

96 QUOTATIONS



Ezra Pound

(1885-1972)

Ezra Pound is the originating Modernist poet who beginning in about 1909 led the movement called the “new poetry”—Imagism. As the European correspondent for *Poetry* magazine, edited by Harriet Monroe in Chicago, he revolutionized poetry while Gertrude Stein was revolutionizing prose. Pound was a genius at recognizing genius. He discovered Robert Frost, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, and James Joyce. He edited Eliot’s “The Waste Land” (1922), the most influential poem of the 20th century. The bohemian Pound was also the most generous artist in Paris. Though poor himself, he helped other writers every way he could. As a critic he practiced and promoted with Eliot the objective literary analysis eventually called New Criticism, leading to the formation of a canon of American literature. His poetry passed through phases culminating in the intellectual expressionism and Postmodern vision of his densely allusive *Cantos* (1917-70) whereas his principles of good prose are Neoclassical, emphasizing simplicity, clarity and social utility. He retreated into isolation in rural Italy and responded to deteriorating social conditions in Europe by becoming obsessed with economic theory. Pound had lost friends in World War I. While surviving in the midst of World War II, he grew paranoid and broadcast anti-Semitic propaganda for the Fascists. He was captured by American troops and indicted for treason, but then was declared insane. After 12 years in custody, due to efforts on his behalf by a group of writers—including Hemingway, Eliot and Frost--Pound was finally released to return to Italy, where he lived out his life in an alpine tower.

ORDER OF TOPICS: youth, education, urbanity, cosmopolitanism, temperament, religion, education, teaching literature, teaching writing, literature, Modernism, Henry James, 20th-century poetry, Yeats, Eliot, economics, treason, decadence, *Cantos*, Postmodernism, Political Correctness, literary criticism, bad art, the artist, patronage, writing, good writing, Neoclassical aesthetics, economy, simplicity, avoid abstractions, concreteness, form, free verse, style, avant-garde, Imagist poem, Imagism and Vorticism, the Vortex:

YOUTH

[Entered college at 15]: I did it to get out of drill at Military Academy.

EDUCATION

Men do not understand books until they have a certain amount of life.

No man understands a deep book until he has seen and lived at least part of its contents.

People find ideas a bore because they do not distinguish between live ones and stuffed ones on a shelf.

Real education must ultimately be limited to men who insist on knowing, the rest is mere sheep-herding.

Properly, we should read for power. Man reading should be man intensely alive. The book should be a ball of light in one's hand.

There are no words permitted in a polite educational bulletin that can describe the dastardliness of the American university system as we have known it. By which I don't mean that the surface hasn't been, often, charming... It has tended to unfit the student for his part in his era. Some college presidents have been chosen rather for their sycophantic talents than for their intellectual acumen or their desire to enliven and build intellectual life.

URBANITY

All great art is born of the metropolis.

And New York is the most beautiful city in the world? It is not far from it. No urban night is like the night there... Squares after squares of flame, set up and cut into the aether. Here is our poetry, for we have pulled down the stars to our will.

I guess the definition of a lunatic is a man surrounded by them.

COSMOPOLITANISM

After a number of years abroad, foreigners begin to appear as unreal. Then you suddenly feel a hunger to go home again.

Civilization itself is a certain sane balance of values.

I wasn't in the least interested in the vices of my friends, but in their intelligence.

TEMPERAMENT

Allow me to say that I would long since have committed suicide had desisting made me a professor of Latin.

I have always thought the suicide should bump off at least one swine before taking off for parts unknown.

I could I trust starve like a gentleman. It's listed as part of the poetic training, you know.

I have never known anyone worth a damn who wasn't irascible.

RELIGION

A slave is one who waits for someone to come and free him.

A general loathing of a gang or sect usually has some sound basis in instinct.

Religion, oh, just another of those numerous failures resulting from an attempt to popularize art.

Any general statement is like a check drawn on a bank. Its value depends on what is there to meet it.

If I could believe the Quakers banned music because church music is so damn bad, I should view them with approval.

TEACHING LITERATURE

In introducing a person to literature one would do well to have him examine works where language is efficiently used; to devise a system [New Criticism] for getting directly and expeditiously at such works, despite the smoke screens erected by half-knowing and half-thinking critics. To get at them, despite the mass of dead matter that these people have heaped up and conserved round about them in the proportion: one barrel of sawdust to each half-bunch grapes.

All teaching of literature should be performed by the presentation and juxtaposition of specimens of writing and NOT by discussion of some other discussor's opinion *about* the general standing of a poet or author. Any teacher of biology would tell you that knowledge can NOT be transmitted by general statement without knowledge of particulars. [New Criticism]

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. [New Criticism]

What we need is a literary scholarship, which will weigh Theocritus and Mr. Yeats with one balance...and will give praise to beauty before referring to an almanac.... Art is fluid moving above or over the minds of men.... Art is a joyous thing. Its happiness antedates even Whistler; apropos of which I would in all seriousness plead for a greater levity, a more befitting levity in our study of the arts.

