

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

EZRA POUND

The American Critical Archives is a series of reference books that provides representative selections of contemporary reviews of the main works of major American authors. Specifically, each volume contains both full reviews and excerpts from reviews that appeared in newspapers and weekly and monthly periodicals, generally within a few months of the publication of the work concerned. There is an introductory historical overview by a volume editor, as well as checklists of additional reviews located but not quoted.

No one better symbolizes the course of modern literature – its triumphs and defeats – than Ezra Pound. From the dreaminess and aestheticism of his early poems, to his Imagist and Vorticist manifestos, to the formally experimental method and mythic engagement with history in *The Cantos*, Pound marks the path that modern and postmodern poetry would follow. This collection provides a documentary record of the reviews of Ezra Pound's work in contemporary journals and newspapers, an introduction that traces the public outrage and controversy that characterized Pound's reception, and checklists of all known reviews of Pound's work. Most of the major poets and critics of the twentieth-century reviewed Pound's work, including T. S. Eliot, Ford Madox Ford, William Carlos Williams, and Edmund Wilson. Their multiple, perplexed, and sometimes hostile responses to his work provide a rich record of the struggles that marked the emergence of modern and contemporary poetry and poetics.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

THE AMERICAN CRITICAL ARCHIVES

GENERAL EDITOR: M. Thomas Inge, Randolph-Macon College

1. Emerson and Thoreau: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Joel Myerson
2. Edith Wharton: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by James W. Tuttleton, Kristin O. Lauer, and Margaret P. Murray
3. Ellen Glasgow: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Dorothy M. Scura
4. Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by John L. Idol, Jr., and Buford Jones
5. William Faulkner: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by M. Thomas Inge
6. Herman Melville: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Brian Higgins and Hershel Parker
7. Henry James: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Kevin J. Hayes
8. John Steinbeck: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Joseph R. McElrath, Jr., Jesse S. Crisler, and Susan Shillinglaw
9. Walt Whitman: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Kenneth M. Price
10. Langston Hughes: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Letitia Dace and M. Thomas Inge
11. Mark Twain: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Louis Budd
12. Willa Cather: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Margaret Anne O'Connor
13. Louisa May Alcott: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Beverly Lyon Clark
14. T. S. Eliot: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Jewel Spear Brooker
15. Eudora Welty: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Pearl Amelia McHaney
16. Flannery O'Connor: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by R. Neil Scott and Irwin H. Streight
17. Stephen Crane: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by George Monteiro
18. Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews, edited by Betsy Erkkila

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Ezra Pound

The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by
Betsy Erkkila
Northwestern University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews
 Edited by Betsy Erkkilä
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521401395

© Cambridge University Press 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Ezra Pound : the contemporary reviews / edited by Betsy Erkkilä.

p. cm. – (The American critical archives ; 18)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-40139-5

1. Pound, Ezra, 1885–1972 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Pound, Ezra, 1885–1972 –
 Criticism and interpretation – Bibliography. 3. American poetry – 20th century –
 Book reviews. I. Erkkilä, Betsy, 1944–

PS3531.O82Z6275 2010

811'.52 – dc22 2010032004

ISBN 978-0-521-40139-5 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
 accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to
 in this publication, and does not guarantee that any content on such
 websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Contents

Series editor's preface	page vii
Introduction	viii
Acknowledgments	lviii
<i>A Lume Spento</i> (1908)	1
<i>Personae</i> (1909)	5
<i>Exultations</i> (1909)	17
<i>The Spirit of Romance</i> (1910)	25
<i>Provença</i> (1910)	31
<i>Canzoni</i> (1911)	41
<i>Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti</i> (1912)	49
<i>Ripostes</i> (1912)	55
<i>Cathay</i> (1915)	61
<i>Gaudier-Bzreska: A Memoir</i> (1916)	69
<i>Lustra</i> (1916)	75
<i>Pavannes and Divisions</i> (1918)	91
<i>Quia Pauper Amavi</i> (1919)	101
<i>Instigations</i> (1920)	115
<i>Hugh Selwyn Mauberley</i> (1920)	123
<i>Umbra: The Early Poems of Ezra Pound</i> (1920)	127
<i>Poems 1918–21</i> (1921)	133
<i>A Draft of XVI Cantos</i> (1925)	147
<i>Personae: The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound</i> (1926)	153
<i>A Draft of XXX Cantos</i> (1930)	171
<i>ABC of Reading</i> (1934)	205
<i>Make It New</i> (1934)	213
<i>Eleven New Cantos</i> (1934)	219
<i>Homage to Sextus Propertius</i> (1934)	229
<i>Jefferson And/Or Mussolini</i> (1935)	233
<i>Polite Essays</i> (1937)	237
<i>The Fifth Decad of Cantos</i> (1937)	241
<i>Guide to Kulchur</i> (1938)	253
<i>Cantos LII–LXXI</i> (1940)	265

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

<i>The Pisan Cantos</i> (1948)	273
<i>The Cantos</i> (1948)	299
<i>Selected Poems</i> (1949)	311
<i>Patria Mia</i> (1950)	317
<i>The Translations of Ezra Pound</i> (1953)	323
<i>Literary Essays of Ezra Pound</i> (1954)	335
<i>Section: Rock-Drill, 85–95 de los Cantares</i> (1956)	353
<i>Thrones, 96–109 de los Cantares</i> (1959)	367
<i>The Cantos (1–95)</i> (1965)	381
<i>Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX–CXVII</i> (1968)	389
<i>The Cantos of Ezra Pound</i> (1970)	395
Appendix: Reviews of Works Not Included in This Volume	401
Index	405

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Series editor's preface

The American Critical Archives Series documents a part of a writer's career that is usually difficult to examine, that is, the immediate response to each work as it was made public on the part of reviewers in contemporary newspapers and journals. Although it would not be feasible to reprint every review, each volume in the series reprints a selection of reviews designed to provide the reader with a proportionate sense of the critical response, whether it was positive, negative, or mixed. Checklists of other known reviews are also included to complete the documentary record and allow access for those who wish to do further reading and research.

The editors of each volume have provided an introduction that surveys the career of the author in the context of the contemporary critical response. Ideally, the introduction will inform the reader in brief of what is to be learned by a reading of the full volume. The reader then can go as deeply as necessary in terms of the kind of information desired – be it about a single work, a period in the author's life, or the author's entire career. The intent is to provide quick and easy access to the material for students, scholars, librarians, and general readers.

When completed, the American Critical Archives should constitute a comprehensive history of critical practice in America, and in some cases England, as the writers' careers were in progress. The volumes open a window on the patterns and forces that have shaped the history of American writing and the reputations of the writers. These are primary documents in the literary and cultural life of the nation.

M. THOMAS INGE

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Introduction

On May 6, 1945 the *New York Times* carried a brief article, with a photograph, announcing that Ezra Pound, the poet and impresario of the literary avant-garde, had been arrested in northern Italy on suspicion of treason against the American government. To many of his friends in the transatlantic literary community, among them T. S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, Robert Frost, and Ernest Hemingway, Pound's arrest seemed absurd, a further instance of what New Directions editor James Laughlin called a "world which habitually hangs or torments men of genius or vision." To Pound's friend and fellow Vorticist, Wyndham Lewis, Pound was "the Trotsky of literature," the leader of a revolution in modern art that provoked public outrage and fear. But to others his arrest and incarceration in a cage outside Pisa, his trial for treason, and his subsequent confinement for twelve years in a hospital for "the Criminally Insane" bore the quality of a cautionary tale about the dangers of modern art and its solipsistic and delusion-possessed propagators. In fact, Pound himself appeared to prophesy his own fate in Odysseus, the culture hero as modern artist in *The Cantos*, whose tragic destiny Tiresias foretold in the first of the "Ur-Cantos" published in *Poetry* in 1917: "Lustrous Odysseus, shalt / Return through spiteful Neptune, over dark seas, / Lose all companions."¹

