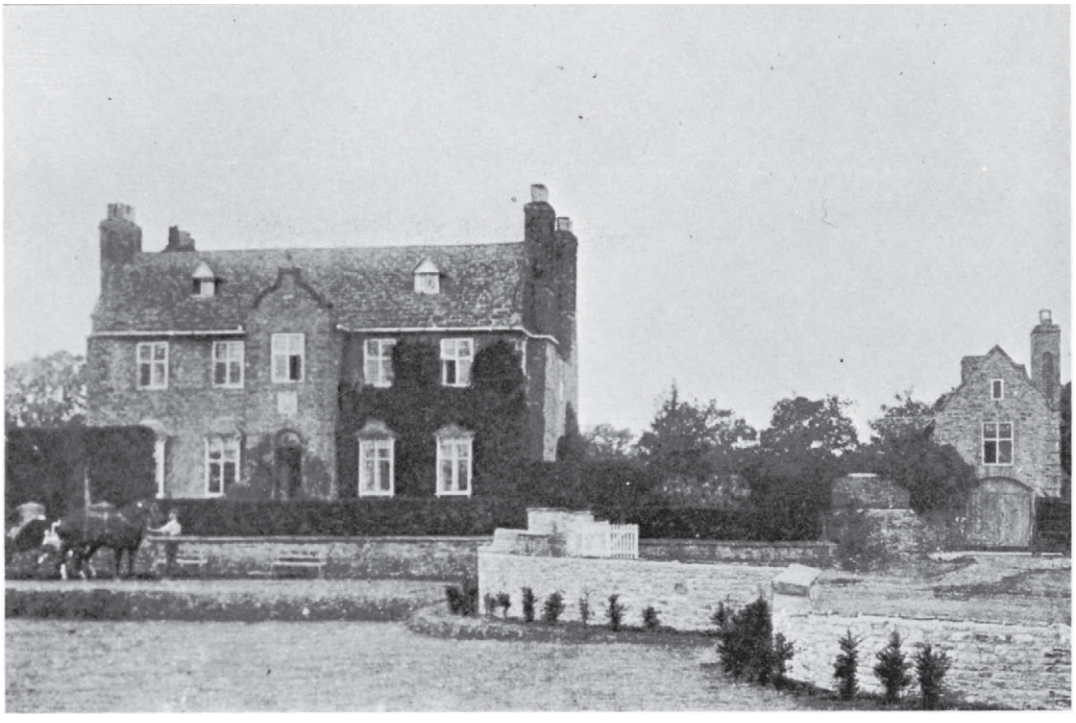


FIG. 2
Newbuildings Place (Longford, *Pilgrimage*, pl. 16).

poetry, implicit honor was also given to Blunt's potency and an analogy made between poetic and erotic power. The muse had no clothes on. United in homosocial intimacy inside the box where their poems lay, the young men presented the old one with one more box to admire.[2]

Usually known as "the peacock dinner," after the chief item on its menu, this occasion has featured in biographies of Blunt, Pound, Yeats, and Aldington—a "narrative gift from the gods," Elizabeth Longford calls it—but it has rarely been analyzed ("Wilfrid Scawen Blunt" 67).[3] One of the few extended commentaries on the dinner, that by James Longenbach in *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats, and Modernism*, reads it as a "profoundly aristocratic" experience, a "secret society of the arts meeting in medieval splendor" (67, 69). From this point of view, it was a ritualized expression of the exclusive brotherhood established in the friendship of Yeats and Pound, living together that winter at Stone Cottage in Sussex, not far from Blunt: "By sequestering himself in the country with Yeats, Pound was finally able to recreate the aspect of the Rhymers' Club that he admired most: the sense of a poetic aristocracy, meeting in private, ignoring the demands of a vastly inferior public" (26). To Yeats's biographer Roy Foster, the dinner gave the opportunity for Yeats "to affirm commitment to an artistic freemasonry" (509).

The emphasis on the elite and clubby nature of the dinner needs to be qualified by consideration of it as a *public* private event. The meeting of this "secret society of the arts" was announced afterward in articles planted by the participants in four publications—the London *Times* ("Mr. W. S. Blunt"), the *Egoist* (Aldington, "Presentation"), *Poetry* (Pound, "Homage"), and *Poetry and Drama* (Flint). A photograph was taken and copies sent to the poets; Pound mailed a print to Alice Corbin Henderson "as an adornment to the office" of *Poetry* in Chicago (Letter 67). This "medieval" event was planned as much for the spin as for the dinner, and the poets made sophisticated use of the techniques available to the moderns, those "new strategies for reputation building

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involving . . . novel modes of cultural marketing and media manipulation" singled out by Lawrence Rainey (4). The dinner had a double purpose, to construct a poetic genealogy that would give meaning to a distinctly masculine tradition and to make that genealogy visible. The ritual would construct not just a brotherhood but a patriarchy, extending over several generations of poets; and these were not just poets but celebrities, whose professional status would be broadcast in carefully selected print media. Blunt was being honored so that his fame—as a wealthy landowner, an eccentric, a "gentleman of genius," an anti-imperialist, a poet, and a philanderer—could give the poets a boost (Forster 279). That his fame was mostly notoriety was a bonus.

The dinner itself is not sui generis and constitutes part of several overlapping cultural practices. Plato's *Symposium* describes another meal at which two generations of men affiliate through common intellectual purpose in an erotically charged atmosphere, and Benjamin Haydon's diary entry offers a brilliant account of the "immortal dinner" of the Romantics in 1817.[4] Although the peacock poets enjoyed themselves less hilariously than Keats, Lamb, and Wordsworth, something like Lamb's teasing of Wordsworth—"you old lake poet, you rascally poet"—is audible in Yeats's comments on his roommate: "Ezra Pound has a desire personally to insult the world" (qtd. in Aldington, "Presentation"). The prandial genre offered the kind of setting Pound found useful for networking: a meal that could establish friendships and suggest possibilities but required no major commitments. Pound organized many such dinners at the Soho restaurant Dieudonné, where he would have entertained Blunt, had Blunt been willing to go to London. Formal testimonial dinners, especially those for aristocrats, provided a paradigm for some of the ritual elements of the peacock dinner: only days before it took place, the earl of Harrington "was presented by the past and present members of the [South Notts] hunt with an illuminated address enclosed in a gold casket," given by the master of the Rufford Hunt ("Presentation to Lord Harrington"). In 1926 Virginia Woolf visited Thomas Hardy (then eighty-six) and published her account of the occasion, but she did not bring a committee with her (just Leonard) or organize any ceremonial moments. Much of her time was spent petting the dog and listening to Hardy reminisce about her father (96–98). Apart from the circumscribed rituals of meals and visits, the dinner for Blunt should be situated in a historical continuum marking the institutional history of writing and writers. In the surrounding years, there was a great blossoming of organizations designed to serve the collective professional needs of writers, chief among them the Society of Authors (1884), the Poetry Society (1909), and PEN (1921). Designed as a "strateg[y] of authorial construction," the peacock dinner was a symposium with one eye on the public, a poets' dinner whose immortality would be ensured by print media, a tribute as much to the poets' ambitions as to the achievement of an older poet (Rainey 4). As in effect a provisional "poetry society," its purpose was to signal its own existence to the world. Like the strut of the male grouse, the flight of the red-winged blackbird, or the spreading of the peacock's tail, the entire event served as display behavior, showing the world the poets' potent masculinity.