TEACHING WRITING

Let the pupil examine a given piece of writing, say, the day's editorial in a newspaper, to see whether the writer is trying to conceal something; to see whether he is "veiling his meaning"; whether he is afraid to say what he thinks; whether he is trying to appear to think without really doing any thinking.

- (1) Let the pupils exchange composition papers and see how many and what useless words have been used—how many words that convey nothing new.
- (2) How many words that obscure the meaning.
- (3) How many words out of their usual place, and whether this alteration makes the statement in any way more interesting or more energetic.
- (4) Whether a sentence is ambiguous; whether it really means more than one thing or more than the writer intended; whether it can be so read as to mean something different.
- (5) Whether there is something clear on paper, but ambiguous if spoken aloud.

LITERATURE

Literature is news that stays news.

A great age of literature is perhaps always a great age of translations.

Colloquial poetry is to the real art as the barber's wax dummy is to sculpture.

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

Music begins to atrophy when it departs too far from the dance...poetry begins to atrophy when it gets too far from music.

MODERNISM

If a certain thing was said once for all in Atlantis or Arcadia, in 450 before Christ or in 1290 after, it is not for us moderns to go saying it over, or to go obscuring the memory of the dead by saying the same thing with less skill and less conviction. My pawing over the ancients and semi-ancients has been one struggle to find out what has been done, once for all, better than it can ever be done again, and to find out what remains for us to do, and plenty does remain, for if we still feel the same emotions as those which launched a thousand ships, it is quite certain that we come on these feelings differently, through different nuances, by different intellectual gradations. Each age has its own abounding gifts yet only some ages transmute them into matter of duration. No good poetry is ever written in a manner twenty years old, for to write in such a manner shows conclusively that the writer thinks from books, convention and cliché, and not from life.

As for the nineteenth century, with all respect to its achievements, I think we shall look back upon it as a rather blurry, messy sort of a period, a rather sentimentalistic, mannerish sort of a period. I say this without any self-righteousness, with no self-satisfaction....

The actual outlook of the experimental generation was all a question of the private ethos.

HENRY JAMES

When he died one felt there was no one to ask about anything. Up to then one felt someone knew.

20th-CENTURY POETRY

“Maunderley” was...the definite attempt to get the novel cut down to the size of verse.

As to twentieth-century poetry, and the poetry which I expect to see written during the next decade or so, it will, I think, move against poppy-cock, it will be harder and saner, it will be what Mr. Hewlett calls “nearer the bone.” It will be as much like granite as it can be, its force will lie in its truth, its interpretive power (of course, poetic force always does rest there); I mean it will not try to seem forcible by rhetorical din, and luxurious riot. We will have fewer painted adjectives impeding the shock and stroke of it. At least for myself, I want it so, austere, direct, free from emotional slither.

When a young man in America, having the instincts and interiors of a poet, begins to write he finds no one to say to him: “Put down exactly what you feel and mean! Say it as briefly as possible and avoid all sham or ornament. Learn what technical excellence you can from a direct study of the masters, and pay no attention to the suggestions of anyone who has not himself produced notable work in poetry.

W.B. YEATS

I went to London because I thought Yeats knew more about poetry than anybody else. I made my life in London by going to see [Ford Madox] Ford in the afternoons and Yeats in the evenings.... I went to study with Yeats and found that Ford disagreed with him. So then I kept on disagreeing with *them* for twenty years.

T.S. ELIOT

Eliot and I started diverging from the beginning. The fun of intellectual friendship is that you diverge on some thing or other and agree on a few points. Eliot, having had the Christian patience of tolerance all his life and so forth, and working very hard, must have found me very trying.... There's the whole problem of the relation of Christianity to Confucianism...

ECONOMICS

A vicious economic system has corrupted every ramification of thought.

In our time, the curse is monetary illiteracy, just as inability to read plain print was the curse of earlier centuries.

TREASON

My method of opposing tyranny was wrong over a thirty-year period... If the individual, or heretic, gets hold of some essential truth, or sees some error in the system being practiced, he commits so many marginal errors himself that he is worn out before he can establish his point.... I thought I was fighting for a constitutional point. I mean to say, I may have been completely nuts, but I certainly *felt* that it wasn't committing treason.

Oh, it was paranoia to think one could argue against the usurpations, against the folks who got the war started to get America into it.

I undoubtedly have moments when I should like very much to live in America.

DECADENCE

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

The one thing you should not do is to suppose that when something is wrong with the arts, it is wrong with the arts ONLY.

