

READING POUND : ONE

1. In vain have I striven
to teach my heart to bow;
In vain have I said to him
"There be many singers greater than thou."

But his answer cometh, as winds and as lutany,
As a vague crying upon the night
That leaveth me no rest, saying ever,
"Song, a song."

Their echoes play upon each other in the twilight
Seeking ever a song.
Lo, I am worn with travail
And the wandering of many roads hath made my eyes
As dark red circles filled with dust.
Yet there is a trembling upon me in the twilight,
And little red elf words crying "A song,"
Little grey elf words crying for a song,
Little brown leaf words crying "A song,"
Little green leaf words crying for a song.
The words are as leaves, old brown leaves in the spring time
Blowing they know not whither, seeking a song.

White words as snow flakes but they are cold
Moss words, lip words, words of slow streams.

In vain have I striven
To teach my soul to bow,
In vain have I pled with him,
"There be greater souls than thou."

For in the morn of my years there came a woman
As moon light calling
As moon calleth the tides,
"Song, a song."
Wherefore I made her a song and she went from me
As the moon doth from the sea,
But still came the leaf words, little brown elf words
Saying "The soul sendeth us."
A song, a song!"
And in vain I cried unto them "I have no song
For she I sang of hath gone from me."

Ezra Pound, initial two-thirds of 'Praise of Ysolt', the first piece in *Personae* (London, April 1909); reprinted in *Umbra* (London, June 1920), in *Collected Shorter Poems* (London, 1952), pp. 29-31, and in *Personæ; The Shorter Poems*

of *Ezra Pound*, ed. Lea Baechler and A. Walton Litz (New York, 1990), pp. 15-16; text here (with certain differences from *CSP* and *Pers* in layout and punctuation) from *Collected Early Poems*, ed. M.J. King (London, 1977), pp. 79-80, as followed in *Ezra Pound; Poems and Translations*, ed. Richard Sieburth (Library of America; New York, 2003), pp. 83-4 (note that for all later citations from the shorter poems I shall generally prefer either the *Collected Shorter Poems* or the 1990 revised edition of *Personae*, shortened in passing refs to *Pers*, or the *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth; regarding Sieburth's editorial outcomes see 'Pound Ascendant', review by Marjorie Perloff, *Boston Review* (2004). Pound himself reviews (rather blandly) the 'Tristan and Ysolt legend' in *The Spirit of Romance* (1910; London, 1952), pp. 82-3. Pound's poem may have some connection with Yeats, 'The Everlasting Voices' from *The Wind Among the Reeds* of 1899: see T.H. Jackson, *The Early Poetry of Ezra Pound* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), pp. 152-3. See also Ezra Pound, *Plays Modelled on the Noh* (1916), ed. Donald C. Gallup (Toledo, Ohio, 1987), and Peter Nicholls, 'An Experiment with Time: Ezra Pound and the Example of Japanese Noh', *MLR*, 90 (1995), 1-13. [For background to the shared interests of Yeats and Pound in the Japanese court drama, see firstly (for its sumptuous illustrations) Yasuo Nakamura, *Noh. The Classical Theater*, trans. Don Kenny (New York, 1971), and then Hiro Ishibashi, *Yeats and the Noh; Types of Japanese Beauty and their Reflection in Yeats's Plays*, ed. Anthony Kerrigan (Dublin, 1966) and Akiko Miyake et al. (eds), *A Guide to Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa's Classic No Theatre of Japan* (Orono, Maine, 1994).]

Edward Thomas, reviewing *Personae* for the *English Review*, said: 'The beauty of it [the world of these poems] "In Praise of Ysolt" is the beauty of passion, sincerity and intensity, not of beautiful words and images and suggestions . . . the thought dominates the words and is greater than they are' (quoted by T.S. Eliot in *Ezra Pound, his Metric and Poetry*, originally published anonymously [New York, 12 November 1917]; reprinted in *To Criticize the Critic* [London, 1965]; on this pamphlet see also Robert Langbaum, 'Pound and Eliot' in George Bornstein [ed.], *Ezra Pound Among the Poets* [Chicago, 1985], p. 171). The first 20 lines of 'Praise of Ysolt' were originally a separate poem, 'Vana', collected in *A Lume Spento* (Venice, June 1908); *CEP*, p. 27, *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, p. 40; for a late echo, see Canto XCIII. The feminised vocabulary here, and the attempt to build a dialogue from gender differences and colours, is part of the pre-Raphaelite idea; for the weaving of 'the Iseult and Tristram story' into the fabric of biography and presentation, see Jerome McGann, *Black Riders; The Visible Language of Modernism* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), pp. 76-80. We might also notice how such legend can be cruelly solicited into individual lives; through most of 1917 Maude Gonne's illegitimate daughter, set up with the name Iseult by her mother with whom Yeats had been hopelessly infatuated, had herself been subjecting Yeats to extended erotic torments (see Brenda Maddox, *George's Ghosts; A New Life of W.B. Yeats* [London, 1999], and Ann Saddlemyer, *Becoming George; The Life of Mrs W.B. Yeats* [Oxford, 2002]).