Pound's Odyssean voyage as one of the founding figures of artistic and literary modernism is part of the story that this collection tells. It is a particularly remarkable tale because Pound is a particularly remarkable figure: no one better symbolizes the course of modern literature – its triumphs and its defeats – in the twentieth century. It was "more due to Ezra Pound than to any person," wrote Harriet Monroe, the founder of *Poetry* magazine, "that 'the revolution' or 'the renaissance,' or whatever one chooses to call the freer modern impulse in poetry, was on." Described by English writer and poet Richard Aldington as a "a small but persistent volcano in the dim levels of London literary society," Pound became an "impulse," a "force," and what James Joyce called a "large

¹ Letter of James Laughlin to T. S. Eliot, cited in John Tytell, *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1987), 285; Wyndham Lewis, cited in *ibid.*, p. 3; "Three Cantos," in Ezra Pound: *Personae: The Shorter Poems*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York: New Directions, 1990), 245.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

bundle of unpredictable electricity” at the center of the struggle for radically new forms of poetry, aesthetics, art, translation, and criticism in the twentieth century.²

From the elusive fin-de-siècle dreaminess and aestheticism of his early poems, to the poetics of the image and movement announced in his Imagist and Vorticist manifestos, to the formally experimental ideogrammic method and the mythic and economic engagement with history in *The Cantos*, Pound marks the path that Modernist and Postmodern poetry would follow. His work in criticism and translation, from his Imagist Manifesto and *Guide to Kulchur* to his translations from Provençal and Chinese, signaled new directions and a more comparative global perspective in modern literature and criticism. Most of the major poets and critics of the twentieth century have had occasion to comment on Pound, and their multiple, perplexed, and sometimes hostile responses to his work in poetry, criticism, and translation provide a fascinating record of the struggles that marked the emergence of modern and contemporary poetry and poetics.

But it is not only as a record of the struggles over poetry that the story of Pound’s reception assumes center stage in any account of twentieth-century and twenty-first-century English and American letters. His controversial life, work, and personality – his ideas on the relation between economics and art, his fascism and anti-Semitism, his broadcasts for Mussolini, his indictment and arrest for treason, his incarceration, his receipt of the Bollingen award for poetry – have provoked major controversies over the nature and function of art, and especially poetry, in the modern world. In their attempt to find a critical idiom adequate to an evaluation of Pound’s work in the fields of poetry, translation, and criticism, critics have had to find new ways of thinking about the relations between life and art, poetry and politics, craft and vision, the artist and the world. These new ways of thinking about poetry are at the center of the critical debates sparked by Pound’s work within a transatlantic and increasingly global literary community.

Beginnings

Even before he published his first volume of poems, Pound began to assume the intellectual mannerisms and swashbuckling style that would make him the unorthodox *provocateur* of literary London and later the scandal of post-World War II American letters. In “How I Began,” Pound asserted that at age fifteen he decided to become a poet and to know more by age thirty than any living man:

² Harriet Monroe, “Ezra Pound,” *Poetry*, 26 (May 1925), 90–97 (in Eric Homberger, *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972], 213); Richard Aldington, *Life for Life’s Sake: A Book of Reminiscences* (New York: Viking Press, 1941), 105; *Pound/Joyce Letters*, ed. Forrest Read (New York: New Directions, 1970), 178.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

“In this search,” he says, “I learned more or less of nine foreign languages, I read Oriental stuff in translations, I fought every university regulation and every professor who tried to make me learn anything except this, or who bothered me with ‘requirements for degrees.’” William Carlos Williams, one of Pound’s classmates at the University of Pennsylvania in 1902, described Pound as often “brilliant but an ass”: “not one person in a thousand likes him, and a great many people detest him and why? Because he is so damned full of conceits and affectation. He is really a brilliant talker and thinker but delights in making himself just exactly what he is not: a laughing boor.”³

From Pennsylvania, Pound transferred to Hamilton College in upstate Clinton, New York, where once again he acquired a reputation for snootiness and eccentricity. According to one legend, “Pound customarily entertained visitors to his room by smashing up furniture.” After receiving his B.A. degree in 1905, Pound returned to the University of Pennsylvania, where he earned an M.A. degree in Romance Languages in 1907. Failing to receive a fellowship to pursue the doctorate and having “spatted,” said Pound, “with nearly everybody,” he accepted a teaching position at Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Indiana. The job lasted four months. With his black velvet coat, malacca cane, bohemian mannerisms, and ambition to be the great American poet, Pound became known as “the Latin Quarter type.”⁴ When he was discovered in his private apartments with a female actress – a “lady-gent impersonator” according to Pound – he was promptly terminated. Rather than head further west – he had, after all, been born in Hailey, Idaho – Pound chose the other prototypically American way out: he sailed for Europe (on a cattle boat).

Pound arrived in Venice in the Spring of 1908, carrying the poems that were to be the core of his first collection, *A Lume Spento*. The title, “With Tapers Quenched,” is drawn from a mourning ritual in Dante’s *Purgatorio*: it may allude to the death of Pound’s young artist friend, William Brooke Smith, the “Painter and Dreamer of Dreams,” to whom the volume is dedicated and to the pagan tradition of beauty and song that Pound sought to revive in this volume.⁵ Having failed to place it with an American publisher, Pound thought that if he could create a critical stir in Europe, he might be able to drum up some American interest. With this in mind, he paid the Italian publisher

³ Ezra Pound, “How I Began,” *T.P.’s Weekly*, June 6, 1913, p. 707; William Carlos Williams, *Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1951), 58; letter of William Carlos Williams to his mother in 1905, cited in Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 48.

⁴ *Modern American Poetry*, ed. Louis Untermeyer (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), 286.

⁵ It was Smith who introduced Pound to Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and the aestheticism of the 1890s before he died of consumption in 1908. See Hugh Witemeyer, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewal, 1908–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

A. Antonini to print 150 copies of *A Lume Spento* in July 1908. The forty-four poems, which he later described as “a collection of stale creampuffs,” reveal Pound to be a good late Victorian poet, with sources in Medieval and Provençal poetry, the dramatic personae of Robert Browning, and the lyric aestheticism of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Swinburne, and early Yeats. Dedicated “to such as love the same beauty that I love, somewhat after mine own fashion” (with a nod in the direction of Ernest Dowson’s “Cynara” [1891]) and ending with “Make-strong old dreams lest this our world lose heart,” the poems swing between the fleshiness and worldliness of Browning’s historical personae and the aspiration toward beauty, spiritualism, and the occult that characterized 1890s aestheticism. Pound himself had misgivings about this first volume. At proof stage, he wondered: “shd / I chuck the lot into the tide-water? / le bozze ‘A Lume Spento’” (Canto LXXVI). After publication, he confessed to Williams that it was, finally, “a rather gloomy and disagreeable book.”⁶

Nevertheless, the poems were, by Pound’s own admission, the most finished work he had done, and he busily set about eliciting some kind of response from the press, even if he had, like his forebear Walt Whitman, to write reviews. The first brief one, from Pound himself, was published in the *Evening Standard and St. James Gazette* in November, 1908, shortly after his arrival in London. Assuming one of his first public masks as a critic of London literary taste and what he called “the trite and measured verses of our decorous poets,” Pound described *A Lume Spento* as “wild and haunting stuff, absolutely poetic, original, imaginative, passionate, and spiritual.” The following year, in the *Daily News*, R. E. Scott-James appears to echo this review when he writes: “He has individuality, passion, force, and an acquaintance with things that are profoundly moving.”

The American response was more mixed. The poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, to whom Pound had sent a copy, wrote a brief “Greeting of a Poetess of Established Fame to a Newcomer Among the Bards” in the *New York American Journal-Examiner*. But a reviewer in the *Book News Monthly* voiced what would become a more widespread resistance to Pound’s pedantry and obscurity when he complained that “the academician bristles all over his work.”

The poems of *A Lume Spento* might have become quenched tapers had Pound not personally delivered a copy to the English publisher Elkin Mathews. He had published works by Yeats and other nineties poets, and was impressed with Pound’s aesthete verse. In December, 1908, he sponsored the reprinting of Pound’s pamphlet of poems *A Quinzaine for this Yule*,⁷ and in April

⁶ Cited in Louis Martz, “Introduction,” *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, ed. Michael John King (New York: New Directions, 1976), vii; *The Selected Letters of Ezra Pound: 1907–1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: New Directions, 1971), 5.

