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Writing that needs to be read

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Serendipity in the City of Falling Angels

by Ted Wojtasik

This serendipitous incident happened on the island cemetery, Isola di San Michele, in Venice, Italy, with Mary de Rachewiltz, the daughter of Ezra Pound, in front of Pound's gravesite. November 1st is both Pound's death date and All Saints' Day, which is a solemn Roman Catholic celebration to honor all the saints, known and unknown, as well as to visit family gravesites. Each year Mary makes this annual pilgrimage to Pound's gravesite as well as to Olga Rudge's gravesite, who is her mother and who is buried next to Pound. She places flowers in front of both gravesites and then reads out loud Pound's poem "Night Litany" in their honor.

Earlier, in Sienna, in the last week of October 2005, I saw a paperback edition in English of John Berendt's new book *The City of Falling Angels*. The title derives from a sign in the 1970s posted outside the Santa Maria della Salute Church before the restoration of its marble ornaments: Beware of Falling Angels. I was surprised to see it because the hardcopy edition had just been released in September in the States. Anyway, I was eager to read this book for one particular chapter called "The Last Canto," which is about Olga Rudge, Pound's long-term mistress, and how the Rylands of the Peggy Guggenheim Museum persuaded Rudge in 1986, when she was 91 years old, to establish the Ezra Pound Foundation, a tax-exempt outfit, to promote scholarship on Pound and his works. She sold all her letters, papers, and books to the Ezra Pound Foundation for seven thousand dollars, but Berendt claims that the archive was worth close to one million dollars. She then donated her three-storied house in Venice that her father had bought for her in 1928 to the foundation. A house of that kind in that neighborhood would have sold, probably, for a quarter of a million dollars or more in 1986. The idea was that the house would become an academic center to study Pound.

There were three officers: Olga Rudge as president, Mrs. Jane Rylands as vice president, and an American attorney from Cleveland, Ohio. Berendt writes: "The foundation's bylaws stated that two of the three could outvote the third." Rudge, Mary, and her family had to legally challenge this foundation because it had not been Rudge's intention to do what she did. Her archive was later deposited in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University. There are 208 boxes of the Olga Rudge Papers. As Berendt was doing research he discovered that box 156, which contains the papers of the Ezra Pound Foundation, was "restricted" and sealed until 2016—he speculates that the sale price for her papers are in that box.

In 1988, there were two competing claims against the Olga Rudge Papers: Olga Rudge and the Ezra Pound Foundation. The Beinecke bought out both claims and bought the papers. Mary and her family managed to save the Hidden Nest, Pound's nickname for the house in Venice, but the basic implication that Berendt argues is that the Rylands took advantage of an elderly woman (as they had taken advantage of Peggy Guggenheim), essentially stole her archive, and sold it to the Beinecke. After the archive was sold, the Ezra Pound Foundation was dissolved.

Olga Rudge herself was a renowned concert violinist. In fact, Pound wrote a music review of one of her performances in 1920. She toured throughout Europe and played before Heads of States. By 1926 she was considered one of the most celebrated solo violinists of her time. She published a catalog of works by Antonio Vivaldi, did a concert tour of his work, and was in large part responsible for the Vivaldi revival.

In addition to Rudge's story, the book explores the interwoven lives in Venice in the aftermath of the fire that destroyed La Fenice, one of Italy's most famous opera houses, on January 29, 1996. A court in Venice found two electricians guilty of setting the fire.

I knew about this book and the chapter "The Last Canto" from Mary. Berendt had stayed in the Hidden Nest, at some point, while doing research for the book, and he had visited Mary and her family at Brunnenburg Castle, their main home, in the Tyrolean section of the Italian Alps. Mary was not upset in any manner about what Berendt wrote in "The Last Canto," but dismissed it as "gossip." I pointed out that Berendt's first book, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*, had been a record-breaking book on the New York Times Bestsellers List—his book was on this list for 216 weeks!

In Sienna, I bought the book and started to read it that night. "The Last Canto" is chapter nine in the book, and all the chapters are, as far as I recall, self-contained stories; however, I resisted the urge to read that chapter first. I read more the following day on the Eurostar to Venice. While in Venice, in the Dosoduro neighborhood, near the Hidden Nest, I read "The Last Canto" and finished reading the book that night. I did not think this book was as strong as his first book, but it was a well-written and engaging narrative. I was duly impressed with the various people and stories, and I thought "The Last Canto" was extremely well done. As is mentioned in the chapter, the complicated goings-on between Rudge, the Rylands, and Mary has all the 19th-century shadows and angles of Henry James's *The Aspern Papers*.

