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Four generations

Ezra Loomis Pound's father, Homer Loomis Pound, kept a scrapbook in which he pasted photographs and cuttings concerning his cherished only child. The earliest photograph, taken in the Fall of 1888 when Ezra was just 3, shows four generations of Pounds back to great-grandfather Elijah Pound III, born 1802. Elijah had moved his Quaker family from Pennsylvania to Chippewa Falls in the Territory of Wisconsin in 1847, there to farm in a small way, and he now looks very much the aged patriarch.

The child Ezra sits on the knee of his grandfather, Thaddeus C. Pound, with his head dropped comfortably on grandfather's chest. Thaddeus, born 1832, had risen from farm boy to Republican Congressman, representing his north-western district of Wisconsin from 1876 to 1884. He had raised himself by education; then by enterprise in the lumber business, in which he had made and lost a fortune, and in connection with which he had made and lost a railroad. Both the lumber business with its timber rights and the railroad fell to Weyerhauser, one of the powerful robber-barons of the age. Thaddeus had been regularly elected to the State Assembly from 1864 to 1869, was its Speaker in his last term, and was elected Lieutenant-Governor of Wisconsin in 1871. In 1888, all this, and his time in Washington, was behind him. He farmed unprofitably, was to discover and bottle Chippewa sparkling spring water but make no profit on it, and would die in 1914 with no money but with much honour in the State of Wisconsin. Ezra was not to see him again, but grandfather Thaddeus grew in his imagination into a legendary figure, a maker of America at once familial and heroic. That he was moved, in building a railway, or in labouring to get a measure through Congress to irrigate the desert, by other impulses than hope of riches was what most distinguished him for Pound, who wrote of him in 1920, 'And in his extreme old age when he no longer owned an inch of land... he was

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still capable of being happy because the state's crops for the season were good'.

Standing very upright between Elijah III and Thaddeus is Homer, Ezra's father, now about 30, and at this moment with not much to show in the way of achievements, apart from his child. He had been offered a place at West Point, but had got off the train on the way there and returned to Chippewa Falls. He had worked for a time in his father's lumber business, then followed him to Washington where he mainly enjoyed the social life, though he did work for three months in 1881, and again in 1882, as an assistant assayer in the Mint in Philadelphia. That experience presumably qualified him to be sent out to Hailey, in the Territory of Idaho, in 1883, to open a Government Land Office there. He was to register mining claims and assay the silver ore. Thaddeus was behind this appointment, having acquired claims near Hailey and hoping Homer could protect his interests. Homer hadn't been able to do that, but he had held his own and done his job in the wild west mining town, and had done it without a gun and while, reportedly, drinking only lemonade in its saloons. One could underestimate Homer. If he didn't have his father's drive, it may have been because he never felt the need to prove himself. He followed his father by knowing his own mind, and if Thaddeus disapproved there is no record of it. Nor is there anything to suggest that Homer ever deviated from good sense, good will to all men, and absolute devotion to Ezra. Of Ezra, in 1888, there is little to record, beyond the great fact that he had been born in Hailey, Idaho, on October 30 1885; and had been carried from there a year or so later, his mother having found the far West rather too unlike New York.

The Westons

Though his mother, Isabel Weston Pound, and her mother, Mary Parker Weston, were present in Chippewa Falls on the occasion of the 1888 photograph, they don't figure in that all-male and Western context. The Westons were of New York. With the Pounds they could trace their line back through farmers in the north-eastern states to early seventeenth-century colonists; but about the time the Pounds moved out West the Westons were moving into New York. Mary Parker married Harding Weston in 1858, and their daughter Isabel was born in New York City in 1860. Harding then went on permanent leave from the family, and mother and daughter were taken into his brother Ezra's household, Uncle Ezra standing in as a father to Isabel.¹

¹ 'Ezra' was a not uncommon name in America from the 17th into the 20th century, particularly among Presbyterians. It was associated with the Old Testament reformer Ezra the Scribe, author of

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Ezra's was an hospitable nature. He had worked in banking in the financial district; then in 1870, with his wife Frances, 'Aunt Frank' to Isabel and later to young Ezra, he escaped from Wall Street and opened a hotel in Nyack-on-the-Hudson for 'artists, writers, and appreciators of The Beautiful'. There is a portrait of Isabel as a young girl which may have been painted by one of Uncle Ezra's artists. Sometime after 1877 an insufficiency of paying appreciators of The Beautiful forced the surrender of the Nyack property to the mortgagors, and drove Uncle Ezra and Aunt Frank back to New York City, where they started up and made a moderate financial success, and a lively though eccentric social success, of a boarding house on East 47th Street. That was where Homer, up from Washington at Aunt Frank's invitation, met Isabel, and where Isabel and Homer were married in December 1884; and it was to there that they returned from Idaho, with the infant Ezra, early in 1887. Uncle Ezra and Aunt Frank had no children of their own, and welcomed Isabel's Ezra like a grandchild. Much later Ezra recorded Uncle Ezra's lowering from a rear window a strawberry on a thread to the infant Ezra in his baby-carriage below, and this was to teach him 'to look about; to look "up" and to be ready for the benefits of the gods'.

