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WHOSE VANITY IS IT ANYWAY?
THE END OF POUND'S CANTO LXXXI

The Pisan Cantos are compelling for a number of reasons. *The Cantos* is an epic poem and, it could be argued, the hero of this epic is Ezra Pound. 1945 marks the greatest crisis in Pound's life. The Pisan Cantos are a chronicle of Pound's mental life during the summer of this year. In a sense they are the Hell cantos. They are a mosaic of Pound's reminiscences of happier times, of his contemporary experiences, including possibly a mental and/or physical breakdown, of recent European history and, of course, examples of Pound's learning. The snippets of learning are used either as parallels for Pound's emotional life, or as argument to back up a contention on a political or historical point.

Non-Poundians may be puzzled by the persistency with which Pound critics drag in the poets' life to illustrate one interpretation or another when writing on *The Cantos*. This is caused by a failure to recognize the poem as an epic account of the life of the poet. This essay will attempt to bring both Pound's writing and life to bear in an examination of the Pisan Cantos and, in particular, in dealing with the most quoted passage of the poem, that which comes at the end of canto LXXXI, sometimes known as the "Pull down thy vanity passage" (520-522/534-536).

First of all let us look briefly at what the Pisan Cantos says about Pound's relationship with the former Italian leader, Mussolini. This issue is raised by the first few lines of the sequence:

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent
shoulders
Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
Thus Ben and la Clara *a Milano*
by the heels at Milano
That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock (LXXIV 425/439)

To put this passage into context we should first glance back to canto XLI, which opens with a reference to Pound's visit, in Rome, in January 1933, to Mussolini. During the meeting Mussolini, whom Pound rather obsequiously refers to as "the Boss," browsed through a copy of *A Draft of XXX Cantos*. Apparently in response to a passage of Pound's colloquialized French or Italian, Mussolini made a dismissive remark:

"Ma Questo,"
 said the Boss, "è divertente." [it is amusing]
 catching the point before the aesthetes had got
 there: (XLI 202)

By canto XLI Pound had already spent around two decades on what would be his life's work, a poem in which one may find the intention to encapsulate much of human history from ancient China, ancient Greece, Rome or Egypt, to twentieth century Europe, including a quest to discover the causes of wars. The secret, and in Pound's view iniquitous, working of money-dealers, from the Shylock-type to modern international capitalists and arms manufacturers become an evil thread that Pound perceives to be winding its way through history.

Part of Pound's aim was what he called, in the 1913 essay "The Serious Artist," "the art of diagnosis and the art of cure" (LE 45). He believed himself to be exposing the negative, even cancerous effects of what he called "Usury: A charge for the use of purchasing power" (note at end of canto XLV). Indeed canto XLV is a litany of these effects:

With usura hath no man a house of good stone

 with usura, sin against nature,
 is thy bread ever more of stale rags (XLV 229)

Whether or not one agrees with Pound's reading of economics and history it is clear that he saw his work as much more important than a mere diversion, that the very health of society was at stake. So it is inexcusable for Pound to have included Mussolini's remark and to have tried to pass it as high praise.

Pound would have seen Mussolini as an exponent of "the art of cure," as a worthwhile force, a constructive force, building a better society in Italy. Mussolini's misdemeanours were justified by these ends. When Mussolini was executed in April 1945, Pound would have been devastated. Thus his post-war poem begins with a lament for Fascist Italy and for Mussolini in particular. One should be in no doubt as to the regard in which Pound held Mussolini. Through the ideogrammic method the first few lines of the *Pisan Cantos* compare Mussolini to the third century

Persian sage Manes, to Dionysus, and there is subsequently an implicit comparison with Christ. Pound's Italian dream had turned to tragedy, but there is little sign of regret. Rather Mussolini becomes the archetypal dead hero, or the dead bullock eaten by the "maggots", specifically by the partisans, but more generally by all his enemies, including the Allies. It should be remembered that Mussolini's enemies were also Pound's enemies.

