2
Pound and Yeats

Thirty years on, half-crazed and caged by his victorious American compatriots in a prison-compound near Pisa, Ezra Pound recalled an English winter – the first of three – spent with W.B. Yeats in 1913-14 by a waste moor in Sussex. It was at Stone Cottage in Coleman's Hatch, near Ashdown Forest, and 'Uncle William' had been no easy companion, refusing to eat hot ham for his dinner because peasants do it, and intoning his poetic triumphs downstairs in a voice like a winter wind. In *Pisan Cantos*, in 1948, Pound mocked the old man's brogue in a moment of affectionate recollection:

I recalled the noise in the chimney
as it were the wind in the chimney
    but was in reality Uncle William
    downstairs composing
that he had made a great Peeeeacock
    in the proide ov his oiye
    had made a great peeeeeeecock in the . . .
made a great peacock
    in the proide of his oyyee,

adding generously "as indeed he had" – Yeats's finest poems being "perdurable" and more lasting than bronze.

Those three winters in Sussex, before and during the first world war, make up one of the odder incidents in poetic history, and a key moment in the prehistory of modern theory, since Yeats was to introduce Pound to James Joyce, and Pound was to introduce Eliot to Yeats. All were non-academic, though Pound had taught briefly in a college in the American Midwest. When the forty-eight year-old Yeats invited him, a younger man by twenty years, to be his secretary in the country for three months, he had been deeply stirred by their evening talks in Bloomsbury, where Yeats lived – talks where Pound's brash critical confidence and American charm had made him sound more like a master, at times, than a disciple. It was a meeting of opposites, but opposites with much in common. Both men were provincials – vividly, defiantly conscious of it – in the cosmopolitan world of London. In the loosest of loose senses they were even relatives, Pound being about to marry Dorothy Shakespear, daughter of Yeats's former mistress Olivia; and the Pounds, when they married in 1914, were to spend more winters with Yeats in Sussex during the first world war. In a *Paris Review* interview of 1962 Pound recalled reading Doughty's *Dawn in Britain* aloud to Yeats, and wrangling, since "the Irish like contradiction," though he failed to teach Yeats how to fence. Both were credulous of high theory, bold political nostrums and the lure of the righteous dictator, though here their most dangerous thoughts were still to come. Both, it is easy to forget, were Nineties romantics,

infatuated with what Pound in his first book called the Spirit of Romance – though for Yeats that spirit was Celtic and occult, for Pound Mediterranean – and both were conscious that time was short for romance, its spirit running out in the civilisation of Europe. Lovers of past ages, they were compulsorily innovative and forced to create and vindicate a spirit of the new.

But there was still twenty years between them, and a whole wide Atlantic stretching from Philadelphia to Sligo. Their congeniality was a freak: they fascinated each other as exotic specimens. "This queer creature," Yeats called Pound in a letter to Lady Gregory in December 1909 – queer enough to be interested in the poetry of medieval troubadours, which must have looked strange in a 24-year-old American in Edwardian London. Pound in any case hated the country and wrote to his mother in November 1913 that he fully expected to be bored with Yeats's talk about psychical research. But he could still help. He was a careless, exuberant linguist, Yeats none at all, never even learning to speak French. Gilbert Murray used to tell how, when years later he asked Yeats whether he knew anything of the Irish language he spoke so highly of, Yeats had shamefacedly replied, after an embarrassed pause: "It is the great grief of my life that I have never been able to learn a *word* of it."

Above everything, both poets were convinced that a decayed romanticism was inadequate to the new century, and dangerous to their own reputation in the world. Yeats, above all, had some cause for concern. He had been publishing volumes of verse since 1889. But though nearly fifty, he was not married or settled in life, and anxiously aware that two monarchs had died, two generations come and gone, since he had launched himself as a poet in Tennyson's lifetime. "Now I'm the king of the cats," he remarked gleefully in Dublin in 1909, on hearing of the death of Swinburne. He cannot have felt king of the cats by 1913 – more like an ageing, anxious player in need of a better act.

