



# An Appreciation of Ezra Pound, Editor

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A sign posted on a Ball State University department of journalism bulletin board reads: "The strongest drive is neither love nor hate; it is the urge to change another's copy." To prove the point, someone has crossed out the word "change" and scrawled the word "alter" above it. I'd like to think Ezra Pound would have appreciated that sign. Other than his drive to write, Pound's strongest drive was his compulsion to blot the lines of his fellow writers. An able editor and an energetic supporter of fellow artists, Pound profoundly affected the lives and works of the best twentieth century writers. This odd, frenetic, red-haired spawn of an Idaho mining town was literature's equivalent of a baseball talent scout, a bird dog at recognizing promise in aspiring poets and novelists.

From 1908 to 1920, the period that Pound lived in England, he worked for many stellar literary periodicals. He contributed verse and served as foreign or London editor of *Poetry*, *The Dial*, *The Egoist* and *The Little Review*.

Pound—like Ezra, his biblical namesake—was a lifelong reformer. Pound became impatient with the progress of poetry during the first decade of the twentieth century, claiming what was written lacked intellectual depth and stylistic grace. Most poets, he believed, aspired to mediocrity and fell short even of that. "Serious people" of the time did not write poetry, according to Pound biographer Noel Stock, regarding such work "as balderdash—a sort of embroidery for dilettantes and women."

Pound, in the 15 February 1912 issue of *The New Age*, emphatically took his editorial stand. "As far as the 'living art' goes, I should like to break up *cliche*, to disintegrate these magnetized groups that stand between the reader of poetry and the drive of it, to escape from lines composed of two very nearly equal sections, each containing a noun and each noun decorously attended by a carefully selected epithet gleaned, apparently, from Shakespeare, Pope, or Horace." Moreover, in that same issue, Pound attacked the pomposity and excess he recognized in too many now-forgotten bards of the day. "We must have a simplicity of utterance," he declared, "which is different from the simplicity and direct-

ness of daily speech. . . This difference, this dignity, cannot be conferred by florid adjectives or elaborate hyperbole; it must be conveyed by art and by the art of the verse structure, by something which exalts the reader, making him feel that he is in contact with something arranged more finely than the commonplace."

Pound believed that the ideal poem was one in which a "twofold vision can be recorded" from a marriage of "the perfect rhythm joined to the perfect word" (Stock, 117). He maintained that when a poet's technique was unpraiseworthy, not even the most wonderful imagery could salvage a work. "Don't chop up your stuff into separate iambs," he once said. "Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin again every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause."

Pound exhorted poets to strive for plainness of expression, urging them to strip the suet from the beefsteak. He said that poetry achieved a heightened effect when derived from economy of expression. "Twentieth-century poetry," he predicted, "will, I think, move against poppy-cock." He hoped the genre would become "harder and saner [and] as much like granite as it can be." He predicted that "We will have fewer painted adjectives impending the shock and stroke of it." The perfect poem, believed the poet, was "austere, direct, free from emotional slither" (Stock, 109). In addition, as a spokesman for the Imagists, Pound argued for the need to strive for precision and "an exact rendering of things" (Stock 127).

The young Pound shared Edgar Allan Poe's conviction that any word unessential to a piece of work should vacate the premises. Nor did Pound tolerate the use of indefinite language. "Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something," he wrote in a *Poetry* essay in 1913. "Don't use such an expression as 'dim as lands of *peace*,'" he advised. "It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol. Go in fear of abstractions. Do not tell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose."

Pound not only rendered advice, he also possessed a talent for detecting flaws in manuscripts of poetry, making him much in demand as a pre-publication reader. When friends and acquaintances asked him to inspect their freshly typed manuscripts, he compulsively dragged his pencil like a rake across each page, stopping only when scattered leaves were stacked in neat piles. Moreover, according to biographer Eustace Mullins, the self-assured Pound frequently failed to wait for an invitation before editing the manuscripts of others. At literary gatherings he jerked manuscripts from the hands of poets reading new work aloud, amending lines on the spot that ruptured his sensibilities. No reputation was too established for Pound to criticize. In his role of foreign editor with *Poetry*, he persuaded William Butler Yeats to send him some un-

published work for consideration. Yeats, then in his late forties and in the twilight of a starred career, gave his young friend a poem entitled "Fallen Majesty." Pound read the poem and altered Yeats' final line from "Once walked a thing, that seemed as it were, a burning cloud" to "Once walked a thing that seemed a burning cloud." It is difficult to convey the implications of Pound's impertinence today when our best poets are as often lampooned as lauded. But imagine, if you can, the reaction of say, poet James Dickey, if Reginald Gibbons, the editor of *Triquarterly*, called him to say: "Jim, baby. Loved your submission. I cleaned up a few lines and printed the sucker."

