

### *The Closed House*

When the last tenuous link with the outer world is broken, when for too long the milk bottles are left standing outside the closed door, the neighbors call the police to the house of the recluse. The door is broken down; the dismal inventory is made. It happens sometimes that the house is filled with an insane accumulation of objects. Bicycles, tin cans, mounds of newspapers and books, a grand piano, broken chairs, a sewing machine, piled to the ceiling in every room. The intruders move them with the greatest precautions, as if they were jackstraws. The public stands outside the house and gapes.

When the American poet, Ezra Pound, ended what he calls his *periplum*—from Idaho to Italy (1908), to London (1909-1920), to Paris (1920-1924), to Italy again (1924-1945)—he returned to his native land under arrest for treason. He had broadcast for Mussolini. In Washington, certified insane and confined, he later was awarded a prize for his poetry. It was then that the amateur thought-police and the newspapermen broke into the house of his poetry. Stepping over words and phrases in Greek, Latin, Italian, French, German, Spanish, and Provençal, skirting ideographs in Sanskrit and Chinese, hopping over erudite, or confidential, allusions, the newspapermen investigated the latest addition to the house, *The Pisan Cantos*—written while Pound was a prisoner of the U. S. Army in Pisa—picked up a few words here and there, the most readily comprehensible, the ugliest, and hurried back to print them.

The public looked with astonishment and real dismay at various objects extricated from Mr. Pound's poem. Item: the word "yidd"; item: the word "nigger"; item: the American flag described as "the bacon-rind banner"; item: the American people, Mr. Pound's compatriots, alluded to insistently as "*barbaroi*"—an epithet that it is not necessary to translate. The public could not believe that a man so venomously detached from the feeling of his country could be given a prize. It was as if a cross-eyed, bowlegged girl had won at Atlantic City.

Pound is sixty-five now and locked up. You think of all the books he has written and of all the articles written about him before the war, when his anti-Semitism was taken for no more than a tedious idiosyncrasy, his dispraise of his country for no more than wounded vanity. You read *The*

*Pisan Cantos*. In fairness, the cantos are a lament more than anything else. They are exciting to read if you keep clear of the crossword puzzles. It was decent in Pound not to go back on Mussolini, "poor Ben," or, after having talked on the Italian radio, to make no attempt to sound like the Voice of America. There are other items besides the ugly ones to present from *The Pisan Cantos*, and two of them are these: "As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill from the wreckage of Europe, *ego scriptor*." and: "Oh, let an old man rest."

But what poet sounds like the voice of America? What poet in our times is not in a closed house of his own? It is not always by choice. Few of the better poets think that this is a time for "art for art's sake." Most are socially conscious. They are sorry that they have to live in a marginal world, writing for each other, writing about each other—as Whitman said, "incommunicado." They recognize and fear the danger that writing will become an end in itself.

The war affected poets in various ways. It got the Frenchman Aragon out of his doctrinaire Communist isolation. He wrote *Le Crève-Coeur*, in which he could quote Richard II—"You may my glories and my state depose. But not my griefs. Still am I king of those"—and speak brokenheartedly of occupied France. He was listened to by Frenchmen and inspired their resistance. The war brought Pound to the microphone. Obsessed with the comic illusion that "Muss" would someday accept his credit scheme, and grieving because the monuments he loved were being destroyed, he talked his way into treason.

The poets live in a dilemma. They have money and live in the country, or they starve in the cities, or they take a job with Mr. (not yet Senator) Luce, in which case all their friends, even the rich ones, tell them that they have sold out. In South America things are sometimes better ordered; they put their poets in the diplomatic service.

Ariosto, the "Divine Lodovico," (*Orlando Furioso*) was employed as a diplomat also, and at first it looks as if the artist and the poet were far better off in the Italian Renaissance than they are now. The artist was given enormous surfaces on which to paint pictures that the public wanted to see and could judge and admire. The poet was taken into some great nobleman's house; and later that sort of thing happened all over Europe, too, so that every work was dedicated, elaborately, to some eminence or other, or to some little princeling. The artist worked for wages.

