THE LONG JOB: POUND, DANTE AND THE EPIC AMBITION

DİLARA SARI

BOĞAZİÇİ UNIVERSITY

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THE LONG JOB: POUND, DANTE AND THE EPIC AMBITION

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Dilara Sarı

Boğaziçi University

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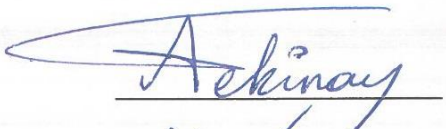
The thesis of Dilara Sarı

has been approved by

Prof. Dr. Aslı Tekinay
(Thesis advisor)



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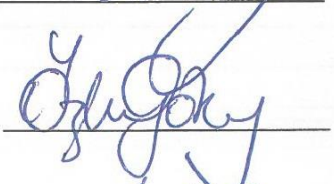

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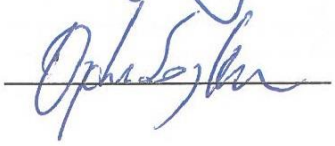

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ABSTRACT

The Long Job: Pound, Dante and the Epic Ambition

The legacy of Ezra Pound has long been a source of awe, disturbance and confusion; more so than almost any other poet of the modern age. *The Cantos* serves as the foundation to that legacy as representative of decades-long sadness, conflict, isolation, and hope. Various critical discussions surrounded the work ever since its publication as a whole, but more often than not, *The Cantos* is treated as a thing of the past: as an accumulation of ancient knowledge, immersed with myths no longer in fashion, pining after a world that was to never exist. This work argues that despite such reputation, *The Cantos* possesses a great dynamism, a moving force that hopes alter the society, and the human civilization, into which it was born. In order to understand its potential better, *The Cantos* should be approached as an expression of the same ambition that drives the pages of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy.* These two epics share a clear representation of the faults of contemporary times, an insistence on directness and precision, and an emphasis on intellectuality as the saving force. Looking at *The Cantos* through the light provided by *The Divine Comedy* helps us to better situate the epic ambition of the work, and to comprehend the dynamic desire to initiate change that is inherent in Pound's magnum opus.

ÖZET

Uzun İş: Pound, Dante ve Destansı Azim

Amerikan şair Ezra Pound'dan geriye uzun yıllardır hayranlık uyandıran, rahatsızlık veren ve şaşkınlık yaratan bir miras kalmıştır. Bu mirasın en net şeklini aldığı eseri *Kantolar* onlarca yıllık bir üzüntü, güzellik, karmaşa, yalnızlık ve umut içermektedir. Esere zaman içerisinde çeşitli tepkiler gelmiş olsa dahi, çoğunlukla bu tepkiler eseri geçmiş zamana ait görmüştür. *Kantolar* sıklıkla, içinde önemini yitirmiş antik bilgilerin toplandığı, sayfalarını rağbet görmeyen efsanelerin renklendirdiği, asla gelmeyecek bir dünya ardından ağlayan bir eser olarak yorumlanır. Bu tez bu algıya karşı çıkıp, *Kantolar*'ın sahip olduğu dinamik gücün ve taşıdığı değişim umudu ve azminin altını çiziyor. Eserin doğru potansiyelinin farkına varmak için benzer bir yol izleyen Dante Alighieri'nin *İlahi Komedyası* ile karşılaştırılması okuyucuya fayda sağlamakla kalmıyor; benzer yöntemlerle dönemin hatalarını ortaya döken, berraklık ve kesinlik içerisinde, entelektüel bir kurtuluş planlayan iki eser arasında güçlü paraleller olduğunu ortaya çıkarıyor. *İlahi Komedya* ile çizilen paraleller yardımıyla Pound'un büyük eseri *Kantolar*'ın içselleştirdiği dinamik güç, değişim arzusu ve destansı azim daha da netleşiyor.

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For my grandfather;

fair, kind, and worthy of anyone's paradiso

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 2 : KINGDOM OF THE DEAD: HOW THE WESTERN EPIC ALTERED WITH THE AGES 21

2.1 The Homeric start 22

2.2 The narrative of an empire 25

2.3 Dante's epoch 27

2.4. The modern epic 30

CHAPTER 3: FINDING THE ERROR: DEPICTIONS OF A DIFFICULT WORLD 35

3.1 Wealth, corruption and clergy: Dante's Italy 36

3.2 Usury, grief and carnage: Pound's Europe 44

CHAPTER 4: THE SHAPE OF THINGS: PRECISION AGAINST RHETORIC 54

4.1. The visual skeleton 54

4.2 Dante's particular people 59

4.3 Pound's factive personality, and the Ideogram 61

CHAPTER 5: MANKIND'S POTENTIAL: LIGHT, INTELLIGENCE AND PARADISE 74

5.1 Light and vision 77

5.2 Paradiso terrestre 82

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION 89

REFERENCES..... 94

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

For Dante Alighieri:

INF – *Inferno*

PAR- *Paradiso*

PUR- *Purgatorio*

For Ezra Pound:

ABC- *ABC of Reading*

EW- *The Early Writing*

GK- *Guide to Kulchur*

JM- *Jefferson and/ or Mussolini*

LE- *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*

SR- *Spirit of Romance*

TL- *The Letters of Ezra Pound*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> "However the *real* reader of… *The Cantos* is still a single individual: how on earth will she manage to tackle them? How will she *defend herself against them?"*
>
> Frank Moretti, *Modern Epic*

Six good lines, Ezra Pound believed, were enough to make a man immortal. That was of course by *his* standard of good. Pound's validation often came through severe criticism; but when granted, it did make immortal men in the likes of T.S. Eliot and James Joyce. Six lines is a good bet for anyone, but Pound's own experience proved four decades of good lines to be a rather messy affair: Pound devoted his life to creating *The Cantos*, over 100 poems of reflection and revelation, and in doing so presented the world a piece of work that not only enraged and contradicted, but also confused. The most harrowing moment of the poem, dubbed the "long job" by Pound himself, comes when grieving King Pedro digs up his murdered beloved, Ignez, to be placed beside him at court. The lords begin to pay their respects to the crowned corpse:

> Came the Lords of Lisboa
> a day, and a day
> In homage. Seated there
> dead eyes,
> Dead hair under the crown,
> The King still young there beside her. (Canto XXX, p.148) [1]

[1] All *The Cantos* quotations are cited by the relevant canto number, followed by the number of the page they appear on. The edition used may be found in the list of primary sources on the References page.

Metaphorically speaking, *The Cantos* often gets a similar treatment. Placed up high on the throne, twentieth century's most extensive work is often perceived as a tangled web of historic tales, fascist propaganda and imagistic instances; an antiquated list of names and figures doomed forever to remain on the outer circles of public consumption. Our insisting incapability to treat Ezra Pound's magnum opus with an eye out for its life force arrested not only how we read the work, but also how we studied it: interpretations, strained further by Pound's troubling political choices, fell short of truly achieving an insight to what the poet had hoped to formulate.

And what the poet had hoped to formulate is akin, more than any other epic attempt penned in the centuries in between, to what Dante Alighieri had in mind in creating his epic supernova, *The Divine Comedy.* Despite the six centuries that set them apart, the position both poets ended up in, following years of chaos and warfare, is strikingly similar. Dante was born in 1295 when Florence was largely divided between two political factions, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. His family belonged to the former; and stood for devotion to Pope, whereas Ghibellines' commitment was to the Emperor, and both struggled to maintain the city-state powers of Florence. The Guelphs took over the city during Dante's political career, allowing for a brief period of victory, until more factionalism occurred. Dante's side, now called the White Guelphs, lost the power struggle, and a host of its prominent political figures, the Italian poet included, were driven to exile. His return to Florence was forbidden under the absolute punishment of death; he spent the rest of life in hopes of returning to his beloved city. Eventually he switched sides and opted to become a stout defender of monarchism, producing his *De Monarchia* in an attempt to prove that an emperor was the solution to the chaotic condition of the world. His life, spent in political turmoil, uncertainty and

discontent, fueled his desire to set the world to his taste: he believed, even in the face of all the never-ending chaos, "the world's disorder can be remedied" (Farnell, 1985, p.7). Pound's life too was spent in cycles of enduring and surviving conflict, albeit of different sizes; his friends perished in battle fields, his movements faltered; he eventually chose a reclusive life in Italy's Rapallo, where Mussolini's fascist policies were slowly taking form. The world was in disarray because, according to Pound, it was "in most areas hag-ridden by capitalist-democracy—more generally, by usury and its maleficent effects" (Watts, 1952, p.16). Usury, by definition, is the making of money through loan interests; creation of wealth that requires no labor, an income which comes from nowhere. Pound decided against the bank-ridden politics of the West, and instead expressed support for the corporatist policies of the fascist governments, with their heightened propaganda on agriculture, labor and government subsidies. As WWII came to end things took a turn for the worse: he was not driven to exile perhaps, but his fascist radio broadcasts landed him treason charges in U.S. courts. He was detained under horrible conditions in Italy, at one point being kept in a cage; he was acquitted following an insanity defense that led to his decade-long confinement in St. Elizabeth's Hospital. If Dante's sincere love for his hometown adorned the pages of *Comedy*, it was the painful experience of alienation that brought life to sections of *The Cantos*. The majority of Pound's life force and energy was spent to formulate *The Cantos*; spanning over decades in making. Much like Dante's eternal longing for Florence, constant unrest, disappointment and loneliness reigned through the latter part of his life.

If poetry is "a sort of inspired mathematics", as Pound suggested in *The Spirit of Romance* (1952, p.14), it is rather easy to see that the formula with which the modernist approaches his craft has its roots in the refined output of the Italian mastermind: socio-

political agendas employed through stylistic clarity in an ambition not only to diagnose the disease of the contemporary world, but to cure it, at any rate at least to incite a reaction that would result in its cure. This study aims to counter the sterile approach often taken towards Pound's *The Cantos* in an attempt to reveal its true legacy of initiation and change through a comparison with Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy.* I argue that despite its reputation as an antiquated accumulation of knowledge with dispersed poetic merit, *The Cantos* in fact possesses a great dynamism, a moving force that hopes not only to represent the society of its origin, but also to cause its ultimate alteration. Looking at Pound's epic poem through the lens of *Comedy* provides us with a treasure map that leads to a part of *The Cantos'* potential which we have been inclined to ignore. To recall the perceived shared circumstances of Dante's withering Florence and Pound's "botched civilization"[2] helps us to better situate what *The Cantos* aimed to achieve, and the overlapping areas help us to simplify the metaphorical mathematics involved to reach sounder conclusions with regards to Pound's aspirations.

It might be of some use, before moving further in the discussion, to remind ourselves how, and what, *The Cantos* came to be. In a 1917 letter John Quinn, Pound announces, "Then came proofs of *Noh,* and then work on a new long poem (really L O N G, endless, leviathanic)" (TL, 1951, p.157). In 1922, he writes to Felix E. Schelling:

> Perhaps as the poem goes on I shall be able to make various things clearer. Having the crust to attempt a poem in 100 or 120 cantos long after all making has been commanded never again to attempt a poem of any length, I have to stagger as I can. (TL, 1951, p 247)

There were, at the time, few works of some length in modernist literature, but those were either in novel form or in a size closer to that of *The Waste Land* (1922). T.S. Eliot,

[2] Line from Pound's "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley." Citation: Pound, E. (2005, p.130). *Early writings: Poems and prose* (I. B. Nadel, Ed.). New York, NY: Penguin Group.

following the publication of the very first cantos in a literary magazine, applauded the editor Harriet Monroe for "her courage in printing an epic poem in this twentieth century" (Eliot, 1917/2004, p. 24). Even if the long poem could have been somewhat tolerated, the one thing that certainly wasn't in demand was the "canto": an archaic poetic device no one had thought of in centuries since its days of popularity in Dante's *Comedy*. The word canto is Italian for song, and canto's legacy was closely interwoven with sound and rhythm. Pound had declared, earlier in his prose, that "poetry atrophies when it gets too far from music" (ABC, 1934/2010, p. 60). In his "Vers Libre and Arnold Dolmetsch", Pound writes, "Poetry is a composition of words set to music. Most other definitions of it are indefensible or metaphysical" (LE, 1968, p.437). He repeatedly worked with musicians throughout his life, reviewing their works, contributing to their publicity, and even once composing an opera of his own. The canto, with its tonal tradition, responded to Pound's needs of sound; where its monster Dantean projection carried well his ambition.

The "move to the epic"[3] took some time in making. It was in mid 1920s that the very first book-edition of the poems, 16 of them all together, were published under the heading *A Draft of XVI Cantos.* The next four decades saw intermittent publications of sections Pound composed during various stages of his life, until a 1966 fragment devoted to his life partner, Olga Rudge, concluded the work. It wasn't until the next decade that a complete publication was available for the readers. Just as an overview, the final cantos include:

> the classical world of Greece, the European Renaissance of Italy, the T'sung dynasty of China, the American War of Independence, and Europe before and

[3] "Even since "Lustra," Mr. Pound has moved again. This move is to the epic…" (Eliot, 1917/2004, p. 24)

> during the Second World War. Languages include Greek, Latin, French, Chinese, German, Provençal and English. (Nadel, 2007, p. 65)

The final work, in its latest 1996 paperback edition, is a vast 824 pages.

