

## The Sheila Variations

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### It's Ezra Pound's Birthday: "Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose."

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And give up verse, my boy,  
There's nothing in it.  
— Ezra Pound

I grew up hearing stories of Ezra Pound. Not the stories of his fascism or his time in a cage in Italy, or being indicted for treason or his mental breakdown. Fun stories for kids! Pound was a character in my childhood lexicon because of his support and promotion of James Joyce. Even the name calls up the rows of books on my father's shelves, and my father's gravelly voice talking to me about the literary world of the 20s and 30s, and Pound's advocacy for new and radical voices.

**Ezra Pound.** The name is an onomatopoeic device.

Pound didn't just do it for Joyce, he did it for so many people. T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, H. D., Ernest Hemingway. He was ferocious in his promotion of new talent. He pushed new voices until reluctant editors had no choice but to publish them. Pound wasn't a rich man. He couldn't afford to be a Renaissance-era-type benefactor. But he had pull and power. Pound's dictum "Make it new" is famous, and at the time it was a galvanizing command. WWI had destroyed more than Europe, it had destroyed the past, too. The issue was: how can we use the OLD language to describe this NEW world? Well, there needed to be a NEW language, too, and writers had to "make it new." Pound was a poet, of course, but his true legacy lies in his support of others. His poems are controversial to this day, because of his political beliefs and his eventual insanity. He worked openly against the United States during WWII. So, you know, it's complicated. Maybe for you it's not complicated. In that case: Lucky you!

“Joyce — pleasing; after the first shell of cantankerous Irishman, I got the impression that the real man is the author of *Chamber Music*, the sensitive. The rest is the genius; the registration of realities on the temperament, the delicate temperament of the early poems. A concentration and absorption passing Yeats’ — Yeats has never taken on anything requiring the condensation of *Ulysses*.” - Ezra Pound

I immersed myself in all things Ezra Pound early this year when I was doing my research for my piece on H.D.'s film criticism, [published in the final \(so far?\) issue of \*Film Comment\*](#). Pound and H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) got to know each other back in the first decade of the 20th century, H.D. a teenage girl, a college student, Pound a burgeoning poet and college teacher. Her religious parents did not approve of the relationship. While they did not end up getting married, true to form Pound encouraged H.D. to break free of America and come to Europe. She heeded the call. Pound was busy in London trying to create a poetic movement, by fiat. H.D. wrote some poems — her very first — and Pound realized their worth. He sent them on to *Poetry* magazine, where they were published, and H.D. was off to the races. In fact, Ezra Pound christened her “H.D.” It stuck. Their relationship lasted their whole lives, even when their paths separated. She wrote a couple of books where their relationship is prominent, if not central: *HERmione* and *An End to Torment*. The second book was written in the late 1950s, when H.D. got word that her old boyfriend was set to be released from St. Elizabeth's mental hospital, after 15 years behind bars. It stirred up old feelings. In *HERmione*, the narrator describes the impact “George Lowndes” (Ezra Pound) had on her:

“She did not know that all her life would be spent gambling with the stark rigidity of words, words that were coin; save, spend; and all the time George Lowndes with his own counter, had found her a way out.”

Pound's poetry can be dense, difficult and his contemporaries (like Eliot, Yeats) were conflicted about it. In my H.D. research I read a lot of Pound's *Cantos*, and found them very tough going! Incomprehensible, to be perfectly honest.

Pound's cleverness can be a barrier.

It seems to me Pound had that gift-slash-curse of the insane (speaking from experience), which is to inflate abstractions into something unlivably austere. It is when people strive to live by *theories* — even when reality contradicts said theories — that they lose their humanity. This goes for political theories, too. The great political cataclysms of the 20th century — hell, the 21st century too thus far — all the genocides and slaughter, has something to do with a couple of generations' worth of people engaging in love affairs with theories. Breaking eggs for omelettes, you understand. Abstractions imposed on a living populace never goes well. It is amazing how powerful these delusions are. One of the harbingers of living-by-theory is a belief in utopia (to lay it out broadly: for righties, the Utopia is in the past, for lefties, the Utopia is in the future. I fear both).

His insanity was obviously clinical, it was mental illness, but he was also a rabid anti-Semite (people have clocked how many times “usury” shows up in his poems. It's a lot). Much of the manifestation of his illness came from the rigidity of his belief in rules. He had theories for everything. He was a bossypants! His rules for the Imagists — the poetry movement he basically strong-armed into being in the 'teens — were stringent. He came up with an acronym for his #1 rule for poets: GIFOA (Go in fear of abstractions). More rules from Ezra in [“A Few Don'ts”](#).

There's a lot of controversy surrounding Pound's eventual retraction of fascism and anti-Semitism. For example, Robert Lowell – who counted Ezra Pound as a friend (sort of), and would take pilgrimages up to St. Elizabeth's to visit Pound – tried to read one of Pound's poems onstage during a lecture in 1968 and was booed. People got up and stormed out, etc.

What really interests me is his belief in people with talent. He was evangelical about it. *James Joyce MUST find a wide audience!!* Pound was a dog with a bone when it came to his contemporaries. My dad loves him for that, and so do I. [2019 update: I wrote a lot of this in 2008, when my dad was still here. I am keeping that tense as a reminder.]

Pound's tendency towards abstraction – so detrimental to his mental health, which also led him down very unsavory philosophical paths – also helped him be a master theorist. This is the difficult part of Pound. I prefer to wrestle with it, as opposed to dismiss him as not worthy of my attention. Wrestling with people like Pound – whose lives are symbolic of entire eras – keeps you sharp! Pound *engaged* with poetry. He actively tried to divorce himself from his influences. He could be very prescriptive, i.e. "Here is the proper way to do it." A damaging mindset, but it was also a valid reaction to the unthinkable slaughter of WWI. CLEARLY the "old ways" deserved to die, if the "old ways" brought us to that precipice. He hated anything that was passively received. Everything must be evaluated on its own merits. Swallow nothing wholesale. He wrote about writing, he wrote about poets and poetry and what a poem SHOULD be ... and if he couldn't do it himself in his own work, he recognized the genius of others. He was not a bitter Salieri.

Modernism needed a champion. That champion was Ezra Pound.

In a 1915 letter to Harriet Monroe, editor of *Poetry* magazine, Pound wrote (now famously):

*Poetry must be as well written as prose. Its language must be a fine language, departing in no way from speech save by a heightened intensity (ie. simplicity). There must be no book words, no periphrases, no inversions. It must be as simple as De Maupassant's best prose, and as hard as Stendhal's ... Objectivity and again objectivity, and expression: no hindside-beforeness, no straddled adjectives (as 'addled mosses dank'), no Tennysonianness of speech; nothing – nothing that you couldn't, in some circumstance in the stress of some emotion, actually say. Every literaryism, every book word, fritters away a scrap of the reader's patience, a scrap of his sense of your sincerity.*

This was a revolution.