⁷ *A Quinzaine for this Yule* had originally been printed by Pollock & Co. in London in 1909.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

1909, published *Personae*. Mathews was for several years Pound's publisher in England and his main avenue of entry into London literary circles.

The Pound Revolution

Personae, which included sixteen poems from *A Lume Spento* and several more recent ones, created a wave of critical excitement in England strong enough to carry interest in Pound's work back across the Atlantic and into American publishing houses. In England, the volume was enthusiastically reviewed by influential figures, including in the *Daily Telegraph*, by W. L. Courtney, the editor of the *Fortnightly Review*. Edward Thomas, a poet of the Edwardian revival, hailed the volume in the prestigious *English Review*, edited by Ford Madox Hueffer, which had published original work by Thomas Hardy, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad.⁸ F. S. Flint, an influential critic of contemporary French poetry and later one of the founders of the Imagist movement, also praised Pound's work in the *New Age*, a primary organ of the literary avant-garde in England. Even Rupert Brooke, the popular poet of the Edwardian age, was prompted to respond, but was mostly negative. By mid-year, *Personae* had drawn enough attention to be noticed – and satirized – by *Punch*. Punning on Pound's name and his Americanism, the journal refers to Ezekiel Ton, “the most remarkable thing in poetry since Robert Browning,” who “has succeeded, where all others have failed, in evolving a blend of the imagery of the unfettered West, the vocabulary of Wardour Street, and the sinister abandon of Borgiac Italy.”

As the French Symbolist poet and critic, Rémy de Gourmont, once observed, literary tradition is “a choice and not a fact”; tradition as a fact is “merely a mass of contradictory tendencies.”⁹ All of the reviewers of *Personae* agreed that Pound was pressing the boundaries of literary tradition. But was he a poet or a charlatan? To answer this question, reviewers engaged from the start in a quarrel about the proper nature and forms of poetry in the world. Serenely confident about the nature of aesthetic experience, Rupert Brooke asserted: “There are certain extremely valuable ‘aesthetic’ feelings to be got through literature,” and these come “often and more intensely through poetry, in which the three elements of thought, words, and meter are employed.” This being the definition of *poetry* and the boundary between *poetry* and *prose*, Brooke scolded Pound for falling “under the dangerous influence of Whitman” and dismissed what he calls his *vers libre* as prose. While Brooke recognized certain flashes of brilliance and intensity in Pound's work, his conclusion opted for the smug complacency of the Edwardian era: “When he has passed through

⁸ Tytell describes the *English Review* as “the most important literary magazine in London” (*Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano*, p. 49).

⁹ Cited in John Gould Fletcher's review of Pound, in *Criterion*, 8 (April 1929), 514.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

stammering to speech, and when he has more clearly recognized the nature of poetry, he may be a great poet.”

Equally confident about the nature and limits of poetry, the *Nation* dismissed those “artistic malcontents” who do not see “that the boundaries of poetic content were long ago extended to such spacious width that it is not humanly possible to extend the *imperium* of poesy, and consequently, that the mode of proper poetic expression is also, within broad limits, practically fixed.” Evaluating Pound’s *Personae* in terms of these fixed laws of poetry, the review was weirdly prophetic in equating Pound’s “strange method of expression” with “rebellion and treason” against government and the state: “He has mistaken insurgence for strength, treason for originality.” Poetic words must clothe “a spiritual shape,” the unnamed reviewer insisted, and then cited the “vigorous poetic phrasing” and “heroic thought” of only a few God-centered lines in “Ballad For Gloom”:

To love your God as a gallant foe
that plays behind the veil
To meet your God as the night Winds meet
beyond Arcturus’ pale.

Not surprisingly, it was this rather Kipling-esque poem that Arthur Quiller-Couch chose to include in *The Oxford Book of Victorian Verse* (1919). Perhaps as a parting gesture to the moral and aesthetic certitudes of the Victorian Age, Pound excluded it from his collected edition of *Personae* in 1926.

More open to Pound’s experiments in poetic language and meter, Curtis Hidden Page, an American reviewer and a Professor of English and French at Northwestern University, recognized something different and wholly original in Pound’s verse. At the same time, however, he placed Pound in the tradition of the nineties poets: “This poet, in spite of frequent roughness (often intentional), is a true singer, genuinely carrying on the tradition of the schools of Henley, Symons, Hovey, Dowson – and Browning: a strange combination, but truly representing the literary spirit of to-day.”

It was the English reviewers, Courtney, Thomas, and Flint, who were the first to draw attention to the animal vitality, simplicity of idiom, and formal freedom that set Pound apart, even at this early stage, from his Edwardian contemporaries. Introduced by an epigraph from the final poem of *A Lume Spento*, “Make-strong old dreams lest this our world lose heart,” Pound’s *dramatis personae* are no longer the sick phantoms, tempered spirits, and thin ephemera that tended to dominate the poetry of the nineties and the Edwardian age. As Pound said in “Revolt Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry,” his poems sought to “give / For shadows – shapes of power / For dreams – men.” Courtney, Thomas, and Flint all recognized that Pound’s poetry extended traditional modes of poetic perception. The poems of *Personae* are a beautiful “new seed,” wrote Courtney in “A New Note in Verse”; “the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

writer is only just getting under sail,” said Thomas in the *Daily Chronicle*, and he predicted that “he will reach we know not where; nor does he, but somewhere far away in the unexplored.”

This was a promising beginning. At age twenty-three, Pound was within reach of what he called “the white stag, Fame,” and it gave him the much-sought-after publicity he had been “a-hunting” since his arrival in Europe. With the publication of *Exultations* in October, 1909, news of Pound’s British fame again reached American shores. “An American Poet Discovered in England,” announced a headline in the *Literary Digest* in 1909, which printed excerpts from the British reviews of *Personae* and *Exultations*. In “Philadelphia Poet Hailed in England,” the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* introduced Pound as “the young man, who has captured the critics as well as the literary craftsmen in England and the Continent.”

In England, however, the response to *Exultations* was mixed. Although “Ballad of the Goodly Fere” was an immediate success, perhaps because it focused on a recognizably religious subject – the death of Christ – even Pound sympathizers, such as Ford and Flint, expressed impatience with his derivative and affected use of language. Nonetheless, at about the same time that Pound was beginning to return to the vernacular sap and root of his American forefather, Whitman,¹⁰ Flint used his 1910 review of Pound in *New Age* to sound an early call for the liberation of English verse. “One thing is proved by these two little books of his,” Flint wrote of *Personae* and *Exultations*,

and that is that the old devices of regular metrical beat and regular rhyming are worn out; the sonnet and the three-quatrain poem will probably always live; but for the larger music verse must be free from all the restraints of a regular return and a squared-up frame; the poet must forge his rhythm to the impulse of the creative emotion working through him.

Impressed by Pound’s British reception, in 1910, E. P. Dutton and Company of New York agreed to publish *The Spirit of Romance: An Attempt to Define Somewhat the Charm of the Pre-Renaissance Literature of Latin Europe*. This collection of essays on the “charm” or genius of late Medieval literature is part of what Pound called his “struggle to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again, and to find out what remains for us to do.”¹¹ Through criticism and translation, he introduced the general reader and contemporary poets to a counter-Miltonic lyric, epic, and vernacular tradition he discovered in Dante and Villon, and in a range of Provençal

¹⁰ Ezra Pound, “What I Feel About Walt Whitman” (1909), reprinted in Herbert Bergman, “Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound,” *American Literature*, 27 (March 1955), 58–61.

¹¹ Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, ed. T. S. Eliot (New York: New Directions, 1968), 11.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

and Italian troubadour writings. *The Spirit of Romance* was “Pound’s initial skirmish in what turned out to be a long battle to free modern poetry,” wrote a *New Yorker* reviewer when it was reprinted in 1952: “A key volume in the modern revolution in English literature, it comes back into print as fresh and as invigorating as ever, when the war it began has been won.”