An overview of themes may be considered as such: The poem opens with a beautiful rendition of Odysseus' descent to hell, where the reader is introduced to somewhat familiar Greek figures like Elpenor and Circe. Just within the first few Cantos we get a list of characters that range from Helen of Troy to Sigismundo Malatesta, from Ignez and King Pedro, to Robert Browning. Hell intensifies in Cantos XIV and XV, where hell is "'is a portrait of contemporary England" (TL, 1951, p. 262). The first 30 cantos wrap up the some of its Greek and Italian storytelling, and the upcoming cantos launch into a detailed account of American history that touch on some major figures like Thomas Jefferson, and some lesser known ones as well, like Martin Van Buren. A series of cantos about currency, banks, Sienna, Florence and public debt follow, including one of the most well-known cantos, Canto XLV, on usury and its harmful impact. Midway through the design, the infamous Chinese and Adams cantos take over: presenting historic and personal accounts of ideas on governance, statehood and monetary affairs through Chinese dynasties and personal diaries of the American statesman John Adams. Three separate sections bring the work to a close: *The Pisan Cantos,* written through Pound's experience during his detainment in Pisa, *Section: Rock Drill De Los Cantares,* a mixture of Confucius and Western history, and finally, *The Thrones de los Cantares*, fashioned after Dante's thrones appearing at the end of *Comedy,* with an emphasis on justice. The remaining bits are offered as notes and fragments, with some constituting cantos, while others, like the note on Rudge, personal jottings.

Few decades prior to the Rudge dedication, Pound attempted to explain the inner makings of the poem, 49 cantos then completed, to his old friend and one-time mentor William Butler Yeats. His initial efforts fail Yeats:

> For the last hour we have sat upon the roof which is also a garden, discussing that immense poem of which but seven and twenty cantos are already published. I have often found there brightly printed kings, queens, knaves, but have never discovered why all the suits could not be dealt out in some quite different order. Now at last he explains that it will, when the hundredth canto is finished, display a structure like that of a Bach fugue[4]. (Yeats, 1962, p.4)

The ambition, as Pound tells Yeats, is to create something "as characteristic of the art of our time as the paintings of Cézanne" (Yeats, 1962, p.4). Yeats then moves on to outline an elaborate scheme of letters (ABCD, XYZ) which Pound presented him, corresponding to themes that continuously repeat themselves as well as their inverted selves in an order that doesn't quite sit well with Yeats. In a letter dating April 11, 1927, Pound complains to his father that the "whole damn poem" is "rather obscure, especially in fragments" (TL, 1651, p.284). He moves on to explain his early conceptualization:

> A. A. Live man goes down into world of Dead
> C. C. The 'repeat in history'
> B. C. The 'magic moment' or moment of metamorphosis, bust thru from quotidien into 'divine or permanent world.' Gods, etc. (TL, 1951, p. 285)

Some of the earlier segments of the work reflect this basic outline; it can be said that the remaining sections reinvent the scheme in various ways. What is certain and nonnegotiable, however, is Pound's firm belief in design. In 1932, in a letter to John Drummond, Pound states, "Most Cantos have in them 'binding matter,' i.e., lines holding them into the whole poem" (TL, 1951, p. 323).

[4] A musical fugue is a complex structure that consists of repetition and imitation of different parts of the work, with a 'subject' designated early on in the piece. It contains several layers of melody in its texture, and is perhaps the most difficult one of all musical compositions.

That binding matter, however, proves to be a bit of a trouble. At this point it brings very little to the discussion to say *The Cantos* is a difficult read. If four decades of readership has agreed on anything, it's that the work is obscure, difficult, borderline schizophrenic in its assumptions of the reader's accumulated knowledge. Pound has previously told Monroe that "one can't stop merely because some people haven't read Latin" (TL, 1951, p. 173). Even in his earlier works, Pound has been criticized for his frequent use of history and foreign languages; a critique that was rather underwhelming to Eliot:

> Very few people know the Arthurian legends well, or even Malory … but no one accuses Tennyson of needing footnotes, or of superciliousness toward the uninstructed. The difference is merely in what people are prepared for; most readers could no more relate the myth of Atys correctly than they could give a biography of Bertrand de Born. It is hardly too much to say that there is no poem in these volumes of Mr. Pound which needs fuller explanation than he gives himself. What poems do require is a trained ear, or at least the willingness to be trained. (Eliot, 1917/2010, p. 8)

Is the poet at fault here, or is it some parts on the reader to make it through? Pound himself didn't see much in the obscurity claims, refusing any "mystery" on their meaning, believing certain themes would unlock themselves "as history becomes better understood" (GK, 1970, p.194). "Often," he told Donald Hall, during an interview with The Paris Review, "I think, so-called obscurity is not obscurity in language but in the other person's not being able to make out *why* you are saying a thing" (1962). Hugh Kenner, whose critical works constitute a force of nature for the Poundian tradition, looks into the image of impossibility in his *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (1985). If anything, he finds the phenomenon overrated. Kenner compares our understanding of a poet like Wordsworth, with our understanding of Pound:

> If we do not today regard Wordsworth as a difficult poet, it is not entirely because we have outgrown his sensibility. We have systematically anaesthetized

> against such jutting edges as familiar poetry presents. ... Much of Pound's poetic organization, questions of erudition aside, is essentially similar to Wordsworth's. The reason we do not notice this is simply that tradition has provided us with a cliché version of Wordsworth's poetic objectives ('Leave off thy books;' 'Language of everyday life;' 'One impulse from the vernal wood," etc.) knowledge of which enables us to suppose that we have arrived without having travelled. (Kenner, 1985, p.194-95)

This becomes especially clear in the often negative response the Chinese and Adams cantos get; lines where conventional literary methods of investigation fail and not only the themes (obscure Chinese ruling families) but also the presentation (minute details of diaries, etc) find uncharted territories. Kenner focuses on these two sections of perceived strangeness, and warns the reader of their possible result:

> It can be said of the passages most widely enjoyed in the Cantos that they are either translations apprehended via the original or at least in confidence that an original text exists, or anecdotes and adaptations approached via their sources, like the song of the Lotus-eaters in Canto XX (the identification of sources is for this reason the major labor of commentators)… which utilize Pound's most complained-of devices but which give no trouble because their line of development is equated with some *idée reçue*[5]. The reader who finds the poem brilliant and dull by turns is probably unaware of his intermittent reliance on such crutches. (Kenner, 1985, p.197)

In other words, if we bring rulers to weigh down a box of apples, we are likely to fail in most aspects, except perhaps in taking the measurements of the box itself. Thus some moments of *The Cantos,* which we can fit into familiar frames, receive appreciation, while others garner negative results.

Needless to say during the course of *The Cantos* the unknown territories outnumber the familiar ones. One of these is the complexity of the form. Narration in *The Cantos* is layered, elusive and periodic. A plot is nowhere to be seen, or needed, since time flows in a different manner through Pound's lines. This confusion has opened up a series of critical takes on the work that seeks to focus on one line of thread in a bid

[5] An idea generally accepted.

to achieve some grasp of the whole story. Mary Bernetta Quinn (1954), for instance, chooses to untangle the thread of Odysseus:

> And that myth, set in the first Canto, is th myth of Odyssesus, the hero who wishes to return home but cannot return until he has suffered and learned through that suffering. But far more importantly than the construction is the identification of the person who sees and tells in *The Cantos.* The narrator is Ezra Pound as Odysseus, and his Cantos relate the education of Ezra Pound, the modern man, as Homer's poem relates the education of Odysseus. (Quinn, 1954, p.102)

Quinn opts to follow Odysseus, as set on his journey in the opening Canto, to gain a momentum of access to the work. She is not alone in her efforts. Plenty of works dip into specified streaks of the overall content offered by the poem as means to unravel its continuity. Guy Davenport (1968), in his "Persephone's Ezra", prefers an Ovidian approach, by casting the spotlight on the theme of metamorphosis, as previously stated by Pound. He exchanges the myth of the Greek hero for a myth of metamorphosis, weaved through female goddesses:

> The early interpreters of *The Cantos* tended to see the poem as a study of the man of willed and directed action, personae of Odysseus. It is now clear that the poem rests most firmly in a deeper, stiller sense of humanity, the city and its continuity, symbolized by the goddess of field and citadel wearing the sanctuary of her people as a crown. (Davenport, 1968, p.198-99)

Quinn's tale of education and Davenport's perspective of rebirth can be seen as two major attitudes of filtering in the criticism surrounding Pound's epic work. Neither of which present a complete picture of the work; but they do succeed in imposing a sense of unity on the text.

Despite these few examples, complex criticism is rare when it comes to the studies of Pound. Inherent in the reception of *The Cantos,* was a wave of critical inefficiency that clouded the work and its interpretations. Carroll F. Terrell (1980) admits that the difficulty of the text and the prolonged publication harmed viable efforts,

but a third reason also complicated the poem's reception by critics: Pound's fascism. Terrell writes:

> First, Pound has been identified as a partisan on the wrong side in the most violent upheavals of a violent century. … A decade of war propaganda, which still lingers in the minds of those who lived through it, has made it almost impossible to get past the public image of the poet formed in those years so as to consider what he really believed in and thought he was doing or to get past the mythical man to consider the work—especially *The Cantos*—as an object of art. (1980, p.9)

Where the poet stopped and the poem started, if it ever did at all, became a nuisance for the quality of the critical work; writing suffered under attempts to defend, insult or to ignore the poet. William M. Chace refers to this "social stigma" of fascism as getting in the way of "the study of ideas… [that] would otherwise irresistibly intrigue us" (1973, p.3).

The odds are stacked rather against *The Cantos* as it is, but fascism does deepen the complexity of the piece, both for the critique and the reader. Pound often uses his medium to communicate through an ideology that at points overlap with fascism. His reverence of Mussolini as a man of action, "the Boss", complicates the expression; it strains the sympathy with which less-than-devoted readers might approach such a work. Still, just as Kenner's (1985) habitual hampering gives way to obscurity; most of what we consider as fascist gives way to a misrepresentation of the poem. When poet Archibald MacLeish asks the great Bob Dylan about Pound's work, Dylan is rather clueless, except that he knows that the poet "was a Nazi-sympathizer in World War II and did anti-American broadcasts" (Dylan, 2005, p.110). Dylan, as it goes, had never once read any of Pound's work. Imagine, if you can, the public's perception. Pound, a man who spent the most vital years of his life in constant chaos, wanted order, tranquility and a fruitful society in which arts can flourish; he also wanted to create a

piece of art that transcended all the particularities and expanded over human experience. His notions were about ideas, action, labor and good governance; a good amount of which he found in the fascist propaganda—and subsequently a good amount of fascism can be found in *The Cantos.* Frank Moretti (1996) explains in his *Modern Epic*:

> So yes: the totalitarian temptation is almost always present in the modernist world text, as a reaction to a complexity that has grown beyond every expectation. But it is just a temptation—which never becomes the dominant presence. And let us be clear, it is not that literature cannot be fascist. It can very well be fascist, and indeed has been. But it is harder for that to happen *in the case of world texts*. Culturally impure, transnational, with no longer any sense of the 'enemy', hypereducated, indulgent towards consumption, enamored of eccentricities and experiments: hard to make reactionary works, with such ingredients. Hard, above all, to do so with fragments. … A Fascist fascist like Ezra Pound may well sing the praises of Mussolini ('the Boss'), and insert here and there bits of unadulterated ideology: but I would not really call the overall structure of The Cantos fascist. The man was weak, but the form was strong. (1996, p.228)

It was "the man" with which most of the criticism of the early era was involved in, and still to this day, "the man" remains to be somewhat of an issue.

The attempt of the present work is a response to some of these misgivings: throughout these pages I will offer a reading of *The Cantos* through a Dantean lens, in a bid to honor its unity not only in form and theme, but also in ambition. *Comedy* follows the journey of Dante through three stages of the afterlife: hell, purgatory and paradise. Through each stage the audience is introduced to a series of figures, real and fictional, much like throughout *The Cantos,* embodying different virtues and vices, punishments and rewards which Dante saw fit according to his worldview. Guided by Virgil in the earlier stages, Dante is ushered into the experience by his beloved Beatrice, who now resides in heaven. While presented as a journey to follow her, and subsequently to reach God's grace, Dante's poem in fact reveals the ills of his time and offers, sometimes blatantly, sometimes a bit more conspicuous, the respective remedies. It's an energized

manifesto, a formation of the world as it should be, not as it presently is. Most criticism on Pound tends to refer to Homeric or Ovidian influences with regards to *The Cantos*, limiting the Dantean input mostly to a half-hearted hell-purgatory-heaven construct. There are, however, great similarities between the two epic works with regards to ambition and charge; and through the poems, it becomes quite clear that Pound's attempt is an embodiment of what Dante aimed at following *Comedy:* movement, and change, for a better world. *The Cantos* benefit from keeping in mind the position and strength the Italian poet assigned to poetry as an initiator of change. It was an interventionist desire to change that gave way to Dante's work. David Higgins (1993/2008) writes:

> His keen interest in the contemporary world, his desire to identify himself with his times, and his fascination for the *immediacy* of any situation, if they led ultimately to his political downfall, were by the same token responsible also for the genesis of *The Divine Comedy* and in part for the power of his poetry in his major work. (1993/2008, p.7)

Not only did he hope to rewrite the world into a better shape, but he strived to do so through his poetic capabilities, by assigning the poet with a mission of modern nature:

> It is precisely this aspect of Dante and his works—a concern to participate directly in the events of his time, formulate protest and register shock—that puts him in tune with somewhat with our own times. Dante, the first great poet of our times, was also the first great writer whom we may term *engagé.* That is to say, he was the first creative writer of our millennium who took a notable stand with regard to the current moral, religious and political issues of his day, and whose work springs from irreconcilables, when frustration and disappointment are released in the act of creation. (Higgins, 1993/2008, p.11)

The very first *engagé* gave way to a brand new understanding of art and the artist. Dante not only imagined, but he wanted that imagination to transcend into a system of order headed by those he figured to be the solution. The resulting work was a gateway, a tunnel; never a final destination. It wasn't simply storytelling, but a hopeful act of initiation.