Grandma Mary Weston, who by now was looking after a boarding house for young ladies on Lexington Avenue at 52nd Street, was another generous fountain of loving attention. It was a source of pride and romance to her that her mother had been a Wadsworth, and that the Wadsworths had a distinguished history, some serious wealth on the New York Stock Exchange, and a connection with Longfellow. She passed on to Isabel a perhaps rather vague air of superiority, or of aspiration to superior cultivation. And by his own account she poured out to her grandson, along with reading him Longfellow's *Hiawatha* and *Paul Revere's Ride* and the novels of Sir Walter Scott, a romanticized family history—a Captain Wadsworth saving the Connecticut Charter from the perfidious English by dousing the candles with a sweep of his cloak and riding off into the night to hide it in The Charter Oak. She wrote verse and prose to him—just as occasional verse, not as literature. She wanted him to write. When Uncle Ezra died in 1894 she gave up her establishment to help Aunt Frank run 24 E. 47th Street until her own death in 1897.

Those three, Uncle Ezra, Aunt Frank and 'Ma Weston were the loving guardians of young Ezra's ten most impressionable years. They stood

The Book of Ezra, a record of the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity. Ezra lived in Babylon a century or more after that event, and went to Jerusalem to reorganize the returned Jews. (*Chambers Biographical Dictionary* 5th edn., 1990). 'Ezra' in Hebrew means 'help'.

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for 'respect for tradition', balancing the rugged frontier individualism of Homer's family.

A small boy in Wyncote

The Homer Pounds stayed with the Westons in New York until Homer at last found a permanent position in the Philadelphia Mint in June 1889. They then made their home in the leafy suburb of Wyncote, ten miles north of the city on the Reading Railroad, at 166 Fernbrook Avenue. The estate agent described this, when they put it up for sale or rent upon Homer's retirement in 1927, as a three-story-and-attic dwelling on a 50 by 200 feet lot; first floor comprising hall, drawing room, library, dining room, kitchen and summer kitchen; second floor, four bedrooms and two baths; third floor, two bedrooms, bath and storeroom. That doesn't mention the flourish of a square tower at one corner. The top floor was Ezra's, the tower room his den.

In Homer's scrapbook there is a studio photograph of Ezra aged 8 or thereabouts. His face has a childish roundness, accentuated by round spectacles, but there is alert concentration in the eyes. There is no consciousness at all of the very wide lace cuffs and lace collar gracing his wrists and shoulders, nor of the great bow knot of cloth at his throat. His mother has dressed him up as a Little Lord, but he is not acting up to her idea.

A school photograph taken a year or so later shows the same poised and alert small boy in his ordinary clothes and setting. While his schoolmates are visibly suffering under the command to keep still and look at the camera, his gaze is level, serious and considering. Who can know the clear mind of a child? This was Miss Florence Ridpath's provisional Wyncote public school in spring 1895, with just seventeen pupils of all ages in the picture. Pound's previous schooling had been at an even smaller Quaker school run by a local family. Only his last two years before high school were at a formally established public school. No records survive from those schools; nor any anecdotes to suggest that he stood out particularly among his mixed ability schoolfellows. However, he did recall being called 'professor' at the Quaker school at age six: 'I wore glasses and used polysyllables, in the wake of my mother'. He was known as 'Ra' (pronounced Ray), a shortening of 'Ezraaa' or 'Ezray' initiated by Grandma Weston's friend Mrs P. T. Barnum.

On November 7 1896 the *Jenkintown Times-Chronicle* published a limerick by 'E.L. Pound, Wyncote, Aged 11 years', on the defeat of William Jennings Bryan. It is of no interest apart from the false measure in the second line: 'There was a young man from the West, / He did what he

could for what he thought best'. Evidently young Ezra wanted to keep hold of his thought more than he wanted to keep in step.

Homer

A photo taken in Homer's office about 1897 or 1898 shows father and son together. Homer is seated and leaning back at ease, his head slightly turned as if drawn towards Ezra. Son is standing, leaning in slightly against Homer's shoulder, and his hand has found Homer's. Both have their eyes on the camera, while their hands are in undemonstrative private communion. There was to be always an unusual harmony between them.

