

Cambridge University Press

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

Edited by Betsy Erkkila

Excerpt

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*A LUME SPENTO* (1908)

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[Ezra Pound]. "Some Criticism and Appreciation of Modern Singers." *Evening Standard and St. James Gazette*, Special Supplement, 26 November 1908, p. 2.

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A *Lume Spento*, by Ezra Pound, is good wine kept to the last. It is wild and haunting stuff, absolutely poetic, original, imaginative, passionate, and spiritual. Those who do not consider it crazy may well consider it inspired. Coming after the trite and measured verses of our decorous poets, this poet seems like a minstrel of Provence at a suburban musical evening. It is no use quoting bits of his without the context: –

"Audiart, Audiart,  
For whose fairness one forgave"

conveys nothing alone. Nor does Cino, with his: –

"Bah! I have sung women in three  
cities . . .  
I will sing of the sun."

The unseizable magic of poetry is in this queer paper book; and words are no good in describing it.

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Ella Wheeler Wilcox. "A New Singer of Songs: The Greeting of a Poetess of Established Fame to a Newcomer Among the Bards." *American Journal-Examiner*, 14 December 1908.

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A *Lume Spento* ("With Tapers Quenched") is the title of a slender little booklet of verse which came to me from Venice, Italy, the other day. This is the dedication:

"This book is dedicated to such as love the same beauty that I love, somewhat after my own fashion: and In Memoriam of William Brooke Smith, Painter and Dreamer of Dreams."

The name of the poet is "Ezra Pound," and when I realize that this poet is grown to the age of manhood it makes my own youth seem far and far away; for somewhere among my souvenirs of a Spring-time of life there is a little tintype picture of several youths and maidens; and the father of this poet is among the number; and so am I.

And then I stop and remember that my own wee son, who tarried so short a time on earth, would be also man-grown were he here; and he too might be writing verses, even as the son of my friend of long ago.

And so, with more than the interest of an older writer in a young singer, I give these strange, and weird, and new songlets a setting here, that "those who love what he loves after his own fashion" may read.

[quotation of "La Fraisne," "Ballad For Gloom," and "Threnos."]

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Success to you, young singer in Venice!  
Success to “With Tapers Quenched.”

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[A. Antonini]. *Book  
News Monthly*, 27 (May  
1909), 719.

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Mr. Pound is talented, but he is very young. The academician bristles all over his work. French phrases and scraps of Latin and Greek punctuate his poetry and prose, and the carelessness that attends the swift birth of an idea marks his every line. He affects obscurity and loves the abstruse; he has apparently been influenced by Whitman. This small volume of

poems, entitled *With Tapers Quenched*, contains some strange specimens of verse, though a certain underlying force gives promise of simplicity to come – when Mr. Pound has learned that simplicity and greatness are synonymous.

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## Checklist of Additional Reviews

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Curtis Hidden Page. “Recent Verse.”

*Book News Monthly*, 28 (September 1909), 51–52.

R. E. Scott-James. *Daily News* [London],

ca. October 1909; cited in Charles Norman, *Ezra Pound* (New York, 1960), 30.

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*Evening Standard and  
St. James Gazette, 21  
April 1909, p. 5.*

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Various influences are manifest in this daintily produced volume of verse. The Old French singers and Browning – contrasts indeed! – are the most prominent. Mr. Pound has any amount of affectations, and sometimes is incoherent in order to seem original, but, in spite of drawbacks, he manages to suggest his essential sincerity. It is a queer little book which will irritate many readers. We dislike its faults, and confess to being puzzled here and there. And yet – and yet we are attracted occasionally by lines which are almost, if not quite, nonsense. Our conclusion is that Mr. Pound is a poet, though a fantastic one.

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[W. L. Courtney]. *Daily  
Telegraph, 23 April  
1909, p. 6.*

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Most people are more or less the victims of that convention which made Byron ridicule the idea of a man named as Amos Cottle (“Phoebus, what a name!”) winning fame as a poet, and so they may be expected to smile on taking up a volume of poems the author of which is Mr. Ezra Pound. They may begin by smiling, they will end with admiration, not unmixed with irritation, for here is a poet with individuality and with sufficient disregarding for the conventional to express that individuality in the way that likes him best rather than in the way which more accommodating talents would have

chosen. He limits himself just so far as he chooses to measure which those who run may read; he indulges in rhyme when he likes; runs off into mere assonance, or uses lines which need the most careful reading if we would beat their music out. Yet, for the most part, there is through all a thread of true beauty, which gives the book something of a haunting charm. It lifts it out of the ruck of those many volumes the writers of which toe the line of poetic conventions and please us for more than a single reading in that they have mastered the knack of saying certain things in certain fashions. “Most can grow the flower now, for all have got the seed,” said the late Laureate. Mr. Pound is of the few who have gone forth into life and found something of a new seed, and his “flower” is one that is unquestionably beautiful, though it will scarcely please many of those who prefer rather new varieties of the old favourites than Hesperidean novelties. It is true that Mr. Pound shows himself a keen reader of Browning; indeed, his lines on Browning’s “And a cat’s in the water-butt,” form a triumphant piece of parody.