The Cantos therefore is structured much like its medieval counterpart, not as a frozen instant in time, but as a fluent current of movement. Pound saw in himself, as Dante had done centuries back, the responsibility of the torch-bearer; and the flame of that torch was language. Language was the direct kinship of ideas to action, and both men believed in the significance of language in the contemporary societies of their respective times. It is no coincidence that prior to penning down their epic poems, Pound and Dante both produced prose pieces that delved into the construction, use and significance of language. Pound's years of criticism, and his modernist habits, were always shaped by a feverish loyalty to language, and to its healthy construction. Language, in its rightful quality, is a strong weapon. According to Pound:

> Language is not a mere cabinet curio or museum exhibit. It does definitely function in all human life from the tribal state onward. You cannot govern without it, you cannot make laws without it. That is you make laws, they become mere mare's nests for graft and discussion. (LE, 1968, p.76-77)

And again a few lines after that:

> As language becomes the most powerful instrument of perfidy, so language alone can riddle and cut through the meshes. (LE, 1968, 77)

Not only was language crucial, it had to be *real*—it had to connect to its people. Dante's earlier *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (early 1300s) portrays his attempts to come up with a quality vernacular—the vulgar tongue. The vernacular is distinguishable from the higher language of artificial grammar that one can only learn through scholarly pursuits, therefore it's nobler. The use of real-world language, realized by people through direct agency, was so important to Dante that he shunned the more respected form of tragedy when the time came to write his pivotal epic, and chose instead the comedy. Comedy allows for its writer to use the vulgar, common language, unlike tragedy's higher style. Dante utilized that to the maximum through his changing figures.

A sense of clarity and directness shapes such a loyalty. Language had to be connected to the living; it had to be unadulterated. Pound despised abstractions; he viewed them as the ultimate impurity. His revolutionary essay "A Few Don'ts" is largely a warning against the muddy water of abstract constructions, veils of clichéd descriptions that get in the way of the true meaning. His motto-like declarations of "Go in fear of abstractions" and "Use either no ornament of good ornament" have become stable pieces of the culture of creative (or non-creative, for that matter) writing. Under the heading of "Language", he writes:

> Don't use such an expression as 'dim lands of *peace'*. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer's not realizing that the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol. (EW, 2005, p.254)

His dislike of abstractions was so profound that it constituted the basis of his hatred of usury, where labor becomes an abstraction of its own:

> One of the worst consequences of usury, Pound argues, is a trust in abstractions or—more precisely—an abuse of abstractions, a use of them as a screen to hide from both the rulers and the ruled what is really 'up' in our civilization. Thus 'liberty', 'progress' and 'free competition' conceal the realities that Pound finds frightful. … For the abstractions we keep repeating have no relation to what is really happening in the usurer's world; they serve, in that world, the function of deceptive ornament, non-functional and invalid. (Watts, 1952, p.31)

Clarity, according to Pound, was one of the highlights of Dante's work:

> *The Vita Nuova*[6] is strangely unadorned; more especially is this evident if it be compared with work of its own date. It is without strange, strained similes. … Dante's precision both in the *Vita Nuova* and in the *Commedia* comes from the attempt to reproduce exactly the thing which has been clearly seen. (SR, 1952, p.126)

To define *Comedy* as "direct" and "clear" may seem like a stretch when its symbolic dimension is concerned; but Pound's method of inspection was with regards to the use

[6] *The Vita Nuova (The New Life)* is a book of poems Dante penned prior to the *Comedy*, also inspired by the love and loss of Beatrice, to whom he strives to reach throughout the epic.

of language through which ideas were *realized*. Dante's ideas are always grounded in images, in historical figures, in actions that resound with a strange sense of realism despite the supernatural settings around them:

> The characters of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven are therefore preponderantly of verifiable historicity: from Virgil to Brunetto Latini, Lucretia to Beatrice, Constantine the Great to Emperor Frederick II, they stand as concrete *exempla* of vices and virtues, not mere ethical personifications such as are found without exception in works of medieval literature before Dante. (Higgins, 1993/2008, p.22)

"Clarity, order and relevance" rings through the work despite its spiritual ambitions, not because grand ideas don't exist through it, but because they exist in "concrete" terms, they are not cloaked behind inexplicable abstract decorations (Higgins, 1993/2008, p.23).

If we are to remove needless abstractions, what is it that we are really after? A single word: action. Both *The Cantos* and *Comedy* are manifestos in the sense that they do not only depict a situation, but they call for action, for participation. Truth is a manner of behavior, it isn't simply an idea (an abstraction, we may call it), but a course of action. Pound writes:

> Not only is the truth of a given idea measured by the degree and celerity wherewith it goes into action, but a very distinct component of truth remains ungrasped by the non-participant in the action. (GK, 1970, p.182)

Ideas in action, the opposite of ideas as abstractions, lie at the heart of *The Cantos*' composition. One of its earlier heroes, Sigismundo Malatesta, is praised as a builder; his monumental temple, dedicated to his mistress Isotta, is built, as Pound dictates, through a series of struggles with the church and the bank who try to get in the way. Men who build, reap, found—these are the men Pound employs in his panorama of history,

because these are the men who *act*. Dante's counterpart to the problem of inaction is not only to praise it when it's there, but also to punish it when it's not:

> Here the novel idea of Ante-Hell is introduced, which has no precedent in either Christian or classical conceptions of the infernal realms. This region lies outside the confines of Hell proper; it is a sort of no-man's-land to which the 'luke-warm' in this life are relegated—those whose life was a compromise over important issues of all types, the 'sitters-on-the-fence', the moral cowards or neutrals… In Dante's view they were not worthy of Hell, and even less of Heaven. (Higgins, 1993/2008, p.10)

There is a reason why Virgil calls this flock of miserable spirits "those who have lost the benefit of intellect" (INF III, p.56) [7]. Intellect, much like language, is of no use unless it is connected to action. Dante goes further to say that these people did *nothing* for their lives, chose no sides, angered and pleased no one. They are similar to those who stand against the likes of Pound's Malatesta, who stand against action and participation.

The evolving thread of ideas-in-action is what holds most of Pound's historic faces together; it is also the theme through which their significance is unveiled. Watts explain the importance of action in Pound's plans:

> Only 'ideas in action' continue to ring changes that are vital; they do not fade out into a chime heard only in the memory or—hideous mishap!—a chime generalized. If our society is to be made new, it must experience that stimulus that comes from actually experienced ideas, 'ideas in action'; it must cease to expect guidance from ideas which are abstracted from reality, which are but gibbering, impotent shades of action. (1952, p.32)

Canto LI speaks of "the light of the doer" (p.251); Canto LXXXI claims "the error is all in the not done" (p.542). Pound's collection of faces represents "above all things a man who exercises his will, who brings things to pass" (Whittier-Ferguson, 2010, p.223). Elsewhere in Canto XVIII needless wars reign due to men "who couldn't put up a good

[7] The same logic that shapes *The Cantos* citations also applies to *Comedy*. Each quotation will be provided with its canto number and page unless several pages are used within a single sentence, which will then be referred to in footnotes. The edition used may find in the References page.

hen-roost" (p.83). Pound's waves of thought crash upon failures of incompetence; negation of human's intellect by prevention of its realization. Just like Dante's men who "have lost the benefit of intellect", the recipients of Pound's anger end up being the men who entangled the relation between thought and action, reflective in their usurious ways, and their incapability to further the light on which human potential depended.

Comedy and *The Cantos* strive for a better world. A world in which political rightness, spiritual wealth (even in secular intellectual terms as presented by Pound) and human involvement unite to break free from the shackles of misery; both works hope to present a new form of order. Dante's order is one with a divine flavor:

> The central principle, both of God's creation and Dante's *Divine Comedy* is order. Within the structure of the whole, moral and political lives have their own proper structures. The purpose of this order is to allow God's creatures to live in joyful harmony with their Creator. To attain temporal and eternal happiness, individual souls need to be rightly ordered. (Farnell, 1985, p.18)

There is a symbolic significance to the *in medias res* method of both poems; Dante starts midway through the forest and Pound opens right in the midst of a rainstorm, on a ship, by the looks of it, about to go down. Higgins finds the forest as a representation of "error, Dante's own, but also that of Everyman" (1993/2008, p.15). Dante presents the error in lists of misguided church officials and tyrannical rulers; he unveils the corrupt nature of those that placed it in such a horrid state of dishevelment. Pound too does the same. He finds his error in economics, through which society, politics and art have deteriorated. If the error of usury can be fixed, then man can have a rightful order again—an order that foresees the culmination of good language, integrity and intellectual enlightenment. Dante's divinity is made up of forms of light; Pound's light is made up of the intellect.

An innate optimism ensures the safety of the structure. Pound's blind devotion to fascist leaders comes from a place of hopefulness; he believes firmly that these men of action will proceed as they promise. That is rarely the case in politics. While the brutal natures of particularly the Nazi regime should have been a wake-up call, it is likely that Pound's method of simplifying complex political matters to singular cause-solution linearity had pushed him towards blissful ignorance; he turned his focus more on Italy rather than the German end. Watts states that his "optimistic naiveté" allowed him "to believe that his general hopes found specification in Fascist Italy" (1952, 21). Dante shares a less politically charged version of the same hope:

> Dante's optimism about the possibilities of human nature leads him to believe that, in principle, cupidity can be overcome. Appetites can be checked, initially through the power of law, and ultimately through the acquisition of the moral virtues through habituation to virtuous action. (Farnell, 1985, p.126)

Dante's optimism reserves a seat for Henry VII, the Holy Roman Emperor, who attempted to reinstitute an imperial order that would reign over the corrupt Italian states. As Pound rested his hopes on Mussolini's agenda, Dante found his earthly hero in the imperial goals of Henry VII, the "Augustan upon earth" (PAR XXX, p.485). What followed optimism, however, was disappointment. Henry VII died during the composition of *Comedy*, and a similar fate was brought upon Mussolini. The dire conditions of his death are portrayed in Canto LXXIV:

> Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
> This Ben and la Clara *a Milano*
> by the heels at Milano
> That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock (p.445)

Benito Mussolini, along with his mistress Clara Petacci, was shot to death first, and then hanged by the ankles for display. It was a pitiful end to a pitiful estate—Pound's hopes had come to nothing; Mussolini, along with others, had failed to become instrumental in

the achievement of a better society. Most of the remaining cantos deal with that disappointment, and the bitterness that comes with it; but the optimist, or whatever is left of him, continues to direct *The Cantos* towards a path for the better world.

And here it could be said that we have covered in rather general terms the basis of my argument: that *The Cantos* is a moving piece; its strength lies in its charging will of change, and its heritage comes from the epic tradition that was reinvented by Dante with the realization of *Comedy*. If *The Cantos* is the course, then *Comedy* is the better light that helps us stay on it.

CHAPTER 2

KINGDOM OF THE DEAD[8]: HOW WESTERN EPIC ALTERED WITH THE AGES

"*Do you think that ashes, or ghosts underground,*

can mind about such things?"