Pound broke away from the Victorian stylings of the former generation. He felt that Yeats alone was doing something new. Pound served as Yeats' secretary during the teens, so he had a front-row seat to Yeats's various transformations. You can sense in Yeats' work around that time that he was trying to wrench himself out of the 19th century into the unknown 20th. Pound was instrumental in pushing Yeats in that direction, encouraging him, with, "yes, yes, yes, THAT way ..." If you read Yeats's work in chronological order, the development is startling. It's like you are reading the works of two entirely separate people. You wonder where that second guy, the guy who wrote poems like "Among School Children" came from. Pound was an essential part of Yeats's process of breaking-free of the past. Sometimes Pound wielded way too heavy an editorial hand. (One need only look at *The*

*Waste Land* for that. Pound was so instrumental in helping Eliot – who was in the middle of having a nervous breakdown – put *The Waste Land* together, that Eliot dedicated it to Pound.)

There's [a recent-ish biography](#) out (the first volume of what promises to be a giant work). I have my father's copy. I haven't been able to bring myself to read it yet.

Pound's politics ruined him. His reputation has not recovered. It's impossible to "cancel" him, because you cannot cancel the past. Like, it happened. Do we want to ignore it, because it doesn't line up with our 21st century sensibilities, or do we want to learn from it? Either way, you can't cancel it because it already happened. It's done. Pound's influence is too vast to be canceled, or deemed unworthy of discussion. Besides: haven't we learned anything from Stalin? You cannot airbrush people out of existence. They may not appear in the photo, but *they were there*. In 1984, George Orwell wrote that those who control the past control the future. This is totalitarianism. History has shown that eventually the circle comes back round, history always ALWAYS boomerangs. So you're the one who airbrushes someone out of a photo, someone who once was an insider and has now been declared persona non grata. A year later you are now on the outside, and you are now being airbrushed out of the same photo. It's how these things go.

Pound's journey is also worth getting into because it's representative of so many of the forces of that particular time: the cataclysm of the two World Wars, and the abyss in between. There was a lot of bad theorizing going on. Pound is the most notorious, because of how far it all went. Not too many people were kept in a cage in a public square. Not too many people were institutionalized for 15 years. He was diabolical!

Here's a poem he wrote that I really like, and it's indicative of Pound's mighty wrestling with the past. Ironically, after all of this talk about Pound's political rigidity ... what I am struck most in this poem is its flexibility, his willingness to accept, to change. But also: I find almost nothing Whitman-esque about Pound's poetry. Not even close. Pound didn't love people like Whitman did. But clearly, Pound somehow felt they were related, and Pound needed to assert himself against all prior influences.

## A Pact

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 you that broke the new wood,  
 Now is a time for carving.  
 We have one sap and one root –  
 Let there be commerce between us.

There are other poems worth exploring, and the *Cantos* are fascinating even though reading them was a chore (for me). I struggled with every single line, and got lost in the single lines, forgetting what the hell the poem as a whole might be about, or even what it was trying to say. Perhaps it is akin to *Finnegans Wake* ... which I actually find pretty clear, as weird as that might be to say. It is certainly Joyce's simplest book because it's about one thing: a

man goes to sleep and dreams. That's it. Then you have 800 pages of word play, puns, a riot of images and metaphors, jokes, words. So perhaps Pound was attempting something similar with the *Cantos*.

I also haven't even mentioned his work as a translator, which may very well be – along with his championing of other writers – his greatest contribution. His translations of Japanese and Chinese poets helped bring these works to the English-speaking public. He was obsessed with haikus.

But sometimes, wow, Pound was ON as a poet. For example, his poem "In a Station of the Metro", originally published in *Poetry* magazine in 1913. It had been much longer, until he pared it down into just fourteen words. This is my favorite Ezra Pound poem.

## **In a Station of the Metro**

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

The poem's title places the poem in a specific place, grounding you. The first line describes the scene. The second moves, brilliantly, into metaphor. I don't know why this poem haunts me.

His reputation has not surpassed those of the friends whom he championed. Eliot, Joyce, Yeats, and many many others, loom far larger, cast far longer shadows. Maybe Pound wouldn't have it any other way. But if you look into the journeys of that generation of writers on even a superficial level, one name comes up again and again and again.

Ezra Pound.

## **QUOTES:**

### **T. S. Eliot:**

*"Pound is more responsible for the twentieth-century revolution in poetry than is any other individual."*

Ezra Pound:

*"An image is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. It is the presentation of such complex instantaneity that gives a sudden sense of liberation that we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art."*

### **Michael Schmidt, *Lives of the Poets*:**

*Without Pound, much of the most innovative poetry looks like nonsense. Williams is not enough: Pound is the problematic, polyphiloprogenitive ancestor. And those who reject him, for his politics or for his poetry, build on the tradition he abandoned in 1920 when he abandoned England, the "sinking island."*

## Introduction to the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:

*H.D. had arrived in London in 1911, and her verse, written under the spell of ancient Greek lyrical fragments, so impressed Pound that a year later he sent her poems, signed "H.D. Imagiste" at his insistence, to Harriet Monroe, the founding editor of Poetry, the Chicago clearinghouse for modern verse. He told Monroe that H.D.'s poems were "modern" and "laconic," though classical in subject... H.D.'s early poems — lucid, economical, often centered in a single metaphor — best exemplified [the Imagist] theory.*

### Robert Lowell:

*"The Pisan Cantos are very uneven ... If you took what most people would agree are maybe the best hundred passages, would the beliefs in those passages be obnoxious? I think you'd get a very mixed answer. You could make a good case for Pound's good humor about his imprisonment, his absence of self-pity, his observant eye, his memories of literary friends, for all kinds of generous qualities and open qualities and lyrical qualities that anyone would think were good. And even when he does something like the death of Mussolini, in the passage that opens the Pisan Cantos, people debate about it. I've talked to Italians who were partisans, and who said that this is the only poem on Mussolini that's any good. Pound's quite wily often: Mussolini hung up like an ox — his brutal appearance. I don't know whether you could say the beliefs there are wrong or not. And there are other poems that come to mind: in Eliot, the Jew spelled with a small j in "Gerontion," is that anti-Semitism or not? Eliot's not anti-Semitic in any sense, but there's certainly a dislike of Jews in those early poems. Does he gain in the fierceness of writing his Jew with a small j? He says you write what you have to write and in criticism you can say what you think you should believe in. Very ugly emotions perhaps make a poem."*