Homer's skills were being able to assay the quality of silver simply by looking at it in solution, and to operate the gold balance which measures the fineness of gold by weight. That is all he did in the Mint, for forty years, rising over that time to second in command of the assaying department. It was a responsible but dull job, and not well paid. One is reminded of Hawthorne's Custom House. But Homer was not a dull man; he was just not ambitious to get on.

His cares were elsewhere. He provided for his family, whose comfortable style of life must have required great good management on both his and Isabel's parts. He was active in bringing about improvements in Wyncote, especially in promoting the provision of public education. He was most active in the Calvary Presbyterian Church at Wyncote, which he helped found. In making his profession of faith, in January 1891, 'Homer explained that he had not been brought up in a religious way and was now joining in the face of family opposition and ridicule', meaning his own Wisconsin family whose background had been Quaker. He was elected an elder in 1894; and became President of the Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour, 'a nationwide group that was zealously promoting a socially enlightened form of Christian action'. He worked in the Italian Settlement in the slums of South Philadelphia, and helped found the First Italian Presbyterian Church in the city and a College Settlement House for the poor. At home in Wyncote he grew vegetables for Isabel, and planted a row of fruit trees, pear, peach and cherry.

Ezra made his profession of faith in March 1897, and at least once attended a Christian Endeavour convention in Boston with his parents.

Isabel

The Westons in New York had been church-going Presbyterians, and Isabel arrived in Wyncote with her certificate of membership of the

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Madison Square church. She served as vice-president of the Calvary Presbyterian Church's Women's Union, and helped train Sunday School children in the singing of Christmas carols. She worked with Homer in the Society of Christian Endeavour and in the Italian Settlement in South Philadelphia she played the piano to accompany the singing.

Wyncote thought Isabel's speaking voice 'high society'. She did flower painting on china. There is a studio photograph of Isabel and Ezra, taken possibly in 1897 when Ezra was about to begin high school. He is wearing his new dress uniform for Cheltenham Military Academy, and his hands are formally folded together on his knee. Isabel's hands are likewise formally folded in her lap. She sits upright in a dark silk dress, with a frill of lace at the cuffs, a full lace front and a high choker collar. Both mother and son are looking their formal best for the camera; no current can be detected flowing between them. Isabel's face is round, full-cheeked, good-looking in an inexpressive fashion. Ezra's face is round, chubby-cheeked, without expression. Both have eyes you would look twice at.

It was Isabel's habit to go every evening to Jenkintown Station, a five-minute walk downhill, to meet Homer as he returned from his day at the Mint. In their later years she would greet him at the door of their home, 'beautifully dressed'.

Cheltenham Military Academy

From just 12 until he was 15 Ezra attended the small, private Military Academy a mile from his home, sometimes as a dayboy, sometimes as a boarder. The boys wore Civil War style uniforms and were drilled in Civil War style exercises. A photograph in the Academy Catalogue shows cadets in a hollow square, down on their knees firing rifles (big puffs of smoke) from behind their prone bicycles. The cadets were to be 'schooled in self-restraint and self-mastery, in prompt obedience, in submission to law and authority, and in the exercise of authority under a consciousness of personal responsibility'. Ezra disliked the daily drill and the forming fours, preferred gymnasium exercises, and fenced well enough to be chosen in January 1899 to represent the Academy at a display in Philadelphia. He played tennis with enthusiasm, and chess. His main subject was Latin. There was at least one epiphany, though outside the classroom: 'it was old Spencer (,H) who first declaimed me the Odyssey', on a tennis court near some pine trees—'that was worth more than grammar when one was 13 years old'.

In the school photograph taken during Ezra's first year his is a very young face in the midst of the seventy or so cadets of all ages. He is looking

THE GRAND TOUR WITH AUNT FRANK

straight back at the camera. While most of the other boys and young men have the usual self-conscious look of being looked at, he is intent on what the photographer is up to, absorbed in the object of his attention. That seems to isolate him, to set him apart as having an individual consciousness within the uniformed group.

Homer's caption to a photo of Ezra at home in his tower room, taken probably a year or two later, is 'E.P.s Den. (Photo by himself.)'. Here he is posed for the delayed shutter release, leaning back rather stiffly on a divan, wearing his Military Academy uniform and holding a large book. The interest is in what one can make out on his wall. There are crossed fencing foils, a framed picture of a young girl with a watering can (a Pears Soap advertisement?), several indistinct reproductions, a poster for 'Scribner's for August', and another advertising *The Laurels of the Brave* by Marie Corelli, this illustrated by a woman wearing a sash and apparently standing at attention and saluting with her left hand.

