

Ezra Pound - Last Months in London.

He became acquainted with Conrad Aiken, another poet but not one whose work Ezra admired. Ezra asked him if there was anybody in the US writing genuinely modern material, and Aiken said there was a guy called Eliot who was writing weird stuff. This Eliot was actually in England at the moment - in fact at Oxford working on a doctorate in philosophy

Thomas Stearns Eliot was, like Ezra, born in the Midwest and got his education on the East coast. He was raised in a severe, inherited unitarian household. His ancestors included the Reverend Andrew Eliot, an 18th century Boston Minister who had declined the Presidency of Harvard because of religious duties and William Eliot, his grandfather, a celebrated unitarian divine. Eliot pursued graduate and undergraduate studies at Harvard but appears not to have enjoyed either its courses or the Social life. He spent a year in Paris after completing his undergraduate studies and then, after a years' post-graduate work in philosophy at Harvard, he went to Oxford. In the autumn of nineteen-fourteen, Oxford was almost lifeless; most undergraduates had enlisted as soon as war broke out, and Eliot was glad to make contact with Ezra and receive his encouragement. Eliot sent Ezra a longish poem he had written in Paris, called 'The Lovesong of Alfred J. Prufock' and Ezra wrote to Harriet Monroe at 'Poetry' magazine. " Eliott has sent in the best. I have yet had or seen from an American. He has actually trained himself and modernised himself on his own. The rest of the promising young have done one or the other but never both - most of the swine neither." This was the beginning of a life long friendship between the two poets who were quite different in their personalities. In contrast with Ezra's flamboyant and Bohemian attire, Eliot was always to be seen in a suit, looking rather like a bank manager. Despite Eliot's upbringing and his serious appearance, he had an irrepressible sense of fun. This sense of fun combined with his undoubted poetical abilities, is most familiar to us in the the famous musical "Cats". Andrew Lloyd Webber used the words from Eliot's "Old Possum's Book of Cats" as the libretto for his musical. Although Eliot had intended to resign himself to an academic career in philosophy, Ezra encouraged him to stick to poetry. He also began to introduce Eliot to London literary and artistic circles taking him to various restaurants, changing fairly often due to the effects of the Zeppelin raids. Eliot recalled their early days together when Ezra would go to any lengths of generosity and kindness; from inviting constantly to dinner a struggling author whom he suspected of being under-fed, or giving away clothing (although only Ezra's shoes were similar to what other men wore), to trying to find jobs for him, collect subsidies, get work published and then get it criticised and praised.

Eliot finished his year at Oxford and took work as a schoolmaster. His inclination to stay in England was reinforced when he married.. Ezra continued to work on his Chinese translations, eventually putting together enough to make up a book which Elkin Matthews agreed to publish under the title "Cathay". These poems are translations in Ezra's way of original Chinese poems noted down by Fennellosa. The book was well received among the literary establishment saying it was full of the most beautiful things. Amongst Chinese scholars the translations were considered to be very poor work indeed, but Eliot

observed that each generation must translate for itself, whilst a literary critic said that Cathay altered the feel of the language and set the pattern of cadence for modern verse. In 1910, Ezra had met an American collector called John Quinn. Quinn was not a rich man by American standards, but he lived modestly and spent all his surplus income on the arts. He was born of Irish parents, had studied Law at Harvard and became a partner in a New York legal firm. He had bought paintings from Jack Yeats and helped Yeats set himself up in America. He became a patron of Augustus John and a friend of Joseph Conrad. He also bought from Jacob Epstein and Gaudier-Bzreska, under Ezra's advice. In nineteen-fifteen, Ezra contacted John Quinn again urging him to help living poets and artists and set a new renaissance in motion. He wrote to Quinn that if a patron buys from an artist who needs money, the patron then makes himself equal to the artist: he is building art into the world; he creates.

Ezra was still working hard on James Joyce's behalf and managed in 1916 to obtain money for him from such diverse sources as the Society of Authors, Lady Cunard, The Civil List, Harriet Shaw Weaver and others. Joyce said to him, 'but for you I should have been derelict'. He was also working on a book about Gaudier-Bzreska which was published to general acclaim and did much to establish Gaudier's reputation. Henry Moore has spoken of its importance. Ezra also bought drawings from Sophie-Bzreska on behalf of John Quinn. In the middle of all these activities, Ezra was trying to think of ways in which he could bring out a book of Eliot's poetry, unsuccessfully so far. And he was involved in the setting up of an art-show in New York for his various friends. And he was trying to get a novel published written by Wyndham Lewis. Some of his activities were not well regarded, especially by the old guard. Edmund Gosse, a doyen of the Royal Literary Fund, said of Ezra that he was a preposterous American filibuster and a Provençal charlatan.

In the midst of all this, he began work on his magnum opus, the Cantos, eventually to be described as a landmark in twentieth century poetry, and republished frequently. He wrote to Joyce that he was working on 'an endless poem, all about everything.' Certainly his intention from the very outset of the work was to create a poem that could quite literally deal with everything - everything of importance in human experience which did not seem to him to have been adequately recorded elsewhere.

The idea was to a degree influenced by the poem Sordello by Robert Browning whose work he much admired. Sordello is ostensibly about the life of the Provençal poet of that name, but in fact is used by Browning to roam over a great deal of issues, historical periods, in a variety of poetic styles - a rag-bag to stuff things in - a multi-faceted historical consciousness. And Ezra did the same. He still wrote other work - sometimes not at all similar to the cantos - as in this irreverent response to 'Summer is a-coming in, loud sings the cuckoo'.