[I]

It concerns the world of letters & nobody else.
—Ezra Pound (qtd. in Yeats, Letter to Gregory, postmarked 12 Jan. 1914)

Pound's statement is misleading. He appears to be referring to an unworldly profession, monks in some remote, holy spot, quietly and anonymously decorating capital letters and scarcely

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noticing as secular catastrophes come and go. Yeats's letter is worth quoting at length, because it indicates how unstable and ambiguous were the notions of that "world of letters" in which the poets' dinner would find its meaning.

> I can do nothing about the press. Pound says "tell Lady Gregory we hate the newspaper press as Blunt hates the British Empire[.]" I spoke of a 'photographer[.]' [H]e made contemptuous allusions to Ducal shooting parties, which are photographed for the American press. I had to tell him Blunt did not make the suggestion or Blunt might have suffered the same eclipse Bridges did when he refused to honour Blunt. . . . I preserved our dignity by saying we had mechanically suggested what is usual in case of plays. Ferocious Youth does however agree to my sending a report to 'the Times' as this leaves 'a record for posterity[.]' I was so sick and sleapy on Friday night that I hardly know what you said. Did you say I was to write to Miss Lawrence to get a photographer if we cannot? If she does he will not be appreciated, but I have no doubt he will be endured but I think he should not send anything to the press. It is really more valuable to Blunt for these young men to be at ease, & feel they have done a spontaneous fine thing, than for him to have the compliment made more generally known at the moment. It will get known very quickly. I think any writers of the press might make them feel it was done with that object.
>
> Pound suggests our bringing Nagochi the Japanese poet, as "he will make it known among men of letters in Japan." "It concerns the world of letters" he says "& nobody else."

Yeats (almost forty-nine at the time of this letter) distinguishes between the worldly-wise elders—himself and Augusta Gregory (almost sixty-two)—and "Ferocious Youth," the more idealistic twenty-eight-year-old Pound. Gregory, who was in the loop as Blunt's good friend and one of his numerous former lovers (or "loves," as he preferred to style them), had delivered the invitation to Blunt personally just after Christmas. It was she who had suggested the peacock, knowing of Blunt's large flock and of Yeats's onetime culinary disappointment: he had gone to a London reception "tempted . . . by the rumour that a roast peacock was always a feature of the supper," but no peacock had been served (*Seventy Years* 479).

As founders and directors of the Abbey Theatre, Gregory and Yeats were master publicists, expert in "theatre business, management of men," especially management of hostile audiences, refractory players, touchy patrons, and unpredictable reviewers. To them the world of letters had no boundaries: it was coextensive with the nonliterary world, articulated through social, political, and economic systems. The Abbey Theatre's value and reputation existed in a market economy driven by reviews, riots, gossip, and fund-raising. In managing controversies such as those over Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and Shaw's *Shewing Up of Blanco Posnet* (1909), Gregory and Yeats would make emendations in the script, flatter playwrights, call the police, visit the viceroy, soothe the players, make the rounds of newspaper offices with press releases, organize debates, determine ticket prices, and supply barmbrack for cast parties.

In November and December 1913 and January 1914, as the peacock dinner was being planned, the dependence of the fluctuating fortunes of the theater on the press dominated every other concern; the dinner's value came to be seen as a usefully distracting media event. Because of the outcry in Liverpool over a traveling production of *Playboy*, performances had to be stopped, "[a]nd," wrote Gregory to Yeats, "I mind more the bad press (evidently Irish) it will be quoted for ever." A few sentences later she wrote, "Go to the dinner to Wilfrid Blunt, I am sure the invitation wd. please him very much," and then closed, "Wilson very rightly cross at players chattering to interviewers—I think we must make some rules against it" (28 Nov. [1913]). Living

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in a continual struggle to create good press and therefore raise the value of the theater and all attendant artistic projects, Gregory soon saw the dinner for Blunt as potentially useful. She began spinning it even before it happened. To the Irish American patron of the arts John Quinn (another former lover of Gregory's), she wrote on 1 January 1914, "I spent my Sunday in the country with Wilfrid Blunt. He has given up politics and is writing fine poetry again, and there is a cult of him beginning among the young poets, who uphold him as 'an expert in life' and think the Laureate colourless." Writing to Quinn, a rich, well-connected lawyer in New York, was another way of sending out press releases. Her letter to Yeats to which Pound was responding when he spoke about "the newspaper press" must have been written only days later. And the letter from Yeats to Gregory describing the dinner after the event touches first on "some absurd press notices"—absurd, it seems, because "the press has scored hits naps & cuts at you & me" ([31 Jan. 1914]).

To these old hands at marketing and publicity, Ferocious Youth may have seemed innocent, with his "contemptuous allusions to Ducal shooting parties, which are photographed for the American press." Pound spoke as if the "newspaper press" would turn the peacock dinner into tabloid fare, a beautiful, rarefied event contaminated by the eyes of the many. The concession to "a report" in the *Times* (fig. 3) acknowledged the value of "posterity," as if the sophisticated readers of the future "world of letters" outweighed in importance the ignorant ones of the present. As quoted by Yeats, Pound appeared to believe that boundaries around the world of letters maintained it in perpetual quarantine.