### William Carlos Williams, from *Kora in Hell*:

*E.P. is the best enemy United States verse has. He is interested, passionately interested—even if he doesn't know what he is talking about. But of course he does know what he is talking about. He does not, however, know everything, not by more than half. The accordances of which Americans have the parts and the colors but not the completions before them pass beyond the attempts of his thought. It is a middle-aged blight of the imagination.*

*I praise those who have the wit and courage, and the conventionality, to go direct toward their vision of perfection in an objective world where the signposts are clearly marked, viz., to London. But confine them in hell for their parietic assumption that there is no alternative but their own groove.*

### Ezra Pound:

*[A] one-image [poem is] trying to record the precise instant when a thing outward and objective transforms itself, or darts into a thing inward and subjective.*

### Peter Carey:

*I started to read. I read all sorts of things in a great huge rush. James Joyce and Graham Greene and Jack Kerouac and William Faulkner, week after week. No nineteenth-century authors at all. No Australian authors, because I thought they were worthless, of course – that's good colonial self-hatred. I read haphazardly but with great passion. I would sit there earnestly annotating Pound's Cantos, for instance, almost building a way between myself and the possibility of reading them.*

### **Ezra Pound, from "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" (1909):**

*I honour him for he prophesied me while I can only recognize him as a forebear of whom I ought to be proud ... 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 marasmus.*

### **Robert Lowell:**

*Ezra Pound has written that he doesn't think anyone can know anything at all about the art of lucid narrative in English if he hasn't seen all fifteen books of Ovid's Elizabethan translator, Arthur Golding. That is a good way of putting it, and yet I imagine Golding has rarely been read cover to cover.*

### **Introduction to Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*At first, Eliot and Pound seemed to be moving in the same direction. They both wrote about the modern world as a group of fragments, Pound in the first Cantos that he published in Poetry and Eliot in The Waste Land, which Pound had helped Eliot complete. Only gradually did it become clear that these poems embodied divergent views: for Eliot, the disjunctiveness of the world was intolerable, and he was determined to mind it (as his eventual conversion to Anglican Christianity helped him do). Pound preferred to accept and exploit this disjunctiveness.*

### **T.S. Eliot:**

*Then in 1914, I think, we were both in London in the summer. [Conrad Aiken] said, "You go to Pound. Show him your poems. He thought Pound might like them. Aiken liked them, though they were very different from his..." I think I went to call on him first. I think I made a good impression, in his little triangular sitting room in Kensington. He said, Send me your poems. And he wrote back, This is as good as anything I've seen. Come around and have a talk about them. Then he pushed them on Harriet Monroe, which took a little time... When I went to see Pound, I was not particularly an admirer of his work, and though I now regard the work I saw them as very accomplished, I am certain that in his later work is to be found the grand stuff... He was a marvelous critic because he didn't try to turn you into an imitation of himself. He tried to see what you were trying to do... There was a long section about a shipwreck. I don't know what that had to do with anything else, but it was rather inspired by the Ulysses canto in The Inferno, I think. Then there was another section that was an imitation Rape of the Lock. Pound said, It's no use trying to do something that somebody else has done as well as it can be done. Do something different.*

**Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, November 20, 1947:**

*I've seen Pound some more and won his heart by telling him that I was a collateral descendant of Aaron Burr, whose only mistake was not having shot Hamilton twenty years earlier. He remembers your work before the war as having more "address" than Mary Barnard and some New Directions woman whose name he can't recall.*

**Harold Bloom, *Best Poems in the English Language*:**

*Pound's major work is The Cantos, which seem to me to anthologize badly, nor do I have much esteem for them, or for Pound, whether as a person or a poet. Like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who, with Robert Browning and Walt Whitman, was a crucial precursor, Pound excelled as a translator.*

**The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*But the total impression of The Cantos may rather be one of shifting intersecting forms, coming into being and then retreating from the page. The fragments, instead of adding up to degradation, as in Eliot's Waste Land, compose for Pound possibilities and brief realizations. The Cantos stand like a monolith in modern literature, not to be avoided or ignored.*

**Ezra Pound:**

*At a particular date in a particular room, two authors, neither engaged in picking the other's pocket, decided that the dilution of vers libre, Amygism, Lee Masterism, general floppiness had gone too far and that some countercurrent must be set going. Parralel situation centuries ago in China. Remedy prescribed 'Emaux et Camees' (or the Bay State Hymn Book). Rhyme and regular strophes. Results: Poems in Mr. Eliot's second volume, not contained in his first...also H.S. Mauberley.' Divergence later.*

**Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, February 10, 1963:**

*Pound's daughter was here, looking like him and strangely like Jack Sweeney's Irish wife, Maire. Somewhere there was an awakening from father—not a disillusionment but surprise: "Until six years ago I never questioned one of his thoughts...Of course I wasn't prepared to be impressed by T.S. Eliot...Wjem je came back, we didn't know that even he couldn't do anything...two years of sitting hardly raising an arm and thinking all his contemporaries' careers had gone better than his...stopped me from translating the Cantos, saying they were no good...Do people in such a state really feel the terrible things they say?...at first it was Cantos at every meal." She saw Frost the day before he died. "I wanted him to know that some one who loved Father didn't have bad manners." Frost said that he loved Ezra and hoped to see him in Venice, where he now is in a rather better state. She and her husband live in a Tyrolean castle, cold, too large, isolated; Dorothy Pound stays with them ("It seems she and father exhausted all they had to say to each other at St. Elizabeths") and they talk about cats and flowers, and each winter some one in the small family launches off on the New York edition of Henry James—"his subtle qualifications hardly seems to fit*



*the circumstances of my life." A strange, shy, pathetic and in no way ugly life. She hardly knows what country she belongs to and has just taken a short course in filing at Yale to take care of her father's papers. I have been thinking of the great callousness and bravado of Ezra's existence, so free one might [think] of half-thought, of most men's waverings, feelings of being a copy, of not pursuing the good, etc. Then the shell breaks and the cold air tortures the exposed flesh. Then partial recovery, though the other was a recovery of humanity.*

### **Donald Davie:**

*The chief advantage of looking at modern poetry from the point of view of the Imaginary Museum is that only from this standpoint do poetic styles as various as those of Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot, of Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, appear as so many different (yet related) answers to one and the same problem – the problem of a radically changed relationship to the poetic past, a relationship which must be different from Tennyson's or Pope's.*

### **Hugh Kenner on *The Cantos*:**

*[There is a] paradox that an intensely topical poem has become archaic without ever having been contemporary: archaic in an honorific sense ... There is no substitute for critical tradition: a continuum of understanding, early commenced ... Precisely because William Blake's contemporaries did not know what to make of him, we do not know either.*