But *The Spirit of Romance* was not only a key volume in renewing the sensibility and technique of modern poetry. As several of Pound’s early reviewers noted, it also introduced a new critical method based on aesthetic *value*, close reading of representative passages of the best writers, and literary – rather than historical or philological – interpretation and analysis. “The whole treatise is a protest against regarding the literature of this period merely as a stamping ground for philological investigation,” wrote the reviewer in the *Dial*; it surveys Romance literature “in such a way as to give an idea of *the worth of this literature as art*. The method pursued is that of interpretation by means of brief expository and narrative comment, and of illustrative selections in translation” (emphasis added). Almost a decade before T. S. Eliot’s more well-known articulation of “new” critical values in “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” *The Spirit of Romance* introduced the techniques of close reading and stylistic analysis that would come to dominate literary criticism and the academy after World War II. In ranging across numerous national languages and literatures, Pound also anticipated the founding ideals of the American Comparative Literature Association, which was started in 1960, and the more recent transnational turn toward a less nation-centered approach to the literatures of the globe. “When it comes to the question of poetry,” Pound wrote in 1934, “a great many people don’t even want to know that their own country does not occupy ALL the available surface of the planet. The idea seems in some way to insult them.”¹²

In November 1910, a few months after the American publication of *The Spirit of Romance*, Small, Maynard & Co. of Boston published *Provença*, the first book of Pound’s poetry to be issued in America. Continuing to ride the wave of Pound’s British popularity, the publishers announced on the jacket:

Mr. Pound is the American poet who has significantly won his spurs in London. *Provença* is the first American edition of his work and contains the best of the two volumes, *Personae* and *Exultations*, already brought out in England separately under the title *Canzoniere*. It is not too much to say that no other poet in recent years has made so marked an impression on the critics.

The poems of *Provença* made a similarly marked impression on American reviewers. Floyd Dell, a well-known advocate of the Chicago Renaissance and

¹² Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 42.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

the works of such modern American writers as Theodore Dreiser, Carl Sandburg, and Sherwood Anderson, described Pound as “a very new kind of poet” in a review for the *Chicago Evening Post*. Comparing his poems to the Post-Impressionist paintings of Monet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Matisse, and Gauguin, whose controversial works had been displayed to a baffled art world in London in November, 1910, Dell was the first to stress the inadequacy of current aesthetic categories for an evaluation of the work of Pound and other experimental artists who were challenging the boundaries of “realist” art: “One may sincerely admire Monet, and yet be entirely unable to explain to a skeptic why haystacks should be painted lavender. And one may have acquired, in regard to poetry, that critical vocabulary and manner . . . and yet not be able to bring it to bear on Ezra Pound.”

This crisis of aesthetic category is particularly evident in the critical response to Pound’s experiments with free verse. Perceiving, once again, an analogy between his experimental style and the Post-Impressionists, a Boston *Independent* reviewer complained: “Just as painting monstrosities, whether before or after seeing Matisse, seems to us bad art, so does cruelty to rhythm.” Similarly fixed in his notions of traditional rhyme and meter, a reviewer in the *New York Times* saluted Pound as a “New Planet on the Literary Horizon,” at the same time that he scolded him for failing to observe the rules of rhyme. Offended by Pound’s use of “fleet” to rhyme with “wander-ried,” he reminded the poet that “miscegenation is no more pretty in languages than among races” – a seemingly offhand critical pairing that evinces the interdependencies of race and aesthetic theory in pre-World War I America.

Several critics remarked on the manliness and vigor of Pound’s verse. “[T]here is a healthy, manly, virile note in his poetry, a note that expresses itself in man-song and in passionate love poetry,” wrote Milton Bronner in the *Bookman*. “They are rough, uncouth, hairy, barbarous, wild,” exuded H. L. Mencken in the *Smart Set*. Describing him as a kind of modern-day Whitman, Mencken’s comment linked Pound’s “revolt against the puerile kittenishness which marks so much of latter day English poetry” not only with the ongoing struggle between “English” and specifically American forms of modernity, but with what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar would later call the “Battle of the Sexes” at the origins of literary Modernism.¹³ “Nine-tenths of our living makers and singers it would seem are women, and fully two-thirds of these women are ladies,” Mencken complained. The “arresting and amazing vigor” and Dionysian “prancing” of Pound’s “American” verse rebelled against this “boudoir tinkle in the tumult of the lyre.”

¹³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “The Battle of the Sexes: The Men’s Case,” in *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 1, *The War of the Words* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 3–62.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Imagism and Vorticism

“[O]n or about December 1910, human character changed,” Virginia Woolf announced in what she called a “disputable” but now famous “assertion” of the transformation in human consciousness that took place in response to broader social, psychological, technological, and scientific changes in the early twentieth century. About the same time, Pound began to move away from his earlier “studies in form” toward a more direct, modern, free verse idiom. Provoked by his friend Hueffer, who rolled on the floor in gales of laughter at the “absurdly archaic” diction of *Canzoni* (1911), Pound eliminated these poems from his collected works.¹⁴ That roll, Pound said, saved him two years. In conversation with Hueffer, T. E. Hulme, Richard Aldington, and Hilda Doolittle, he formulated the principles of precision, concreteness, and rhythmic freedom in verse that he set forth in the Imagist Manifesto of 1913. Instead of imitating the rigid rhyme and stanzaic scheme of the medieval *canzone*, he invented the ironic, contemporary idiom of “Portrait d’Une Femme.”

When Pound offered it to the *North American Review*, which had praised (along with William Dean Howells) his Greek anthology poem “Two Cloaks,” “Portrait d’Une Femme” was rejected for being improperly mellifluous and Tennysonian. “I sent them a real poem,” Pound recalled in 1913 in *Patria Mia*, “a modern poem, containing the word ‘uxorious’ and they wrote back that it was difficult to pronounce, and that I might not remember that Tennyson had once condemned the use of four s’s in a certain line of a different meter.” To Pound, this rejection slip signified the critical rigor mortis of America. “It is well known,” he continued in *Patria Mia*, “that in the year of grace 1870 Jehovah appeared to Messrs. Harper and Co. and to the editors of ‘The Century,’ ‘The Atlantic,’ and certain others, and spake thus: ‘The style of 1870 is the final and divine revelation. Keep things always just as they are now.’ And they, being earnest, God-fearing men, did abide by the words of the Almighty, and great credit and honour accrued unto them, for had they not divine warrant!”¹⁵

An amateur fencer, Pound fought back by publishing “Portrait d’Une Femme” along with other poems in a more direct and natural idiom in a new volume, entitled *Ripostes. Whereto Are Appended the Complete Poetical Works of T. E. Hulme*, in a print run of 400 copies, in London in 1912. Dedicated to William Carlos Williams, illustrated with a Cubist design by Dorothy Shakespeare, and with a “Prefatory Note” on *Les Imagistes*, *Ripostes* is generally regarded as Pound’s breakthrough volume, marking his turn away from

¹⁴ Virginia Woolf, *Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), 4; obituary of Ford Madox Ford, *Nineteenth Century and After*, 26 (August 1939), 179.

¹⁵ Ezra Pound, *Patria Mia: A Discussion of the Arts, Their Use, and Future in America* (Chicago: R. F. Seymour, 1950), 42.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

the Medievalism and Romance of his early work toward the Modernism and Objectivism of his later period.

The volume was reviewed unfavorably in the *Times Literary Supplement*, which compared the public misunderstanding of Pound's book to the mixed effect that the Post-Impressionist exhibition had on its spectators and urged the poet to return to the earlier style of "The Seafarer." In *Poetry and Drama*, F. S. Flint reviewed Pound's "long apprenticeship in the technics of his craft" and defended his experiments with *vers libre* as solidly based in tradition. But in America, with the exception of a review of his career by a friend and fellow Imagist poet, John Cournos, who predicted that like Whistler "in the art of painting" Pound would "achieve something altogether new and distinctly his own," *Ripostes* received no notice in the press.