But the painters and the poets did not like the system. The wages were irregular, and the duties included command performances at banquets. Ariosto certainly did not like the system, though he could not escape it. He did not like it when the Duke of Ferrara sent him on a mission to Pope Julius II, whom he found in so irritated a mood that he nearly was put to death; nor was he entertained when the Cardinal D'Este glanced up from *Orlando* and asked him: "*Dove hai trovato tutte queste coglionerie?*" for which there is a precise American translation which cannot be printed, so the question must be rendered: "Where did you find all the damn nonsense you have put in here?"

No, the dear lost times were not perfect for the poet or for his dignity. It would not be a solution to the modern poet's unhappy state even were the President to recall Archibald MacLeish to Washington; even were the ILGWU to give a job to Wystan Auden; even were public-spirited foundations to give a thousand more poets a thousand dollars each; even were General Motors to employ fifty poets at a time to entertain at conventions.

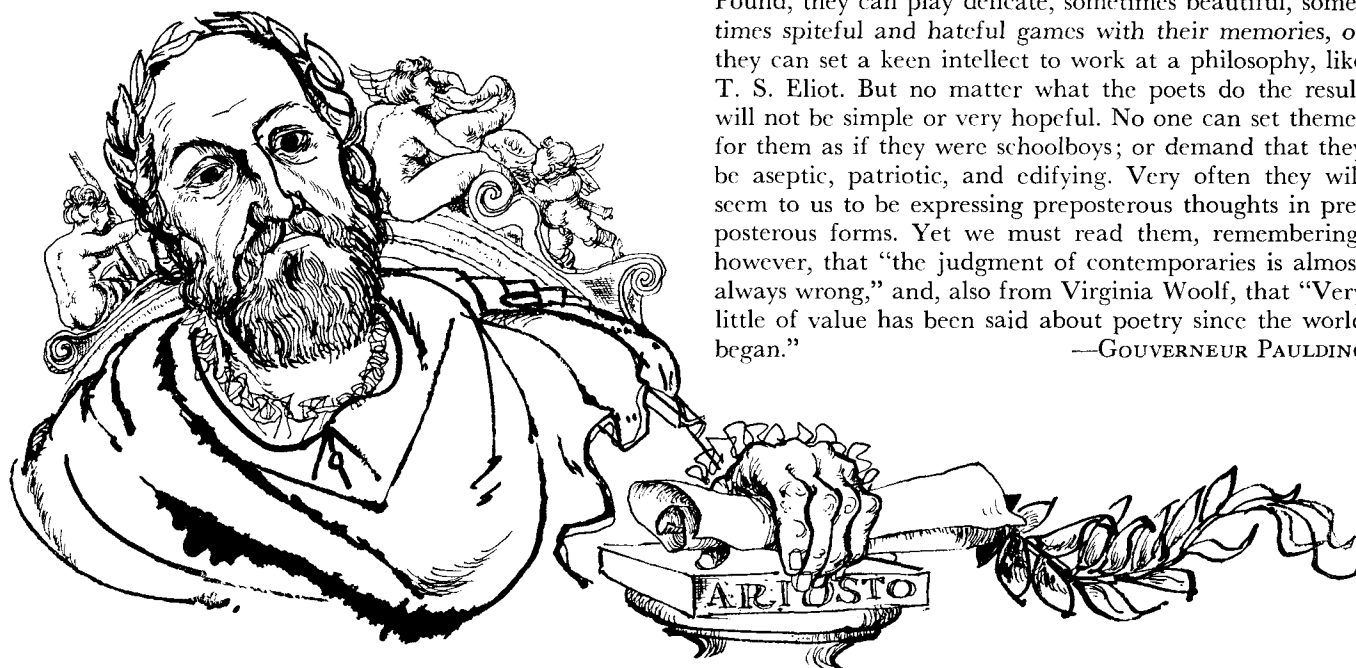
For the Italian poet of the Renaissance, as for the Elizabethan, the reward came from a broader source; the