### **Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, September 7, 1948:**

*Had a good afternoon with Pound. "It does me good to get unstoppered." The only trouble is that it is always much the same bottle. New this time: that he went to Italy to be somewhere the French couldn't look down on; and stories about the seven male poets of England (who were they?) going to call on Wilfred S. Blunt, and his 20 year old mistress. "When I went with Dorothy, the mistress was gone, but I told her all about it." "I wish I'd read Confucius when I was young, but Dorothy says I would have been the most unbearable old bore that ever lived." He's translated the Confucian odes in St. Eliz and wants them printed with a Chinese, phonetic and English texts. His family think them his best work, and I wouldn't be surprised.*

### **Introduction to Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*Even Pound and Eliot did not break completely with nineteenth-century poetry: they were indebted to Whitman ... But since Pound and Eliot sought to distinguish themselves from the Romantics and Victorians, their modernist emphasis on rupture and on formal invention colors the overall picture of what is new and distinctive in modern poetry as a whole.*

### **Ezra Pound, *Active Anthology*:**

*Mr. Eliot and I are in agreement, or "belong to the same school of critics," in so far as we both believe that existing works form a complete order which is changed by the introduction of the "really new" work.*

**Elizabeth Bishop, letter to Robert Lowell, March 5, 1963:**

*I admire Pound's extraordinary courage, maany things about him—but read [the biography of Chekhov], Cal, and see how petty Pound appears, how horribly "flawed," as you say—and almost completely lacking in natural human feelings.*

**Marianne Moore:**

*In Henry James it is the essays and letters especially that affect me. In Ezra Pound, The Spirit of Romance, his definiteness, his indigenously unmistakable accent. Charles Norman says in his biography of Ezra Pound that he said to a poet, "Nothing, nothing, that you couldn't in some circumstance, under stress of some emotion, actually say." And Ezra said of Shakespeare and Dante, "Here we are with the masters; of neither can we say, 'He is the greatest'; of each we must say, 'He is unexcelled.'"*

**Harold Bloom, Best Poems in the English Language:**

*My subject here, in necessarily curtailed terms, is Pound's relation to poetic tradition in his own language, and to Whitman in particular. Pound's critics have taken him at his word in this regard, but no poet whatsoever can be trusted in his or her own story of poetic origins, even as no man or woman can be relied on to speak with dispassionate accuracy of his or her parents. Perhaps Pound triumphed in his agon with poetic tradition, which is the invariable assertion of all of his critical partisans. But the triumph, if it occurred, was a very qualified one.*

**Ezra Pound on "Hugh Mauberley", 1922 letter:**

*"Of course, I'm no more Mauberley than Eliot is Prufrock...Mauberley is mere surface. Again a study in form, an attempt to condense the James Novel. Meliora speramus."*

**Robert Lowell:**

*"I thought the Pisan Cantos was the best writing Pound had ever done, though it included some of his worst. It's a very mixed book: that was the question. But the consequence of not giving the best book of the year a prize for extraneous reasons, even terrible ones in a sense – I think that's the death of art. Then you have Pasternak suppressed and everything becomes stifling. Particularly in a strong country like ours you've got to award things objectively and not let the beliefs you'd like a man to have govern your choice. It was very close after the war, and anyone must feel that the poetry award was a trifling thing compared with the concentration camps. I actually think they were very distant from Pound. He had no political effect whatsoever and was quite eccentric and impractical. Pound's social credit, his fascism, all these various things, were a tremendous gain to him; he'd be a very Parnassian poet without them. Even if they're bad beliefs – and some were bad, some weren't, and some were just terrible, of course – they made him more human and more to do with life, more to do with the times. They served him. Taking what interested him in these things gave a kind of realism and life to his poetry that it wouldn't have had otherwise."*

**Ezra Pound, from "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" (1909):**

*He is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America. He is the hollow place in the rock that echoes with his time. He does 'chant the crucial stage' and he is the 'voice triumphant.' He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission.*

**Michael Schmidt:**

*His economic theories seemed hare-brained, his anti-Semitism intolerable. Friends chose to ignore him rather than call him to account. Unchecked in his pursuit of "truth," unheeded in his Cassandra-like prophecies, he became ever more strident. The politics and economics of the later Cantos are increasingly crude, until the poem is broken open by the defeat of the Axis powers and Pound himself is arrested by the Americans in 1944 for treason. Was he driven mad by his theories, hatred and defeats? The Pisan Cantos and the later work suggest that he was not.*

**Ezra Pound:**

*I respect Mr. Joyce's integrity as an author in that he has not taken the easy part. I never had any respect for his common sense or for his intelligence, apart from his gifts as a writer.*

**Marianne Moore:**

*The Spirit of Romance. I don't think anybody could read that book and feel that a flounderer was writing ... [The early poems] seemed a little didactic, but I liked them.*

**Harold Bloom, Best Poems in the English Language:**

*Collage, which is handled as metaphor by Marianne Moore and by the Eliot of The Waste Land, is a much more literal process in Pound, is more scheme than trope, as it were. The allusive triumph over tradition in Moore's "Marriage" or The Waste Land is fairly problematical, yet nowhere near so dubious as it is in The Cantos. Confronted by a past poetic wealth in figuration, Pound tends to resort to baroque elaborations of the anterior metaphors. What he almost never manages is to achieve an ellipsis of further troping by his own inventiveness at metaphor. He cannot make the voices of Whitman and Browning seem belated, while his own voice manifests what Stevens called an "ever early candor."*

**Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, February 25, 1948:**

*What's on the inside of this page is something Ezra wants sent to 12 writers, me, Randall, Allen, Williams, Cummings, Wyndham Lewis, Auden, Spender—I forget the rest—"action within 24 hours" whatever that means. When Spender saw him, he offered to be our academical adviser, and Pound said, "No, you're to be one of the advised." See if you can guess to whom he's sending his Confucius translation "The Unwobbling Pivot"! It's the most unlikely person in the world.*

**Ezra Pound, 1948:**

*to Jarrell / Tate / Spender / ?*

*discuss: Brooks Adams, Frobenius, Gesell, essential Loeb / Ford, W.L. to Tate.*

*Barry Domville "Admiral to Cabin Boy"*

*Has Tate anything of Devlin's / or has L?*

*what any one else know of him.*

*Tate's question re / Marianne /*

*O.K. but see what others think / IN ANY CASE NEVER more than ONE wumman at a time.*

*Tate's re / some prof /*

*?? usual time lag or not?*

### **Michael Schmidt on William Langland's *Piers Plowman*:**

*His "I" is strong and affirmative – one might say "modern," in the way of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis – compared with Gower's and Chaucer's reticences.*