In hindsight it seems peculiar that *Ripostes*, which bore the traces of what T. S. Eliot would call "a different idiom . . . more thought; greater depth," met with such critical silence in America. But Pound had in some sense "always outdistanced his audience," as he said in an interview with Malcolm Cowley. And in 1912, Messrs. Harper and Company – and Howells – were still in charge of American letters. The *Ripostes*, or jabs, were at odds with a genteel literary culture in which, as Pound once said, "Any pleasant thing in symmetrical trousers will find a purchaser." Thus, Howells, from his Editor's Easy Chair at *Harper's* would praise Robert Frost's *A Boy's Will* (1914) and *North of Boston* (1915) for their strong, sweet music. "Here is no *vers libre*," he wrote, "no shredded prose, but very sweet rhyme and pleasant rhythm, though it does not always keep step . . . but always remains faithful to the lineage of poetry that danced before it walked."¹⁶ Pound's new poems, which did not dance to the beat of the metronome, would never be reviewed in *Harper's*; and it would be years before his work would be discussed in the prestigious *North American Review* and *Atlantic Monthly*.

And yet despite the American literary establishment being closed to him, Pound was certain, as he wrote in *Patria Mia* in 1913, that if a "renaissance" in modern art occurred, it would come from American newness rather than tradition-bound Europe. "America has a chance for a Renaissance," he wrote, and "certain absurdities in the manners of American action are, after all, things of the surface and not of necessity the symptoms of sterility or even of fatal illness." To bring about this artistic renewal would require two things: "indiscriminate enthusiasm" and "a propaganda."

Like his medieval persona Bertrams de Born, Pound became for the literary establishment in Europe and America, "a stirrer up of strife." He found a

¹⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry" (1917), in *T. S. Eliot: To Criticize the Critic and Other Writing* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), 172; Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (New York: Viking, 1961), 122; Editor's Easy Chair, *Harper's Magazine* (September 1915).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

network of enthusiasts in the cause of modern art in a group of English and American innovators that included Flint, Aldington, Doolittle (newly christened H. D.), Hueffer, Wyndham Lewis, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and Eliot. Through his own writing and his positions as editor, anthologist, translator, and publicist for the work of others, Pound set about orchestrating the “propaganda” for a renaissance of the arts. In “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste,” which appeared in *Poetry* in 1913, he announced the Modernist poetics of precision, concision, and metrical freedom. The following month, *Poetry* carried his “Contemporaria” poems, including “In a Station of the Metro” and “The Garden,” which put the Imagist theory into practice. Through a series of reviews and articles for such small magazines as *Poetry*, *New Age*, *Egoist*, and *Little Review*, Pound attacked everything from Romantic slither to pharisaical American editors. He also sought to promote the works of a vanguard of modern artists by editing two collections of modern poetry: *Des Imagistes* (1914), which included James Joyce, Hueffer, Williams, and H. D.; and *Catholic Anthology* (1915), which promoted the new work of Eliot, including “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and featured Sandburg and Yeats.

With the publication of his translations of the Chinese poems of Li Po and others in *Cathay* (1915), Pound became what Eliot called “the inventor of Chinese poetry for our time.”¹⁷ *Cathay* was not only the first volume to introduce Chinese poetry to twentieth-century English readers; it also innovated a new mode of translation as adaptation or reinvention that bodied forth the emotion and energy of the original at the same time that it advanced a modernist poetics of direct presentation and sculpted image, and a language freed from the insistencies of rhyme, rhetoric, and the metronome.

The publication of *Cathay* in London, after the outbreak of World War I, marked a turning point in Pound’s reputation on both sides of the Atlantic. “The poems in *Cathay* are things of supreme beauty,” wrote Hueffer in *Outlook*. At a time of personal isolation and “protracted war,” the poems open “upon a landscape made real by the intensity of human emotions” and reveal the Chinese of two thousand years ago “as being just ourselves.” Carl Sandburg, a major poet of the Chicago Renaissance, opened his review in *Poetry* by singling Pound out as the “one individual, who, in the English language, . . . has done most of living men to incite new impulses in poetry.” “All talk on modern poetry, by people who know, ends with dragging in Ezra Pound somewhere,” Sandburg observed. “He may be named only to be cursed as wanton and mocker, poseur, trifler and vagrant. . . . The point is, he will be mentioned.”

In 1914, as part of his effort to further a revolution and renaissance in the arts, Pound became involved with Wyndham Lewis, his Rebel Art Centre, the magazine *BLAST*, and the increased emphasis on the force and dynamism of

¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Introduction,” Ezra Pound, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Gwyer, 1928), xvi.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

the image that Pound called “Vorticism.” Using the term *Vortex* to denote an Imagist concentration of energy, a “radiant node or cluster” in any medium through which “ideas are constantly rushing,” Pound found in the work of the sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska the most perfect illustration of Vorticist art.¹⁸ When Gaudier was killed in the war at age twenty-three, Pound was moved to write *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, a book that became crucial to sustaining Gaudier’s work for a new generation when it was published in 1916 by John Lane in London and New York. Reactions to the book, which included Pound’s essay on “Vorticism” as well as a selection of writings and illustrations by Gaudier, reflected an intensifying critical division in response to the new movements in modern art. Whereas the *Dial* praised the Vorticist aesthetics of both men, the *New York Times* introduced Pound as “an advocate of the most advanced and eccentric form of Imagisme and vers libre.” “Mr. Pound diminishes the value of his memoir by including a number of his own pronouncements on the subject of sculpture and of art in general,” the reviewer complained. Betraying a similar impatience with “muddled” theories of “the new ‘pure’ art,” the *Nation* concluded that Gaudier-Brzeska “deserves a better fate than to be maundered about by an unvenerable *Imagiste*.”

Criticism from Right to Left

Reactions took an even more negative turn with the publication of *Lustra* in 1916, a volume that exhibits the range of Pound’s poetic interests and experiments in 1913–16. Censored in both American and English editions, *Lustra* includes poems that “dance the dance of the phallus,” voicing the desires of *l’homme moyen sensuel*; lyrics in the Latin, Provençal, Anglo-Saxon, and Chinese modes; contemporary sketches in the ironic manner of Jules Laforgue; Imagist poems that nod in the direction of Théophile Gautier’s *Émaux et Camées*; Whitmanian exhortations to his songs and to his readers; poems that splash color in the manner of the Post-Impressionist painters; and in the American edition published in 1917, the first part of his epic odyssey, “Three Cantos of a Poem of Some Length.”

Like the Cantos, the poems of *Lustra* represented a new departure. Commenting on the positive reception accorded his earlier work, Pound said in “Salutation the Second,”

You were praised, my books
because I had just come from the country;
I was twenty years behind the times
so you found an audience ready.

¹⁸ Ezra Pound, “Vorticism,” in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 92.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Adopting a newly aggressive attitude toward the moral and aesthetic complacencies of his time, Pound taunted and ridiculed the ready-made audience he found for his earlier work. Elkin Mathews had already expurgated several *Lustra* poems for being, as he put it, “very nasty.”¹⁹ While Alfred Knopf published the material excluded from the English edition (with the exception of “The Temperaments”), he attempted to abate possible objections to the work by commissioning Eliot to write an anonymous essay that would explain Pound’s experiments in form to an increasingly disaffected American public. Entitled *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, the essay was published separately as a pamphlet to coincide with the American *Lustra*.

Eliot’s essay begins with a strikingly accurate assessment of Pound’s “reputation” then and now. He acknowledged Pound’s increasing notoriety as a propagandist of Imagism, Vorticism, free verse, and modernity in the arts: “There are twenty people who have their opinion of him” – who are “shocked,” “ruffled,” “irritated,” or “outraged” – “for every one who has read his writings with any care.” Even the critic who knows his poems believes “‘Pound is primarily a scholar, a translator,’ or ‘Pound’s early verse was beautiful; his later work shows nothing better than the itch for advertisement, a mischievous desire to be annoying, or a childish desire to be original.’”²⁰ Eliot sought to counter this negative public image by emphasizing Pound’s apprenticeship to the craft of poetry, his ten years’ work “with rigid forms and different systems of metric” as a means of renewing the language, metrical variety, and idiom of modern English poetry.

