

Pound's *Cantos* as Challenge and Provocation

Ezra Pound, perhaps more even than T. S. Eliot, was the great innovator of modern Anglo-American poetry. His motto "Make It New" (that Emperor Cheng Tang is said to have inscribed on his bathtub) links the modernist concept of formal and linguistic innovation with the rediscovery of a multitude of literary traditions that combined linguistic economy with visual precision. Pound translated many of these texts into English: poems by Catullus and other Roman poets, songs of the Provençal troubadours, Chinese poetry, Japanese haikus and Noh plays. At the same time he was considered the selfless promoter of modern poetry and one of its most effective propagandists: Not only that his essays established new critical standards and thus laid the foundation for modernism's critical reception, he also had an unfailing eye for literary talent (for that of H. D., Mina Loy or Louis Zukofsky, for instance). There is hardly any representative of modern poetry who did not profit from his advice or critical objections.¹ That he belonged to the reactionary wing of modernism (as did Eliot, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Wyndham Lewis, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Gottfried Benn or Ernst Jünger) is, of course, a scandal and an unpardonable sin for many. His partisanship for Mussolini's fascism and his anti-capitalist, anti-Semitic rhetoric have damaged his literary reputation – and make him, even today, an iconic figure of the Italian right.²

Scholarly criticism of Pound has always labored to do justice to a poet whose increasing involvement in conspirational theories compromised his aesthetic intelligence and linguistic brilliance so profoundly. Accordingly, critics either ignored Pound's political blindness for his aesthetic merits (especially in the 1950s) or, inversely, tried to discover in his political errors the cause also of his aesthetic failures, such as the incoherence of *The Cantos* (which Pound himself acknowledged: "I cannot make it cohere" Canto CXVI); or the didactic-propagandistic discourse of his *Cantos* of the late 1930s and early 1940s that had not much in common with the more poetic diction of an earlier phase. In the introduction to his subtle

¹ Thus the 'left' poet George Oppen wrote in a letter to Pound: "I suppose if we should take to talking politics to each other I would disagree even more actively than all those others who have disagreed, but there has been no one living during my life time who has been as generous or as pure as you toward literature and toward writers. Nor anyone less generously thanked. I know of no one who does not owe you a debt" (qtd. in Beach xiii).

² This is true of "CasaPound," for instance, a right-wing "community for art and action," founded in 2002. Its claim to the name of Pound is preposterous, however, since its nationalist and xenophobic program differs in essence from the cosmopolitan dimension and spirit of Pound's work.

discussion of Pound's late work, Massimo Bacigalupo, taking an extreme position in the role of *advocatus diaboli*, argued that "[i]n many ways *The Cantos* belong in those stores that sell swastikas and Mussolini's speeches, for they are, among other things, the sacred poem of the Nazi-Fascist millennium which mercifully never eventuated" (x). Even *The Pisan Cantos* – in which, as most of his critics believe, Pound achieved a new level of linguistic brilliance and a new mastery of expression – bear evidence of his stubbornly clinging to his political beliefs and of his loyalty even to the dead Duce.

Of course, the point is not to deny or smooth over contradictions. Pound's poetry will always remain a bone of contention – and an enigma: alive in the jarring simultaneity of ideological blindness and the life-promoting energies of innovative form and linguistic invention. These antagonistic tendencies cannot be separated from each other, even though they trouble any reading of *The Cantos*. Christine Brook-Rose acknowledges these baffling complexities when she writes that she finds *The Cantos* "funny, soothing, exhilarating, infuriating, tender beyond endurance, dogmatic beyond belief, bawled out, murmured, whispered, sung, true, erroneous, beautiful, ugly, craftsmanly, confident, contradictory, collapsing – in short, totally human, alive, and relevant" (1-2).

It may be tempting to call *The Cantos* Pound's intellectual self-portrait. In an interview of 1920 he declared that they expressed his inmost self.³ Yet throughout *The Cantos* that self is broken up into a multitude of roles, masks and voices as much as it lives and speaks through a multitude of mythological and historical figures. For the poem's autobiographical space is also a space of experienced, documented and fictionalized literary and cultural history from its beginnings in European antiquity and the dynasties of Chinese emperors, to recent European-American economic and social crises and the catastrophes of two World Wars. Although the historical space of the text is stuffed with subjective reminiscences, allusions, anecdotes, remembered conversations, opinions and judgments, the contours as well as the position of the poetic subject are lost in the various forms of its projections and (self-)dramatizations. This happens primarily via the mass and diversity of the textual material from different centuries and cultures: the collage of quotations taken from literary and historical sources, from letters, old chronicles, newspaper reports, tracts and edicts (European as well as Chinese); in short: via the "luminous details" of everything Pound called "facts."

Not only are *The Cantos* highly eclectic, they are also encyclopedic, intertextual and transcultural, polyglot and intermedial. Pound disrupts

³ "[...] the *Cantos* which come out of the middle of me and are not a mask" (qtd. in Brooker 31).

conventional homogeneities of textual surface by inserting quotations in several languages (Provençal, Latin, Italian, French, German, Greek). In addition, he opens his text, transmedially: toward music (most obviously in Canto LXXV with the notation of Janequin's "Chant des oiseaux"), but even more so toward the pictorial by including the visually interesting Greek script or by frequently using the picture script of Chinese ideograms or Egyptian hieroglyphics, both translating, if in different ways, the meaning of word into image.⁴ (This emphasis on the visuality of writing increases throughout *The Cantos* and is perhaps most noticeable in their later sections "Rock-Drill" and "Thrones.")

Although *The Cantos* push toward the impersonal and objective (toward the materiality of texts, things, facts), they also acknowledge the vision and the shaping power of the poet. They mark, in each of their eight poem blocks, the historical moment of their composition (increasingly according to the fascist calendar) and the presence of the writer (e.g., "ego scriptor" in Canto LXXVI). They also do not hide that their abundance of material and of detailed facts is the result of subjective selection: that the text is a field already weeded by the poet. The text is composed of passages Pound excerpted from diverse sources which he then condensed and cut up. At least on first sight, their selection is confusing since it seems to increase quite arbitrarily the difficulty of reading the text: Why this quote from one of John Adams's letters and not another, equally plausible? Why this sudden shift from Adams or Jefferson to Confucius, or from Greek antiquity to the political present? The quotations function as a kind of cipher or shorthand, i.e., they do not speak for themselves (or, if so, only incoherently), but invite or even force the reader to go back to Pound's sources for a larger context, for the missing connecting link: to Homer's *Odyssey*, perhaps, or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Dante's *Divina Commedia* or the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, the diary of John Quincy Adams or the memoirs of Martin Van Buren – to name only those most easily accessible. *The Cantos* are thus also an educational project, encouraging the reader to rediscover forgotten or neglected texts of what Pound considers a viable tradition (be it that of the Chinese and European classics or that of the American founding fathers). He wanted to revise and reconstruct the canon, to bring dying traditions back to life.