Yet who more conscious of money, marketing, publicity, the fluctuations of reputation, the worldliness of the literary world, than the young Ezra Pound? He allowed his first book, *A Lume Spento*, a small print run of only 150 copies to ensure that it would soon be "a rarity": "He told his father he hoped before long to be able to announce 'First edition exhausted,' thereby giving 'the impression of a larger circulation'" (Carpenter 90). Homer Pound was urged to "try the book on Ella Wheeler Wilcox," a poet who was his childhood friend, and Wilcox "obliged" with a favorable, though rather vague, item in a New York paper (95). Pound's instinct was right: the best advertisement for the first edition of *A Draft of XVI. Cantos*, Pound wrote William Bird, would be to say that "at auction recently a copy of Mr. P's 'A Lume Spento' published in 1908 at $1.00 (one dollar) was sold for $52.50" (Rainey 40). When his poem about Christ, "Ballad of the Goodly Fere," made a bit of a stir in 1909, causing some readers of the *English Review* to cancel their subscriptions, Pound reacted as Gregory and Yeats did in similar circumstances at the Abbey, exploiting the publicity for profit. "American serial rights were available," his father was to announce to American periodicals (Carpenter 119).

The planning for the Blunt dinner testifies to the genius of Pound's networking: Pound arrived in London in 1908, according to legend, knowing no one, and set out systematically to meet every luminary in the world of letters—"Swinburne my only miss," he notes proudly in canto 82 (*Cantos* 523). Through visiting Elkin Mathews's bookshop, he had met Mathews, who introduced him to the minor poet James Gryffyth Fairfax, who introduced him to Eva Fowler, at whose tea he met Olivia Shakespear, who introduced him to Yeats (Carpenter 97, 98, 103, 119). Yeats was the goal of Pound's sojourn in London, and through Yeats's close friend and colleague Gregory, Pound gained access to Blunt (93). The world of letters, as few knew better than Pound, was enmeshed in the social and commercial realities of salons, bookshops, restaurants, family friends, American little magazines, and Harrods, to which Yeats

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(FROM OUR CORRESPONDENT.)

CAIRO, JAN. 19.

The airman McClean left Assuan about 10 this morning for the South. The Frenchman Pourpe left Khartum at 6.30 a.m. and arrived at Atbara at 10.40 this morning. He leaves to-morrow for Abu Hamed.

MR. W. S. BLUNT.

At Newbuildings Place, Sussex, on Sunday, a committee of poets consisting of W. B. Yeats, Sturge Moore, John Masefield, Victor Plarr, Frederic Manning, Ezra Pound, F. S. Flint, and Richard Aldington, presented to Mr. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, in token of homage for his poetry, a carved reliquary of Pentelican marble, the work of the sculptor Gaudier Brzeska. It bears a recumbent female figure and an inscription. The committee had intended to give a dinner in Mr. Blunt's honour, but he preferred to receive them at Newbuildings.

The following verses of address were read:—

"To Wilfrid Blunt.

"Because you have gone your individual gait,
"Written fine verses, made mock of the world,
"Swung the grand style, not made a trade of art,
"Upheld Mazzini and detested institutions;
"We, who are little given to respect,
"Respect you, and having no better way to show it
"Bring you this stone to be some record of it."

Mr. BLUNT said in his reply that he was to some extent an impostor. He had been all sorts of other things, but never a poet. He was not brought up that way at all. He was never at a public school, nor at a college. He had written a certain amount of verse, but only when he was rather down on his luck and had made mistakes either in love or politics or some branch of active life. He found that it relieved his feelings. He never thought in the least of getting it published; he did not even show it to his friends. His first little anonymous work was published when he was 35 or 36—and it was not much of a thing even then. He did not publish a single verse over his own name till he was about 43. His life had been an active one in various connexions, and people wrote to him sometimes, "We have great admiration for you." But it was never about his poetry. It had been either because he had taken up the cause of the Indian or the Egyptian, or more generally because he bred horses, that he was generally known. In one of the very first things he wrote he was ill-advised enough to say that he would not be called a poet, and that had stuck to him ever since. However, he had come round rather from that now. Within the last year or two he had washed his hands of politics and all forms of public life, and had withdrawn to a great extent from horse-breeding, and, having nothing to do, he had taken up with verse-writing to console him for a new disappointment. He had been writing a certain amount in the last year, and was very pleased now to be considered a poet.

There was then some general discussion of rhyme, blank verse, and assonance as Mr. Blunt's speech became less formal and was mingled with replies from individual members of the committee.

BOXING IN FRANCE.

NICE, JAN. 19.

In a boxing match between Carpentier and O'Keefe here to-night Carpentier was declared the winner in the second round, O'Keefe being knocked out by a right hook on the jaw.

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FIG. 3
From the *Times*, 20 Jan. 1914.

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paid five pounds for the rented motorcar that drove the poets from London to Newbuildings Place for dinner with Blunt (Yeats, Letter to Gregory, [31 Jan. 1914]).

The population of the car represented Pound's and Yeats's collective determination of those in the world of letters eligible to pay tribute to Blunt.[5] But just as important for Pound were the people who would have come had they been able to, the wish list of writers whose names in ink (in Pound's report of the event in *Poetry*) compensated for their bodily absence from the dinner: "Mr. D. H. Lawrence, who is in Italy; Mr. Padraic Colum, now in Ireland; Mr. James Joyce, in Austria; and Mr. Rupert Brooke, somewhere in the South Pacific" ("Homage" 222). The world of letters could be constructed as well by publishing a list as by sharing a bird. One principle of exclusion merited no discussion in the correspondence: "It would be entirely a men's dinner," Yeats wrote Gregory on 24 November 1913, evidently quoting Pound's prescription, "and so would escape the usual air of Hampstead & of literary men's wives." Who were those "wives," and what suffocating "air" did they exude? One such Hampstead wife was Mrs. Rhys, wife of the publisher Ernest; she had said to Pound, after he ate the flowers decorating the dinner table at Eva Fowler's, "Would you like another rose, Mr. Pound?" (Carpenter 134). According to the only records available on the subject of the guest list, the correspondence between Yeats and Gregory, Yeats accepted this exclusion without comment, as did Gregory. She enjoyed making her men happy: Yeats would have his peacock; Blunt would have his tribute. The only questioning seems to have come from Blunt, who wrote to Gregory (in sentences she cites in her autobiography), "I hope you are to be of the poets' party to give a countenance at it, I should feel it lacked reality without you" (qtd. in *Seventy Years* 478).

