The background to the story of Ezra Pound and the writing of The Pisan Cantos is too well known to develop in any detail at this time. It is enough to recall that the famed expatriate American poet was captured by the United States Army in Italy after the fall of Mussolini and charged with treason for having broadcast over Radio Rome for the Fascists. Pound, however, never stood trial on the treason charge because a trio of government psychiatrists pronounced him insane and he was locked up in a mental institution until his release in 1958.

Before going to the United States to stand trial, however, Ezra Pound was imprisoned outside of Pisa, Italy for a period of six months. It was at this time that he began to write the eleven cantos (74 to 84) which make up the 118 pages of The Pisan Cantos. These poems were published in 1948. while Pound, certified insane, was in St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D. C. For the most part, the Cantos were greeted with praise and a certain amount of grudging respect throughout the literary world. Many poets owed a great deal to Pound and an increasing number—led by T. S. Eliot and Archibald MacLeish—were anxious to see him removed from the Hospital's insane ward and sent back to his home of two decades—Rapallo, Italy.

What caused the comment was not the publication of the poems, but the award that was given to them in 1949 by the Library of Congress Fellows in American Literature, a panel of 14 respected writers and scholars who had been empowered to select the best volume of verse published by an American poet in 1948 and award to it the first annual Bollingen Prize in Poetry of $1000.00. There had been a number of nominations, but on the final ballot, 10 of the 12 voting jurors selected The Pisan Cantos. The jury fully expected to be criticized for its choice, but it had no reason to assume the violence of the controversy. It began with an attack in Senior Scholastic, followed by a vicious harangue in Masses and Mainstream. It reached a high level of scholarly debate in Partisan Review. But by far, the most interesting phase of the controversy took place in the pages of the Saturday Review of Literature and it is with that debate that I should like to deal at this time.

All the while that the Partisan Review controversy was being waged on the relatively high level that usually characterizes scholarly disagree-
ment, Saturday Review patiently awaited its own opportunity to enter the fray. The editors--Harrison Smith and Norman Cousins--had quietly commissioned Pulitzer-Prize-Winning-Poets Robert Hillyer and Peter Viereck to write three articles on the merits of the Prize itself and on the undue influence exercised by T. S. Eliot and the New Critics on American poetry.

Hillyer's first article, "Treason's Strange Fruit: The Case of Ezra Pound and the Bollingen Prize," was published in the June 11th issue, accompanied by an editorial note declaring the board stood squarely behind Hillyer and inviting legal action if he or the board were guilty of libel or misrepresentation. The editors accused Pound of having "voluntarily served the cause of the greatest anti-humanitarian and anti-cultural crusade known to history" as an "official of considerable standing and an intimate of Mussolini, to boot" and even suggested that the award to Pound might be a calculated attempt on the part of the "super" snobs like W. H. Auden and T. S. Eliot to bring about the release of the traitorous mad poet. Arguing that "art cannot be separated from life and attain true greatness," the editors refused to accept the "anti-humanitarian ravings of an insane man, the incoherent medley of wild ideas, of symbols that reflect nothing but obscurity, as a work of genius."

Robert Hillyer, if anything, was even more honestly outraged than editors Cousins and Smith as he dismissed The Pisan Cantos abruptly as a "vehicle of contempt for America" and as a ruthless mockery of "our Christian war dead." The jury had "defied all critical standards" by choosing the Cantos for the Prize. And in an involved argument linking the Mellon family (donators of the money) with Carl Jung (an accused Nazi), Hillyer demonstrated to his own satisfaction that the Bollingen Foundation (named by Mellon for Jung's summer home in Switzerland) and the Library of Congress Fellows were linked together in a fascist-like conspiracy to strangle native American verse.

T. S. Eliot, he argued, was a foreigner and never should have been picked for the panel in the first place and W. H. Auden, he implied, was a foreigner by birth and equally suspect. Their appointment to the Jury, he conceived of as a vicious and secret act on the part of the Librarian of Congress and the prize, a permanent disgrace to the nation and to Congress itself. 8

