ABC of Reading

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by

EZRA POUND

INTRODUCTION BY MICHAEL DIRDA

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EZRA POUND: ABC OF READING

An introduction by Michael Dirda

Ezra Pound never took a single undergraduate course in English poetry. As a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania he failed a class in the history of literary criticism. In the way of such things, it was probably inevitable that he should emerge as one of the twentieth century's greatest poets and critics.

Pound's distinctive genius lay in his unbounded energy and exuberance. As the poet Donald Hall once observed, he combined "accuracy of taste" with "energetic magnanimity." That magnanimity took myriad forms, from helping shape T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* to passing along secondhand clothes to the impoverished James Joyce—and, later on, persuading *The Egoist* to serialize *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Yet even while Pound was tirelessly calling for poets and novelists to "make it new," he was also arguing for a return to origins, for a reexamination of Provençal lyrics, Renaissance translations, and the poetry of such underestimated figures as the Earl of Rochester and Walter Savage Landor. The only classics that truly mattered, he maintained, were those of the "first intensity," those that broke fresh ground, invented or revealed new formal techniques, added a tool to the writer's kit. As such, they provided the serious reader with needed "axes of reference."

ABC of Reading is Pound's concise introduction to these touchstones—or at least the European ones—and it establishes what he would later call a "set of measures, standards, voltometers." In fact, Pound's little book—something of a literary equivalent to *The Elements of Style*—gathers the artistic convictions and observations, his so-called gists and piths, from thirty years of personal and journalistic writing about literature.

In editorials for *The Little Review*, in "Letters from Europe" for *The Dial*, and in myriad essays for various other periodicals, the young Pound had both hammered out and proclaimed his esthetic principles. Like Nietzsche, Pound quickly mastered the aphoristic provocation: "The history of art is the history of masterwork, not of failures, or mediocrity." The business of a critic is not "to write huge tomes 'about' this, that, and the other but 'to

dig out the fine thing forgotten.' " "In each age one or two men of genius find something, and express it. It may be in only a line or two lines, or in some quality of cadence; and thereafter two dozen, or two hundred, or two more thousand followers repeat and dilute and modify." "All that the critic can do for the reader or audience or spectator is to focus his gaze or audition."

As such brilliant sloganeering shows, Pound's criticism is determinedly flamboyant and personal. Wyndham Lewis regarded his old friend, with some condescension, as "half sensationalist, half impresario, half-poet." About the same time Gertrude Stein called him "a village explainer." More accurately, Pound — who in his early twenties was briefly a professor of Romance languages at Wabash College in Indiana — never really stopped being a teacher. In later years he made himself into a one-man Ezuversity.

Open to virtually any page of Pound's critical writing or commentary, from 1910's *Spirit of Romance*, a study of medieval poetry, to 1964's anthology *Confucius to Cummings*, and you will hear his no-nonsense, pedagogical voice. It's so striking and memorable that one can hardly quote it enough: "I have always wanted to write 'poetry' that a grown man could read without groans of ennui." Literature is meant "to relieve, refresh, revive the mind of the reader — at reasonable intervals — with some form of ecstasy, by some splendor of thought, some presentation of sheer beauty, some lightning turn of phrase." "You are a fool to read classics because you are told to and not because you like them."

Again and again, Pound rightly stresses that "art is a joyous thing" and that we need "a greater levity, a more befitting levity, in our study of the arts." Is it any surprise then that *ABC of Reading* might well be the most lively and provocative work of literary criticism ever written? As its author says on its opening page: "Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man." Throughout the exhilarating first half of *ABC* one finds jokes, put-downs, ripostes, and shrewd remarks cloaked in humor: "France may possibly have acquired the intellectual leadership of Europe when their academic period was cut down to 40 minutes."

In fact, when not sounding like the best literature professor you will ever have, Pound could almost pass for a modern-day blogger. He buttonholes the reader in a voice that is colloquial, brassy, and loud. He even writes in short paragraphs, like twitter messages or video sound bites. All his life Pound searched for a forum where he could broadcast to the world his ideas about poetry, the arts and society. He would have loved the internet. In attacking the clay icons of the literary establishment of his day Pound was even snarky, long before the word existed. He proudly admitted, "I have never known anyone worth a damn who wasn't irascible."

Though sometimes a scourge, Pound was at his best as modernism's press agent or carnival barker: "It is after all a grrrreat litttttterary PERIOD!" A movement needs manifestos and polemics, publications with names like *Blast* and *The Enemy*, and labels, lots of labels—Imagism, Vorticism—that might attract media attention. When T. S. Eliot, in the dedication of *The Waste Land*, called Pound "il miglior fabbro," the better maker, he may have spoken more shrewdly than he knew. Yes, Pound was a great "maker," an old term for poet (cf. William Dunbar's "Lament for the Makers"), and he did possess his era's most sensitive ear for the music of verse. But he was also a better "macher," the Yiddish word for a deal-maker, the guy who knows how to make things happen.

Pound did this largely through hectoring personal communication. When James Laughlin, the future publisher of New Directions, visited the poet at his home in Rapallo, Italy, in 1934–35, Pound told him that postage was his greatest single expense. After all, he corresponded with people from around the world, sometimes advising W.H.D. Rouse on his translation of Homer or Laurence Binyon on his translation of Dante, sometimes assailing U.S. congressmen about economic reform. Nonetheless, as the 1930s advanced, Pound's already cracker-barrel epistolary style grew increasingly eccentric—more and more pockmarked with abbreviations, odd spellings, nicknames, words in ALL CAPS, and almost incomprehensible allusions. "Fat-Faced Frankie," for instance, was the Renaissance poet Francesco Petrarch. In effect, the poet's idiosyncratic correspondence took on the appearance of extreme text-messaging.

