

The Epistles of Ezra

These are the poems of Eliot
By the Uranian Muse begot;
A Man their Mother was,
A Muse their Sire.

How did the printed Infancies result
From Nuptials thus doubly difficult?

If you must needs enquire
Know diligent Reader
That on each Occasion
Ezra performed the Caesarean Operation.

The “diligent Reader” of this particular letter was T.S. Eliot, and with it he got back the manuscript of the twentieth century’s most famous poem, *The Waste Land*. It had been reduced to half its original size by the blue pencil of his friend Ezra Pound, who was in Eliot’s view *il miglior fabbro*, “the better craftsman” to whom he dedicated the poem when it was published. If we didn’t know the circumstances surrounding it, we might assume the “diligent Reader” to be someone quite different, perhaps one of Samuel Johnson’s correspondents in the eighteenth century, since “diligent Readers” were more common in Johnson’s time than in Pound’s. But the fact is that it was written in the twentieth century by a man who was in many respects Johnson’s polar opposite, Ezra Pound. The two writers were as different as their ages. One was a proper English scholar and gentleman, who had much to do with shaping the Neo-Classical literary style, while the other was a bohemian American expatriate, an improper scholar and no gentleman, who had as much to do with shaping the Modern literary style. What they have in common is that they were two of the most influential writers of their respective ages, and they were voluminous in their correspondence. Johnson produced five full volumes of edited correspondence in his illustrious career; Pound has already produced thirteen edited volumes--

one during his lifetime and the rest after his death—and we know there are going to be many more, because the unpublished letters of Pound are almost as numerous as his published letters.

In both cases, the style was the man. Eighteenth Century prose is epitomized by the magisterial politeness and formality of Samuel Johnson, in his letters as in his poetry and essays; Twentieth Century prose is epitomized by the defiant irreverence and informality of Ezra Pound, as manifest in his letters as in his poetry and essays. Both writers were noted for their wit, but Johnson was typically a satirist, poking elaborate fun at human foibles, while Pound was a gifted parodist, imitating the styles of other writers past and present to mock their pretensions. To Pound, “good art thrives in the atmosphere of parody. Parody is, I suppose, the best criticism.” He filled his poetry and letters with parody, a habit so instinctive with Pound that when he returned the manuscript of *The Waste Land* to Eliot, he imitated the style of the eighteenth century with a closing piece of light verse in meter and rhyme, not in the free verse which was his chosen poetic form. Though Pound and Eliot were serious, ambitious poets, they loved to joke with each other, and often addressed each other with nicknames. Pound’s favorite nickname for Eliot was “Possum,” because of his sly way of appearing solemn even when smiling, and Eliot often called Pound “Brer Rabbit,” because of his lifelong habit of imitating the American dialect humor of Joel Chandler Harris. Before he ended his letter to Eliot with a mock tribute in an old-fashioned poetic form, Pound’s letter bristled with twentieth-century informality and slang, which were typical of Pound’s epistolary style. His style was profane, but it was right on target, since Pound was the first to recognize Eliot as one of the master poets of his time. He assured Eliot, as he returned the condensed *Waste Land* manuscript, that, “The thing now runs from ‘April’ to ‘shantih’ without a break. That is 19 pages, and let us say the longest poem in the English langwidge. Don’t try to bust all records by prolonging it three pages further.” Pound

was quick to praise Eliot's poem as superior to anything he himself had written, for he was always a generous critic: "Complimenti, you bitch," he wrote. "I am wracked by the seven jealousies, and cogitating an excuse for always exuding my deformative secretions in my own stuff, and never getting an outline."

Pound was a singular sort of genius, but he was not the only great poet of the twentieth century whose letters are as interesting as his other writings. The greatest writers of any age are usually its best letter writers, and the twentieth century had an abundance of both. The letters of William Butler Yeats and T.S. Eliot, who were his poetic peers, complement their poetry just as Pound's do, and are every bit as readable, but Pound's are the more idiosyncratic and personal, and in that sense more reflective of the style of his age. To read any volume of Pound's letters is to see a brilliant and eccentric mind doing battle with everyone in sight, mostly with contemporary writers whom he was badgering constantly with advice on how to be better writers. Katherine Anne Porter was a slightly younger writer who absorbed Pound's salutary influence, and she remarked, on reading the first selection of his letters, from 1907 to 1941, that "Ezra Pound detested the 'private life,' denied that he ever had one, and despised those who were weak enough to need one. He was a warrior who lived on the battlefield." Yeats was an older writer who benefited from Pound's admiration as well as his influence, but he had reservations about Pound's belligerence, saying somewhat doubtfully that "Ezra Pound has a desire personally to insult the world." In truth, Pound was combative by nature; he relished verbal fisticuffs.