In Blunt's telling phrase, the peacock dinner did lack reality: it constructed an all-male world of letters, entirely inconsistent with the literary world the poets lived in the rest of the time, one that included not only Gregory but also Katharine Tynan, HD, Amy Lowell, and many other women. The dinner constituted one more example of what Rachel Blau DuPlessis has called Pound's "constructed maleness." Beginning around 1912, when he wrote "Portrait d'une Femme," Pound's

> particular modernism . . . is gradually coming to be parallel with non-effeminate maleness. Despite the enormous contemporaneous critical thinking on this issue, one kind of masculine sensibility—"the real sperm of them"—triumphs within his thinking. Propounding this maleness is part of Pound's notable achievement during this period; it is probably one of his most culturally influential acts within the reception of modernism as well as its production. One part of Pound's constructed maleness is sustained . . . by various short and long-term strategies working against the acknowledgment of women as coequal and co-temporal producers of artistic and critical works. . . . (401)

Like the earlier "Sestina: Altaforte" and "Ballad of the Goodly Fere," as well as "Portrait d'une Femme," the dinner created within poetry a male—a macho—tradition, excluding the bad air not only of "literary men's wives" but also of literary women.

Blunt's transgressive sexuality offered the perfect opportunity to define a tradition of male poets; their value as writers was less important than their maleness. The famous picture—objected to by Pound until he saw it and decided to send it on to America—indicates visually why Blunt is important: he is the glamorous begetter of this lineage (fig. 4). Without any knowledge of who these men are, someone viewing the picture could not fail to observe that it showed a patriarch with his sons, a brotherhood. The picture makes visible one more way in which the world of letters was worldly: for this particular group

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of men—most of them—intermarriage and adultery constituted professional networking. Their kinship network was a professional network, and it was one they created deliberately. From the oldest, Blunt (then seventy-three), to the youngest, Aldington (then twenty-one), the poets had chosen their romantic partners for reasons that were in large part professional. This group constituted in many senses a "family of poets" (fig. 5).

In 1869 Wilfrid Blunt had married Lady Annabella King-Noel, attracted not only to her but also to her grandfather, the poet Byron. Long before Blunt met his future wife, he had many close brushes with Byron, visiting in or near houses where Byron had lived in England and Italy. Once Blunt was married into the family, he took a great interest in family papers, stories, relics, and everything else connected with the Romantic poet. Every time he fell in love with one of his cousins—at least three times—he thought of Byron's feelings for his half-sister, Augusta (who was married to a cousin); as he fought British imperial tyranny in Egypt, he thought of Byron in Greece (Longford, *Pilgrimage* 106, 164, 324, 428). Blunt and Yeats might not ever have met, or certainly not so often as they did, without Gregory: she formed the link between them, having fallen in love with Blunt in 1882 as they worked to save the life of the imprisoned Egyptian nationalist Urabi.[6] Yeats's first lover was Olivia Shakespear, the cousin of the poet Lionel Johnson: Yeats met her at a party for *The Yellow Book* in 1894. After Pound's first tea at Mrs. Shakespear's, he



Fig. 4
After the peacock dinner. From left: Victor Plarr, T. Sturge Moore, William Butler Yeats, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, and F. S. Flint. Reproduction by permission of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

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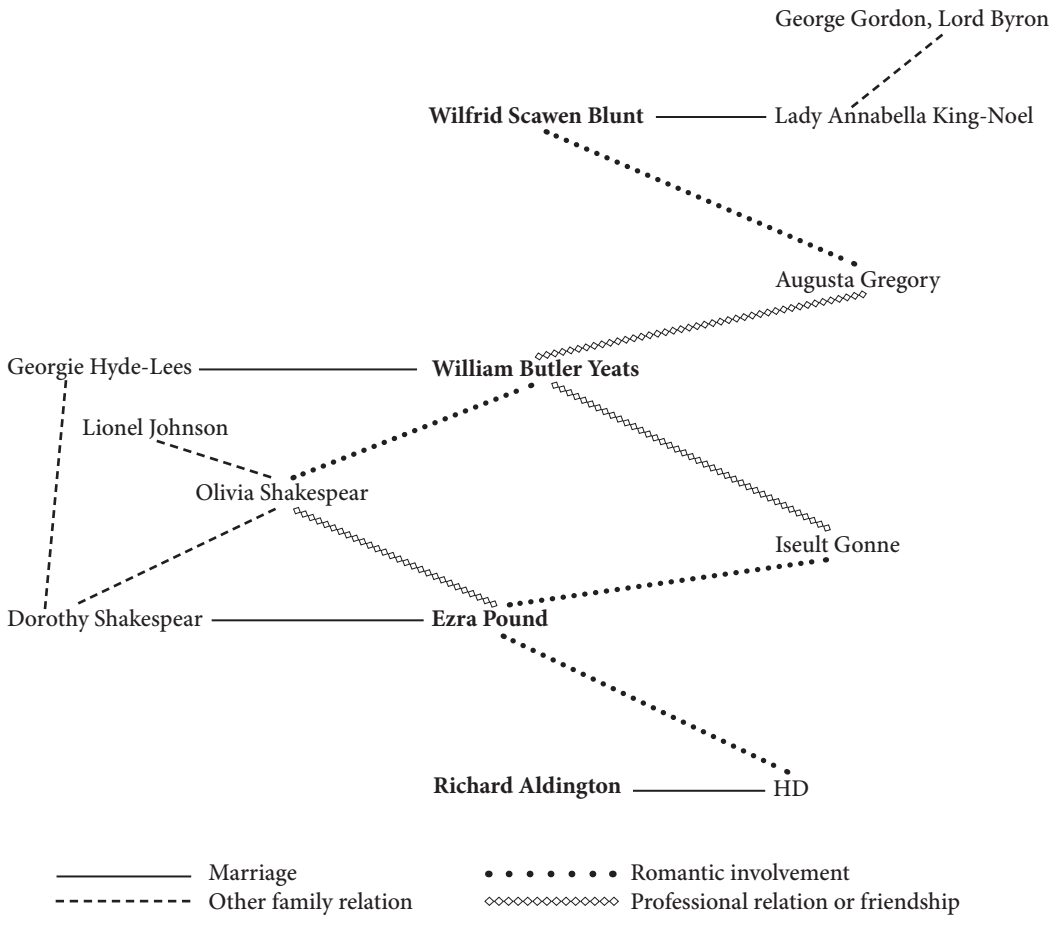


FIG. 5
Personal and professional networks among four of the poets attending the peacock dinner.

wrote an American friend that he had been "sitting on the same hearth rug" where Yeats sat: Shakespear's rug connected Pound's bottom with the bottom of Yeats, the man he had gone to London to meet, as Lady Anne connected Blunt with Byron and as Gregory connected Yeats with Blunt (Carpenter 105). Pound married Shakespear's only daughter, Dorothy, in April 1914, two months after the dinner for Blunt; and Yeats, through his renewed friendship with Olivia Shakespear, strengthened by his friendship with Pound, met Dorothy's stepcousin Georgie Hyde-Lees, whom he married in October 1917.[7] In 1912, soon after meeting the young poet Richard Aldington, Pound introduced him to his own former fiancée, the American poet HD (Hilda Doolittle), who had recently arrived in London to see Pound. HD had just married Aldington in October 1913.