Virgil, *Aeneid* IV, 35-36

The Cantos is commonly regarded as the ultimate epic poem of the modern age. An epic is "a poem including history," Pound declares (LE, 1968, p. 86), but the degree to which it includes that historic streak and its uses have been prone to change over time. To see how Pound follows Dante's line of thought, we must clarify how the Western epic came to form its tradition, and what how it evolved as a genre with regards to its dealings with history and heroes. Van Kelly, in his introduction to *Epic and Epoch,* offers a rather extensive definition of the genre:

> The epic is a creative habit, mentality and practice, expressed in verse and/or in prose, that (1) attempts to adequate a spatiotemporal vastness, and a sense of the multiplicity of sociopolitical and cultural frames that transcend individual interests, with a continuous narrative… and (2) simultaneously attempts to merge that wide field of referents into a highly-dense symbolic, or mythic, structure that is exploited and "worked" continuously and intensively as if the context were lyrical, not narrative. (Kelly, 1994, p.17)

The epic, in principle, employs two sets of characteristics called "mnemonic traits" and "regenerative traits":

> Any epic carries within its own language and organization a segment or segments of the genre's prior evolutionary history. Any such segment, or mnemonic trait, is first translated from its former context; then it is combined with other traits that the epicist has created ingeniously, has borrowed from other

[8] "They said: 'Who is this creature, who, without death/ travels through the kingdom of the dead?'" (INF VIII, p.79)

> genres, or has assimilated from other domains (contemporary history or politics, for example). Characteristics taken from non-epic sources, which I will call regenerative traits, in combination with mnemonic traits from the pre-existing canon, furnish mixes that progressively redefine epic, allowing it to stay clearly attached, despite the passage of time, to earlier exemplars of the genre… (Kelly, 1994, p.5)

One can associate Pound's descent to hell in the opening cantos as a mnemonic trait, employed both by Homeric epics, and Dante's *Comedy* prior*;* whereas his unique ideogram style and feverish journalistic streak can be seen as his attempts to revitalize the genre. The epic as a genre, and as a story-telling tool, takes its greatest strength (and arguably its rather intimidating nature) from its ability to bridge the past to the present. The epic is not simply *long*, but expansive; its themes are grand, their dealings intricate, its structure "a layering of the ages" (Kelly, 1994, p.16). Its obscurity comes from its "extensive representation of the human condition," adorned with "a symbolic denial" that charges against the reduction of literature to an innately private, individual-sized expression (Kelly, 1994, p.17). Dante's timeline may not extend to centuries, but his people do; an earlier example of *Aeneid* weaves its romantic tale to the "history of the world" (Auerbach, 1929/ 1961, p.11). Pound brings forth plenty of the past to his poetry with his present tale continuing, and this method intensifies with *The Cantos.* Tradition adds on to tradition through his lines.

2.1 The Homeric start

The Homeric epic is an institution. The war-torn journeys of wrath, revenge and homesickness, attributed to Homer as their creator, are the cornerstones of the Western civilization, shaping much of what we consider today to be the Western storytelling. Passing on from generation to generation, their impact has been of an eternal kind. *Iliad*

traces a decade of war in Troy through the personal battles of the fierce warrior, Achilles; while *Odyssey* serves as a follow-up by bringing to the front lines the hero Odysseus, and his troubled journey back to his home, now nearly invaded by suitors clawing at his wife. These works not only reflect the dominant values of their respective eras, but they are also the very first examples of how history and society slowly formed the genre of epic. Paul Barolsky explains in his *A Brief History of the Artist from God to Picasso*:

> The close relations of history and poetic fiction traceable from Vasari to back to Pliny can be pursued even further back in time, to the dawn of ancient Greek literature in the epic poetry of Homer, in which history and poetic fiction were intertwined for the first time. …. In fact, classicists and scholars of ancient art history, even when disagree about details, are forever attempting to demonstrate the different ways in which the world of Homer's poems reflects the real world of Greek history. (Barolsky, 2010, p.12)

These works were the root of a long line of tradition that sought to define and record human experience; however, they also gave way to one of the key struggles of the genre. Was history *necessary?* How much of it had to be involved? Was the story really about the Trojan War, or was it simply about a man involved in it? Is it the history, or the hero? W. P. Ker writes:

> Early epic poetry may be concerned with great historic events. It does not necessarily emphasize—by preference it does not emphasize—the historic importance or the historic results of the events with which it deals. Heroic poetry implies a heroic age, and age of pride and courage, in which there is not any extreme organization of politics to hinder the individual talent and its achievements, nor on the other hand too much isolation of the hero through the absence of any national or popular consciousness. (Ker, 1908/1957, p.20-21)

To say that Homer's epics were the retelling of history may be of a stretch, but their reception as such shaped much of what history came to occupy within the genre of epic. From an early age, these works were taken not just as moral stories, but also as historical

recollections of particular societies. According to Wallace Gray, they were treated as history courses:

> The *Iliad* was the education of Greek youths in the fifth century B.C.; it was considered history, not literature. Children were expected to memorize large portions of the text, to model their behavior on that of the heroes, and to practice the ethical codes presented in the epic. (Gray, 1985, p.8)

Iliad, being the chronologically prior installation, set most of what was later on coined as an epic; but even within the two works, themes and methods progressed. *Odyssey* became a work much different from *Iliad,* taking on the basic notions of history, morality and society from its predecessor, but adding its own flavor to the mix. Some of the trends that later on emerged in the works of Virgil and Dante, saw their early inceptions between *Iliad* and *Odysseus.*

The key change comes with the emergence of the Homeric hero, not as the fate-driven Achilles, but as the cunning and plotting Odysseus. The early days of the Dantean poet-hero, and ultimately Pound's set of infused narratives, can be traced to the shaping of Odysseus as "the first total man in Western literature" (Gray, 1985, p.17). Gray parallels our modern understanding of the conflicted man with the becoming of Odysseus:

> Odysseus, on the other hand, is the first alienated hero. He is truly alienated from society and foreshadows so many twentieth-century heroes. Alienation allows one to see from a distance, usually creates difficulty, and thus knowledge, through crisis. The Greek word *krisis* carries within in the meaning of separation and judgment. In order to judge, one must separate, make distinctions, make choices. Odysseus is a man of choices. (Gray, 1985, p.31)

This shift, ultimately, defines the entirety of the piece; turning *Odyssey* to be a regenerated version of *Iliad*.

2.2 The Narrative of an Empire

History and hero continued to collide in the following centuries. The Roman epic altered the genre with the help of Ovid and Virgil, and a new era of myths, narratives, and imperial agendas emerged. It was through the works of Roman poets that instrumentality of the epic became evident in not simply recording the past, but in shaping the present, and hopefully, securing the future. Sander Goldberg points out to a wave of "self-consciousness" in the Roman poets in their manipulation of literary construction "as an instrument of social definition" (Goldberg, 2010, p.169). Goldberg writes:

> They worked from extensive knowledge of what their Greek predecessors had done n the fields of epic and drama and also knew from Greek examples what "literature" could do for fostering civic ideology and national identity. … Roman poets, as heirs to old Greek traditions even as they founded new Latin ones, put the past to work for the present and in the process set a clear course for the future. … (Goldberg, 2010, p.169)

The Homeric epic had included history as loyalty to circumstances affecting the story's subjects; but the Romans had found a way to amplify the strength of their works by employing it in the field of social and political ideologies. After all, Virgil's hero, Aeneas, comes from Troy, and is briefly mentioned in the Homeric poems; but it's his regeneration as the mythical founder of Rome that makes him the leading figure of *Aeneid.*

Embedded in Aeneas' journey is the ultimate destiny of giving way to the Roman Empire; the whole work is fashioned to situate Rome alongside the mythical Troy, where history is pulled closely to the present, and not only legitimacy, but also legend-value, is constructed. In Wallace Gray's words, Virgil's method was to create "a parallel between the world of Roman Empire and the classic world of Homer" (Gray, 1985, p.97). There was one strong distinction, according to Peter Toohey, between how the

poets intensified their work: Homer's poems focus very little on the rule or the regime under which the stories occur, and instead stay on the issue of "power and how it benefits the group"; Virgil, on the other hand, has a clear "focus is on institutional power, which might also be described as empire" (Toohey, 2010, p.37).

The other strand of impact Roman poetry left of the genre of epic follows, without a doubt, the construction of Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* Ovid's stories focused on a variety of actors, and the narrative shifted to follow each in its own might, but the overall theme remained a unified concept. Ovid's work also carries Virgil's multiplicity of narratives, which Toohey defines as "imperial", "private" and "ludic" (2010, p. 39) one step further: *Metamorphoses* presents as many view points as the number of gods and myths it brings to the page. This break in the unity of narrative, as well as the vision presented later became the key point of the genre, findings its way to *Comedy* and *The Cantos.* In the core of the change is Ovid's succession in highlighting the individuality of feeling:

> The change wrought by Ovid entailed no less than an upending of the Homeric and Virgilian imperatives of the collective and their replacement with a new narrative royalty: a loyalty to the private, to what was based in private emotion or affect. (Toohey, 2010, 41)

The private emotion brings on a personal dimension to Ovid's tales of change; and through the changing characters, highlighted the persona of the poet. Barolsky defines Ovid's poetry as "very personal", bypassing military victories and societal confusions, he instead "metamorphoses martial glory into the poet's—namely, his own" (210, p.32). This isn't to say, however, that Ovid lacks all bonds to the Roman narrative of imperial glory. *Metamorphoses* occurs as if it's made up of individual pieces, but it still carries an overarching sense of ambition. Much like *Aeneid*, the poem hopes to infuse then-current

figures, like the empire, with the touch of legends by employing mythical narratives. According to Toohey, Ovid hopes to "provide a link between mythological heroes and non-mythological heroes such as Hercules, Aeneas, Romulus, Julius Ceasar, and Augustus" (2010, p.43). It was this merging of the myth, persona, and agenda that slowly shaped the tendencies that gave way to Dante's *Comedy.*

2.3 Dante's epoch

It could be said that *Comedy* wasn't so much communicated as it was unleashed on its audience. It was a strange tale unlike anything anyone had ever encountered, certainly not in the Italian language, and it didn't appear to follow any of its creator's previous works. Yet great works of art often follow one another; and this was still the case with Dante's epic journey to death and back. Rooted in its lines were images, stories and narratives picked up from the prior examples of the epic genre; with Virgil singled out as a guide and mentor. The reason for Virgil's stardom was largely caused by Dante's desire to follow the former's conception of the underworld; but the Roman poet's manifestation of political mythology was surely another factor.

In the sixth book of *Aeneid,* Aeneas, after completing a list of requests by the gods, finally enters the underworld: made up of rivers, forests and caves. Virgil's underworld, according to Wallace Gray, is similar to a prototype of the later Christian conception of afterlife:

> Virgil roughly divides Hades into regions corresponding to later Christian concepts of Hell, Purgatory and Heaven: there is a place where sinners are being horribly punished; one where there seems to be neither pleasure nor pain, inhabited by Phaedra, Dido, and others; and, finally, a beautiful, blessed grove where we find priests, poets, other artists, and Anchises, the father of Aeneas. (Gray, 1985, p.105)

Hence Dante chooses Virgil as his guide through the intricacies of the afterlife; a journey he fashioned much like the one lead by Aeneas. Barolsky follows this thread of thought as well, stating that Dante's journey is in form a direct descendant of Virgil's tale, except now colored with Christian dogma. The Christian spirit, according to Baroslky, is "assimilated into the classic epic tradition" (2010, p.49). This should not, however, trick us into thinking that Dante's merit was a mere case of repetition, according to Erich Auerbach, who points out that Dante "incorporated in his work a Virgilian element that he had thoroughly transformed" (Auerbach, 1929/1969, p.90)

Several changes that occur through *Comedy* altered the genre in unique ways, and resulted in the palette of colors with which Pound painted his *Cantos*; but the most significant one indubitably was the assertion of character. Prior to *Comedy*, character was something that remained in the shadow of the event that reigned through the epic poem; even with Aeneas, the mission means more than the man. Dante's men and women however, including the Everyman persona he attributes to himself, are vivid creations independent of the event or the plot; and each appear in striking manner. Auerbach writers:

> But Dante records no events; he has only a moment in which everything must be revealed; a very special moment, to be sure, for it is eternity. And he gives us something which the Greek tragedy scorned, namely, the individual, concrete qualities of man: through language, tone, gesture, gesture, bearing, he penetrates to the essence. (1929/1961, p.142)

This strengthening of individuality finds its absolution in Dante's Everyman, as the poet, for the first time, becomes the hero of the epic. It is Dante who finds himself in the forest, where it all begins, and it is Dante, to the very end, that speaks to us. The voice is individual—it is unique; it is unmistakable. Barolsky calls this change from hero to poet-hero as the "epoch-making shift" (2010, p.32).

This individuality brought on another unique change: in the lines of *Comedy*, history and fiction come together to form a strange, hybrid historicity that reflects and affects Dante's present times. Not only does *Comedy* feed on myths and mythical creatures, but it completes them with contemporary personae. There is an encyclopedic tendency to the completion of its current data: according to Auerbach, Dante aims at "a coherent view of the world", something that could then only be achieved through "an encyclopedic system" (1929/1691, p.75). But avoiding the present was out of the question, since "to Dante culture and tradition were inseparable from the living present" (Auerbach, 1929/1961, p.98). Through *Comedy* we meet various contemporary figures, some, like Guido Cavalcanti, remembered fondly; while others, like Pope Boniface VIII, much less so. In a somewhat renewed Virgilian move, Dante bridges the past, present and future by bringing his contemporaries alongside historical figures—even fictional ones, like Ulysses. The journey is dated, by Dante, as 1300; according to Lino Pertile, the poet utilizes his decade-and-a-half head start as a mean to induce the tale with a prophesying streak (1996, p.66). The story then becomes a contemporary event for the contemporary audience—it is presented not as simply myth-making, like *Aeneid* and its Roman foundations, but as a guide, a living process, an ongoing gesture, "a fully integrated answer to all questions and fears of his contemporaries" (Pertile, 1996, p.67).

