

THE POET UNMASKED IN *THE PISAN CANTOS*

Kevin Kiely

The Pisan Cantos come after the relentless history of the preceding Chinese/Adams Cantos (Randall Jarrell called them “the dullest and prosiest poetry that he has ever written”) (Homberger 348-49). In these new cantos, the tone changes perceptibly, becoming markedly confessional as the poet is unmasked. They are infused with personal reference as well as mystical vision, and the language of self-revelation and self-transcendence becomes dominant.

Composed in the aftermath of World War II, the Pisan cantos portray adversity and mental breakdown as Pound hears and sees ghostly voices, “apparitions against Mt Taishan.” There is a stream of memories from persons and places, and great affection is shown for fellow writers and artists, not overlooking their faults: “and for all that old Ford’s conversation was better, / consisting in *res non verba*, / despite William’s anecdotes, in that Fordie / never dented an idea for a phrase’s sake / and had more humanitas (82/545). (Compare: “But the lot of ’em, Yeats, Possum, Old Wyndham / had no ground to stand on” – 102/748.) He quotes significant comments on the war:

the guard did not think that the Führer had started it
 Sergeant XL thought that excess population
 Demanded slaughter at intervals. (76/477)

...
 “Why war?” sd/ the sergeant rum-runner
 “too many people! When there git to be too many
 you got to kill some of ’em off. (80/519)

There are, regrettably, several anti-semitic remarks, though Wendy Flory notes that in these cantos of “over 3,800 lines, there are three anti-semitic passages, totalling thirteen lines” (291). She admits that even thirteen lines are too much, since they show an ugly inhumanity in Pound. But he had melted greatly, and in preparing his defence to the American Department of Justice by letter (5 October 1945) Pound mentions his son on leave from the U.S. Army, “good news of Omar” (Heymann 168). The human paternal instinct could outweigh his concern for himself, the imprisoned poet who knows he will soon be on trial.

Pound’s concern with language is omnipresent in the Pisan sequence, as it was throughout his career. As he was to write later on: “And as Ford said: get a dictionary / and learn the meaning of words” (98/709). He defines the highly original poetic technique which distinguished his practice when he says: “To break the pentameter that was the first heave.” He also confesses the difficulty of producing poetry at all when he quotes Beardsley’s reply to Yeats, “beauty is difficult.” And he warns in his poetry, as he often did in life, against the poetasters, “those who deform thought with iambs” (98/707) while regretting that it was “a pity that poets have used symbol and metaphor / And no man learned anything from them / for their speaking in figures” (“Addendum for Canto 100”).

Language is always the imperative: “Of such perceptions rise the ancient myths of the origin of demi-gods. Even as the

ancient myths of metamorphosis rise out of flashes of cosmic consciousness” (*Personae* 322). He includes Mussolini in his personal pantheon of heroes because he spoke well of poetry: “The Duce and Kung fu Tseu equally perceive that their people need poetry; that prose is NOT education but the outer courts of the same. Beyond its doors are the mysteries. Eleusis. Things not to be spoken save in secret (*Kulchur* 144).

There is mystical vision to be found in these cantos, hinted at in “States of mind are inexplicable to us” (76/480), while in the next canto it becomes more explicit: “bricks thought into being ex nihil” with the mention of the spheres of heaven derived from Emanuel Swedenborg’s *Arcana Coelestia*. The rain image in canto 80 is both mystical and pantheistic:

this is from heaven
the warp
and the woof
with a sky wet as ocean
flowing with liquid slate

(80/514)

Pound was prompted to write some of his best lines by reading the Bible at Pisa, taking a major theme from the book of Ecclesiastes: “Pull down thy vanity” (“Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, saith the Preacher”), and a memorable image from the book of Proverbs: “The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world,” (“Go to the ant, thou sluggard, and learn from him”), and borrowing a line from Chaucer’s “Balade de Bon Conseyl”: “Reule wel thyself, that other folk canst rede,” (“Master thyself, then others shall thee beare”). But this most famous of Pound’s lyrics is preceded by what must have been a personal vision:

there came new subtlety of eyes into my tent,
whether of spirit or hypostasis,
but what the blindfold hides