### **Introduction to the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*Yeats found unexpected company in a young American, Ezra Pound. Pound arrived in London in 1908, at twenty-three, convinced that Yeats was the best poet then writing in English and determined to learn from him. Yeats also discovered how much this young man could tell him of new ideas and techniques, and from 1913 to 1916, they spent three winters together in a stone cottage south of London. Pound's generosity and gregariousness, his propagandizing for the avant-garde, made his apartment in Kensington for a time the headquarters of innovative verse for both England and America.*

### **Ezra Pound, from "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" (1909):**

*I am (in common with every educated man) an heir of the ages and I demand my birth-right. Yet if Whitman represented his time in language acceptable to one accustomed to my standard of intellectual-artistic living he would belie his time and nation. And yet I am but one of his 'ages and ages encrustations' or to be exact an encrustation of the next age. The vital part of my message, taken from the sap and fibre of America, is the same as his.*

### **Robert Lowell:**

*"I got [Propertius] through Pound. When I read him in Latin I found a kind of Propertius you don't get in Pound at all. Pound's Propertius is a rather Ovidian figure with a great deal of Pound's fluency and humor and irony. The actual Propertius is a very excited, tense poet, rather desperate; his line is much more like parts of Marlowe's Faustus."*

### **Clive James, *Cultural Cohesion*:**

*The Cantos, the twentieth-century version of Casaubon's "Key to All the Mythologies" from Middlemarch, ranges through all time and all space looking for a pattern, tracing specious lines of connection in which Pound progressively entangles himself, until finally he hangs mummified with only his mouth moving, unable to explain even his own era, a nut for politics whose political role was to be the kind of Fascist that real Fascists found naive.*

### **Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, January 1, 1954:**

*I saw Pound some two weeks ago at St. Elizabeths, the first time in four years. It's a shock how unchanged he was, the same list of books (when he learned I was only to be there for the day, he brushed aside human amenities, plunged in medias res, and told me how to teach history from 1830-1860), the same rhetoric. But he's much fatter and healthier, jumps about, dances like a bear and no longer complains of memory gaps. O, I think he has lived because he has wanted to, and [Dylan] Thomas didn't. No I don't mean that exactly. Thomas wanted to live burning, burning out.*

*So we. I want to live to be old, and want you to.*

### **Marianne Moore:**

*If you have a genius of an editor, you are blessed: e.g. T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.*

### **Harold Bloom, *Best Poems in the English Language*:**

*Pound, brash and natural child of Whitman and Browning, found his idealized forerunners in Arnaut Daniel and Cavalcanti, Villon, and Landor. Oedipal ambivalence, which marks Pound's stance toward Whitman, never surfaces in his observations on Cavalcanti and Villon, safely remote not only in time and language, but more crucially isolated from the realities of Pound's equivocal relation to his country and compatriots.*

### **Michael Schmidt on Pound/Chaucer:**

*Of the poems doubtfully attributed to Chaucer, one, "Merciles Beaute," a triple roundel, touched Ezra Pound to the quick:*

*Your yen two wol slee me sodenly;  
I may the beautee of hem not sustene,  
So woundeth hit thourghout my herte knee.*

### **Marianne Moore:**

*In his book on Ezra Pound, Charles Norman was very scrupulous. He got several things exactly right. The first time I met Ezra Pound, when he came here to see my mother and me, I said that Henry Eliot seemed to me more nearly the artist than anyone I had ever met. "Now, now," said Ezra. "Be careful." Maybe that isn't exact, but he quotes it just the way I said it.*

**Pound, again, on *Ulysses*:**

*"In a single chapter he discharges all the cliches of the English language like an uninterrupted river."*

**Ezra Pound, from "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" (1909):**

*Mentally I am a Walt Whitman who has learned to wear a collar and a dress shirt (although at times inimical to both). Personally I might be very glad to conceal my relationship to my spiritual father and brag about my more congenial ancestry—Dante, Shakespeare, Theocritus, Villon, but the descent is a bit difficult to establish. And, to be frank, Whitman is to my fatherland (Patriam quam odi et amo for no uncertain reason) what Dante is to Italy and I at my best can only be a strife for renaissance in America of all the lost or temporarily mislaid beauty, truth, valour, glory of Greece, Italy, England and all the rest of it.*

**H.D.:**

*Ezra Pound was very kind and used to bring me (literally) armfuls of books to read ...I did a few poems that I don't think Ezra liked ...but later he was beautiful about my first authentic verses ... and sent my poems in for me to Miss Monroe [the editor of Poetry magazine]. He signed them for me, 'H.D., Imagiste.' The name seems to have stuck somehow.*

**Harold Bloom, *Best Poems in the English Language*:**

*I find Whitman quite unrecognizable in nearly every reference Pound makes to him. Our greatest poet and our most elusive, because most figurative, Whitman consistently is literalized by Pound, as though the Whitmanian self could be accepted as a machine rather than as a metaphor.*

**Ezra Pound on H.D.**

*Objective – no slither; direct – no excessive use of adjectives, no metaphors that won't permit examination. It's straight talk, straight to the Greek!*

**Introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*:**

*In 1912-13, he adopted the more epigrammatic and ironic mode that became Imagism. Imagism evolved from symbolism and shared its antipathy for explanatory discourse, but it shifted the emphasis from the musical to the visual, the mysterious to the actual, the ambiguously suggestive symbol to the clear-cut natural image. Pound was helped to chart the new course in his writing by Ford Madox Ford, an American expatriate novelist who insisted on precision and efficiency in writing, on presenting facts without commenting on them,*

**Ezra Pound on Gavin Douglas' *Virgil*:**

*Gavin Douglas re-created us Virgil, or rather, we forget Virgil in reading Gavin's Aeneid and know only the tempest, Acheron, and the eternal elements that Virgil for most men glazes over.*

### **Ezra Pound, from "What I Feel About Walt Whitman" (1909):**

*Like Dante he wrote in the "vulgar tongue," in a new metric. The first great man to write in the language of his people.*

### **Harold Bloom, on Ezra Pound's "Oedipal" essay "What I Feel About Walt Whitman":**

*Its subject is hardly Whitman at all, but rather the United States in 1909, viewed as a country that does not acknowledge its self-exiled bard, Ezra Pound, who had taken up residence in London the year before. As a country that needs to be scourged with/by beauty (a conceit perhaps more Sacher-Masoch than Whitman), the United States (or Whitman) becomes a castrated father, even as the passionate Pound assumes the male function of driving the American vitality into the old world. If this seems crude, it is, but the crudity is certainly not Walt Whitman's.*

