***Ezra Pound's and Olga Rudge's* The Blue Spill*: A Manuscript Critical Edition*. Edited by Mark Byron and Sophia Barnes. London: Bloomsbury, 2019. Pp. 172 (cloth).**

Reviewed by Roxana Preda, University of Edinburgh

Mark Byron and Sophia Barnes's edition of *The Blue Spill* is an impressive addition to the Bloomsbury series *Modernist Archives*. One of this series's aims is to shed light on lesser-known aspects of modernism by publishing documentary research on texts that are still in the archive and thus away from scrutiny. This orientation and goal cannot help but change our perspective on modernist authors by supplementing what we already know. Byron and Barnes have curated an unfinished detective novel, *The Blue Spill*, that the violinist Olga Rudge and poet Ezra Pound wrote together in the late autumn of 1929. It is indeed one of the surprises of this edition that Olga and Ezra were attempting an original literary text at all. Ezra's lack of interest in novels is a matter of public record. Olga was a musician, with no special prior involvement in literature at all. So why did they do this? One reason may be that at the onset of the Great Depression, Olga was going through a difficult period—her professional life was disintegrating and her performing activities were not making their mark towards a sustained career as a concert violinist. Financially, she continued to be supported by her father, a situation that came to an end after the Black Tuesday on 28 October 1929. Pound, as ever the good friend, tried first to help her get through her money difficulties by organizing translation work: with his editorial assistance, Olga translated Jean Cocteau's *Mystère laic*, which Pound got published in the American magazine *Pagany*.[1]

Moreover, Olga's professional practice was diluted by her life as a part-time socialite. She was often in Paris and London, and routinely invited into rich people's houses, away from Ezra. Their letter-exchange, preserved at the Beinecke archive in Yale, shows they were apart for long stretches of time. Olga often sent her lover so-called "tecs," detective novels, which show up as a recurring motif in their letters. Ezra used to binge on them when he was fatigued or ill, as he regularly was during the winter months. The "tecs" were something they shared, a stable

[1] Jean Cocteau, "The Laic Mystery: An Essay in Indirect Criticism," trans. O. E. Rudge, *Pagany* 3.1 (Winter 1931): n.p.

element and interest in their relationship. Besides, Olga's former musical collaborator, the composer George Antheil, wrote a detective novel in 1929, *Death in the Dark*,[2] and managed to sell it to Faber in London. That was an encouraging sign that Olga might do the same and earn a little from writing.

The topic of *The Blue Spill* is not brought up in Olga and Ezra's correspondence, which indicates that the novel was written when they were together. Olga's father had given her a last significant sum of money before the Crash and she spent it to buy a small flat in Venice, where she moved in September 1929. Pound spent a fortnight there and, later, the summers, while his wife Dorothy was away in London. This might help us see the existing drafts as a sort of love game between Olga and Ezra.

As clearly stated by Byron and shown by the facsimile pages in the volume, the text of the novel is Olga's, with Pound as an editor, somewhat in the style of collaboration that Ezra had had with Eliot on *The Waste Land* (5, 151). The attempted novel is what Byron calls a "clue-puzzle," in the drawing-room-murder genre of Agatha Christie; a feminine, genteel take on the whodunit, relying on Olga's greater familiarity with socialite life and her normal intercourse with aristocratic circles in France and England. I find it therefore a bit puzzling that in the title on the front and back covers of Byron and Barnes's edition, as well as on the title page, Pound's name is given first. It might give readers the wrong impression that he was the author of the manuscript, with Olga just adding and supplementing. Byron insists on the word "collaboration," which would suggest an unquantifiable and roughly equal input from both artists, but the introduction clearly spells out the roles and division of labour—Olga was the author and Ezra the editor, a fact already settled by Olga's biographer, Anne Conover.[3] That of

[2] Stacey Bishop [George Antheil], *Death in the Dark* (London: Faber, 1930), ed. Mauro Piccinini (CreateSpace, 2017). Faber paid Antheil for the manuscript, but the novel was not a commercial success. Eliot sent a copy to Pound on 23 January 1930 (Piccinini, Afterword 183).

[3] Anne Conover, *Olga Rudge and Ezra Pound: "What thou Lovest Well…"* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). This is Olga Rudge's biography, which has the great advantage of a strict chronological approach based on her archive at Yale. Olga's correspondence with Ezra preserved there is virtually a diary, as the two wrote to each other almost every day.

course does not mean that relevant elements connecting the novel to Ezra's personality, opinions, and life are missing; quite the contrary: in 1929, Pound was engrossed in his studies of the medieval Italian poet Guido Cavalcanti.[4] It is thus a private joke that the case inspector's name is "Love" and that his personality, both in regard to genius and asperity, is inspired by Ezra's. Byron characterizes Love in a few strokes: "sharp as a tack and a little bit eccentric, with a healthy ego and a few odd habits to boot" (138). The text of the novel reveals Pound's aversion to the press and to financial dealings, something that Olga could not have supplied on her own. The title, *The Blue Spill*, is a conflation between Olga and Ezra's American heritage (think of E. A. Poe's *The Purloined Letter*) and their common memories of the *petits bleus* (short messages on blue paper) they used to send in Paris when they first met. These little personal touches are charming to someone familiar with Olga's and Ezra's life stories.