By the late 1930s, alas, Pound's various intellectual passions overheated. He grew starry-eyed over Mussolini as a kind of Renaissance strong man, rabid about the cause of distributive economics and "Social Credit," increasingly anti-Semitic, and generally loony about anything outside of art and poetry. The later installments of his masterwork, *The Cantos*, not only highlight his obsessions but also sink under increased hermeticism. His notorious anti-American radio talks during World War II often ranted incoherently, stymieing transcribers. Regarded as a traitor at war's end and locked up in a cage for three weeks during 1945, Pound finally suffered a complete psychological breakdown.

Instead of being imprisoned or shot (as he expected), the poet was committed to St. Elizabeths mental hospital in Washington D.C. and lived there for twelve years, from 1946 to 1958. When Pound was finally released, following petitions from virtually every major American writer of his generation, as well as considerable secret string-pulling, the poet returned to Italy, worked desultorily on his later Cantos, grew increasingly depressed, then utterly silent. He came to wonder if his life's work was a botch, finally repudiated his deluded politically based anti-Semitism, and only emerged from seclusion to visit the grave of James Joyce, attend the funeral of T. S. Eliot, and say goodbye to Marianne Moore and the failing William Carlos Williams. Pound himself died in 1972 at the age eighty-seven, and is buried in Venice.

As a poet, Ezra Pound is seemingly inexhaustible in his variousness. One might say—to paraphrase T. S. Eliot's original (Dickensian) title for "The Waste Land"—that "He Do the Poems in Different Voices." Pound was a genuine shape-shifter, taking on one persona after another to produce complicated troubadour stanzas, compact imagist "haiku," scathing satirical verse, translations of Old English, imitations of Propertius, the limpidly beautiful Chinese poems of *Cathay*, Japanese Noh plays, the polyphonic *Cantos*. "Like Picasso and Stravinsky," as Guy Davenport says, he "has styles rather than a style."

But, again, that's Pound the poet. As a critic and literary theorist, he was much more narrowly focused. Throughout his life, Pound trumpeted forth the same basic tenets: Learn from the poets who, in their time, made it new! Clarity, economy, and preci-

"a sort of energy . . . a force transfusing, welding, and unifying."

The second half of *ABC* is devoted to assorted passages—"Exhibits"—from a few of the writers discussed in the first seventy-five or so pages. Be warned: Pound expects you to work your way through some fairly demanding material, often in an archaic dialect. At the same time, he urges you to challenge him: "Let the student hunt for a dozen poems that are different from any of the exhibits, or that introduce some new component, or enlarge his conception of poetry, by bringing in some kind of matter, or mode of expression not yet touched on." In his later *Guide to Kulchur* (1938), Pound praised a reader of *ABC of Reading* who "asked why particular authors (naming them) were omitted and whether someone or other cdn't replace something else. This, the careful student will observe, is the kind of answer I asked for."

Perhaps the most obviously theoretical aspect of *ABC* lies in its division of poetry into three types: melopoeia, phanopoeia, and logopoeia. In essence this is poetry as music (e.g., Provençal lyrics such as Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega"), as picture (e.g., Chinese ideograms), and as idea or argument (e.g., poetic satire, knotty modern poems like *The Waste Land*). Similarly, Pound taxonomizes poets themselves into inventors, masters, diluters, "good writers without salient qualities," "writers of belles lettres," and the "starters of crazes."

In *ABC* he is most interested in the inventors, those who added some new technique or beauty to the art of poetry: But Pound's select pantheon may surprise you. Arthur Golding's *Metamorphoses*, he asserts, is "the most beautiful book in the language" and a poem by the wholly obscure Mark Alexander Boyd (1563–1601) may be "the most beautiful sonnet in the language." Pound even recommends that poets would do well to study Stendhal and Flaubert, maintaining that verse should be as well written, as exact and natural-seeming, as prose.

In the end, though, the truly important quality of *ABC of Reading* remains Pound's energy and enthusiasm, his highly adrenalized desire to encourage people to explore the literature of the past. *ABC* itself is a compendium of the kind of inspirational maxims and pronouncements one might tape to the side of a computer monitor or pin to a bulletin board: "More writ-

ers fail from lack of character than from lack of intelligence." "Incompetence will show in the use of too many words." "The way to learn the music of verse is to listen to it." "One definition of beauty is: aptness to purpose."

By the time of Ezra Pound's death in 1972, the modernist generation had been enshrined as gods. People spoke of "The Age of Eliot." Hugh Kenner titled his critical masterpiece *The Pound Era*. An entire Joyce industry was humming along. Sooner or later, such reverent genuflection was bound to provoke an antithetical revaluation. Nowadays, we tend to honor our home boys — like Robert Frost and William Carlos Williams — far more comfortably than the international men of letters, such as Eliot and Pound.

Yet Ezra Pound — at least the early Pound, up to the mid 1930s — is a writer that readers of the twenty-first century should find deeply appealing. He's got the piratical bravado of an outlaw hacker, a rebel with a cause. Johnny Depp could play him in the biopic. Moreover, everyone now understands the need to open up the canon to the literatures of other countries and times. The tradition, as Pound reminds us, "is a beauty we preserve and not a set of fetters to bind us." But just as importantly, Pound also supplies a corrective to the more sterile aspects of postmodernism: He is a man who takes literature with compelling, needed seriousness.

Ambitious fiction and poetry — "language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree" — matter in this increasingly noisy and trivialized world. Pound once said that "beauty is a brief gasp between one cliché and another," and in this, too, alas, he may have foreseen the internet generation. Like George Orwell in "Politics and the English Language," Pound repeatedly underscores the importance of honest, efficient language for human communication. "If a nation's literature declines," he writes, "the nation atrophies and decays." No wonder that one of Pound's favorite Chinese ideograms, "Ching Ming," is the symbol for precise verbal definition, for calling a thing by its proper name.