[Quotation of “Mesmerism”]

Mr. Pound is much moved by the spirit of the troubadours; to them he turns again and again for theme, and gives us verses instinct with beauty, even when the outline is blurred. A few simple lines in one of his poems might be given as a test. Those readers who are touched by them will find much to delight in this little book, those who are unmoved will have little difficulty in finding metal more attractive:

For I am homesick after mine own  
kind  
And ordinary people touch me not.  
And I am homesick

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After mine own kind that know,  
and feel  
And have some breath for beauty and  
the arts.

From one of his irregular but forceful pieces, “Revolt Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry,” we give a fuller taste of Mr. Pound’s quality:

I would shake off the lethargy of this  
our time,  
and give  
For shadows – shapes of power  
For dreams – men.

[Quotation of lines 4–22 of “Revolt”]

It is more or less inevitable that we should on being touched by a new writer, seek to “place” him by comparison with the old. Mr. Ezra Pound then suggests such incompatibilities as a troubadour of old Provence and – Walt Whitman. He has much of the sense of beauty of things and of words (“little red elf words,” “little green leaf words”) of the one, much of the vigorous individuality of the other.

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*Times Literary  
Supplement*, 20 May  
1909, p. 191.

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Ezra Pound admires Browning, whom he addresses as “Old Hippety-hop o’ the accents.” Like Browning he is fond of medieval and Italian themes, and he affects the eccentric and the obscure; but these qualities do not, in these pages at any rate leave much room for beauty.

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F. S. Flint. “Verse.” *New Age*, 5 (27 May 1909),  
101–02.

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“Make strong old dreams lest this our  
world lose heart.” –

Epigraph to *Personae*.

Mr. Pound is a poet with a distinct personality. Essentially, he is a rebel against all conventions except sanity; there is something robustly impish and elfish about him. He writes with fresh beauty and vigor; and revolting against the crepuscular spirit in modern poetry, he cries: –

I would shake off the lethargy of this  
our time

And the songs and histories of the old Provençal poets being at his command, the bitter-sweet vision of Dante part of his emotional existence, to them he turns for the personae of his dreams. Whoever has read anything at all of the Troubadours cannot but admire the color and intense energy of their lives: battle and love and song succeeding each other, entered into with the same ardor and passion, the hot meridional sun beating itself into all. Bertran of Born – strange, wild figure of songs and war, that troubled the peace of an English Henry. Arnaud of Marveil – son of a serf and poet, admitted to court the Countess of Bezfers; banished when too importunate. Piere Vidal – who ran as a wolf because his lady’s name was Louve, brought back fainting, all fanged by the hounds – masochism before the man. They move in Mr. Pound’s dreams; but whether his strengthening and beautifying of them with English verse will give us heart, I do not know – or, rather, I fear we shall lose heart in watching them; for, it seems, the world is in the grip of a dragon against

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which, so far, has appeared no effectual Saint George.

Let us once and for all acknowledge what Mr. Pound owes to Browning, his medieval poets, mystics and thinkers, and, perhaps, a little to Mr. Yeats and Thompson; and take his poems as poetry, without reference to sources of raw material. I think there is sufficient craft and artistry, originality and imagination in *Personae* to warrant one in giving them high praise. Mr. Pound writes in a free form of verse that will not, I hope, lead him into the wastes. He is working towards a form that other English poets might study.

How can one quote? Coupez donc un sein à une femme belle, said Verlaine. I like in "La Fraisine" the well-imagined raving of Miraut de Garzelas, whose madness took him to the woods: –

[Quotation of lines 9–19]

This book is as tufted with beauty as the bole of an old elm tree with green shoots; and, as I cannot quote all, I give one poem entire: –

[Quotation of "And Thus in Nineveh"]

As Omar did. One must read "Na Auditart," "Praise of Ysolt," a fine piece of work, "An Idyl for Glaucus," to appreciate Mr. Pound's quality. Perhaps he was himself among those whom he saw coursing and crying: –

"'Tis the white stag, Fame, we're  
a-hunting,  
Bid the world's hounds come to  
horn."

The wind swept round the earth to make that last image; it has the matinal gusto Keats heard in Keane's delivery of

Be rising with the lark to-morrow,  
gentle Norfolk. . . .

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Edward Thomas. "Two Poets." *English Review*, 2 (June 1909), 627–30.