Pound once wrote Harriet Monroe, *Poetry's* founder who had named him foreign editor in 1912, that he desired to publish "modern stuff" with "the laconic speech of the Imagistes." Specifically, he demanded work with "no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination" (Stock, 112). One year previously he had written an essay for a literary magazine called the *Poetry Review* that specified his literary beliefs. "I believe in an 'absolute rhythm' which corresponds exactly to the emotion or shade of emotion to be expressed." In the same essay, he stressed "that the 'proper and perfect symbol' was the natural object and that if a poet used symbols he should so use them that their symbolic function did not obtrude; so that. . .the poetic quality of the passage. . .was not lost to those who did not understand the symbol as such, to whom, for instance, a hawk was simply a hawk." He maintained that the content of a poem was either "solid" or "fluid," meaning—according to Noel Stock—that "a poem might have form as a tree has form or as water poured into a vase."

That Pound followed his own dictums is seen in an examination of his tightknit, powerful body of work during the decade preceding his 1920 publication of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, a collection of eighteen poems that marked a shift in Pound's emphasis from aestheticism to bitter social commentary. During this period the poet achieved desired directness and cast off stilted mannerisms. Says Stock, "His diction [was] clearer and he applied more art with less visible effort." At that time in Pound's career, the poet consciously and ruthlessly tried, in his expression, "to new-mint" language, eliminating "such encumbrances. . .as set moods, set ideas, conventions." The result of Pound's application of his own strict principles to his work was the creation of compelling poems such as his colorful and emotional two-line masterpiece of simplicity, "In a Station of the Metro."

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;  
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Quite obviously, Pound was as good a self-editor as he was an editor. Unlike many excellent editors, Pound never allowed the work of other writers to take up all his time; he realized that he needed to work the hardest on his own writing. "Mastering an art does not consist in trying

to bluff people," he declared in *The Little Review*. "Work shows; there is no substitute for it; holding one theory or another doesn't in the least get a man over the difficulty."

One of the strongest influences upon Ezra Pound's writing and editing was Ford Madox Ford, a titan of a literary critic and a Titanic of a businessman, who eventually sank all his enterprises. Ford edited the *English Review*, a London-based magazine of such quality that its maiden issue, published in December of 1908, showcased literary heavyweights Thomas Hardy, Joseph Conrad, H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, W.H. Hudson and Henry James. The offices of the *English Review* must have thrilled young Pound, who loved all things literary, and who, at the time, affected pince nez spectacles, a flowing cape, and a walking cane that he used to make imaginary rapier thrusts at passersby. Ford kept up appearances despite his debts that shortly were to cost him his beloved *English Review*, throwing extravagant dinners at the magazine's offices located at 84 Holland Park Avenue. Such a life was heady stuff to Pound, who, like Ford, seemed blind to the winos passed out below the publication's gilt-plated name plaque and impervious to the omnipresent odors of fish and decaying garbage. The *English Review*, one flat above a fishmonger's shop, was located in one of the city's seedier districts.

But despite his faults as a businessman, Ford recognized literary talent. He provided first big breaks to both D.H. Lawrence and young Pound. The latter poet published his experimental "Sestina: Altaforte" in the June 1909 *Review* that showcased work by John Galsworthy, Joseph Conrad, Hilaire Belloc and Wyndham Lewis. It was Ford who taught Pound an important lesson in an unorthodox, rather undignified manner. When Pound brought his manuscript of a collection of poems called the *Canzoni* to Ford, the young poet watched in shock as his trusted editor, after reading the work, gasped and rolled upon the floor. Needless to add, Pound amended his misguided copy posthaste, admitting that Ford's acrobatics saved him two years of wandering along the wrong poetic path.