The Blue Spill has been published as a scholarly edition, with introduction, reading text, facsimile reproductions, and two longer essays, one on the golden age of the detective novel (1920s and 1930s) and one on the practice of "collaboration" in modernist projects. As a physical object, it is to be greatly admired: the volume is a hardback, printed on excellent paper and showing the greatest care in layout, format, and illustrations. All these elements are meant to elevate to an object of permanent interest and relevance the unfinished and unpublished manuscript of an amateur experiment in a middlebrow genre. The greatest feat of the editors was indeed to establish the novel's reading text out of a cluster of drafts and give coherence to typescripts which had been revised, annotated by hand, kept in relative disorder, and occasionally misplaced.

For myself, I have found more pleasure in reading the scholarly apparatus than the novel itself. As I had difficulty in focusing on the narrative, I constantly had to have recourse to the excellent introduction, which contained both the complete cast of characters and chapter summaries. The novel was left unfinished and I think that an interesting investigation that readers of this book might pursue is to figure out why. Conover attributes it to Olga's character—she got bored easily and could not keep up her motivation to finish a project (89). Byron indicates that Olga

4 Pound's translation of Guido Cavalcanti's poem, "Donna mi prega" (A Lady Asks Me), was published in the *Dial* in July 1928. The lady's inquiry is about the nature of love.

left the resolution of the story to Ezra and he simply did not provide it. But there may be another reason why the manuscript is unfinished: not only does *The Blue Spill* lack an ending, but it is far from being stylistically polished. Characters are no more than mere tokens, the narrative a succession of encounters like musical chairs in various settings. There is hardly anything to sustain a reader's interest in the development of the story. Someone, an important rich man, Mr Marshall, is murdered. Why should we care? We know nothing of him, nor his family. Is the son the murderer? Or rather, the servant? The daughter? The wife? A suite of encounters between the detective and various family members, friends, and servants is meant to sort out the mystery. Overcoming this mechanistic Cluedo-like approach should have been the authors' main concern. Indeed, I find that one of the important reasons why Byron and Barnes's edition is useful to us today is its classroom value: by juxtaposing and comparing it with an accomplished detective novel, *The Blue Spill* acquires great heuristic potential, enabling students to discover on their own what a detective story needs in order to be a masterpiece in the genre. Is it a discernible individual style? A knack at awaking curiosity as to characters and motivations? An art of suggesting enigmas and creating atmosphere? A practice of deferring resolution, inserting cliffhangers and keeping the reader in the net of unsatisfied curiosity? What about arranging events and manipulating dialogue to suggest a string of partial solutions waiting for the ultimate surprise at the end? I feel that all of these are missing from the text of *The Blue Spill*, which in its preserved form is still a skeleton of names with nobody behind them and encounters where they are combined and re-combined in varied locales: the mansion, the office, the pub. It is not just that a left hand or a right foot are missing, but that both Olga and Ezra may have realized that the novel needs much more work and literary inventiveness than they were willing to pour into it. *The Blue Spill* as it stands may have been derived from their appraisal of the genre as something easy to write, as simple to produce as it was to consume. But I would contend that neither Olga nor Ezra were well equipped for the job of writing a publishable and successful detective novel. Olga was not "literary" by temperament or personal culture, whereas Ezra's reviews of novelists show that he was not interested in questions of the craft of fiction, so much as in the power of the novel to be a historical testimony, a document and diagnostic of a period. Pound of course knew the works and aesthetics of James, Proust, Joyce, D'Annunzio, and Crevel, but the force of these writers rested in their consummate mastery of style and intellectual vision, not in manipulating reader interest by the

very specific procedures of genre. Byron mentions Knox's "ten commandments" and van Dine's "twenty rules" of detective fiction,[5] which (pace Laura Marcus)[6] do nothing but increase the distance between the craft of the genre novel and the art fiction Pound was interested in reading and reviewing. Writing something "popular" had never been something he had aimed to achieve as an artist. On the contrary, his goal had been to be meaningful and scintillating to a handful of educated readers. Besides, obeying rules or well-established practices was never part of the modernist project as a whole—rather, deliberately destroying and remaking them, positioning itself in a new, alien no-man's land of writing, away from traditional procedures. All rules were meant to be broken and that was the artistic imperative of Pound's writing, alongside that of every modernist writer we care to think about.

If anything, Olga's and Ezra's game of writing a detective novel together showed that in spite of their status as avant-garde artists, they were human, and delighted in popular entertainment, like everyone else. If they were alive today, they would binge on Netflix and have the time of their lives doing so. Valuable editions like *The Blue Spill* are witness that the aura of elitism around modernist artists is mercifully disintegrating—we are finally able to see them not only at work, but also at play. Writing a novel in collaboration is a very intellectual game, certainly. But the possibilities it offered Olga and Ezra to take a break, delight in an amount of (self)-parody and fictionalizing buzz for a few hours of non-professional indulgence, make our two protagonists almost endearing. It is their journey of invention and its relevance to us, rather than the novel itself that is the true story.

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[5] Ronald Knox, "Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction," in *Best Detective Stories 1928-29*, and S. S. van Dine, *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (1928), both mentioned in Byron's Introduction (20).

[6] Laura Marcus, "Detection and Literary Fiction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. Martin Priestman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 245-65. Byron refers to Marcus's effort to draw lines of agreement between crime fiction and modernist narrative (141).