In the second installment of his two-part attack, "Poetry's New Priesthood," Hillyer announced that if the Cantos were a poetic achievement, then "everything we have known of poetry in the English language from Chaucer to Frost is not poetic achievement." He condemned Eliot as a Jew-hater and suggested that his philosophy of literature was undermining the teaching of literature in the schools and colleges of the nation. The panel members were but the dupes of Eliot since half their number, at least, were "disciples" of him and Pound. Finally, he linked the so-called new aes-
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On July 2nd, the editors gave over the editorial page of the magazine to Luther Evans, the Librarian of Congress, who admitted that he personally regarded the choice of Pound's _Cantos_ as unfortunate, since from his "poetically ignorant point of view Mr. Pound's book is hardly poetry at all." But Evans refused to accede to the demands of some that poetry be politically sound to be good since "a political test for art and poetry" must be regarded as a sign of a "dictatorial, illiberal, undemocratic approach to matters of the mind." SR's editors responded to Mr. Evans' letter in a more temperate manner than that of their original statement. They agreed with him that it was indeed necessary to divorce politics from art but wondered if it were not quite another matter to use the word politics as "a substitute for values." "We do not believe that a poet can shatter ethics and values and still be a good poet," argued Harrison Smith, "nor do we believe that poetry can convert words into maggots that eat at human dignity and still be good poetry." He concluded with the observation that this "Congressional Award," as he termed it, might well have gone to Mark Van Doren, Archibald MacLeish, or Peter Viereck—all of whom had published excellent volumes of verse in 1948.

Peter Viereck, who won his Pulitzer in 1948, had already been chosen by SRL to launch the second round of the attack on Pound, Eliot, and modern poetry in a self-conscious analysis of "My Kind of Poetry" in the August 27th issue. Viereck's theory of art can be summed up in his own maxim "Be Thou Clear" and he was proud to admit to having sinned against the orthodoxy of higher criticism. As Viereck viewed his own poetry, it was guilty of having content, that is, he had something to say "about the profane world" the new critics scorn and not "only form" which made him an "impure poet" in their eyes. His other sin was of trying to "communicate to the qualified layman also, instead of only to fellow poets and critics." As for the Pound _Cantos_, declared Viereck, just so much "ugly gibberish;" but the Bollingen judges were not guilty of a fascist conspiracy in his opinion. Rather, the choice represented "an untenable doctrinaire attempt to separate form from content and to separate poetry from its inextricable moral and historical context."

The second half of Viereck's attack on Pound and modern poetry began disarmingly enough with praise for the verse of Edith Sitwell with its "legitimate and ultimately rewarding difficulty of a deep pool rather than the meaningless obscurity of a shallow and muddy puddle." Only Robert Frost, he mused, of all the major poets in America "has never been adequately subjected to the Higher Criticism of...the Little Magazines." As for Ezra Pound's poetry, he continued, it cannot be aesthetically attractive because "beauty is banished by the moral ugliness basic to the contents" thus, the Bollingen Prize reflects the new critic's "irresponsible qualmlessness
about immorality and about unclarity," the result of ideas originally "liberating and refreshing," but by now exerting a despotism of their own through the second generation of new critics who, like all second generations, are "earnest, sterile, (and) pedantic." The Bollingen Prize, therefore, reflects the triumph of two critical attitudes: first, that of "detailed textual criticism for its own sake" and second, the Eliot maxim that modern poetry must be "complex"--that has been pushed so far as to make critics afraid to "object to obscurity lest they be called insensitive middle-brows."

In the eyes of many, however, the Saturday Review of Literature had already succumbed to the pressure of the middle-brows and neglected its obligations to first-rate writers and their work. It was left to Poetry magazine to reassert the values of freedom of artistic expression. The editorial staff of Poetry felt that it had been badly treated by SRL and resented Mr. Hillyer's implication that it had been taken over lock, stock, and theory by the "obscurist" poets and New Critics. Poetry had first responded to the announcement of the Bollingen Prize to Pound somewhat tongue in cheek. By the time of the June issue, however, the critical stakes had become too high and editor Hayden Carruth felt obligated to defend his position: 1948 had been a bad year for American poetry in general and the prize to Pound was justified, particularly when one considered his total achievement.

By August, Carruth was so angered by SRL and by Hillyer, that he proposed that the worst enemy of poetry may be "the poet himself since he can't reach the heights of the great poet." Admitting that good poets have always violated tradition, he conceded that Pound was "very likely a traitor" and that it was difficult to defend him on "any but the narrow grounds of service to his craft" but there was still not "a single poet whose whole work does not suffer from serious deficiencies, deplorable lapses." Because the values that poetry concerns itself with cannot die, Carruth saw greater danger in the critic's attempt to restrict the domain of the poet and called upon all poets to exert their genius to honor poetry and "maintain its integrity." He challenged Hillyer's assumption that there was a party line operating in modern criticism by scoffing that it was ridiculous to conceive of critics such as Burke, Blackmur, Winters, Ransom, Richards, and Leavis as maintaining a party line, let alone subscribing to one.

