



**A Maze of Self:
The Young Lives of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot**

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May 3, 2004**

“How strange it is, how you weave over and back; the threads hold Europe and America together.”

“That is what Ezra’s Cantos were trying to do – what they do.”

- H.D., End to Torment

To read Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot today is to yearn for a bygone era – a time when one could have a mad first wife or a secret child, when all things now impossible seem to have been accessible if one only sought them out. The great writers of the twentieth century (which is finished, too, now) were all lost young people in the streets of European cities, it seems, and universities opened their doors to anyone who showed the slightest interest in obtaining an education. There is such a wealth of information on this time, and especially these two luminaries, and yet one wants to make something new of it, to own the darkened meeting-places and tattered marriages of poets. How can any modern person, particularly a young American female person, acquire the intimacies of these two difficult old men?

“Every one, I believe, who is at all sensible to the seduction of poetry, can remember some moment in youth when he or she was completely carried away by the work of one poet.”¹ T.S. Eliot wrote this understanding the complex lust of the reader for the word, the one-sided empathy extended by the hungry eye. When I was thirteen, my adoration was lavished on modern American novelists not much older than myself. At sixteen I found William Burroughs and loved him above all others, denouncing the rest of the Beat Generation as young upstarts; and now for nearly two years it has been Pound and Eliot I follow and fetishize.

It seems I am traveling backwards through time, creating a reverse chronology of self through the works of American greats. I have reached a time and a people who did not quite know what it meant to be called “American” and as such I cannot quite swallow and know

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Pound and Eliot. Without total possession of these fellows I cannot completely know their work, or my own.

Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot had all the trappings of ordinary American lives, childhoods spent in play and study, Puritan lineages handed down from Mayflower-esque origins. Then, at early ages both, they departed for Europe. Neither would ever truly return. To understand this desertion of the homeland is to know Eliot and Pound. Steeped in Americana, they turned their back on the concept of the United States. What was it about summers in affluent Massachusetts that made Eliot so wholly British? How did Pound's ejection from Wabash College in Indiana lead him on a walking tour of Europe?

These men and their contemporaries lived in a time of change. Great Britain had since the Industrial Revolution cut a wide swath across the globe, acquiring distant colonies and fighting wars on exotic terrain. Now its prodigal son the United States rose cockily on the international horizon. "The sun that never sets is setting," wrote one Price Collier in 1909². The upstart "New Republic" had become a greater military and economic power than its mother country.

England had always expected (and received) deference and acknowledgement from America. The last quarter of the nineteenth century saw a marked decrease in this reverence. A quiet trans-Atlantic war began. British critiques of America damned the young nation as crude, boorish and underdeveloped. Americans responded by referring to Britain as a small, faraway place that would soon find itself unable to match the United States' ascendant pace.

By 1900, the American boasts had become truth. A powerful new navy had taken its place above British sea power, which had held sway since the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The center of the economic world moved west, to New York City. British condemnations of American greed seemed sour grapes. Pax Britannia had passed and Pax Americana begun.

² Zwerdling 17.

This sea change was accompanied by a growing recognition of American art. The United States had produced consecutive generations of artists. American literature³ had gained international recognition. Writers such as Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne and Emerson had become known as great creators of a literature written in English but not made in England. A growing canon of American classics was emerging, comprised of works unique in their tone and distinct in their greatness. The new generation – which Gertrude Stein would famously deem “lost” – would produce the most remarkable influx of American writers in the nation’s history.

Many of the Lost Generation would become expatriates, creating a famous community in Paris. Unlike Pound and Eliot, however, these writers would return to America; most would die there. The allure of Europe was not strong enough to anchor them outside of America. Eliot and Pound were set apart from the beginning by their lack of any concept of a return. They did not go to Europe to fight or avoid the war. They went instead to embark on a new citizenship, to recreate themselves and their language in what they deemed their primeval home.

