

THE WORK OF EZRA POUND

If I were driven to name one individual who, in the English language, by means of his own examples of creative art in poetry, has done most of living men to incite new impulses in poetry, the chances are I would name Ezra Pound.

This statement is made reservedly, out of knowing the work of Pound and being somewhat close to it three years or so. I hope that no luck of war or peace will ever back me into a corner where, by force and duress, I must lie shackled and hungry in a donjon keep until I name the world's champion poet. If, however, as a friendly stranger in a smoking compartment, you should casually ask me for an offhand opinion as to who is the best man writing poetry today, I should probably answer, "Ezra Pound."

All talk on modern poetry, by people who know, ends with dragging in Ezra Pound somewhere. He may be named only to be cursed as wanton and mocker, poseur, trifler and vagrant. Or he may be classed as filling a niche today like that of Keats in a preceding epoch. The point is, he will be mentioned.

One must know how to spell his name, and have heard rumors of where he hangs his hat when he eats, and one must have at least passing acquaintance with his solemn denunciations and his blurted quiddities, in order to debate on modern poetry, and in such debate zigzag a course of progress.

When Nicodemus wanted to know more about the real Jesus of Nazareth, he had the justice to make a night call and ask Jesus some questions.

Let some of those thrusting spears and ink pots at Ezra Pound try to be fair enough to read him.

In the early regulations of the University of Paris, this oath was required of professors: "I swear to read and to finish reading, within the time set by the statutes, the books and parts of books assigned for my lectures." Some like form should be insisted on for reviewers and commentators who in this push-button and dumb-waiter age rush into type with two-minute judgments on twenty-year accomplishments.

Though a Fabre spends ninety years watching spiders and writing a book, any ordinary book reviewer or critic nowadays will type hap-hazard a column of words on the work of a lifetime, and assume without humility or prayer to say this is good and that is bad.

Though an Ezra Pound toil ten years at one aim and coin high joy and red life into a commanding book of poetry, there are plenty of offhand scholars who assume that he means nothing to anybody because he means nothing to them.

The opposition to Pound divides roughly into two groups: first, the mumbo-jumbo school who assert with grave faces that this sort of poetry has never before been written, and therefore it is not poetry; and second, the pish-tush school whose risibilities are

tickled with turning the poems upside down, inside out, or backwards and forwards.

In the cool and purple meantime, Pound goes ahead producing new poems having the slogan, "Guts and Efficiency," emblazoned above his daily program of work. His genius runs to various schools and styles. He acquires traits and then throws them away. One characteristic is that he has no characteristics. He is a new roamer of the beautiful, a new fetcher of wild shapes, in each new handful of writings offered us.

Maybe it is a psalm of his glory in certain old roads "where the hills part in three ways," where also he has "seen the copper come down tingeing the mountains," and sunset "torch flames painting the front of that church." Maybe it is a London girl combing her hair, and he watches her across the street from his room, and wonders pleasantly about her till she sings and her voice sends him running from the rasp of its falsetto. The old, old things that are always lovely haunt him, whether they move on the faces of women, petals of flowers, waves of moonlight, or the waters of Venice by night, which he gives in murmurous lines like these:

And the beauty of this thy Venice
 hast thou shown unto me
Until is its loveliness become unto me
 a thing of tears.
O God, what great kindness
 have we done in times past
 and forgotten it,
That thou givest this wonder unto us,
 O God of waters?
O God of the night,
 what great sorrow
Cometh unto us,
 that thou thus repayest us
Before the time of its coming?

From these soft waters and this gentle blurred nocturne, he may turn to this picture and its hard movement :

Gray cliffs,
 and beneath them
A sea
 Harsher than granite,
unstill, never ceasing.

Or his translation of Bertrams de Born's ballad of the lover of war, wherein the master speaks to his jongleur, Papiol, in this wise:

And I love to see the sun rise blood-crimson,
And I watch his spears through the dark clash,
And it fills all my heart with rejoicing

And pries wide my mouth with fast music.
The man who fears war and squats opposing
My words for stour, hath no blood of crimson,
But is fit only to rot in womanish peace.
Papiol, Papiol, to the music :
May God damn forever all who cry, "Peace !"

Though the Vorticist school now claims Pound and he endorses the claim, he is also an ancient of the ancients. His translations from the Chinese are vivid in feeling and keen in sympathy. One realizes the closeness of the Chinese soul as a next-door human neighbor, fellow-traveler on an old, old planet, after reading *Cathay*.

Drawing a style of writing from hitherto obscure Romance literature and the troubadours, from the Chinese and the Egyptian, from modern science, Nietzsche and syndicalism, the technique of Pound baffles any accurate analysis in a single paper. His own statements of his theories do not get at the gist of the matter, and he passes his warmest inspirations to others through poems in the actual instead of theoretic.

As well should one reduce to chemical formula the crimson of a Kentucky redbird's wing as dissect the inner human elements that give poetic craft to this heart song from Planh:

But if one should look at me with the old hunger in her eyes,
How will I be answering her eyes?