Pound's sense of the matter, at twenty-eight, concerned his own worldly importance. He had settled in England five years before, and was busy conquering literary London, or as much of it he found domitable. "I regard the visit as a duty to posterity," he told his mother, setting aside all thoughts of rural boredom. In the event, he rather enjoyed it. "Yeats is much finer *intime*," he wrote soon after to William Carlos Williams from Stone Cottage, "than seen spasmodically in the midst of a whirl," meaning in London. Their friendship prospered. It was to be revived years later at Rapallo in 1928, when Yeats joined Pound, for a time, in his Italian exile. Though not always eager to acknowledge help, Yeats believed that Pound had been a seminal influence on his poetry after 1914, and even complimented him in *A Vision* (1925) as a "fore-runner," like Nietzsche, to his own thoughts.

What did Pound start, or forerun, in Yeats's poetic mind?

In a letter to Lady Gregory he echoed Pound's famous Imagiste programme, "a few don'ts for an Imagiste," which had appeared in *Poetry (Chicago)* in 1913: no superfluities or clichés, no ornaments but good ones, few abstractions or none. Pound's prescription of gaunt, hard outlines was well understood by Yeats – at least as a programme and a theory. Pound, he

wrote, 'helps me to get back to the definite and concrete, away from modern abstractions. To talk over a poem with him is like getting you to put a sentence into dialect. All becomes clear and natural.'

So theory in London in the 1910s was all for high economy. Pound introduced him to Japanese Noh plays, too, which are ceremonially gaunt and hard; and in 1916 he was to persuade Yeats to write an introduction to *Certain Noble Plays of Japan*. Theory was above all a theory of translation, where the poet selects from a range of earlier models, not always English or even European, a style that would fit the work he had to do. Theory turned anthropological, a prospect suddenly widened to infinity. The Modernist revolution, or attempted revolution, by the Men of 1914 (as Wyndham Lewis called them) was always more than a matter of poetic diction. But diction lay at the heart of it; and the hard, gaunt tone that Pound clamoured for and Yeats tried to emulate – a clear, natural dialect that eschews abstractions – led straight into some hard, gaunt dogmas about finance and power. Both men despised romanticism, as it had become, and both loved romance. Both hated the cant, as they saw it, of free parliamentary states, and despised the decaying rhetoric of Victorian liberty. Whatever constitutions may say or utopians may think, the world is made by power. Finance is one of the forms that power takes; and behind the façade of democracy, as both Pound and Yeats came to believe, it was finance – above all Jewish finance – that pulls the strings.

Merchant and scholar who have left me blood
That has not passed through any huckster's loin,

as Yeats put it in the introductory poem to *Responsibilities* he wrote at Stone Cottage – it is dated January 1914 – boasting the purity of his lineage. Empty abstractions like Liberty, Equality and Fraternity are part of the mush of modern decadence, for such men. As T.E. Hulme remarks in *Speculations*, romanticism is mere "spilt religion," with no more respect for decorum than treacle poured over a dinner table.

If 1913 was the hinge of Yeats's life as a poet, it was Pound that made it so. But in the twenty years and more left to Yeats as a writer – he died in January 1939 – he never, in point of diction or doctrine, seems unambiguously a Modernist figure. It is not easy to say why. The thumbmark of Modernist diction, as Pound and Eliot understood it, is something easily recognisable but difficult to describe. It is highly parasitic on the late romantic diction it derided as degenerate and strove earnestly to supersede. Years later, in *Kenneth Allott and the Thirties*, Donald Davie pinned it to the relations between nouns and their attendant adjectives, where you "press your luck," as he put it, when one points one way and one another, by widening the gap, adding that all that was not charlatanism but "a serious experiment seriously pursued." I suspect it is more a matter of the intrusion of the unpoetical, as Victorians understood it, into the poetical. The chief Modernist intrusion is in terms of words – commonly polysyllables of learned origin – into contexts where they are the last thing you would expect. Nouns and adjectives are only part of the

story. The noisy fanfare to all that was Eliot's famous opening to *Prufrock* in 1917:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table. . . .