In an early letter, he warned his old friend, William Carlos Williams, whom he had encouraged to write poetry when they were fellow students at the University of Pennsylvania, "I hope to God you have no feelings. If you have, burn this *before* reading." He then launched into

a withering critique of some poems Williams had sent him. Pound could be brutally frank, lacing his letters with expletives. After a semester of trying to teach French and Spanish at Wabash College in Indiana, he left in scandal over a carnival girl he brought home one night, and so he gladly escaped to Europe, writing back home to his friend Williams, now a practicing pediatrician in New Jersey, “If any body ever shuts *you* up in Indiana for four months and you don’t at least *write* some unconstrained something or other, I give up hope for your salvation.” He advised Williams to go on writing poetry while practicing medicine, but cautioned “you must remember I don’t try to write for the public. I can’t. I don’t have that kind of intelligence.” He went on to say of Williams’ first book of poetry: “As proof that WCW has poetic instincts the book is valuable,” but “if you were in London and saw the stream of current poetry, I wonder how much of it you would have printed?” He had decided for himself that “London, deah old lundon is the place for poesy” and insisted that “There is no town like London to make one feel the vanity of all art except the highest.” He urged Williams to come to London and see for himself, and eventually Williams did, because in his eyes Pound was a kind of oracle. “Before and after meeting Pound,” Williams said, “was like the difference between B.C. and A.D.” Williams was one of the first of many budding poets who owed their original impetus to Pound, and Pound wrote outspoken letters from England to Rutherford, New Jersey, where Williams had established a successful medical practice. Since Williams is better known today as a poet than as a doctor, he followed Pound’s advice and never stopped writing. He was able, between seeing patients at the hospital, to sit at the typewriter and develop his own literary style, which proved to be very plain American English, very different from the cosmopolitan, multilingual style of Pound, who continued to encourage and criticize him all his life .

As a writer, Pound was pugnacious, which got him into lots of trouble, early and late, but despite his pugnacity—or maybe because of it--Pound exerted a powerful force on twentieth century literature, as great as that of Samuel Johnson in the eighteenth century, if on quite different terms. The letters of Johnson are formal and polished, yet at the same time pithy and quotable, the reflection of a lively intelligence confronting the world, while Pound's letters are colloquial and racy, scoffing at the conventions of *belles lettres*, yet they manage to be just as quotable as Johnson's. It would not be too much to call Johnson's letters pontifical, nor would it be too much to call Pound's letters bellicose. What matters is that each writer had a style that suited his personality and his age. In one of his major poems, Pound wrote that "The age demanded an image/Of its accelerated grimace," but he gave the age more permanent images, first in the brief Imagist poems that were his trademark, and then in the longer *Cantos* that became his poetic autobiography. In his poems as well as his prose, he gave the age much more than it bargained for. I can remember mentioning to him once that I had read a rather uncomplimentary critique by one of his fellow Imagists, the English poet Richard Aldington, and he shot back with a twinkle in his eye, "I always say, one good attack is worth twenty eulogies." Pound treated writing as a form of intellectual combat, and in his early days in London, he had the gall to challenge a respected British writer, Lascelles Abercrombie, to a duel, reacting violently to an unkind remark Abercrombie made about him in a review. The challenge was ignored, but Pound's chivalric protest caused a sensation in literary circles.

His strict artistic conscience made him a formidable companion to other writers, who were awed by his supreme confidence and quite willing to learn from him. Two of his closest friends were older writers, William Butler Yeats and Ford Madox Ford, who learned as much from him as he learned from them. Yeats asked him to go through his poetic work and take out all the

abstractions, because he thought Pound had an uncanny ability to sift the gold from the dross in literary expression. With Yeats and Ford (whose name had been Hueffer before the First World War), he spent a couple of memorable winters in the English countryside, renting Stone Cottage in Surrey south of London as a place to write. In a letter to his mother he anticipated that “My stay in Stone Cottage will not be in the least profitable. I detest the country.” But he went on to explain his reason for going: “I regard the visit as a duty to posterity.” Small wonder, since Yeats and Ford were much better known to the English reading public than he was, and the three men spent the winter of 1912-1913 sounding each other off quite profitably. To his mother, back home in Philadelphia, he wrote one of his most amusing letters:

[To Isabel Westin Pound]. Slowgh (more or less) 14 December 1912

Dear Mother: Am down here for a week with the Hueffers in a dingy old cottage that belonged to Milton. F.M.H. and I being the two people who couldn't be in the least impressed by the fact, makes it a bit more ironical.