ABC of Reading isn't only a guide to books, then, or just an instruction manual for would-be writers. It reminds us that we need literature to deepen our lives, that poetry's "luminous details" bring us joy and beauty and understanding. A great book, said Pound, is like "a ball of light in one's hand."

A B C of Reading

How to Study Poetry

THE present book is intended to meet the need for fuller and simpler explanation of the method outlined in *How to Read*. *How to Read* may be considered as a controversial pamphlet summarizing the more active or spiky parts of the author's earlier critical skirmishing, and taking count of an enemy. The present pages should be impersonal enough to serve as a text-book. The author hopes to follow the tradition of Gaston Paris and S. Reinach, that is, to produce a text-book that can also be read 'for pleasure as well as profit' by those no longer in school; by those who have not been to school; or by those who in their college days suffered those things which most of my own generation suffered.

A private word to teachers and professors will be found toward the end of the volume. I am not idly sowing thorns in their path. I should like to make even their lot and life more exhilarating and to save even them from unnecessary boredom in class-room.

Warning

1 There is a longish dull stretch shortly after the beginning of the book. The student will have to endure it. I am at that place trying by all means to avoid ambiguity, in the hope of saving the student's time later.

2 Gloom and solemnity are entirely out of place in even the most rigorous study of an art originally intended to make glad the heart of man.

> Gravity, a mysterious carriage of the
> body to conceal the defects of the mind.
>
> LAURENCE STERNE

3 The harsh treatment here accorded a number of meritorious writers is not aimless, but proceeds from a firm conviction that the only way to keep the best writing in circulation, or to 'make the best poetry popular', is by drastic separation of the best from a great mass of writing that has been long considered of value, that has overweighted all curricula, and that is to be blamed for the very pernicious current idea that a good book must be of necessity a dull one.

A classic is classic not because it conforms to certain structural rules, or fits certain definitions (of which its

author had quite probably never heard). It is classic because of a certain eternal and irrepressible freshness.

An Italian state examiner, jolted by my edition of Cavalcanti, expressed admiration at the almost ultra-modernity of Guido's language.

Ignorant men of genius are constantly rediscovering 'laws' of art which the academics had mislaid or hidden.

The author's conviction on this day of New Year is that music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance; that poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music: but this must not be taken as implying that all good music is dance music or all poetry lyric. Bach and Mozart are never too far from physical movement.

Nunc est bibendum
Nunc pede libero
Pulsanda tellus.

SECTION ONE

Chapter One

1

We live in an age of science and of abundance. The care and reverence for books as such, proper to an age when no book was duplicated until someone took the pains to copy it out by hand, is obviously no longer suited to 'the needs of society', or to the conservation of learning. The weeder is supremely needed if the Garden of the Muses is to persist as a garden.

The proper METHOD for studying poetry and good letters is the method of contemporary biologists, that is careful first-hand examination of the matter, and continual COMPARISON of one 'slide' or specimen with another.

No man is equipped for modern thinking until he has understood the anecdote of Agassiz and the fish:

A post-graduate student equipped with honours and diplomas went to Agassiz to receive the final and finishing touches. The great man offered him a small fish and told him to describe it.

Post-Graduate Student: 'That's only a sunfish.'

Agassiz: 'I know that. Write a description of it.'

After a few minutes the student returned with the description of the Ichthus Heliodiplodokus, or whatever term is used to conceal the common sunfish from vulgar knowledge, family of Heliichtherinkus, etc., as found in textbooks of the subject.

Agassiz again told the student to describe the fish.

The student produced a four-page essay. Agassiz then told him to look at the fish. At the end of three weeks the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but the student knew something about it.

By this method modern science has arisen, not on the narrow edge of mediaeval logic suspended in a vacuum.

'Science does not consist in inventing a number of more or less abstract entities corresponding to the number of things you wish to find out', says a French commentator on Einstein. I don't know whether that clumsy translation of a long French sentence is clear to the general reader.

The first definite assertion of the applicability of scientific method to literary criticism is found in Ernest Fenollosa's *Essay on the Chinese Written Character.*

The complete despicability of official philosophic thought, and, if the reader will really think carefully of what I am trying to tell him, the most stinging insult and at the same time convincing proof of the general nullity and incompetence of organized intellectual life in America, England, their universities in general, and their learned publications at large, could be indicated by a narrative of the difficulties I encountered in getting Fenollosa's essay printed at all.

A text-book is no place for anything that could be interpreted or even misinterpreted as a personal grievance.

Let us say that the editorial minds, and those of men in power in the literary and educational bureaucracy for the fifty years preceding 1934, have not always differed very greatly from that of the tailor Blodgett who pro-

there was a good deal of care for terminology, and the general exactitude in the use of abstract terms may have been (probably was) higher.

I mean a mediaeval theologian took care not to define a dog in terms that would have applied just as well to a dog's tooth or its hide, or the noise it makes when lapping water; but all your teachers will tell you that science developed more rapidly after Bacon had suggested the direct examination of phenomena, and after Galileo and others had stopped discussing things so much, and had begun really to look at them, and to invent means (like the telescope) of seeing them better.

The most useful living member of the Huxley family has emphasized the fact that the telescope wasn't merely an idea, but that it was very definitely a technical achievement.

By contrast to the method of abstraction, or of defining things in more and still more general terms, Fenollosa emphasizes the method of science, 'which is the method of poetry', as distinct from that of 'philosophic discussion', and is the way the Chinese go about it in their ideograph or abbreviated picture writing.

To go back to the beginning of history, you probably know that there is spoken language and written language, and that there are two kinds of written language, one based on sound and the other on sight.