Not all the poets in the picture were connected this intimately. Longenbach reads the photo in terms of left (older generation, former Rhymers) and right (younger generation, imagists [71–72]), but it can also be read from the center to the periphery as a dominance hierarchy. The men on the edges lack the power of those in the center. Pound, with the help of Yeats, had invited the others, and Aldington wrote to Flint, "We are all to go down to Blunt's place for lunch. I am instructed to see that you turn up" (Doyle 26). The marginal men had not married for advancement in the world of letters: Sturge Moore was happily married to his first cousin, who had previously been engaged to his brother (Middleton

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336). Frank Flint was widowed young and remarried, though not to anyone mentioned in any of the other poets' biographies, but Victor Plarr's marriage confirms the importance of professional marital networking. Here is Yeats's story (in the postprandial letter to Gregory) about Plarr's mistake:

> All the poets behaved modestly & said what they should say except for Plarr a survived Rhymer, *who has deteri[or]ated through marriage with his cook* & has the most mechanical & foolish small talk. As we came away Blunt asked all there to invite themselves down from a Saturday to Monday any time they chose. As we got into the motor I thought 'all will be too modest to accept but Plarr & he will go[.]' [A]t that moment Plarr said 'I will accept that invitation.' On the way home the poets kept Plarr out of all the conversation—they would not give him the clue to anything—he had become an ordinary person, an enemy, & next day or the day after Ezra said 'Plarr has made his last public appearance.' He was silent & modest in the days of the Rhymers, *but having a story to tell & the cook have undone him.* ([31 Jan. 1914]; my emphasis)

Plarr did not have the wit to marry up, to marry into aristocratic or at least haute bourgeois literary circles. Nothing about him lent importance to the world of letters. Even his body language in the photo is too eager. He was later condemned to be remembered for eternity as "Monsieur Verog" in Pound's poem "Siena Mi Fe," where he is called "out of step with the decade" and "neglected by the young" (*Selected Poems* 66).

Plarr's ignorance of the self-evident professional fact that women were routes to literary celebrity puts into sharp relief the social, economic, and professional qualifications of the women who linked the other men. Not only were they not cooks—Dorothy Shakespear made it clear before marriage that she never cooked—they were artists and writers, and they were independently wealthy. At various times, Blunt lived on Lady Anne's money, Yeats on Gregory's, and Pound on Dorothy's. Dorothy was a painter; Lady Anne Blunt painted and wrote a distinguished travel book. Gregory, Shakespear, and HD were professional writers. As the mediator between Yeats and Blunt in delivering the invitation to the dinner, Gregory functioned perfectly in this system, but it would be misleading not to acknowledge what great vicarious pleasure she took in the whole event. Much of her interest lay in anticipating the letters she knew she would receive from Blunt and Yeats. She did not, of course, participate directly in the act of affiliation that presence at the dinner constituted.

[II]

It is the first time in my life that I have ever had any admiration for my poetry expressed to me.

—Wilfrid Blunt to the poets after dinner (qtd. in Aldington, "Presentation")

The modern poetry represented by these young men is too entirely unlike anything I can recognise as good verse that I feel there is something absurd in their expressing admiration of mine. . . . I feel myself like a stranger in their land and too old to learn a new language.

—Wilfrid Blunt, 19 January 1914 (Blunt Papers)

Whereas the plans for the poets' dinner reveal its organizers' inconsistent notions of the world of letters, the dinner itself set in play different ideas of the poetic vocation. The series of formal speeches by the principals, Pound, Blunt, and Yeats, recorded in detail by Aldington, challenge one another in their implicit definitions of poetic professionalism. To the extent that the dinner represented a professional body, poets meeting as professional writers for a professional purpose, the guest of honor did not altogether take it seriously. In his public and private comments and in the poem he read aloud after dinner, Blunt deprofessionalized the event. He had never wished to broadcast his professional status,

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nor had he climbed a ladder of poets. As E. M. Forster wrote of him, "Socially, he belonged to the governing aristocracy and he never forewent the advantage that this accident gave him. In England it gave him the *entrée* to any society he chose to frequent . . ." (289). Blunt had in his youth made himself visible as a bullfighter and as an active anti-imperialist, taunting the police as he spoke at a banned meeting in Ireland, "Are you all such damned cowards that not one of you dares arrest me?" (qtd. in Longford, *Pilgrimage* 251). But he only wrote poetry, he told his guests, "when I was rather down on my luck and made mistakes either in love or politics . . ." (qtd. in Aldington, "Presentation"). Nor did he see any connection between his poetry and theirs; nor did he like theirs. On whatever basis the kinship was constructed, it was not literary style.

