

Other Books of Interest (excerpt from lecture on Whitman's impact on Eliot, Pound, and Williams)

<https://www.studentwritingcenter.us/walt-whitman/other-books-of-interest-teu.html>

Ezra Pound (1885-1972)

Ezra Pound was a highly influential experimentalist with language. He learned to love language from early on, taking Latin in high school, and he planned to be a poet through college and graduate school (he earned a Masters in poetry at University of Pennsylvania). After trying out teaching and getting fired for misconduct, Pound went to Europe in 1908. He was friendly with a literary circle, and even served as secretary to Yeats for a while.

Here, Pound first tried to establish a new kind of poetry he called "imagism," which was an attempt to present an object directly rather than generalizing about it. He also worked on translations, not only from Latin, but also freely from Chinese and Japanese.

The most important thing he concentrated on from 1920 until his death in 1972 was the writing of his "cantos" (he left 116 in all). They reflect the experiences of the years he composed them.

At heart, Pound believed that a great poem had to be long, and he hoped to write such a poem. Toward that end, he started working on his "cantos"—these were separate poems of varying lengths, combining imagination, memory, descriptions, and excerpts from other works. They were forged into a unity by the heart of the poet's imagination and would somehow, he hoped, form a coherent pattern. What was his model for this? It seems obvious that Pound was looking back to *Leaves of Grass* for inspiration with these ideas. Whitman, as we know, had a way of making many separate poems cohere in a new kind of long

structure that depended completely on the poet's mind and personality.

This bow to Whitman and *Leaves of Grass* is even more odd, considering how critical Pound had always been of Whitman's poetry. In early works, he openly criticized Whitman's style—the long lines, the generalities, the out-of-control movement.

In an early prose work, "The Spirit of Romance" (1910), for example, Pound complained that Whitman was not master of his art or of the emotions within them. However, as early as 1913, Pound started acknowledging his debt to Whitman publishing a poem ("A Pact") in an influential new journal called *Poetry*.

By 1948, his affinity for Whitman was so great that "there is no more callow talk about Whitman's not being 'master of the forces which beat up on him.'" He obviously both hated and loved his "spiritual father." In his late essay, "What I Feel About Walt Whitman," Pound wrote:

Whitman IS America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but he IS America ... he is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission ... I read him (in many parts) with acute pain, but when I write of certain things I find myself using his rhythms. The expression of certain things related to cosmic consciousness seems tainted with this maramis.

Pound finally went on to say, "Mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has learned to wear a collar and a dress shirt (although at times inimical to both)."

In the Pisan "Cantos" of 1948, specifically "Canto 80," there is much reference to Whitman. "Dear Walter" appears in the second stanza. Some of Whitman's favorite phrasings appear in this

canto: "The warp and the woof with the sky wet as ocean, flowing with liquid slate."

Pound even alludes to Whitman's friends and mentions the likes of Whitman's tastes. Pound, in the end, concedes that Whitman is the "home of tradition."

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman— I have detested you long enough. I come to you as a grown child Who has had a pig-headed father; I am old enough now to make friends. It was yo