### **Pound on Ulysses:**

*The action takes place in one day ... in a single place, Dublin. Telemachus wanders beside the shore of the loud and roaring sea; he sees the midwives with their professional bags. Ulysses breakfasts, circulates; mass, funeral, bath house, race tracktalk; the other characters circulate; the soap circulates; he hunts for advertising, the "ad" of the House of Keyes, he visits the national library to verify an anatomical detail of mythology, he comes to the isle of Aeolus (a newspaper office), all the noises burst forth, tramways, trucks, post office wagons, etc.; Nausicaa appears, they dine at the hospital; the meeting of Ulysses and Telemachus, the brothel, the brawl, the return to Bloom's, and then the author presents Penelope, symbol of the earth, whose night thoughts end the story as counterweight to the ingenuities of the male.*

### **Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, April 24th, 1951**

*Had a note from Pound, "Think at last Monsieur Lowell is larnin' to write—going into it hindquarters first like E.P."*

### **Clive James, Cultural Cohesion:**

*Pound's version of the Fascist era never arrived, and indeed it was never there, even under Fascism, although Pound managed to convince himself that Mussolini had actually read his presentation volume of the Cantos. (Admittedly, Mussolini told him so, but Mussolini also told the Italian people that they were going to win the war.)*

### **Michael Schmidt:**

*Concentrating on his studies, he developed his anticapitalist and anti-Zionist theories. In the magnificent Canto XXX, one of the great political poems of the century, unpardonable because it*

*defines with such plangency his early fascism even while his contemporaries were lining up behind Stalin ...*

### **Ezra Pound to Joyce, after reading the drafts of the first three chapters of *Ulysses*:**

*'Wall, Mr Joice, I recon your a damn fine writer, that's what I recon'. An' I recon' this here work o' yourn is some concern'd literature. you can take it from me, an' I'm a jedge.'*

### **Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, October 1, 1948**

*An emotional last meeting with Pound: "Cal, god go with you, if you like the company."*

### **The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*[Hugh Selwyn Mauberley'] anticipates many of the devices of *The Waste Land* (1922), such as sudden shifts in perspective, unacknowledged quotations in different languages, and the presentation of an individual consciousness against a panorama of the age. It is more loosely knit, however, and includes satirical portraits, invectives against modern capitalism, and elegies for the war dead. Pound was eager to disavow that the poem was autobiographical, though he seems to elegize his London self as impossibly aestheticist.*

### **Marianne Moore:**

*When I went to see Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeths, about the third time I went, the official who escorted me to the grounds said, Good of you to come to see him, and I said, Good? You have no idea how much he has done for me, and others. This pertains to an early rather than final visit.*

*I was not in the habit of asking experts or anybody else to help me with things that I was doing, unless it was a librarian or someone whose business it was to help applicants, or a teacher. But I was desperate when Macmillan declined my Fables. I had worked about four years on them and sent Ezra Pound several – although I hesitated. I didn't like to bother him. He had enough trouble without that, but finally I said, Would you have time to tell me if the rhythms grate on you? Is my ear not good? Yes, he said. The least touch of merit upsets these blighters.*

## **Visits to St. Elizabeths**

### **By Elizabeth Bishop**

This is the house of Bedlam.

This is the man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the time  
of the tragic man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.



This is a wristwatch  
telling the time  
of the talkative man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a sailor  
wearing the watch  
that tells the time  
of the honored man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the roadstead all of board  
reached by the sailor  
wearing the watch  
that tells the time  
of the old, brave man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

These are the years and the walls of the ward,  
the winds and clouds of the sea of board  
sailed by the sailor  
wearing the watch  
that tells the time  
of the cranky man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a Jew in a newspaper hat  
that dances weeping down the ward  
over the creaking sea of board  
beyond the sailor  
winding his watch  
that tells the time  
of the cruel man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a world of books gone flat.  
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat  
that dances weeping down the ward  
over the creaking sea of board  
of the batty sailor  
that winds his watch  
that tells the time  
of the busy man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is a boy that pats the floor  
to see if the world is there, is flat,  
for the widowed Jew in the newspaper hat  
that dances weeping down the ward  
waltzing the length of a weaving board  
by the silent sailor  
that hears his watch  
that ticks the time  
of the tedious man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

These are the years and the walls and the door  
that shut on a boy that pats the floor  
to feel if the world is there and flat.  
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat  
that dances joyfully down the ward  
into the parting seas of board  
past the staring sailor  
that shakes his watch  
that tells the time  
of the poet, the man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

This is the soldier home from the war.  
These are the years and the walls and the door  
that shut on a boy that pats the floor  
to see if the world is round or flat.  
This is a Jew in a newspaper hat  
that dances carefully down the ward,  
walking the plank of a coffin board  
with the crazy sailor  
that shows his watch  
that tells the time  
of the wretched man  
that lies in the house of Bedlam.

**Clive James, *Cultural Cohesion*:**

*In the long run, a poet like Galway Kinnell could do what Pound vaunted himself as doing but never could: make poetry from history. Pound staked everything on that, and was bound to fail; not because he couldn't write poetry, but because he was debarred by nature from understanding history; he thought his gift for the dogmatic epigram was a guarantee of universal scope. Having failed, he faded; gradually but beyond recovery.*

**Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, December 3, 1957:**

*I sent copies of my poems to Randall, Allen, and Ezra Pound...Pound wrote:*

*"Mr. Lowell of Boston  
No light Baby-Austin  
but when the garbage froze or  
the vast accumulation of residues  
caused exacerbation,  
a bulldozer  
was wanted for deep excavation...*

*whether I can corrugate  
castigate or elevate this nonsense  
into somethink worthy the occasion  
REEMains to be sawn  
rough, hew them as we will."*

*That does seem unusually clear for Ezra. But, whose nonsense? His or mine? I'm not sure if  
enthusiastic flattery is meant or fierce abuse.*

**Michael Schmidt on Ben Jonson:**

*The more we read Jonson the more we see him as an enabling figure comparable to Pound. Clarity  
of expression is matched by intellectual and perceptual rigor.*

**Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, April 20, 1958:**

*Pound is out. Going to a Chinese restaurant and using a telephone for the first time in 15 years, he  
told his daughter-in-law "the ancestral voice is once more on the air." A joke, I think, not the  
beginning of a Jeremiad.*

**Ezra Pound on his early poems:**

*"...stale creampuffs"*

**Michael Schmidt:**

*Ezra Pound loved [Elizabeth Barrett] Browning as only poets love – with jealousy and  
disappointment.*

**More along those lines: one of Pound's Cantos addresses Elizabeth Barrett directly:**

*And I discern your story : Browning's  
Peire Cardinal "Bordello"*

*Was half fore-runner of Dante. Arnaut's the trick  
Of the unfinished address,*

*And half your dates are out; you mix your eras  
For that great font, Sordello sat beside —  
'Tis an immortal passage, but the font? —  
Is some two centuries outside the picture*

*And no matter.*

It's the "and no matter" that matters. Browning's "dates" are "out". She mixes eras in her poems. Pound seems disappointed and angry. But then he gives it all to her, with "And no matter". She was very important to him.