The contemporariness of the work, in part, stems from Dante's own frustrated ambitions. A man of political significance, much of Dante's life is spent making a lot of noise but very little change; his ideas, plans, make-shift treatises that seek to finalize the debate between the Church and the state—none of them come to anything in the political spheres which he served all his life. Even worse so, Dante's ideas were slowly themselves becoming remnants of the past. As Pertile puts it:

> … the ideological and historical premises that underpinned [the synthesis of the world] were manifestly failing, and the unity of the medieval world was irreversibly breaking up under the pressure of historical forces superior to any individual will. Dante perhaps dreamed that his poem would somehow reverse this irresistible process of disintegration… Dante confronted in the *Commedia* a knot of problems which deeply affected European civilization at the end of the Middle Ages… (1996, p.55)

Comedy was to achieve what its poet had failed to do in the circles of political turmoil; it was fashioned as an attempt to right the wrongs that had been left otherwise unscathed, and it was to do so through a narrative that was simultaneously wide in scope, historical in its ambition, and excruciatingly individual. Surprisingly, this was exactly what, 600 years after Dante's salvation, the Modernists were still trying to achieve.

2.4. The Modern Epic

The epic lost some of its glamour as the centuries went by. Chronologically, a brief look into Milton's *Paradise Lost* may have been of some use, but Pound's personal dislike of the work and the method through which it was constructed, renders such an act rather redundant. *The Cantos* share next to nothing with Milton's story of God and his creations, and Pound's repeated dismissal of the work proves that. Thus I will move straight on to the changes that the genre underwent in the early years of the 20th century—the reign of the modernist literary movement.

Van Kelly points to the never-ending struggle of genre that just won't die, stating that in spite of frequent declarations of its finality, "the epic has not so much persisted through change as it has changed in order to renew itself and persist" (1994, p.2). Perhaps the greatest of these changes was the desertion of the poetic epic, and its assimilation to the novel form; or at least the curbing of its magnitude in verse. There is a reason why Frank Moretti's *Modern Epic* looks only into novels in its study of epic in

the twentieth century, namely James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *One Hundred Years of Solitude,* and if verse is to be looked at, we find writings more on the lines of *The Waste Land*, "a poem that is less an epic than a gathering of parts that might belong in an epic" (Whittier-Ferguson, 2010, p.214). In Kelly's words, the modernism of the twentieth century was the very change through which the epic persisted.

Modernism in the early twentieth century can be seen as a very specific set of circumstances that left their imprint upon the general public in such deep ways that even today, we can find its traces in our understanding and expression of the world around us. Pound is often acknowledged as the godfather of modernism, both for his prolific prose manifestos that named, identified and clarified a majority of the modernist terms that we use today; and also for his instrumental capabilities that allowed for the creation of some of the era's most beloved productions. It is nearly impossible to find any notable modernist of the time that hadn't been in some form of communication or professional dealings with Pound, who strived not only to edit the texts themselves, but also find ways for these works to reach the public, to change the settled archaic manners of publishing, and perceiving, literature. When placed together, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, H.D. and others create a panoramic view of change that is hard to miss; yet this change, much like the most radical moments in Pound's writings, come with a stern grasp of the past from which it had sprung. Modernist works of literature, if anything, incorporate tradition and history in such a blatant manner that their works constantly struggle with obscurity. John Whittier-Ferguson writes:

> one of the hallmarks of modernism's epic is that they continually signal their belatedness, their status as 'second-time' productions, and one of their most recognizably modern features is that their authors write while looking over their shoulders at the shelved books, the textual archives that precede them. (2010, p.212)

The modernist drive to remember, and to reflect, can be seen as the several-times updated version of the Virgilian desire to recreate myths. This link to the past masters is one of the key aspects of the modernist formula, and its process depends on the redefining of the crucial concepts of time and memory. Memory, for instance, "becomes more idiosyncratic and more private, more personal," (Whittier-Ferguson, 2010, p.213). Time becomes a "psychological" search; "archeological dating" becomes the norm (Davenport, 1968, p.179). The internal eye, seeing through past occurrences in present format, produces results of divided narrative, a fragmented story-telling; texts "that come to us in pieces," and are, without exceptions, "assemblies of distinguishable and often separable parts" (Whittier-Ferguson, 2010, p.214).

Epics are inherently cumulative; reaching over timelines and geographical borders, they contain behaviors, inspirations, and cultural carbon traces of their times. The modern epic transformed this notion of representing to a process of cataloguing, of preserving and interpreting:

> The notion that the epic cumulates all disciplines, literary and extraliterary, survives into the Romantic period and is even accentuated, giving the genre an increasingly steep epistemological aspect. Pushed to its limits, literary encyclopedism tends to fragment the unified narrative base that epic theorists from Aristotle onward have assigned epic poetry. (Kelly, 1994, p.13)

The epic can portray a "scientific and behavioral microcosm" of the worlds through which they arrive, but the modern author had an altered experience compared to the previous epochs (Kelly, 1994, p.12). Moretti compares Homer's use of geography and genealogy in establishing his characters, with the off-handed listing of Joyce's references:

> And it has changed because—where the ancient epic was able, and almost obliged, to construct its own encyclopedia—the modern epic is not, because encyclopedias already exist. (1996, p.219)

The historic pile of information receives a different perspective: with image-like qualities, the modern epic gathers its references not to purely explain, but to construct.

So these happenings result in the newly furnished epic of the modern era. The modern epic becomes a mirror to these changes, and in return, these changes alter it. The new works show us "how poorly the ancient, heroic genres (the questionable romance, the epic, the spiritual life-narrative and parable) fit the twentieth century" (Whittier-Ferguson, 2010, p.214). The form changes, with fragments and memory moving to front lines, but the aspirations remain close to the origins. What the modern epic shares, along with its predecessors, is the desire to reveal something overarching, something that, though defined by instances, still carries weight. "All of these ambitious words," Whittier-Ferguson writes, "aspire to connect the personal with larger forces, deeper knowledge" (2010, p.217). *The Waste Land,* for instance:

> takes us to the roots of civilization, beyond mere first person anguish and insight, towards the most powerful, most primitive symbols and narratives underlying the 'stony rubbish' of modernity and the isolated self. (Whittier-Ferguson, 2010, p.217)

For *Ulysses* and *The Cantos,* Frank Moretti writes:

> For these are books whose ideal reader is no longer the individual, but an entire society. It is the epic ambition again, re-emphasizing the growing rift between individual and species that we have often encountered. World texts—and texts written *for* the world. (1996, p.222)

So these works, just like those of ancient epics, tread along towards the same transnational end: an encompassing sense of human experience defined through the era's "regenerative" senses.

Works like the *Comedy* and *The Cantos* don't come around too often and there are several reasons for that; most of which come from the extensive weight of the genre of epic, and its vulnerability to certain tendencies, like encyclopedism, to fall short of the mark. As J.K. Newman puts it, "the genre remembers" its own peculiarities and brings them forward when a new material is being formed (122). Here is also a genre that contains a multiplicity of meanings, openness to a variety of interpretations. According to Stuart Y. McDougal, Pound noticed this in *Comedy* early on:

> As Pound returned to Dante's work in the years that followed, he found the *Commedia* to be more than just a "lyric poem," as he designated it in *The Spirit of Romance*, or an "imagist poem," as he called it in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*: it was a poem containing history, with a panoply of methods which Pound could continue to study and draw upon in his struggle with his own *Cantos* (1985, p.79).

The vastness of meaning carried within *Comedy* not only shaped Pound's own ambitions, but also showed him the way to achieve them. It was that "panoply of methods" that bridged six centuries of time, and united the two works in ambition, and in style.

CHAPTER 3

FINDING THE ERROR: DEPICTIONS OF A DIFFICULT WORLD

"*It is difficult to write a paradiso when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse."*

Pound, during an interview with The Paris Review, 1962

"Brother, the world is blind, and you are of it." (PAR, XVI)

It is no coincidence that Dante opens his epic poem in the midst of a "wild and rough" forest (INF I, p.47); and Pound greets us with a ship going down in the eye of a fierce storm. The starting points on which these men begin their journeys reflect their horror in facing the realities of the world in their day: Dante struggles with the consequences of political factionalism, exiled, alone; Pound endures through two world wars and countless losses, only to be labeled as a traitor. Challenging these shortcomings of the world is not only the very first step taken by *The Cantos* and the *Comedy*, but also the key element which pushes these poems towards their agenda of change and improvement.

Dante repeats his Aristotelian creed when he declares, close to the end of *On World Government (De Monarchia)*, that "the way to win an argument is to expose an error" (1957, p.57). The idea of an error runs through most of all of Pound's works, but *The Cantos* uses it intensely, like a specific shade of color in the vastness of the overall palette, assigning it to each character or scheme that represents a part of the problem. A large portion of his earlier criticism too focuses on defining the wrongs committed

against language, against literature, against poetry; so that they may be altered. The idea of an error, where the possibility of remedy is inherent, drives the pages of *The Cantos* and of *Comedy*. Nature, willed by God, is without defect, according to Dante (1957, p.38). Men, on the other hand, have plenty of defects; all of which disrupt the path of the divine design:

> Natural love is always without error,
> But the other kind may err, in the wrong object,
> Or else through too much or too little vigour. (PUR, XVII, p.273)

When Pound hones in on what he considers it to be the underlying current of all ruin—usury—he too labels it, in all capitals, "CONTRA NATURAM" (Canto XLV, p.230). It should be noted, however, that Pound's nature is very little the divine intention of Dante's, but more so a pagan understanding of the conditions apparent in the universe that fulfills the basic principles of existence and function.

For Dante, Florence and its downfall becomes the clearest example of human error; and Pound dissects the decomposing body of Europe in its worst moments. What is, then, this error; this mismanagement of the naturally perfect? Both works align to a similar concept, albeit in different manifestations. Dante finds the disease in greed, rotting the roots of spiritual and political institutions, and Pound in usury, and in corrupt economics that poison the mind.

3.1 Wealth, corruption and clergy: Dante's Italy

The "universal goal of human civilization" for Dante is the "realization of man's ability to grow in intelligence" (1957, p.5). And to achieve that, he insists in the early pages of *On World Government* (1957), universal peace on earth has to be accomplished—which, he considers, is only possible under a strong monarchy. Yet things get in the way and

mankind makes errors at his own expense. *Comedy* is a guideline to the realizations of these errors, and to their possible amendment. Greed seeps into the civilization and brings its slow decay, and such decay, Dante writes, is most clearly manifested in his native Florence—a land once a precious jewel, now "stained with red blood" (PAR XVI, p. 422). Through the pages of *Comedy*, Florence frequently becomes the example of all that has gone wrong with the world: a hotbed of ineffective politicians, faction wars and materialistic clergy officials, including the highest of all, the Pope, who disturb the city's progress in a bid to collect riches and power to satisfy their greed.

It is no surprise, however, that Florence takes up so much of Dante's time. A.P. d'Entréves defines the three major currents in Dante's political thought as *civitas, imperium* and *ecclesia* (city state, the empire and the clergy respectively); and states that *civitas* is "the first constituent element of Dante's theory of politics" (1952, p.24). Florence becomes one of the focus points of the poem, and a mirror reflecting all men's mistakes. In Canto XVI of *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil run into noble Florentines, Guido Guerra and Tegghiaio Aldobrandi, who are being punished for participating in sodomy. The souls are worried about the state of affairs in their native city due to unpleasant words from a fellow Florentine, Guglielmo Borsiere, who explained to them that, "new families, who have made sudden gains" and "have generated pride and immoderate ways" (INF XVI, p. 112). Dante cannot help but agree, and his silence proves to the fellow citizens that the dire image is true. By Canto XXVI of *Inferno*, Dante cries out:

> Rejoice, Florence, seeing you are so great
> That over sea and land you flap your wings,
> And your name is widely known in hell!
>
> Among thieves I found five of them,
> Your citizens, enough to make me ashamed,
> And you get no great honor by that. (INF XXVI, p.154)

Thieves, corrupt officials and greedy citizens all gunning for wealth turn Florence into something Dante despises.

A part of Dante's anger towards Florence stems, indisputably, from his own state of exile. A victim of faction politics, Dante felt the reaching hand of Pope Boniface VIII, when he was driven out of his native land as a result of internal conflicts inside his own Guelph party. Having buried most of the Ghibellines in earlier conflicts, the Guelphs, previous supporters of the Pope, suffer through internal conflict as a rebellious section refuses to back Boniface. When Boniface covertly ordered for his exile, resentment in the harrowing results of unruly conflict became not only a public experience for Dante, but also a private one. Natalino Sapegno writes:

> The exile represents a deep crisis, one that has certain elements of remote preparation even in the preceding phase of Dante's life and one that ultimately affects all aspects of it. His religious conviction, political theory, mental state, and philosophical preparation all converge in that moment of exile in which Dante awakens not merely to an abstract, theoretical realization or consciousness, but to a personal consciousness, one paid for with his own existence and therefore deeply felt. He takes cognizance of the profound crisis investing all aspects of European and Christian civilization—a waning medieval civilization. (1967, p.3)

Exile provided an emphasis on the shortcomings of not only his own life, but of Florence's, and of the world in general. It provided him with a view mostly colored by nostalgia for when days were slightly brighter, before strife and confusion took on the city, hence the world. In Canto XV of *Paradiso,* Dante's own ancestor, Cacciaguida, greets him, and begins to tell of the old days of Florence before greed, and consequently, strife, took hold:

> Florence within the ancient circle
> From which tierce and nones are still rung,
> Lived in peace, soberly, decently.

