

“I Don’t Know Much About Books”

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It is the fall of 1937. The country is still suffering from the depths of the Great Depression, and the misery index is high, especially in Oklahoma, where the Dust Bowl has been turning the sky from blue to brown every summer for years. But for me, it is a time of great adventure. I am ten years old, and have been invited by my Uncle Mac to come all by myself by train from Shawnee, Oklahoma, where I live, to Oxford, Mississippi, where he lives, to be his guest for the Ole Miss-Mississippi State football game, one of those fierce sectional rivalries that epitomizes American sports. I am thrilled at the prospect, and my mind is on football as I walk with my uncle to his drugstore on the town square, just a few blocks from his house on Lamar Street, the main street of town. It is named for its most famous native son, Lucius Quintus Cincinnatus (Yes, Cincinnatus) Lamar, a post-Civil War statesman who served as Senator from Mississippi, and later as Secretary of the Interior under Grover Cleveland, and still later, as an Associate Justice of the US Supreme Court. As we walk along, we pass a number of people who greet my uncle with a smile and a friendly “Good morning, Mac” Then, across the street, we notice a slight figure ambling along with his head in the air, paying attention to no one. He never even looks our way. My uncle bends down to me and says, in a low voice: “That’s William Faulkner. He’s a writer.” It was the first time I’d seen a living writer. I wasn’t even sure what it meant, but at that early age I was fascinated. I was too young to read anything he had written, but I knew that one day I wanted to find out for myself what kind of writer he was.

As I look back now on what for me was a lifechanging moment, it’s my guess that Faulkner’s mind was far away, probably working on his next novel, *The Unvanquished*, which he would publish in 1938. It turned out to be one of his best, but what he meant by “the unvanquished” was not what the reader might expect. They were not the Confederate soldiers who had fought and lost the Civil War. The unvanquished were the women who had stayed behind and had never given up. Many of the men never came back, or surrendered reluctantly after Appomattox, but the women refused to accept defeat. It was the women who remained defiantly unvanquished, and who preserved

family integrity and honor despite the humiliation of defending what proved to be a lost cause. *The Unvanquished* was Faulkner's second novel about the Civil War. The first had been *Absalom, Absalom!*, which he published two years earlier, in 1936. Faulkner's name was nationally known by then, but it was not yet a household word. His two Civil War novels had come out just before and just after Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, the alltime bestseller that cleared the field for Civil War fiction long afterward. Neither of Faulkner's novels ever rivaled hers in popularity, though they were a good deal better artistically. They did not become bestsellers until much later, when everything he wrote was a bestseller, nor were they made into Academy Award-winning movies, as hers was, but they did mark a major turning point in his career. Much later, when I was old enough to read both novels, I came to see that *Absalom, Absalom!* was tragic; it dramatized the Civil War as a tragedy that the South had brought on itself and that it deserved to lose, even if heroically. Faulkner was a realist who was both the South's greatest writer and its most severe critic. He believed that the American Civil War was caused by grave faults of which the South was guiltier than the North, though there was plenty of guilt to go around. He thought Americans in general, and Southerners in particular, had been guilty of exploiting man and nature: they exploited man by importing and enslaving African Negroes and driving out the native race of red men, and they exploited nature by destroying the wilderness for their own selfish use. His first novel about the Civil War was a tragic vision of human ambition and greed, ending inevitably in death and defeat. But his second novel about the Civil War, *The Unvanquished*, was not tragic; it was broadly comic; it viewed the Civil War as proof of the loyalty and bravery and willing sacrifice of Southerners, even though they were clearly doomed to defeat, and it ended with the deliberate renunciation of revenge. Though the two novels were published just two years apart, they reveal a seismic shift in Faulkner's viewpoint toward the South, toward America, toward the whole human race. I now think that when I first saw him, his mind must have been moving from his Tragic Phase to his Comic Phase. Katherine Anne Porter, a Southern writer who admired Faulkner more than any of her contemporaries, thought all his work was on a hairline between tragedy and comedy, with either outcome possible in any given work. Certainly there are comic moments in *Absalom, Absalom!*, and tragedy hangs over every chapter of

