

Guide to Kulchur

by Ezra Pound



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The *Guide to Kulchur*, first published in 1938, is one of Ezra Pound's most stimulating books. As might be expected, this is no ordinary Baedeker of the arts, no conventional tour of familiar landmarks and highspots, but an iconoclastic revision of the cultural (in the broadest sense) curriculum. In a sequence of short, pungent chapters, Pound covers the whole territory of "kulchur"—from the Chinese philosophers to modern poetry, from music to economics—as he discovered it for himself in a lifetime of reading, looking, and listening.

"This book," he says in the foreword, "is not written for the over-fed. It is written for men who have not been able to afford a university education or for young men, whether or not threatened with universities, who want to know more at the age of fifty than I know today, and whom I might conceivably aid to the object."

Here we have Pound the teacher, and he is a good one; whatever he touches comes alive for the student. Long-accepted wrong judgments are rudely exposed. Neglected writers are given their due. Essences are defined and separated from what is superficial. The reader is challenged to explore new areas, reinterpret history, and radically rethink the bases of his own tastes.

Guide to Kulchur Details

Date : Published January 17th 1970 by New Directions Publishing (first published 1938)

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Author : Ezra Pound

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Clint says

This book is a little confusing but really funny, albeit unintentionally. Basically Ezra Pound is just telling you what is and what is not worth your time culture-wise, in his opinion, and his opinion is always very very strong.

Justin Evans says

Much of Pound's prose should be considered indispensable if you want to become a decent person. 'An ABC of Reading,' and the essays gathered in 'Literary Essays of Ezra Pound' are brilliant, and some of his social criticism works too, although you might want to take small bites of his 'Selected Prose' rather than swallowing it whole; start with the stuff from before the 1930's, and you'll be quite enlightened I think.

But 'Guide to Kulchur' is more or less straight decadence. If you already know what Pound thought about economics, poetry, music, architecture, politics and philosophy, you'll be able to grab a few interesting sentences. But it's infuriating and often deathly dull, which is quite an achievement considering how fiery he is. Pound's ideogrammic method - a throwing together of apparently different items - is meant to communicate knowledge more clearly than is sometimes possible with linear prose. The emphasis here, for Pound, was always on *clarity*. But GTK is not clear. At times it reads less like an honest attempt to say something, and more like a 370 page long name-drop: Brancusi, Picabia, Gaudier, Cocteau, Mussolini... yeah, I met 'em all. And anyone I didn't meet, not worth meeting.

The ideogram here is not clear, and we know from Pound's earlier works that it could have been: the effect of monetary policy on art or kulchur is ridiculous in GTK; in earlier essays it's quite convincing. The relation between language and politics is completely opaque in GTK, in earlier essays it's fascinating. The exposition of Confucian thought is incomprehensible here, in earlier essays, or Pound's translations, eccentrically brilliant.

One thing we might be thankful for: the absurdity of GTK and the writings which followed it might have helped convince the powers that be that Pound was, indeed, insane while living in Italy, and thus have saved his life. According to the laws of the time, he certainly deserved to be executed as a traitor. But nobody could read this guff and believe that old Billyum was serious. That's a major failing for a serious man.

Antonio Rodríguez says

¿En qué se parece la poesía al modo en que los bancos de nuestro capitalismo generan dinero? Pues en que los dos, como dijese Yeats en un poema, surgen de una «bocanada de aire», o sea de la nada. El chiste —por llamarlo así— es de Richard Sieburth, experto en la obra de Ezra Pound (1885-1972). Y Ezra Pound, precisamente por su jerarquía de intereses, es, justo hoy, un autor de obligado rescate o relectura. Advirtamos que aquí, en los Cantos, se encuentra el poeta comentando una burbuja inmobiliaria: «Con usura no tiene el hombre casa de buena piedra». Como destacado del modernismo y la Generación Perdida, Pound conoció en

Europa la I Guerra Mundial y las consecuencias del crash, lo que le movió a una especie de cruzada personal contra banqueros y financieros y a considerar la economía como una disciplina central a la hora de comprender la historia y la actualidad —aunque sus ideas económicas hayan pasado bastante desapercibidas entre los expertos—. Para el poeta fueron los banqueros los responsables de la ruina de occidente, la civilización, la cultura y el arte (Victor Perkis). Con todo, a Pound terminarían condenándolo enunciados como éste, recogido en su ensayo «What Is Money For»: «La usura es el cáncer del mundo, el cual sólo el escapelo del fascismo puede extirpar.» Otro caso más de intelectual fascinado por la entonces vanguardia política del fascismo.

