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W. S. Merwin on Ezra Pound

Edited by Ed Folsom

MY FAVORITE POETS, the two that I live with as talismans, are very remote in time and didn't write in English. I would feel even rather diffident about naming them, both out of superstition and awe: François Villon and Dante—not very far apart from each other in time, both medieval poets. And when I began I was fascinated with medieval poetry. I think some of that was due to Pound's influence; I had great admiration for Pound when I was in college. That was partly it; a rebellious stage, because almost no one else admired Pound, and I used to walk around with a beard which I grew just like Pound's. There's one thing that we all owe him, the debt to his way of hearing. That incredible ear runs through much of the *Cantos*. I find them hard to read, not because of intellectual references, which are reason enough, but I keep getting irritated with what the man is saying, the stance, and that cornball American lingo that he keeps lapsing into. But my debt to him began very early. [*The Iowa Review* interview, 1982]

I should perhaps explain that my enthusiasms in poetry had leapt from Milton, with only a relatively brief pause at Shelley, straight to Pound, who was both the first modern poet and the first modern critic who caught my imagination—he was almost the first of either I had read. I realized that I was learning from Pound more about some of the things I had wanted to learn from Milton, than I was learning from Milton, but I could not believe that the two were *totally* incompatible, that no one should be able to learn from both, and yet I was unsure, to say the least, and very troubled by statements like “we have long since fallen under the blight of the Miltonic or noise tradition”; “Milton is the most unpleasant of English poets, and he has certain definite and analysable defects”; “He tried to turn English into Latin” . . . etc., and the passages in which they occurred. I could see that the defects that annoyed Pound were, in many cases, real, though for some time I was reluctant to admit it. But some of Pound's own defects were quite as distressingly plain to me, and others were happily pointed out by *his* personal detractors, and while I was reluctant to admit some of those too, I was convinced that they did not

render the rest of *his* writing worthless and indeed pernicious. At the time I was lucky in being able to go once a week to John Berryman with whatever I had been writing in the interval, and he would tell me why it would not do. Finally I put my confusion before him. I think he already regarded my enthusiasm for Pound as somewhat overdone, though his own was considerable when I could get him on the subject. Anyway I remember my relief at his telling me that he thought Milton was here to stay. [Unpublished “Milton” essay, 1967]

I began translating with the idea that it could teach me something about writing poetry. The great exemplar, of course, was Pound. . . . When I was still at college I made the pilgrimage to St. Elizabeths to see Pound. He spoke of the value of translation as a means of continually sharpening a writer’s awareness of the possibilities of his own language. He meant English, not any personal idiom of mine (I knew perfectly well that I had none at the time) and I still approach translation as a relatively anonymous activity in which whatever in the result may appear to be mine comes there simply because that is how the language, in the always elaborate given circumstances, sounds most alive to me. Pound also urged— at that point and to me, at least—the greatest possible fidelity to the original, including its sounds. [Foreword, *Selected Translations: 1948–1968*, 1968]

I started translating partly as a discipline, hoping that the process might help me learn to write. Pound was one of the first to recommend the practice to me. I went to visit him at St. Elizabeths in the 40s, when I was a student. He urged me to “get as close to the original as possible,” and told me to keep the rhyme scheme of the poems I was translating, too, if I could, for the exercise as much as anything else. He was generous. And eloquent about what the practice could teach about the possibilities of English. He recommended that I should look, just then, at the Spanish *romancero*, and I did; but it was almost fifteen years before I actually made versions of many of the *romances*—and without the original rhyme schemes. I kept to his advice, at the time. When I did come, gradually, to abandon more and more often the verse forms of poems that I was translating, I did not try to formulate any precise principle for doing so. [Foreword, *Selected Translations: 1969–1978*, 1980]

Pound was in St. Elizabeths. I just listened to him. He was wonderfully generous. He had seen some of my writing—I think his son Omar had showed him some things. I don't know why he should have read them or paid much attention to them. When I look back on it, I'm amazed at how seriously he took me. Maybe not many people were calling on him at the time and he wanted somebody to talk to. And he also wrote to me afterwards; I have some postcards and things that he scribbled. There's a wonderful one that says, "Read seeds, not twigs. E.P." That's all it says on it. He said that if you take seriously the wish to be a poet, you should write every day. You should practice it. You should try to write about seventy-five lines a day, he said. And he said, At your age you don't have a subject, so you can't do that. I took it to heart. I think it's a very good thing to tell someone that age, at eighteen or nineteen, that he doesn't have a subject; I think it's pretty rare that someone that age has a subject. If he had a subject, if he really was Rimbaud or someone like that, he may not have gone to see Pound in the first place. And if he does have a subject, he'll find it; he isn't going to listen. Pound suggested I go to the *Romancero*, the Spanish ballad collection, and I did. I tried that for a while but I couldn't make any headway with it at the time. [*Black Warrior Review* interview, 1982]

I had finished a year of graduate courses in the Department of Modern Languages at Princeton, and was working my way through the reading list in French. I was spending my days in the library and living in Morrisville, across the river from Trenton. Yet I had never been entirely certain whether I wanted to take the examination for the degree even if I was allowed to do so. Richard Blackmur's own lack of degrees was more to my taste, and continued to claim my admiration. I had considered ignoring the bachelor's degree that I had earned, or at least skipping the graduation ceremony, and had bowed finally to various persuasions, notably those of my parents. Richard seemed no more eager for me to acquire graduate degrees than I was, myself. Once, in a rapidly passing mood, I mentioned the possibility of working toward a doctorate, and he asked me what on earth I wanted a doctorate for, if I wanted to be a writer. . . . On the other hand, it seemed to him a good idea for me to stay on in Princeton for a while after graduating, unless some remarkable alternative offered. I would be able to use the library, and as for the graduate

school itself, a good education, as he put it, would do me no harm. But I had done my undergraduate work in English, and if I stayed on I wanted to read, and try to translate, the poetry of other languages. I had barely met the entrance requirements for the graduate school in the Department of Modern Languages. . . . I was an erratic graduate student from the start, impatient with what I considered the duller stretches of the canon of French literature, and eager to indulge instead discoveries and enthusiasms of my own. I was being Ezra Pound, by then, in the same seedy bits of old uniform, but with a ratty pointed beard which Bill Arrowsmith referred to, not altogether accurately (with respect to the shape), as an armpit. Pound's criticism, which I was avidly ingesting along with the required French literature, did not help my tact or my status as a student there on sufferance. ["Affable Irregular," *Grand Street*, 1982]

I started translating when I was eighteen. . . . I went to see Ezra Pound in a nut house in Washington—I just wandered in by myself—and we had a lot to talk about even though there was a great age difference. He said, "If you want to be a poet, you should write every day." And he said, "At your age you don't have anything to write about. You may think you have a subject, but you don't know what it is yet." So he said, "What you should do is translate." He also said something that I certainly think is true: that anybody who wants to write should see if he has any linguistic gift. Pound was much more autocratic than I am, saying that everybody should learn a language. Some people can't learn languages—I really believe that—at least after a certain age, but I think they are pretty rare. If you start young enough, everybody can learn languages fairly easily. I would like to have been learning languages all my life. But learning languages and translating is the way to work every day. Try to translate and try to see how close to the original you can get. Pound did say to start by getting just as close to the form of the original as possible. I tried that and came to the conclusion that it was not the way to go for me, probably not for anybody. [*Southwest Review* interview, 1983]