Pound himself often delivered similar harsh judgments upon new work by others thrust upon him, although he never imitated Ford by abandoning his heels. So scathing was his reaction to William Carlos Williams' first book that Pound prefaced a 21 May 1909 letter to his friend with this warning: "I hope to God you have no feelings. If you have, burn this *before* reading." But after coldly assaulting the book's faults, Pound, in that same letter, urged his disciple to study certain specified poets of the first and second rank. "Learn your art thoroughly," advised Pound, ending his letter with an encouraging postscript. "Remember," he told Williams, the New Jersey physician who was later to win both the Bollingen Award and a Pulitzer Prize for poetry, "a man's real work is what *he is going to do*, not what is behind

him." Eleven years after this letter, Pound wrote another missive to Williams, informing his friend as to what was the exact value of strong editorial criticism. "If you weren't stupider than a mud-duck," wrote Pound, "you would know that every kick to bad writing is by that much a help for the good."

Pound likewise was harsh on editors who delivered what he considered foolish or uninformed judgments on his work and that of others. To be sure, Pound suffered his share of stupid criticism. The *North American Review* rejected Pound's modern poem on a modern subject, "Portrait d'une Femme," because the opening line trilled too many r's, violating Tennyson's rule forbidding consonant repetition (Stock 111).

Perhaps because of such ill-advised editorial decisions, Pound in another letter referred to editors as "swine" who "do more harm to contemporary letters in America than all the public bad taste and ignorance put together." He proposed that books should "be compiled by impartial patient students, having no personal ax to grind." He concludes, "It would be of great national service," and provide fodder for numerous doctoral dissertations to boot.

Pound's own excursion into editing *Poetry* occurred after Ford Madox Ford had lost editorial control of the *English Review*. A Chicagoan named Harriet Monroe hired Pound as foreign correspondent and editor sight unseen in 1912, after Elkin Matthews, an early publisher of the poet's work, enthusiastically touted him to her. Pound proved a correct choice, thanks not only to his vitality and eye for young talent, but also to his knack for establishing important literary contacts. "I do see nearly everyone that matters," he boasted to Monroe in a letter.

Pound's dreams for *Poetry* were grand. He hoped to inspire what he called "our American Risorgimento," an "awakening," he said, that "will make the Italian Renaissance look like a tempest in a teapot!" To this end, he energetically recruited submissions for *Poetry* with expertise derived from years spent watching Ford Madox Ford's hustling on behalf of *The English Review*. But Pound's allegiance, unlike Ford's, was divided. In addition to *Poetry*, he also served in 1913 as literary editor of *The New Freewoman*, a feminist publication that in 1914—thanks to Pound's urging—became *The Egoist* in 1914. Pound published the work of such Imagists as Amy Lowell in *The Egoist*, but the publication took second place to *Poetry* in his heart because it allotted comparatively small space to poetry and criticism.

In judging the quality of Pound's work as an editor, it helps to know what he considered a good editor to be. In one letter Pound insisted that certain "cardinal points" determined who is and who is not a good editor. Two of his criteria admirably fit his own accomplishments as foreign editor of *Poetry*, namely "Whom. . .do they print?" and "Whom did they print. . .before the author had a reputation?"

Among the well-known contributors he persuaded to appear in *Poetry* were Yeats, Rabindranath Tagore, and Ford Madox Ford. Tagore, the great Indian poet that translated his work into "very beautiful English prose," according to Pound (Stock, 120), trusted the *Poetry* foreign editor's "friendly hands" enough to ask Pound to edit all his translations before forwarding them to Monroe in the United States. "Please do not hesitate to make corrections when necessary," wrote Tagore (Stock, 129). "I do not know the exact value of your English words. Some of them may have their souls worn out by constant use and some others may not have acquired their souls yet."

Of far more importance to literature than the aid and comfort Pound gave these established men, however, was the *Poetry* editor's capacity for promoting talented little knowns and unknowns. Pound's self-proclaimed "captious and ultrabilious eye" read, with appreciation if not always approval, the work of William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.), Richard Aldington, Carl Sandburg, D.H. Lawrence ("detestable person but needs watching," Pound confided to Monroe), T.S. Eliot, whose "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Pound called "the most interesting contribution I've read from an American," and Ernest Hemingway (six poems accepted).