Libro aún más provocador ahora que en el momento de su publicación, en 1939, Guía de la Kultura es la correspondencia al español de Guide to Kulchur, donde, tal como se explica en la presentación, «llamarlo provocativamente Kulchur tiene su explicación filosófica y política: Pound quería referirse al concepto alemán de Cultura (Kultur) pero para diferenciarlo del tradicional que utiliza la élite (irremediablemente lastrado de connotaciones clasistas, nacionalistas y raciales), lo escribe según la pronunciación», anulando así la indicación del concepto Cultur en inglés. Hace bien, además, Capitán Swing en preparar la edición de esta Guía con el prólogo generoso del filósofo Nicolás G. Varela, pues es éste un libro inconscientemente enmarañado, cuando no opaco y a ratos impenetrable. De una parte, el texto aparece inundado de citas eruditas, cuando no de partituras o ideogramas (mención aparte merecería la atracción de Pound por la literatura china); de otra, el poeta no pudo resistirse al conocimiento enciclopédico, y con este libro aspiró a reunir lo trascendente, aquello que sobrevive al olvido. Su propuesta, aunque acabase con resultados casi más bien contrarios, era perpetrar un texto de divulgación, «tratando de suministrar al lector medio unas pocas herramientas para hacer frente a la heteróclita masa de información no digerida con que se le abruma diaria y mensualmente». Lo que es igual, Pound, como siempre ha ocurrido desde que los medios de información empezaron a plantear graves dolores de cabeza a los pensadores, se proclamaba integrante de una élite iluminadora, gesto que con el tiempo entraría cada vez más en declive.

O dicho de otro modo, un supuesto que ha ido adoptando el estatuto de verdad indiscutible es la imposibilidad de la literatura como herramienta pedagógica, asociada en el imaginario popular a épocas anteriores al siglo XX, en donde los libros servirían como medio de dominio entre las clases culturalmente privilegiadas y aquellas que no lo eran. Naturalmente, esta hipótesis —por la que el ensayo sería no más que un soporte de reflexión, apenas un perímetro conceptual, cuya lectura ha de ser siempre completada por el interlocutor— se sostiene sobre la ilusión de una democracia en donde todos sus ciudadanos comparten bagajes culturales, y sobre la devaluación del concepto intelectual como guía. Pero Pound, que a ratos sonará propagandista y descabellado, ha vuelto para recordarnos cuáles son nuestras obligaciones intelectuales en tiempos de crisis.

Erik-Korvin says

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Rupert Owen says

Difficult to immediately say, but Pound dissects certain fractions in thought about economics, music, literature and history placing them against classical Chinese and Greek philosophy. Ezra suffuses all this with his own wit calling philosophers such as Aristotle "Arry" throughout and observes his distaste with a

distilled acerbic snarl. His views on money are very interesting especially in relation to Aristotle's view of it being a matter of custom and easily altered or rendered useless at will.

Primarily I think Pound set out to cover two quite over-casting levels of mental firmament with this text: one is that ideas only work when they are put into action and the other is that the value of knowledge is not in the facts but in the processes involved through-out history.

This was a fairly challenging read for me, and I laughed when Pound talked of not liking authors that required of him to have a dictionary handy whilst reading.

I think that with a basic knowledge of literature and history, you will enjoy this work, and if you have curiosity or interest in the analects you will draw much from Pound's work. Pace yourself through it, remembering that Pound was as much an anti-academic as was Shaw, and certain vibrancy of ideas are particular to that person, not necessarily a mimesis of other's ideas.

J. Alfred says

Pound was arrested for treason in 1945 and declared mentally unfit to stand trial; this book was written in 1937. It reads like someone who will be declared mentally unfit, and there are also disquieting hints about how the totalitarian state is going to fix things. Hindsight.