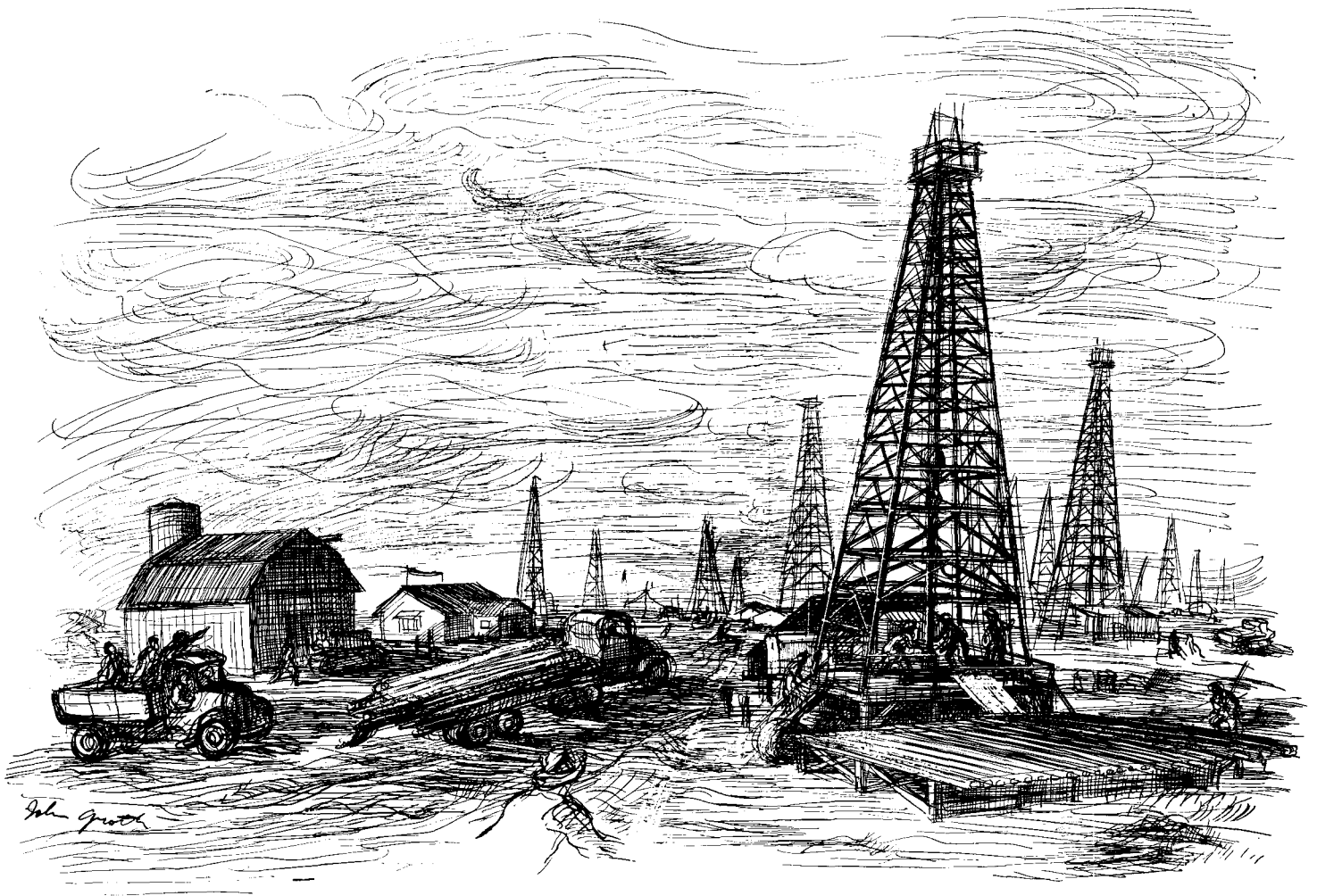
poets were close to the culture of their times. But that remark as it stands is absurd. For no man anywhere at any time is remote from, or can escape, the culture that surrounds him. Springing in Italy, spreading through Europe, the Renaissance brought a fresh chaos of language and ideas to which the poets could give form, recorded and enduring form, because the peoples themselves were at work, too, at this task and it was shared in by all. The adventure, imagination, humor, and passion, of *Orlando* reflected the excitement of a world over which the sun was rising in a new and promising dawn. After all, the First World War was more than five hundred years away.

