The man who took T.S. Eliot & Tennessee Williams to lunch

by Belle Crenner Gironda

On October thirtieth, in the fiftieth anniversary year of his publishing company, on the day of his seventy-second birthday and Ezra Pound's one-hundred and first birthday, James Laughlin, founder and President of New Directions Books, arrived at St. Andrews for a brief visit.

Professor Ronald H. Bayes introduced him as the "Dean of American Publishers" and "the man who took T. S. Eliot and Tennessee Williams to lunch . . . together." It was a down to earth Laughlin who shrugged and added, "You know what they talked about? Ballet dancers' calves!"

James Laughlin is as tall sitting down as I am standing up. He is simultaneously an imposing and an inviting figure. One can't help but be initially awed, not only by his physical stature, but by his renown and power as a publisher, his intelligence, and the vast range of his experience. Yet Laughlin has an easy way of humanizing himself and many of the famous he has known. Certainly this was the effect of his Pound talk, entitled *"Ez as Wu z."* The title is an example of what Laughlin calls "Ezratic Dialogue;" colloquial speech or "common talk" which Laughlin himself often employs in his poetry and even in lecture. The result: Laughlin sat in a rocking chair puffing on his pipe and held a packed Pate lounge fully engaged for two hours. The audience only dissolved for frequent bursts of laughter and to swallow a collective lump with Laughlin himself, towards the end of his talk, when he spoke of Pound's physical and emotional decline. He closed by reading from Canto III, lines describing Venice, the poet's burial place, and a personal tribute to Ezra from his own poem, *"The Deconstructed Man."*

Laughlin's connection to Pound began when, on a leave of absence from Harvard, at age twenty, he came to study under Pound at the "Ezuversity" in Rapallo, Italy. Laughlin recalls Pound as a lively entertaining teacher; a master of dialects, a performer. He compares Pound's style to the Socratic method of teaching by provocation and association. Under Pound's influ-

ence Laughlin became editor of the literary column in *New Democracy,* an American paper devoted to Social Credit theory. The name of Laughlin's page was "New Directions" and contributors included Pound and William Carlos Williams. Laughlin also gives Pound partial credit for his decision to become a publisher. Laughlin was determined not to go into the family business, Jones and Laughlin Steel of Pittsburgh, so he sought Pound's advice.

Pound discouraged Laughlin as a poet by telling him he couldn't write. When the two had dismissed the possibility of assassinating the then Editor of the *Saturday Review* , all that remained was to go into publishing. At age twenty-two Laughlin founded New Directions Books. Of course he became Pound's American publisher and over the years the list of authors has grown to read like a "Who's Who" of the best and the brightest, including: Dylan Thomas, Yukio Mishima, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Carlos Williams, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Tennessee Williams, Denise Levertov, Octavio Paz, Kenneth Patchen and Elio Vittorini, to name a few.

When asked if there was anyone he would have liked to have published but had not, Laughlin mentioned having received Samuel Beckett's *Watt,* and having, by oversight, rejected it. He also said that while he had published some of Henry Miller's work, he was unable to bring out *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* because his family would have disowned him. "They were Pittsburgh Presbyterians, you know," Laughlin said, "Well, it wasn't so much what Miller wrote about, as those words he used. They wouldn't have approved of those words."

Either James Laughlin was born with a limitless patience or he developed it over the years. At any rate, as a successful publisher dealing with so many writers, he must have it. However, Laughlin says Pound was a pleasure to publish. Ezra was satisfied if he got the manuscript in print and it was not

up-side down, and he never telephoned in the middle of the night. (Gregory Corso calls Laughlin at 3 a.m. to ask important questions like, would the publisher leave him his teeth in his will!) Laughlin confesses that finally, his own rapacious love of the ski-slopes often tried Pound's patience. "Jas, are you doing anything?" Pound would write, "Besides sliding down ice-cream cones on two tin tea trays . . . Delays beginning to get the old man down!" Skiing is the one thing that seems to compete with Laughlin's literary interests, even to the extent of causing a delay in getting a book out.

Laughlin's affection for writers in general and Ezra Pound in particular is always evident. Yet when speaking of "Ez as Wuz," Laughlin does not seek to avoid the sticky issue of Pound's politics and his anti-Semitism. As one intimately involved in Pound's legal defense and in the machinations that lead to his release, James Laughlin is well versed about the charges brought against the poet and about the actions that led to them. Laughlin says that it is possible that Pound may never have really seen himself as a Fascist. If this is the case then Pound's outcry at the trial: "I never did believe in Fascism . . . I am opposed to Fascism!" was not theatrics, but a sincere expression of the poet's belief about himself. That those who, like Pound, lived inside of Italy before and during the war, may have had a different understanding of what it meant to be "Fascist" than we outsiders, is also to be considered. Laughlin points out that when he questioned the residents of Rapallo about Pound, their response was very positive. They loved Ezra's colorful personality. On the subject of his Fascism the reply was "Eravamo tutti Fascisti!" (We were all Fascists.)

The question of Pound's anti-Semitism is clearly a more painful and difficult one for Laughlin who cared about Pound and knew that he was as capable of great kindness as he was of great error."Pound was not a monster," Laughlin emphasizes as he struggles to assimilate the terribleness of the anti-Semitism Pound expressed vocally and in print, with the compassion he

saw Pound extend to all kinds of human beings during his life. Laughlin chooses to believe the experts, in particular a Dr. Overholser who examined Pound at St. Elizabeth's. Overholser says that Pound was suffering from an acute paranoia the object of which was an imagined conspiracy of Jewish bankers. Laughlin says that this is consistent with what he observed during this period, recalling how the paranoia became personalized during Pound's incarceration, as a fear that the overall conspiracy included a plot to poison his food. Based on what Overholser told him, Laughlin concludes, "Pound's anti-Semitism is a medical issue not a moral issue." Laughlin's last words to me on the subject came as a sort of admonishment: "Say anything you want *(in the article),* but don't say I endorse Pound's anti-Semitism, because I do not."

Laughlin stayed close to Pound right up to the end of his life. He gave some revealing glimpses of how severely depressed the poet was in his old age but also said that Pound could and occasionally did speak during his famous "period of silence." One of the most tragic and telling stories about Pound's late-life depression is also referred to in Laughlin's poem, *"The Deconstructed Man."* The two were attending a performance of Beckett's *End Game* in Paris. Pound pointed to the trash can on the end of the stage and whispered to his companion, "C'est moi dans la poubelle." ("That's me in the trash can.").

Clearly James Laughlin knew Pound well and loved him well. He does a great service to the poet and to all of us who are interested in him by reconstructing a many faceted Pound. Laughlin reminds us that a human being is too complex a creature to be labeled: Imagist, Vorticist, Fascist, "Phallocentric Poet," Genius, anti-Semite, Modernist, Playboy . . . Ezra Pound has been called all these. In his poetic tribute to Pound, Laughlin calls him " . . . my master and my friend." Not many of us are lucky enough to call one person both; probably even fewer of us will be so lucky as "Ez" to be remembered so wholly "as wuz."