

## THE NOBLE MASK

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Many scholars and critics have explored Ezra Pound's *commedia dell'arte* of masks and the extraordinary richness and complexity of his language, or languages. Is that complexity in itself another mask? And should one change Oscar Wilde's "Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth," to "Remove a man's mask to get to the truth"? Should one, from back-stage, explore the silences of the masks, and the many secrets and legends masking the truth? My own truth is that I am not a Poundian, my mask in academe being that of a Persian, or a Saint-John Perse scholar. However, one of my advantages is having, in Saint-John Perse, an excellent model of the French poet's own masks, as his expertise was in masking the truth, whether poetic, political, or even autobiographical. My other advantage is that both Saint-John Perse and Ezra Pound had the same prestigious ally at about the same time, but for two very different reasons. For Pound, this alliance led to his freedom in 1958, for Perse, to his Nobel Prize in 1960.

The mysterious advocate was Dag Hammarskjöld, or "Noble Dag" as Pound liked to call him, the man who was the

“Noble Mask” as well as the “Nobel Mask” behind the scenes. Off-stage, although not alone, Hammarskjöld, playing the role of the diplomat, embodied the complexity of poetry and politics intertwined – because they often are – in brokering Pound’s release from St. Elizabeths, a feat of “quiet diplomacy.” If it were not already the title of my book on Perse and Hammarskjöld, *The Poet and the Diplomat* would be an excellent title for the story I am now writing about Ezra Pound and Dag Hammarskjöld.

The most striking difference, however, between Saint-John Perse and Ezra Pound is that Perse was both a poet and a diplomat, and Pound was a great poet, but not a great diplomat. Diplomacy is certainly a skill – and even a mask, at times – but isn’t a pseudonym also the ideal mask? Such was the case for French Foreign Affairs secretary-general, Alexis Leger, who left France in 1940 (via London, but refusing to follow de Gaulle) for Canada and then on to New York and Washington. Soon after the Vichy government stripped him of his French nationality (and of his income), his pseudonym of Saint-John Perse marked the beginning of his new kingdom in exile, which lasted seventeen years. And in 1945, it was Pound’s turn to leave Europe, stripped of his freedom and bound for his Elizabethan exile, which lasted some thirteen years. But what else did these two poets have in common, besides being contemporaries, and expatriates even before being exiled? Certainly not their birthplaces (Hailey, Idaho in 1885, and the French West Indies island of Guadeloupe in 1887) nor their family names, as the original spelling of “Leger” had an accent meaning “light in weight,” while “Pound” is, of course, a little heavier. What they *did* have in common were friends – and friends who at times could be their good fortune. Saint-John Perse was lucky to meet Archibald MacLeish, who helped him find a position at the Library of Congress – a position that Pound might have liked to have been offered in 1939, when he visited the

Library of Congress, and MacLeish in Massachusetts.

The other famous American soon to become an important figure in both their lives was United States Attorney General Francis Biddle, to whom Pound wrote his August 4, 1943 letter from Rapallo. Francis Biddle was also a friend of both MacLeish and Saint-John Perse. In fact, it was the poet Katherine Biddle who introduced Perse to her husband, the Attorney General, and to Archibald MacLeish, her friend and colleague at the Library of Congress. Mrs. Biddle was also instrumental in recommending the French poet for a Bollingen Foundation Grant in 1946, but a few years later it would be more difficult for her to also recommend the American poet for the Bollingen Prize, so she didn't (although according to her son, it was an agonizing choice). The only member of the Biddle family to visit Pound at St. Elizabeths was the Attorney General's brother, the artist George Biddle (who was a friend of Saint-John Perse as well).

The Biddles and the MacLeishes had also belonged to the Lost Generation in the Paris of the twenties, and their circle of friends included Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and Sylvia Beach, among *others* (who was *not* in Paris at that time?). Sadly, some were also to become a generation of lost friends, who never even bothered to visit Pound at St. Elizabeths. Ernest Hemingway and Robert Frost never came, and it took Archibald MacLeish ten years to visit Pound, but what about the others? Some no longer could, of course, not because they had passed away, but passed to the dark side. May their names remain blacked-out on FBI files! What about Saint-John Perse, who was living in Georgetown all these years? Although their paths may have crossed in Paris (and perhaps, also London), politically no two people could have been more at odds (and, I am sorry to say, Perse didn't like Pound's poetry). During the Bollingen controversy, "the Pound fracas" and "the Pisan Cantos fiasco" alluded to in MacLeish's letters to Perse, were discussed only when Perse

visited his friend MacLeish, in the peace and quiet of the small New England village of Conway.

