

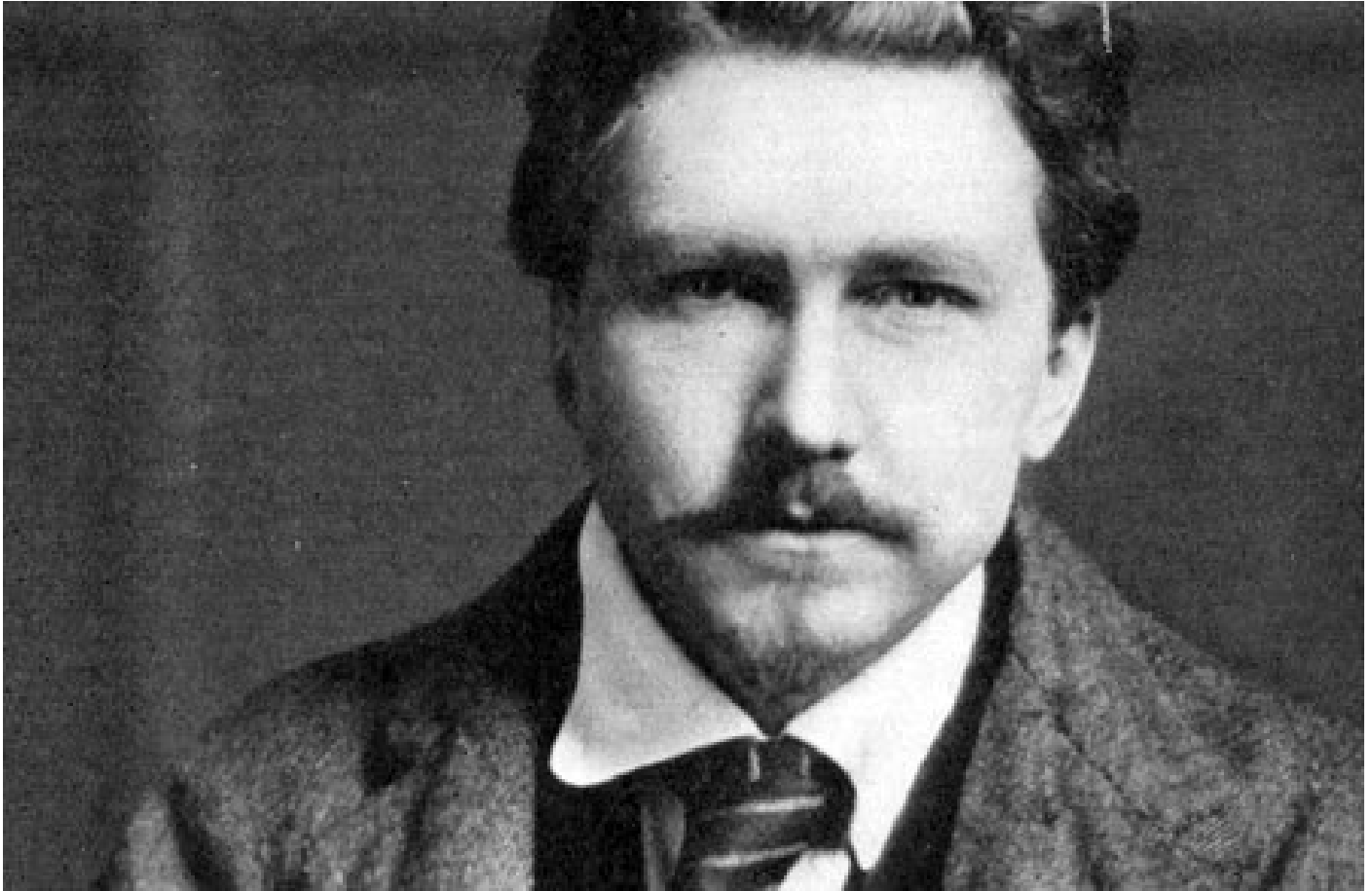


the allen ginsberg project



Mind Mouth & Page – (Pound and the Vernacular)

JUNE 27, 2012



Ezra Pound 1885-1972

Allen's 1975 lecture (that we've been serializing) continues from [here](#) . More on [Ezra Pound](#).

AG: Ok. We need a whole course on Pound (alone), but, briefly, they (the early American modernists) were faced with the problem, 1905-1910, (that Walt) Whitman had already broken apart the old forms. Pound had a little poem..("A Pact") – he didn't like Whitman, because, at first, he thought that Whitman was too unsophisticated and too cranky and too American-provincial, compared to his friend Henry James (who was almost a contemporary of Whitman's). In other words, that's "so refined a mind that no idea could violate it" – Who said that? – Henry James (allegedly) had "so refined a mind that no idea could violate it" – That's Pound or Eliot talking about James, [*Editorial note – it was Eliot*] and it was that kind of really sharp mind that you had to deal with then. So there was a certain European culture that (Pound) dug, and he also got kicked out of Wabash College, Illinois, because he took in a girl who was supposed to have been (a) loose girl-of-the-streets, and put her up in his room overnight, and didn't even sleep with her, and created a great scandal, and this was American culture, provincial culture. So he finally went to Venice where everybody understood things more.

Now he realized that American prosody (we know what the word means, now, by this time – prosody is the measure of the verse and the way that you look at your verse line, the way you figure out how to arrange it on the page, the rhythm, the hearing of it, the sounds, the vowels, counting syllables, or counting iambics, or counting stress, or counting length of vowel) – he realized that American prosody still had to be formed, that it was a whole new field that had to be started all over again from the bottom. Then he also realized that the cause of the problem was a transition from English traditional meters, traditional book meters in English, to American rhythms, which are different from the English rhythms. People in England talk different from people in America (in England, they talk *differently*, in America, they talk *different!*). So the rhythms are different too.