Pound, according to Hemingway, was able to devote only twenty percent of his time to writing, so busy was the red-bearded whirlwind with the affairs of promising writers, even those with not one-tenth his talent. "With the rest of his time he tries to advance the fortunes, both material and artistic, of his friends," wrote Hemingway in a famous 1925 essay. "He defends them when they are attacked, he gets them into magazines and out of jail. He loans them money. He sells their pictures. He arranges concerts for them. He writes articles about them. He introduces them to wealthy women. He gets publishers to take their books. He sits up all night with them when they claim to be dying and he witnesses their wills. He advances them hospital expenses and dissuades them from suicide. And in the end a few of them refrain from knifing him at the first opportunity."

However, as patient as he might seem to Hemingway, Pound did not hesitate to quarrel with Harriet Monroe when she printed poor work from *Poetry*'s benefactors and friends of benefactors. "Good editing, as I see it, means the most effective presentation of *whatever* is on hand," said Pound, chiding Monroe by post. "If I stay on the magazine it has got to improve. . . I will not have my name associated with it unless it does improve." Pound told poet Amy Lowell (in a letter dated 8 January 1914) that he had protested such tactics by quitting his editorship but had reconsidered. "I resigned from *Poetry* in accumulated disgust, and they axed—a.x.e.d.—me back. . . I consented to return 'on condition of general improvement of the magazine'—which won't happen—so I shall be compelled to resign permanently sometime or other." Sometime came on November 1, 1918, when Pound mailed his final outraged letter to *Poetry*.

But by then, Pound's allegiance had for one year been with the *Little Review*, a Chicago-based periodical that had been founded, financed and edited by Margaret Anderson in March, 1914. Pound agreed to become Anderson's unsalaried foreign editor, no doubt impressed with the publication's slogan: "A magazine of the arts, making no compromise with the public taste."

Pound's most significant achievement as an editor with the *Little Review* is that he persuaded James Joyce to submit his serialization of *Ulysses*. In addition, he published the work of Wyndham Lewis and other members of Pound's own Vorticist movement. But by January of 1918, Pound had become disenchanted with working on behalf of the *Little Review*; moreover, he wanted to preserve his energies for his own writing. "I am, for the time being, bored to death with being any kind of editor," he wrote Anderson. In 1919 Pound departed the *Little Review*, but the urge to change another's copy remained sufficiently to interest him in performing what he called his "Caeserean Operation" on friend Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1921 and 1922. Pound's influence upon T.S. Eliot has inspired many critical studies. It suffices to say that Eliot enthusiastically adopted Pound's editorial changes in *The Waste Land* manuscript and dedicated that most influential poem to his editor. Eliot said that Pound not only helped him improve his "verse sense," but influenced him in subtler ways. "I have in recent years cursed Mr. Pound often enough; for I am never sure that I can call my verse my own; just when I am most pleased with myself, I find that I have caught up some echo from a verse of Mr. Pound's," admitted Eliot. In addition, Pound edited even the critical prose of his pupil. On one occasion, disturbed upon reading some ill-tempered commentary by the usually moderate Eliot, Pound admonished him. "That's not your style at all," clucked Pound. "You let *me* throw the bricks through the front window. You go in at the back door and take out the swag."

Pound's interest in editing declined steadily over the next four decades, but he occasionally collected his energies for projects he felt worth his time. For example, in 1928, Pound and his wife Dorothy published a magazine, *The Exile*, which is best remembered for publishing a cryptic poem by Hemingway ("Neo-Thomist Poem"), contributions from William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein, a part of canto 20, and Pound's writings on politics and economic issues. *The Exile* lasted but four issues. In 1931, Pound became a contributing editor to *The New Review*—circulation 73—but left that doomed publication after writing but one essay because of an inability to get along with one of its editors.

The last thing needed to be said in this appreciation is that even had Ezra Pound never written one word of poetry, he still would deserve the homage paid to him by writers included in this special issue of *Rendez-vous*. It was said of one great writer that he never blotted a line, but all twentieth century lovers of good writing should give thanks that Ezra Pound, on the contrary, blotted so many.



# **Rendezvous at the Ezra Pound Centennial Conference**

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