Pound's presentation poem—quoted in full in the *Times* account—offered a rationale for affiliation that attributed to Blunt the kind of masculinity Pound wanted in a poetic ancestor:

> Because you have gone your individual gait,
> Written fine verses, made mock of the world
> Swung the grand style, not made a trade of art
> Upheld Mazzini and detested institutions
> We, who are little given to respect,
> Respect you, and having no better way to show it,
> Bring you this stone to be some record of it.
> (qtd. in Aldington, "Presentation")

Working on the poem three days earlier, Pound had told Yeats that "poems of salutation are obsolete" (Yeats, Letter to Gregory, postmarked 15 Jan. 1914). Be that as it may, with its awkward, accidental final rhyme ("show it," "of it"), uneuphonious anaphora ("little given to respect, / Respect you"), and ugly, desperate directness ("having no better way to show it, / Bring you this stone to be some record of it"), the poem does not rank as one of Pound's best. It was moreover erroneous in several respects: "Sturge Moore is a little unhappy about Ezra's verses," Yeats wrote Gregory, "as he says he respects a lot of things & Ezra has made him say he does not" ([31 Jan. 1914]). And Pound had gotten the patriarch's biography wrong, as Blunt realized when he read the poem later in solitude. It was the Egyptian Urabi, not the Italian Mazzini, whom Blunt had "[u]pheld." But here nevertheless, in a mediocre, inaccurate poem, Pound, in Harold Bloom's phrase, created a precursor: this was the man who "hates the British Empire." The chief quality that Pound admired in Blunt, according to the poem, was his iconoclasm, which was enhanced by his poetry writing and the bravado of his personal style (in canto 82, Blunt's youthful triumph in the bullring is mentioned [523]). Blunt had indeed "not made a trade of art," because he did not publish a trade edition of his poems until September 1914. With the income from four thousand acres of land, why would he need royalties (Longford, *Pilgrimage* 4)? A kind of aristocratic machismo was implied in the physical description: "gone your individual gait," "Swung the grand style." If for "Mazzini" one read "Mussolini," the poem could almost be a prophetic description of its author.

The single act of affiliation created many genealogies. Insofar as Blunt was an enfant terrible, an anti-imperialist, and a generally transgressive figure, he formed the central link in a genealogy that included Byron and the later Pound. Blunt and Pound would also, much later, be linked as prison poets: Blunt wrote the sonnet sequence *In Carcere et Vinculis* (which also influenced Oscar Wilde, who might have been invited to the peacock dinner if he had been alive) in Galway Gaol in 1888, and Pound wrote the *Pisan Cantos*—in which Blunt is a character—while incarcerated in 1945. An anti-imperialist genealogy would include Byron, Blunt, and Yeats and an orientalist one Blunt (Arabia, Egypt, India), Yeats (India, Japan), and Pound (China). The genealogy of amorist or philandering poets includes the greatest number: Byron, Blunt,

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Yeats, Pound, Aldington. And within that category, there are the poets who sired illegitimate children: Byron, Blunt, and Pound.

Blunt had bred horses, not poets, and the notion that he had fathered a school of poetry was one he wittily dismissed:

> The only thing I feel about this visit—which flatters me immensely—is that I am to a certain extent an impostor. I have never really been a poet. . . . I have written a certain amount of verse; but I have only done it when I was rather down on my luck and made mistakes either in love or politics or some branch of active life. I found that it relieved my feelings. But I never wrote any of it with the least idea of getting it published. . . . It is the first time in my life that I have ever had any admiration for my poetry expressed to me. It is either because I have taken up the cause of the Indian or the Egyptian, or more generally because I breed horses. That is what I am generally known as—a breeder of horses. So when I received your flattering invitation, and there was nothing expressed about what kind of admiration it was, I was very much puzzled. I did not know whether it was from some of my horsey friends or political admirers.

Having, he said, "washed my hands of politics" and withdrawn from horse breeding, having now "nothing to do," he had "taken up again with verse-writing" (qtd. in Aldington, "Presentation"). The pleasant nonchalance of Blunt's attitude to poetry no more resembled Pound's intense and single-minded careerism than Newbuildings Place resembled the garrets in which Pound lived in London. But the speech served as a gracious acceptance of tribute.

Yeats's response to Blunt's speech restored a tone of professional seriousness. Although he was not interested in the swaggering, iconoclastic masculinity that Pound praised, Yeats, too, claimed Blunt as an ancestor. In terms that anticipated his introduction to the 1937 *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, in which he included six poems by Blunt, Yeats traced the development of poetry over the previous century, the rise of "the unreal culture of Victorian romance," and the reaction against it.

> When you published your first work, sir, it was the very height of the Victorian period. The abstract poet was in a state of glory. . . . [I]nstead of abstract poetry, you wrote verses which were good poetry because they were first of all fine things to have thought and said in some real situation of life. . . . As the tide of romance recedes I am driven back simply on myself and my thoughts in actual life, and my work becomes more and more like your earlier work, which seems fascinating and wonderful to me.
>
> (qtd. in Aldington, "Presentation")

The precursor Yeats created was not an anti-imperialist or a bullfighter. He was a style changer, credited with pioneering a post-Victorian idiom. This plain style was precisely what Yeats was trying to effect in his own poetry at the time, the "clarity of poetic diction" of the Stone Cottage period (Longenbach 19). Like Pound, Yeats praised Blunt for being the poet he hoped to become himself.

Blunt was not persuaded. Alone the next day, reading the poems in the box carefully and thinking about what Yeats had said, he was baffled at the idea of any stylistic influence and continued to reject the claims made for his poetry.[8]

> The modern poetry represented by these young men is too entirely unlike anything I can recognise as good verse that I feel there is something absurd in their expressing admiration of mine. They explain it by saying that I was the first writer of verse to rebel against the romantic convention of early and mid-Victorian poetry and to write about things as they are, but . . . they do not follow at all in my footsteps.

Reading Pound's presentation poem and taking it in more thoroughly than he had been able to when it was read to him, he realized he did not like it; it was "a kind of futurist verse without rhyme or metre or much reason." Disliking in

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addition the "fantastic Futurist bas relief of a naked Egyptian woman" on the box containing these "word puzzles," he turned the carved side to the wall (Blunt Papers, 19 Jan. 1914).

Not only was Blunt antiprofessional and almost antiliterary in his explanation of his "verse-writing," he also chose to read, later in the afternoon, an entirely unpretentious poem. Perhaps because it was a dirty-old-man poem, openly and cheerfully amoristic, none of the published accounts alluded to it. Blunt's diary says he "could think of nothing else to read them" but his translation of the Comte de Gobineau's "Leporello." He called it "Don Juan's Good-Night," and two stanzas give its flavor:

> Teach me, gentle Leporello,
> Since you are so wise a fellow,
> How your master I may win.
> Leporello answers gaily
> Slip into his bed and way lay
> Him; anon he shall come in.
> . . . . . .
> To console you he a fortune
> Would not grudge. But to importune
> His more tenderness? Nay, Nay.
> A return to even your beauty
> Were too costly a Duke's duty,
> One his whole wealth could not pay.