The Grand Tour with Aunt Frank

Aunt Frank's regular habits included: dancing at each president's 'Inaugural' ball—Uncle Ezra had a house in Washington; attending the Madison Square Presbyterian Church to hear Dr Parkhurst's crusading sermons; and journeying to Europe in June. In the summer of 1898 she took Ezra and Isabel on a three-month grand tour. Ezra made a list of dates and places:

New York, USA—June 18
Southampton, England—June 28
Ryde, Isle of Wight—June 29
London, Eng.—July 4

Then it was Stratford-on-Avon, Kenilworth, Warwic (sic); across to Brussels on July 5, to Antwerp, down the Rhine from Cologne to Mainz, thence to Nuremburg, down via Constance to Zurich, Lucerne; through the Alps into Italy, and Milan, Genoa, Pisa—Pisa on July 16—on to Rome and Naples, back up to Florence, Venice, Como; via Lucerne on August 1 to Paris (two weeks in Paris); and finally back to London on August 22, and an excursion via Eton and Windsor to Oxford and Blenheim. Departed Southampton Sept. 6. And returned to Wyncote, and the local Military Academy, one imagines, with a much enlarged sense of the world and its possibilities.

Aunt Frank took Ezra on a second three-month tour in the summer of 1902, this time with both his parents. In London Homer took Ezra with

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him to visit His Majesty's Mint, where the official who received them 'seemed mainly concerned with his own lofty demeanour'. One gathers that Ezra, now 'a lanky whey-faced youth of 16', felt this as a slight to Homer, and also as offering an insight into the nature of the English as distinguished from the more genial American character represented by Homer. After 'doing Europe' even more rapidly than before, the party went on to Spain, Gibraltar, and Tangier. In Tangier Ezra regarded his great aunt's 'wide and white-bodied figure . . . perched on a very narrow mule', and treasured the image as 'an object of pious memory as she herself is of gratitude'.

Suburban prejudice

Wyncote was WASPish. The *Jenkintown Times* reported April 18 1891, 'The new proprietors of Beechwood announce that hereafter no Jews will be taken to board there. In previous years the Hebrews have been plentiful'. May 30 1896 the *Jenkintown Times-Chronicle* called for 'Just no more Italians in Wyncote. Is our budding hope that this place will be entirely aristocratic squelched?'

If Homer and Isabel Pound shared that hope they appear not to have shared the prejudice. They let their home in the summer of 1902, while they were in Europe, and again in the summer of 1903, to Mr W. B. Hackenburg, President of the Jewish Hospital Association, and recorded the fact in the *Times-Chronicle*. May 8 1897 the *Times-Chronicle* reported 'H. L. Pound, secretary and treasurer of the Children's Institute . . . spoke on the work among the children in the Italian settlement in Philadelphia' during the prayer meeting in the Presbyterian church at Ambler. Evidently Homer and Isabel did not mind it's being known that they cared for Italians and would take Jews as tenants.

There is no record of its making any difference to their taking their turn at entertaining the Wyncote Musicale and the Round About Club, nor to their being active members of the Jenkintown Lyceum and the Wyncote Improvement Association, nor to Isabel's membership of the Wyncote Bird Club, nor to Homer's being elected director of the Wyncote public school around 1900. When he resigned in January 1903 from the Sessional Body of Calvary Presbyterian Church because he was moving into the city for a time in order to be near his work in the Italian Settlement, the resolution unanimously adopted and recorded by his fellow elders could not have been more fulsome—a full printed page to the effect that 'none but a selfish interest can prompt us to retain him . . . feelings of heartfelt sadness . . . many years of faithful service . . . building up the church and

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creating feelings of Christian fellowship and goodwill . . . fervently wish for him a future of active usefulness in his chosen field of new interests’.

One must conclude that Homer and Isabel contrived to be approved and respected members of their suburban community without conforming to its prejudices. Isabel liked to play the fine lady, but was far from hardening her heart against others; and Homer was, as ever, simply too ‘danged’ independent to be swayed by what others might think.