The reader is in any case compelled to create a connection between text fragments that do not seem to fit or hang together. These condensed fragments function like a form of shorthand writing. Like stones, thrown into

⁴ In an interesting essay, Tim Redman has pointed out the hypertextual dimension of *The Cantos*: The innumerable allusions to classical texts of Western and Eastern culture(s) or the quotations from greatly different sources constitute a hidden library of texts and images (paintings, sculptures, architecture and musical compositions etc.) – links that could be made visible and immediately accessible.

water, they create rings that overlap and create patterns: an implied larger text of intratextual and/or intertextual references and associations that make the fragmented surface text cohere covertly, despite its overt gaps. This overlapping of heterogeneous text passages is arranged by Pound, of course, but it is also beyond his control: In the last instance, it is the work of the reader who will create/discover structures of meaning in analogy, juxtaposition or thematic “rhymes.” For Pound, *The Cantos* have thus a didactic dimension in more than one respect. As poet he is also always teacher – a teacher, however, who does not want to pass his message straight to the reader (although he increasingly gave in to that temptation in the late 30s and early 40s), but as deflected through metaphor and filtered through the mass of his dispersed material. So that the structure and symbolic order he finds in his historical and cultural materials is also worked out by him from the textual “stuff” and hopefully made visible to the readers.⁵

Right at the beginning of his first Canto, Pound, by alluding to the voyage of Odysseus, indicates the mould, given by Homer's epic poem, that will lend form to his own risky poetic enterprise. After the fall of Troy and after many years of wanderings, Odysseus descends into the netherworld in order to move Tiresias – by a ritual sacrifice – to give prophecy of his eventual home-coming. Only the descent into the world of the dead (“Nekuia”) – i.e., into the past with its histories and heroes, its traditions and traumata – will make the return ‘home’ possible (finding ‘home’ being Pound's utopian project). The actual meaning of that ‘home’ as well as of the way there is part of a continuous process of experience and poetic process: the necessary redefinition of the voyage and its goal within changing historical contexts as much as contexts of subjective experience. Pound's voyage – like that of Odysseus – follows a trace (*forma*) laid in cultural tradition (or archetypically ingrained in the human mind). Yet it differs from Dante's whose ascent (guided by Virgil) from hell to paradise follows the clearly outlined path of Christian dogma. Pound's voyage does not follow any predefined route but finds its way through eye, experience and the knowledge of handed-down texts. Accordingly it aims at a *paradiso* that is neither artificial nor located in heaven but worked out here on earth, wrung from tradition as much as from experience – to be discovered not from an abstract bird's eye view, but sensuously, at eye-level while traveling along the coast (“periplum”: “as a sailor will find it”).

⁵ “Just as steel dust can take the shape of a rose when a magnet is held underneath a glass plate” (*Literary Essays* 154). This metaphor of creative energy whose aim is beauty and order and which therefore works in nature as well as the human mind Pound uses in *The Cantos* several times. The design/form is there, hidden in the steel dust, yet revealed by the “magnet” of the creative mind (of the poet as much as of the reader).

Pound's search for the reality of a paradise *in* the poem postulates and anticipates a reality of paradise *outside* the text. This makes for many of the tensions within *The Cantos* as well as for their urgency. The word is seen to be an instrument for action by its appeal to the reader: It intends to shake and break up conventional ways of thinking and perceiving, wants to initiate by instigation, to change consciousness and move to action, "to save the public soul by punching it in the face" (qtd. in Schneidau, "Pound's Poetic of Loss" 106). (Which may have been an additional reason for Pound's admiration of John Scotus Eriugena, the ninth-century mystic and Neoplatonist, who – as legend has it – was stabbed by his students for having forced them to think for themselves.)

Time and again, Pound asserts his affinity to Dante and his *Divina Commedia* whose model he acknowledges but whose closed form – predetermined by Dante's adherence to the abstract theological map of Thomas Aquinas – he rejects.⁶ As a modern 'human comedy,' *The Cantos* oscillate between formal openness and closure: Odysseus/Pound drifts in an open ocean of history and experience from whose life-threatening uncertainties he is eventually saved by the veil of Leucothea – the light metaphysical garment of Greek mythology. It provides Pound with those more flexible structures allowing him to get rid of the 'paraphernalia' of dogmas and conventions and to abandon himself to the stream of experience. But it also gives form and direction to that stream via Homer's epic poem with its context of mythological narratives, be they the fertility myths and rites surrounding Persephone (her annual abduction to the underworld and her annual return) or the myth of Dionysos/Osiris whose body is torn apart by wild animals and then put together again to living wholeness.⁷ Or, following Ovid, Pound uses legends concerning the interaction between gods and men or the transformation of men/women into animals and natural objects – as Cadmus's daughter Ino once was transformed by the gods into Leucothea, a goddess in the shape of a seagull.

In Pound's poem these legends function as metaphors of a world in constant transformation in which the "gods" exist and are still actively present (as if they "were standing behind us," as Pound had written in "Religio, or

⁶ "One can't follow the Dantesque cosmos in an age of experiment," he argued in his interview with Donald Hall (48-49). "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" (23).

⁷ Fertility rites may also have been at the core of the mysteries of Eleusis. Pound believed to recognize their cultural echoes even in the heretic beliefs of the Albigensians/Cathars in Southern France whom he saw as "adepts of a pagan love cult" (Surette, *A Light from Eleusis* 92). They were persecuted by the Catholic Church for being Manichaeans (a "Church of Satan") and finally exterminated in a brutal crusade at the beginning of the thirteenth century. See also Hesse, *Ich liebe*.

The Child's Guide to Knowledge," an early credo of 1918). With their help, he creates a network of analogies (or "rhymes") which joins together figures and events of different centuries to form the far-flung history of *The Cantos* – a history that, although progressing, circles in itself in ahistorical simultaneity.

Yet Pound cannot completely do without the structure of the *Divina Commedia* after all, since he creates his own moral history of salvation (or damnation): the history of a never-ending fight against "usura" – Pound's metaphor for the excesses and insatiable greed for profit that drive modern capitalism and have grown to apocalyptic dimensions during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The (temporary?) winners of this battle Pound condemns – as Dante had done with his own allegory of *usura*: the stinking and loathsome dragon Geryon – to the nethermost circle of Hell. It is a secular Hell, to be sure, that for Pound can only be conceived in terms of the abysmal moral corruption that marks the state of societies under the reign of "usura." In contrast, his "paradiso" (his vision of an ordered *polis*, of a balanced *communitas*) is invested with the ideal reality of the not-yet existing but still possible. The Hell Cantos XIV and XV as much as Cantos XLV and LI, that deal with "usura" explicitly, show Dante's dragon as infesting and eventually destroying the creative spirit of the whole community (of the arts, of society itself), and thus as a Satanic power whose agents in history Pound heaps with images of disgusting excretions: with mucus, refuse or stinking excrements.⁸

In contrast, the imagery of Pound's "paradiso" draws on a hoped-for balance of man *and* nature, or rather, on balanced man *in* nature as embodied in Confucius and his disciple Mencius. Paradise is also connected to images of a world perceived *with* and *through* the loving eye: "Where there is love, there also is the eye," Pound quotes Eriguena. Metaphors of light dominate the imagery of paradise (most of all the phallic image of the "acorn of light"). Pound connects these, on the one hand, with the religious-erotic rites of Eleusis and, on the other, with the mystic visions of medieval Neoplatonists – with that of Eriguena, or with Grosseteste's theory of light, or with the meditations on light by Richard of St. Victor and Anselm of Canterbury. These are in turn linked to the love poetry of Cavalcanti whose "Donna mi prega" Pound places (in Canto XXXVI) exactly in the center of the seventy-one Cantos he had published until 1940.

⁸ The biblical diction of Cantos XLV, LI and LII indicates that Pound's demonizing of "usura" can surely be regarded as a critique of capitalism – and yet not entirely so. "Usura" carries the ultimate religious stigma of a 'sin against the Holy Ghost,' i.e., a sin against better (moral) knowledge. One should be aware of the many semantic levels present in the metaphor which has absorbed biblical and anti-Semitic traditions as well as the imagery of Freudian and post-Freudian analyses of fear and disgust; cp., for instance, the chapter on "Filthy Lucre" in N. Brown.

It is here that Eva Hesse, in a recent study, discovers “the unknown Pound” (*Ich liebe, also bin ich*) – a Pound who sees the core of his being not as defined by the act of thinking (as Descartes had famously done) but by the act of loving, or of loving/thinking based on the unity of mind and body, on the illumination experienced in the sexual act (“sacrum, sacrum, illuminatio coitu”). In Hesse’s view, this is the very essence of Pound’s endeavor. It points, in his aesthetic practices, to the continuing presence of those creative energies “that disclose to man the mind-forms through which matter becomes reality” (290) – an ‘earthly paradise’ latently present in the here and now, but revealing itself only through the shaping perception of the loving eye.⁹

Hellish “usura” and earthly “paradiso” are thus woven into the fabric of *The Cantos* like point and counterpoint of a musical composition. With the help of such quasi-allegorical patterns Pound is able to order his steadily expanding textual material. In the late Canto blocks “Rock-Drill” and “Thrones” he can thus absorb into this frame the history of the East Roman empire of Byzantium, the history of the various money systems from antiquity to modern times, as well as the long struggle for the right of coinage (“sovereignty”) or the fight for Magna Carta (1215) and its eventual implementation in the early seventeenth century.