### **Pound on Thomas Hardy's poetry**

*"Now there is clarity. There is the harvest of having written 20 novels first."*

### **Elizabeth Bishop, letter to Robert Lowell, May 18, 1948:**

*And thank you for taking me to see Pound. I am really endlessly grateful for that experience.*

### **Introduction to the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*After abandoning Imagism as too static and insufficiently rigorous in 1914, Pound helped create a new movement, Vorticism, that emphasized not the do's and don'ts of style, such as those he had enumerated in "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," but the dynamism of content. Pound conceived the vortex — an image of whirling, intensifying, encompassing energy— as the movement's emblem. Like Imagism, Vorticism lasted only for a few years, finding its most raucous embodiment in Wyndham Lewis's journal Blast and its main aesthetic achievements in Lewis's painting and Gaudier-Brzeska's sculpture rather than in verse. After its decline, Pound quit founding movements and, a few years later, left London for Italy....Though the Imagist movement formally came to an end in 1917, when [Amy] Lowell published the third of her anthologies, both Pound and H.D. went on to write long, complex, many-layered poems that recall Imagism in their musical cadences, sharp juxtapositions, and free-ranging content.*

### **Ezra Pound:**

*I like Eliot's sentence: "No verse is libre for the man who wants to do a good job." I think the best free verse comes from an attempt to get back to quantitative meter.*

### **Ezra Pound, The Imagists, rules:**

*Direct treatment of the 'thing' whether objective or subjective; to use absolutely no word that did not contribute to the presentation: as regarding rhythm, to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.*

**Clive James, *Cultural Cohesion*:**

*If you read Ezra Pound early on—and when I was coming of age in Australia in the late 1950s we all did—you can spend a lifetime wondering how he ever got under your skin.*

**Elizabeth Bishop, letter to Robert Lowell, May 8, 1958:**

*And now the latest rumour is that Pound is coming here. At least a friend called from Rio last night and said he has a letter about coming here in the current Journal of Letters. I haven't seen it yet but shall try to get a copy today or tomorrow. Can it be true? I thought he wanted to go straight back to Italy. There is an enormous Italian colony in Sao Paulo, and he might well have fascist friends there, and he did translate some of Camoes, and the exchange is extremely high now (but so are prices here)...so I suppose there are reasons why it may be true. It depresses me terribly, though, to think of him spreading more anti-Americanism here, where there is already a lot of it ... Do you know anything about it? If he does come, of course, I'd like to go call on him in Rio, help Mrs. P if I could, even have him up here, maybe. But he'd probably be going to Sao Paulo, and if he ever saw that poem of mine, or Mrs. P saw it, he might not want to see me, anyway...If ever he came up here I'd have to get Lota to swear up and down first that she wouldn't let him get a rise out of her, or argue with him! (I'm a coward, I know,—but I've never seen the point of, or been able to endure, much argument!) I really hope it isn't true. There are too many crack-pots here already.... I am glad he's out.*

**Robert Lowell, letter to Elizabeth Bishop, June 21, 1958:**

*I gather it's pretty certain that Pound is returning to Italy sometime towards the middle of July. He seems rather to hibernate through his winters—a relative hibernation; for us it would seem fierce activity. But of course when he was released, exhausting energies appeared—a trip to Charlottesville, lunches with colones, professors, fans, suggestions that he was about to study old Egyptian, tour Germany, France, and England. Mrs. Pound had a long list of addresses and high-spots to see in Boston. We cut them down to a morning at the John Adams' house—very grave and cool after Ezra and the peeling traffic-wrung environs of Boston.*

**Ezra Pound:**

*I don't know whether it is his own or whether it is a gem that he collected, but at any rate one of the things Frost said in London in 19—whenever it was — 1912, was this: "Summary of prayer: 'Oh God, pay attention to me.'"*

**Florence Herman, wife of William Carlos Williams:**

*Pound came over in ... I think, 1938 to get an honorary degree at Hamilton. And he spent two days with us when he was released from Saint Elizabeth's in 1958, before he sailed for Italy. I wouldn't know what to say of this last impression. He was self-centered, as always. You couldn't talk to him; it was impossible... Ezra always tried to tell Bill off, but they got along as friends over the years. Bill wasn't afraid of him; their letters used to be rather acrimonious, back and forth.*

### **Ted Hughes on Ezra Pound:**

*As a personality – [Pound] doesn't have the power to fascinate as a personality that, for instance, Eliot does, or Yeats, perhaps because his internal evolution, or whatever it was, was so broken, so confused by a militance that took it over from the outside. Perhaps one recoils from what feels like a disintegration. But many pages of the verse seem to me wonderful in all kinds of ways.*

### **Clive James, *Cultural Cohesion*:**

*Pound went on and on about making you see, but the cold truth is that in the Cantos there are not many moments that light up.*

### **Ezra Pound, on being Yeats's secretary:**

*Mostly reading aloud. Doughty's Dawn in Britain, and so on. And wrangling, you see. The Irish like contradiction. He tried to learn fencing at forty-five, which was amusing. He would thrash around with the foils like a whale. He sometimes gave the impression of being even a worse idiot than I am...Once out at Rapallo I tried for God's sake to prevent him from printing a thing. I told him it was rubbish. All he did was print it with a preface saying that I said it was rubbish.*

### **Introduction to Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*For Pound, Eliot's sifting and fusing ended in a surprisingly orthodox religious view that Pound regarded as based on too limited a number of particulars. Pound developed his own "ideogrammatic method," as he called it, in which he heaped up the components of thought so that they would eventually cohere as if without artistic intervention. His image for this method was one of iron filings that, drawn toward a piece of glass for a magnet, assume the pattern of a rose. "Hast 'ou seen the rose in the steel dust?" he asks. He realized that such a rose might serve him as the rose of beauty had served Yeats, the Christian rose had served Eliot. The Cantos gather slices of time and space, fable and fact, images from aboriginal tribes and effete cultures. The poet achieves his effect not by purifying, but by collocating diffuse materials. Eliot consolidated his innovations, while Pound restlessly extended his.*

## **On the Fly-Leaf of Pound's Cantos**

### **By Basil Bunting**

There are the Alps. What is there to say about them?

They don't make sense. Fatal glaciers, crags cranks climb,  
jumbled boulder and weed, pasture and boulder, scree,  
et l'on entend, maybe, le refrain joyeux et léger.

Who knows what the ice will have scraped on the rock it is smoothing?

There they are, you will have to go a long way round  
if you want to avoid them.

It takes some getting used to. There are the Alps,  
fools! Sit down and wait for them to crumble!

