**Ezra Pound**

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Ezra Weston Loomis Pound (1885– 1972) was an American poet, essayist, and literary critic. In addition to his own literary accomplishments, he famously promoted the work of other artists, writers, and musicians such as George Antheil, T. S. Eliot, and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. He helped to establish both the Imagist and Vorticist movements. His best known poems include ‘[Sestina Alta Forte](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Pound/1939/Pound-Ezra_01_Sestina-Altaforte_Harvard_1939.mp3)‘ (1909), ‘In a Station of the Metro’ (1913), *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (1920), and *The Cantos*, a 120 poem epic published in eleven book-length installments between 1917-1969. The Library of Congress awarded him the prestigious Bollingen prize for *The Pisan Cantos* ­in 1949.

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Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, but his family moved east not long after his birth, and he grew up mainly in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. In 1901, at the age of fifteen, he began college at the University of Pennsylvania, where he originally planned to study science but was more interested in languages, particularly Latin and Spanish. He also met a woman named Hilda Doolittle, who was the daughter of a university professor; he would later rename her ‘H.D.,’ and they would be briefly engaged to marry. In 1902, a fellow classmate introduced him to a student in the medical school named William Carlos Williams, who, like H. D., would become a lifelong friend. Pound and Williams shared many ideas about poetry and literature more generally, but they did diverge on one significant point: Williams favored the local and championed American literature and language as distinct from its English lineage; Pound’s focus was international, and he was influenced by global literary traditions across Europe and Asia.

After two years at the University of Pennsylvania, Pound transferred to Hamilton College, where he continued to study languages, adding Italian, Anglo-Saxon, and Provençal to his repertoire, and reading Dante for the first time. He graduated in 1905 and returned to the University of Pennsylvania to continue his studies. In 1906, he was awarded a fellowship that enabled him to travel to Europe to study Provençal poetry and the plays of Lope de Vega. He spent most of his time in Spain but also visited Paris and London—two cities to which he would later return.

He returned to the United States in 1907 and accepted a teaching position at Wabash College, but life in rural Indiana did not agree with him. Deliberately provocative with both the college administration and his landlords, Pound was eventually asked to leave the college in March of 1908. From there he went back overseas to Spain, Italy, and finally England. He first settled in Gibraltar but soon moved to Venice. There, he self-published his first book of poetry, *A Lume Spento* (1908), an allusion to Dante’s *Inferno*, which Pound himself translated as ‘With Tapers Quenched.’ The book contained forty-five poems, many of them dramatic monologues, a form he had adopted from Robert Browning.

Later that same year, Pound travelled north to London with copies of his book. He eventually convinced noted bookseller Elkin Matthews to display them. Pound soon met Olivia Shakespear and her daughter Dorothy. Both would be very important to him. Dorothy was a painter and would become engaged to Pound in 1910; they married in 1914. Olivia Shakespear was a confidante of the noted Irish poet and playwright William Butler Yeats. She introduced him to Pound, and the two poets spent significant time together at a place called Stone Cottage outside of Sussex in the winters of 1913-1916. Yeats was a recognized poet with an international reputation, and Pound, who was just starting to make a name for himself, was to act as his secretary. In practice, both poets immersed themselves in their own writing, though Pound took care of all of their correspondence, and he also read to Yeats, who suffered poor eyesight. In addition to work on verse, Pound was studying Japanese Noh plays and the work of Ernest Fenollosa, an American who had been working on translations of Chinese and Japanese poetry and drama. Yeats too was taken with the ideas that came from Fenollosa’s manuscripts and incorporated them into his own dramatic compositions.

Pound also reunited with H.D., who introduced him to Richard Aldington. On a fateful afternoon in the British Museum the trio founded Imagism, a short-lived poetic movement, which focused on precision and exactitude. The major tenets of Imagism, as proclaimed by Pound, were:

1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective.

II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome (‘A Retrospect,’ 1918).