Ezra Weston Loomis Pound was born on October 30, 1885 to Isabel, nee Weston, and Homer Pound, “in the first plaster residence of the log-house settlement of Hailey, Idaho.”⁴ His father Homer was a government employee working in the local land office, registering claims. Thaddeus Pound, Ezra’s grandfather, was a sometime politician and wealthy “lumberman”; among his ancestors were “Pennsylvania Quakers, New York state horse thieves, and the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow”⁵. In 1889, Homer Pound was transferred to the United States Mint, where he became assistant assayer. The family moved to Wyncote, Pennsylvania, a rural

³ The very idea of “American literature” was enough to upset some British thinkers of the nineteenth century. “Are we to have a Primer of Canadian Literature too, and a Primer of Australian?” Matthew Arnold demanded in response to an advertisement for a primer of American literature during an 1883 – 1884 lecture tour of American. “We are all contributors to one great literature – English literature.” Zwerdling, p. 11.

⁴ Lander 10

⁵ Knapp 17

suburb of Philadelphia. The Pounds lived in a house in the comfortable hills of Pennsylvania and were members of the Calvary Presbyterian Church.

No record of Ezra's primary education remains. We can assume he was educated in a local school where students were taught the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. A summer 1898 tour of Europe with a great aunt was a formative event in his young life. He visited, among other places, London, Brussels, Cologne, Paris, the Alps, Venice, Granada, and Tangiers. I imagine the young Ezra, newly graduated from the vegetable gardens and apple orchards of Wyncote, gazing raptly at some monument or natural wonder, in much the same manner that I did on my own summer tour of Europe.

While this is silly, it is also important to me. I cannot shake the feeling that the grandiose spectacle of the Continent affected Pound deeply, just as it did me. A mere two years later, at fifteen, Ezra Pound announced that he wished to be a poet and enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania. He spent two years at the University, where he met William Carlos Williams. Their friendship endured for the better part of a century and they corresponded frequently when Pound transferred to Hamilton College, in upstate New York. He finished his degree there and returned to the University of Pennsylvania for graduate studies.

Pound's feelings on education were, like much of his personality, largely contradictory. He valued and sought higher learning, but was often frustrated by the constraints of learning institutions. He entered the University of Pennsylvania at fifteen as a "special student", unburdened by requirements and therefore free to take any course he pleased. Pound never felt it necessary to pursue an established course of study, nor did he possess reverence for writers commonly regarded as great. This resistance to tradition was anathema to the concept of education at the turn of the century. One Morton P. Prince wrote of learning at this time:

“Education, in those days, was a custom, an English custom which one acquired, as one acquired English suits from English tailors. The modern concept that education is a tool for survival was only just coming in.”⁶ Rather than an affectation, Pound valued education as a vital and necessary ingredient of a full life.

Ezra Pound’s distaste for accepted education methods mirrors convictions I myself developed during my senior year of high school. The anti-traditionalist ideas that Pound espoused seem to me to have been taken too far. Years of high school English classes that presumed the pupil was disinterested in reading aggravated me, as did the constant replacement of established literary classics with book-of-the-month type potboilers. While Pound bemoaned the dearth of interest in new ideas, I found myself rebelling against the abandonment of the old. However much he might criticize a classical education, Pound derived much of his style and content from the canon of Western literature. That which he denounced was ultimately instrumental to his creative output. And so it is with me: no matter how much I smirk at modern literature, it has inextricably insinuated itself into my consciousness and writing style.

Aside from the scant details I have been able to cobble together above, Poundian history seems to begin at his 1908 arrival in Europe. H.D.’s memoir *End to Torment* is an invaluable document for accessing a Pound who exists only in memory. H.D.’s full name is Hilda Doolittle: her initials became her nom de plume when Pound, editing one of her poems, wrote at the bottom “H.D. Imagiste”. So Imagism was born, along with a patron saint: H.D. This action is a good microcosm for Doolittle and Pound’s relationship: he, constantly revising and creating, she recording and producing.