However, if it had not been for the Bollingen Prize, I would not be addressing this subject, and I would not have spent the last four years trying to untangle what I like to call the “Pound Affair,” an inherently complex situation further obscured by missing FBI files and confusing recollections. First impressions, though, can be quite reliable, which was the case when I initially read some of Pound’s letters to Hammarskjöld in the 1980s; and again in 2001, when I compared my own discovery of the documents related to this book project with the discovery of the Lascaux caves by those young boys in France in 1940. If I needed the talents of a speleologist to bring to light a story that otherwise would have remained buried in library archives, I was soon to call it a “Northern light,” mostly because of Hammarskjöld’s role, but also because of the role played by Lars Forssell, now a well-known Swedish poet and a member of the Swedish Academy. In 1949 Forssell, then in his early twenties, wrote a long essay on Pound soon after – and perhaps thanks to – the Bollingen controversy, and translated several of Pound’s poems into Swedish, thus introducing the American poet to Swedish readers.

Lars Forssell never met Pound, but because of his work, several other Swedish writers did, and so did a Swedish student at Yale, Bengt Nirje, who visited Pound at St. Elizabeths in 1953. During that visit, Nirje also met Pound’s daughter Mary, and he promised her that he would do everything he could to help liberate her father. Bengt Nirje did keep what he likes to call “the promise to Mary.” He immediately wrote to his friend Lars Forssell, who alerted Hammarskjöld, who in turn met with Nirje and then sent him back to St. Elizabeths to discuss the situation with Pound. However, if Bengt Nirje kept his promise to Mary, he also kept this story to himself for almost half a century, until September 2001. I

was then attending the 40th anniversary of Hammarskjöld's death, at Uppsala University, with a keynote lecture by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. At the end of the Conference I was approached by two older gentlemen. One was Bengt Nirje and the other was Ambassador Per Lind, who had been Hammarskjöld's personal assistant at the United Nations; and both, much to my surprise, had already decided that I was the right person to write this story.

However, back in April 1953, those two gentlemen did not know each other, and while Bengt Nirje was visiting Pound in Washington, Per Lind was in New York with Dag Hammarskjöld, who had just been elected Secretary-General of the UN. An election that he certainly owed to another French diplomat and poet at heart, Ambassador Henri Hoppenot. Hoppenot would soon mention his friend Saint-John Perse to the new Secretary-General, eventually leading to a Nobel Prize for the French poet in 1960. A true friend indeed. Perse and Hoppenot, who had met in London in 1912 and worked together in Paris, had kept in touch. And when Hoppenot resigned from the Vichy government, Perse recommended him as Chief of the Special Delegation to the French Antilles in 1943, to restore some order after the crisis created by my great-uncle, Admiral Georges Robert, who had refused to surrender to de Gaulle (and the Americans) the 300 tons of gold from the Bank of France, stored on the island of Martinique.

Ten years later, when Lars Forssell wrote to Hammarskjöld in December 1953, what was really at stake, though – and far more precious than those 8,000 crates of French gold – was “poetry” and the freedom of “a great poet.” Forssell had read in the press about Hammarskjöld's interest in literature and poetry, and especially “the T. S. Eliot generation of poets” (to whom Saint-John Perse also belonged). In a long letter to Hammarskjöld, Forssell very diplomatically mentioned *The Waste Land*, a poem that Hammarskjöld particularly liked, having even campaigned to make the poem better

known, back when he was a student at Uppsala University. Eliot's campaign for a Nobel Prize for Pound was similar to Hammarskjöld's campaign, and significant enough for Forssell to mention it in his appeal. An exchange of letters immediately followed between Per Lind and the Swedish Ambassador in Washington. Then came Hammarskjöld's personal reply to Forssell, promising that, in spite of its complexity, he "would not let this case out of [his] sight" because it was truly "a human tragedy." As Secretary-General of the United Nations and as a new member of the Swedish Academy, Hammarskjöld also knew that he definitely had to wear a "Noble Mask" and carry his "hammer" and "shield" (as implied in his family name). And between December 1953 and April 1958 (four years and four months) "the quiet diplomacy" deployed to liberate Pound was to remain hidden, even from his UN staff. So well hidden, in fact, that for years I, like everybody else, thought that Hammarskjöld could *not* have intervened, and that Pound was only mentioned in the Hammarskjöld-Perse correspondence because of a possible Nobel Prize; not knowing that the "Noble Mask" was yet another shield to protect Pound. If one were to remove that mask, one would discover the *truth* – that Pound had no chance for the Nobel, at least as long as he was at St. Elizabeths.