Not only did Pound offer a poetic prescription in such imperatives, but he also provided an example with his poem ‘In a Station of the Metro,’ a two-line poem that many critics consider a prime example of the movement. In this brief poem, Pound juxtaposes two images directly and simply. He claims to be approximating haiku form and has eliminated all extraneous language in favor of precision. Pound, H. D., and Aldington were three of the many poets who contributed to the *Des Imagistes* anthology, which *Poetry* magazine published in 1914.

Pound met fellow American Robert Frost in London in 1912. He helped promote Frost’s poetry by writing a positive review of *North of Boston*, though Frost himself would later claim that Pound ‘is an incredible ass and hurts more than he helps the person he praises’ (qtd. in Ackroyd 30). In addition to Frost, Pound met English writers Ford Madox Ford (who went by Ford Madox Hueffer at the time), D. H. Lawrence, and Wyndham Lewis as well as French sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, who created the now famous marble bust of Pound’s head

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and was killed in World War I at the age of 23. Pound and Gaudier-Brzeska joined Lewis in the Vorticist movement and were among the signers of the Vorticist manifesto, published in Lewis’s short-lived little magazine *BLAST*. Inspired by Cubism and Futurism, Vorticism embraced abstraction, the machine, and bombast, but as a movement, it was transitory thanks to the onset of the Great War.

A few years later, also in London, Pound met a young American philosopher and would-be poet, Thomas Stearns Eliot. Eliot was in England on a university fellowship and was supposed to spend 1914-15 studying at Oxford, but he spent most of that year in London writing poetry instead. A mutual friend, Conrad Aiken, shared some of Eliot’s verse with Pound, and Pound, who was not easily impressed, lobbied for *Poetry* magazine to publish ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.’ Over the next several years, Pound and Eliot would critique each other’s work and share many ideas about poetry and literature, even after Pound left London for Paris in 1918. In fact, Eliot entrusted to Pound the draft of the poem that would become *The Waste Land* when he traveled through France on his way to Switzerland for a rest cure. Pound’s wax crayon scrawls would transform and shape Eliot’s manuscript into what many critics regard as one of the most important poems of the twentieth century. In recognition of his efforts, Eliot dedicated the poem to his friend, ‘*il miglior fabbro*’ (the better craftsman), echoing a tribute that Dante paid to a poet he greatly admired, Arnaut Daniel, in *The Divine Comedy*.

Previously, in 1914, Pound, at the suggestion of W. B. Yeats, had written to an unknown Irish writer named James Joyce, who sent him a copy of *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Pound recognized Joyce’s talent and accomplishment in the work and began to publish it as a serial in *The Egoist* in 1914. He would also place some of the short stories from *Dubliners* and help arrange for the serialization of *Ulysses* with *The Little Review*. Pound helped convince Joyce to move from Trieste to Paris and made his living arrangements. Once Joyce arrived in France, Pound also introduced him to Sylvia Beach, owner of the American bookstore Shakespeare and Company and future publisher of *Ulysses*.

Beach’s store, located on the Left Bank, became a central location for American expatriates. There Pound met a then-unknown Ernest Hemingway in 1922 and gave him feedback on his prose style, emphasizing precision; he also taught Hemingway to distrust the adjective. He introduced Hemingway to Ford Madox Ford, who with Pound’s recommendation agreed to let Hemingway edit his new literary magazine, *The Transatlantic Review*.

In 1925, Sylvia Beach introduced Pound to a young American musician named George Antheil, who was trying to become the ‘Bad Boy of Music.’ Antheil had studied the music of Stravinsky and *Les Six*, a group of *avant*-*garde* French composers led by Erik Satie.Antheil was trying to make his musical reputation in Europe and agreed to help Pound compose an opera based on the writings of fifteenth-century troubadour François Villon in exchange for Pound’s assistance in promoting his music. Pound was eager to help. He heard in Antheil’s work the musical equivalent of the Vorticist ideals he had celebrated so eagerly. With Antheil’s help, Pound premiered *Le Testament de Villon* in Paris in 1924 and featured Antheil’s touring partner, the American violinist Olga Rudge. Rudge was an accomplished musician and soloist who would premiere work by both Antheil and Pound in the 1920s. She would also become Pound’s long-time lover.