The Unvanquished. Nevertheless, the first is definitely tragic, a great novel by any measure, and the other is ultimately comic, taking a more hopeful view of life in the mythical kingdom of Yoknapatawpha County, Mississippi, which Faulkner created and gave to the world. A few years later, in *Intruder in the Dust*, Faulkner would write that "For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863"--and he fights the Battle of Gettysburg over again in his imagination. When I first saw him, in 1937, I think Faulkner must have been re-enacting the Civil War in his mind, but making up his mind to laugh rather than weep at human folly. Shakespeare had written both tragedies and comedies in his poetic dramas; so did Faulkner in his fiction.

Of course, no such thoughts were in my mind when I first saw him on the main street of Oxford, Mississippi in 1937. But by the time I actually met him 12 1/2 years later, in the spring of 1950, I had begun to understand what kind of writer he was. I was 22 by then, and had graduated from the University of Oklahoma, forty miles west of my home town, and then had gone a few hundred miles east to Vanderbilt University to do graduate work in English literature. I wanted to be an English professor some day, and Vanderbilt had been strongly recommended to my father by a Methodist bishop whose opinion he respected. Since my father had been born in Mississippi and my aunt and uncle still lived there, I had a natural interest in Faulkner. I was able to satisfy it most fully in the summer of 1948, before my senior year in college, when I landed a job with the US Forest Service in Yosemite National Park. Into my gear for the trip to California I packed a pocket-size dual edition of *The Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying*. Yosemite was a perfect place to spend a summer, and Faulkner's two short, complex novels made for excellent reading underneath the giant sequoia trees. It proved to be a decisive choice. I found both novels mystifying and beautiful, like everything Faulkner wrote, and I began to think that if I studied him more closely I might understand him better. So in 1949 I chose to write a Master's thesis at Vanderbilt on *The Sound and the Fury*. My mentor was Donald Davidson, one of the Fugitive poets, who as a critic had written one of the earliest favorable reviews of Faulkner's work. I was working on the thesis when I went to visit my uncle again, during the Easter vacation of my first year at Vanderbilt. My Uncle Mac had graduated earlier from Ole Miss, and though he did not

share my literary interests, he approved of them, and he set it up for me to meet his friend Bill Faulkner. He knew Faulkner was an important writer but he didn't fully understand why: "I'm not a deep student of his work," he told me, "I'm just an old friend who has known him for a long time." He said Faulkner had given him several autographed books over the years but he hadn't had time to read them. He didn't know, and neither did I, that Faulkner would receive the Nobel Prize for Literature later that same year.

And so, on Easter Sunday of 1950, Uncle Mac drove me in his comfortable Plymouth sedan out to Rowan Oak, a few blocks from his house, where his friend Bill Faulkner lived. We drove into his spacious domain in Bailey's Woods, through the entrance gate with its conspicuous "No Trespassing" sign, down the potholed gravel road leading to his fading white-columned mansion, the sort of house a Southern writer ought to live in. It had been called The Old Sheegog Place before he bought it, but he renamed it Rowan Oak—not for the Virginia town of that name but for a Scottish superstition that rowan trees ("mountain oaks" Americans call them) were lucky. He had bought the antebellum mansion in 1930, just before breaking into commercial success with his most sensational novel, *Sanctuary*, published in 1931, which he later said he wrote to make money. He succeeded so well that it embarrassed him, because in his view making money was not a worthy aim for a writer. He was not entirely honest in that view, because he did a lot of writing for money, especially when he willingly accepted jobs to write screenplays in Hollywood, but *Sanctuary* happened to be the first novel by Faulkner I had read, and, in spite of Faulkner's low opinion of it, I found it fatally attractive. It hooked me once and for all on Faulkner.

