

Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

Pound's Basel connection

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In 2013, the major Swiss writer Urs Widmer published his autobiography *Reise an den Rand des Universums* (Journey to the Edge of the Universe) and in it, Widmer recounts an anecdote of Ezra Pound's Basel connection.

While working for a Swiss weekly in the mid-1960s, Widmer heard that Pound received treatment at Basel's mental asylum and that he intended to visit James Joyce's grave in Zurich. Now, Zurich is just a one-hour train ride from Basel. So with the famous photographer Horst Tappe in tow – that's the guy who shot those magnificent images of Vladimir Nabokov chasing butterflies – with Horst Tappe in tow, Widmer, heungry for a publishable story, rushed to Basel's train station to intercept Pound.

But when Widmer saw Pound, who was in his '80s then, but looked, Widmer writes, 'like 110', when he saw Pound, this – and these are Widmer's words – 'appearance out of the primaeval times of the history of the earth', Widmer realised that this man would never, ever say a word to him. Widmer left in shame while the photographer joined Pound and shot a photo of him at James Joyce's grave. That was in 1967.

We're now in Basel's University Psychiatric Clinics, which is where Urs Widmer places Pound in the mid-1960s. Now, this section here has not been renovated since the '60s, and it's no longer in use. So this gives us a pretty good idea of what a psychiatric clinic looked like in Pound's own time.

Now, we know that, when Pound was interned at St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Insane in Washington DC, he spent time in a solitary cell – he called it 'the hellhole'. And this is what a solitary cell or isolation cell looked like in Basel in the '60s. Only the most unruly patients were kept here.

They had only a bed in them. Windows that could not be opened by anyone but the guards and a toilet but no sink. Some of the isolation cells looked upon what was called the 'Tollhof', the 'rage court' where patients could vent their feelings and aggressions.



In the 1960s, all of the inmates' belongings were kept in these wardrobes: their shoes, every piece of clothing, every book, every photograph, every keepsake of their loved ones that they owned.

Now imagine the story Urs Widmer tells us. Pound, this giant of American letters, now in his '80s, fallen from grace because of his fascist politics, spends time in my hometown's psychiatric clinic, and he is on his way to the grave of that other literary giant, James Joyce.

The problem with Urs Widmer's story is that I couldn't verify it. I checked with the archives of the University Psychiatric Clinics. I checked with the public registration office. I checked with the public records office, and Pound's name cannot be found in any of these archives.

So what does this story tell us? It tells us that the past is the past and that it cannot be accessed directly but only in mediated form: through texts that give us a certain perspective on the past, be it fictional texts, autobiographical texts, such as Urs Widmer's, or those official documents that I failed to locate.

Now, did Urs Widmer fabricate a story? Did he entirely invent this story of Pound in Basel, thus, violating the autobiographical pact between readers and writers of autobiographies? Or did Widmer record an event that escaped the official records, or were there official records that got lost in the course of time? How can we know about the past but through texts which are often the only access we have to the past?

Through texts – some of which survive while others disappear – literary historians speak of the textuality of history in this context. And later this week, you'll hear more about that. And of course, even if Widmer's story was entirely invented, it might still give us a glimpse into a truth about Pound. Not so much because Pound did visit James Joyce's grave in Zurich in 1967 and not so much because he spent 12 and 1/2 years of his life in St. Elizabeth's Hospital for the Insane in Washington, DC, where he was diagnosed with 'psychotic disorder, undifferentiated'.

Widmer's account gives us an idea of the kind of public figure Pound was in the '60s: despised by many for his fascist politics and despite his ailing physical and mental health, Pound remained an imposing figure that evoked fear and reverence in this journalist from Basel.