In addition to all he did for other writers, Pound also continued to develop his own talents as a poet. In 1915, he published *Cathay*, a collection of poetry translated from Chinese. In his introduction to Pound's *Selected Poems*, Eliot called Pound ‘the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time’ and predicted that *Cathay* would be called a ‘magnificent specimen of twentieth-century poetry’ rather than a translation. He also produced *Homage to Sextus Propertius* (1919), a series of poems based on the work of first-century Latin poet Sextus Propertius, which, like *Cathay*, was criticized for its many translation errors and inaccuracies. But Pound had studied Chinese and Latin, as well as several other languages, and had he been interested in direct and literal translations, he was capable of producing them. Instead of directly translating each word and line, he favored adaptation: fidelity to the spirit of the language and the work more generally. He also wrote *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920), an eighteen-part poem that is full of literary allusion and spiritual disillusion; it was Pound’s farewell to London. He relocated to Paris in late 1920.

Pound also began to publish the first of his *Cantos*, the verse project that he had begun work on as early as 1904 and that would consume his attention and poetic energy for most of the rest of his life. *The Cantos* is a 120-poem series of epic verse. Pound published the first three cantos in *Poetry* magazine in 1917. The poems were originally published in eleven separate book-length installments with each individual canto numbered sequentially in Roman numerals. They are highly allusive, polyphonic, and notoriously difficult.

Unhappy in Paris, the Pounds moved to Rapallo, Italyin 1924. A pregnant Olga Rudge soon followed, and Pound’s daughter Mary Rudge was born on 9 July 1925. Mary was placed with a couple in the Italian countryside. When Pound’s wife learned of her existence, she left him and spent much of the next two years traveling. When she returned in 1926, she too was pregnant. Dorothy’s son would be named Omar Pound; he was born in Paris in 1926, and his birth certificate lists Ezra Pound as his father. Pound’s son was raised in London by his maternal grandmother until he was old enough to attend boarding school. When Dorothy would visit him in the summers, Pound would spend time with Olga, who was living in Venice. Mary Rudge knew nothing about her father’s wife or about her half-brother.

In Italy, Pound resumed work on *The Cantos*. He struggled with his vision for the project and suffered several false starts as he grappled with an appropriate form. As the poem’s title suggests, Pound imagined a musical and oral component to his verse, and he was heavily influenced by classical predecessors such as Homer, Vergil, and Dante. But as the writing process continued, what began as a translation of *The Odyssey* into contemporarytimes transformed into a thick tapestry of quotation, allusion, and cultural critique. The poem includes a variety of different languages: Greek, Latin, French, Chinese, German, Provençal, English, and even musical notation, and it contains an encyclopedic array of historical and cultural references including Greek and Roman mythology, the European Renaissance, T’sung dynasty China, the American Revolution, and Mussolini’s Italy.

In 1925, *This Quarter*, a short-lived literary magazine edited by Ernest Walsh, dedicated its inaugural issue to Pound for his ‘helpful friendship to young and unknown artists’ and included tributes from Hemingway and Joyce. Pound published *Cantos XVII–XIX* in its second issue, and the experience helped convince Pound to launch his own literary magazine, *Exile*, in 1927. The project didn’t last, only publishing four issues, but it had contributions from the likes of William Carlos Williams, E. E. Cummings, Yeats, and Hemingway.