You speak to an animal with a few simple noises and

gestures. Lévy-Bruhl's account of primitive languages in Africa records languages that are still bound up with mimicry and gesture.

The Egyptians finally used abbreviated pictures to represent sounds, but the Chinese still use abbreviated pictures AS pictures, that is to say, Chinese ideogram does not try to be the picture of a sound, or to be a written sign recalling a sound, but it is still the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things. It *means* the thing or the action or situation, or quality germane to the several things that it pictures.

Gaudier Brzeska, who was accustomed to looking at the real shape of things, could read a certain amount of Chinese writing without ANY STUDY. He said, 'Of course, you can *see* it's a horse' (or a wing or whatever).

In tables showing primitive Chinese characters in one column and the present 'conventionalized' signs in another, anyone can see how the ideogram for man or tree or sunrise developed, or 'was simplified from', or was reduced to the essentials of the first picture of man, tree or sunrise.

Thus


man


tree


sun


sun tangled in the tree's branches, as at sunrise, meaning now the East.

But when the Chinaman wanted to make a picture of

something more complicated, or of a general idea, how did he go about it?

He is to define red. How can he do it in a picture that isn't painted in red paint?

He puts (or his ancestor put) together the abbreviated pictures of

ROSE CHERRY

IRON RUST FLAMINGO

That, you see, is very much the kind of thing a biologist does (in a very much more complicated way) when he gets together a few hundred or thousand slides, and picks out what is necessary for his general statement. Something that fits the case, that applies in all of the cases.

The Chinese 'word' or ideogram for red is based on something everyone KNOWS.

(If ideogram had developed in England, the writers would possibly have substituted the front side of a robin, or something less exotic than a flamingo.)

Fenollosa was telling how and why a language written in this way simply HAD TO STAY POETIC; simply couldn't help being and staying poetic in a way that a column of English type might very well not stay poetic.

He died before getting round to publishing and proclaiming a 'method'.

Bach: Toccata (piano solo, ed. Busoni).
Bach: Concerto Re maj. for two violins and piano.
Ravel: Sonata per violino e pianoforte.

There was nothing fortuitous. The point of this experiment is that everyone present at the two concerts now knows a great deal more about the relations, the relative weight, etc., of Debussy and Ravel than they possibly could have found out by reading ALL the criticisms that have ever been written of both.

The best volume of musical criticism I have ever encountered is Boris De Schloezer's *Stravinsky*. What do I know after reading it that I didn't know before?

I am aware of De Schloezer's mental coherence, and thoroughness. I am delighted by one sentence, possibly the only one in the book that I remember (approximately): 'Melody is the most artificial thing in music', meaning that it is furthest removed from anything the composer finds THERE, ready in nature, needing only direct imitation or copying. It is therefore the root, the test, etc.

This is an aphorism, a general statement. For me it is profoundly true. It *can* be used as a measuring-rod to Stravinsky or any other composer. BUT for actual knowledge of Stravinsky? Where De Schloezer refers to works I have heard, I get most, perhaps all, of his meaning.

Where he refers to works I have not heard, I get his 'general idea' but I acquire no real knowledge.

My final impression is that he was given a rather poor case, that he has done his best for his client, and ultimately left Stravinsky flat on his back, although he has explained

why the composer went wrong, or couldn't very well have done otherwise.

2

ANY general statement is like a cheque drawn on a bank. Its value depends on what is there to meet it. If Mr. Rockefeller draws a cheque for a million dollars it is good. If I draw one for a million it is a joke, a hoax, it has no value. If it is taken seriously, the writing of it becomes a criminal act.

The same applies with cheques against knowledge. If Marconi says something about ultra-short waves it MEANS something. Its meaning can only be properly estimated by someone who KNOWS.

You do not accept a stranger's cheques without reference. In writing, a man's 'name' is his reference. He has, after a time, credit. It may be sound, it may be like the late Mr. Kreuger's.

The verbal manifestation on any bank cheque is very much like that on any other.

Your cheque, if good, means ultimately delivery of something you want.

An abstract or general statement is GOOD if it be ultimately found to correspond with the facts.

BUT no layman can tell at sight whether it is good or bad.

This doesn't in the least rule out the uses of logic, or of good guesses, or of intuitions and total perceptions, or of 'seeing how the thing HAD TO BE'.

It has, however, a good deal to do with the efficiency of verbal manifestation, and with the transmittibility of a conviction.

Chapter Two

What *is literature, what is language, etc.*??

Literature is language charged with meaning.

'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree' (E. P. in *How to Read*).

But language?

Spoken or written?

Spoken language is noise divided up into a system of grunts, hisses, etc. They call it 'articulate' speech.

'Articulate' means that it is zoned, and that a number of people are agreed on the categories.

That is to say, we have a more or less approximate agreement about the different noises represented by

a, b, c, d, etc.

Written language, as I said in the opening chapter, can consist (as in Europe, etc.) of signs representing these various noises.

There is a more or less approximate agreement that groups of these noises or signs shall more or less correspond with some object, action or condition.

cat, motion, pink.

The other kind of language starts by being a picture of

the cat, or of something moving, or being, or of a group of things which occur under certain circumstances, or which participate a common quality.

APPROACH

It doesn't, in our contemporary world, so much matter where you begin the examination of a subject, so long as you keep on until you get round again to your starting-point. As it were, you start on a sphere, or a cube; you must keep on until you have seen it from all sides. Or if you think of your subject as a stool or table, you must keep on until it has three legs and will stand up, or four legs and won't tip over too easily.

WHAT is the USE OF LANGUAGE? WHY STUDY LITERATURE?

Language was obviously created, and is, obviously, USED for communication.