The same month that Poetry attacked the Saturday Review of Literature, the Committee of the Fellows of the Library of Congress in American Literature, chaired by Leonie Adams and including Louise Bogan, Karl Shapiro and Willard Thorp, issued a detailed mimeographed statement defending itself against the charges raised in SRL. Among others they rejected the accusation that Pound was handpicked by T. S. Eliot by demonstrating that Pound had been originally nominated by six different jurors, none of whom was Eliot, and that Eliot had never spoken up in favor of The Pisan Cantos in their discussions. The statement was mailed special delivery to the Saturday Review of Literature whose editors refused to print it.
On October 3rd, Malcolm Cowley joined the fray via an article in the 
*New Republic*, in which he rejected the notion of a conspiracy and asserted 
his belief that in the past too many second-rate authors had been rewarded 
for expressing the right opinions. He considered, however, that *The Pisan 
Cantos* was the weakest of Ezra Pound's many books and inferior, in fact, 
to several other volumes of poetry published in 1948. He maintained, though, 
that Robert Hillyer had "misled the public about the nature of an argument 
among poets and critics" and had "gone over to the enemy, like Pound in 
another war" because he had been "worsted in a struggle among his col­ 
leagues and compatriots" forcing him to appeal over their heads and "under 
false colors to the great hostile empire of the Philistines."

Also in October, the *Hudson Review* jumped into the fight with an edi­ 
torial blasting the *Saturday Review*’s action as the most "unscrupulous 
attempt that has been made her in recent years to discredit a group of seri­ 
ous writers, and serious writing in general" by charges based on "cowardly 
insinuation" and filled with "inaccuracies." Harshest of all was their judg­ 
ment of Robert Hillyer as a "failure as a poet and sufficiently mean-spirited 
ough to vent his venom on the eminent and successful." The editors of SRL 
had used the Prize as a "pretext for an attack on the Fellows and on other 
unspecified writers" in a manner that was both "unscrupulous and unfounded."

By the fall of 1949, so many men of letters were angered and frus­ 
trated by the stand taken in *Saturday Review* that John Berryman circulated 
a letter for their signatures to be printed in *Saturday Review* as a protest to 
the Hillyer articles. This letter signed by 84 writers and critics was 
returned to Berryman after three weeks by the editors of the magazine with 
the lame objection that it was a petition rather than a letter and as such it 
was necessary to list the names of all those writers who had refused to sign 
it. Angered by this response, Berryman published the letter in the Decem­ 
ber 17th issue of *The Nation*, instead, along with a heated covering statement 
from Margaret Marshall. This letter condemned the *Saturday Review of 
Literature* for publishing "under pretense of attacking the award...a pre­ 
pared attack on modern poetry and criticism, impugning not only the liter­ 
ary reputation but the personal character of some of the foremost writers." 
The writers were particularly upset by the smear technique of guilt by asso­ 
ciation and called upon the *Saturday Review of Literature* in the name of 
"public decency" to announce the names of all those accused of involvement 
in a fascist conspiracy.

*Poetry* magazine continued its attack on the *Saturday Review* by pub­ 
lishing, in place of its usual November issue, a special edition devoted almost 
entirely to reprinting the response of the Library of Congress Fellows to the 
charges hurled against them. To this response, originally circulated in 
mimeographed form, were added reprints of several previously published 
articles and six hitherto unpublished letters of protest from eminent scholar­ 
ly figures. Two of these letters, from Archibald MacLeish and Mark Van
Doren, had actually been written prior to the publication of the Hillyer articles at the request of Harrison Smith, who sent the manuscripts to a dozen or more literary figures to read prior to actual publication. MacLeish's original comments had caused Smith to urge certain changes in the articles, but MacLeish was still unhappy about the final result and asked how "a responsible publisher can offer his pages to personal aspersions as little supported by evidence as those Mr. Hillyer has committed to paper." Van Doren remarked to Smith that he did not "care for Pound's Cantos, early or late," and he agreed with much of "what Mr. Hillyer says about contemporary criticism, New or otherwise." But he could not countenance an attack based on such flimsy evidence.