Despite being unintelligible often, Pound is passionate and interesting and will make you think differently about the history, goal, and continuation of Western civilization. He may also convince you that you need to get your hands on Hardy's collected poems.

Rafael Eaton says

I'm slowly making my way through this'r. But it's awesome.

Mitch says

Not bad, but nowhere near what it should have been, considering...

Jane says

Synthetic proto-fascist cultural treatise/prose poem/rant. I have to admit I kind of liked it, though I didn't have the patience to read it very carefully. It literally seems like he's going insane at this point, and the paranoid ranting about usury and monetary systems, in 1938, is deeply distressing - and yet there is something just brilliant about his writing and sympathetic about his struggle to reboot tired assumptions about "kulchur."

Harry says

The definite conclusion of this book in paraphrase: " Although we've gotten through all of this criticism, we have to admit plato must be seen as... at-least somewhat right"

Brady says

Insane and erratic. Wtf.

Sally says

My favorite Pound. Excellent read along with the 20-30 and 40-50 Cantos, or all of them. (snicker)

Seán says

Invariably infuriating and yet strangely seductive, this is Pound's chaotically organized curriculum of necessary culture. It's a bizarre collection of rants, Chinese characters, prejudices, top ten lists, sentence fragments, obsessions, weird abbreviations, and conscious iconoclasm. Pound gives a thumbs down to Aristotle and Swinburne; St. Ambrose and Froebenius a thumbs up. Brancusi, Gaudier, and Confucius are Gods, and Mussolini gets more than a few words of praise (Pound wrote most of the text in the late 30s in Italy--seems he was carried away with the Black Shirts a mite bit too much).

The text's key themes (obsessions) are: (1) the Necessity of Paideuma, and (2) the Evil of Usury. Paideuma is a rather academic term having something to do with the intricacies of creating a culture (or whatever). When considering a paideuma, Pound felt it necessary to develop a proper terminology, which is strange considering his own seemingly slapdash manner of laying out *GTK*. But far more prominent is Pound's visceral, all-consuming hatred of usury, money-lending, credit dysfunction, modern economic forms. This latter obsession springs up on every page, every problem, every bad composer or flawed critic is reduced to a failure to observe the importance of a moral monetary policy. Absolutely crazy.

On Education:

[I:]t does not matter a two-penny damn whether you load up your memory with the chronological sequence of what has happened, or the names of protagonists, or authors of books, or generals and leading political spouters, so long as you understand the process now going on, or the processes biological, social, economic now going on, enveloping you as individual, in a social order, and quite unlikely to be very 'new' in themselves however fresh or stale to the participant.

On the Catholic Church:

Given a free hand with the Saints and Fathers one could construct a decent philosophy, not merely a philosophism. This much I believe. Given Erigena, given St. Ambrose and St. Antonino, plus time, patience and genius you cd. erect inside the fabric something modern man cd. believe.

Not far off here.

On Usury:

The one history we have NOT on the new-stands is the history of Usura. Salmasius ... wrote De Modo Usurarum... This treats of terminology and of usurer's habits, and of laws regulating his process. But the history of where such and such tyrant, dupe, idiot, bewigged pustulent Bourbon, bewigged pietist diseased Stuart got his money and how, from Caesar's time...to our own is not clearly written. Who paid for such and such wars, what save poverty prevented so and so making more wars, with more splendid equipment? Malatesta and the late condottieri, their mouths watering over the designs, in Valturio, of war engines, tanks, superior catapults, as damn'd froust now letches after a Vickers' advertisement or a farm boy over automobile ads.

He is right here--I would love to read such a history.

david says

really unfortunate that pound digressed into this non-sense politricking after his internment. obviously he was made crazy, but he was on the precipice before that. either way, what began earning a good deal of my highlighter quickly earned little, then none, the further things went down the monetary slope. tragic. the most tragic part of all is how impossible it is to not transpose his late life bullshit back over the fruitful periods of his youth. i just wanted it to be over. if you are looking for insights into pound's writing or influences or rationales before he went crazy, this is not a good source at all. in fact, go opposite in what seems to be all cases pound, and rely on outside sources rather than the actual writer, which is backwards to usual, of course, but imperative in his case. other than his letters. those are real wizzbangers.