'Literature is news that STAYS news.'

These things are matters of degree. Your communication can be more or less exact. The INTEREST in a statement can be more or less durable.

I cannot for example, wear out my interest in the *Ta Hio* of Confucius, or in the Homeric poems.

It is very difficult to read the same detective story twice. Or let us say, only a very good 'tec' will stand re-reading, after a very long interval, and because one has paid so

And of two men who had made automobiles, would you go to one who had made a good one, or one who had made a botch?

Would you look at the actual car or only at the specifications?

In the case of poetry, there is, or seems to be, a good deal to be looked at. And there seem to be very few authentic specifications available.

Dante says: 'A canzone is a composition of words set to music.'

I don't know any better point to start from.

Coleridge or De Quincey said that the quality of a 'great poet is everywhere present, and nowhere visible as a distinct excitement', or something of that sort.

This would be a more dangerous *starting*-point. It is probably true.

Dante's statement is the better place to begin because it starts the reader or hearer from what he actually sees or hears, instead of distracting his mind from that actuality to something which can only be approximately deduced or conjectured FROM the actuality, and for which the *evidence* can be nothing save the particular and limited extent of the actuality.

Chapter Three

1

Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function exactly proportioned to their ability AS WRITERS. This is their main use. All other uses are relative, and temporary, and can be estimated only in relation to the views of a particular estimator.

Partisans of particular ideas may value writers who agree with them more than writers who do not, they may, and often do, value bad writers of their own party or religion more than good writers of another party or church.

But there is one basis susceptible of estimation and independent of all questions of viewpoint.

Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear. It doesn't matter whether the good writer wants to be useful, or whether the bad writer wants to do harm.

Language is the main means of human communication. If an animal's nervous system does not transmit sensations and stimuli, the animal atrophies.

If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.

Your legislator can't legislate for the public good, your commander can't command, your populace (if you be a democratic country) can't instruct its 'representatives', save by language.

It is very difficult to make people understand the *impersonal* indignation that a decay of writing can cause men who understand what it implies, and the end whereto it leads. It is almost impossible to express any degree of such indignation without being called 'embittered', or something of that sort.

Nevertheless the 'statesman cannot govern, the scientist cannot participate his discoveries, men cannot agree on wise action without language', and all their deeds and conditions are affected by the defects or virtues of idiom.

A people that grows accustomed to sloppy writing is a people in process of losing grip on its empire and on itself. And this looseness and blowsiness is not anything as simple and scandalous as abrupt and disordered syntax.

It concerns the relation of expression to meaning. Abrupt and disordered syntax can be at times very honest, and an elaborately constructed sentence can be at times merely an elaborate camouflage.

2

THE sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is CAPABLE of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.

This is a very unpalatable and bitter doctrine. But I cannot omit it.

People occasionally develop almost a fanaticism in combating the ideas 'fixed' in a single language. These are

generally speaking 'the prejudices of the nation' (any nation).

Different climates and different bloods have different needs, different spontaneities, different reluctances, different ratios between different groups of impulse and unwillingness, different constructions of throat, and all these leave trace in the language, and leave it more ready and more unready for certain communications and registrations.

THE READER'S AMBITION may be mediocre, and the ambitions of no two readers will be identical. The teacher can only aim his instruction at those who most *want* to learn, but he can at any rate start them with an 'appetizer', he can at least hand them a printed list of the things to be learned in literature, or in a given section thereof.

The first bog of inertia may be simple ignorance of the extent of the subject, or a simple unwillingness to move away from one area of semi-ignorance. The greatest barrier is probably set up by teachers who know a little more than the public, who want to exploit their fractional knowledge, and who are thoroughly opposed to making the least effort to learn anything more.

Chapter Four

1

'Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.'

Dichten = condensare.

I begin with poetry because it is the most concentrated form of verbal expression. Basil Bunting, fumbling about with a German-Italian dictionary, found that this idea of poetry as concentration is as old almost as the German language. 'Dichten' is the German verb corresponding to the noun 'Dichtung' meaning poetry, and the lexicographer has rendered it by the Italian verb meaning 'to condense'.

The charging of language is done in three principal ways: You receive the language as your race has left it, the words have meanings which have 'grown into the race's skin'; the Germans say 'wie einem der Schnabel gewachsen ist', as his beak grows. And the good writer chooses his words for their 'meaning', but that meaning is not a set, cut-off thing like the move of knight or pawn on a chess-board. It comes up with roots, with associations, with how and where the word is familiarly used, or where it has been used brilliantly or memorably.

This is the last means to develop, it can only be used by the sophisticated.

(If you want really to understand what I am talking about, you will have to read, ultimately, Propertius and Jules Laforgue.)

IF YOU WERE STUDYING CHEMISTRY you would be told that there are a certain number of elements, a certain number of more usual chemicals, chemicals most in use, or easiest to find. And for the sake of clarity in your experiments you would probably be given these substances 'pure' or as pure as you could conveniently get them.

IF YOU WERE A CONTEMPORARY book-keeper you would probably use the loose-leaf system, by which business houses separate archives from facts that are in use, or that are likely to be frequently needed for reference.

Similar conveniences are possible in the study of literature.

Any amateur of painting knows that modern galleries lay great stress on 'good hanging', that is, of putting important pictures where they can be well seen, and where the eye will not be confused, or the feet wearied by searching for the masterpiece on a vast expanse of wall cumbered with rubbish.

At this point I can't very well avoid printing a set of categories that considerably antedate my own *How to Read*.

2

WHEN you start searching for 'pure elements' in literature you will find that literature has been created by the following classes of persons:

1 Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process.