In addition to his work on *The Cantos* and his efforts at publishing and promoting his fellow writers and artists, Pound was increasingly interested in economic theory and global politics. He was convinced that capitalism was the cause of the Great War: more specifically, that money was dedicated to the war machine and the deceitful rhetoric and propaganda that fed it instead of to supporting art and culture. He turned to the theories of Major C. H. Douglas, specifically his idea of social credit, which held that the oversupply of goods and the inadequate amount of currency in circulation would lead to a depression, which only war and the accompanying demand for certain goods could surmount. Douglas proposed the introduction of an annual social credit dividend to citizens to counteract the need for war profits; economic reform was necessary to avoid war, its destruction of culture, talent, and life. Pound not only supported this idea but also believed that Fascism was the appropriate vehicle for this credit. Olga Rudge had performed for Mussolini in 1927. Pound sent him a copy of *Draft of XXX Cantos* and met with *il Duce* in 1933. Pound was impressed with Mussolini’s charm and intelligence, and he saw fascism increasingly as a viable political system that would provide support for artists and writers. At the same time, he became increasingly critical of capitalism and the United States, President Roosevelt in particular.

His writings, both public and personal, became more and more anti-Semitic. He produced a series of prose works that were programmatic in nature. Some of these works aimed to instruct their audience in what and how to read, such as *ABC of Reading* (1934) and *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), while others were political: *ABC of Economics* (1933), *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935), *Social Credit: An Impact* (1935). For Pound, aesthetic critique, political ideology, and economic theory were all connected by way of key concept that he adopted from German ethnologist Leo Frobenius, the ‘paideuma,’ which he defined as ‘the spiritual essence of a culture,’ which as Alec Marsh explains, ‘means something like a culture’s “soul” because it is unique to that culture (54). Pound used the term slightly differently; in *Guide to Kulchur*, he defined it as ‘the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period’ (57) and ‘the grisly root of ideas going into action’ (58). It signals yet another commitment to ‘making it new,’ an attempt at thinking beyond the limitations of ideology, language, and culture as they are understood in isolation and an attempt at bringing them together into something fundamentally different.

Pound was awarded an honorary degree by his alma mater Hamilton College in 1939, and he traveled back to the United States to accept the award but also, as he would later say, ‘to keep hell from breaking loose in the world’ (Ackroyd, 78). He tried to lecture members of Congress on his political ideas, and his friends in the United States, notably William Carlos Williams and his publisher, James Laughlin, were increasingly concerned about him. After Pound had returned to Italy, Williams wrote to Laughlin, ‘The man is sunk, in my opinion, unless he can shake the fog of Fascism out of his brain during the next few years’ (Ackroyd, 79). But Pound would not shake the fog of Fascism. If anything, he embraced it more fully.

Pound began to air his ideas publically over Rome radio in 1941 after Italy entered the Second World War. His broadcasts were between seven and ten minutes in length, and they aired twice or three times a week during a program called ‘The American Hour,’ which was broadcast throughout much of western Europe, the Pacific, and the United States. The broadcasts covered a wide range of topics such as Douglas’s social credit, various criticisms of democracy, anti-Semitism, and Joseph Stalin. At first they were read by others, but in 1941, Pound himself began to deliver them; the broadcasts continued until Mussolini’s deposition in 1943, and there are over 100 of them (http://www.whale.to/b/pound.html).

The broadcasts were monitored by the U.S. government, and in 1943 Pound was indicted for treason in absentia. He wrote to the U.S. Attorney General questioning the validity of the charge: ‘I do not feel that the simple fact of speaking over the radio, wherever placed, can in itself constitute treason’ (Ackroyd, 85). His personal life had fallen into disarray: German soldiers, who were stationed nearby in an attempt to defend Italy from an Allied invasion, insisted that their home was no longer safe, so the Pounds moved in with Olga Rudge, who was living in nearby Sant’Ambrogio. Pound kept writing pamphlets and essays as the Allied occupation loomed.

The Allies took Rome in 1944. Mussolini and his lover, Clara Barton, were captured and executed in April, 1945. Shortly thereafter, Pound tried to surrender himself to American troops, but none of the soldiers on duty knew who he was, so they told him to return home. A few days later, he was arrested by Italian partisans on behalf of the American military in late May of 1945. After interrogation, he was transferred to the American Disciplinary Training Center just north of Pisa. There, he was housed in one of the camp’s ‘death cells,’ which were intended for the most vicious or dangerous military prisoners. Pound’s cell was ten feet square and seven feet high, and there was little protection from the elements. It was specially made of reinforced steel and had a concrete floor. He was held there for more than two weeks before he suffered a physical breakdown, at which point he was transferred to the facility’s medical compound. There he began work on what would become *The Pisan Cantos,* poems LXXIV-LXXXIV.