I had heard many anecdotes about Faulkner before I met him, because his eccentricities had become legend, along with his reputation as a writer. An early interviewer quoted him as saying matter-of-factly, "I was born male and single at an early age in Mississippi...of an Indian slave and an alligator..." Faulkner had a wicked sense of humor, and was fond of saying that writers were born liars; he was equally fond of proving it. As an undergraduate at Oklahoma, I had gone to a lecture by Hodding Carter, the widely known Editor of the *Delta Democrat-Times* in Greenville, Mississippi, who told some outrageous stories about Faulkner from his own experience. I remembered one of Hodding Carter's anecdotes in particular, as we drove up to Faulkner's house. He said

that Faulkner was fiercely protective of his privacy, and hated intruders. Not only did he make a practice of digging holes in his gravel driveway to discourage casual visitors, but once, on the porch of Rowan Oak, he became so annoyed at the approach of an uninvited stranger that he stood up, opened his fly, and said, "Well, he's come to see me and I'll give him an eyeful," and calmly urinated into the bushes. I was half afraid he might welcome us in some equally shocking way, but my uncle was an old friend, and Faulkner was on his best behavior the whole time we were with him.

We parked in front of the house and walked through an alley of tall old cedar trees to the front door, where Faulkner courteously greeted us. I had seen him before, but was surprised to find myself being introduced to a short, slight man with a high squeaky voice. From reading his books, I had imagined a tall, imposing figure with a deep voice. In a polite but diffident way he invited us to come in, and then walked us through the dark hall of his mansion to the back door. I noticed as we passed through the main hall that the rooms were sparsely furnished and minimally decorated, and I spotted a small niche in the wall for the telephone, next to which he had penciled some phone numbers, including one for Gathright-Reed, my uncle's drugstore. He took us all the way through the house and out to his back yard, where he offered us seats on the bench of a plain wooden picnic table and began talking to my uncle. I was an outsider, and took little part in the conversation between the two men, which mainly concerned people in town they both knew. Though he had lived there most of his life, Faulkner had always seemed oblivious to the daily life of the town, but I found he was aware of almost everyone, and everything that went on there, and took as much interest in it as my uncle did. They enjoyed gossiping about their neighbors as much as anyone in town, and I listened quietly as they talked about people who were strangers to me.

Faulkner took an interest in the natural world as well, and was keenly aware of his surroundings in the Mississippi woods, being a farmer, a hunter, and a dedicated conservationist as well as a writer. As we sat there, he pointed to a pear tree which had fallen on its side near the picnic table, and which in April was loaded with blossoms. He explained that he had given his yard man strict instructions never to cut down a living tree. Then he went on talking with my uncle about Oxford citizens they knew, who meant little to me. Once I made a clumsy attempt to enter the conversation by asking

about a new book I had heard he was writing, called “Notes on a Horse Thief.” It would become an episode of a longer novel called *A Fable*, which he published in 1953. The novel was about the First World War and was set in France, but the horse thief episode took place in his mythical Yoknapatawpha County and was better than the rest of the novel. His reply quickly cut me off. “I don’t know much about books,” he said. “A book’s a book to me, and they’re all too durned expensive.” I knew it was a lie, and he knew it was a lie, but it was the sort of disingenuous answer an expert might give to a novice to keep him from asking further questions. I kept quiet after that. Later that year I would buy the book at my favorite bookstore in Nashville, after it had been published by Hodding Carter on his Greenville Press, in a run of a thousand copies numbered and signed by the author. I still have it in my library. I bought it for \$15 in 1950; fifty years later, I had it appraised for \$1,189.