He has said, again quoting Chaucer, in lines that precede this vision:

Your eyen two wol sleye me sodenly
I may the beauté of hem nat susteyne

(that is to say, “your eyes will suddenly slay me and I may not be able to withstand their beauty”). Pound’s vision cannot be dismissed as an hallucinatory experience, because it is borne out in the “Pull down thy vanity” section that follows. The unmasking of this visionary figure is an emblem of what Pound achieves in unmasking himself in the Pisan cantos. It is the moment of *volte face* for him, a refinement of personality through pain and suffering that leads toward a new humanity.

Pound’s mystical references and moments of transcendence are part of the unmasking. There is in the Pisan cantos little of the bombast and cant that is frequent in some of the preceding sections, and there is more of the humanity: “the loneliness of death came upon me / (at 3 P.M., for an instant)” (82/547), and “When the mind swings by a grass-blade/an ant’s forefoot shall save you” (83/553). Beyond his personal agony and pain in the prison camp at Pisa, Pound manages a personal transcendence, as in the apostrophe to Pomona, the Goddess of fruit-trees and her lynx (canto 79).

The Lynx image is linked to the image of birds in visual harmony: “three solemn half notes / their white downy chests black-rimmed / on the middle wire” (82/547), which is a musical notation that would be playable on an instrument. Canto 75 is all birdsong music, Janequin’s composition “made new” by Gerhart Münch.

Profundity emerges from the Pisan cantos with “Wisdom lies next thee, / simply, past metaphor” (82/546) and transcendence abides in “This fruit has a fire within it, / Pomona, Pomona / no glass is clearer than are the globes of this flame / what sea is clearer than the pomegranate body / holding the flame?” (79/510).

And Pomona leads naturally to Pound's love-goddess, Aphrodite:

This Goddess was born of sea-foam
 She is lighter than air under Hesperus (79/512)

Thus, after all the many masks Pound wore in his long career are dropped, what is revealed is a more humane poet behind the mask. He was able to praise unstintingly a fellow poet like Eliot, "His was the true Dantescan voice, not honoured enough, and deserving more than I ever gave him" (*Selected Prose* 464). And there is a softening of the harsh anti-semitism that marred so much of his writing, when, in 1972, just short of his death, Pound in the foreword to Cookson's selection of his prose writings clarifies some of his obsessions, "In sentences referring to groups or races 'they' should be used with great care. Re USURY: I was out of focus, taking a symptom for a cause. The cause is AVARICE." His later frankness about himself is exemplified especially in what he told Robert Lowell, as Lowell reported in a poem: "I began with a swelled head and end with swelled feet." And appealingly, in the final cantos, he brings himself to admit "That I lost my center/fighting the world." What Pound seems to have learned for himself, painfully, during the months of confinement in Pisa and later in St. Elizabeths, makes up for his many errors: "When I talked that nonsense about Jews on the Rome / wireless, Olga knew it was shit, and still loved me" (Lowell 537).

The Pisan cantos change the tone of Pound's poetry, that much is clear. Abandoning the jingoistic pugnacity of the pro-fascist cantos (72-73), they contain a personal as well as a visionary experience which unmasked the poet, changing his attitude toward himself and others. Their closing note is hardly triumphant; it is full of humanity and a new humility. Indeed, the final couplet might well be from a hymnal.

Without a hint of melodrama, it forms a prayerlike conclusion:

If the hoar frost grip thy tent
 Thou wilt give thanks when night is spent. (84/560)

Massimo Bacigalupo's literary detection illuminates this conclusion, by revealing it as lacking two additional lines which Pound excised, and which followed the above couplet:

Italy, my Italy, my God, my Italy
 Ti abbraccio la terra santa

It is no surprise to discover these lines, when one bears in mind Bacigalupo's suggestion that the Pisan cantos are "particularly significant insofar as they present an adversarial view, that will not espouse the accepted dogma of righteousness of the winners" (99-100). Think of how his detractors might have taken the lines about embracing the blessed land of Italy. Of course, as an expostulation from a poet it is magnificent, and in Pound's case a fitting declaration to his beloved adopted country. This is a valuable paratextual gloss relating to the inherent politics of Pound's position. There is the added paradox that cantos 74-84 were merely to be subtitled *The Pisan Cantos*, according to Pound in a letter to James Laughlin. Their publication was a success de scandale due to the Bollingen Prize controversy and, not least, Pound's detainment by the U.S. authorities. Bacigalupo ultimately finds in the apocryphally entitled Pisan Cantos "the elusiveness of the best poetry" (106).