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It is easier to enjoy than to praise Mr. Pound, easier to find fault with him, easiest to ridicule. His *Personae*, probably a first book, is strewn with signs of two battles not yet over, the battle with the world of a fresh soul who feels himself strong but alone, and the battle with words, the beautiful, the soiled, the rare, the antique words. It is not wonderful then that one coming up from the outside should be tempted for a moment to turn away from the battlefield with a promise to come back and see who and what is left. And yet such tumults are fascinating for themselves, especially if we know that sometimes when they are over, nothing, from the spectator's point of view, is left. In Mr. Pound's case we feel sure there will be a great soul left. Also, in the meantime, the book is well worth having for itself and regardless of its vague large promise.

Let us straightway acknowledge the faults; the signs of conflict; the old and foreign words and old spellings that stand doubtless for much that the ordinary reader it not privileged to detect; the tricky use of inverted commas; the rhythms at one time so free as not to be distinguishable at first from prose, at another time so stiff that "evanescent" becomes "evan'scent"; the gobbets of Browningsque; and one piece of construction at the foot of p. 39 which we cannot unravel and are inclined to put down as not the only case of imperfect correction of proofs.

To say what this poet has not is not difficult; it will help to define him. He has no obvious grace, no sweetness, hardly any of the superficial good qualities of

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modern versifiers; not the smooth regularity of the Tennysonian tradition, nor the wavering, uncertain languor of the new, though there is more in his rhythms than is apparent at first through his carelessness of ordinary effects. He has not the current melancholy or resignation or unwillingness to live; nor the kind of feeling for nature that runs to minute description and decorative metaphor. He cannot be usefully compared with any living writers, though he has read Mr. Yeats. Browning and Whitman he respects, and he could easily burlesque Browning if he liked. He knows medieval poetry in the popular tongues, and Villon, and Ossian. He is equally fond of strict stanzas of many rhymes, of blank verse with many unfinished lines, of rhymeless or almost rhymeless lyrics, of Pindarics with or without rhyme. But these forms are not striking in themselves, since all are subdued to his spirit; in each he is true in his strength and weakness to himself, full of personality and with such power to express it that from the first to the last lines of most of his poems he holds us steady in his own pure, grave, passionate world.

It will appear paradoxical to say after this that the chief part of his power is directness and simplicity. A characteristic opening is this, put in the mouth of an Italian poet – “Italian Campagna, 1309, The Open Road”:

Bah! I have sung women in three cities,  
But it is all the same;  
And I will sing of the sun . . .

or this, from “A Villonaud: Ballad of the Gibbet; or the Song of the Sixth Companion of Villon”:

[Quotation of lines 1–4]

In the poem “In Tempore Senectutis” the old man says to his old love:

[Quotation of lines 28–32]

The finest of his pieces are the love-poems. In “Scriptor Ignotus: Ferrara, 1715,” he astonishes us by using again the poet’s claim, Ronsard’s and Shakespeare’s, to give immortality to a mistress by words, by “A new thing as hath not heretofore been writ.” But it is not a playing upon an old theme as, e.g., Locker-Lampson played on it. It is a piece of strong tender passion that happens to lean upon the old theme and to honour it. “In Praise of Ysolt” is equally beautiful in an entirely different way, showing that the writer does not depend upon a single mood or experience. The beauty of it is the beauty of passion, sincerity and intensity, not of beautiful words and images and suggestions; on the contrary, the expression is as austere as Biblical prose. The thought dominates the words and is greater than they are.

It opens:

[Quotation of lines 1–6]

In the “Idyl for Glaucus” a woman hovers by the sea in search of Glaucus, who has tasted “the grass that made him sea-fellow with the other gods.” Here the effect is full of human passion and natural magic, without any of the phrases which a reader of modern verse would expect in the treatment of such a subject. In “From Syria” and “From the Saddle” the thought is not new but it is made his own by genuineness, weakened only by allowing such a line as

So if my line disclose distress. . . .

In taking leave of this admirable poet we should like to mention other poems we have particularly enjoyed, “La Fraisine,” “Famam Librosque Cano” (a prophetic sketch of the kind of reader he will one day have), “Ballad for Gloom,” “For E. McC.” (these two last very brilliant and noble), “Occidit,” and “Revolt Against the Crepuscular Spirit in Modern Poetry”;



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and to apologize to him for our own shortcomings and to any other readers for that insecurity of modern criticism of which we feel ourselves at once a victim and a humble cause.

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“Heresy, and Some  
Poetry.” *Nation*  
[London], 5 (28 August  
1909), 789–91.

