

The Return by Ezra Pound

See, they return; ah, see the tentative
Movements, and the slow feet,
The trouble in the pace and the uncertain
Wavering!

See, they return, one, and by one,
With fear, as half-awakened;
As if the snow should hesitate
And murmur in the wind,
and half turn back;

These were the "Wing'd-with-Awe,"
inviolable.

Gods of the wingèd shoe!
With them the silver hounds,
sniffing the trace of air!

Haie! Haie!

These were the swift to harry;
These the keen-scented;
These were the souls of blood.
Slow on the leash,
pallid the leash-men!

Ezra Pound is generally considered the poet most responsible for defining and promoting a modernist aesthetic in poetry. In the early teens of the twentieth century, he opened a seminal exchange of work and ideas between British and American writers, and was famous for the generosity with which he advanced the work of such major contemporaries as W. B.

Yeats, Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, H. D.,
James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, and especially T. S. Eliot.

His own significant contributions to poetry begin with his promulgation of Imagism, a movement in poetry which derived its technique from classical Chinese and Japanese poetry—stressing clarity, precision, and economy of language and foregoing traditional rhyme and meter in order to, in Pound's words, “compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in the sequence of the metronome.” His later work, for nearly fifty years, focused on the encyclopedic epic poem he entitled *The Cantos*.

Ezra Pound was born in Hailey, Idaho, on October 30, 1885. He completed two years of college at the University of Pennsylvania and earned a degree from Hamilton College in 1905. After teaching at Wabash College for two years, he travelled abroad to Spain, Italy, and London, where, as the literary executor of the scholar Ernest Fenellosa, he became interested in Japanese and Chinese poetry. He married Dorothy Shakespear in 1914 and became London editor of the *Little Review* in 1917.

In 1924, he moved to Italy; during this period of voluntary exile, Pound became involved in Fascist politics, and did not return to the United States until 1945, when he was arrested on charges of treason for broadcasting Fascist propaganda by radio to the United States during World War II. In 1946, he was acquitted, but declared mentally ill and committed to St. Elizabeths Hospital in Washington, D.C. During his confinement, the jury of the Bollingen Prize for Poetry (which included a number of the most eminent writers of the time) decided to overlook Pound's political career in the interest of recognizing his poetic achievements, and awarded him the prize for the *Pisan Cantos* (1948). After continuous appeals from writers won his release from the hospital

in 1958, Pound returned to Italy and settled in Venice, where he died, a semi-recluse, on November 1, 1972.

Themes and Meanings

Pound was one of many thinkers and writers at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century who believed that the Judeo-Christian religious tradition had crippled the spiritual and psychological life of many people. He believed that the otherworldly, self-renouncing tendency of monotheistic religions had caused people to ignore the world around them, making them dull and ridden with guilt.

Yet, Pound also believed that, under the surface, modern human beings still retained an older belief in a polytheistic universe where godlike spirits dwelled in springs, trees, mountains, and fields. Throughout his poetic life, Pound reasserted this conviction in an attempt to refresh the minds and senses of twentieth century urbanites cooped up in their cities and penned in by their guilt.

“The Return” is an expression of this belief in the continuing reality of human-kind’s ancient gods. Although these beings, as the poem portrays them, have been defeated, they are by no means dead. In “The Return,” Pound, through his persona, calls out to his readers in an attempt to gain their attention: The gods still exist for those who have eyes to see them.

Generally, this poem has an elegiac tone: Even as Pound reasserts the continued existence of the gods, he acknowledges their lost vitality. Thus, the poem struggles with two contrasting themes: the isolated, forgotten status of the gods in the modern era and the memory of their ancient splendor. Pound acknowledges that the gods at the zenith of their power were neither kindly nor merciful. These were superhuman beings with ferocious, superhuman passions. The gods were hunters, perhaps of

human souls, and their strengths were those associated with predators—keen senses, an aptitude for violence, power, and speed. Yet these same attributes, Pound seems to say, are ones that humans have lost in the modern world. For all their faults, the ancient gods lived in close association with humans, imparting to mortals these full-blooded immortal traits. In contrast, contemporary human beings live in a universe remote from their all-seeing, omnipotent, monotheistic God, whose ultimate characteristics humans cannot share.

The poem ends hesitantly, akin to the stumbling pace of the returning gods. Perhaps, the final stanza implies, the gods have fallen so low that a recovery of a polytheistic world view is impossible. In the modern world, both humanity and its ancient heroes have grown weak, pale, and slow.

The apparent simplicity of this twenty-line poem belies its mysterious subject and persona. Its short lines, straightforward diction, and compelling rhythms pull the reader forward through a series of striking images, but at the poem's end, he or she is nowhere nearer to discovering
the dramatic situation.

Most scholars agree that “The Return” is about the return of the ancient, pre-Judeo-Christian gods to earth, but others argue that the poem describes the retreat, the “anabasis,” of a once-mighty army. Either interpretation fits, although the “Gods of the winged shoe” in the third stanza suggest the former reading. In either case, “The Return” portrays the passage of a group of formerly heroic beings, now weary and worn out by their anxieties. The persona watches them pass and describes their slow, uncertain movement. He seems to be calling others to witness the defeated return of this godlike host.

Line 1 suggests that the persona was present when these hero-gods were at the zenith of their power or that he is at least knowledgeable about their former glory; the fact that they have “returned” implies an earlier journey. If these are indeed the ancient gods who held sway before the advent of modern religions, then the assumption is that monotheism has conquered but not yet destroyed them. The less mysterious interpretation—that these are warriors returning after years of hard campaigning—would also

account for the...