Faulkner was a professional writer, and his income came almost entirely from his publications, yet he acted most of the time as if he were indifferent to them. In his early years, people regarded him as a ne’er-do-well, though the Falkners (the family spelled the name without the “u”) were a prominent family in Mississippi. His great-grandfather, the first William Falkner, had been a Confederate colonel, a railroad builder, a state legislator, and a writer of popular novels, and Faulkner as a schoolboy said he wanted to be a writer like his great-grandpappy. But he was never a diligent student, and often played hookey. Later, he would call himself “the world’s oldest living sixth grader.” That was no lie; it was close to the truth. He never finished high school, and though he took a few courses at Ole Miss, where his father was the Business Manager of the university and the family lived on campus, he pledged a fraternity but failed English. As a young man he had no steady job, working for a time in his grandfather’s bank but preferring to paint houses or shovel coal in the university power plant. He wrote one of his best novels while working at night in the power plant. It was *As I Lay Dying*, and he said it was the easiest novel he ever wrote, because the humming of the dynamo was soothing to his ears. Everyone in town knew that Bill Faulkner wanted to be a writer; but it took him a long time to make it a paying profession. Most of the people in town were in the habit of calling him “Count No ‘Count” and expecting nothing serious ever to come from him.

Their disdain turned to awe in the fall of 1950, when Faulkner won the Nobel Prize for Literature. It stunned the town, and though it pleased Faulkner when he got the news, he went out hunting with some friends after he heard it, and he would have preferred to accept the honor in absentia. It took his daughter Jill to persuade him to go to Stockholm and receive the award in person. She was the editor of the high school newspaper when the award was announced, and it was a golden opportunity for her to cover a news story of international significance. He doted on his daughter, who was his only child, and agreed to fly to Sweden with her. On the way, he took the time to write the acceptance speech that turned out to be the most famous ever given by a winner of the Nobel Prize. For fifty years Nobel Prizes for Literature had been given to writers of genius, from William Butler Yeats and George Bernard Shaw to T.S. Eliot and Winston Churchill, but their acceptance speeches were forgotten afterwards, while Faulkner's address was the only one to be widely quoted long after it was given. Sentences from it are carved today in stone on the wall of the Ole Miss library, which houses a Faulkner Collection that is its main claim to fame: "I decline to accept the end of man," he had said in Sweden, to an international audience; "I believe that man will not merely endure, he will prevail." These words astonished the world, which was trying to live in the shadow of the nuclear mushroom cloud that exploded over Japan in 1945. Many felt that it was just a matter of time until the human race obliterated itself. Faulkner felt otherwise, and was openly optimistic about the future of man: "He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things."⁸⁰ He wrote those stirring words just a few months after I met him. They were not what he said to my uncle and me as we sat at his picnic table in the back yard of Rowan Oak on Easter Sunday of 1950. He talked informally and easily about the hunting trips he enjoyed with friends, in the deep woods of the Mississippi Delta, about farming a patch of land he owned near Puskuss Creek, not far from Oxford, and about riding his favorite horse, Stonewall, which later threw him and precipitated his untimely death in 1962 at the age of 65. All he said to my uncle, as we got up to leave, was "Mac, you don't come out to see me often enough." Then he got up from the picnic table, led us

back through the house to his front door, and said goodbye with a courteous old-fashioned bow.

It was in the spring of 1950 that I had my first personal encounter with a great living writer, and it had a lasting effect on me. I had a second encounter five years later with a great writer very different from Faulkner, which proved even more consequential. It happened by chance in the spring of 1955, when I was a young officer in the US Naval Reserve in Washington, stationed at the Pentagon, where my job, as Assistant Special Congressional Liaison Officer to the Judge Advocate General, was to attend the meetings of Congressional Committees that oversaw military spending and to report back in writing to the admiral in charge. I served as the eyes and ears of the Navy on Capitol Hill for two years, and my main charge was to let the Judge Advocate General know whether, when Senator Joe McCarthy finished disemboweling the Army by his investigations of Communists in government, he might turn his attention to another military service and begin looking for hidden traitors in the Navy. He headed what was called the Government Operations Committee, and under his electrifying leadership it had become a newsmaking blockbuster. There were headlines every day that showed how effectively Senator MacCarthy had seized the attention of the media. McCarthy was the man of the hour in Washington, and I had the privilege of being close to the action, not as a journalist but as an observer, trusted to make confidential reports without creating a sensation. I did my best to deserve the assignment. It was pure luck that I had the job, and even luckier that it led to my encounter with another great writer.