With lines 21-2 compare 'The Seafarer':

Hung with hard ice-flakes, where hail-scur flew,
There I heard naught save the harsh sea

And ice-cold wave, at whiles the swan cries,
 Did for my games the gannet's clamour,
 Sea-fowls' loudness was for me laughter,
 The mewes' singing all my mead-drink. (lines 17-22)

Pound's translation of the Anglo-Saxon elegy was first printed in the *New Age*, X,5 (30 November, 1911), p. 107, then reprinted in *Ripostes* (London, October 1912), *Cathay* (London, 6 April 1915), etc; see *Pers*, pp. 60-3, *CSP*, pp 76-9, *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, pp. 236-8 plus Pound's original note of 1911, p. 1275. For linguistic discussion see Susan Bassnett-McGuire, *Translation Studies* (rev. ed., London, 1991), Chap. 3: 'Specific Problems of Literary Translation'. For translation and ventriloquism in modernist practice see Stan Smith, *The Origins of Modernism; Eliot, Pound, Yeats and the Rhetorics of Renewal* (Hemel Hempstead, 1994), pp. 5-11; also Gould (Warwick), 'The Unknown Masterpiece: Yeats and the Design of the *Cantos*', in Gibson (Andrew) (ed.), *Pound in Multiple Perspective; A Collection of Critical Essays* (London, 1993), pp. 40-92, and Tomlinson (Charles), 'Metamorphosis as Translation', in his *Poetry and Metamorphosis* (Cambridge, c.1983), Lecture 4 (pp. 72-97). The fullest and most acutely informed discussion of Pound's close and extended interest in Anglo-Saxon poetic form, and a reasoned defence of Pound's philological methods, is Fred C. Robinson, "'The Might of the North:" Pound's Anglo-Saxon Studies and The Seafarer', *The Yale Review*, 71 (1982), 199-224, reprinted in his *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English* (Oxford, 1993).

2. **BALLATETTA**

The light became her grace and dwelt among
 Blind eyes and shadows that are formed as men;
 Lo, how the light doth melt us into song:

The broken sunlight for a healm she beareth
 Who hath my heart in jurisdiction.
 In wild-wood never fawn nor fallow fareth
 So silent light; no gossamer is spun
 So delicate as she is, when the sun
 Drives the clear emeralds from the bended grasses
 Lest they should parch too swiftly, where she passes.

Ezra Pound, first published in *Canzoni* (London, July 1911), then not reprinted until *CSP* (p. 52); *Pers*, p. 36, *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, p. 145; then self-quoted at the close of Canto 93. For the Victorian-romantic daintiness from which this idiom derives, compare James Joyce, 'My love is in a light attire' (*Chamber Music*, 1907, VII; *Poems and Shorter Writings*, ed. Richard Ellmann et al. [London, 1991], p. 19). The title echoes one of Cavalcanti's favourite verse-forms and the poem follows his device of a courtly *visio*; it is modelled exactly on the strophic pattern and rhyme-scheme of Ballata II, which Pound translated for *The Sonnets and Ballate of Guido*

Cavalcanti (Boston, April 1912); see David Anderson (ed.), *Pound's Cavalcanti; An Edition of the Translations, Notes, and Essays* (Princeton, 1983), pp. 128-9. The pentameter metre is Guido's, and the feminine rhymes imitate his practice. For Pound's practice here of metaphorically transferred personal affect see Christine Brooke-Rose, *A ZBC of Ezra Pound* (London, 1971), pp. 95-6.

3. **HE THINKS OF THOSE WHO HAVE SPOKEN
EVIL OF HIS BELOVED**

Half close your eyelids, loosen your hair,
And dream about the great and their pride;
They have spoken against you everywhere,
But weigh this song with the great and their pride;
I made it out of a mouthful of air,
Their children's children shall say they have lied.

W.B. Yeats, from *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899); Peter Allt and R.K. Alspach (eds), *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1957), p. 166 (or *Collected Poems* [London, 1950], p. 75). See James Longenbach, *Stone Cottage; Pound, Yeats, and Modernism* (New York, 1988), pp. 240-1; Peter Makin, *Pound's Cantos* (London, 1985), p. 34. Pound remembers this poem in *Guide to Kulchur* (London, 1938; reprinted, 1966), p. 152.

4. to break the pentameter, that was the first heave

Canto LXXXI (1945); compare Canto XCVIII: '. . . as for those who deform thought with iambics'. See also 'Affirmations - As For Imagism' (*New Age*, 28 January 1915): 'There is no form of platitude which cannot be turned into iambic pentameter without labour. It is not difficult, if one have learned to count up to ten, to begin a new line on each eleventh syllable or to whack each alternate syllable with an ictus. Emotion also creates patterns of timbre. But one "discards rhyme", not because one is incapable of rhyming neat, fleet, sweet, meet, treat, eat, feet, but because there are certain emotions or energies which are not to be represented by the over-familiar devices or patterns' (*Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, ed. William Cookson [London, 1973], p. 345). Compare 'A Retrospect' (1918); 'Don't make each line stop dead at the end, and then begin every next line with a heave. Let the beginning of the next line catch the rise of the rhythm wave, unless you want a definite longish pause. In short, behave as a musician' (*Literary Essays*, ed. T.S. Eliot [London, 1954], p. 6). On behaving 'as a musician' for early Pound, however, compare his argument against 'emotional, or impressionist music' in 'Arnold Dolmetch' (1918; *Literary Essays*, p. 434); which has in retrospect been taken as part of a general modernist alliance with pre-romantic performance practices (Bach!); see Richard Taruskin's excitable piece, 'The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past' (1988), in his *Text and Act; Essays on*

the use of spondaic or double-accented formations, in his 'The Poetry of Ezra Pound' (1949), collected in his *The Freedom of the Poet* (New York, 1976), pp. 254, 257. The same figure as here, though differently fragmented, hovers at the start of Canto IV: 'Dawn, to our waking, drifts in the green cool light; / Dew-haze blurs, in the grass, pale ankles moving'; and compare the uncollected 'Wine' (of 1918, after Li Po), *Poems and Translations*, ed. Sieburth, p. 1186.

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