Towards the end of the war Pound wrote two cantos in Italian that were to become cantos LXXII and LXXIII. These had been expurgated from all collected editions of cantos, apparently because of their fascist content, and were printed in England by Faber for the first time in their rightful place in the 1994 edition of *The Cantos*. They were printed in America for the first time in the mid-1980's. My references to the text from canto LXXIV on also include page numbers for the 1994 Faber edition.

It is still widely believed that the Pisan Cantos were composed in their entirety whilst Pound was in the custody of the U.S. Army at Pisa, either in the small iron cage where he was held for six weeks, or in the prison's medical tent.

In a recent article Ronald Bush has demonstrated that two more Italian cantos were written by Pound during the final days of the war at Rapallo. These, Bush shows, became a kind of early draft for the Pisan Cantos, and English phrases found in the latter can be traced back to their counterparts in Italian, written whilst the war was still raging (Bush 1995, 69-89). Tim Redman relates the opinion of Pound's daughter, Mary, that unpublished notebooks suggest parts of the Pisan Cantos were written in the months preceding Pound's arrest in May 1945 (Redman 1991, 194).

In December 1944 Mussolini made a public speech calling for one last counterattack, a last great effort to turn round the fading fortunes of the Axis powers, and the Fascists. Bush implies that Pound's writing, during this winter, of the Italian drafts of the Pisan Cantos was his response to this call by il Duce. Redman believes Pound was reacting to the mistaken newspaper reports of the destruction of Sigismundo Malatesta's temple in Rimini by Allied Bombers (Redman 1991, 261). According to Bush, elements such as the recurrence of disembodied eyes in Pound's Pisan tent, the young girl "la scalza" whose presence sparks a visionary moment, the various attendants to the ancient gods (Dryads, Hamadryads) and the historical female figures like Cunizza and Isotta, have been anticipated by the manuscript versions.

All this suggests that the Pisan Cantos were a continuation of Pound's work during the previous months, and that he did not begin from scratch. The eyes, belonging to female acquaintances, or to Cunizza, or Aphrodite, had also appeared to Pound at Rapallo and maybe even in Rome, from where he had broadcast speeches on Italian State Radio between 1941 and

1943. The location that Pound mentions several times in the *Pisan Cantos*, “al triedro,” at the three-way crossroads, may well be found at Rapallo. The vital point is made by Bush himself when he says that Pound calls upon these encounters with mythological or historical characters “to justify a jeremiad against his accusers and the modern world” (Bush 1995, 75). Pound was lining up these and all the other characters of the *Pisan* pageant to stand behind him in an attempt at self-justification and accusation. His world had fallen apart, his cause was defeated, and he sought someone or something to blame.

The principle tactic that Pound employed was resurrecting, and recruiting to his cause, legendary characters and dead Fascists soldiers. In canto LXXII the ghost of the former leader of the Italian Futurist movement, and ardent Fascist, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, appears and asks if he can borrow Pound’s body in order to continue the fight. Marinetti had died in December 1944, shortly before Pound began canto LXXII. Six months before Pound’s imprisonment in Pisa, he gives Marinetti the disembodied voice to say:

Voglio il tuo corpo, con cui potrei ancora combattere.

[I want your body, with which I could still make war.] (LXXII 425)

and also to cry:

Noi tornerremo!
Noi tornerremo!

[We will return!]
[WE will return!] (LXXII 427)

A few pages later the various generals who had served in the Italian army are celebrated.

With a characteristic defiance Pound, who had been indicted for treason the previous year, describes the signing of the armistice of Castille between the Allies and the Italian government on 3 September 1943, as “il tradimento”: “the treason” (LXXII 425). Towards the end of canto LXXII Pound resurrects the thirteenth century Italian tyrant Ezzelino da Romano, a man whose name was synonymous with cruelty. He allows Ezzelino to justify himself and to attack his biographer’s disparaging portrayal. Massimo Bacigalupo detected Pound’s strategy when he stated:

Ezzelino’s defence of his occasional violence sounds very much like an apology for EP himself (Bacigalupo 1991, 14).