When I saw Mary the next day, I told her that I had found a copy of the Berendt book in Sienna and had finished reading it last night. I praised "The Last Canto" and had not known the entire story behind the Olga Rudge Papers. Mary expressed surprise that I thought well of the book saying, once again, that it was just "gossip." I explained again how very popular his first book had been and that it put Savannah, Georgia, on the map with bus tours of sites mentioned in its pages and that the city of Savannah presented John Berendt with a key to the city. I said that it was possible that this book might prompt more interest in her father's work. Not that Venice needed any more tourists, but I said more people might seek out the Hidden Nest. Mary did not think so. As it turned out, his second book did not do at all as well as his first book.

I teach at St. Andrews Presbyterian College, which has a fall semester-abroad program in Italy at the Brunnenburg Castle, where our students have the opportunity to study *The Cantos*, by Ezra Pound,

with Mary and two courses with Siegfried (Sizzo), Pound's grandson. At this point during the semester, on Pound's death date and All Saints' Day, Mary gives a walking tour for our students of Pound's Venice. This walking tour always ends at the Isola di San Michele cemetery, which is a small island outside the mainland of Venice. It is primarily a cemetery, but the island also has the first Renaissance church in Venice and a monastery. It's an extraordinary place. Named after Saint Michael, who holds the scales on the day of judgment, it has been nicknamed "The Island of the Dead." That sounds gloomy, but the place is really a grand tribute to dead family members and ancestors with walls of marble crypts and pots of hanging flowers and burning ruby red sanctuary lamps.

I have been with Mary twice before to visit Pound's gravesite, which is really a small garden with shrubbery, palm-like plants, and a bed of variegated ivy. It is a rectangular plot with the front part extending into a half circle. One time there was a cremation urn tossed in the ivy, so someone asked that his or her ashes be strewn on Pound's grave, and this time there was a prayer candle burning—it was a pillar candle and had a lid with air holes. Mary placed the flowers down before Olga Rudge's grave and then before Ezra Pound's grave. She then asked me to read "Night Litany," and I was deeply moved and honored to read it. After that, some of the students wandered over to look at Joseph Brodsky's gravesite (which is near Pound's) and also to Sergei Diaghilev's and Igor Stravinsky's gravesites in another section.

After the reading of the poem, the walking tour is officially over, and the students take the vaparetto (water bus) back to the mainland or go on to Murano to see the glassmakers. I was walking back with Mary when she said, "I think my mother deserves a candle as well." I nodded. She went into a small shop and returned with a prayer candle.

As we were walking back, I said, "How are we going to light this candle?"

"That is a very good question."

When we returned to the gravesite, I found a twig and pushed it through an air hole of the burning prayer candle and got the end aflame. Mary leaned over and I used the burning twig to light the wick of her prayer candle. I blew out the twig. Mary stood back up straight and the flame immediately went out. All this while, I was aware of a woman moving slowly along one path near us—there was no one else in this section. I got the twig aflame again and we lit the wick and this time when Mary stood back up straight the flame did not go out.

At that moment, with Mary holding the lit prayer candle, this middle-aged woman, dressed in a long beige overcoat, stepped over and said, "Excuse me, but I'm trying to find a gravesite." She was an American.

"Yes," I said. "Which one?"

"Ezra Pound's."

I glanced at Mary and said, "This is his gravesite."

"Oh," she said, "it is?"

“This is it,” I said and extended my hand to indicate the marble headstone.

She stepped over and looked down at his etched name. “Oh, my, this is so moving. I read that new Berendt book about Venice and what that poor daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, had to go through with that couple at the Guggenheim.”

I saw Mary straighten her back a little more and lift her chin slightly.

“Have you read that book?” she asked. “It’s called The City of Falling Angels. My husband and I are from Boston, and I wanted to pay tribute to Ezra Pound and Olga Rudge after reading about the ordeal she and her daughter had to go through.”

I knew Mary would not say a word, and I thought that I would create a memory for this woman that she would never ever forget for the rest of her life.

“Actually,” I said, “this is Mary de Rachewiltz.”

“Oh, Ted,” Mary murmured.

The woman did not speak for a moment, her eyes wide. “Oh, my, I can’t believe this, I am so honored to meet you.” She introduced herself and we shook hands and talked some. Mary put the lit prayer candle in front of her mother’s grave. This woman from Boston took a picture of Mary and me. I took a picture of Mary and her.

Horace Walpole coined the word “serendipity” after the Persian fairytale “The Three Princes of Serendip,” because the princes were always making desirable discoveries through accident and sagacity. (Serendip today is Sri Lanka.) The basic definition of serendipity is the faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident. That woman from Boston truly had a serendipitous moment.

Written by wildgoosepoetryreview

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Befriending the Friendless
by Jordan Moses

Sitting with my friends at a crowded table in the middle of the high school cafeteria, I feel the blanket of acceptance shroud over me, bringing with it a certain latitude of safety. We take turns making witty comments, indulging in the gossip of our lives, and debating current school affairs. Every once in a while I’ll pop in to give my perspective. It assures them that I’m listening instead of staring vacantly at the nearest wall. We are at ease with the conversation knowing every comment made, regardless of