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From time to time one hears of artistic malcontents who would have poetry do what music is doing nowadays, which is, altering its mode of expression. Of course, music is changing its expression because the content of music is, in some sort, changing; but what these malcontents do not see is 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. We may liken the two arts to states, and the expression of the arts to government. Poetry is a very ancient state, its antique frontiers thrown out as far as ages of experience show may be congruous to good government; and the mode of government (that is, the art’s expression) has long ago adapted itself to the administration and control of all the various peoples and climates within the state. It is unlikely that anything will occur within the borders of the poetic state with which the established poetic government will not be able to cope. But music is a new and upstart state. It is continually throwing out new and more ambitious frontiers; and therefore the state government (the expression of music) has to be continually altered to meet the

requirements of the new provinces that are from time to time absorbed. Strauss and Debussy, for instance, are not insurgents against the constitution; rather they are viceroys ruling, with provisional powers, recent additions to the empire of music. But we may justly accuse a poet of mere rebellion and treason if, while abiding within the old boundaries, he defies the constituted, but extremely elastic, government of his state. Not such were Browning and Whitman; they were rather eccentric, but quite law-abiding citizens. Such, however, is Mr. Ezra Pound. He has mistaken insurgence for strength, treason for originality. Not having anything particularly new to say (it is none the worse for that), he yet seeks to be unusual through a strange method of expression. By this we do not only mean queer tricks of meter and diction; poetry easily allows such eccentricities. Mr. Ezra Pound gives us plenty of them; some are successful and pleasant, others irritating and foolish. One may tolerate such Chaucerian words in modern verse as “swevyn” for “dream,” and “everychone” for “everyone.” But “ellum” for “elm,” in a poem written not in dialect, and “mine fashion” for “my fashion,” are merely silly; and to address Phoebus Apollo as “Pollo Phoibee, old tin pan, you,” is not humorous, but ludicrous. Such matters some modern critical opinion holds to be insignificant, though they are greatly important really; but they are not Mr. Pound’s gravest offenses. And we could forgive his habit of beginning a poem in the middle, and his uses of German, French, and Italian words. The grave error that Mr. Pound commits lies in the initial shaping and conduct of his thought. From the beginning he will not, or cannot, manage his thought according to the high and nameless, but rigorous, logic of poetry. Poetry does not consist in a fine clothing of words; the words must clothe, not only a spirit, but a spiritual shape. A

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mere gusty wind of spirit will not do for poetry; it must be a spirit with formed lineaments and stature, a spirit with at least the shape of divinity. Except in a few cases where he is following Romance models, one finds no such spirit wearing Mr. Pound's words; they are but carried on unruly tempests of thought or emotion. We dare say Mr. Pound finds these poems of his full of subtleties and allurements, for he knows, no doubt, what meaning runs through them. But for most others many of them will seem, we fear, only abrupt, discontinuous and meaningless exclamations, rather trying to patience. One sometimes detects vigorous poetic phrasing in his work, and the ring of heroic thought, as in the "Ballad for Gloom": –

[Quotation of lines 3–8]

Mr. Pound very properly objects to the "crepuscular spirit in modern poetry," and would be the cock that "scatters the rear of darkness thin," as he says, rather finely: –

Great God, if we be damn'd to be not  
men, but only dreams,  
Then let us be such dreams the world  
will tremble at.

Certainly, Mr. Pound makes a lively din; and it is because it is lively, and not mechanical, that we have criticized it at some length. There are admirable qualities in his work, but not the supreme quality; like the cock's, Mr. Pound's din lacks measure. Were that present, he would be one of the most notable poets of our time.

There are no doubt those who would commend Mr. Pound for breaking away from the "holy habit" of poetic thought; in these free days, they will think, it is a hardship that the manner of poetic expression should be fixed and determinate, even though the bounds of that manner be so large that for those who understand its

necessary limitations its service is perfect freedom. . . .

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Curtis Hidden Page.  
"Recent Verse." *Book  
News Monthly*, 28  
(September 1909),  
51–52.

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The most original note struck in English verse, since the publication of Ernest Dowson's poems some three or four years ago, rings through the songs and dramatic lyrics of two volumes, partly identical with each other, by Ezra Pound. One of these volumes, *A Lume Spento*, appeared in Venice late last year, and the other, *Personae*, has just been published by Elkin Mathews in London. The first impression one receives from them is that their author has gone a little mad from overmuch reading of Browning, Morris, Yeats, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Symonds, Dowson, and even the American poets of Vagabondia, Hovey and Carman, and has jumbled their subjects and manners, together with reminiscences of the Provençal troubadours. On closer knowledge, and after sympathetic rereading, he proves to be mad only after Hamlet's fashion; and to be speaking dramatically, with a manner wholly his own, if not wholly new. His dramatic lyrics and romances are couched in somewhat exaggerated Browningese, with a touch of Morris' early mannerisms; but they express, like Browning's, living and strongly individualized *dramatis personae*. In the first of them a mad old knight speaks from his retreat in the ash wood of Malvern, and in the second a mad-cap troubadour sings the joy of free love, sunlight, and the open road in the Italy