The contention continues in its infinite variety when it comes to this American poet who leads us (in Bunting's phrase) towards "the Alps" of *The Cantos*. In my own case, Pound's provocation has fruitfully, if I may presume to say so, visited the two poems that follow. The rendering of the visitation is my responsibility, as are the results; and that one of the

poems includes Mary Pound is all the more felicitous in my humble opinion. I first saw Pound's name in the epigraph to *The Waste Land* as a schoolboy in Blackrock College, Dublin, which had a good library that gave me my first encounter with EP's poems. It was even a lesson in itself, seeing Eliot exalt and exult in his confrere; somehow puncturing his own long poem, as I thought at the time. James Joyce in a fit of drunkenness once declared that the reader should spend a lifetime perusing his works. Pound never made any such declaration drunk or sober to my knowledge, but he has also gained such ideal readers as Joyce wished for.

The two poems which follow first appeared in journals, and when it came to including them in my collection *Breakfast with Sylvia* I did not hesitate in deference to an early mentor.

MARY POUND DE RACHEWILTZ

Fresh and unfussed you came from Brunnenberg
 in the Alps, to lecture at Maynooth
 for the Gerard Manley Hopkins Summer School
 your father never owned a book of his poems
 finding the metrical labours "unduly touted."

The theatre seated less than fifty and afterwards
 you showed your translation of the Cantos
 into Italian in a boxed edition.

A crowd huddled around, you smiled
 and tucked up your head proudly
 "And do they cohere?"

What about his years of incarceration?
 "Ezra was, (you admitted)

a bad boy and had to pay
his debt to society.”

But the head shifted, the jaw turned on line
with your shoulder, as you signed
the bulky tome below your name
adding “daughter-translator”

Then a lecturer said
“there was only one Ezra Pound”
and someone mumbled
“One was enough.”

WHO’S AFRAID OF EZRA POUND?

Hang it all? They locked you in a cage at Pisa
then twelve years in St. Elizabeths for treason
never madder than Dante or Cavalcanti
hunting usury through twenty centuries
with chunks of rhetoric in the Cantos
and a few more cant than canto
Shark’s teeth of your form lit in sylvan igneousness
from *inluminatio coitu* to Browning trochees
victim of some unfaithful establishment brochures
Surgeon-critic castigating hackneyed drivel
amongst the printing glut and printmania
leading your *paideuma* towards kulchurality
Your rancour was not always creative
Or did the rancour consume you?

Dublin, Ireland

Works Cited

- Bacigalupo, Massimo. "Pound's Pisan Cantos in Process." *Paideuma* 27.2-3 (1998): 93-106.
- Homberger, Eric, ed. *Ezra Pound: The Critical Heritage*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972.
- Flory, Wendy. "Pound and Antisemitism." *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*. Ed. Ira B. Nadel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. 284-300.
- Heymann, C. David. *Ezra Pound: The Last Rower*. New York: Seaver Books, 1980.
- Kiely, Kevin (kevinkiely.com). *Breakfast with Sylvia*. Belfast: Lagan Press, (lagan-press@e-books.org.uk)
- Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. London: Faber, 2003.
- Pound, Ezra. *The Cantos*. New York: New Directions, 1995.
- . *Guide to Kulchur*. New York: New Directions, 1968.
- . *Personæ: Collected Early Poetry*. New York: New Directions, 1976.
- . *Selected Prose 1909-1965*. Ed. William Cookson. New York: New Directions, 1975.