which is little more than the knockdown effect of a young man in a hurry. Far subtler, and far more predictive of how English poetry was to move in this century, are the delicate stylistic surprises of the later Eliot. "Etherised" is a surprise, but not exactly a subtle one: it grabs the romanticism of sunsets and cheerfully gives it the boot. *Ash-Wednesday*, a dozen years later, opens with an infinitely refined version of a similar stylistic effect:

Why should I mourn
The vanished power of the usual reign?

where "usual" strikes a thin, clinical chill into what might otherwise look like a romantic elegy on the loss of youth. That "usual" is a word unusual in poetry is admittedly a fairly recent fact: strictly speaking, it is only surprising here because the nineteenth century would have found it so, and on a longer view it is nothing of the kind. Shakespeare employs it untrivially:

. . . such wanton, wild and usual slips
As are companions noted and most known
To youth and liberty,

says Polonius, solemnly enough, in *Hamlet*. In his critical essays, and not only there, Eliot was bent on reviving the language and spirit of the Elizabethans. Modernism, in its cheeky way, translated the past. You looked forward by looking back.

Yeats sometimes approaches that kind of stylistic surprise, harsh and chilling though it is, as if romanticism needed a cooling agent to be tolerable to severe modern taste. But he does not characteristically indulge it far, even after 1913. He dallies with it. When Pound reviewed his *Responsibilities* at its first appearance in 1914, he plainly saw that the Modernist revolution was not fully there. "Is Mr Yeats an Imagiste?" he asks, and replies: "No, Mr Yeats is a symbolist, but he has written *des Images* as have many good poets before him," praising "the new note" in some of his poems, as if Yeats were a brand still waiting to be plucked from the burning. Lately, he approvingly remarks, Yeats has become "gaunter, seeking greater hardness of outline," though "this is not demonstrable by any particular passage."[1] That is suitably cautious: but if a particular passage does not demonstrate the theory of Modernism, what does? In fact the ageing Yeats of the 1920s does draw upon occasional Modernist effects of style. But he seldom, if ever, writes an entire Modernist poem; he does not succeed when he attempts it; and some of his modernising effects are so glancing that one could be forgiven for missing them altogether. The celebrated last line of "Among School Children", for example, from *The Tower* of 1928, is so faintly wrenched out of true that one might wonder whether it is wrenched at all:

1. *Poetry (Chicago) 4* (1914); reprinted in his *Literary Essays* (London, 1954), pp.378-9.

. . . O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

where 'know' for 'tell' strikes the native ear with a faint chill. That interrogative ending is one of Yeats's proud devices – "And what rough beast . . . ?" It is never notably used by Eliot or Pound; and it gives some of Yeats's shortest poems a sense of endless horizon which may be simulated but is still invigorating, as if more were being offered than is there.

Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

as he ends "Leda and the Swan"; and one is meant to imagine – it is the supreme test of good Yeatsians to imagine it – that the poet could indeed answer his own question if he chose, that he sees further than his own poem, as sages see even further than their profoundest utterances. That tactic is fundamental to Yeats's standing as a sage, which was subject to some mockery in his own lifetime. There is a devastating account of visiting him in Oxford, for example, in a letter by the young C.S. Lewis of March 1921: ". . . into the presence chamber, lit by tall candles, with orange-coloured curtains . . . Then the talk began, . . . all about magic and cabbalism and 'the Hermetic knowledge'." As a Belfast man, Lewis was unashamedly a prejudiced witness in anything that concerned Celtic twilight or mumbo-jumbo, though he generously allowed that Yeats's "eloquence and presence" were great – adding in an ensuing letter that, on his next visit, Yeats was "almost quite sane," even if he always got round to magic in the end.