> There were no golden coronets
> Embroidered gowns nor bands about the middle
> Which were more to look at than the person herself. (PAR XV, p. 416)

These were the days, according to Cacciaguida, where "there were no houses empty of families" (PAR XV, p.416). Then he recounts, one by one, all the fallen families of Florence that were lost in the factitious wars. He ends his tale by saying:

> With these people and with others with them,
> I saw Florence enjoy such peace
> That there was nothing for which she had to weep;
>
> With these people I saw her inhabitants
> In glory and justice, so that the lily,
> Was never turned upside-down on the flagpole
>
> Nor, through division, stained red with blood. (PAR XVI, p.422)

As clothes become more expensive and people vainer, Florentine politics suffer from greedy grasps for power that resuls in the wasting of noble families that were once the cause of its pride. All this cause irreparable harm to the city:

> How many times, in the years that you remember,
> Have you changed laws and coinage, offices, customs,
> And even brought in new inhabitants!
>
> And if you see yourself in a clear light,
> You will see that you resemble a sick woman
> Who cannot stay upon quiet upon her bed
>
> But twists and turns all the time to ease her pain (PUR VI, p.225)

While Dante vehemently explains the shifting tides of the city, a point of interest lies with the "new inhabitants." An underlying tension of Dante's critique of Florence is a medieval form of right-wing immigration politics. Dino Bigongiari, in his introduction chapter to *On World Government*, writes:

> When in the Divine Comedy he comes to distinguish the good from the bad, a strange racism appears which seems to rout all Christian belief. The Florentines, he tells us, are partly good, partly bad. The good are those who descended from

> old pagan Romans; the bad are those whose progenitors were the people of Fiesole. (1957, p. xiv)

Conflict with Fiesole was a part of Florentine consciousness, a part which embedded itself onto Dante's. A.P. d'Entréves, having examined early examples of Florentine political thought, concludes:

> In these first attempts to relate the history of Florence, two motifs are particularly significant: the place given to the antagonism between Florence and Fiesole and the importance attributed to the Roman descent of the Florentines. The earliest manifestation of political ideas in Florence would thus appear to be one of growing 'nationalism'—perhaps the Italian *campanilissmo*[9] is still better word. (1952, p.14).

Corruption came in several forms, and racial corruption too was an element which the conservatives of Florence, along with Dante, saw as a sickness. According to Raffaello Morghen, his anger towards immigrants led Dante to support possible invasion:

> Against the degenerate Florence, infested with that "ungrateful wicked populace" (ingrate popolo maligno) descended from the beats of Fiesole and from the immigrants of the countryside, Dante did not hesitate to invoke the vengeance and punishment of the ineffective Henry VII. (1967, p. 37).

It altered the citizenry of the city, Dante believed; it contaminated its pure nature with greedy interruptions of foreigners.

Wealth is searched for not simply by the citizens and politicians, but most alarmingly, by man of religion—who are the worst offenders in Dante's eyes. Rather than leading the people to goodness and Christian values, clergy too fills the vaults with gold and by courting the favors of the Pope in bids of wealth and power; they commit the worst errors of greed. Florence is now a place of greed which "produces and diffuses that cursed flower/ which has sent both sheep and lambs astray" (PAR IX, p. 390). In Canto XVII of *Paradiso*, Dante prays:

[9] The Italian word *campanile* translates to bell tower—a key building in village life. Thus *campanilissmo* can be translated as a form of devotion to one's native village or city.

So that once more there may be anger against
The buying and selling inside the temple
Which is walled with miracles and martyrdoms.

Oh army of prayer which I contemplate,
Offer a prayer for those who upon earth,
Are led out of course behind a bad example!

The custom was once to make war with swords,
But now it is made by taking from one or another
The bread of the loving father keeps from none. (p.431)

Not only do church officials betray their divine mission of upholding God's vision, they further sin by preventing mortal people from following spirituality and God's way. This, Dante concludes, is rooted in their greed for wealth, for earthly treasure, for which they are sacrificing God, and speeding up the fall of civilization by failing their duties. Considering the massiveness of the Christian agenda embedded in *Comedy*, the significance Dante assigns to the purity of the Church is quite understandable. In Canto XVII of *Paradiso*, Dante refers to Rome, and indirectly to Vatican, as "the place where Christ is bought and sold every day" (p.424). To him, the institution and its members only follow their own rules, not God's, and have only earthly goals:

In this manner the gospel and the great doctors,
Are abandoned, so that only decretals
Are studied, as may be seen by the margins.

It is on that that the pope and cardinals are intent:
Their thought does not go as far as Nazareth,
Where Gabriel opened his wings.

But the Vatican, and other choice parts
Of Rome which have become the cemetery
Of all the soldiery which followed Peter (PAR IX, p.390)

The popes no longer follow the holy writing, nor cast their eyes towards holy lands such as Nazareth, but spend their time trying to enjoy the gifts of earthly Rome. Dante claims that decretals, documents penned by the pope to settle questions on the rules of religion,

are valued higher than the actual religion itself, and are manipulated by clergy to garner more strength.

The church, and its greed for power, not only affects individual lives but also the life of the whole country—Dante sees the strife and confusion of Florence as a micro version of the entire Italian nation. With Vatican and city states grabbing for prizes, Dante draws attention to the sufferings of Italy, once the glorious home of culture, now lost in battles and petty maneuvers. The vehement state of Italy is apparent in the story of Count Ugolino as Dante tells it in Canto XXXIII of *Inferno.* Ugolino, an Italian politician and a nobleman of Pisa, through a series of betrayals and fights over power between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines, ends up being imprisoned in a tower. His adversaries, led by Archbishop Ruggieri degli Ubaldini, place the Count's sons and grandsons with him; where all of them, the young ones before Ugolino himself, fall victim to starvation. After two days of crying and calling out of their names, Dante furnishes the tale with a single line that leaves a mark on the reader: "And, after that, grief was less strong than hunger" (INF XXXIII, p. 188). Almost the entirety of Ugolino's tale, including his brutal end, is historically accurate; excluding the cannibalism, which is largely considered to be Dante's adornment of the fictional account. That, however, isn't all Dante does. Ugolino is seen in one of final circles of hell eating Ruggieri "just where the brain joins the nape of the neck" (INF XXXII, p.184). Thus both men, guilty of betraying others in the name of wealth and power, spend the rest of eternity in a mutual punishment—but Ruggieri, having caused sufferings of the innocent, himself suffers just a bit worse that his prisoner.

The story serves, more than any of the remaining rhetoric on Italy, as a dire portrayal of the state of strife and greed in the country—caused largely, in Dante's mind,

by Church's meddling with political affairs. A key strand of Dante's political thought is the idea of "two suns"—the Roman Empire for worldly affairs, and the Church for spiritual ones (PUR XVI, p.269). The problem arises, according to the Italian poet, when the Church assumes the role of the emperor as well, claiming dominion over the political affairs of the country, turning Italy into "a place of grief/ A ship without a master in great storm/ Not mistress of provinces, but a brothel" (PUR VI, p.222). The poet Sordello explains to Dante:

> And now your living children are always at war;
> People thrown together within the same wall and ditch
> Cannot live without biting one another.
>
> Wretched country, look around your shores,
> On every coast, and then into your heart
> And see if any part enjoys peace. (PUR VI, p.223)

Sordello further states that the problem is an empty "saddle" that fails to help Italy through stormy days. That very saddle, once filled with strong monarchs, now lacks the necessary might to lead the way. And the fault again lies with the Church and its misgivings, since "people who are supposed to be devout" failed the empire and did not "let Caesar sit well in his saddle" (PUR VI, p. 223). Bad church leads to bad government, and that leads surely to a bad world:

> You can see easily that bad government
> Is the cause which has made the world wicked,
> And not your nature, corrupted though it may be.
>
> Rome, which was the maker of the good world,
> Used to have two suns, by which could be seen,
> Both the road of the world and the road to God.
>
> One has put out the other; and the sword is combined
> With pastoral crook, the two held together,
> It must be of necessity be that things go badly (PUR XVI, p.269)

If good government reigned, Dante believed, all these errors, with greed at the core of them, could be fixed; and the obstacles, most of which set up by those wanting wealth, riches and power, could be removed. Sapegno summarizes Dante's woes on the Church:

> The corruption that has invaded spirituality and religion has extended to all fields. This has happened precisely because the Church has forgotten her function, her religious mission, in order to turn to illusions of power and wealth and to interfere in fields of activity not properly hers. It is for this reason the world is in disorder and the imperial authority is no longer recognized. (1967, p.13)

And mismanagement of power, Dante emphasizes, slowly gnaws at the pillars of the world.

Whether or not the situation was as horrid as Dante argues to be is debatable. Plenty of the changes that he complained of—increasing trade, cultural fusion, nation states—were ultimately what the next generation of humanity accepted. Sapegno states that part of the darkness of Dante's image comes from the exclusion he experienced during his exile:

> The pages of the Commedia that can be cited to characterize and define this scene of deterioration are infinite. From these pages emerges a deeply pessimistic view of mankind's state at the time. This pessimism is born in the poet's soul after his exile; it is evident in his works written at this time, in which there is a growing sense of solitude and isolation from a world he no longer understands or, at least, refuses to understand or accept. (1967, p.7)

Dante's reflection of the world came from a mixture of exclusion, longing, anger and frustration—and the errors which he found in the fabric of his medieval world reflected that. Pound, too, shared a similar fate—and found similar errors seeping into the atoms of the world.

3.2 Usury, grief and carnage: Pound's Europe

The first half of the twentieth century was the worst of times that Europe has ever encountered. It was also the block of time, in Pound's life, that shaped him the most—

transforming him from a wide-eyed revolutionary of the higher cause of literary perfection to a rather weary, frustrated, angry resident trapped in a tide of culture continuously falling apart. Just as the world awakened from the horrid nightmare of the First World War, the second one followed—the rise of Nazi Germany, the rapid invasion of Europe, the U.S. involvement in the war unraveled, one after the other, in a matter of few years. Pound, who has fled to Europe in hopes pursuing high culture, was dealing with its disarray. By 1920s, he was too tired to keep trying to "resuscitate the dead art/ Of poetry" ("Hugh Selwyn Mauberley", 1990, p.185). His move to Italy's Rapallo only deepened his sense of being an outsider, a non-reluctant participant of an age, and of a world system, he no longer felt adequate for human development. It was through this sense of despair and frustration he intensified his economic emphasis, and began to look for world's troubles within the scope of misguided economic errors.

The answer, to him, was obvious. The economic system of the world was rigged, and usury was causing the malfunctioning of the whole system. Usury, much like Dante's greed, was showing its ugly head *everywhere*; it wasn't the cause of one form of decay, but of all of it—politics, government, intelligentsia, the arts… In his *nota bene* at the end of Canto XLV, Pound defines usury as, "a charge for the use of purchasing power, levied without regard to production, often without regard to the possibilities of production" (p. 230). It was the root of all the world's problems, because it was the symptom of a greater defect: a contradiction against nature, a mishandling of function and potential. It was, in itself, *an abstraction*—something Pound abhorred.

So he did what he thought he could do best: expose the error through poetry first, so the amendment could be implemented as the next step. It was a method, Pound

realized, that had been used before his time. In his literary essay "Date Line," Pound refers to Dante as the previous champion of the said method:

> I thought in my jactancy that I had performed a *tour de force* when I reduced a contemporary economic equation to what the benevolent consider verse; within 24 hours (twenty four hours) I came on Dante inveighing against Philippe le Bel for debasing the currency… (LE, p.86)

Dante gives reference to coinage and monetary mistakes several times during the course of *Comedy*, as he delves into the symptoms of greed in society. Usury, too, he mentions, when he comes to the seventh circle of hell, where those committing violence against nature are punished. Dante questions why usury "offends divine goodness" and receives the answer:

> That your art follows nature, as far as it can,
> Much in the way in a student follows his master;
> So that your art is the grandchild of God.
>
> From these two, if you recall to mind
> The beginning of Genesis, it is proper for man,
> To win his bread and to advance his race:
>
> And because the usurer takes another way,
> Treating nature and what follows from her
> Contemptuously, he puts his hopes elsewhere. (INF XI, p.92)

If we are to take God out of the equation and use nature as an end in itself, Dante's sense of usury and Pound's understanding of the concept do not fall that far from from each other. In the essay "Hell," Pound retrospectively reflects on Dante's aim:

> One advantage of having the book in penetrable idiom is that we (one, I) see more clearly the grading of Dante's values, and especially how the whole hell reeks with money. The usurers are there as against the nature, against the natural increase of agriculture or of any productive work.
> Deep hell is reached via Geryon (fraud) of the marvelous patterned hide, and for ten cantos thereafter the damned are all of them damned for money. (LE, 1968, p.211)

Greed and material ambition is a component to Pound's usury; whereas usury is part of Dante's greed—a matter of emphasis separates the two.