Hilda Doolittle and Ezra Pound met when he was a discontent University of Pennsylvania graduate student and she an undergraduate at Bryn Mawr College. They were engaged, but the

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terms of their engagement seem to have been tenuous at best, and their betrothal abruptly ended when Pound left for Europe.⁷ H.D. and Pound shared a remarkable intimacy; they were young poets in love, and then expatriate together in London, and finally elderly writers a world apart from each other, keeping in touch as much through newspaper clippings as letters.

End to Torment makes the reader a third party to Pound and Doolittle's relationship. Many passages possess a crystalline beauty, as though the moment Doolittle describes never actually ended, and exists still somewhere:

“No, Dryad,” he says. He snatches me back. We sway with the wind. There is no wind. We sway with the stars. They are not far.

We slide, slip, fly down through the branches, leap together to the ground. “No,” I say, breaking from his arms, “No,” drawing back from his kisses. “I’ll run ahead and stop the trolley, no – quick, get your things – books – whatever you left in the hall.” “I’ll get them next time,” he says. “Run,” I say, “run.” He just catches the trolley, swaying dangerously, barely stopping, only half stopping. Now, I must face them in the house.

“He was late again.” My father was winding the clock. My mother said, “Where were you? I was calling. Didn’t you hear me? Where is Ezra Pound?” I said, “O – he’s gone.” “Books? Hat? “He’ll get them next time.” Why had I ever come down out of that tree?⁸

This memoir is precious to me, as it must be to any young reader. Here the invincible figures of literature, like Easter Island monoliths in their inapproachability, are confused and gorgeous. Pound and Doolittle are often late, disheveled, untrue, and unsure: in short, they are young people. They bear almost no resemblance to the masters of the English language that dominate entire aisles at libraries.

The Ezra Pound that H.D. describes is a rake, a ne’er-do-well, a kind and gentle lover, a joker and an unpredictable young man. In the same tone of love and slight exasperation Doolittle speaks of the past Ezra and the present⁹. Ezra, telling her during her second pregnancy: “...my

⁷ Ezra Pound was notoriously close-mouthed about his romantic life; even his closest friends were not aware he was even seeing anyone when he married Dorothy Shakespear in 1914.

⁸ Doolittle 12

⁹ Pound’s release from St. Elizabeth’s Hospital was pending in 1958, the year *End to Torment* was written.

only real criticism is that this is not my child.”¹⁰ Ezra, remarking spuriously “They say in Wyncote that I am bi-sexual and given to unnatural lust”¹¹ in response to Hilda’s questions about his scandalous reputation. Ezra, who “danced badly” and “had no ear for music”, singing and dancing. Here, finally, is a man that I can know and sympathize with. Hilda Doolittle gives her Pound to the rest of us in *End to Torment*.

The event that can most nearly be given credit for driving Pound to Europe is his brief and disastrous time as a professor at Wabash College in Indiana. In 1907 Pound applied for a position at the all-men’s school. Wabash was located in the heart of the Midwest and had yet to enter the twentieth century. Pound took up residence in a boarding house run by two unmarried sisters and proceeded to make a spectacle of defying the conservative standards of Crawfordsville, Indiana. He regularly took in bands of traveling actors and performers, giving them shelter and food. One such act of charity led to his dismissal from the school. Having allowed a young female dancer to stay the night in his room – Pound maintained that he slept on the floor and she in his bed – he went to class, only to discover the president of the university had been informed of his “indiscretion”.

Actors and dancers were considered denizens of the same demimonde as prostitutes at the same time, and Pound’s guests scandalized Wabash College. He was promptly dismissed after being informed he was “too European”. Although his didactic tendencies and impassioned sense of the word would have made teaching an ideal career for Pound, he was so thoroughly disgusted with the entire system of education after this experience that he would later write famously to the University of Pennsylvania: “All the U. of P. or your god damn college or any other god damn

¹⁰ Doolittle 8

¹¹ Doolittle 15

American college does or will do for a man of letters is ask him to go away without breaking the silence...”¹²

Wabash College may as well have bought Ezra Pound’s ticket to Europe. “Mr. Pound, with your magic, your ‘strange spells of old deity,’ why didn’t you complete the metamorphosis?” H.D. asks, recalling her time as Pound’s fiancé. “Pad, pad, pad...come along, my Lynx. Let’s get out of here. You are suffocating and I am hungry. You spoke of grapes somewhere – you were starving.”¹³ Seeking a finer fruit, Pound embarked upon Europe. He left in January 1908, turning his back on all of America’s recent supremacy and supposed triumph over Britain, leaving a country he felt he could not succeed in for one that would be transformed by his presence.