Thematic points of intersection such as these generate paradigmatic lines connecting figures (mythical as well as historical) who have similar characteristics or fulfill similar functions: the seafarer Odysseus thus “rhymes” with wanderers and adventurers like Apollonius of Tyana, the “Hellenic Messiah” (cp. Wilhelm, *Dante and Pound* 137), whose search for wisdom led him as far as India; or with Hanno the Navigator who explored the northwest coast of Africa; or with Aeneas whose flight from the ruins of Troy led to the foundation of Rome (and whose descendant Brutus was the first king of Britain according to the medieval epic *Layamon’s Brut*). Then there is that crafty man of action, Odysseus, who “rhymes” with the hero of the Spanish epic *El Cid* but also with the historical Condottiere Sigismundo Malatesta, a patron of the arts admired by Pound who saw in him the very embodiment of the Renaissance’s creative spirit. As *maecenas* and ruler who cared for his subjects, Pound put him in line with the Austrian Archduke of Tuscany, the reform-minded Pietro Leopoldo (who later became Emperor Leopold II.); but also with another hero of the Romagna, Benito Mussolini, who is part of a historical line leading back to ideal statesmen of the early American Republic, to Jefferson and Adams (who, thus Pound, had attempted “to lay the foundation of a civilization in America”), and from those American representatives of good statesmanship to the ideal emperors of the Chinese empire and their teacher Confucius.

⁹ Hesse is well aware of the other, not so loving and not at all lovable Pound. For her discussions of his fascism see *Die Achse Avantgarde-Faschismus*.

A similar line connects the “everlasting fight” and its protagonists. Its modern phase begins with the foundation of the Bank of England in 1694. As a private institution it lent credit money at high interest rates to state and king so that they were able to engage in costly wars – to the great profit of the bank that lent the money. (While its ‘paradisical’ counter-image, the Banca Monte dei Paschi in Siena, gave money at low interest to everybody who needed it, investing the profit it made in public projects.)

In 1791, Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury of the American Republic (and one of the main scoundrels in Pound’s version of modern history), founded The First Bank of the United States after the model of the Bank of England. It was chartered for a term of twenty years against strong opposition (Jefferson’s, for instance), so that its charter was terminated in 1811. Five years later, in 1816, the Second National Bank was founded and terminated until 1836 unless it became renewed. The seventh American president, Andrew Jackson, not only refused to renew its charter, he also wanted to dissolve it four years earlier because he strongly believed that the corrupt politics of the Bank did harm to the American people. His fight against the national bank and its president Nicholas Biddle was caricatured in the contemporary American press as the mythical struggle of a popular hero with the Hydra, the many-headed monster of capital. Martin Van Buren, who shared the enmity *vis-à-vis* the monetary policy of banks (their “usury”) with his predecessor, continued the battle. The populist resentment against banks increased during several economic crises in the course of the nineteenth century from which private banks (such as the house of J. P. Morgan) drew enormous profits to the disadvantage of the ‘common people.’ Although neither the banks in the U.S. nor those in England were primarily owned by Jews, “usury” was increasingly associated with a new Jewish financial oligarchy – the “usurocracy” as Pound called it polemically. He shared this prejudice with many of his contemporaries – with lower-class ‘know-nothings’ as well as members of the educated elite in both countries.¹⁰

Pound’s line of historical scoundrels begins with Hamilton, is continued with the Rothschilds (whom he attacks in his infamous “Stinkschuld” Canto LII) and other Jewish bankers; it leads to J. P. Morgan and to speculators and weapon dealers like Basil Zaharoff who grew enormously rich from economic crises in the early twentieth century as well as from the

¹⁰ At least in the beginning, Pound knew to distinguish between “usury” and the Jewish people, as he made clear by pointing to the example of Andrew Mellon who was not Jewish. Unfortunately, he lost this ability later on in the late 1930s when he “came to adopt the anti-Semitism that befouled the work of Douglas, [Arthur] Kitson and [Hugo] Fack, in addition [...] to the radio priest, Father Coughlin” (Surette, “Economics” 113). On the historical context of such prejudices (which were not at all confined to the political right), see Perloff, “Fascism.”

slaughter of World War I. It ends with Franklin Delano Roosevelt who, as far as Pound was concerned, was a friend of the banks and an agent of a deeply erroneous fiscal policy, and thus becomes the object of Poundian invective in several *Cantos*.¹¹

Succeeding Jackson and Van Buren in the heroic role of the dragon slayer are intellectual and populist opponents of 'high finance,' proponents of alternative finance systems like Major C. H. Douglas, the progenitor and propagator of "social credit" (whom Pound met via the journal *The New Age* and its editor A. R. Orage), or Silvio Gesell, the inventor of *schwundgeld* (stamp scrip).¹² All these counterforces came together for him in the nationalist socialism of the early Mussolini who, for Pound, was ideal statesman and dragon slayer in one. In Mussolini (such was Pound's great leap of faith) the ideally possible had become the historically real. With the death of the Duce and the end of fascism, Pound's world collapsed. Sitting in what he called a "gorilla cage" in an American detention camp near Pisa, he saw himself confronted with the ruins of Italy as well as those of his own intellectual existence. At this nadir of his life – without books and thrown back on his bare self, alone with what is left of his creative substance, of his dreams and desires – he finds a new, an essentially personal, voice in his "Pisan *Cantos*."

While Pound stages the "paradiso" sections of his *Cantos* in visually clear, condensed and emotionally expressive images, his discursive passages (economical, political, historical) are loosely arranged: a heaping of fragmentary information ("facts," as Pound defined them). One could thus even speak of a change between contractions and expansions of the text. There are rhythmic changes like these inside individual *Cantos* as well as between them. There may also be changes within different *Canto* blocks between primarily lyrically condensed and primarily discursively loose *Cantos*. Parts that are contrapuntally set against each other may often be connected by central Poundian concepts of value (mostly Confucian) – for instance, to stand by one's word (*hsin*) or to name things by their exact names (*chêng ming*), or the concept of balance, middle or measure (*chung*) – very often enhanced by the corresponding Chinese ideogram. Such rhythmic changes between lyrically condensed and discursively expansive passages/*Cantos* are a characteristic of all *Canto* blocks with the exception of the Adams *Cantos*. In a related manner of quasi-musical composition, almost all themes, sub-themes and counter-themes are introduced and

¹¹ Initially, Pound had set some hope in FDR and the New Deal: He even dedicated his *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (1935) to Roosevelt, apparently connecting him via Jefferson with Mussolini – as another good ruler in the Confucian sense. Roosevelt of course ignored him and subsequently became anathema for Pound.

¹² Pound gave his own version of Major Douglas's social credit theory in *Canto XXXVIII*.

transformed in the expository block of the first thirty *Cantos* and subsequently repeated in many variations: Pound/Odysseus in Canto I, Helena/Aphrodite and Dionysos in Canto II, Confucius and the question of balance and right measure in Canto XIII, the sin of "usury" in the subsequent *Cantos* XIV and XV, etc.

There can be no doubt, however, that Pound begins to shift, formally as well as thematically, the weights of his *Cantos* in reaction to the political and economical developments of his time: Odysseus and his theme loses in importance, while the Confucian emphasis on the problem of good governance and the concept of the just ruler is foregrounded. Parallel to this shift, Pound's notion of *tò kalón*, associated at the beginning with the beauty of Aphrodite, is now connected with the concept of "order." Accordingly, the discursive elements steadily increase in the Leopoldian *Cantos* of 1937 (XLII-LI) and even more so in the China and John Adams *Cantos* of 1940 (LII-LXXI): Pound abandons the lyrical mode and now favors the dry diction and raw materiality of not always "luminous facts" which he excerpts (condensed, yet mostly verbatim) from historical sources – from the books of Couvreur and de Mailla on China, or the writings of Adams. Although he ends his distressingly discursive Adams *Cantos* abruptly with a quote from Cleanthes's celebratory "Hymn to Zeus" (in Greek and in Greek script), the indirect communication of poetic language apparently has become a burden to him. In this phase of his writing, his creative energy is absorbed by an obsessive occupation with economic and political problems ("Arguments, arguments, and arguments," as he later said about this phase in his *Paris Review* interview of 1962.) "Murder by Capital" – the title of one of the articles he wrote in 1933 – made clear that all activities merely concerned with aesthetic matters had become utterly irrelevant for him.