Yeats's stylistic triumphs often depend on an acceptance, readily given, that a native speaker cannot make a mistake with language. When he writes "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" you sense that something exceptional is happening without remotely suspecting an error. If he had written "How can we tell . . ," nothing exceptional would have happened, and the line could as easily have been written a hundred years earlier. That wrenching and bracing may be presumed an effect of Modernist theory. But even the greatest poems of his sixties – "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium", for example – are still not radically Modernist poems. They have been no more than mildly sunburnt by Modernism, so to speak – a touch of the sun. They are still the old Yeats.

Why is this? One mark of Modernism that Yeats seldom adopted is the short, stabbing phrase that does business for the long syntactical pattern. It is in the tensile power of his extended syntax that, early and late, Yeats proved himself as a poet. Pound, by contrast, can write like a literary *pointilliste*:

For three years, out of key with his time,
He strove to resuscitate the dead art
Of poetry; to maintain 'the sublime'
In the old sense. Wrong from the start

– as *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* began in 1920 in his casually fragmented way. Yeats never scatters detail like that, unyoked by syntax. To take "Leda and the Swan" again: metrically speaking, the poem is nothing more adventurous than a Shakespearean sonnet, and even the enjambment is modest and

unexceptional; while the subject, which concerns the fall of Troy, is no more than familiar and classical. The syntax, however, is something else: the first three words – "A sudden blow" – ripped out of context; the reader floored, like Leda herself, and (like her) left staggering; then a mounting tension fully in the romantic tradition, if more succinct than most nineteenth-century poets would have attempted or achieved. The poem, tiny as it is, is so fiercely realised that it has even excited feminist indignation, though Yeats's note suggests it began, at least, as a political poem calling for "some violent annunciation" to usher in a new, post-individualistic age, the long tradition of Hobbes and the French Revolution being (as he supposed) exhausted. If that is right, it is about a theory of politics and not about love. At all events, Pound seldom wrote like this, in high syntactical tension, and it is hard to see any Pound in the sonnet, unless in its magisterial terseness. It is pure Yeats.

Why, then, did that winter at Stone Cottage matter to English theory?

It mattered, I suspect, by virtue of what Yeats and Pound already had in common. This was a friendship of disparate personalities but like minds. Though a generation apart, Uncle William and young Ezra already shared some crucial similarities of temperament and belief: similarities best presented and set out in order.

Both inclined towards what W.H. Auden, in his late, safe Anglican period used to deride as "heathen mumbo-jumbo." Soon after Yeats's family settled in England in 1887, he joined or formed the Order of the Golden Dawn, a mish-mash of medieval Judaic mysticism and late Victorian spiritualism, and it held his loyalties at least till 1902. Pound's dogmatisms, down to his imprisonment by the American army at the liberation of Italy, were a succession of Latin myths that stretched from pre-pagan times down to classical paganism to the last of the Roman deities, Benito Mussolini, for whom he gave treasonable broadcasts at the height of the war. It would be a large understatement to call such dogmas alien to the England of the years down to 1920, when Pound left London. They are simply *wild* – some would say mad. They qualify both poets for the proud title of cranks. "How on earth," Auden once mused on Yeats's passion for the occult.

> How on earth . . . *could* a man of Yeats's gifts take such nonsense seriously? . . . How could Yeats, with his great aesthetic appreciation of aristocracy, ancestral houses, ceremonious tradition, take up something so essentially lower-middle-class – or should I say Southern Californian? . . . Mediums, spells, the Mysterious Orient – *how* embarrassing.[1]

A more recent and sympathetic account, Graham Hough's *Mystery Religion of W.B. Yeats*, rejects this as crass, on the loyal ground that it is impossible to make great poems out of mere rubbish. But Auden is surely right, and the

1. W.H. Auden, "Yeats as an example," *Kenyon Review 10* (1948); reprinted in *The Permanence of Yeats*, ed. by James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York, 1950), p.345.