The Navy had been generous enough to grant me a commission simply because I had earned a college degree following an earlier tour of duty as a naval air cadet at the end of the Second World War. When I was called back in 1953 for a second tour of duty during the Korean War, some obscure Navy administrator must have noticed that I was about to finish a doctorate in English literature at Vanderbilt, and he knew the Navy needed someone who could write. The Navy had appointed as its Special Congressional Liaison Officer a captain whose previous duty had been the command of one of the battleships sunk by the Japanese at Pearl Harbor. The Navy probably thought that since he had proved himself such an able wartime captain, an easy desk job would be his peacetime reward. I was happy to work under him, because he was an affable

Tennessean of sterling character, and he and his wife were kind to me and my new bride. But he lacked one essential qualification for the job: he couldn't write. So, as his lowly lieutenant, I was given the job of going from the Pentagon to Capitol Hill every day in my uniform, attending the hearings of the McCarthy Committee and other Congressional committees concerned with the military, then returning to the Pentagon and writing the reports, which the captain dutifully signed and sent upstairs to the admiral. The admiral never complained about them, probably because I was able to write reassuringly about what was happening in Congress, causing him little worry about what Joe McCarthy might do to the Navy. Together, Captain Gill and I had the pleasure of witnessing at close quarters the decline and fall of Joe McCarthy, which happened fairly precipitously under our watchful gaze, to the amazement of almost everyone else in the world, who had come to believe that McCarthy was an indestructible American demagogue. My first encounter with a great living writer came during the Great Depression in Mississippi; my second came during the McCarthy Era in Washington.

This second encounter was not directly connected with my job. I lived in Washington from the summer of 1953 to the summer of 1955, and when I first got there I shared a house in Georgetown with two other young bachelors, both graduates of Harvard Law School. One of them was a lawyer for the Department of Justice; the other was an economist in the Office of Management and Budget. Harvard had given them a good education and plenty of good connections in Washington. Later, after I married and moved out to Falls Church, they took me and my wife to dinner at the University Club, where we met some of their Harvard classmates. They introduced me to a young psychiatrist named Michel Woodberry, who was on the staff of St. Elizabeths Hospital, the national mental asylum. When he heard that I was writing a doctoral dissertation on three American expatriate writers, Henry James, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound, his interest picked up and he began to take me seriously. The most famous inmate of St. Elizabeths Hospital at that time was Ezra Pound. Everyone knew that Pound had been indicted for treason in 1945 but had never faced trial. Instead, he had been declared "incompetent to stand trial in his own behalf" by three court-appointed psychiatrists. Dr. Woodberry saw an opportunity waiting to be seized, and told me that Ezra Pound was lonely and needed literary company. He insisted I should go out to see Pound, and he told me exactly how

to do it. I was first to write him personally to ask if I could pay him a visit. Then I was to write to Dr. Winifred Overholser, one of the psychiatrists who had examined Pound, now the head of St. Elizabeths, for official approval of my visit. That was what I did. I screwed up my courage and wrote to Pound the very next day. His reply came a couple of days later. I still have his letter among my most valuable possessions, scrawled in his inimitable hand in his patented abbreviated style, and signed with a flourish that looked rather like a caricature of his own profile:

S. Eliz. 23 Ap. [the year was 1955]

Dear Mr. Pratt:

&nb sp; By all means. Write to Superintendent S.Liz. for permission. Thursdays are best.

I like slow talk can't crowd into ¼ hour. Visiting hours 2-4 Sat. Sun. Tu. Th.