I can't remember much of what has been going on...

Yeats reading to me up till late Sat. evening, etc...

Have written about 20 new poems.

3 days later:

Impossible to get any writing done here. Atmosphere too literary. 3 “Kreators” all in one ancient cottage *is* a bit thick.

Xmas passed without calamity.

Have sloshed about a bit in the slush as the weather is pleasingly warm. Walked to the Thames yesterday.

Play chess and discuss style with F.M.H.

Am not convinced that rural life suits me, at least in winter.

Love to you and dad. Ezra

Obviously, Pound enjoyed being playful about his endeavors in some of his letters, but in many he showed he was quite serious about aiming for the highest literary art. It was his firm belief that “If a man write six good lines he is immortal—isn't that worth trying for?” He put that question in a letter to Harriet Monroe, who as Editor of the newly founded *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse* in Chicago, had asked him to serve as her Foreign Correspondent. It suited him perfectly, because he was always looking for promising young poets, preferably American,

to give real distinction to the new magazine. Before he persuaded her to publish T.S. Eliot, whom he met in London in 1914, he persuaded her to publish Robert Frost, whom he met in London in 1913. He wrote her enthusiastically about Frost; “Have just discovered another Amur’kn. Vurry Amur’kn, with, I think, the seeds of grace.” He offered to review *A Boy’s Will*, Frost’s first book of poems, as a way of promoting him, and cavalierly predicted that “After my declaration of his glory he’ll have to stay out of print for a year in order not to ‘disappoint’ the avid reader.” A year later, he met Eliot in London, and was so elated he wrote her immediately:

I was jolly well right about Eliot. He has sent in the best poem I have yet had or seen from an American PRAY GOD IT BE NOT A SINGLE AND UNIQUE SUCCESS. He has taken it back to get it ready for the press and you shall have it in a few days.

That was how “The Love-song of J. Alfred Prufrock” finally got published, after Eliot had tried and failed for months to get it published. Eliot was on his way from Harvard to Oxford, headed for a career as a philosophy professor, when he met Pound, but Pound persuaded him that his true career was in poetry, not philosophy, and Pound’s judgment was vindicated when, many years later, Eliot was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. Pound had perceived Eliot’s promise at first sight, as is clear in his letter to Harriet Monroe:

He is the only American I know of who has made what I can call adequate preparation for writing. He has actually trained himself and modernized himself *on his own*. The rest of the *promising young* have done one or the other but never both (most of the swine have done neither). It is such a comfort to meet a man and not have to tell him to wash his face, wipe his feet, and remember the date (1914) on the calendar.

He soon sent “Prufrock” to her as “the most interesting contribution I’ve had from an American,” and then he badgered her for six months to publish it. “Do get on with that Eliot,” he wrote in exasperation, until finally she published it and gave Eliot his first taste of fame.

Pound was at his most serious when he was promoting a writer he had discovered; at his most humorous, he wrote wickedly funny letters full of inside jokes. He wrote often to the English painter and novelist Wyndham Lewis, with whom he had published a sensational little magazine called *Blast*, and in one of his letters he enclosed an erotic self-critique:

Virgin's Prayer

Ezra Pound
And Augustus John
Bless the bed
That I lie on.

Pound's ditty wasn't original, but he liked the innuendo, and footnoted it: "(Authorship unrecognized, I first heard it in 1909.)" Augustus John was an English portrait painter and noted rake who at the time was as well known as Pound among the artistic set in London.

Pound was by then happily married to Dorothy Shakespear (no relation to William), a young English beauty and a talented visual artist, but had pursued several romantic attachments before he met her. Dorothy was the daughter of a London lawyer, who objected strongly to her marrying this impecunious American poet, and her mother doubted that Pound would ever be able to support her in the manner to which she was accustomed. But they were in love and they persisted, writing many letters to each other during their courtship. Pound proposed to her in one letter with a simple sentence: "I think you'd better perhaps marry me and live in one room more." Like a proper young lady, she waited for her parents to give her permission to marry him, and then replied just as tersely: "Consent appears to be given—with some reluctance." She herself wasn't a bit reluctant, adding eagerly, "Anyway please come in tomorrow morning to see me." So in April 1914 they were married in St. Mary Abbott's, Kensington, and moved into an apartment nearby that became the birthplace of Modern Poetry. Not long ago, the English Heritage Society put up a Blue Plaque on the outside wall to say that Pound once lived there.