Rome rose with the idiom of Caesar, Ovid, and Tacitus, she declined in a welter of rhetoric, the diplomat's "language to conceal thought," and so forth. The man of understanding can no more sit quiet and resigned while his country lets its literature decay, and lets good writing meet with contempt, than a good doctor could sit quiet and contented while some ignorant child was infecting itself with tuberculosis under the impression that it was merely eating jam tarts.

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... If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.... Greece and Rome civilized BY LANGUAGE. Your language is in the care of your writers.

Cantos (1917-70)

I am writing to resist the view that Europe and civilization are going to Hell.... It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse.

Obviously you haven't got a nice little road map such as the middle ages possessed of Heaven. Only a musical form would take the material, and the Confucian universe as I see it is a universe of interacting strains and tensions.... The problem was to build up a circle of reference—taking the modern mind to be the mediaeval mind with wash after wash of classical culture poured over it since the Renaissance. That was the psyche, if you like.

There is no doubt that the writing is too obscure as it stands, but I hope that the order of ascension in the Paradiso will be toward a greater limpidity.

POSTMODERNISM

People who have lost reverence have lost a great deal.

It is doubtful whether the individual soul is going to be allowed to survive at all.

False witness in the teaching of letters OUGHT to be just as dishonorable as falsification in medicine.

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.

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Good art however "immoral" is wholly a thing of virtue. Good art can NOT be immoral. By good art I mean art that bears true witness, I mean the art that is most precise.

The whole fight is for the conservation of the individual soul. The enemy is the suppression of history, against us is the bewildering propaganda and brainwash...

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.

LITERARY CRITICISM

I consider criticism merely a preliminary excitement, a statement of things a writer has to clear up in his own head sometime or other, probably antecedent to writing; of no value unless it come to fruit in the created work later.

BAD ART

This brings us to the immorality of bad art. Bad art is inaccurate art. It is art that makes false reports. If a scientist falsifies a report either deliberately or through negligence we consider him as either a criminal or a bad scientist according to the enormity of his offence, and he is punished or despised accordingly.... By good art I mean art that bears true witness, I mean the art that is most precise. You can be wholly precise in representing a vagueness. You can be wholly a liar in pretending that the particular vagueness was precise in its outline. If you cannot understand this with regard to poetry, consider the matter in terms of painting.

THE ARTIST

It ought to be illegal for an artist to marry. If the artist must marry let him find someone more interested in art, or his art, or the artist part of him, than in him. After which let them take tea together three times a week.

Literature does not exist in a vacuum. Writers as such have a definite social function exactly proportional to their ability as writers. This is their main use.

PATRONAGE

If a patron buys from an artist who needs money, the patron then makes himself equal to the artist; he is building art into the world; he creates.

WRITING

Make it new.

Artists are the antennae of the race.

A man of genius has a right to any mode of expression.

Genius...is the capacity to see ten things where the ordinary man sees one.

Nothing written for pay is worth printing. Only what has been written against the market.

GOOD WRITING

Good writers are those who keep the language efficient. That is to say, keep it accurate, keep it clear.

More writers fail from lack of character than from lack of intelligence. Technical solidity is not attained without at least some persistence.

Also the "prose," the words and their sense must be such as fit the emotion. Or, from the other side, ideas, or fragments of ideas, the emotion and concomitant emotions of this "Intellectual and Emotional Complex"...must be in harmony, they must form an organism, they must be an oak sprung from an acorn.

NEOCLASSICAL AESTHETICS

Good writing is writing that is perfectly controlled, the writer says just what he means. He says it with complete clarity and simplicity. He uses the smallest possible number of words.

In proportion as his work is exact, i.e., true to human consciousness and to the nature of man, as it is exact in formulation of desire, so is it durable and so is it "useful"; I mean it maintains the precision and clarity of thought.... One moves the reader only by clarity. In depicting the motion of the "human heart" the durability of the writing depends on the exactitude. It is the thing that is true and stays true that keeps fresh for the new reader.

ECONOMY

Incompetence will show in the use of too many words. The reader's first and simplest test of an author will be to look for words that do not function; that contribute nothing to the meaning OR that distract from the MOST important factor of the meaning to factors of minor importance.

SIMPLICITY

Use no superfluous word, no adjective which does not reveal something. Don't use such an expression as "dim lands of *peace*." It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol. Go in fear of abstractions.

AVOID ABSTRACTIONS

In Europe, if you ask a man to define anything, his definition always moves away from the simple things that he knows perfectly well, it recedes into an unknown region, that is a region of remoter and progressively remoter abstraction.

Mr. Swinburne is famed or infamed for having used a great many [abstractions] which express nothing but "colour" or "splendour." It has been said that he used the same adjectives to describe a woman and a sunset.