In November 1945, Pound was transported back to the United States to await trial for treason. He was arraigned on 27 November, but the trial was postponed pending a psychiatric examination. Four different psychiatrists examined Pound, and their report pronounced him unfit for trial. He was then remanded to St. Elizabeth’s hospital, where he was housed in the ward for the criminally insane. He would stay at St. Elizabeth’s from early 1946 until his release on April 18, 1958. He received many visitors during his time there. Initially, visitors were limited to fifteen minutes at a time, but in 1947 Pound was transferred to another ward of the hospital where he had his own room and more privacy. His wife Dorothy visited him daily, and over the years he also had such high profile guests as T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, Robert Lowell, and Charles Olson. He also carried on an extensive correspondence, translated more than 300 Chinese poems, and continued to write more of *The Cantos*.

During his hospitalization, many critics raised questions about Pound’s poetic reputation. First, Random House decided not to include any of his work in their 1946 anthology of American poetry, on the grounds that not only was he a Fascist but also that his verse did not merit inclusion. The editorial decision stirred up a great debate about the nature of poetic value, patriotism, censorship, and democracy. Eventually, the decision was reversed and Pound was included after all. But the Random House debates paled in comparison to what would follow in 1949, when the U.S. Library of Congress decided to award *The Pisan Cantos*, published in 1948, their first Bollingen Prize for Poetry. Pound’s work was competing with Book II of *Paterson*, by his long-time friend William Carlos Williams. In its announcement of the award, the committee’s press release proclaimed that to consider elements other than the poetic achievement of the work would diminish the importance of the award (Nadel 17). The public did not share this opinion, claiming that the Library of Congress had been infiltrated by Fascist sympathizers. Congressman Jacob Javitz called for a congressional inquiry into the circumstances surrounding the award. As a result of the investigation, the award was transferred from the Library of Congress to Yale University; Yale has awarded the prize since 1950.

Pound was released from St. Elizabeth’s in 1958, thanks in large part to a campaign by friends and fellow authors Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, and Robert Frost. The charges against him were dropped and his indictment was dismissed. Pound and his wife returned to Italy, where they lived with his daughter and her husband in the Italian Alps. He continued to read and write, and he put the finishing touches on the *Thrones* section of *The Cantos*. But he was both restless and easily fatigued. He traveled to Rapallo and to Rome, but by the summer of 1960, he had returned to the Alps. His final years were marked largely by silence. He and his wife had grown estranged, and he became dependent on Olga Rudge. He struggled with depression and declining health, and by the early 1960s, he had lost several of his close friends, including Williams in 1963 and Eliot in 1965. He attended Eliot’s funeral at Westminster Abbey and visited Yeats’s widow in Dublin. He attended the Spoleto Festival that summer for a performance of his opera *Le Testament de Villon*. He visited Joyce’s Zurich grave in 1967 and traveled to New York in 1969 for a meeting of the Academy of American Poets and the unveiling of the opening exhibition of *The Waste Land* typescript, which he had corrected so many years ago. Later that year, *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX –CXVII* was published, largely in response to a pirated edition, which had surfaced in 1967.

Pound returned to Venice and lived there until his death on 1 November 1972.

**List of Major Works:**

**Poetry**

*A Lume Spento*

*Personae*

*Hugh Selwyn Mauberly*

*Homage to Sextus Propertius*

*The Cantos*

**Prose**

*The Spirit of Romance*

*Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*

*Pavannes and Divagations*

*Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*

*How to Read*

*ABC of Economics*

*ABC of Reading*

*Jefferson and/or Mussolini*

*Guide to Kulchur*

*Confucius: Digest of the Analects*

*Ernest Fenollosa: The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry.*

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