



# **James Laughlin, New Directions Press, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound (Studies in Print Culture and the History of the Book)**

*Greg Barnhisel*

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Although James Laughlin (1914–1997) came from one of Pittsburgh's leading steel-making families, his passions were literary rather than industrial—he wanted to be a poet. Laughlin was a freshman at Harvard when he traveled to Rapallo, Italy, in 1933 to meet Ezra Pound (1885–1972), and he returned the following year to enroll in the poet's "Eziversity." Pound dismissed Laughlin's poetic talents, advising the wealthy young man to make himself over into a publisher. Laughlin did just that, founding New Directions Press in 1936.

For much of the 1930s prior to World War II, Laughlin and Pound were friends, business associates, collaborators, student and teacher, and even at times son and surrogate father. But Laughlin's investment in Pound—and their friendship—was severely tested by Pound's wartime propaganda broadcasts for Italian state radio, his capture and abortive trial for treason, and his thirteen-year stay as a mental patient in St. Elizabeth's Hospital. Following this scandal and disgrace, the reading public no longer wanted to buy Pound's books, and the critical establishment dismissed him as a Fascist crank.

Laughlin and New Directions responded by marketing Pound in such a way as to convince consumers that the poet's importance needed to be judged solely on aesthetic grounds, and that his political beliefs were irrelevant to his accomplishments as a pioneering literary artist. With Pound's encouragement, and despite the poet's oft-expressed opposition to the mixture of commerce and art, Laughlin used such marketing tools as advertising, the cultivation of friendly critics, and the development of the trade paperback to enhance Pound's reputation.

Drawing on a wide range of sources—including interviews with Laughlin and other New Directions staffers and published materials from numerous literary archives—Gregory Barnhisel tells the story of the personal and professional relationship between one of the twentieth century's most controversial writers and his loyal and innovative American publisher—a relationship that eventually helped remake literary history and continues to shape our understanding of modernism itself

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