Blunt prefaced his reading of the poem "with the remark that he hoped they wouldn't be too shocked" (Longford, *Pilgrimage* 396). This was boy talk. Not only was the tone of the poem light and the subject matter low, but its "message" was anti-idealistic: the woman who sleeps with Don Juan may get money if she wants it, but no love. Blunt was deromanticizing the erotic as casually as he had deprofessionalized the poetic.

And yet in this forgotten contribution to the poets' dinner Blunt was actually in poetic conversation with members of a male-linked genealogy. His grandfather-in-law Byron had authored the mock epic *Don Juan*, and his friend Gobineau, with whom Blunt had dined in 1871, was another wealthy, anti-imperialist, literary diplomat and self-styled Byronic adventurer. On the occasion of that earlier dinner, Blunt gave his host the newest edition of Byron's poems (Tetreault 64). To translate Gobineau on Don Juan was to affirm that lineage. The poem, moreover, engaged thematically with the same topic as poems by two of Blunt's alleged poetic sons. Yeats's contribution to the marble box, "When Helen Lived" (*Variorum* 293), considers explicitly the proper register for addressing "Beauty that we have won / From bitterest hours." However the speaker might "despair" that other men desert beauty for "noisy, insolent sport," his own stance might also be inadequate. Had he been "within / Those topless towers / Where Helen walked with her boy," he might have "given but as the rest / Of the men and women of Troy, / A word and a jest." Aldington's "In the Via Sestina," another poem in the box, also considers the mixture of poetic registers available to a man gazing at pure sexuality:

> O daughter of Isis,
> Thou standest beside the wet highway
> Of this decayed Rome
> A manifest harlot.
> Straight and slim art thou
> As a marble phallus;
> Thy face is the face of Isis
> —Carven
> As she is carven in basalt.
> And my heart stops with awe
> At the presence of gods,
> For there beside thee on the stall of images
> Is the head of Osiris
> Thy lord. (35)

Blunt's poem about Don Juan, Yeats's about Helen, and Aldington's about the "manifest harlot," together with the Gaudier-Brzeska carving, create a discourse of female beauty, all posing the question how erotic womanhood is to be valued. This debate never took the form of direct argument on the day the authors spent together, but the poems were provisional positions on the topic offered by

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men to other men. No doubt the homosocial intimacy of the occasion inspired the writers and sculptor to assume explicitly masculine subjectivities and to consider how much the muse was worth and how she should be spoken of. She was the absent presence at the peacock dinner: but as a marble box, she offered the space that made them a family.

[III]

She tells me that a man in the Foreign Office called Clark whom I have met at her house says he will "never speak to any of those poets again." This because of our paying honour to Blunt.

—W. B. Yeats (Letter to Gregory, [31 Jan. 1914])

According to Aldington's account in the *Egoist*, Yeats gave his host background on the poets who were his guests. "We represent different schools and interests," said Yeats, who after a few words about Sturge Moore began talking about Pound. "Ezra Pound has a desire personally to insult the world," Yeats began. "He has a volume of manuscript at present in which his insults to the world are so deadly that it is rather a complicated publishing problem" (qtd. in Aldington, "Presentation"). Yeats's insight was more accurate than he could then have known and sheds light on one larger meaning of the peacock dinner. Within Newbuildings Place, it had been a happy afternoon, as pleasant and self-contained as the "immortal dinner" of 1817. "All were delighted with Blunt," Yeats wrote to Gregory ([31 Jan. 1914]). But no less than the Abbey Theatre, the dinner was articulated through and given meaning by communications media: to release it to the world outside Sussex was to surrender its definition to people other than the seven poets and Gregory. The interpretive process began early and continued long. Read by others, the poets' dinner took on a note of oblique aggression.

The dinner immediately became part of the larger agonistic configuration of Yeats's professional life. On board the *Lusitania* on his way to New York, writing Gregory about the visit to Blunt, Yeats mentioned press cuttings he had received from Lennox Robinson at the Abbey and remarked, "I think there has been a new tone of spite towards us lately—I suppose inferior men are writing the notices exclusively" ([31 Jan. 1914]). Then he turned to another public relations issue. In the January issue of the *English Review*, George Moore had published the section of *Hail and Farewell* called "Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Synge"—which appeared, as Adrian Frazier says, "right on the heels of her self-promotional *Our Irish Theatre* (issued in late 1913)" (390). All January, while the peacock dinner was being planned and eaten, Moore had been in correspondence with Gregory about her threatened lawsuit over his representation of her as a Protestant proselytizer. Yeats had just written the lines that became the closing poem of *Responsibilities* (*Variorum* 321), in which he says that his "priceless things" have become "but a post the passing dogs defile," Moore being one of those urinating dogs. In the letter of 31 January, just after the comment on the "inferior men" writing the notices, Yeats talks about submitting this poem to the *New Statesman* (where in fact it was published on 7 February). "People have constantly spoken to me of the article with indignation," he wrote. Then, "I dined with Mrs. Fowler last night" he began—Mrs. Fowler was Eva Fowler, the London hostess and friend of Olivia Shakespear's whose flowered centerpiece Pound had once eaten. "She tells me that a man in the Foreign Office called Clark whom I have met at her house says he will 'never speak to any of those poets again.' This because of our paying honour to Blunt." Clark, reading his *Times*, felt the oblique aggression of the dinner and responded obliquely himself. He was not going to have them all arrested; he simply was not going to speak to them again. Like Yeats reading Moore or Moore reading Yeats, Clark found himself in a series of attacks and rebuttals.

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Pound's account of the dinner in the American little magazine *Poetry* subtly represents it as a form of "insult to the world." At the heart of Pound's version is the glamour of the occasion, an elite group of poets in a magnificent setting paying homage with due ceremony to an illustrious elder poet. Blunt had entertained them "with great charm, regaling us with the roast flesh of peacocks at Newbuildings, a sixteenth-century defensible grange in Sussex" (actually built in 1683). Although Yeats had praised Blunt for breaking away from Victorian abstractness of language, Pound praised him in *Poetry* as "the last man who has been able to use the old-fashioned Elizabethan 'grand-style' effectively." Pound's emphasis on the exoticism of the past (defensible grange, grand style) makes an implicit comment on the present, and his focus on the place hints at a world outside this gathering of kindred artistic spirits in a castle. Other remarks reinforce the geopolitical divisions. Blunt, wrote Pound, was probably better known in America "for his various political martyrdoms than for his poems." Had the dinner taken place in London, as originally planned, Pound noted that there might have been more poets, but not any "who hold official positions." Blunt's politics would have precluded that, because he "has never ceased to protest against the tyrannies and swindles of the Empire, '*a Semitic invention of Disraeli's*'" ("Homage" 220; my emphasis).