Accordingly, his correspondence on questions of economy increases dramatically during the 1930s and the time immediately preceding World War II. He writes letters to members of the U.S. Congress who he thinks might have influence on Roosevelt's policy decisions, and, in 1934, writes two letters to the President himself¹³ in the delusionary expectation that, via his engagement, he might change the economic and financial policies of the American government and prevent the U.S. from entering the war. After his *ABC of Economics* (1933) he writes countless pamphlets (in English and Italian) on the corrupt financial order of the West and the absolute

¹³ Roxana Preda collected and published this correspondence in her *Ezra Pound's Economic Correspondence, 1933-1940*. Her introduction offers a fascinating discussion of Pound's obsession with (primarily conservative) economic theories that might replace the economic system of capitalism. See also Preda's *Ezra Pound's (Post)Modern Poetics and Politics*. On Pound's "Politics" and "Economics" see also the excellent contributions by Alec Marsh and Leon Surette in Ira B. Nadel's *Pound in Context*.

necessity to change it.¹⁴ In January 1941 he begins with his infamous propaganda speeches on Radio Roma which he continues twice a week – even after Pearl Harbor (in December 1941) and after the U.S. entered the war against the axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan; right until the collapse of Italian fascism in early 1945.¹⁵ Insisting on his right to free speech, he aims to incite his American fellow citizens to return to the values of the Constitution that, so he claimed, had been violated by Roosevelt. (It was most of all on these speeches that the federal prosecutor later based his indictment of treason.)

After the Allied armies landed in Southern Italy, after the dismissal and imprisonment of Mussolini by King Vittorio Emanuele III in July 1943, the subsequent liberation of Mussolini by the SS and his reinstatement as head of the newly founded Republic of Salò in Northern Italy, Pound fled, on foot, from the chaos of the Italian capital toward his North Italian home. Influenced by Mussolini's defiant calls for resistance, the death of his fascist-futurist poet colleague Marinetti and the damage done to his beloved Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini by Allied bombs, Pound wrote two Cantos in Italian, imploring the indestructible spirit of fascism, which he published in a local party newspaper. (These "lost Cantos" were included in the Complete Edition of *The Cantos* only in 1986 as Cantos LXXII and LXXIII.) Since they transfer Pound's poetic strategies into the traditional realm of Italian poetry, they have been called "innovative" by some critics. Thematically, however, they mark the propagandistic perversion of Pound's vision and a low point in his artistic achievement. He, who – as he maintained even as late as 1937 – wrote against "raw ideology" ("The Jefferson-Adams Letters" 158) had become a raw ideologue himself.

He was taken prisoner by Italian partisans in May 1945 (shortly after Mussolini's death), yet, after some confusion, was set free again. He then gave himself up to the American army, which had by then conquered Northern Italy, and was kept for three weeks in an open cage at the "Disciplinary Training Center" (DTC) near Pisa. The Guantanamo-like conditions of his solitary confinement eventually led to his breakdown. (He was a man of almost sixty by that time.) He was subsequently transferred to a tent in the hospital section of the camp and there, in a period of deep distress (his "black night of the soul"), began to write those eleven Cantos to which he now owes his reputation as one of the great poets of the twentieth century.

The Pisan Cantos constitute the inner core of the whole *Cantos* cycle. They connect and condense its multi-voiced and wide-ranging material and anchor it in personal voice and experience. "For the first time in the poem," writes Leon Surette, "everything is seen from the perspective of the

¹⁴ Many of them reprinted in William Cookson's collection of Pound's *Selected Prose*.

¹⁵ "My mistake was," Pound later said in St. Elizabeths, "to go on after Pearl Harbor" (qtd. in Wilhelm, *The Tragic Years* 258).

speaker's immediate and actual situation. As discontinuous, allusive and cryptic as ever, *The Pisan Cantos* reclaim the traditional ground of coherence for the narrative or lyric work – a single speaking voice” (*A Light from Eleusis* 105). Even if Pound meanders through familiar topical territory (that of politics, Greek mythology and literature), he does it largely from memory. Apart from the Bible, four classic Chinese texts, a Chinese dictionary he had brought with him and an anthology of English poetry he found in the latrine, he had no books at his disposal. Memories of friends and political or literary companions (many of them dead); of episodes from his time in London and Paris; of hikes (with Eliot) through Southern France; of the poetry of Dante, Cavalcanti and the troubadours, especially François Villon's *Le Grand Testament* (with its “Ballade des pendus,” which he saw as a literary foil to his own precarious situation) – all these are mixed with diary-like recordings of everything that came before his eyes: the everyday life of the camp and its protagonists (co-prisoners as well as guards), its four watch towers, the mountains surrounding it, the partial silhouette of Pisa, the changing cloud formations, the birds sitting and changing positions on the barbed wire of the camp (creating what looked like musical notations – like the notation of Janequin's “Chant des oiseaux,” for instance). Pound never loses sight of the political and economic topics of the previous *Cantos*, but he combines, as never before or afterwards, these discursive interests with lyrical self-reflection, his empathy with the living creatures around him (human and animal), with Confucian wisdom, visionary perception and exact observations of nature and its life-generating processes.

All this moved critics to argue *The Pisan Cantos* gave evidence that Pound had abandoned the conceptual and ideological premises of his previous work. (Such efforts to redeem Pound increased especially after he received the Bollingen prize in 1949 against vehement critical opposition.¹⁶) *The Pisan Cantos* were seen as the self-reflective and self-critical account of a man facing his life in ruins, “a man on whom the sun has gone down.”¹⁷ The famous lines of Canto LXXXI: “Pull down thy vanity / Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail, / A swollen magpie in a fitful sun” documented, or so it seemed, a new tone of self-questioning humility. Accordingly, James J. Wilhelm calls the poems from the Pisan detention camp Pound's “Purgatorio” (cp. his *Dante and Pound*).

Recent critics have been more skeptical. Discussing *The Pisan Cantos'* history of composition, Ronald Bush speaks of considerable shifts in mood that would seem to disallow any clear assumptions concerning the poet's

¹⁶ On the various contexts of that controversy see Gross.

¹⁷ Or has Pound put on a mask after all? At the beginning of Canto LXXIV, he echoes crafty Odysseus's deceptive response to the cyclop's demand that he identify himself: “Noman [gr. OY TIS, OY TIS], Noman is the name of my family.”

attitude (“Modernism”). Thus Pound decided to place the elegy on Mussolini’s death at the very beginning of *The Pisan Cantos* only after he had learned that Laval and Quisling, two prominent French and Norwegian Nazi collaborators, had been executed (as mentioned only later in Canto LXXX). Peter D’Epiro therefore believes that Pound addressed his rejection of vanity not (only?) ruefully to himself but (also?) to the arrogance of the victors. Ambivalences like these can indeed be found in all eleven Cantos which constantly oscillate between rebellion and humility; in fact, they draw some of their creative energy from Pound’s shifting position. “Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down,” he repeats at the conclusion of Canto LXXXI and then continues: “But to have done instead of not doing / this is not vanity / [...] To have gathered from the air a live tradition / or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame / This is not vanity. / Here error is all in the not done, / all in the diffidence that faltered.”

One may see in this self-deceiving obdurance a pigheaded uprightness – or even an absolute dedication to his creative and social function as a poet (in the Shelleyan tradition¹⁸). Whatever doubts Pound may have suffered in that “dark night of the soul,” he apparently never doubted that his poetry was worth all risks taken and all sacrifices made. He certainly acknowledges that “the sun has gone down on him” and is indeed ready to humbly recognize continuity between himself and the lowest beings in creation (the insects, for instance, he sees crawling through his tent). But as one last resource of his self-esteem he clings to the notion of his being someone who – wise as Confucius and crafty as Odysseus – stands by his word (*hsin*).