E. Pound

Dr. Overholser replied shortly afterward that if Mr. Pound agreed to my visit, so did he. Thus, on a sunny day in April 1955, I went to meet Ezra Pound in the insane asylum where he had been living for ten years, believed by most people in the country to be a traitor and a lunatic. He had built a daunting reputation for himself as a leading international poet in the 1910's and 1920's, when he was living in London and Paris, but in 1924 he moved to Rapallo, Italy, and became an outspoken admirer of Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, whom he began referring to as "The Boss." He even met Mussolini once and was flattered that Il Duce, as the Italians called him, seemed to listen seriously to what Pound had to say about economics. We don't know what Mussolini thought of Pound, but much later, in the 1940s, Pound was given the chance to make broadcasts over Rome Radio during the Second World War. In those broadcasts, which got him into so much trouble later, he said whatever he wanted to say in plain American English, using slang and dialects in the tried and true method of American humorists—reading poetry, including his own, talking about the writers he knew, expounding his pet ideas on economics and other subjects—but, unfortunately for him, often praising Mussolini and the Fascists, and urging Americans not to fight20against Italy, which had become Pound's home though he never gave up his American passport. I knew a good

deal about how Pound had come into the humiliating situation in which I found him, because though I was primarily interested in his literary work, I had looked up the transcripts of his speeches in the Library of Congress and knew there was good reason why he was arrested in Rapallo by Italian partisans in 1945, imprisoned in an American Army prison camp in Pisa, and then flown to Washington to be indicted for treason. But it was while he was a prisoner at Pisa that Pound wrote a series of poems called *The Pisan Cantos*, which became the most famous of all his voluminous writings, and when they were published in 1949 he was awarded the Bollingen Prize for Poetry, an American literary prize even more prestigious than a Pulitzer Prize. Pound was by that time an inmate of St. Elizabeths, and the award touched off a firestorm of protest by a host of American writers, which was countered by an equally spirited defense from the writers who had awarded him the prize, an eminent jury of his peers that included T.S. Eliot, Archibald MacLeish, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, Katherine Anne Porter, and Robert Lowell.

So when I met Pound in 1955 he was the most controversial figure in American letters, and I went to see him with some trepidation, wondering what it would be like to meet him in person. It turned out to be easy. I was careful to change out of my Navy uniform when I visited him so as not to put him on his guard. I found him seated in a canvas lawn chair on the spacious grounds of the hospital, with a small circle of admirers around him, including his wife Dorothy, a dignified English woman who visited him every day. Pound was no longer the dashing figure with red hair and beard, flashing the bohemian costume that had dazzled London literary circles in the period before the First World War. T.S. Eliot said that when he met Pound in London in 1914, Pound's clothing was so flamboyant that only his socks could be worn by anyone else. Eliot himself dressed like a banker, which he was for a time, but despite the difference in their dress, the two American expatriates hit it off immediately, and Pound was responsible for getting Eliot's first poems published and starting him on what became the most distinguished career in Anglo-American letters. Eliot would rise above Pound in public esteem, and would win a Nobel Prize for Literature which Pound never achieved, but when the two men met it was Pound who was the acknowledged leader of the Modern movement, and that was why Eliot sought him out. Pound at that time headed

the *avant garde*, as a poet, translator, essayist, and editor, a man every aspiring writer, English or American, wanted to meet, including the yet unknown T.S.Eliot.

I knew about the dashing earlier Pound whom Eliot met in London in 1914, but when I met him at St. Elizabeths in 1955, forty years later, he was in disgrace, a prisoner in his own country, convicted in the minds of many of his fellow countrymen as a traitor and a lunatic. The charge of treason for which he had been indicted was clearly legal, but his offense had been entirely verbal: he had made broadcasts over Rome Radio during the Second World War, when Italy was our enemy, though he always claimed that he was only exercising his American right of free speech. That claim led to the second charge, that he was insane, a charge which was never proved, because though it was apparent to everyone who knew him that he lacked common sense in some of his opinions, chiefly political and economic, he was completely lucid when he talked about literature, and he never lost his sense of humor. I remember once hearing him say, when he was asked whether a rather eccentric woman feeding squirrels on the grounds of St. Elizabeths might be an inmate of the asylum, "No, but I think she's responsible for someone's being here."