So Pound, being a great scholar, went to find all the parallels in history where there was a transition from an official, or archaic, or classical, prosody and tongue and language to a popular language. There are other times in history when this has happened, and those have been times of great growth and creation of new forms. So he went, as I mentioned before, to Sextus Propertius, who had made the transition from the Greek dance rhythms, (bringing) Greek dance rhythms into Latin verse. (He) made use of the treasury of Greek dance rhythms to get Latin verse hopped up a little and get it out of the heavy-handed mold that it was in, a heavy-mouthed mold. He went to Chinese, because he realized that the English language and the American language were subject to such abstractions – the language itself was “more subject to abstraction and conditioned thought than hieroglyphic language(s), in which each word is a picture. So that in his essay on “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry”, (Pound) notes on notes of a professor, Ernest Fenollosa, who had done that kind of study.

Fenollosa pointed out that we have the word “red” – R-E-D – Now, we’re conditioned to see red when we *hear* red. In Chinese, the word “red” is a combination (of the) hieroglyph of rust, a flamingo’s neck, a sun setting behind a tree, and maybe something else. In other words, pictures that carry the actual red instead of the abstract word, “R-E-D”. And so it was out of that study that he got to the ideas of Imagism, that is, that it should be primarily (a) visual image.

And he pointed out that poetry had always been a combination of three basic elements – *phanopoeia* – the casting of a visual image on the mind’s eye – *melopoeia* – the tone-leading of vowels, or the melody of vowels with tones and with lengths of vowels, or the vocalization part, melody, including rhythm somewhat – and *logopoeia* or the wittiness of the words, the funniness of the words, or, as he said, “the dance of the intellect among words”. So there’s the intellectual *logopoeia*, there’s the *melopoeia*, which is a song, and there is the *phanopoeia*, which is the picture part.

Now for the *melopoeia* part (which is what you were asking about really), for the *melopoeia*, he went to research how rhythms had been adapted and changed when all the high-class verse had been written in Greek and then there were all these creepy Latins trying to write in their vulgar Latin tongue (because Athens was the great cultural center, and for a long while it was considered vulgar to write in Latin). However, Sextus Propertius (so go read Ezra Pound's "Homage to Sextus Propertius") was the great man who brought Greek rhythms into Latin in a way that they were useable in Latin and fitted the Latin tongue, or was conscious of the problem. (Propertius) was conscious of the transition. There was a tradition in Dante from writing in church Latin to writing in the Vulgate tongue, and I think Dante also – who else beside Dante? – was the first – Petrarch?

Student: Petrarch's the first.

AG: Petrarch was the first to write sonnets in Latin, and I guess invent a sonnet form perhaps, because he was singing songs in Italian rather.. singing songs in Italian, instead of intoning church Latin. And then Dante went ahead and picked up on that, and wrote this huge epic [*The Divine Comedy*] in Italian common tongue, using all sorts of precise Italian talk, like "then I squinted my eye like a tailor squints his eye when he tries to put a thread inside a needle" [*e sì ver' noi aguzzavan le ciglia come 'l vecchio sartor fa ne la cruna*], (which nobody could write about in Latin, but you *could* write about that (in Italian)) Just like Williams wrote about turning on the water-tap and waiting for the water to freshen in American language, so Dante wrote common perceptions in the common language. Pound got hung up, then, and studied Dante to see how did he do that? (because Dante was very conscious of having done that – and Petrarch also).

Then he (Pound) got interested in the Provençal tongue – Provençal – provincial – (just) like Williams – Do you know what century? 13th? 14th? 12th? 12th-13th? – (In the) 12th-13th centuries, Frenchmen in the south of France stopped writing in a royal tongue and started writing in a local dialect (like Kerouac wrote? (spoke) in Canuck, local dialect, from Lowell, Massachusetts...

ALLEN GINSBERG DANTE ERNEST FENOLLOSA EZRA POUND
HENRY JAMES ITALIAN PETRARCH

⌂ Previous

Next ⌂

Leave a Reply

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked *

COMMENT *

NAME *

EMAIL *

WEBSITE

☐ NOTIFY ME OF FOLLOW-UP COMMENTS BY EMAIL.

☐ NOTIFY ME OF NEW POSTS BY EMAIL.

Post Comment

Search ...

Tags

Allen Ginsberg Anne Waldman Beat Beat History Beat Memories Beats Beat
Studies Bill Morgan Bob Dylan Bob Rosenthal Buddhism Censorship Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche City Lights Diane
di Prima Drugs Ed Sanders Education Ezra Pound Gary Snyder Gregory Corso Harry Smith Howl India Jack
Kerouac Kaddish Lawrence Ferlinghetti Mantra Meditation Michael McClure Music Naropa Neal Cassady
Peter Orlovsky Philip Whalen Robert Creeley Russia Sociology Steven Taylor Walt Whitman William
Blake William Carlos Williams William S Burroughs William Shakespeare Zen

Archive

Select Month ▼

© 2005-2016 Allen Ginsberg Project. All rights reserved. [Contact us](#) for more information.

Site Links

[Biography](#)

[Published Works](#)

[Links](#)

Collections

[Lectures](#)

[Interviews](#)

[Photos](#)

External Links

[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)

[Merchandise](#)

[Blogger site](#)