Pound's correspondence with James Joyce fills a whole volume, spanning the years between 1913 when, at Yeats's recommendation, Pound first wrote from London to Joyce in Trieste, until the 1930s, when their paths diverged exclusively, with Pound living in Rapallo and Joyce living in Paris, each preoccupied with writing increasingly mystifying works, Pound's later *Cantos* and Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. But in the years between, Pound had masterminded Joyce's career, publishing his first novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* in serial form in a little magazine he was editing in London, and then publishing *Ulysses* in serial form in another little magazine out of Chicago, until it was confiscated by the censors for obscenity and became the most famous banned book of the twentieth century. Joyce and Pound were the chief innovators of modern fiction and poetry, and they naturally appreciated each other, Joyce calling Pound "a miracle worker" and Pound calling *Ulysses* "perhaps the most savage bit of satire we have had since Swift suggested a cure for famine in Ireland." They joked back and forth with each other in their letters, much as he and Eliot liked to do, and Pound often parodied the Irishness of Joyce, as in his letter of 21 Dec. 1931:

Dear Jhaysus Aloysius Chrysostum:

Blarney Castle, it come into me mind. Do you know anything, apart from the touchin' ballad about it. I mean when did fat ladies from Schenekdeky or Donegal first begin to be held by their tootsies with their hoopskirts falling over their privates to in public osculate the said stone:

and for what reason? Fecundity? Or the obverse?

Whose stone, in short, was it?

I regret not havin the opporchunity to sing you my last ditty when in Paris or rather the last before I went thither, composed for yr special postprandial delectation and then, domme, I forgot it. At least I think I forgot it, I can't remember having performed it.

When you get an address send it on; or come down and watch the icicles forming on the edge of the mare Thyrenno [the Tyrrhenian Sea at Rapallo] Benedictions. E.P.

Pound then appended his mocking little apostrophe to the Blarney Stone:

And there's a stone there that whoever kisses
He never misses
To grow eloquent.
'Tis he may clamber to a lady's chamber
Or become a member
Of sweet parliament.
A clever spouter
He'll soon turn out or
An out-and-outer to be left alone.
Don't seek to hinder him
Or to bewilder him
Sure, he's a pilgrim from the Blarney Stone.

We may never know how many thousand letters Ezra Pound wrote in his long lifetime, because there are many still unpublished letters to add to the thirteen volumes already published. The best of them tend to be written to his most literate contemporaries, especially to Eliot and Joyce, and the worst of them are couched in expressions so weird they have been named Old Ezraic, a language of his own making, beyond comprehension even to old friends like Wyndham Lewis, who once told him frankly "your last letter undecipherable, just cannot imagine what lies beneath the words." Pound's correspondence, like the rest of his writing, suffers too often from excessive wordiness and obscure references which only he could fathom, and some day there will have to be a one-volume selected letters that can be read consecutively. Yet his multi-volume correspondence contains some of his wittiest and most accessible writing, to be found in the unpublished as well as the published letters. I know, because I once had the pleasure of discovering, in the reams of unpublished letters that are stored uncatalogued in the Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, a letter he had written about me, of all people. In May of 1955, writing from St. Elizabeths to one of his many young female correspondents somewhere in the world, he wrote: "Mr. Pratt about to be prof. in Tenn brot Mrs. Ditto." My wife and I had visited him one afternoon in Washington, and she had baked him a tin of cookies, which occasioned a comment in another unpublished letter: "Wm. Pratt doing a thesis and the

kulchur hounds faithful with thermos, proper tea but no cups." Pound held court to "kulchur hounds" like us for nearly thirteen years at St. Elizabeths, where he was the unlikeliest prisoner the US government ever punished for recklessly exercising his freedom of speech. We hadn't guessed he would put our visit in a letter, but Pound wrote whatever came into his mind, the trivial along with the momentous. At their best, his letters are a verbal feast, full of surprises, along with a running account of the birth and progress of Modernism, literary history in epistolary form. Pound's letters mirror the age he lived in as much as his poetry, and according to *The London Blue Plaque Guide*, "nothing can diminish his stature as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century."

William Pratt