CONCRETENESS

A work of art is the honest reproduction of a concrete image. Imagination is the faculty which finds out all about this image, and never the revelation of the feelings aroused by it.

FORM

Any work of art is a compound of freedom and order. It is perfectly obvious that art hangs between chaos on one side and mechanics on the other. A pedantic insistence on detail tends to drive out 'major form.' A firm hold on major form makes for a freedom of detail.

I'll tell you a thing that I think is an American form, and that is the Jamesian parenthesis. You realize that the person you are talking to hasn't got the different steps, and you go back over them. In fact the Jamesian parenthesis has immensely increased now.

FREE VERSE

No verse is libre for the man who wants to do a good job.

I think the best free verse comes from an attempt to get back to quantitative meter.

STYLE

The attainment of a style consists in so knowing words that one will communicate the various parts of what one says with the various degrees and weights of importance which one wishes.

AVANT GARDE

Life wd. have been (in my case) much less interesting if I had waited till Joyce, Lewis, Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, etc. complied with what my taste was in 1908.

IMAGIST POEM

“In a Station of the Metro” (c.1910)

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

IMAGISM AND VORTICISM

Vorticism has been announced as including such and such painting and sculpture and ‘Imagisme’ in verse.... The ‘image’ is the furthest possible remove from rhetoric. Rhetoric is the art of dressing up some unimportant matter so as to fool the audience for the time being.... As a ‘critical’ movement, the ‘Imagisme’ of 1912 to ‘14 set out ‘to bring poetry up to the level of prose.’... Flaubert and De Maupassant lifted prose to the rank of a finer art, and one has no patience with contemporary poets who escape from all the difficulties of the infinitely difficult art of good prose by pouring themselves into loose verses. The tenets of the Imagiste faith were published in March, 1913, as follows:

1. Direct treatment of the ‘thing,’ whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome.

I believe that every emotion and every phase of emotion has some toneless phrase, some rhythm-phrase to express it. (This belief leads to *vers libre* and to experiments in quantitative verse.) To hold a like belief in a sort of permanent metaphor is, as I understand it, ‘symbolism’ in its profounder sense. It is not necessarily a belief in a permanent world, but it is a belief in that direction. Imagisme is not symbolism. The symbolists dealt in ‘association,’ that is, in a sort of allusion, almost of allegory. They degraded the symbol to the status of a word.... The symbolist’s symbols have a fixed value, like numbers in arithmetic... The imagiste’s images have a variable significance, like the signs...in algebra. Moreover, one does not want to be called a symbolist, because symbolism has usually been associated with mushy technique. On the other hand, Imagisme is not Impressionism, though one borrows, or could borrow, much from the impressionist method of presentation....

Dante’s ‘Paradiso’ is the most wonderful *image*. By that I do not mean that it is a perseveringly imagistic performance. The permanent part is Imagisme, the rest, the discourses with the calendar of saints and the discussions about the nature of the moon, are philology. The form of sphere above sphere, the varying reaches of light, the minutiae of pearls upon foreheads, all these are parts of the Image. The image is the poet’s pigment.... The Vorticist uses the ‘primary pigment.’ Vorticism is art before it has spread itself into flaccidity, into elaboration and secondary applications.... All poetic language is the language of exploration. Since the beginning of bad writing, writers have used images as ornaments. The point of

Imagisme is that it does not use images as *ornaments*. The image is itself the speech. The image is the word beyond formulated language....

In the 'eighties there were symbolists opposed to impressionists, now you have vorticism, which is, roughly speaking, expressionism, neo-cubism, and imagism gathered together in one camp and futurism in the other. Futurism is descended from impressionism. It is, in so far as it is an art movement, a kind of accelerated impressionism. It is a spreading, or surface art, as opposed to vorticism, which is intensive.... Vorticism is an intensive art. I mean by this, that one is concerned with the relative intensity, or relative significance of different sorts of expression. One desires the most intense, for certain forms of expression *are* 'more intense' than others. They are more dynamic....

THE VORTEX

The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perform, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. In decency one can only call it a VORTEX. And from this necessity came the name 'vorticism.'... I am often asked whether there can be a long imagiste or vorticist poem. The Japanese, who evolved the *hokku*, evolved also the Noh plays. In the best 'Noh' the whole play may consist of one image. I mean it is gathered about one image. Its unity consists in one image, enforced by movement and music. I see nothing against a long vorticist poem [such as Eliot's 'The Waste Land' (1922)]....

"The Game of Chess" poem shows the effect of modern abstract art, but vorticism from my angle was a renewal of the sense of construction. Color went dead and Manet and the impressionists revived it. Then what I would call the sense of form was blurred, and vorticism, as distinct from cubism, was an attempt to revive the sense of form...

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