= The Pound I met in the spring of 1955 was a grandfatherly figure: elderly, portly, clad in a flannel shirt gaping at the navel, with a fur-lined hunting cap on his head, and wearing shoes without socks. Meeting him was a greater shock than meeting Faulkner, but if it was Faulkner who had caused me to be seriously interested in modern literature; it was Pound who took my interests farther than they would ever have gone without him. His friend and fellow poet, William Carlos Williams, said that when he met Pound as a college student at the University of Pennsylvania, even before Eliot met him in London, his life had been changed by it. Before and after meeting Pound, he said, was like the difference between B.C. and A.D. I knew exactly what he meant. I didn't know it immediately, but it gradually dawned on me, while I continued studying and teaching Modern Literature for the next fifty years, that Ezra Pound was the Modern writer at the center of the action, or as Eliot himself testified, that "Mr. Pound is more responsible for the 20th century revolution in poetry than any other individual." Eliot was one of Pound's disciples, and another was the younger poet E.E. Cummings, who wrote that Pound was "the authentic 'innovator,' the true trailblazer of an epoch.."

My awareness of Pound's central role in modern literature took a long time to sink in. What struck me on my first meeting with Pound, after I got over the shock of his appearance, was how gentlemanly he was. I was prepared for some angry raving and ranting from this flaming rebel who had so dramatically upset the world, but instead I was treated with old-fashioned courtesy the moment I shook hands with him. He was eager to talk. He wanted to know what I was up to, and I told him I was studying "The European Tradition in American Literature." His eyes lighted up and he began telling me how he had to leave America for Europe to avoid being trapped in provincialism. He wanted to belong to the world tradition in literature, he said, and so he chose to live in a number of European cities, never settling for long in any of them: first in Venice, then in London, then in Paris, and then in Rapallo. He said other American writers had to do the same to avoid provincialism: Henry James went to Europe to get away from the shadow of Hawthorne; T.S. Eliot went to Europe to escape the heavy influence of Emerson; and Pound himself had gone to Europe to flee—of all people, from the ghost of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow! These were the three expatriate writers I had chosen as the subject of my dissertation, and I was fascinated by what I was hearing from one of them. I knew all three had become great world writers, who together revolutionized American literature in the twentieth century, transforming it from what was then a largely national audience to what is now an international audience. At first, I wasn't sure which of the three had been most influential, but after long study I came to the conclusion that it was Pound. Pound had been the central figure in Modernism, the major movement in intellectual history after Romanticism, and meeting him was the beginning of my lifelong pursuit of what Modernism meant. To me, Modernism meant a change for the better, creating and fostering a new international style of writing, and going deep into the inner workings of the human mind, deeper than anyone had ever gone before—so deep that modern literature still remains incomprehensible to many readers, particularly if it's the kind written by Ezra Pound or William Faulkner.

Pound could be as severe a critic of America as Faulkner, yet he remained a loyal American, even when he made those treasonable broadcasts over Rome Radio. He insisted he was only exercising his American right of free speech in an effort to keep his country out of the war. In his broadcasts as well as in his writings, he came down

hardest against what he called Usury, the making of excessive profit, which to him was the cardinal sin. He thought it led inevitably to war, because those who had too much money would be constantly at odds with those who had too little. Americans, he believed, were especially guilty of an obsession with money. He argued that caring more about money than art was bad for society. But since economics was hardly his specialty, he persuaded few people that he was right about the cause of war, in particular the Second World War that was then raging. Poetry was his real specialty, and there his influence was much more effectual. Long before he was incarcerated, Pound had successfully shown, through his intellectual leadership both in poetry and in criticism, that a new period of literary greatness was possible. His motto was “Make it New,” and his study of poetry in a variety of languages had convinced him that poetry was the key to making it new, because he took poetry to be the essential form of literature, and literature is, as he liked to say, “news that stays news.” Faulkner would certainly have agreed, for he called himself a “failed poet” in spite of being a highly successful novelist, and it was Faulkner, not Pound, who said that in a poem every word must be perfect. To Faulkner, whose medium was fiction, the short story was second and the novel third in the careful use of words. Pound’s medium was poetry, and language was the source of poetry. Pound believed that a poet uses words as a painter uses color and line, or a composer uses rhythm and sound. He therefore began early in his life to study the major languages of the world, hoping to know more about world poetry than any living man. He studied Greek and Latin as a schoolboy in Philadelphia, and then, at Hamilton College in upstate New York, he studied Anglo-Saxon and French, Italian, Spanish, Provençal, Portuguese—capping it with the study of Romance Philology at the University of Pennsylvania, where he completed a Master’s degree and nearly finished a doctorate. He learned languages not as a scholar but as an artist: he wanted to know the best poetry that had ever been written so that he could try to equal it himself.