The story of T.S. Eliot’s emigration is wholly different from Pound’s. Eliot had a different beginning and would have a vastly different end. Thomas Stearns Eliot was born September 26, 1888, in St. Louis, Missouri, the youngest of seven children. His parents were Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte, nee Campe, religious members of Midwestern nobility well into their middle age. The Eliots were a wealthy, idiosyncratic bunch who could trace their roots back to William the Conqueror. Henry’s father William Greenleaf Eliot was the founder of Washington University. Henry Ware Eliot was a quiet man who had made his fortune through a series of business endeavors. From him T.S. inherited the oversized ears that were the bane of Eliot men.

Eliot was brought up in a strict English fashion, the monotony of which was dulled by the presence of a beloved Irish nanny. A strong sense of Christian faith was instilled in Eliot through early trips to church with this nanny, as well as his mother’s fervent belief in the Unitarian

¹² Lander 21

¹³ Doolittle 17

Church. Charlotte Eliot's devotion to Unitarianism led her to write religious poetry, which although it was never published held an important place in her life. T.S. Eliot was made aware of the necessity and power of faith and words early in life.

Whereas Ezra Pound's parents seem to have mostly accepted and supported as best they could the whims and convictions of their singular offspring, Eliot's parents had definite expectations of his life and career. He was sent to the finest preparatory schools, two in St. Louis and one in Boston. It was expected he would complete his degrees at Harvard and become a professor at that august institution. Such a career was respectable, well paid, a both impressive and realistic career goal.

These expectations and duties were thrust upon Thomas Stearns Eliot from the moment of birth. He was coddled and controlled by his mother, who passed her combination of neuroses and staunch standards to her son. Concerned about her son's perceived frailty, she wrote to the heads of each of his schools asking that he be left out of athletic activities. Eliot harbored a fear and respect of his mother to the end of her days. He knew that she was never satisfied with his choice to move to London and pursue a career as a writer. She did not live to see him become the penultimate man of letters of the twentieth century.

T.S. Eliot was separated from his schoolmates in St. Louis by neighborhood. Eliot and his family lived in an older part of town, which, while still presentable, had become somewhat empty and industrial. Most of the families of T.S.'s schoolmates had moved to further suburbs of the city. As a child, Eliot often played in the small garden of a girls' school next door to his home rather than with other boys.

The Eliots summered in Cape Ann, Massachusetts, where Eliot enjoyed sailing and bird watching. T.S. Eliot's time in Massachusetts comprises an important part of his American

consciousness. Boston as a city has always considered itself somewhat more European than American, and the summer residences and activities of well-to-do families along these capes resembled those of English families. His poem “Cape Ann” rhapsodizes the simple glories of a summer life:

Follow the dance of the goldfinch at noon. . . Greet
in silence the bullbat. All are delectable. Sweet sweet sweet
but resign this land at the end, resign it
to its true owner, the tough one, the sea-gull.¹⁴

Eliot’s succinct observation of nature is obviously the result of many summers spent lovingly witnessing wild Cape Ann, which must have seemed a place both foreign and comforting at once.

While Ezra Pound studied the subjects of his choice, Eliot was subject to a rigorous curriculum of those texts viewed unique and indispensable for a proper education. He did not much care for a good deal of his reading, preferring books he himself sought out. This disinterest in schoolwork came back to haunt him when he was placed on academic probation during his freshman year at Harvard. His unspectacular record later improved, but Eliot would never truly distinguish himself academically at Harvard. He acquired a group of friends and acquaintances who were all unique personalities in his own right. Their memories of him often feature adjectives like “shy”, “observant” and “witty”. He was known to have a wry sense of humor and a withdrawn manner.