2 The masters. Men who combined a number of such processes, and who used them as well as or better than the inventors.

3 The diluters. Men who came after the first two kinds of writer, and couldn't do the job quite as well.

4 Good writers without salient qualities. Men who are fortunate enough to be born when the literature of a given country is in good working order, or when some particular branch of writing is 'healthy'. For example, men who wrote sonnets in Dante's time, men who wrote short lyrics in Shakespeare's time or for several decades thereafter, or who wrote French novels and stories after Flaubert had shown them how.

5 Writers of belles-lettres. That is, men who didn't really invent anything, but who specialized in some parti-

3

COMPASS, SEXTANT, OR LAND MARKS

LET the student brace himself and prepare for the worst. I am coming to my list of the minimum that a man would have to read if he hoped to know what a given new book was worth. I mean as he would know whether a given pole-vault was remarkably high, or a given tennis player at all likely to play in a Davis Cup match.

You might think it would be safe to print such a list, or that it 'would be the last thing a reader could misunderstand'. But there would seem to be almost no limit to what people can and will misunderstand when they are not doing their utmost to get at a writer's meaning.

With regard to the following list, one ingenious or ingenuous attacker suggested that I had included certain poems in this list because I had myself translated them. The idea that during twenty-five years' search I had translated the poems BECAUSE they were the key positions or the best illustrations, seems not to have occurred to him. He surpassed himself by suggesting that the poem of Bion's was an afterthought mentioned out of place, and that I had mistaken it for a poem of Moschus which he himself had translated. That is what comes of trying to bore people as little as possible, and to put down one's matter in the least possible space.

The Bion is separated by centuries from the Homer and Sappho. In studying the earlier parts of the list, the atten-

tion would, I think, have gone to the WRITING, to the narrative, to the clarity of expression, but would not have naturally focused itself on the melodic devices, on the fitting of the words, their SOUND and ultimately their meaning, to the tune.

The Bion is put with those troubadours for the sake of contrast, and in order to prevent the reader from thinking that one set or a half-dozen sets of melodic devices constituted the whole of that subject.

AT ABOUT THIS POINT the weak-hearted reader usually sits down in the road, removes his shoes and weeps that he 'is a bad linguist' or that he or she can't possibly learn all those languages.

One has to divide the readers who want to be experts from those who do not, and divide, as it were, those who want to see the world from those who merely want to know WHAT PART OF IT THEY LIVE IN.

When it comes to the question of poetry, 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.

Nevertheless the maximum of **phanopoeia** [throwing a visual image on the mind] is probably reached by the Chinese, due in part to their particular kind of written language.

In the languages known to me (which do not include Persian and Arabic) the maximum of **melopoeia** is reached in Greek, with certain developments in Provençal which

are not in Greek, and which are of a different KIND than the Greek.

And it is my firm conviction that a man can learn more about poetry by really knowing and examining a few of the best poems than by meandering about among a great many. At any rate, a great deal of false teaching is due to the assumption that poems known to the critic are of necessity the best.

My lists are a starting-point and a challenge. This challenge has been open for a number of years and no one has yet taken it up. There have been general complaints, but no one has offered a rival list, or put forward particular poems as better examples of a postulated virtu or quality.

Years ago a musician said to me: 'But isn't there a place where you can get it all [meaning all of poetry] as in Bach?'

There isn't. I believe if a man will really learn Greek he can get nearly 'all of it' in Homer.

I have never read half a page of **Homer** without finding melodic invention, I mean melodic invention that I didn't already know. I have, on the other hand, found also in Homer the imaginary spectator, which in 1918 I still thought was Henry James' particular property.

Homer says, 'an experienced soldier would have noticed'. The sheer literary qualities in Homer are such that a physician has written a book to prove that Homer must have been an army doctor. (When he describes certain blows and their effect, the wounds are said to be accurate, and the description fit for coroner's inquest.)

Another French scholar has more or less shown that the geography of the Odyssey is correct geography; not as

There is one quality which unites all great and perdurable writers, you don't NEED schools and colleges to keep 'em alive. Put them out of the curriculum, lay them in the dust of libraries, and once in every so often a chance reader, unsubsidized and unbribed, will dig them up again, put them in the light again, without asking favours.

Virgil was the official literature of the middle ages, but 'everybody' went on reading Ovid. Dante makes all his acknowledgements to Virgil (having appreciated the best of him), but the direct and indirect effect of Ovid on Dante's actual writing is possibly greater than Virgil's.

Virgil came to life again in 1514 partly or possibly because Gavin Douglas knew the sea better than Virgil had.

The lover of Virgil who wishes to bring a libel action against me would be well advised to begin his attack by separating the part of the Aeneid in which Virgil was directly interested (one might almost say, the folk-lore element) from the parts he wrote chiefly because he was trying to write an epic poem.

You have been promised a text-book, and I perhaps ramble on as if we had been taken outdoors to study botany from the trees instead of from engravings in classroom. That is partly the fault of people who complained that I gave them lists without saying why I had chosen such-and-such authors.

YOU WILL NEVER KNOW either why I chose them, or why they were worth choosing, or why you approve or disapprove my choice, until you go to the TEXTS, the originals.

And the quicker you go to the texts the less need there will be for your listening to me or to any other long-winded critic.

A man who has climbed the Matterhorn may prefer Derbyshire to Switzerland, but he won't think the Peak is the highest mountain in Europe.

An epic is a poem including history.

Greek Drama depends greatly on the hearer or reader knowing Homer. It is my firm opinion that there are a great many defects in Greek drama. I should never try to stop a man's reading **Aeschylus** or **Sophocles**. There is nothing in this book that ought in any way to curtail a man's reading or to prevent his reading anything he enjoys.