The other Italian canto, LXXIII, is narrated for the most part by the thirteenth century poet Guido Cavalcanti. Cavalcanti tells of his meeting with the spirit of a young peasant girl, “una contadinella,” who had been raped by some Canadian soldiers and then led another group of Canadians

on to a mine field, and to their deaths. She is celebrated as a fine little girl, "che brava pupetta!", and Pound leaves us in no doubt about his attitude towards the scene:

Che splendore!
All' inferno 'l nemico,
furon venti morti.

[What splendour!]
[The enemy blown to hell,]
[Twenty were dead.]
(LXXIII 434)

Pound had read the story on the front page of the newspaper *Corriere Della Sera* in October 1944. Although Redman finds "nothing . . . particularly shocking" in the Italian Cantos, the above passage may be added to the beginning of canto XLI as episode that will disconcert most readers (Redman 1991, 270). It must also be held in the mind when one reads the well-known passage at the end of canto LXXXI which has become representative of the tone of the Pisan Cantos.

Peter D'Epiro has shown that the traditional interpretation of the end of canto LXXXI views the passage as either a sort of confessional lament for Pound's own past errors, or as a general monitory address to all men (D'Epiro 1984, 247-248). The passage, written around eight months after the Italian cantos, begins by reaffirming the validity of Pound's convictions:

What thou lovest well remains (LXXXI 520/534).

What Pound loved well included the Fascist ideology as well as his family and acquaintances.

Pound was already old, as he told Marinetti's shade the previous winter (LXXII 425), when he sat in the Pisan prison, "in the halls of hell" (LXXXI 521/535) and conjured up his lost companions as well as remnants of his favourite literature as consolation. But a few lines later a new note enters the poem:

The ant's a centaur in his dragon world.
Pull down thy vanity . . . (LXXXI 521/535)

Many have read this passage as a lament for Pound's own errors, as a recognition of his own catastrophic mistake. It is as if Pound had come through the hell of the prison camp to a realization of his own failures as a man. Along with moments of irrational joy Pound chronicled his deep despair throughout the Pisan sequence:

That from the gates of death (LXXX 513/527)
.....
the loneliness of death came upon me
(at 3 P.M., for an instant) (LXXXII 527/541)

There is no doubt that Pound may have been close to losing his mind in the dreadful circumstances of the summer of 1945. Canto LXXXII suggests as much:

When the mind swings by a grass-blade
an ant's forefoot shall save you (LXXXIII 533/547)

He also took great consolation in watching small creatures like ants, wasps, and crickets, in observing the sunset and in studying the stars. Out of such experiences, it is often suggested, a new element of self-awareness and self-criticism emerges. Ernest Renan's remarks on the imprisoned Christ may be considered here:

The man who sacrifices his repose, and all the legitimate rewards of life, to a great idea, always experiences a moment of sad revulsion when the image of death presents itself to him for the first time, and seeks to persuade him that everything is vanity (Renan 1889, 218).

And indeed, on at least two occasions we find Pound looking back on his life with some regret and a sad revulsion:

J'ai eu pitié des autres
probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own convenience
(LXXVI 460/474)

and again later:

Tard, très tard je t'ai connue, la Tristesse,
I have been hard as youth sixty years. (LXXX 513/527)

And if Pound did not quite have pity for others he does have some now for himself:

As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill
from the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor. (LXXVI 458/472)

The "lone ant" carries us back to the "vanity" passage and the metaphor of the ant conceiving of himself as a centaur. This would lead us to believe that the ant's vanity is Ezra Pound's (as scriptor). Thus the whole passage may be an attack on his own lack of self-awareness. But this reading is not sustained by the subsequent lines. It is never made clear who Pound's target is.