Pound was abruptly transported to the U.S. in mid-November 1945. A month later he was accused of treason, but, upon a motion of his defense, the Court declared him insane and unfit to stand trial.¹⁹ He was then transferred to the somber St. Elizabeths Hospital for “the Criminally Insane,” where he remained for more than twelve years – until he was released in April 1958 at the instigation of his friends and left the U.S. for Italy on the last day of June.

The traumatic experience at the DTC camp at Pisa was surely deepened during his first year at St. Elizabeths by the conditions of his special

¹⁸ In a sense, Pound’s was a paranoid fulfillment of Shelley’s dictum that poets were the legislators of the world – a claim for the poet’s power (or for the magic power of his word) that connects Shelley with Whitman, Pound, Crane, Williams and Charles Olson.

¹⁹ That the Federal Prosecutor was Francis Biddle – whose ancestor, Nicholas Biddle, had been the president of the Second National Bank which Jackson and Van Buren so bitterly opposed – is a historical irony that was surely not lost on Pound. Francis Biddle later became prosecutor at the Nuremberg Nazi trials.

confinement at the loony bin of Howard Hall (the “Hell Hole” as he called it)²⁰ – especially since his commitment to the hospital was also tied to his losing all legal rights. (They were given to his wife Dorothy who was declared “guardian of her husband’s estate”; cp. Moody 245-50) As never before, Pound had to rely on the financial and, even more so, on the spiritual support of his friends – old ones, like William Carlos Williams and T. S. Eliot, but also new ones like Charles Olson whose reports from St. Elizabeths convey a complex picture of Pound (see Seelye). Against considerable public and critical opposition, Pound’s reputation steadily grew in the following years on the basis of *The Pisan Cantos*, published in 1948, the Bollingen Prize he received for them a year later and the subsequent collected edition (in 1954) of those *Cantos* that had been published until then. Then there were editions of his letters (1951) and of his *Literary Essays* – the latter edited with a preface by Eliot (1954). Nevertheless he found back to creative work only at the beginning of the 1950s, partly because the conditions of his confinement at St. Elizabeths had improved and, despite complaints concerning his secluded existence, he “had become comfortable in the ‘bug house,’ as he called it, sustained by a stream of often sycophantic visitors and left relatively free to pursue his increasingly rarefied interests” (Nicholls, “The *Cantos*” 46).²¹ He first finished translations of Confucius he had begun while still in Italy. *The Classic Anthology Defined by Confucius* came out in 1955 and his translation of Sophocles’s *The Women of Trachis* in 1956. Two new blocks of *Cantos* – “Rock-Drill,” still written in St. Elizabeths, and “Thrones,” begun and almost finished there – appeared in 1955 and 1959 respectively, published in Milano before Pound’s American publisher, New Directions’ James Laughlin brought them out, in each case a year later.

The name “Rock-Drill” for *Cantos* LXXXV-XCV Pound presumably owes to Wyndham Lewis’s review of his *Selected Letters*, bearing the same title.²² Lewis’s metaphor refers to the stubbornness Pound displayed in his

²⁰ He spent fifteen months in the “Hell Hole” in solitary confinement. While his opponents were of the opinion that Pound just pretended to be insane in order to avoid trial and punishment (which might have meant the death sentence), some psychiatrists at the hospital and many of his friends believed that he was at least mentally confused. That Pound himself was afraid to lose his mind is apparent from the letters he wrote from the hospital asking his friends to please visit him and talk to him: “Do come see me. I can’t hold two pages of an idea together. But I can live on memory, if someone BRINGS it” (qtd. in Wilhelm, *The Tragic Years* 261).

²¹ Peter Nichols in *The Ezra Pound Encyclopedia*, 46. That “stream of visitors” included “America’s aspiring poets and the world’s literary elite” (Bush, “Late *Cantos*” 118) as well as a great many from the lunatic fringe of American politics (among them the racist and right-wing propagandist John Kasper).

²² It might also refer, however, to a Vorticist sculpture of the same name by Jacob Epstein whom Pound knew from his London days.

correspondence, constantly 'pounding' or drilling topics of economical and financial policy. 'Drilling through hard rock' is indeed a fitting image for the resumption of themes Pound had pursued in his pre-Pisan *Cantos*. The concept for the "Rock-Drill" and "Thrones" sections he had outlined – probably in 1946, shortly after his transfer to St. Elizabeths – as follows: "Bellum cano perenne [I sing of the continuing war] / to which Troy but a flee-bite / between the usurers / and the man who wd do a good job" (qtd. in Bush, "Late Cantos" 118-19). With the difference now, that the death of Mussolini had returned the Confucian ideal of the good ruler and the concept of an ideal *polis* (Ecbatan, Wagadu) from the realm of what he had considered historically real back to the mythological and bygone (although still latently possible).

Perhaps it is for this reason that the eleven "Rock-Drill" *Cantos* are especially didactic and markedly different from the more personal language of *The Pisan Cantos*. The model for "the man who wants to do a good job" is once and for all Confucius in whose concept of measure or balance (*chung*) these *Cantos* are more exclusively anchored than any of the previous ones. Confucius is grouped by Pound with the mystics (with Eriugena, for instance, whose "Ubi amor, ibi oculus" is placed at the beginning and end of Canto XC) and with Neoplatonists like Ocellus. The antagonist of Pound/Confucius is, as always, "usury" and its agents everywhere. Pound fights them rebelliously from the margins and in the name of Confucian order. Accordingly, the travelers of these *Cantos* (Apollonius of Tyana or Odysseus) combine restless- and homelessness with Confucian wisdom. "Rock-Drill" ends with Odysseus's shipwreck and his salvation by Leucothea – which is evoked again at the beginning of "Thrones."

"Thrones" is the longest of all Canto blocks (comprising fourteen *Cantos*) and perhaps also the least accessible. The title refers, on the one hand, to the thrones in Thomas Aquina's hierarchy of angels and Dante's Christian mythology, on the other to the earthly paradise that might be brought about by the good governance of competent rulers. In his interview with Hall in 1962 Pound explained: "The thrones in these *Cantos* are an attempt to move out from egoism and to establish some definition of an order possible or at any rate conceivable on earth" (58). In his 1946 sketch of this block, thrones are associated with crystal and topaz, "something god can sit / on / without having it squish" (qtd. in Bush, "Late Cantos" 119). The non-subjective clarity of rule and the crystal hardness of precious objects are indeed the characteristics of these *Cantos*, focused on Byzantium, the "holy city" of timeless artifact in William Butler Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium."

"Thrones" deals with the construction of financial and judicial order (by ordinance) in the history of the East Roman Empire (Byzantium), China and England – against the always threatening chaos of dictatorial

arbitrariness and corrupt financial policy. Pound excerpts and condenses, in his familiar manner, *The Book of the Eparch*, written by Emperor Leo VI (the Wise) of Byzantium (866–912) – a book thought lost for a long time but rediscovered at the end of the nineteenth century and published in Latin and French translations. Pound sets it in analogy to a neo-Confucian text, the “Sacred Edict” of the Manchu Emperor K’ang Hsi (1654–1722), which was then revised in the language of the people by a Chinese minister and translated into French around 1900. Pound combines both of these ordinances on the right measure in everyday conduct as well as on correct measuring in commerce and in the distribution of goods with Alexander del Mar’s history of the money systems. Del Mar’s book deals with questions concerning the right of coinage and the right mixture of gold and silver in coins, as well as with the right of decree in matters of law and possession. The latter issue Pound connects, in the last *Cantos* of this section, with the figure of Sir Edward Coke who, in person as well as through his writings, fought the arbitrary decisions of King James I and helped enforce the Magna Carta – which later became a model for the American and all subsequent democratic constitutions.

Although reading Pound’s *Cantos* is never an easy task, the “Thrones” *Cantos* appear especially hermetic. Pound condenses his collages of quotations (most of them from rather obscure sources) to such an extreme degree that they become ciphers of a very private process of auctorial reading. These *Cantos* thus constitute a self-enclosed and self-sufficient textual world whose abundant materiality of sound and visual sign is playfully used by Pound across language barriers. They also demonstrate his never ceasing curiosity and willingness to explore and include new source material (as, for instance, the rituals and ceremonies of the Nakhi, a people living in the Chinese Himalayas). Despite variants in its thematic emphasis the structural mould into which he ‘fills’ this new material is essentially the same, however, and therefore familiar at least to the tenacious reader of *The Cantos*.