This is perhaps the most telling classmate recollection: “He was English in everything but accent and citizenship. His remarks were quiet, witty and precise but not precious. He smoked a pipe, liked to be alone, carefully avoided slang, and dressed with the studied carelessness of a

¹⁴ Eliot 95

future dandy.”¹⁵ Eliot’s years as an outsider, in the wrong part of town, under the protective eye of his mother, the lone boy on a girls’ nursery school playground: this time created a man who wanted to escape and reinvent himself. And where better to do this than England, a nation both far and close?

T.S. Eliot did not intend to go to Great Britain in 1914. He was instead supposed to study at a German university for a season and then move on to London. The outbreak of the First World War propelled his arrival in London, the place he would decide was his home. Eliot became a naturalized British citizen and was baptized into the Church of England. When he died, his remains were transported to East Coker, a town in Somerset from where Andrew Eliot, the family’s English primogenitor, had originally disembarked.

In the journey of the outsider I can identify T.S. Eliot. Isolated and trapped by his place and responsibilities, he turned in on himself. The snake bites its tail; circles have no end. When Eliot went to London, he had no inkling of the fame and importance he would acquire. He was simply making a return journey, to retrace paths and discover the familiar.

Ezra Pound and Thomas Stearns Eliot must have possessed some similar trait, some particular peculiarity that propelled them so inexorably towards the Continent, causing them to focus and settle finally in London. American aristocracy no longer held the culture or society of the United States in sway. Captains of industry and plutocrats, who seemed to Eliot and Pound uneducated and brash, had supplanted old money. European immigrants came not from the accepted north and west of their continent but the south and east, hungry for work and shelter. These huddled masses did not move Pound and Eliot. They are both known to have abhorred egalitarianism, which had risen as an ideology and a reality in America. The very concept of the human mass incurred Pound’s ire. “The artist is not dependent upon the multitude of his

¹⁵ Soldo 52

listeners.” He stated in a 1914 essay, “The Audience”. “Humanity is the rich effluvium, it is the waste and the manure and the soil, and from it grows the tree of the arts.”¹⁶

This misanthropy included strong anti-Semitism. Although Pound is the more famously hateful of the two, both poets harbored lifelong prejudices against Judaism. Eliot’s more controlled intolerance first manifested itself at an early age:

In *Fireside* No. 8 [a magazine Eliot drew and wrote as a child], written on 30 January 1899, Eliot drew a caricature of a man in profile, whose principal features were a prominent nose and a raised gesturing hand. To the right of the sketch appeared this caption: “History of the Jews by Fulish [sic] Writers.”¹⁷

Pound was more prone to statements like “Damn remnants in you of Jew religion, that bitch Moses and the rest of the tribal barbarians”¹⁸, but both men possessed a bigotry that was increasingly unacceptable in an American setting.

As the United States moved (albeit slowly) towards a more tolerant society, expanding in diversity of thought and ethnicity, Pound and Eliot withdrew. They fled east, to a place where anti-Semitism was the norm in their circles and exclusivity was seen as a virtue rather than a societal problem. London received the young writers with grace and excitement.

In 1913, *Punch*, a satirical London periodical, published the following couplet:

The bays that formerly old Dante crowned
Are worn today by Ezra Loomis Pound.¹⁹

I must admit the slightest swell of pride at the emergence and relish with which Pound and Eliot were greeted and folded into the ebb and flow of London society. Just as they were unknowns with little renown at the start of their journeys, only to become celebrated poets that shone

¹⁶ Pound as quoted in Zwerdling, p. 230

¹⁷ Soldo 20

¹⁸ Pound in a letter to Harriet Monroe as quoted in Lander, p. 3

¹⁹ Zwerdling 220

brilliantly, these two men seemed to me as impenetrable and distant from me as England itself. It seemed that to know Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot I might have to walk the length of their lives, retracing the steps they took across the Atlantic to a foreign place. Instead I have found these men in the selfsame construct of their American childhoods, the stories of which are indistinguishable from my own.

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