case illustrates the logician's point that nothing can be called impossible after it has happened. To Europeans, all swans were white till the first explorer reached Australia and saw a black one. Yeats is not the first black swan, in any case: great poets have used rubbish before he did, and believed it. The theology of Lucretius is not now, to my knowledge, accepted by anyone. Pound's dogmas, which eventually involved Italian Fascism and a fervent anti-Semitism, are by now even more embarrassing than Yeats's, and easily worse that what Auden called Southern Californian. Literature excites an ever-wider tolerance of art but not, if wisely used, an ever-wider tolerance of error. Yeats and Pound were truly in error, on a monumental scale; and Pound, at least, lived long enough to be embarrassed by it himself. In 1967, in abject old age, he called anti-Semitism his worst mistake of all, "that stupid, suburban prejudice."[1]

Both poets, too, believed in an *avant-garde*. That notion has died so recently in English-speaking countries and (more surprisingly) in France that only the very young can need to have the matter explained to them – and not even they, if they listen and read. In Yeats's London, and from the 1890s onwards, the notion was highly recent and French, and in the London that Pound inhabited between 1908 and 1920 it had all the excitement of a new faith. For the first and (perhaps) last time, London in that age was full of 'gangs', as Pound called them in his cheerful way – shifting coteries of writers and aspiring writers – and aflame with manifestoes. Julian Symons described the phenomenon in *The Makers of the New* in carefully restrained irony, as a survivor who lived to see and savour the Age of Nostalgia that awoke to life in the 1970s. That new mood left Modernism looking dilapidated and sad, so that it takes an effort of will to re-enter the literary consciousness of Late Victorian and Edwardian chic. Yeats's candlelit room in Oxford that C.S. Lewis derided sounds much like the trappings of a French coterie *maître*; so, in photos, do Pound's broad-brimmed hat and flowing mantle. Allen Tate used to say that Ezra, a happily married man, was not naturally the kind to take a mistress – he merely thought a poet should be seen to have one – and George Moore once remarked that Yeats in his floating tie and long black cloak looked to him like "an Irish parody of the poetry I had seen all my life strutting its rhythmic way in the alleys of the Luxembourg Gardens." Both Yeats and Pound set themselves up as *maîtres* in public posture as well as in verse. That is quite distinct from T.S. Eliot, who affected that air in his early poems, as a sort of American Laforgue, but never in his dress, manners or morals. To the coterie-mind, literature is a group impelled by a cause. You make a life, Pound remarked in 1914, out of about twenty people drawn from the two hundred most interesting people a nation has to offer: "the score of this two hundred with whom one happens to have made friends."[1]

Again, both poets strove to see things – material objects – as the true stuff of poetry. "Your interest is in mundane things," Yeats's father once perceptively

1. "A conversation between Ezra Pound and Allen Ginsburg." *Evergreen Review* (June 1968).

told him, "whether beyond the stars or not." The thinginess of their poems, their *chosisme*, was designedly startling to their first readers, even unnerving, like Eliot's mention of a gashouse in *The Waste Land*. In Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" the bird that entertains the emperor is not a bird out of nature but a mechanical contraption:

. . . such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake.

That drugged, incantatory power is alien to Pound. But its thinginess is not, nor its artifice – even eternity, apparently, was an artifice to Yeats – and Pound's *Cantos* were a laborious attempt to make an epic out of things and things and ever more things. When in his last years Yeats wrote "The Circus Animals' Desertion," he was pounding the same drum:

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. . . .

High specificity in that fashion is a strenuous bid to keep up the Imagiste programme of eschewing abstraction. But even in poems written early at Stone Cottage, one can see the same force at work. When Yeats wrote "The Cold Heaven" for *Responsibilities*, he triumphantly married a passion for things with the romantic lyric:

Suddenly I saw the cold and rook-delighting heaven
That seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice.

One might allow "rook-delighting" as a compound epithet from the old romantic tradition, like Keats's "branch-charmèd." But Yeats dares introduce the ugliest of common birds into a love poem, and the Imagiste mark is even plainer when he insists that ice is so icy that it scorches. No wonder Pound, reviewing the book, remarked that though Yeats was a symbolist, not an Imagist, he had used *des images* "as many good poets before him" – rightly implying that Modernism is less an innovation than an intensification of an existing style. Browning, after all, whom Pound admired, is given to heaps of broken images, as in "Childe Roland to the dark tower came": so much so that his heaps can look formless and wholly outmatched by their component parts. That makes the Georgian prejudice against things all the harder to understand. I can remember an old lady remarking that poems simply have no business to be about things like pubs and gasworks – much as if Browning had never written at all.