The second two letters, by William Meredith and William Van O'Connor, were written in response to the publication of the Hillyer articles, but SRL declined to publish them. Meredith admitted to a certain agreement with Robert Hillyer on the sometimes unfortunate obscurity of much of modern verse and so was all the more pained by the personal and intemperate quality of Hillyer's attack with his dishonest methods and his "wholly distorted and unjust assessment of the work of the major poets and critics of his time." William Van O'Connor had originally reviewed The Pisan Cantos for the Saturday Review of Literature and thought that he deserved to be heard on the Bollingen issue, but the editors also declined to publish his letter in which he attacked Robert Hillyer as a man who has "for many years been writing poetry as though he had been living in a little hamlet in Maine without benefit of radio, telephone, or any but a local weekly newspaper." Wrote O'Connor, "there is little evidence in his poetry that he is alive in the 20th century."

The final two letters published in Poetry's rebuke to the Saturday Review of Literature were from two mainstays of the new critical movement in literary criticism, Cleanth Brooks and Yvor Winters. Professor Brooks' letter, asking the Saturday Review editors to name names, was eventually printed on October 29th but Winters, who also asked that they name names, had his letter returned to him even though he had demanded publication "without alteration or omission" and with an adequate reply.

Although the Saturday Review of Literature had refused to print the letters of such eminent men of letters as Yvor Winters, William Van O'Connor, Mark Van Doren and Archibald MacLeish— to say nothing of a letter carrying the signatures of 84 of the most important writers in America— it did open its weekly letter columns for six months to the charges and counter-charges of its general readership. All told, in 1949, Saturday Review published 106 letters on the controversy with the editors maintaining from the beginning that the letters were almost seven to one in favor of the magazine's position— although they promised to give equal space to the opposition. But a detailed examination of the 106 letters published indicates the following to be true: 56 letters were openly in favor of Hillyer's position.
most of them enthusiastically so); 24 letters were opposed to his stand—but not one of these came out in favor of the award to Pound; 12 letters were written in defense of Carl Jung; 20 thirteen can only be classed as middle-of-the-road or incidental to the main issues (people who asked that the government get out of the arts or who queried what all the fuss was about since poetry was so unimportant anyway); and one lone letter can be construed to have been completely and unequivocally pro-Pound. In other words, out of 106 letters published in 1949 by the editors of the Saturday Review of Literature on the Bollingen Prize controversy, only one was written to support the choice of The Pisan Cantos.

It is worth noting in passing, perhaps, that at least three of the correspondents offered financial assistance to the magazine should it be sued for libel or defamation of character and that at least three poetry societies came out as opposed to modern poetry and Pound and Eliot, including The Poetry Society of Texas and the Los Angeles Chapter of Poets of the Pacific. Finally, and most interesting, three of the writers identified themselves as college teachers and a fourth as a prep school teacher: they were enthusiastic in their support of Hillyer and vehement in their denunciation of the Higher Critics.

It is enlightening to discover that the only letter writers actually identifying themselves as college teachers should come out in opposition to the award and in praise of Robert Hillyer as these did. For although the Pound-Bollingen controversy is provocative on a number of levels, perhaps the most intriguing aspect is how quickly Pound himself was pushed into the background and the emphasis shifted to T. S. Eliot, the new poetry, and the Higher Criticism.

The Library of Congress Fellows in American Literature had steeled themselves for the hostile reaction of the public, but they could hardly have been prepared for the type of onslaught their judgment precipitated. They had fully expected the verdict of Senior Scholastic that The Pisan Cantos were fit reading for only Pound's psychiatrist or, even, the Masses and Mainstream suggestion that it was all an anti-communist plot to embarrass Lenin. They seem even to have been aware of the likelihood of serious and profound debate over the anti-semitic quality of the poetry, a debate which, indeed, did take place in the pages of Partisan Review. But it appears more likely, judging by their statement of February 20th, that these objections were conceived of in terms of the well-known fact that Ezra Pound was an accused traitor and a convicted lunatic. It would seem that the irrational, intemperate, and often inaccurate attack launched on the award by the Saturday Review of Literature and the two Pulitzer-Prize-Winning poets had little to do with Pound's actual physical or mental state or even with the quality of his verse.

