

Ezra Pound

Ezra Pound [1] (1885-1972) is one of the most influential, and most controversial poets of the twentieth-century. He is a major figure in 'modernist' literature - that is, experimental literature written during the first part of the twentieth century, renowned for his remarkable knowledge of poetic forms, his experiments in style, and his interest in world literatures. He is best known for the group he founded in 1913, which he named 'Imagism', and for his long poem, *The Cantos*, which he began around 1915 and left unfinished at his death in 1972.

Pound was born in 1885 in Hailey, Idaho, and he grew up in Philadelphia. At the University of Pennsylvania and Hamilton College, he studied Romance literatures, and planned to write a doctoral dissertation on the seventeenth-century Spanish playwright, Lope de Vega. Instead, he moved to London in 1908, to sit at the feet of W.B. Yeats, he later said, whom he considered the greatest living poet. His early verse shows the influence of the Victorian poet Robert Browning, and the late pre-Raphaelite poet Algernon Charles Swinburne, as well as Yeats and the medieval poets he'd studied at university: the Provençal troubadours, François Villon, and the Tuscan poets Guido Cavalcanti and Dante Alighieri. Over the next few years, working alongside contemporary British and American poets, including his ex-fiancée, the poet H.D., and coming to share their interest in and French, Chinese and Japanese poetry, his work became more experimental. In 1913, he founded Imagism with H.D. and her husband Richard Aldington. D.H. Lawrence [2], Amy Lowell, William Carlos Williams, and James Joyce [3], amongst others, were also associated with the movement. Imagist poetry tends to be brief, precise, and use free verse. Pound published a description of imagism and some of his imagist poems in *Poetry* (March, April 1913), a new Chicago literary magazine, and the *New Freewoman* (15 August 1913), which was based in London. You can read both of these journals at the 'Modernist Journals Project' website, and the imagist poems are included in collections such as Faber's *Selected Poems, 1908-1969*, and Penguin's *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*. There's also a Penguin *Imagist Poetry* collection that includes all the poets who published under the banner of imagism.

During the Great War, Pound began working on *The Cantos*, a long poem that took Dante's *Divine Comedy* [4] as one of its models. Individual cantos were published in literary magazines and instalments appeared in book form during the rest of his life. The poem came to include everything that Pound wanted to write about?if you read his essays and books of prose (like *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) which he thought of as a substitute for going to university) you'll find that most of the ideas contained there reappear in *The Cantos*. The text is made up of quotations from and comments on books on history, politics, economics and religion, and research about historical figures (*Cantos* 8-11 are about the fifteenth century ruler of Rimini, Sigismondo Malatesta, which Pound researched in Italian archives). The experience of reading it is at first bewildering, because Pound refers to so many different texts, people and ideas. But as you continue, you start to recognise what Pound called 'subject rhymes', ideas repeating, that build up to an argument about how civilisation should be ordered. Like many people in the aftermath of the Great War, Pound became interested in economic solutions to poverty and war, and much of the poem presents arguments from contemporary economists, which he also traces back into historical sources. The result is a remarkable text that has the capacity to hold any kind of material--there are even sections of musical notation in the later

cantos. While there are passages of remarkable beauty and precise observation in the poem, one of its great achievements is in destroying the idea that only certain kinds of language, ideas or emotions are appropriate for poetry.

In 1921, Pound moved to Paris and then in 1924 to Rapallo, on the Italian Riviera. During the following years, he became admiring of Mussolini and Italian fascism?arguing in *The Cantos* and in his prose that the spirit of the early Presidents of the United States was more evident in Italy under Mussolini than in the United States under Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt. During the Second World War, he broadcast his ideas on Rome Radio, and this resulted in him being arrested towards the end of the war, and incarcerated in the US Army Disciplinary Training Center near Pisa. He was taken back to the United States, where he was judged unfit to stand trial due to insanity. He lived in St Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. until 1958, when he was released and returned to Italy.

Criticism has always struggled with how to discuss Pound's poetry in light of his political beliefs: some think his work shouldn't be studied at all. For a long time, readers focused on the least controversial parts of his writing, his early imagist work, and the part of *The Cantos* he wrote while in incarcerated at the army camp, *The Pisan Cantos*. But more recently, critics have started to think directly about the economic and political dimensions of *The Cantos*, and of Pound's career. This is surely welcome: we need to know about our own history - all of it - and we shouldn't whitewash Pound, or any poet.

Pound has been enormously influential on other poets: Basil Bunting, Charles Olson, Louis Zukofsky, and J.H. Prynne are just a few of the poets who have worked through his legacy in diverse ways. Although he is a very different kind of poet from his friend and fellow modernist, T.S. Eliot, they appreciated each others' work, and Pound famously edited *The Waste Land* - you can see his comments and deletions in *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts*, edited by Valerie Eliot.

In the podcast you can download from this site, I talk about a poem that Pound published in *Blast*, the magazine of the vorticist movement - another of the modernist movements--which Pound joined in 1914. Vorticism was mainly a visual arts movement, founded by Percy Wyndham Lewis. *Blast* is also available on the *Modernist Journals Project* website (certain licence restrictions): the poem I discuss, *Et Faim Sallir le Loup des Boys*, is on page 22 of *Blast*, volume 2 (War Number). Looking up the poem's title in a search engine should bring it up easily. Because we don't want to infringe copyright, I don't quote from the poem, so you might want to read it before listening.

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