A profound hatred of intellect, finally, is likely to have animated theoretical debates at Stone Cottage in the winter of 1913-14 and after. The dogmatic road the two poets trod, it is now clear, was stained with blood and ultimately

1. Ezra Pound, *Literary Essays* (London, 1954), p.372

discreditable to both. Yeats's "The Ghost of Roger Casement," it is all too probable, gloated in the late 1930s over the rise of the Luftwaffe in an age when the catchword "The bomber always gets through" was widely believed, and about to prove all too true:

The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.

That was to invite Armageddon. Yeats was lucky to die as early as January 1939 – the very month, as it happened, that Auden emigrated to America – and in March Auden wrote his elegy "In memory of W.B. Yeats," containing the unforgettable line

You were silly like us: your gift survived it all,

which may be taken as an ingenious compound of reproach and self-reproach. If Christopher Isherwood's account of their sea journey to New York together is to be believed, Auden chose that moment to announce that he was giving up his left-wing activity. He had resembled Yeats, as he saw, in supposing his poetic gifts had given him a charter to dogmatise, his scepticism a safe and sure defence against credulity. But it is the classic fate of the radical sceptic to fall for dogmas wilder by a mile than the conventional dogmas they have rejected, and no decade illustrates the easy gullibility of the professed sceptic more tragically than the 1930s. A few months after the Yeats elegy, in "September 1, 1939," Auden reproached himself again at the outbreak of a war where fascism and communism stood armed together in an alliance "sealed in blood," as Stalin put it:

As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade.

That is usually read as a jibe against the appeasers, and it surely includes them. But there were other clever hopes besides theirs: Yeats's Order of the Golden Dawn, Pound's ideas about fascism and Funny Money, and Auden's about Marxism and Homer Lane. These are fantasies of clever people fearfully conscious of their cleverness who yet live to realise that in the event they have not been as clever, or as wise, as ordinary men.

There is an open and avowed contempt for rationality in Yeats and Pound alike. Wordsworth, as Yeats wrote to his father in January 1915, was "always destroying his poetic experience . . . by his reflective power". That suggests a fear of rational reflection, an intellectual pride founded on a love of innovation: *new* dogmas, *new* theories, *new* ceremonies. The theory-credulity of an intelligentsia is above all a credulity of the new, or rather what looks new to them, and the hedgehog, though not a savage beast, was claiming new victims. Both Yeats and Pound believed they knew one big thing, and that one big thing could save the world.

Eliot distanced himself from all that by commonplacely joining the Church of England, which was an astounding move. But even earlier than 1927, when he publicly declared for King and Canterbury, he had insisted in his essay on William Blake that no man, not even a great poet, can plausibly invent a whole tradition:

> Blake's supernatural territories . . . illustrate the crankiness, the eccentricity, which frequently affects writers outside of the Latin traditions. . . . What his genius required, and what it sadly lacked, was a framework of accepted and traditional ideas which would have prevented him from indulging in a philosophy of his own.

That could as easily have been said of some of Yeats and much of Pound. More than twenty years later, Eliot was to chide his old friend in the carefully coded language of *Little Gidding* as the "familiar compound ghost" who was now working for the enemy in time of war. If that ghost is Pound, as I believe, then Eliot's sad, distinguished lines might prove an epitaph upon the spirit of Stone Cottage and its high innovative spirit:

> For last year's words belong to last year's language,
> And next year's words await another voice,

and the ghost of Pound chronicles the penalties of old age: the expiry of sense, an impotent rage against folly, and laughter that bespeaks no amusement. But worse of all

> . . . the reading pain of re-enactment
> Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
> Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
> Of things ill done and done to others' harm
> Which once you took for exercise of virtue.

In such terms of formal regret, a poet in time of war said farewell to Modernism and its lost leader.