Indeed if one were to turn to canto LXXVII one may find more candidates. There Pound blames the fall of Mussolini's government on the "jactancy", "peculation" and, more importantly for our discussion, the vanity of its members rather than anything inherently wrong with the ideology of Fascism (LXXVII 470/484). So the vanity in question, which

deeds and beliefs: "What thou lov'st well is thy true heritage" (LXXXI 521/535). Then the onslaught against the vanity of the opponents of Mussolini, who embodied Pound's dream of a new order, and also against Pound's own captors. The lines, "Thou art a beaten dog beneath the hail, / A swollen magpie in a fitful sun, / Half black half white" (LXXXI 521/535), reminds one of the frequent references to the multi-racial character of the American army and specifically of the guards at the prison camp. "Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity" (LXXXI 521/535), echoes the fear expressed in the previous canto that the Allies might have bombed Siena: "and I trust they have not destroyed the / old theatre" (LXXX 496/510). So although the tone changes again in the last few lines to one of celebration:

To have gathered from the air a live tradition (LXXXI 522/536)

the tenor of the passage remains consistent. Pound, the passage tells us, has stored up a "true heritage," and what *he* "loved well cannot be reft from" *him*, although he has been "reft" from his family and friends. The ant-like Allies, although they march into his beloved Italy, and have (so he thought) bombed the Temple at Rimini, which he had celebrated as early as canto IX, though they have overthrown the government and society that Pound had so much hope for, still he can console himself in highlighting the vanity of all their efforts. Thus Pound compares their "man-made" successes with nature:

Learn of the green world what can be thy place
In scaled invention or true artistry. (LXXXI 521/535)

echoing his indictment of usury in canto XLV: "with usura, sin against nature" (229).

The tirade reaches a crescendo, with Pound's opponents given no respite:

How mean thy hates
fostered in falsity. (LXXXI 521/535)

As we discover from the final lines of the canto, Pound himself has not been in error:

Here error is all in the not done
all in the diffidence that faltered . . . (LXXXI 522/536)

and if Pound had been diffident, even now, the implication is that the poem itself would have faltered.

I write all this at the risk of seeming to want to put Pound on trial. Nevertheless it is important, I believe, not to gloss over the distasteful

aspects of *The Cantos*. But Pound's generosity toward other artists during his time in London and Paris cannot be denied. Nor can one deny the fact that the Allies committed what could be called crimes against art and humanity during World War II. The metamorphosis of Dresden into Phlegethon, the river of fire in Hades, in canto LXXV (450/464), is a stark reminder of this fact. Nor can one deny the moments of genuine emotion and imagistic beauty that Pound manages to extract from his dire circumstances.

Pound drew inspiration from the poet-soldiers of medieval Provence and from the tyrannical art patrons of the Italian Renaissance and was drawn to tough, masculine artists and philosophers like Gaudier, Hulme and Lewis. He was obviously attracted by what Yeats called "the antithetical self": the presence of opposite tendencies in one personality. And it was Yeats who once said of Pound: "Here is a man who produces the most distinguished of work yet in his behavior is the most undistinguished of men" (Heymann 1976, 56).

We should not attempt to make a saint of Pound. His less palatable side gives *The Cantos* an extra dimension. We could not and should not imagine *The Cantos* written by a Pound who left Italy for his homeland at the outbreak of the war or who, like Lewis, retracted his support for the totalitarianism of Hitler, or who stayed silent during and after the war. The Pound of the Pisan *Cantos* would have considered such alternatives to be "the diffidence that faltered" (LXXXI 522/536).

The Italian film director Gillo Pontecorvo, who ironically was a Jewish partisan commander during the war, and who may well have been in Milan when Mussolini was strung up by the heels, once said:

[T]o make an epic film you can be very wrong about the idea behind the film, but you must believe it strongly. Then maybe you will communicate. (*Times Literary Supplement*, June 26 1998, 20)

Whether or not Pound was correct in his interpretation of history and politics, he certainly believed firmly in his own ideas. His defiance continued after Mussolini was defeated, after he himself was arrested and incarcerated, even after he had spent some time in a mental hospital. Pound demonstrated his defiant nature early on by attempting to write an epic poem in the twentieth century. Apart from anything else *The Cantos* stands as a monument to the strength of Pound's own convictions, and single-mindedness. The ugliness and the beauty are complementary elements of that monument.

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