Our poets must invent each one his own dawn. It is useless for them to consult the calendar, or the meteorological experts, or the sales prospects as forecast so diligently in the *Saturday Review of Literature*, or any of the other confidential guides to success. Not long ago no one even looked for the dawn or felt any anxiety about it. A century ago, the English-speaking poet stood in the broad Victorian daylight. But now the poet falters in the uncertain, changing shades.

Whittier and Longfellow—that was Mr. Brooks's *The Flowering of New England*—and of course it is not wholly impossible to suppose, as foreigners constantly are supposing, that it may be the turn of California to restore America's poetic confidence. Longfellow and the rest are gone. And there is a figure nearer to us in time, yet so distant now, and lost; Whitman. It is as if he had hardly gone from this closed room. His voice still echoes. And yet he is gone, as far back as Shakespeare, as far back as Ariosto, as far back as the Greeks.

Our poets express our times. We have the government (the poets) we deserve. In democracy, in poetry, it is a question of patience. If our poets are difficult, they are not all trying to be difficult. Einstein does not try to be difficult. Our times are difficult. Our poets can be antiquarian, moan and wail—like Robinson's Miniver Cheevy, who "wept that he was ever born, and he had reasons" or, like Ezra Pound, they can play delicate, sometimes beautiful, sometimes spiteful and hateful games with their memories, or they can set a keen intellect to work at a philosophy, like T. S. Eliot. But no matter what the poets do the result will not be simple or very hopeful. No one can set themes for them as if they were schoolboys; or demand that they be aseptic, patriotic, and edifying. Very often they will seem to us to be expressing preposterous thoughts in preposterous forms. Yet we must read them, remembering, however, that "the judgment of contemporaries is almost always wrong," and, also from Virginia Woolf, that "Very little of value has been said about poetry since the world began."  
—GOUVERNEUR PAULDING





# Canada's Black Gold

*Huge strikes will soon turn the Northwest into a big oil exporter*

A few weeks ago, a friend who works for one of the 180 oil companies that have, in the past two years, joined the rush to tap Alberta's fabulous new fields, took me out to a farm in the Redwater area whose owner had struck it rich. We drove northeast out of Edmonton, bumping over gumbo roads across the flat prairie, and finally reached the untidy collection of houses and stores that make up the village. Less than eighteen months ago, Redwater was a dreary commercial center for the scattered wheat farmers of the district. Nowadays oil riggers swarm through the town, and their trucks,

loaded down with drilling equipment, are heading for oil fields that were amber, swaying seas of wheat last summer.

The farm we visited was owned by a Ukrainian immigrant who, unlike many of his neighbors, had been lucky enough to acquire the mineral rights on his 160-acre section when he bought it twenty-five years ago. He had raised wheat all those years: Sometimes he brought in a crop that netted him around five thousand dollars. Other years, the rain came too late to kill the grasshopper eggs in the ground, or winter lasted two or three days longer than it usually does—the growing sea-

son in these latitudes is fewer than one hundred days—and he had to go to the bank for another loan. Then, eighteen months ago, an oil company came along and offered him forty thousand dollars, plus royalties, for his mineral rights. The oilmen drilled first one well, then another, and sometimes the farmer's royalties amount to around ten thousand dollars a month.

We found him in his barn greasing his tractor, as he does every year at this time. "Well, Bill," the oil official said, "I see from the records that you're getting some fat checks from us. How do you find things now?"