Judging from the many hundred pages of FBI files I recently read – or tried to – matters concerning the Nobel Prize were nearly as complex and controversial as those leading to Pound's arrest not far from Rapallo, a little over sixty years ago. If, according to Bill Pratt, the Nobel Committee did "miss the masters" (Pratt 225-228), and among them Pound, one can also add that several of Pound's friends kept faith with their own master and recommended that he be "Nobelized" (T.S. Eliot in 1948, Hemingway in 1954 and MacLeish in 1957). And if, according to Archie Henderson in "Pound, Sweden, and the Nobel Prize" (Taylor & Melchior 164), the Swedish Academy could not forgive Pound "his political mistakes," there may have been other reasons for not

awarding him the prize, like first helping Hammarskjöld in his campaign to free Pound, or at least, not hinder him. If you ask Pound scholars about Pound's release you will invariably hear about Archibald MacLeish or Robert Frost, but never about Dag Hammarskjöld, a name absent from the index in most Pound studies, or merely mentioned because Hammarskjöld signed the famous Frost-MacLeish-Eliot letter to the Attorney General in January 1957. Concealing his own involvement would not have bothered Hammarskjöld at all, even for years to come. And it seems that Archibald MacLeish did not mind either. Even though they had joined forces in 1956, MacLeish never mentioned the Secretary-General's efforts, not even in his memoirs, or *Reflections*, many years later, in the late 1980s. And as Thurman Arnold wrote in his "Dissenting Lawyer's Life": "What right had a foreigner to interfere with our own domestic affairs? But with Robert Frost it was different. Frost instinctively knew the right political action to take" (238-239). Really? Well, he did get all the credit, didn't he? Not mentioning Hammarskjöld's, or at least MacLeish's involvement, certainly did not bother Robert Frost; although, on April 19, 1958, it was to MacLeish that Hammarskjöld sent his telegram of "Congratulations to you, common sense and poetry."

So at the end, all was well? Thanks to his American friends and poets, Pound returned to Italy in 1958. Saint-John Perse, thanks to his own circle of American friends and poets, had already ended his exile and returned to France in 1957. And in 1960 Perse was awarded his Nobel Prize, in Stockholm, where he also visited the French school I was attending, as did Albert Camus and others. Pound never had that chance, of course. My friend Sylvia Ponzanelli would have greeted him in Italian, others in French and German, and Hammarskjöld's niece, Marlene, may even have quoted a few lines from "Praise of Ysolt" (also quoted by Lars Forsell in his essay), which you may recognize:

Förgäves har jag strävat  
att lära mitt hjärta ödmjukhet;  
Förgäves har jag sagt till det  
"Det finns många sångare större än du"  
Men dess svar kommer, som vind och som luts spel,  
som ett svagt rop I natten.  
Det lämnar mig ingen ro, dess befallande  
"Sång, en sång."

Although Pound never had a chance to visit Stockholm, he was at least very present among us in Uppsala in September 2005, at the International Conference commemorating Dag Hammarskjöld's birth, a hundred years earlier. Perhaps because of his tragic and still mysterious death in 1961, Hammarskjöld reminds us of John F. Kennedy, and has become a major figure in Swedish history, and in the history of the United Nations. This time, at the Uppsala conference, a classmate of Bengt Nirje was the key speaker: Hans Blix. A striking choice, no doubt. And I was asked to present my work on Pound and Hammarskjöld, which is of great interest for Hammarskjöld scholars, as this is only the second international conference to address aspects of his legacy outside the boundaries of politics and diplomacy. It is almost as if what Hammarskjöld liked to call his "true profile" is yet another mask that we still needed to remove.

For Hammarskjöld there were, in fact, no boundaries between poetry and politics (and, with very different consequences, the same was true for Pound). One could then say that Hammarskjöld's "Noble Mask" was not only politically correct and true to his own politics but also at the very core of his promise to Lars Forssell. It was a mask that he wore to his death to protect both the truth and Pound himself. And for the sake of poetry.



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