Winter is icummen in,
Lhude sing Goddamm,
Raineth drop and staineth slop,
and how the wind doth ramm!

Sing Goddam.
Skiddeth bus and sloppeth us,
An ague hath my ham,
Freezeth river, turneth liver,
Damn you, sing: Goddam!

Of course the war reduced the amount of books and magazines published and Ezra noted that in his 31st. year his earned income was only £48. Eliot too was having financial problems and was obliged to join Lloyds Bank for £120 per annum. Ezra got a commission to translate the opera *Cinderella* by Massenet for Sir Thomas Beecham's Opera Company, and also to review a book attacking American isolationism for, surprisingly, the *Times Literary Supplement*. During 1916 he offered to prepare a large anthology of world poetry for the publishers Macmillan. Unfortunately he referred to the need to replace 'that old doddard Palgrave'. As the Macmillan fortunes were based on the success of Palgrave's *Golden Treasury of Poetry*, his proposal was rejected.

He continued to look for opportunities to acquire editorial control of a magazine. He and John Quinn conceived the idea of taking over a section of an American periodical called 'The Little Review'. Founded in Chicago in 1914 by Margaret Anderson, the magazine had gained a reputation for publishing modern writers and poets. Margaret Anderson was delighted at the idea of Ezra becoming its Foreign Editor and of giving him space to use at his discretion. Quinn put up \$750, \$300 for Ezra's remuneration and the rest for contributors. Ezra published work by Yeats, himself, Eliot, Lady Gregory (of *Mabinogion* fame) Arthur Symons, William Carlos Williams and others of his circle. He also managed to get a job for Eliot as assistant editor of the magazine 'The Egoist', for which Eliot who was paid £9 a quarter, doing the work in his spare time from the bank. He further arranged for 'The Egoist' to publish forty of Eliot's poems under the title 'Prufrock and other Observations', without Eliot being aware. His own level of literary journalism increased and he wrote, under pseudonyms, musical criticism and art criticism for the magazine 'New Age' and book reviews for the magazine 'Future'. There were more 'little magazines' in those days than there are now, and Ezra was a major contributor, being obliged at one stage to take on a typist for three days a week.

In the meantime, Joyce had been writing 'Ulysses' in Trieste and sent the first chapter to Ezra, who immediately wanted to publish it in 'The Egoist' although he did not personally approve of the obscenity and lavatorial details. The printer refused and eventually a Serbo-Croat printer was used who had a very limited understanding of English. As publication continued, Ezra deleted some of the lavatorial text without informing Joyce. H.G. Wells said of Joyce's work: "Mr. Joyce would bring back into the general picture of life aspects of life which modern drainage and modern decorum have taken out of ordinary intercourse and conversation. Coarse, unfamiliar words are scattered about unpleasantly and if the reader is squeamish there is nothing for him to do but shun it. But if he will pick his way, then it is quite worthwhile".

As for his own work, Ezra was now, again in his own way, translating the work of Sextus

Propertius, a 1st century BC poet who wrote four books of which the principal subject is his infatuation with his mistress, Cynthia. Ezra selected certain passages from Propertius, rendered them as it suited him and introduced into his version lines that did not appear in the original. The translation was as usual the subject of ridicule and fury from classicists which went on for many years, with Robert Graves attacking it in 1955 and a Professor Hight in 1961 describing it as an insult to poetry and to scholarship. Unfortunately the literary reviews were not so good either. A much better reception awaited his next set of poems about Ezra's world and the people in it - Hugh Selwyn Mauberly - it is as though a contemporary novel had been made into poetry with remarkably new language, rhythm and metre. Eliot described it as much the finest poem before the Cantos and the eminent Cambridge literary figure F.R. Leavis said: 'In Mauberly we feel a pressure of experience, an impulsion from deep within. The verse is extraordinarily subtle and its subtlety is the subtlety of the sensibility that it expresses.' One of his disciples said 'the superb restraint of Mauberly, its urbane flexibility, the way the verse is handled, impressed me deeply. I had never read anything like this before. All the romantic outpourings of previous poets seemed tame compared to the tough irony of Pound'.

Ezra and Dorothy made a couple of trips to Europe, chiefly Italy (to see Joyce) each time coming back through Paris. In 1920, they decided to have a holiday in the South of France and then to try an extended spell of Parisian life during the Spring. Down in the South of France, they relaxed and did absolutely nothing except enjoy themselves. For Ezra it was a period of necessary recuperation and he won a silver ashtray at the local tennis club. Then they moved up to Paris. Ezra resumed his literary life, assumed new editorial roles - this time as Paris correspondent as it were - and took up his pen again, and of course his role as champion of unrecognised genius.

And there they stayed, only returning to London for infrequent visits. Ezra was now 35 years old - he lived to the age of 87; a life full of incident and poetry - and tragedy - and finally, family contentment. But the formative years of his career as a poet, and the years of his influence on unknown talents that were also to become literary giants, were here in the U.K., in London, in Kensington, which he always remembered affectionately. "The pale grey light in Kensington Gardens and the gulls floating over the pond and the so very quiet demeanour of the nicely dressed females that used to float up the broadwalks".