Eliot also sought to bolster Pound’s reputation in England by translating and publishing in the *Egoist* a glowing review of *Lustra* by the French poet and painter, Jean de Bosschère, who celebrated Pound as “the best-known poet of his generation.” Pound is at the center of all discussions of modern art, Bosschère averred, because of two distinctive qualities: “He is free and without rhetoric – no one more so . . . His independence comes from the fact that he has dug into the past with a keener mind, and more profoundly than is necessary for ordinary culture. The number of influences he has passed under have also freed him, and he has made his departure from the known with rare audacity.”²¹ For Bosschère as for Eliot, *Lustra* was grounded in tradition at the same time that it represented a revolutionary break with the past.

But despite these efforts to explain the Pound revolution to readers in America and England, *Lustra* was more widely and more negatively reviewed than any of his previous works. “More Poetry That Is Sick,” read the headline in the *Springfield Republic*, concluding that Pound had “left poetry out of his book.”

¹⁹ Elkin Mathews, “The Memorandum Agreement,” in *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Homburger, p. 123.

²⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1917), 3.

²¹ Jean de Bosschère, “Ezra Pound,” trans. T. S. Eliot, *Egoist*, February 1917, p. 17.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For others, the resistance to Pound was more social and political, reflecting in the wake of World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917, an increasing turn toward an art of social substance and political engagement. Despite Pound's looking to the contemporary world and the tradition of Whitman – "It was you that broke the new wood," he wrote in "A Pact" – reviewers found him oddly out of touch with his times. In the *Dial*, the leftist poet and critic, Louis Untermeyer, described *Lustra* as "the record of a retreat, a gradual withdrawal from life" and a "cloistral aversion to the crowd." To the *New Republic*, Pound was not the true son of either Whitman or America: he was a "strange hybrid of cosmopolitanism and exotic influences . . . who is European in everything except actual birth."

In postwar America, other, now forgotten, poets and movements loomed larger in the poetic landscape than Ezra Pound. In the *New York Call*, a socialist daily, George W. Cronyn observed that he would rather have one of the "catastrophically human" poems of Edgar Lee Masters, or the recently published prose poems of the Italian immigrant and labor activist, Arturo Giovanetti, "such as 'The Last Nickel' or 'The Walker,' or one of Carl Sandburg's Chicago poems than the whole volume called *Lustra*." "Some of his followers who are not so well known have surpassed him in his own *métiers*," Untermeyer concluded, citing not only Eliot but other Modernist poets – the Aldingtons, John Gould Fletcher, Maxwell Bodenheim.

Although we have come to assume that the emergence of Modernism corresponded with an increasing decline in the popular audience for poetry, reviews of *Lustra* suggest the contrary: most envisioned the possibility of a large and possibly even growing market for poetry, including Pound's Cantos: "These verses were not written for the multitude and the rabble," wrote William Stanley Braithwaite in the *Boston Evening Transcript*, "but there is a class of readers who regard all art with the common sense and fundamental mood of the multitude, who can find no truth or vitality in such odds and ends of verse as these." A lengthy appreciation of Pound's "clearness," "precision," and artistic "mastery," in the *New York Times Book Review* appeared to agree: "He has a certain disdain for the easy laurel of the popular poet." But the review went on to say of the "Three Cantos": "Their full appreciation calls for an uncommon background of scholarship, though every lover of poetry, albeit unlettered, can get something from them." In a review for *Poetry*, Max Michelson took this notion of an "unlettered" audience for Pound's Cantos one step further when he blamed "the denseness of many of our established opinion-makers" for keeping "thousands of lovers of poetry away."

In England, A. R. Orage, the editor of the *New Age* and advocate of guild socialism, took a somewhat different position on Pound, finding him high on theory and low on "actual achievement": "He has always a ton of precept for a pound of example," and there is nothing "very original in the creation of poetic images, or even in the employment of irregular metric; neither of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

them can be said to constitute a new departure in poetic technique.” And yet English critics usually condemned “the good side of Mr. Pound’s technique,” which is that a poet who belongs “to the school of Mr. Pound” has also been “to school to poetry and submitted himself to a craft-apprenticeship; and no poet will long command Mr. Pound’s approval who is not always learning and experimenting.” It was this “good side of Mr. Pound’s doctrine” that “is disliked in England, where it has for years been the habit of critics to pretend that poetry grows on bushes or in parsley-beds.” Orage’s emphasis on poetry as “the practice of ‘a learned, self-conscious craft’ to be carried on by a ‘guild of adepts’” linked Pound’s poetic doctrine not with the political right but with the socialist left, with issues of labor, worker control of industry, and guild socialism, suggesting importantly that in postwar England, at least, a commitment to the craft of poetry and the literary avant-garde was not necessarily a conservative or politically reactionary position.

But in this era of uniting nations and saving the world for democracy, Pound’s fierce devotion to artistic beauty, clarity, and precision as a means of cultural regeneration seemed curiously out of tune. For all his efforts to bring about an American Renaissance, in the eyes of the American press, he emerged as an antidemocratic, antisocial aesthete. In a review of *Pavannes and Divisions* (1918), a collection of Pound’s writings on the contemporary scene, Untermeyer added “aristogoguery” to his earlier charge of escapism: “Pound never lets one forget his scorn of America and his antagonism to the crowd. His unconcealed dislike of Demos, half contempt, half fear, together with his patrician attitudes, make him seem something of an anachronism, a hyperaesthetic pedant, a disgruntled aristogogue.”

The most damaging attack came from W. G. Hale, a professor of Latin at the University of Chicago, who ridiculed Pound’s “blundering” and inaccurate translation of Propertius’ odes in “Homage to Sextus Propertius,” when sections of the poem were published in *Poetry* in March 1919. “Mr. Pound is incredibly ignorant of Latin,” Hale wrote in a letter to the editor that carefully traced his many “school-boy” blunders in the language. “If Mr. Pound were a professor of Latin, there would be nothing left for him but suicide,” Hale concluded. Pound denied that he ever intended a “literal translation,”²² but the attack on his credentials as translator prompted a more widespread reaction against Pound and his work in England and America.

“Mr. Pound is not, never has been and almost, I might hazard, never will be, a poet,” wrote the poet Robert Nichols in the London *Observer* in a review of *Quia Pauper Amavi* (1919), a collection of Pound’s recent poems and translations that included “Homage to Sextus Propertius.” Pound was vigorously

²² In April 1919, Pound wrote to A. R. Orage: “there was never any question of translation, let alone literal translation. My job was to bring a dead man to life, to present a living figure”; in *Selected Letters*, ed. Paige, pp. 148–49.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

defended by Eliot, Orage, and Lewis. “Homage” was “a new *persona*, a creation of a new character, recreating Propertius in himself, and himself in Propertius,” Eliot explained in a review for the *Athenaeum*.²³ This controversy between those who advocated a philologically accurate and historically grounded approach to translation and those who advocated a more creative and interpretive approach to translation has continued at the center of Pound studies.²⁴

American Renaissance

American critics focused not only on Pound’s credentials as translator and poet, but also on the question of his Americanism. Contrasting the literary scene in Britain and America before the war, Pound announced: “All developments in English verse since 1910 are due almost wholly to Americans. In fact, there is no longer any reason to call it English verse.”²⁵ In the years leading up to and following the war, many American artists, intellectuals, and progressives believed that America was about to become the site of new and revolutionary forms of artistic creation commensurate with its political ideals. The scholars began to define a distinctively American field of interdisciplinary studies that would, in the words of Vernon Parrington, one of the founders of the American Studies movement, “follow the broad path of our political, economic, and social development, rather than the narrower belletristic.”²⁶ Others, including Van Wyck Brooks and Lewis Mumford, sought to revive the literature and values of New England transcendentalism and the reputation of Herman Melville and his American masterpiece, *Moby Dick*.