The most well-known of all the cantos, Canto XLV, is devoted to usury's condemnation by the poet. It truly is a "tour de force" of poetic merit infused with an economic agenda; but it is also a sincere dedication to the beauties of art and knowledge, all of which, Pound concludes, are now part of the past: the arts will never be as pure and as wonderful, if usury continues to infiltrate all fields of human existence. Pound writes:

> with usura[10]
> seeth no man Gonzaga[11] his heirs and his concubines
> no piture is made to endure nor to live with
> but it is made to sell and sell quickly
> with usura
> is thy bread ever more of stale rags
> is they bread dry as paper,
> with no mountain wheat, no strong floour
> with usura the line grows thick
> with usura is no clear demarcation
> and no man can find site for his dwelling
> Stonecutter is kept from his stone
> weaver is kept from his loom

Pound continues to count down several of the world's greatest paintings and cathedrals, saying they would never have come to life had they been interrupted by the ways of usury. He ends the canto by saying usury destroys what is natural:

> It hath brought palsey to bed, lyeth
> between the young bride and her bridegroom
> CONTRA NATURAM
> They have brought whores for Eleusis
> Corpses are set to banquet
> at behest of usura. (Canto XLV, p. 230)

[10] The Latin word *usura* means, in the literal sense, "the use of" something, but has come to be known as "interest."

[11] Here, Gonzaga, stands for "any of the great patron lords from Mantua" that further helped the progression of the arts in the region (Terrell, 1984, p.178).

In a classic Pound move, a Greek motif finds its way through the poet's cry: Eleusis, a place for sacred celebrations in Greek myths, is interrupted by prostitutes. Usury decays even the most sacred. It rots through the thought. According to Pound:

> Usury is contra naturam. It is not merely in opposition to nature's increase, it is antithetic to discrimination by the senses. Discrimination by the sense is dangerous to avarice. It is dangerous because any perception or any high development of perceptive faculties may lead to knowledge. The money charger thrives on ignorance. (GK, 1970, p.281)

Intellectual capabilities, most dear to Pound, are not any safer than moral values, when it comes to usury.

"In the gloom," Pound writes, "the gold gathers the light against it" (Canto XI, p.48). As values and civilization decay, greed and wealth become more and more important. This could be easily seen in what has been since called the "Hell" cantos—Canto XIV and XV, where Pound describes the state of England in the early decades of the 20th century. England, to him, becomes the Florence of his age: a place of high culture of intellectual and artistic endeavor that has morphed into the most despicable example of civilization's downfall. Reed Way Dasenbrock writes:

> The modern world was for Pound is as driven by *cupiditas*[12] as Dante's world was form him, and both poets incarnate this *cupiditas* in a given city, Florence for Dante and London for Pound. (And they picked well enough, for the two cities were key economic centers of their times.) But both cities came to represent not just centers of corruption but Hell for the poets, and both poets represented themselves as exiled from these cities because of their opposition to *cupiditas*. (1990, p.524-25)

When favorites fall, they don't land, but crash with force. Quite a strong tone dominates both Hell cantos: there is very little to rejoice or to look forward to; there is repulsion, rather than tragedy. The situations depicted are degrading, borderline gruesome. Dante's

[12] The Latin word for avarice, greed.

influence in Pound depicting his own hell is apparent from the very start: the section opens with a line from *Inferno,* about complete darkness, and continues to describe the state of people condemned to reside in that horrible place. Politicians, "their wrists bound to their ankles/ Standing bare bum/ Faces smeared on their rumps," are there, so are "betrayers of language" and "the perverters of language,/ the perverts, who have set money-lust/ Before the pleasure of the sense" (Canto XIV, p.61). He adds, close to the end of the Canto, "obstructors[13] of knowledge/ obstructors of distribution" (p.63). In the next Canto, we see "the beast with hundred legs, USURA" talking to the residents of hell, explaining them wealth and the benefits usury will bring (Canto XV, p. 64). "The best with hundred legs," is also a Dantean reference to the beast of Geryon, who guards the door of Malebolge—the final circles of hell. Pound continues to use usury and Geryon as interchangeable throughout *The Cantos,* relying on its hundred legs and fraudulent nature as representative of usury's reign. When confronted by a friend on the strong language of the poem, Pound writes, "that *section* of hell precisely has *not* any dignity. Neither had Dante's farthing devils. Hell is not amusing. Not a joke" (TL, 1951, 385).

It is those who are taken under the curse of usury that become the focus point of Pound's chaotic Europe. In modern age, usury proceeds through the banks, so Pound spends quite some time on the formation and management of banks that feed off of usurious ways. The bank, Pound states, "creates out of nothing" (Canto XLVI, p.232). Pound follows the trail of Dante, to a more updated version: what the bank does is to break the connection man has to the earth, to agriculture, to labor. It corrupts the very basic of production, *out of nothing,* it creates. Throughout *The Cantos,* the Rothschild

[13] Pound's spelling.

family is frequently chastised due to their wealth collected through the usurious bank system. Considering their immense wealth, Jewish roots, and Pound's anti-Semitism, they serve as a perfect catalyst to what Pound considers as a usurious destruction. Against the likes of them and the modern age banking, Pound puts up the early days of the Bank of Sienna—now the oldest still-standing bank in the world—and finds in its formation a reliance on the human component. Historically, the Bank of Sienna, Banca Monte dei Paschi di Siena in its original name, was formed to help the locals with agricultural investments, relying on already existent state money.[14] To Pound, who struggles against unfair capital but not capital all together, Sienna represented a lucky break in history.

Pound believed that the chaos of usury, greed and unfair wealth translated themselves into two world wars. It is these two wars that have the strongest impact on Pound's world view. "In 1920," he puts in *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, "I saw nothing in Europe save unscrupulous bankers, a few gangs of munitions vendors, and their implements (human)" (1970/ 1935, p.93). Much like Dante's faction wars, and their turbulent consequences; World War I and II shape most of what Pound sees in the deterioration of Europe. In part IV of "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley," a poem written right after the First World War, Pound writes:

> Died some, pro patria,
> non "dulce" et non "et decor"
> walked eye-deep in hell
> believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving
> came home, home to a lie,
> home to many deceits,

[14] Ironically, the modern age didn't treat the Bank of Sienna too well. During my research, I came across reports of the bank's involvement in a major fraud scandal in 2014. Italy as a whole has suffered through a rough few years in banking. In a way, it goes to show that Pound's ethical values in finances were relics of a past age; in our day and age, no bank is more innocent than the other.

home to old lies and new infamy;
usury age-old and age-thick
and liars in public places. (1990, p.188)

The banks, the money and their accomplices unleash violence and cruelty into the world to create profit. In Canto XVI, he again revisits the toxic environment of the war, and the wastage of lives:

They put Aldington on Hill 70, in a trench,
dug through corpses
With a lot of kids of sixteen,
Howling and crying for their mamas (p.71)

One of those lives, wasted, belonged to Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, a close friend to Pound, who writes, "and they killed him/ And killed a good deal of sculpture" (p.71). Not only did he suffer personal loss, but the country suffered the loss of plenty of its bright individuals. "The 'best of England'," he complains in *Guide to Kulchur*, "having gone out and got shot in the first months of the 1914 war" (1970, p. 190). After all, "wars are paid for in blood and carnage. Indiscriminate murder is respectable, discriminate murder is criminal, and so forth, so weiter, etcetera" (1970, p.116). As for London, he is quite clear: "After the War death was all over it" (1970/ 1935, p.49).

By the time both world wars end, Pound's tone reflects sadness and isolation. A sense of defeat colors his nostalgia—nostalgia for a culture wrecked by unethical money relations and two world wars. "As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill," he speaks, during *The Pisan Cantos*, "from the wreckage of Europe" (Canto LXXVI, p.478). In one of the most delicate moments of the piece, at the end of Canto LXXX, he speaks of wanting to see London again, even though "God knows what else is left of our London" (p.536). Wars end, occasionally, but banking never does. "We are not yet out of *that* chapter," he writes in Canto LXXVII (p.488). When he returned to Italy following his trial and

confinement in St. Elizabeths, his chosen home was no longer home-like. "Europe was a shock," he told Donald Hall in 1962, "the shock of no longer feeling oneself in the center of something is probably a part of [disappointment]" (The Paris Review, 1962).

Before closing down the chapter on Pound's portrayal of the world, it's rather a necessity to delve into the poet's much-debated anti-Semitism—an undeniable part of the poet's worldview. The depths to which Pound's mind was influenced by racial hatred through his life may be questionable; but its existence in *The Cantos* is not. The anti-Semitism comes and goes, in flashes that appear and disappear across several instances throughout the work. His earlier rhetoric on *Guide to Kulchur* on the issue sounds somewhat milder, where he condemns racism as a "red herring" and "the tool of man defeated intellectually", before moving on to say that usury runs through *every* race, just like it does through the Jewish people (GK, 1968, p. 242-243). That statement, however, comes as a direct contradiction to some of the anti-Semitism present on the pages of *The Cantos.* Most of the racist name-calling is done through narratives of various characters, rather than the poet interjecting the content in a personal tone. One of the clearest examples is Canto LII, where a series of racial slurs run through it:

> Remarked Ben:[15] better keep out the jews
> or yr/ grand children will curse you
> jews, real jews, chazims, and *neschek*[16] (p. 257)

Pound, following age-old racial prejudice, assigns the business of usury to the Jewish race, hence his immense anger towards its corrupt ways end up being unloaded on the shoulders of Jewish people. The Rothschild family takes the heat the worst, and Pound often uses the bankers' name in attempts to express the unjust ways of usury. Most of

[15] Pound is referring to Benjamin Franklin. According to Carroll F. Terrell, "the document on which this line was based has been exposed as a forgery" (1984, p.201).
[16]The Hebrew word for interest. (Terrell, 1984, p.200).

Pound's better-known anti-Semitist statements come from a series of broadcasts he did during the World War II, where his tone is both hateful and offensive. His later statements, curbed by facing up to the destructive imprint hate speech left on his life's works, often rebuked his earlier racism, and he expressed sadness and guilt over them. He told Allen Ginsberg in 1967, "My worst mistake was the stupid suburban prejudice of anti-Semitism all along. That spoiled everything" (Ginsberg, 1986, p.8). His eventual change of heart, however, does very little for *The Cantos*, where his anti-Semitism is cemented as part of the worldview he struggles to get across, destined, perhaps ironically, to become the most well-known aspect of the poet, and retrospectively, the poem.

Pound, as a man and as a poet, was the result of the chaos he endured. What connected him to Dante, more than anything else, was the insistence on the need for a poetic representation of the wrongdoings of the world, so that their correction can also come through. Both men sought to inject to the mass consciousness a strong sense of awareness, so that humanity could go forward; in other words, for remedies to be presented, the error had to be identified. In a bid to draw out a treasure map for change, Dante blamed greed for corrupting even the holiest, and Pound placed financial dishonesty under the spotlight. They were forced to experience a world riddled with personal and public crises, and those crises colored their judgment; which, in return, shaped what they hoped to communicate to their readers.

CHAPTER 4

THE SHAPE OF THINGS: PRECISION AGAINST RHETORIC

"The touchstone of an art is its precision."

Pound, "The Serious Artist"[17]

Pound, aiming to direct the youth to some sort of useful literary understanding, declares, "Consider the definiteness of Dante's presentation, as compared with Milton's rhetoric" (EW, 2005, p.257). It comes as no surprise that Pound found most of what he himself supported, like clarity, directness and avoidance of abstractions, in the words of the Italian mastermind, rather than in the prolonged narratives of Milton's troubled Satan. Even through its most divine invasions, *Comedy* retains its visual prowess, its dependence on the event and on the object. It was such a refinement that Pound not only admired and praised in Dante, but also aimed to achieve in his own epic journey.

4.1. The visual skeleton

Pound's insistence on the object as the ultimate goal, and his aversion to rhetoric and abstraction, is well-known; but what we often miss in our dealings with Dante is that the same sense of precision runs through his tale of the afterlife. In *ABC of Reading*, regarding Dante's focus on sounds in poetry, Pound writes:

> Dante's statement is the better place to begin because it starts the reader or hearer from what he actually sees or hears, instead of distracting his mind from that actuality to something which can only be approximately deduced or conjectured FROM the actuality, and for which the *evidence* can be nothing save the particular and limited extent of the actuality. (1934/ 2010, p. 31).

[17] EW, 2005, p.241.