“Thrones” appeared a year after Pound’s unexpected release from St. Elizabeths, but is nevertheless a product of his time there. When he, once again, set foot on Italian soil in mid-July 1958, he thought it appropriate to raise his hand in fascist salute for the journalists eagerly waiting for him. At that time he may not have been aware how much the world in which he was going to live from now on had changed. Pound had worn his political and economic convictions like a suit of armor protecting his threatened self-esteem against an environment that had questioned his sanity for more than a decade.²³ But now, after twelve years of ‘secure’ confinement, he

²³ This protective armor Pound had developed in his DTC cage near Pisa and later in the asylum of St. Elizabeths. It no doubt helped him to mentally survive; it also allowed him to persist in the security of self-delusional certainties – seeking the

was suddenly exposed to the uncertainties of a new freedom that possibly tested him – who was now 73 – more severely than his previous imprisonment in the cage of the DTC camp or his cell in St. Elizabeths. Returning to a Europe that had become strange to him and to a post-war world that escaped his familiar patterns of interpretation deeply confused him. “Europe was a shock,” he admitted to Hall. “The shock of no longer feeling oneself in the center of something” (59).

Uncertainty also described his precarious financial situation and perhaps even more so the precarious emotional economy of a life with or between people he loved: his wife Dorothy, his longtime lover Olga Rudge, his daughter Mary and the love of his old age, Marcella Spann Booth, who, together with Dorothy, had accompanied him to Italy. As he was well aware, dividing his affection between them was asking more than either of them was able or willing to bear. (In 1959 Marcella had to go back to America.)

He continued work on his *Cantos* but what he wrote approached a linguistic state of silence which became real and complete during the 1960s. At the beginning of 1962, Donald Hall was able to persuade him to do an interview for *The Paris Review* – an interview that revealed Pound's depression and self-doubt: “It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse” (57). The opaque history of publication of *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII* shows that he had begun to lose control over the poems of his last phase since he authorized their publication only after they had been individually published. Therefore the sequence of these fragments is still debated today, so that different editions of the *Collected Cantos* have different endings.²⁴

They end elegiacally in any case, that is, in a lyrical tone and manner closer to *The Pisan Cantos* than to “Rock-Drill” and “Thrones.” The “Fragments” are personal poems, full of self-doubt. Echoing the consciousness of his physical and psychic frailty in critical and self-reflective concentration on what is “essential,”²⁵ these late poems attempt to remember and to lovingly hold on to what has remained: “To confess wrong without

company mostly of those who shared his ideological convictions: isolationists, neo-fascists, “Sons of Freedom,” followers of McCarthy, fighters for the ‘right’ interpretation of the constitution, etc.

²⁴ This is especially true of Canto CXX, placed at the end of many editions of the cycle because Pound here seems to admit his failure and ask forgiveness for his mistakes. Apparently Pound himself, however, wanted *The Cantos* to end with the appeal: “To be men not destroyers” (see, for instance, Wilhelm, *The Tragic Years* 49).

²⁵ During this time many of his friends died: E. E. Cummings, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot. At a performance of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, Pound said in a self-deprecating gesture that had become more and more characteristic of him: “C'est moi dans la poubelle” [That's I in the garbage can] (Wilhelm, *The Tragic Years* 340).

losing rightness" (Canto CXVI); "The Gods have not returned. They never left us" (Canto CXIII); "I have tried to write Paradise / Do not move / Let the wind speak/ that is paradise" (Canto CXX). Despite all darkness surrounding Pound the end of his *Cantos* is stoical and resigned – serene.²⁶

And yet, questions remain. Coming from an American cultural diaspora to London in 1908, Pound changed there from an admirer of Swinburne and the *fin-de-siècle* symbolists to a modernist innovator. The poetic movement of "Imagism" he initiated and propagated a few years later aimed at a new economy of poetic language: the sharp and clearly defined visual image was to put an end to the vague and elevated rhetoric of an earlier period. Influenced by Futurism and his friends, the writer and painter Wyndham Lewis and the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Pound became a propagator of "Vorticism." In the name of Vorticism, he energized his concept of the image. It was not enough to conceive of it as an equivalent to mood or sentiment, it should rather be seen as a formal expression of emotional energy.²⁷ Although visual concreteness was still essential (as is apparent in Pound's "Metro" poem), emphasis had clearly shifted to mental process: "An 'Image' is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time," thus Pound's famous definition. "It is a radiant node or cluster; it is [...] a VORTEX, from which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing. Through the dynamics of the image the mind/body is connected to the patterns of a 'world of moving energies'" (*Gaudier-Brzeska* 92). And: "An image, in our sense, is real because we know it directly [...] with a subtle and instantaneous perception [...] such as savages and wild animals have of the necessities and dangers of the forest" ("Affirmations II" 278).

This desire for a direct and immediate, for a 'primitive' grasp of a world experienced without the abstracting filter of thought Pound shares with the modernist movement in general. It received a special twist when, in 1913, Pound discovered in the papers of the American Japanologist Ernest Fenollosa, who had died in 1908, research material on the Chinese ideogram which Fenollosa's widow, who knew of Pound's fascination with Chinese poetry and thought, asked Pound to publish. Fenollosa understood the Chinese sign as part of a system of notation "based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature" (*The Chinese Written Character* 8).

²⁶ "The end I think is serenity," Mary de Rachewiltz ruminates in the interview she gave to Richard Sieburth (40).

²⁷ "Pound seems to redefine Imagism in terms of *energeia*, which Aristotle defined (*Rhetoric* III, xi) as making one's hearer 'see things' by 'using expressions that represent things as in a state of activity'" (Materer 23).

As a form of recorded observation it was therefore close to an original form of perception, closer in any case – thus Fenollosa believed – than any Western writing ever could be. In contrast to the syntactic structure of Western grammars (which are linear and abstract), the Chinese ideogram was able to combine “several pictorial elements in a single character.” Its ideographic roots carry “a verbal idea of action” (9). Things as well as the words naming them are never isolated but always stand in active relation to each other. “The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things” (10). (Thus the idea of “morning” is shown concretely as a picture of the sun rising in a tree). No wonder that Pound saw his concept of vortex – as an image cluster or a whirl of images – confirmed by Fenollosa’s definition of the Chinese ideogram: charged with semantic energy, as a representation of things in active relation to each other, the ideogram correlates the mental processes of the perceiver with a universe-in-motion. In Fenollosa’s eyes, the pictorial method of the Chinese was still close to natural origins.

Pound translated the “graphic practice of the Chinese into the literary practice of his ideogrammatic method” and made the “intellectual and emotional complex” created by the dynamic fusion of different or opposed sets of images the most important compositional principle of his *Cantos* (Nänny 76). In a similar way, Sergei Eisenstein transformed the ideogram into the cinematographic method that informed his own filmic strategy of montage: a technique based on the “conflict of two oppositional elements” which he called an “imagist” transformation (Eisenstein, *Film Form* 38).²⁸ Jumps, hard cuts, the juxtaposition of elements that, on first sight, have nothing in common thus become part of a strategy aiming, through apparent fragmentation, at eventual coherence. At the same time, they are a linguistic method meant to undermine – by suggestiveness and association – the thought patterns of Western logic (of instrumental reason and rationalization). To that extent, Pound’s alternative ‘logic’ (his ideogrammatic-cinematographic representation of a world in motion aiming to set minds in motion) is very much in line with his evoking classic mythologies of change and metamorphoses as well as traditions of mystic thought.

The basis of Pound’s ideogram is thus essentially mimetic, anchored in the mentally or visually perceived image that is created in the act of seeing *with* or *through* the eye:

Serenely in the crystal jet
as the bright ball that the fountain tosses
(Verlaine) as diamond clearness. (Canto LXXIV)

²⁸ Pound loved the cinema – not only the films of Walt Disney but also Walter Ruttmann’s film *Berlin – Die Symphonie der Großstadt* (1927) that was influenced by Eisenstein’s work. I owe this information to a conversation with Richard Sieburth.