The layman objecting to The Pisan Cantos would return time and again to the seven lines of vicious anti-semitism in the poems and would question,
often in a bewildered tone, how good poetry could be a vehicle for such reprehensible ideas. But the Saturday Review of Literature knew how it was that good verse could be expressive of bad ideology and laid the blame at the door of the New Criticism. Indications are that for some years previous, in fact, the editors of SRL had been receiving more and more perplexed letters from intelligent readers about the nature of modern poetry. Judging by the letters published from teachers in small colleges throughout the nation, even the so-called professional was bothered. This is to say nothing of the poetry lovers—the myriad readers and writers of verse—who make up the membership of such organizations as the Los Angeles Chapter of Poets of the Pacific.

This is not the place to chart the history of the rise and fall of formalistic criticism, but it is tempting to suggest that the award of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound in 1949 must mark some sort of high point for its dominance of American letters; moreover the controversy engendered by Hillyer and Viereck over this award may also reflect the degree to which the reaction against the new orthodoxy had already set in.

Indeed, what more ironic footnote to the whole proceedings can be offered than a brief reminder that it was not T. S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, or Archibald MacLeish who succeeded finally in obtaining the release of Ezra Pound from St. Elizabeths Hospital in 1958. It was Robert Frost, beloved national poet of the American people (and friend of Sherman Adams), who succeeded where all others had failed. It might well be that no other poet could have accomplished what he did. But with Robert Frost to vouch for him, to lend him some of the dignity and respect that had become attached to his name and position over the years, Ezra Pound gained his freedom and a controversial era came to an official end.

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Footnotes:


4 Leonie Adams, Conrad Aiken, W. H. Auden, Louise Bogan, Katherine Garrison Chapin, T. S. Eliot, Paul Green, Robert Lowell, Katherine Anne Porter, Karl Shapiro, Allen Tate, Willard Thorp and Robert Penn Warren. Theodore Spencer died before the final vote was taken; Archibald MacLeish and William Carlos Williams were not appointed until after the decision had been reached.

5 "Pisan Cantos," *Senior Scholastic*, LIV (March 2, 1949), 15.


8 Congress agreed, it would seem, and on August 20, 1949, the New York Times announced that the award to Pound was "to be the last" by the Library. Beginning in 1950, the award was administered by Yale University.

9 *Saturday Review of Literature*, XXXII (June 18, 1949), 7-9; 38.


11 Eunice Tietjens, "The End of Ezra Pound," *Poetry*, LX (April, 1942), 38-40 had made it clear what the magazine thought of Pound's politics.

12 "News Notes," LXXIV (April, 1949), 56; 59.


16 Among the signers were: Agee, Blackmur, Brooks, Cummings, Richards, Trilling and Wimsett. John Dos Passos sent along a separate statement.

17 "The Saturday Review Unfair to Literature," *Nation*, CLXIX (December 17, 1949), 598.

18 *The Case Against The Saturday Review of Literature*, (Chicago, 1949).

19 "What Does Mr. Pound Believe?" September 4, 1948.

20 The charge that Carl Jung was a Nazi sympathizer provoked a number of letters and two articles in the *Saturday Review of Literature*: Philip Wylie, "What About Dr. Jung? A Misunderstood Man," (July 30, 1949), 6-7; 37 and Frederic Wertham, "A Reply to Philip Wylie," (July 30, 1949), 7-8; 35.
Pound and the Bollingen Prize: A Bibliography

This bibliography is an attempt to bring together all of the materials published on Ezra Pound and/or relevant to the Bollingen Prize Controversy for the year 1949. Rather than listing them in alphabetical order, I have catalogued them according to the date of publication, the idea being that such a list provides a much more meaningful insight into the controversy than the usual alphabetical sort. With few exceptions, the items recorded are ones which I have copies of and have examined.

I should be grateful to learn of any materials for 1949 that I have overlooked. Subsequently, I hope to issue such a list for the two decades from 1939 to 1958.

15. "Ezra Pound Awarded Bollingen Prize For Poetry," Publisher's Weekly, 155 (March 5, 1949), 1162-1163.
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49. Patterson, James T.: "Treason's Strange Fruit," Appendix To The Congressional Record, A4617 (July 14, 1949).


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100. Trace, Granville: "Letter," Saturday Review of Literature, XXXII (September 24, 1949), 27.
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141. Drummond, John: "The Italian Background to The Cantos," (1949), Russell: An Examination of Ezra Pound, 100-118.