### **T.S. Eliot, letter to Conrad Aiken, on Pound's poems:**

*Touchingly incompetent.*

### **Ezra Pound:**

*I went to London because I thought Yeats knew more about poetry than anybody else. I made my life in London by going to see Ford in the afternoons and Yeats in the evenings. By mentioning one to the other one could always start a discussion. That was the exercise. I went to study with Yeats and found that Ford disagreed with him. So then I kept on disagreeing with them for twenty years.*

### **Robert Graves, on meeting Ezra Pound:**

*From his poems, I had expected a brawny, loud-voiced, swashbuckling American; but he was plump, hunched, soft-spoken and ill-at-ease, with the limpest of handshakes.*

### **Introduction to the Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry:**

*It is one of the great ironies of modern literary history that Pound, an anti-Semite, living in and supporting Benito Mussolini's Fascist Italy, inspired the left-wing Objectivist American Jews—Oppen, Zukofsky, and Charles Reznikoff—as well as Bunting, the one prominent British member of the Objectivist group, and the American Lorine Niedecker, the only woman.*

### **Ezra Pound:**

*Eliot and I started diverging from the beginning. The fun of an intellectual friendship is that you diverge on something or other and agree on a few points. Eliot, having had the Christian patience of tolerance all his life and so forth, and working very hard, must have found me very trying. We started disagreeing about a number of things from the time we met. We also agreed on a few things and I suppose both of us must have been right about something or other... There's the whole problem of the relation of Christianity to Confucianism, and there's the whole problem of the different brands of Christianity. There is the struggle for orthodoxy – Eliot for the Church, me gunning round for particular theologians. In one sense Eliot's curiosity would appear to have been focused on a smaller number of problems. Even that is too much to say. The actual outlook of the experimental generation was all a question of the private ethos.... I should think the divergence was first a difference in subject matter. He has undoubtedly got a natural language. In the language in the plays, he seems to me to have made a very great contribution. And in being able to make contact with an extant milieu, and an extant state of comprehension.*

### **Ernest Hemingway:**

*Ezra was extremely intelligent on the subjects he really knew.... Ezra [was] a great poet and a loyal friend.*

### **Clive James, *Cultural Cohesion*:**

*Galway Kinnell's great poem The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World is the long Ezra Pound poem that Pound himself could never have written. It could not have been written about Pound's Cantos as a point of departure, but it is so much more human, humane and sheerly poetic that you realize why Pound's emphasis on technique and language, fruitful to others, was barren for himself. A poetic gift will include those things—or anyway the capacity for them—but finally there is an element of personality which brings them to their full potential, and only as a means to an end.*

### **Ezra Pound on *The Cantos*:**

*A fugue: theme, response, contrasujet ... Reading matter, singing matter shouting matter, the tale of the tribe.*

### **Ezra Pound:**

*We are up against so many mysteries. There is the problem of benevolence, the point at which benevolence has ceased to be operative. Eliot says that they spend their time trying to imagine systems so perfect that nobody will have to be good. A lot of questions asked in that essay of Eliot's cannot be dodged, like the question of whether there need be any change from the Dantesque scale of values or the Chaucerian scale of values. If so, how much? People who have lost reverence have lost a great deal.*

### **Introduction to the *Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*:**

*Referring to himself in letters as the "sonny" and to Pound as his "papa," [Louis] Zukofsky put Pound's methods to work in forging a second generation modernist aesthetic that could include Yiddish song and humor, as in "Poem Beginning "The."*

### **Ezra Pound:**

*A man who fits in his milieu as Frost does, he is to be considered a happy man.*

### **Michael Schmidt:**

*[Basil Bunting] spent six months in prison as a conscientious objector to National Service in 1918, and the next year went to London to become a journalist, studying for a time at the London School of Economics. In 1923, when he met Pound in Paris, he subedited Ford Madox Ford's Transatlantic Review, then moved to Italy to work near Pound in Rapallo. There he met Yeats.*

### **W.B. Yeats on Basil Bunting:**



*One of Ezra's more savage disciples.*

### **Ezra Pound:**

*Often, I think, so-called obscurity is not obscurity in the language but in the other person's not being able to make out why you are saying a thing. For instance the attack on Endymion was complicated because Gifford and company couldn't see why the deuce Keats was doing it.*

### **William Carlos Williams, on Pound's Cantos:**

*"the impressive monument which Pound is building against our time."*

### **Ezra Pound's outline for *The Cantos*:**

*A.A. Live man goes down into world of Dead*

*C.B. The "repeat in history"*

*B.C. The "magic moment" or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidian into "divine or permanent world." Gods, etc.*

### **Ezra Pound, 1915:**

*[I am working on] a poem of immeasurable length which will occupy me for the next four decades, unless it becomes a bore.*

This entry was posted in [Books](#), [James Joyce](#), [On This Day](#), [writers](#) and tagged [Basil Bunting](#), [Chaucer](#), [Elizabeth Barrett Browning](#), [Elizabeth Bishop](#), [Ernest Hemingway](#), [Ezra Pound](#), [H.D.](#), [Harold Bloom](#), [Harriet Monroe](#), [Marianne Moore](#), [Michael Schmidt](#), [poetry](#), [Robert Graves](#), [T.S. Eliot](#), [Ted Hughes](#), [Thomas Hardy](#), [Ulysses](#), [W.B. Yeats](#), [Walt Whitman](#), [William Carlos Williams](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

## **3 Responses to *It's Ezra Pound's Birthday: "Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose."***

[Bill Altreuter](#) says:

October 30, 2019 at 11:13 am

Pound is tough in ways that other poets are not— at least for me— because I am insufficiently erudite in the matters which were important to him and were shattered by the Great War. And now I have expressed myself poorly, in a way that would have irritated him, so I will try again. I know that the world was broken by the war, and Pound's work was a complex reaction to the effect this had on the things that were most important to him.

[Reply](#)

**sheila** says:

October 30, 2019 at 11:32 am

Bill –

// because I am insufficiently erudite in the matters which were important to him and were shattered by the Great War. //

It's Ezra Pound's Birthday: "Do not retell in mediocre verse what has already been done in good prose." | The Sheila Variations  
I feel the same way. The cloud of associations are lost to me and I have to look up every other word, practically! It definitely requires a different kind of engagement.

// I know that the world was broken by the war, and Pound's work was a complex reaction to the effect this had on the things that were most important to him. //

I like how you say this. Thank you.

[Reply](#)

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**[William Dorsey](#)** says:

October 30, 2020 at 6:22 pm

I once saw Ginsberg lecture on Pound. He recited the canto about usury with a clipped Zen precision. Then he played a recording of Pound reciting the same and it sounded like a lion roaring.

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**The Sheila Variations**

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