²³ See Ezra Pound’s own defense of “Homage” as “a character sketch which never was, and never was intended to be, an *ad verbum* translation,” in Ezra Pound, “Propertius and Mr. Pound,” *Observer* (25 January 1920), 5. Speaking “in the name of the humanities of life, of art, of literature,” Orage wrote that Mr. Pound did not intend a literal translation: “He set out with the intention of creating in English verse a verse reincarnation, as it were, of Propertius, a ‘homage’ to Propertius that should take the form of rendering him a contemporary of our own,” in A. R. Orage, *Readers and Writers (1917–1921)* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1922), 34. See also Wyndham Lewis, “Mr. Ezra Pound” (109).

²⁴ For other studies, See J. P. Sullivan, *Ezra Pound and Sextus Propertius: A Study in Creative Translation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964); Thomas Ron, *The Latin Masks of Ezra Pound* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983); Daniel M. Hooley, *The Classics in Paraphrase: Ezra Pound and Modern Translators of Latin Poetry* (Selingsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1988); and Peter Davidson, *Pound and Roman Poetry: A Preliminary Survey* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995).

²⁵ Ezra Pound, *How to Read* (London: D. Harmsworth, 1931), 43

²⁶ Vernon Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought: An Interpretation of American Literature from the Beginnings to 1920*, 3 vols. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927–30), 1: iii.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

The critical response to Pound became intricately bound up with American cultural and political self-definition at home and abroad. Revealing the increased fear of the foreign and the un-American during and after the war, for example, the reviewer in the *New Republic* quoted above described Pound as “exotic” and “European.” Hailing the “scream coming to free verse today [from] the ‘journalist’ Carl Sandburg,” Emanuel Carnevali, an Italian poet and a critic for *Poetry*, exclaimed: “The bookish discernment of men who left America ‘to seek intelligent conversation’ ought to limit itself to things less alive than free verse is today!” “Men are forces *within* the world. . . . This world is one and ours,” he declared in words that reveal the optimism about human and artistic possibility shared by other immigrant and working-class poets of the time. “Ezra Pound has estranged himself,” Carnevali concluded; “he cannot talk to us. By us, I mean readers, artists and shoemakers.”

Other critics, however, sought to reclaim Pound and in some cases Modernism more generally as a home-grown and fully American creation. “Pound has never been at home in twentieth-century Europe,” wrote the Alabama-born Imagist poet and critic, John Gould Fletcher, and this is why the poems in his last two volumes – *Lustra* and *Quia Pauper Amavi* – “are almost valueless.” Pound’s “restless seeker after beauty . . . came to him primarily from the keen, vivid atmosphere of America, and from his hatred of the prevailing commercial ugliness, so utterly unsuited to that atmosphere.” His true “gold” was in the earlier poems of *Exultations*, “and in this book he produced poetry such as no Englishman could ever write.” Speaking for and to America as a kind of cultural ambassador abroad, Fletcher concluded with a salute to early Pound and the generation of American poets he inspired: “As a pioneer, as a trader in unbroken paths, America can afford to salute the earlier, as it is forced to reject the later Pound; and a whole host of modern American poets could never have done the work they are doing without the inspiration of his influence.”

The American literary historian, Van Wyck Brooks, celebrated not only Pound’s American roots and influence, but – like the poet himself – the American and specifically Midwestern roots of literary Modernism more generally. “I am sure he has done more for the new literature in this country than many of those who claim a proprietary right over it,” he wrote in a review of *Instigations* (1920), a collection of Pound’s recent prose work, including several key essays in the development of literary Modernism, such as his study of modern French poetry; major essays on the work of Henry James, Eliot, Lewis, and Joyce; and Fenollosa’s essay on “The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry.” “Most of Mr. Pound’s little expatriate coterie hails from the Valley of Democracy,” Brooks noted: Pound, Eliot, and Fletcher were all products of the “exotic” Midwest. But he also lamented the fact that Pound had set himself against humanity in a manner that seemed “tiresomely out-of-date”:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

It is really Mr. Pound's loss that he hasn't been able to ally himself with the most vigorous creative forces of our day, on the side . . . of the intellectual-proletarian movement. For the first time in generations the aristocrat of the spirit has an opportunity to share, without abating a whit of his artistic conscience, in a great constructive effort of humanity.

What Brooks most admired was Pound's dedication to literature as "a high, difficult and austere pursuit": "One can not imagine an attitude more vitally important for our literature at the present time than that." Whereas Brooks's essay ends with an implicit wish that Pound avoid becoming a "bore" by returning to America, H. L. Mencken, in a brief and characteristically contrarian review for *Smart Set*, hailed Pound's American achievement and his expatriation: "He is perhaps the most extraordinary man that American literature has seen in our time, and, characteristically enough, he keeps as far away from America as possible."

From Aesthetics to Epic and Economics

What critics on both sides of the Atlantic had failed to notice was that in turning to the composition of his epic *Cantos*, Pound had embarked on his own "great constructive effort of humanity": he was becoming more politically engaged. Through the literary and cultural criticism he wrote for Orage's *New Age* during the 1910s, Pound came into contact with Fabians and Guild Socialists who influenced a shift in his thinking from the artist to society and the relation between them. It was in the offices of the *New Age* that Pound met the Social Credit theorist, Major C. H. Douglas, in 1918, and drawn to Douglas's economic ideas as a means of countering capitalist greed and supporting artistic creation, he had begun thinking about the relation between economics and history, politics and art.²⁷

"Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," in which Pound used the term *usury* for the first time, represented his official farewell to literary London and the aestheticism of his early years. Published in a limited edition of 200 in London 1920, the volume received no notice in the American press and only passing interest in the British, for the *Times Literary Supplement* found it "needlessly obscure," "esoteric," and "obsessed by the thought of the greater semi-artistic public." Usually read as a parodic treatment of Pound's growing isolation from literary London, the poem is also a satirical and semi-tragic enactment not only of the critical response to him after 1912 in England and America, but also of the

²⁷ For a more extended discussion of Pound's political and economic ideas, see Tim Redman, "Pound's Politics and Economics," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 249–63.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

defeat of the artist and the dedication to art for art's sake by the forces of the literary marketplace that dominated both sides of the Atlantic.

In the *Dial*, Untermeyer had characterized Pound's *Pavannes and Divisions* as "a queer, out of tune collection," and *Mauberley* was similarly out of tune with his times. In the opening poem, "E. P. Ode Pour L'Élection de Son Sepulchre," the speaker E. P. ceremoniously buries the aesthete figure of his early period, who is described as "three years, out of key with his time":

Unaffected by "the march of events,"
He passed from men's memory in *l'an trentuniesme*
De son eage; the case presents
No adjunct to the Muses' diadem.

In this mock-eulogy E. P. passes from men's memory in the thirty-first year of his life – the same age as Pound himself when *Lustra* was published and when he began working on the Ur-Cantos that were published in the American edition of *Lustra* in 1917. Having entombed his aestheticism in the literary, social, and self-satire of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," the actual Ezra Pound left London for Paris and eventually Rapallo, where he turned his main energies to politics and economics, and to writing what he called his epic as "a poem including history."