Pound's account suggests that outside the peacock dinner lies an empire dominated by the Jews in the British government. The glancing allusions to the world against which Blunt protests give a note of defiance to the gathering: the homage to Blunt constituted a message of disrespect to "detested institutions," especially imperialism and its supporters. Blunt had said that he didn't invite his Sussex neighbor Hilaire Belloc to the poets' dinner, receiving him just for tea, because Belloc would have turned the conversation to "Marconis and Jews," so Blunt clearly did not want that kind of talk over peacock (Longford, *Pilgrimage* 394).[9] In his weekly magazine, the *Eye-Witness*, Belloc had exposed what came to be called the Marconi shares scandal (1912–13), a political controversy over alleged insider trading by Jewish members of the government, including the attorney general, Sir Rufus Isaacs, and the postmaster general, Herbert Samuel.[10] Whether Blunt used the phrase about Disraeli over tea, in Belloc's presence, was not recorded. But Blunt's unpublished ballad about the Irish martyr Roger Casement, written two years later, links in the manner of that period anti-imperialism with anti-Semitism when Blunt writes of Sir Rufus, who pronounced the death sentence, "And a cheer for Hebrew Isaacs / Our great Chief Justice Lord. . . ." He ends the stanza with the line "All hail to our Chief Jew" ("Ballad").

Echoes of that conversation may have resonated in Pound's mind as he wrote about the dinner three decades later. The contrast between the little group of poets and the worthless surrounding civilization exists in transmuted form in canto 81 (*Cantos* 521–22), written when Pound was incarcerated in Pisa in 1945 by the American army for broadcasting treasonous speeches. There he became, like Blunt, a prison poet. After castigating himself for his vanity, the speaker offers the peacock dinner as an example of something he did that was good and not vain:

> But to have done instead of not doing
> this is not vanity
> To have, with decency, knocked
> That a Blunt should open
> To have gathered from the air a live
> tradition
> or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
> This is not vanity.

The dinner functions in many ways here, as an oasis of value and a model of fellowship, generosity, and reciprocal kindness (they knock;

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Blunt opens) but also as a defense of Pound's character. The "live tradition" may include English aristocratic iconoclasm in all its nuances as well as the live tradition of poetry embodied in the three generations of poets conversing over dinner. The visit has become the microcosm Pound retreats to when his hopes for the larger world have collapsed, and thus it is absorbed into the manifold aggressions and excuses of Pound's postfascist life.

The beauty of canto 81, perhaps the beauty of the passage about Blunt's dinner, led to another provocative act by another group of poets awarding a prize to an older poet. In 1949, after much discussion and two vote counts, the Bollingen Prize Committee—associated with the Library of Congress and including Allen Tate, W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell, Karl Shapiro, and T. S. Eliot—chose Pound's *Pisan Cantos* as the best volume of poetry published in 1948, despite the poems' explicitly anti-Semitic passages and despite the author's treasonous broadcasts. (Pound was at that time incarcerated in Saint Elizabeths, a psychiatric hospital in Washington.) As a result of protests raised against the award, Representative Jacob Javits of New York wrote the librarian of Congress inquiring how the decision had been made. In August the Joint Committee of the House and Senate on the Library of Congress resolved that "the Library should abstain from giving prizes or making awards" (McGuire 121). Like Eva Fowler's friend Clark, Javits wanted nothing to do with any of those poets again.

As a meal, the poets' dinner looks tidily self-contained, from 12:30 to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, 18 January 1914. But it took place in many histories, erotic, literary, and political. So long in the making, so carefully planned, the dinner collected, reinforced, and disseminated powerful cultural forces. If it can be said to have lasted till 1949, it may have begun in 1908, when Pound walked into Elkin Mathews's bookshop; in 1895, when Yeats went to bed with Olivia Shakespear; in 1882, when Lady Gregory and Blunt fell into each other's arms; in 1865, when Mme Olympia Usedom determined to find Blunt "a nice rich wife" and told him about Lady Annabella King-Noel; or in 1823, when Byron sailed for Greece with the family motto, *Crede Biron,* emblazoned on his helmet.

Notes

The author would like to thank Isaac Gewirtz, Declan Kiely, and Philip Milito of the Berg Collection and Stella Panayotova and N. R. Robinson of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

[1] Elizabeth Longford found the names of thirty-eight women listed as lovers in Blunt's "Secret Diaries," but she adds that "no doubt there were others too ephemeral to win even a paragraph" ("Wilfrid Scawen Blunt" 64).

[2] Although I do not cite any particular passages from works by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, it seems important to give her credit for the terminology and the line of thought used in my comments on the box.

[3] The only essay I have found devoted entirely to the dinner is by William T. Going; it was published before the Blunt Papers in the Fitzwilliam Museum were opened (in 1972, fifty years after Blunt's death).

[4] For a study of the "immortal dinner" in its complete cultural and historical context, see Hughes-Hallet.

[5] John Masefield and Frederic Manning were invited, and they contributed poems to the box. At the last minute, both were unable to go.

[6] Although Blunt (and hence Gregory) spelled the name Arabi, connecting it obviously with Arabs and Arabia, the correct transliteration is Urabi.

[7] Iseult Gonne, Maude Gonne's daughter, is included in the network diagram because Pound was her first lover, and it is worth noting in the context of this essay that Pound slept with the daughters of two of Yeats's lovers (Carpenter 316–17).

[8] The poems in the box included (on top) the presentation poem by Pound, "The Return" (Pound), "Truth" (Masefield), "When Helen Lived" (Yeats), "In the Via Sestina" (Aldington), "The Swan" (Flint), "The Dying Swan" (Sturge Moore), "Kore" (Manning), and "Ad Cinerarium" (Plarr).

[9] Gobineau, whose poem Blunt had translated, was the author of *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853–55), which propounded the racial theory used (long after his death) by the Nazis to justify their belief in the superiority of the Aryan race.

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[10] Sir Rufus's brother Godfrey was managing director of the Marconi Wireless Telegraph Company, which had been authorized to build six of the eighteen stations of the Imperial Wireless Scheme, and Belloc accused them and other members of the government of profiting from the anticipated contract before it was announced. A parliamentary inquiry in 1913 determined that no one involved had been guilty of corruption.

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