Yet one can easily see how the 'dialectic' of the ideogrammatic method may be set loose from its mimetic foundation and used for the constructivist purpose of ordering and integrating what Pound called "facts." All these fragments of episodes, those snapshots and excerpts that he drew from his historical or literary sources are, just like his images, language material. In *The Cantos* the word material based on the visually perceived world and the world material acquired from the reading of books are fused to form the (linguistic) materiality of the text – with clear and precise images as 'nodal points,' structuring and holding together the potential chaos (the "ragbag" he feared his poem might turn into) of its fragmented and dispersive elements.

But perhaps Fenollosa was important for *The Cantos* in yet another way. Shortly after the American conquest of the Philippines in 1898, Fenollosa had published an essay called "The Coming Fusion of East and West," in which he asked his fellow Americans to overcome their provincialism and finish the project of Columbus by carrying "the Aryan banner of his caravels where he aimed to plant it – on the heights of an awakened East" (122). It is unlikely Pound knew this essay (although it could have been among the papers left to him by Fenollosa's widow). In addition, he loathed all sabre-rattling imperialism – even if he would have no objections to Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia a few decades later. But Fenollosa's vision of a cosmopolitan unifying of cultures by the creative will of the young American nation was very much in line with Pound's grandiose project: the aesthetic appropriation (through ideogram and collage) of mankind's cultural heritage and the correlation of Chinese traditions of thought with those of the West. To be sure, Pound did not cast himself in the role of the Romantic creator-spirit forcing together, via the godlike power of his vision, a chaotic world of appearances. (He rejected the subjectivism of Whitman whose "Passage to India" echoes in Fenollosa's essay.) Rather, he saw himself as a mediator – as (re)discoverer, translator or interpreter – of living (or neglected) traditions of art and culture. Accordingly, he does not build the linguistic edifice of his *Cantos* on the notion of an autonomous creative self but on something that precedes or goes beyond the concept of self and subject – on the perceived material world as much as on the text as part of a handed-down tradition (*pen yeh*, "to hold on to the roots," as he calls it in the late *Cantos*).²⁹

This rejection of the Romantic subject runs parallel with his externalizing the powers that oppose the poet's vision. In contrast to Whitman,

²⁹ At this phase of his life, he would define as "roots" the four great books of Confucianism (*The Great Digest* [*Great Learning*], *The Unwobbling Pivot* [*Doctrine of the Mean*], the *Analacts*, *Mencius*), the American Constitution and the late correspondence between Adams and Jefferson.

Pound does not stage his epic poem as a drama of subjective consciousness but as a secular theater of salvation with clearly assigned roles. In his "Song of Myself," Whitman had made the bloody episodes of war in sections 35 and 36 a test for the visionary power of his poet-seer: It is the shock of the experience of death and destruction that deeply threatens the speaker's faith in himself as representative man and in the collective future. In Pound's *Cantos*, however, the horrors of war are caused by the political and economic machinations of historical agents that can be called by name. In contrast to other epic poems of the modernist period, *The Cantos* are thus also highly didactic: They convey modes of right conduct, point out the right way to knowledge, name the right texts to read – less in the spirit of nineteenth-century prophecy than in the spirit of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment.³⁰ But then, in its linguistic strategies, also *against* that spirit since its heritage (faith in the value of reason) had been so blatantly perverted and instrumentalized by bankers and speculators, industrialists, war-mongers and profiteers of all kinds.

That it should be the task of poets, especially, to set the world right again is an idea of the early nineteenth century that accompanied the process of modernization in Western Europe and the United States as an obstinate cultural counterpoint. Blake, Shelley, Emerson and Whitman conceived as the poet's social function the regeneration of spirit and language – as did, despite their anti-romantic *animus*, the poets of the modernist and even the postmodernist period (the latter perhaps with a certain amount of self-irony).

After the carnage of World War I (that cost the lives of several of his friends, among them Gaudier-Brzeska and T. E. Hulme), Pound wanted to escape from the aestheticism he had been committed to until then.³¹ Therefore he could not content himself with either Mallarmé's absolute unworldliness – "Literature does not exist in a vacuum," he insisted in his *ABC of Reading* (32) – nor with a notion of poetic language as a quasi-autonomous force metonymically cleansing the collective idiom (as Charles Bernstein did some sixty years later³²). For Pound, the need for purifying the "language of the tribe" (Mallarmé) for making it 'efficient' by giving back to it

³⁰ The English term "Enlightenment" contains the elements of light and illumination Pound connected with the theories of light advanced by mystics like Grosseteste and Eriguena, but also with the French encyclopedists and the truly enlightened protagonists of the American Revolution and the Early Republic, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in particular.

³¹ His *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley: Contacts and Life* (1920) combines Pound's farewell to London with his retreat from the aestheticism of the *fin de siècle* that the war had made irrelevant.

³² "Poets don't have to be read, any more than trees have to be set under, to transform poisonous societal emissions into something that can be breathed" (*The Politics of Poetic Form* 226).

lost clarity and precision, could not be separated from its pragmatic effect: He aimed at connecting word and action, insisted on the word's ability to change reality – and the more impatiently and urgently so, the more it appeared that historic circumstances prevented poetry from exerting this society- and world-building public function.

Confucius helped Pound establish a link between the aesthetic and the pragmatic functions of poetic language since his philosophy of measure and balance granted social status as well as social function to the poet. The poet was a guardian of the commonweal in a society conceived of as organic entity. If and when he allowed language to deteriorate, then – Pound believed – the social order also broke down. Aesthetic order must therefore be anchored in a poetics of the precise image (*chêng ming*, the right name) as well as in an ethics of right measure (*chung*). Thus he writes in *ABC of Reading*:

Language is the main means of human communication. [...] If a nation's literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays. Your legislator can't legislate for the public good, your commander can't command, your populace (if you be a democratic country) can't instruct its 'representatives,' save by language. [...] It is difficult to make people understand the *impersonal* indignation that a decay of writing can cause men who understand what it implies, and the end whereto it leads. (32-34)

This belief in the redemptive mission of the poet and of poetry (at a time when both were increasingly marginalized in all modernizing cultures of the West) transforms the former aesthete into a crank and determined troublemaker. The search for a magic formula that would readjust the disturbed relation between language and society and restore the lost inner balance that ideally marked individual as well as collective existence, made Pound turn to Confucius whose teachings had already influenced philosophers and statesmen of the Enlightenment before him (such as Leibniz and John Adams). But it also made him reach out for various schemes of an alternative economy and moved him to project his utopian hopes on Mussolini (the “Boss”) – who, needless to say, put none of these theories into practice.

Pound placed his finger on a wound still bleeding today (perhaps more than ever, now, in times of digitally-connected capital markets and unimaginably high gains and losses in financial speculation). Yet the concepts of anti- or precapitalist economy that he made so intensely his own were either limited local solutions (like the practice of Gesell's *schwundgeld* in the Austrian town of Wörgl) or, like Major Douglas's social credit theory, incongruous in a context of fast-changing economic structures. Pound clung to the idea of a predominantly agrarian society (like the Italian still at his time, or the Chinese before Mao) where the rites and mythologies of

pre-industrial cultures were still known or practiced.³³ This conservatism, together with his evocation of the 'holy' foundational texts of the American Republic, of the Constitution as a bulwark against the encroachments of a 'socialist' federal (central) government, anticipate many positions of today's Tea Party – although, in all likelihood, Pound would have despised its narrow provincialism.