Pound's physical isolation from the literary scene in London and New York was exacerbated by the fact that following the negative response to *Lustra*, most of his works were published in limited editions by small, independent presses, including *The Fourth Canto* (London: Ovid Press, 1919), *Quia Pauper Amavi* (London: Egoist Press, 1919), "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" (London: Ovid Press, 1920), *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (Paris: Three Mountains Press, 1924), and *A Draft of XVI Cantos* (Paris: Three Mountains Press, 1925). A part of this was Pound's own doing: he came to see the struggle to publish his own works and the works of other avant-garde writers such as Eliot, Lewis, and Joyce as a battle in which the lovers of good writing were beginning to break away from the commercial publication system altogether. "I shall never again take any steps whatever to arrange publication of any of my work in either England or America," Pound wrote to R. P. Blackmur from Paris in 1924. "*Tant pis pour les indigènes*" [Too bad for the natives].²⁸

Given his experience with his publishers, his sense of the death-grip of the commercial marketplace on literary aspiration and innovation was not far from wrong. Alarmed by the poor reviews of *Lustra*, Elkin Mathews refused to publish *Quia Pauper Amavi* unless Pound omitted his experimental translation "Homage to Sextus Propertius" and his attack on the middle class in "Moeurs Contemporaines." Pound was angered by Mathews's pusillanimity and promptly arranged to have the work printed by the Egoist Press, which

²⁸ *Selected Letters*, ed. Paige, p. 190.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

had also at his urging published T. S. Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations* in 1917. Pound's American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, exhibited a further instance of editorial shortsightedness when he refused to publish *Instigations*. Seeking, like his persona Propertius, "a few pages brought down from the forked hills unsullied / . . . a wreath which will not crush my head," Pound turned to the small presses, but then as now, such publications rarely get reviewed, so most received little or no notice. When Elkin Mathews published *Umbra: The Early Poems of Ezra Pound* in 1920, this definitive edition was barely noticed by the English press.

Poems 1918–21, published by Boni and Liveright in New York in 1921, got mixed reviews in the American press. This volume includes "Homage," "Langue d'Oc," "Moeurs Contemporaines," "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," and Cantos 4–7. The response to Pound's "creative" translation of Propertius was more positive: "Mr. Pound does not concern himself with literality," explained Richard Le Gallienne in the *New York Times*: "It is the life-blood of his poet he is after." Occasionally, "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" was singled out for praise: "Pound has written the most condensed and deftly sardonic account of the war and its causes that has so far appeared," wrote Maxwell Bodenheim, a leading American poet. But Edmund Wilson, a writer and literary critic known for his support of Modernist writers, dismissed Pound as a literary failure in a review for the *New Republic*:

In the "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" poems in this latest book we have one of his most furious attempts to conceal his fundamentally simple reactions in formidable and complicated riddles. His failure is particularly flagrant because he here copies T. S. Eliot . . . and hence challenges comparison with him. The comparison goes all against Pound. Where Eliot in one knotty stanza will open a vivid window on the past and convey a sharp emotion about it, Pound merely paraphrases statements of obvious fact in a tortured pedantic jargon.

For Wilson, as for Joseph Wood Krutch, the publication of *Poems 1918–21* marked Pound's death as a poet. "He is a case for Mr. Van Wyck Brooks, that blood-hound of American artistic failures," Wilson concluded.

Conflicting Modernisms

Ironically, given Pound's support for Eliot's work and his editorial assistance on *The Waste Land*, Eliot's rise to literary and critical dominance appeared to correspond inversely with Pound's demise. With the publication of *Prufrock and Other Observations*, *The Sacred Wood* (1920), which included the influential 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and especially *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot's poetry and critical values came to dominate literary

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

culture in England and America in ways that Pound could not. His friend and fellow poet Richard Aldington explained:

Tom Eliot's career in England has been exactly the reverse of Ezra's. Ezra started out in a time of peace and prosperity with everything in his favor, and muffled his chances of becoming literary dictator of London – to which he undoubtedly aspired – by his own conceit, folly, and bad manners. Eliot started in the enormous confusion of war and post-war England, handicapped in every way. Yet by merit, tact, prudence, and pertinacity he succeeded in doing what no other American has ever done – imposing his personality, taste, and even many of his opinions on literary England.²⁹

William Carlos Williams remembered the publication of *Waste Land* as a “bomb” that dropped on Modernist poetic experimentation in America: “It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it. . . . Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself – rooted in the locality which should give it fruit.”³⁰

Between 1922 and 1926 Pound appeared to have “passed from men's memories” like his imagined double in “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley.” But while critics were sounding Pound's death knell, he was becoming a vital presence for a small, elite, and dedicated group of artists, intellectuals, and friends. The figures in this group – which included among many others Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, Aldington, Fletcher, Ford Madox Ford, Ernest Hemingway, May Sinclair, Mencken, Sandberg, Williams, Moore, Allen Tate, and R. P. Blackmur – were linked by their shared belief that Pound was, as Eliot acknowledged in dedicating *The Waste Land* to him, *il miglior fabbro* (the better maker) and *the* major influence in twentieth-century English and American verse.

Even Pound's most ardent supporters, however, were baffled by the Cantos. Eliot's response to “Three Cantos” in *Lustra* was at best equivocal: “We will leave it as a test: when anyone has studied Mr. Pound's poems in *chronological* order, and has mastered *Lustra* and *Cathay*, he is prepared for the Cantos – but not till then.”³¹ Aldington's comment in a review of *Quia Pauper Amavi* was typical: “The writing is so elliptic, the thought so carefully hidden, that I cannot imagine what the poem is about, but it has delightful lines.” He went on to cite several unconnected lines without commentary or explication. Others cited individual lines as technically expert or “delightful,” while remaining clueless

²⁹ Cited in Tytell, *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano*, p. 176. See also Edmund Wilson who acknowledges the influence of Pound's work on *The Waste Land* but describes it as “partially sunk by its cargo of erudition” in comparison with Eliot who “has left upon English poetry a mark more unmistakable than that of any other poet writing in English” (*Axel's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* [New York: Scribner's and Sons, 1931], 111).

³⁰ Williams, *Autobiography*, p. 174.

³¹ Eliot, *Ezra Pound: His Metric and Poetry*, p. 28.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-40139-5 - Ezra Pound: The Contemporary Reviews

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

about their meaning or connection. Defending Pound's poetry in Mallarméan terms as "a logical art in itself, detached entirely from any human contact, existing solely as a source of aesthetic and intellectual enjoyment," Fletcher presented the Cantos as "another stage in the gradual advance towards a final type of absolute technique, containing the extreme of hardness, the extreme of concision, and the extreme of personal detachment." What counted was their metrics "based on the Anglo-Saxon alliterative measure and on the freely-handled anapest." He gave one example of each measure from Canto VII, and then confessed: "As for the full meaning of these 'Cantos,' that I cannot pretend to fathom. It will be necessary to look at them again in another fifty or a hundred years, if our civilization lasts that long."

With the publication of the first volume of Pound's experimental epic, *A Draft of XVI Cantos* in Paris in 1925, Blackmur, who was only twenty-one at the time, became the first critic fully to analyze and imaginatively engage with the poem as a whole rather than merely cite beautiful lines. The essay, which appeared in the second issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, is a tour de force of what would become known as new critical analysis, or what Blackmur called the critical "labor and mental agility" demanded for "enjoyment" of the *Cantos*. His laudatory but understated conclusion comes only after close reading and analysis that scrupulously connected parts of the *Cantos* to its whole: "Amazing as the work may be – and surely it is the most amazing poem of our time – it is as classical in spirit and manner as Dante or T. S. Eliot. Which is to say that, above all, the work is mature, mature and completely honest."

Along with Blackmur's rave review, the publication of *Personae: The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound* in 1926 marked another turning point in Pound's reputation as a poet and critic. *Personae*, which collects all of the poems that he wanted to preserve except the Cantos, occasioned a series of retrospective evaluations of his poetic achievement.³² Although not all positive, most of the reviewers agreed that what was once a cult – Imagism, Vorticism, Modernism, Post-Impressionism – had now become a movement. A revolution in English and American letters had taken place, and Pound was hailed as its first maker. Rather than being "killed by silence" as Eliot had once worried, Pound found himself at the center of the literary renaissance that he had set out to create.³³

This transformation in the arts was, like Pound himself, "aggressively trans-Atlantic," wrote Ford Madox Ford in a review of *Personae* in the *New York*

³² "The things I'm throwing out are the 'soft' stuff, and the metrical exercises," Pound wrote to his father on 28 November 1925 while he was making his selection for *Personae*; cited in *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia*, ed. Demetres P. Tryphonopoulos and Stephen J. Adams (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 218.

³³ T. S. Eliot to John Quinn, 25 January 1920, in *Letters of T. S. Eliot (1898–1922)*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 358.