Ultimately, I suppose, any man with decent literary curiosity will read the ***Agamemnon*** of Aeschylus, but if he has seriously considered drama as a means of expression he will see that whereas the medium of poetry is WORDS, the medium of drama is people moving about on a stage and using words. That is, the words are only a part of the medium and the gaps between them, or deficiencies in their meaning, can be made up by 'action'.

People who have given the matter dispassionate and careful attention are fairly convinced that the maximum charge of verbal meaning cannot be used on the stage, save for very brief instants. 'It takes time to get it over', etc.

This is not a text-book of the drama, or of dramatic criticism. It is unfair to a dramatist to consider his

intellectual or 'coldly intellectual' significance. The how much you mean it, the how you feel about meaning it, can all be 'put into language'.

I took my critical life in my hand, some years ago, when I suggested that **Catullus** was in some ways a better writer than Sappho, not for melopoeia, but for economy of words. I don't in the least know whether this is true. One should start with an open mind.

The snobbism of the renaissance held that all Greek poetry was better than ANY Latin poetry. The most intelligent of the Quattrocento Latinists, Basinio of Parma, proclaimed a very different thesis; he held that you couldn't write Latin poetry really well unless you knew Greek. That is, you see, very different. In the margins of his Latin narrative you can still see the tags of Homer that he was using to keep his melodic sense active.

I don't believe that any Latin author is in measurable distance of Homer. I doubt if Catullus is inferior to Sappho. I doubt if **Propertius** is a millimetre inferior to his Greek antecedents; **Ovid** is for us a store-house of a vast mass of matter that we cannot NOW get from the Greek.

He is uneven. He is clear. His verse is as lucid as prose. Metrically he is not a patch on Catullus or Propertius.

Perhaps the student will now begin to see that I am trying to give him a list of authors who are unsurpassed IN THEIR OWN DOMAIN, whereas the writers whom I omit are demonstrably INFERIOR to one or more of the writers I include, and their inferiority can be computed on some particular basis.

. . . . .

HAVE PATIENCE, I am not insisting even now on your learning a multitude of strange languages, I will even tell you, in due course, what you can do if you can read only English.

To put it another way, I am, after all these years, making a list of books that I still re-read; that I keep on my desk and look into now and again.

Chapter Five

1

The great break in European literary history is the change over from inflected to uninflected language. And a great deal of critical nonsense has been written by people who did not realize the difference.

Greek and Latin are inflected, that is, nouns, verbs and adjectives have little tags, or wagging tails, and the tags tell whether the noun is subject or predicate; they indicate that which acts and that which is acted upon, directly or indirectly, or that which is just standing around, in more or less causal relation, etc.

Most of these tags were forgotten as our modern contemporary European languages evolved. German, the least developed, retains most inflection.

The best way of using a language with these signs and labels attached to the words, is NOT the best way to use a language which has to be written in a certain order if it is to be clear.

It makes a difference in English whether you say man sees dog [or] dog sees man.

In Latin either canis or canem, homo or hominem, can come first without the sentence being the least bit ambiguous.

There are passages of Anglo-Saxon as good as paragraphs of the Seafarer, but I have not found any whole poem of the same value. The Spanish **Cid** is clear narrative, and the sagas of **Grettir** and **Burnt Nial** prove that narrative capacity didn't die out.

I don't know that a contemporary writer could learn anything about writing from the sagas that he couldn't learn better from Flaubert, but Skarpheddin's jump and slide on the ice, and the meeting of Grettir, or whoever it was, with the bear do not fade from one's memory. You can't believe it is fiction. Some Icelander on a ledge must at some time have saved himself by lopping off the outside paw of a bear, and so making the brute lose its balance. This is in a sense phanopoeia, the throwing of an image on the mind's retina.

The defect of earlier imagist propaganda was not in misstatement but in incomplete statement. The diluters took the handiest and easiest meaning, and thought only of the STATIONARY image. If you can't think of imagism or phanopoeia as including the moving image, you will have to make a really needless division of fixed image and praxis or action.

I have taken to using the term phanopoeia to get away from irrelevant particular connotations tangled with a particular group of young people who were writing in 1912.

3

It is mainly for the sake of the melopoeia that one investigates **troubadour poetry.**

One might almost say that the whole culture of the age, at any rate the mass of the purely literary culture of the age, from 1050 to 1250 and on till 1300, was concentrated on one aesthetic problem, which, as Dante put it, 'includes the whole art'.

That 'whole art' consisted in putting together about six strophes of poesy so that the words and the tune should be welded together without joint and without wem.

The best smith, as Dante called **Arnaut Daniel**, made the birds sing IN HIS WORDS; I don't mean that he merely referred to birds singing——

In the canzone beginning

L'aura amara
Fals bruoills brancutz
Clarzir
  Quel doutz espeissa ab fuoills.
Els letz
Becs
Dels auzels ramencz
Ten balps e mutz
  etc.

And having done it in that one strophe he kept them at it, repeating the tune, and finding five rhymes for each of seventeen rhyme sounds in the same order.

Having done that he constructed another perfect strophe, where the bird call interrupts the verse.

Cadahus
  En son us

at that point because it didn't seem to them to have an inherent musical interest.

The point of the foregoing strophes, or at least one dimension of their workmanship, can be grasped by anyone, whether they know Provençal or not.

What is to be said for the quality of **Ventadour** in the best moments, or of **Sordello**, where there is nothing but the perfection of the movement, nothing salient in the thought or the rhyme scheme? You have to have known Provençal a long time perhaps before you perceive the difference between this work and another.

Nevertheless, if you are to know the dimensions of English verse melody a few centuries later, you must find your measures or standards in Provence. The Minnesingers were contemporary; you can contrast the finesse of the south Latin, with the thicker pigment of **Heinrich von Morungen** or **Von der Vogelweide.**

Germans claim that German poetry has developed since the middle ages. My own belief is that Goethe and Stefan George at their lyric best are doing nothing that hadn't already been done better or as well. Borchardt's best verse to-day is in his translations of the Vita Nuova.