XRa

The fond parents treasured young Ezra’s letters to them. The earliest preserved in the archive at Yale is from Wyncote to his mother in New York, dated October 1, 1895: ‘Dear Ma, I went to a ball game on Saturday between our school and Heacocks. the score was thirty-five to thirty-seven our favour, it was a hard fight in which wee were victorise. . . . As nobody has looked over this pleas excuse mistakes. Love from all/your loving son, E.L.Pound.’ To his father from New York: ‘4/25/96—Dear Pa. . . . With love, E.L.P.’ In November ’96 to his mother in New York: ‘Dear Ma . . . Yesterday we went to the city and saw the minstrels which we enjoyed greatly; the description would fill ten sheets of paper and so I will not send it. . . . Pleas excuse this writing as I sprained my little finger playing football—not when under a lot of fellows but when I tried to catch the ball which struck the finger with considerable force. . . . I remain your loving son, and for the present your Ra.’ To his father from New York in June ’97: ‘I remain your loving Ra / And ma your loving Dame’. There is nothing extraordinary about these letters. They show a bright 9-, 10-, and 11-year-old boy with a boy’s interests, responsive to what he has been taught about spelling and writing, and playfully trying out styles of self-presentation. Just the occasional sentence, like that one about spraining his little finger, suggests a precocious ability to express things.

Something else emerges when Ezra is a cadet at the Cheltenham Military Academy. In January [1898 or 1899?] he writes home to his mother, about fencing—challenges from the Major and from Mr Doolittle, his Latin teacher; about having recited ‘The bivouac of the dead’ and ‘got a pretty fair mark (I think)’; and then, ‘I have tried to write a composition and have here inclosed the first copy. I thought perhaps you would like to see it. [DO NOT PUBLISH IT] nor read it to anyone. . . . E. L. Pound.’ There is quite a flourish to the signature, and quite a consciousness to the presentation of his composition. One can tell that he wants his mother to see it; and the emphatic warning not to publish it nor even read it to anyone—meaning his father, her visitors?—is almost an invitation to

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do so. He might be remembering that his proud father had fixed the publication of the political limerick by 'E. L. Pound Aged 11 years'. But then if that could be an embarrassment to look back upon now, it would also be an encouragement to expect publication and to see himself as a poet.

In September of 1898, at sea on the return journey from Europe, he writes a really ambitious verse thank-you letter to someone who had given him a splendid knife. The verse is playful doggerel, but there is energy and enjoyment in the finding of words and stringing them together, and in the finding of rhymes. There is also a precocious sense of form. It is done in fun, but there is a feeling that beneath the fun the young author is thinking of himself as a maker of verse. He begins with the modest disclaimer, 'Though not among the famous bards / I send to you my kind regards / For knives galore'; and ends—after rhyming 'Naples' and 'the states of the Papals', and 'ice' and 'Aedelvice' [Edelweiss]—

And now as the Muse will no
longer work
I my duty will have to shirk.
But when on land we once more be
I'll think of you across the sea
In gay Paree
And when we ride up in the handsome
I'll think of you dear Madame Ransome.

He was now signing himself 'Xra'.

What he wanted to do

'Xra' did not graduate from Cheltenham Military Academy. He may not have completed even his fourth year there, but instead finished the year at a nearby high school. According to the Academy's Catalogue filed in the Library of Congress in June 1894, he would not have been expected to graduate until he had completed six years of study and was about 17. That would assume commencing at age 12, as Ezra did, and spending two years in the Lower School doing Penmanship, Spelling, Reading, Composition; Arithmetic; Descriptive Geography, Primary U.S. History and Natural History. However, if Ezra began Latin and Greek at the age of 12, as he implied in his essay on 'Early Translators of Homer' (1918)—'well taught his Latin and very ill-taught his Greek'—then he must have gone straight into the Third Form, and then followed the Classical course designed to prepare the boys over the following three years 'for entering

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the best American Colleges'. The Third Form continued with the Lower School subjects, with the addition of beginner's Latin and Elocution. Greek was begun in the Fourth Form; German or French could be taken in the Fifth Form. A year and a half of algebra was followed by a half year of plane geometry. Grammar and Composition gave way to Rhetoric and Composition in the Fifth Form. English Literature was taught in the Sixth Form only. It is not clear why Ezra left half way through his fourth year. 'It was boring—boring—boring', he recalled in 1946, 'There was an awful book of Kipling'.

He already knew, apparently, pretty much what he wanted to do—that by the time he was 30 he 'would know more about poetry than any man living'. That at least is what he claimed in 'How I Began' in 1913. He had arrived at the conviction that while it is not within a man's control whether or not he is a great poet, 'It is his own fault if he does not become a good artist—even a flawless artist'. I doubt he would have expressed his ambition in quite those terms in 1901, but the fact remains that by some unaccountable process he had become possessed, at the age of 15, by the motive idea of his entire mature life: to be a good, even a flawless artist in words. His boyish way of expressing it to his parents had been 'I want to write before I die the greatest poems that have ever been written.' His father at least seems to have firmly believed that he would do just that.