At his best he did equal it, and I learned much about poetry from meeting and talking with Pound. I also learned from meeting and talking to his wife Dorothy. It was she who told me Ezra’s best-kept secret: you didn’t need to know all there was to know about a language to master it; you needed to know it well enough to recognize its best poetry. That’s what he did, she said, and it made him first of all a great translator of

poetry, in fact the greatest translator who has ever lived. Pound's best translations don't read like translations; they read like original poems. To anyone who asks me what to read first in Pound, I say *Cathay*, a selection of some of the best ancient Chinese poems converted into modern American English. It is so readable that Eliot credited Pound with becoming "the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time." His own poetry is full of translations from poetry in other languages, often quoted in the original. That's what makes reading his poetry so difficult: you feel you must know every language Pound knew to understand him. It isn't really as necessary as it seems, however, because Pound at his best incorporated world poetry into his own very characteristic American poetry, no matter how strange the combination looks on the page. Reading Pound can be a liberal education in itself, as I should know. I have been reading Pound for over fifty years and I am still trying to understand him. He is the kind of writer whose meaning eludes you, yet entices you to go on trying to grasp it. Trying to understand Pound can become a lifelong pursuit.

My meeting with Ezra Pound at St. Elizabeths in 1955 was the real beginning of my professional career. I realize that all my education up to that point had been haphazard, a matter of personal interest combined with dedicated study, but after meeting him I was on the track of something more specific: I was trying to understand how words could be used to express meanings that went beyond words. That was what Pound at his best could do. I believe he understood the true motive for writing better than any writer who ever lived, and he understood it as nothing less than a quest for immortality, a lifelong journey of the soul. "It is tremendously important that great poetry be written," he maintained, "but it makes no jot of difference who writes it." Pound never claimed too much for himself. He probably expressed his artistic credo best in a line that is often quoted from the *Pisan Cantos*: "What thou lovest well is thy true heritage." He loved great poetry, and he helped renew its power in his own lifetime. Like his alter ego, a fictional poet he called *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, "he strove to resuscitate the dead art/ of poetry, to restore 'the sublime' in the old sense." Pound did restore the poetic quest for greatness in his lifetime, and he encouraged gifted friends and fellow writers like Yeats and Joyce and Eliot and Hemingway to do the same. He was the champion of Modernism, a major epoch in world literature, and for that cause he will be remembered

long after his political sins have faded into history. It was my good luck to meet him at a crucial point in my life, and I have been in his debt ever since.

I have an enduring souvenir of my visits to Ezra Pound. It is a copy of the book he published in 1954, the year before I went to see him at St. Elizabeths, his translation of *The Classical Anthology Defined by Confucius*. In those straitened circumstances, with few books around him to consult, he had translated a whole book of Chinese poetry. His wife Dorothy told me that sometimes he gave her Chinese characters to take down to the Library of Congress and check for him. I carried my copy of the book out to him on my last visit to St. Elizabeths in the hope he would sign it. He readily agreed. On the flyleaf of the book is this inscription: “Certified to hv been in the possession of Wm. P ratt. June 28 1955. Ezra Pound.” I bought it in 1955 for \$5. When I had it appraised fifty years later, it was valued at \$1,975, proving how right Pound was: “literature is news that stays news.”