For I have followed the white folk of the forest,

Aye ! It's a long hunting,
And it's a deep hunger I have when I see them a-gliding
And a-flickering there where the trees stand apart.
But oh, it is sorrow and sorrow,
When love dies down in the heart.

He has prowled in streets, taprooms, libraries and lexicons. Out of a mixed lore gathered among hooligans, bookmen and beautiful women, he projects such films as these:

FRANCESCA

You came in out of the night
And there were flowers in your hands.
Now you will come out of a confusion of people,
Out of a turmoil of speech about you.

I, who have seen you amid the primal things,
Was angry when they spoke your name
In ordinary places.
I would that the cool waves might flow over my mind, And that the world

should dry as a dead leaf,
Or as a dandelion seed-pod and be swept away,
So that I might find you again,
Alone.

ON HIS OWN FACE IN A GLASS

O strange face there in the glass,
O ribald company, O saintly host,
O sorrow-swept my fool,
What answer? O ye myriad
That strive and play and pass,
Jest, challenge, counterlie?
I? I? I?
And ye?

LI PO

And Li Po also died drunk.
He tried to embrace a moon
In the yellow river.

ANCIENT WISDOM

So-Shu dreamed,
And having dreamed that he was a bird, a bee, a butterfly,
He was uncertain why he should try to feel like anything else.
Hence his contentment.

Out of thousands of Christ poems, there are not a dozen that live on shining with the luminous power of the Christ life. Judges like William Butler Yeats say Pound's *Ballad of the Goodly Fere* will last. These are two of its fourteen verses:

I ha' seen him cow a thousand men
On the hills o' Gallilee,
They whined as he walked out calm between,
Wi' his eyes like the gray o' the sea.

Like the sea that brooks no voyaging
With the winds unleashed and free,
Like the sea that he cowed at Genseret
Wi' twey words spoke suddenly.

On the fly-leaf of a book of Italian translations Ezra
Pound wrote:

The reader must bear in mind that these poems were written one by one. It is impossible

to read the book "straight through" with any pleasure. It is unfair to Guido to attempt it. The poem of the close school is a subject for meditation. It is best to read one at a time. Four or five together are all that should ever be tried.

The same counsel goes for those who take up the collected works of Ezra Pound. These are not in the same class with reading matter farmers buy from mail-order houses to while away long winter nights and the rainy season. A piece like this keeps its music through more than a hundred readings:

Beautiful, infinite memories
That are a-plucking at my heart,
Why will you be ever calling and a-calling,
And a-murmuring in the dark there?
And a-reaching out your long hands
Between me and my beloved?

And why will you be ever a-casting
The black shadows of your beauty
On the white face of my beloved,
And a-glinting in the pools of her eyes?

His way of working, his art and craftsmanship, is more conscious and deliberate, more clear-cut in purpose and design, than might be thought from first glance at the careless surface of one of his free-running poems. While he is an ignorant barbarian on the sources of his inspiration and the power by which he works out his inward flashes, once the urge and blaze is on him he works by rules, measurements, formulae and data as strict and definite as any worker who uses exact science, and employs fractions of inches, and drills in steel by thousandths of millimeters. These two sentences may offer clues to the intuitions that guide him:

Poetry is a sort of inspired mathematics, which gives us equations, not for abstract figures, triangles, spheres and the like, but equations for the human emotions. If one have a mind which inclines to magic rather than science, one will prefer to speak of these equations as spells or incantations ; it sounds more arcane, mysterious, recondite.

Since he wrote the foregoing in *The Spirit of Romance* some years ago, he has been joined with the Imagists and from them passed on to the Vorticists. Wyndham Lewis in *Blast* starts with the Red Indian, and then cites Poe, Whistler, Henry James, and Walt Whitman, ending with Ezra Pound as the high points of American art. These are Lewis' notes on Pound :

Demon pantechnicon driver, busy with removal of old world into new quarters. In his steel net of impeccable technique he has lately caught Li Po. Energy of a discriminating element.

People write poetry because they want to. It functions in them as air in the nostrils of an athlete in a sprint. Moods, thoughts, emotions, surge over writers as they do over inventors

and politicians. It is a dark stuff of life that comes and goes.

There are those who play safe and sane in poetry, as in mechanics and politics. To each realm its own gay madmen. Some win their public while they live. Others must mould a very small public while alive, and be content with a larger one after death. Still others need no public at all, and in the rôle of by-standers they get more enjoyment and knowledge of life than as performers.

In a world with so high a proportion of fools, it is neither disgrace nor honor when people say of a finished work, "I can't understand it." The last word on the merits of it will be spoken by the future. And sometimes the future decides that a work is beautiful and worth treasuring, and then ironically destroys it and leaves behind no word of explanation nor apology.

I like the pages of Ezra Pound. He stains darkly and touches softly. The flair of great loneliness is there. He is utter as a prairie horseman, a biplane in the azure, a Norse crag, or any symbol of the isolate, contemplative spirit of man unafraid and searching. He is worth having.

Carl Sandburg