During seven centuries a lot of subject matter of no great present interest has been stuffed into German verse that is not very skilful. I can see no reason why a foreign writer should study it.

I see every reason for studying Provençal verse (a little of it, say thirty or fifty poems) from **Guillaume de Poictiers,**

Bertrand de Born and **Sordello**. **Guido** and **Dante** in Italy, **Villon** and **Chaucer** in France and England, had their root in Provence: their art, their artistry, and a good deal of their thought.

European civilization or, to use an abominated word, 'culture' can be perhaps best understood as a mediaeval trunk with wash after wash of classicism going over it. That is not the whole story, but to understand it, you must think of that series of perceptions, as well as of anything that has existed or subsisted unbroken from antiquity.

This book can't be the whole history. Specifically we are considering the development of language as a means of registration.

The Greeks and Romans used one set of devices, one set of techniques. The Provençals developed a different one, not in respect to phanopoeia, but in respect to melopoeia, AFTER a change in the language system (from inflected, to progressively less inflected speech).

The quantitative verse of the ancients was replaced by syllabic verse, as they say in the school books. It would be better to say that the theories applied by grammarians to Latin verse, as the descendant of Greek, were dropped;

And that fitting, *motz el son*, of words to tune replaced the supposedly regular spondees, dactyls, etc.

The question of the relative duration of syllables has never been neglected by men with susceptible ears.

I particularly want to keep off these technical details. The way to learn the music of verse is to listen to it.

After that the student can buy a metronome, or study solfège to perfect his sense of relative duration and of pitch. The present booklet is concerned with language.

For the specific difference between Provence and Italy or the 'progress' from Arnaut Daniel to Sordello, to Cavalcanti and Dante, the reader who cannot and will not read Italian, can, if he like, refer to my descriptive criticism.

Without knowing Dante, Guido Cavalcanti and Villon, no one can judge the attained maxima of certain kinds of writing.

Without the foregoing MINIMUM of poetry in other languages you simply will not know 'where English poetry comes'.

New Directions Paperbooks—a partial listing

César Aira, Ghosts
Paul Auster, The Red Notebook
Djuna Barnes, Nightwood
Charles Baudelaire, The Flowers of Evil
Bei Dao, The August Sleepwalker
Roberto Bolaño, By Night in Chile
Last Evenings on Earth
Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths
Kamau Brathwaite, Middle Passages
Basil Bunting, Complete Poems
Anne Carson, Glass, Irony & God
Horacio Castellanos Moya, Senselessness
José Camilo Cela,
Mazurka for Two Dead Men
Louis-Ferdinand Céline,
Journey to the End of the Night
Inger Christensen, alphabet
Julio Cortázar, Cronopios & Famas
Robert Creeley, If I Were Writing This
Osamu Dazai, The Setting Sun
H.D., Trilogy
Robert Duncan, Selected Poems
Eça de Queirós, The Maias
Shusaku Endo, Deep River
Jenny Erpenbeck, The Book of Words
Lawrence Ferlinghetti,
A Coney Island of the Mind
Poetry as Insurgent Art
F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Crack-Up
Forrest Gander, As a Friend
Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha
Takashi Hiraide,
For the Fighting Spirit of the Walnut (bilingual)
Susan Howe, My Emily Dickinson
Bohumil Hrabal, I Served the King of England
Christopher Isherwood, Berlin Stories
B.S. Johnson, The Unfortunates
Franz Kafka, Amerika: The Man Who Disappeared
Denise Levertov, Selected Poems
Clarice Lispector, The Hour of the Star
Federico García Lorca, Selected Poems
Nathaniel Mackey, Splay Anthem
Javier Marías, Your Face Tomorrow (3 volumes)
Thomas Merton, New Seeds of Contemplation
Henry Miller, The Air-Conditioned Nightmare
Big Sur & The Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch
Yukio Mishima, Confessions of a Mask
Vladimir Nabokov, Laughter in the Dark
Pablo Neruda, Love Poems (bilingual)
Residence on Earth (bilingual)
George Oppen, New Collected Poems (with CD)
Wilfred Owen, Collected Poems
Michael Palmer, The Company of Moths
Nicanor Parra, Antipoems
Kenneth Patchen, The Walking-Away World
Octavio Paz,
The Collected Poems 1957–1987 (bilingual)
Ezra Pound, Cantos
New Selected Poems and Translations
Raymond Queneau, Exercises in Style
Kenneth Rexroth,
Written on the Sky: Poems from the Japanese
Rainer Maria Rilke, The Possibility of Being
Arthur Rimbaud,
A Season in Hell and The Drunken Boat
Guillermo Rosales, The Halfway House
Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea
Delmore Schwartz,
In Dreams Begin Responsibilities
W.G. Sebald, The Emigrants
The Rings of Saturn
C.H. Sisson, Selected Poems
Stevie Smith, New Selected Poems
Gary Snyder, Turtle Island
Muriel Spark, Memento Mori
George Steiner, My Unwritten Books
Yoko Tawada, The Naked Eye
Dylan Thomas, Selected Poems 1934–1952
Uwe Timm, The Invention of Curried Sausage
Tomas Tranströmer,
The Great Enigma: New Collected Poems
Leonid Tsypkin, Summer in Baden-Baden
Enrique Vila-Matas, Bartleby & Co.
Robert Walser, The Assistant
Eliot Weinberger, An Elemental Thing
Nathanael West,
Miss Lonelyhearts & The Day of the Locust
Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie
A Streetcar Named Desire
William Carlos Williams, Selected Poems
In the American Grain
Paterson

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