In other words, as much as he attempted to shed the aestheticism of his early London years and as much as he insisted (to the annoyance of his friends) that poets were socially obliged to acquire knowledge in economical matters, his concepts of an ideal (or future) social order were based on what one might call a secular religion of aesthetic life grounded in the pre-industrial and rural. In an illuminating essay, Richard Sieburth analyzed the connection between poetry and money in *The Cantos* as well as in Pound's name itself – a connection of which Pound himself was quite conscious.³⁴ On the one hand, word/writing and "usury" form the basic opposition in *The Cantos*, on the other, they are mutually connected in a "poetics of money" (Sieburth). "Pound is obsessed with what he calls the 'black magic of money,'" Sieburth argues in an interview with Pound's daughter Mary, "money as the obscene Doppelgänger of the poetic word" (see de Rachewiltz 27). Money created by interest is, like the poet's word, 'made from air.' In addition, word economy and money economy meet via the common denominator of measure, efficiency and right use: What Pound fought as an excess of rhetoric in the literary inheritance of late Victorianism, he also fought as the metaphorically related excess of "usury." Both economies overlap in the concept of a quasi-cosmic order of right measure (balance) where the value of the word and the value of money coincide. (As demonstrated, for instance, in Canto XCVII, where justice lies in finding the right/just proportion of gold and silver in the process of minting.) It is an order guaranteed by the authority, the good "credit" of the poet as well as the authority of the "good ruler" – an order that is threatened, time

³³ Sieburth argues that "The Cantos deal so predominantly with agrarian societies because these preindustrial economies allow Pound to subsume labor and production under natural process – 'work does not create wealth, it contributes to the formation of it. Nature's productivity is the root'" (166).

³⁴ His name held highly symbolic implications for Pound: Ezra, associated with scripture and prophecy in the Old Testament, and "Pound," connoting the British currency but also the imprint on the coin as well as the act of coining that engraves (or "pounds") on the unembossed metal the seal of authority. In addition, there is his family history: his grandfather, Thaddeus Coleman Pound, was the founder of a wood processing factory where he introduced a local financial system that apparently anticipated Gesell's *schwundgeld*. Pound's father, Homer, was assayer in the mint of Philadelphia. Pound frequently signed his pamphlets on economy and finance with £, the sign for the English Pound. Cp. Sieburth.

and again, by those who devalue money *and* the word to the detriment of the common weal.

However, what Pound intends to eliminate as material(ist) “excess” in the name of an ideal order (with the chisel of the sculptor or the “surgeon’s knife of Fascism”), is still present in *The Cantos* as an excess of word and (word) material, resisting the will of its maker to create (or impose on it) order and coherence. This dialectical tension between condensation and excess, between ideal form and formless materiality, between the controlled coinage of word/money and the excessive accumulation of words/coins running against and undermining the poet’s strife for order, pervades *The Cantos* and makes for their tensions, fractions and contradictions.

It is the uncontrollable growth of his textual and/or historical material that resists the form imposed on it – the form that Pound extracted from ancient mythology or the dichotomies of Christianity. As when, in the first of *The Pisan Cantos*, he tries to give to Mussolini’s death the “form” of a ritual of Dionysian dismemberment and resurrection. In this respect, *The Cantos* also ‘speak’ – perhaps speak most of all – through what can *not* be translated into myth, can *not* be integrated. As part of the poem, it works against its order-imposing, centripetal pull. The principle (and act) of love that, as Eva Hesse argues, Pound places in the center of his poetic universe and that he connects with the Neoplatonists’s imagery of light – “Amo, ergo sum” (Canto LXXX), “Ubi amor, ibi oculus” (CXIV) – evidently has its limits. It is capable of turning itself away from the Other, even capable of hating him in a manner that is more than “impersonal indignation” but an almost metaphysical loathing of Geryon’s breed, the perpetrators of “usury,” *neschek*, or those he holds accountable for it.³⁵

Until Pound begins to doubt himself, his capacity for love, his ability even to create an earthly “paradise” merely of words; until he finally applies “sincerity” – one of his fundamental principles – as a critical measure of his own behavior: “Charity I have had sometimes, / I cannot make it flow through. / A little light, like a rushlight / to lead back to splendor” (Canto CXVI).

M’amour, m’amour
 what do I love and
 where are you?
 That I lost my center

³⁵ As most of all the Jews whom Pound associates with banks and “usury” and counts among the forces selfishly working against the establishment of Ekbatan, the ideal *polis*, the possible paradise on earth. Occasionally, Pound calls them “victims” – but only if they are ‘poor Yidden’ and thus victims of the revenge taken on Jews for the usury that rich Jews committed on non-Jews as a vengeance for past pogroms. Pound’s dizzying logic of revenge hardly diminishes his anti-Semitism.

fighting the world.
The dreams clash
and are shattered –
and that I tried to make a paradiso
terrestre. (“Fragment”)

“In Pound,” Charles Olson wrote about his visits in St. Elizabeths, “I feel myself confronted with the tragic Double of our day. He is the demonstration of our duality. In language and form he is as forward, as much the revolutionist as Lenin. But in social, economic and political action he is as retrogressive as the Czar” (qtd. in Seelye 53). Doubles and *doppelgänger* are also mentioned by other critics.³⁶ In his interview with Mary de Rachewiltz, Sieburth called Pound a “Confucian anarchist” wanting to create order (and to submit himself to it), but also a rebel agitating against the state of things as they are. (“I hate the idea of obedience to something which is wrong,” Pound told Hall.) Or as Eva Hesse believes: In *The Cantos*, Pound acts as “a mouthpiece of heretics and rebels against established opinion,” as the representative of a “conspiracy of intelligence” (as Pound himself phrased it) that runs through Western history as a covert and often repressed counter-tradition (*Ich liebe* 293).

But faced with the ruins of his original dreams, Pound finally relinquishes the “directed will” that had driven him to work “form” (his *paradiso* of possible perfection) out of the abundance of the literary, historical and empirical material he found. It increasingly gives way to an awareness of a divine presence in the “luminous details” of “facts,” to a passive acceptance of the sensuous materiality of things. (He could not exclude something simply “because it does not fit,” he said in his interview with Hall.) So that the concept of an organic *forma* that the poet, like a sculptor, shapes from his shapeless “stuff” is replaced by the more relaxed assumption of “form” as processual formlessness where paradise does not mark a *telos* but a moment in the flux of perception, experience and poetic creativity.³⁷

This movement toward the momentary and particular undermines Pound’s modernist push toward a timeless universal and makes *The Cantos*

³⁶ Sieburth even argues that homeless Pound may have seen himself as doubled in the homeless Jew – that hateful figure of fascist fantasies. And indeed, Pound writes in *Guide to Kulchur* that it did not become him to reproach “Brother Semite” with being a nomad since this was part of his own disposition. In a review of 1927, Conrad Aiken wrote of Pound as someone who “has, always, the air of a man on the point of departure” (323).

³⁷ As he told me in conversation, Sieburth sees in Pound’s strategies of the late *Cantos* an analogy to Jackson Pollock’s action painting: The painter, in the act of painting, does not position himself opposite his painting but within it, as part of the process.

interesting for the poetry of our time.³⁸ Indeed, for contemporary poets – from Olson via the Language poets and Susan Howe to the Noigandres group of poets in Brasil – Pound's texts have been a quarry from which they took what they needed. Not only that Allen Ginsberg discovered in Pound's allegorical image of Geryon the “moloch” of his poem “Howl.” Charles Bernstein, perhaps the most eloquent of the Language poets, for whom Pound's fascism is highly offensive, acknowledges in the “complexly polyphonous style” of *The Cantos* and in the “hyper-space” of his modernist collages “the result of a compositionally de-centered multiculturalism.”³⁹ In this sense, Pound is the Richard Wagner of modern poetry whose prejudices entered the themes as well as the structures of his music but who, by the excessive sensuousness and structure-dissolving audacity of his compositions, nevertheless influenced even those for whom his ideological message was scandalous. It is indeed Pound's “never ceasing, boundless curiosity” (Hesse, *Ich liebe* 9) that makes his *magnum opus* “the most intellectually alive” poem of the past century (Wilhelm, *Dante and Pound* 159) – despite all irritations it has caused (and will no doubt continue to cause) and despite all reservations its readers will have to struggle hard to overcome.

³⁸ According to Perloff, Pound (and not Eliot or Stevens) is the “father” of the subsequent generation of modern/postmodernist poets (cp. *The Dance of the Intellect*); see also Beach, esp. 17-41 and 237-51.

³⁹ See Bernstein's “Pounding Fascism” in *A Poetics* (pp. 121-27). As for Ginsberg see Beach 38.