The starting point of actuality is, as Pound once stated among his imagist principles, "the direct treatment of the 'thing'" (EW, 2005, p. 252). This can be found in the visual skeleton that carries the *Comedy*; Dante never strays too far away from the thing as it is—no matter how phantasmic that thing may be. It is this closeness to the object and the action that fascinates Pound. The *Comedy* is one of the most frequently illustrated pieces in classical literature; and this is caused by the infinite inspiration provided by the direct telling of the surroundings in which souls are damned, cleansed and saved. Even in the case of Geryon, an unreal creature of imagination, Dante's eyes lead his poesy:

> His face was the face of a just man,
> So mild, if you looked no deeper than the skin;
> The rest of the body was a reptile's:
>
> He head two tentacles, hairy to the arm-pits,
> His back, his breast, and both his flanks were garish,
> With a variety of knots and and whirls.
>
> Tartars and Turks never made cloth with colors
> Brighter than that, background and pattern together,
> Nor did Arachne ever weave such webs. (INF XVII, p.115)

Geryon's detailed description is not a unique case in the pages of *Comedy.* Dante often plays with light, colors, shadows and texture to develop the idea he wishes to convey to the reader. In the opening canto of *Purgatorio,* he writes:

> Sweet color of oriental sapphire,
> Which gathered in the clear face of the sky
> Right to the very edge of the first circle,
>
> Restored to my eyes the touch of pleasure,
> As soon as I issued from the dead air
> Which had saddened my eyes and my heart (PUR I, p. 200)

As Dante continues to move forward in his journey, what he sees alters, but his insistence on it never does. Again, early in *Paradiso,* the visuals are stunning:

> It seemed to me we were covered by a cloud,

> Shining and thick, as if solid and polished,
> Like a diamond which has been caught by the sun.
>
> The eternal pearl took us into itself
> In the same manner that water receives
> A ray of light through it, yet remains entire. (PAR II, p.356)

The reader is consistently offered images upon images, a direct link from the eye to the mind.

Throughout *Comedy*, the images are often the sole bearer of the responsibility of conveying any sort of narrative to the reader. Time after time, Dante describes things as they are, with his beautiful tone and undeniable poetic merit, and leaves the object to do the rest of the work. Cyril Hinshelwood writes:

> Indeed no quality of the *Divina Commedia* is more striking than Dante's all-pervading preference for clear, concrete, luminous and colorful visual images, which arouse the feeling that he is not so much describing in the purely literary sense as laying down a specification for a painting, or indeed is engaged in painting before our eyes. (1965, p.39)

Thus, abstractions are rather pointless for Dante. A little after the above passage, Hinshelwood focuses on the imagery that prevails throughout the lines of *Comedy*:

> Its development and elaboration immediately become quite literal and concrete: dark wood, savage, rough, terrifying: sleepiness, hills, valleys, rays of the star, the beasts, encounter with Virgil, all these are untinged with abstraction. There is no talk of vain deluding joys, sorrow's faded form, or anything of the sort. (1965, p. 51).

Hinshelwood moves on to declares that it is such a use of language that dislocates most of Shakespeare's greatest moments from functionality, since "phrases like *such stuff as dreams are made on, all the world's a stage, leave not a wrack behind, last syllable of recorded time, death's dateless night*, are utterly non-visual and completely unpaintable," therefore, rather useless to Dante (1965, p. 44).

The reliance on the object seen is one of the building blocks of Pound's poetry. Despite decades piling up on one another as he composes *The Cantos*, his understanding of natural beauty, and his reliance, much like Dante's, on the proper telling of the object as it is seen, never changes; on the contrary, it thrives, and never disappoints. In a letter to Harriet Monroe, he writes, "Language is made out of concrete things. General expressions in non concrete terms are a laziness; they are talk, not art, not creation" (TL, 1951, p.91). There are many examples throughout *The Cantos* of imagistic perfection, of a refinement of the visual. To note a few, we may start with Canto XXIX, where the opening lines stun the reader with their effortless elegance:

> Pearl, great sphere, and hollow,
> Mist over lake, full of sunlight,
> Parnella concubina[18]
> The sleeve green and shot gold over her hand (p. 141)

Canto XLIX, the famous "Seven Lakes Canto," begins with:

> For the seven lakes, and by no man these verses,
> Rain, empty river; a voyage,
> Fire from frozen cloud, heavy rain in the twilight,
> Under the cabin roof was one lantern.
> The reeds are heavy; bent;
> and the bamboos speak as if weeping.
>
> Autumn moon; hills rise about the lakes
> against sunset
> Evening is like a curtain of cloud,
> A blurr above ripples; and through it
> Sharp long spikes of cinnamon,
> a cold tune amid reeds. (p. 244)

Again, in Canto LXXVI, colors are evoked:

> And the sun high over horizon hidden in cloud bank
> lit saffron the cloud ridge

[18] Carroll F. Terrell identifies "parnella concubina" as the mistress of Count Aldobrando Orsini. The canto continues to talk about betrayals and murder among the Orsini family members (Terrell, 1984, p. 115).

dove sta memoria (p.472)

And finally, in one of the most well-known passages of the whole piece, longing, sadness and weariness translates into a visual tour de force:

> as the young lizard extends his leopard spots
> along the grass-blade seeking the green midge half an ant-size
> and the Serpentine will look just the same
> and the gulls be as neat on the pond
> and the sunken garden unchanged
> and God knows what else is left of our
> my London, your London
> and if her green elegance
> remains on this side of my rain ditch
> puss lizard will lunch on some other T-bone
>
> sunset grand couturier. (LXXX, p.536)

These passages do not in any form rely on elaborate rhetoric or forced-over metaphors. There is nothing in these lines that "dulls the image," as Pound writes in "A Retrospect"; nothing that "mixes an abstraction with the concrete" (EW, 2005, p.254). There are only images—objects—reflected in the eyes of the poet, and the reader, as "the adequate symbol" (EW, 2005, p. 254). Just as Dante's sapphires, Pound's sunsets, lakes and lights help us communicate with the feeling, and the narrative, intended by the poet, without stiff metaphors or endless abstractions.

The directness of the image, and a close camaraderie with the object leads Pound and Dante to a similar path—that of an emphasis on the particulars, on real examples; as opposed to general theories. It is through particulars that they form the ideas with which they hope to alter their respective communities; and it is through these particulars that they hope to show others the better path.

4.2 Dante's particular people

If abstractions can be avoided through the use of objects, then rhetoric can easily be avoided through the use of particulars—that is, exact moments, acts, and statements that come together to reflect the desired idea. While it could be said that both Dante, and Pound, were men of grander schemes; and that their planned ideals were great in size, they were nevertheless always grounded in real behavior. It was their insistence on the object that allowed them to see that ideas mattered in as much as they could be used with corresponding actions. The way metaphors weaken whenever distanced from the objects, ideals lose blood when taken away from real instances.

Dante knits salvation through the exposure of individuals guilty of specific behaviors; each vice, and virtue, comes through the specific acts of specific persons. There are never elongated explanations with Dante; the desired message follows, even in the most spiritually infused section of the poem—*Paradiso*—particular men and women, and their particular behavior. Comparing Dante's use of language with some of his Italian predecessors, Erich Auerbach writes that "even where he deals with a very general theme, it is transformed by the keenness and range of his perception; it ceases to be a mere figment of thought and seems to become a concrete historical reality" (1961, p.42). This is why a tale like Ugolino's haunting demise serves far better than pages and pages of rhetoric on the divisions between Italian nobles; or why Dante finds expression for even the most divine principles through various rulers, philosophers and saints, ranging from Justinian to Virgin Mary.

The fact that Dante offers, for each virtue or vice, a list of people guilty or possessive of it, shows his firm belief in the power of the particular over generalizations. Higgins writes:

> The characters of Hell, Prurgatory and Heaven are therefore preponderantly of verifiable historicity: from Virgil to Brunetto Latini, Lucretia to Beatrice, Constantine the Great to Emperor Frederick II, they stand as concrete *exampla* of vices and virtues, not mere ethical personifications such as are found without exception in works of medieval literature before Dante. (Higgins, 1993/2008, p.22)

Dante's moral codes of salvation rests on the actions and reactions of a host of figures that color his pages—from the very first stages of hell to the highest circles of heaven. These little particulars—shaped and represented by individual certainties—add up to create a vast moral panorama. Still, the narrative is never muddled by anything out of place, or out of directness:

> With all their evocative power and emotional overtones, there is never any vague impressionist suggestion in these landscapes of hell. The exposition is always orderly and methodical, as in a realistic record, and even where he raises his voice to adjure, even where he arouses sympathy, anger, dread or horror in the reader, he never sacrifices the strictest clarity. (Auerbach, 1961, p. 110)

Clarity, based on the use of individual cases, helps the reader understand the journey, without causing confusion, or betraying the natural purity of language. For sexual immorality, we get Francesca de Polenta, and her poignant and beautiful "That day we got no further with our reading" (INF V, p.68). For tyrants, we get Alexander the Great and Atilla, among others; for those who committed suicide we get Pier del Vigne. For betraying the church and the holy mission in search of wealth and power we get Pope Boniface VIII, as a fellow resident of hell calls out to Dante:

> And he cried: 'Are you standing there already?
> Boniface, are you standing there?
> My information was out by several years.
>
> Are you soon sated with your wealth
> For the sake of which you shamefully and deceitfully
> Took the beautiful lady, and made havoc of her?'[19] (INF XIX, p.124)

[19] The lady represents the Church.

Before the poem closes we know for sure that Boniface is set for hell to repay for simony. In short, we get individual stories, a sense of certain reality, for each corresponding general theme. Dante presents us these little pieces of the puzzle, by a surprising clarity and directness of language, and together, through their juxtaposition, we reach the intended destination. A similar method helps Pound form some of the most key moments of *The Cantos.*

4.3 Pound's factive personality, and the Ideogram

"Any general statement is like a cheque drawn on a bank," Pound writes in *ABC of Reading*, "its value depends on what is there to meet it" (1934/ 2010, p.25). The way abstraction flees from the real thing, a general theory often distances itself from the corresponding instances in individual timelines. Generalizations escape reality, Pound believed, and cause a sense of decay whenever they are involved. Again in *ABC of Reading,* he writes, "A general statement is valuable only in REFERENCE to the known objects or facts" (1934/ 2010, p.26). His insistence on the facts, the behavior, or the individual case, was what brought the likes of Sigismundo, Mussolini and Adams into the mixture of inspirations that gave way to *The Cantos.* Pound, a leader and a child of modernism, combined the vividness of the particular, the fact, the object; with an ongoing method of juxtaposition—a way of working through instances to create an idea much wider in scope. This tendency to juxtapose several factors to create an outlook, evident clearly in his earlier movements, like Imagismé and Vorticism, was something Pound had taken on from his study of Chinese literature; namely, from the Chinese ideogram.

The ideogram is the key component of pictorial languages, where the idea is communicated through the use of particulars. They are units in languages like the Egyptian hieroglyphs and the Chinese language; where the expression of things are much closely related to how they are seen, as compared to abstract alphabetic constructions like the Latin alphabet, where the idea that the letters b-o-o-k represents what we consider as the object is simply an abstraction we are taught in childhood. In an essay written by Ernest Fenollosa, and translated by Pound himself, the Chinese ideogram for "man sees horse" is explained as:

> It is based upon a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. In the algebraic figure and in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends upon sheer convention. Bu the Chinese method follows natural suggestion. First stands the man on his two legs. Second, his eye moves through space: a bold figure represented by running legs under an eye, a modified picture of an eye, a modified picture of running legs, but unforgettable once you have seen it. Third stands the horse on his four legs. (EW, 2005, p.309)

It isn't very difficult to see why Pound found a home in the Chinese ideogram. Its reliance of the object as seen, and its use of relation among these objects making up the thought, serves as a micro example of what Pound envisioned poetry should be like. The entirety of *The Cantos* can be looked at as an ideogram, with multiple parts standing together to create something astonishing in scope, with internal relations working between them. Fenollosa states that the ideogram "speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds" (EW, 2005, p. 309). The shape of things is at a central role. And that was something that Pound believed to be susceptible to minds open to directness. In *ABC of Reading,* Pound remembers his old sculptor friend: "Gaudier Brzeska, who was accustomed to looking at the real shape of things, could read a certain amount of Chinese writing without ANY STUDY. He said, 'Of course, you can *see* it's a horse' (or a wing or whatever)" (1934/ 2010, p.21).

Out of the ideogram, Pound comes up with the ideogrammic method; the same principle stretched out, not just as units of language, but as a wider way of composing poetry. In *Guide to Kulchur,* Pound writes, "the ideogrammic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind, onto a part that will register" (1970, p.51). As Dante picked his saints and sinners, Pound found an array of men and women to reflect his ideal—the ideal of good men doing good things against those giving way to decaying habits like usury and abstraction. As Hugh Kenner writes in *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, "the mode of making complete and properly qualified statements is to present a selection of EXAMPLES" (1985, p. 83).

Particulars juxtaposed through the ideogram puts most, if not all, of *The Cantos* together. What Pound had envisioned is much like what Dante had hoped to achieve: bringing together a series of actualities, with each their representative nature, brought together for an elevated thought. These men, women, states—Italian, Greek, Chinese, European—all became smaller parts of his scheme. Kenner writes:

> Joyce's catalogue of Bloom's books in *Ulysses* is the simplest possible application of the ideogrammic method; so is Pound's transcription of the contents of Sigismundo's post-bag. It may be suggested as a helpful analogy for the cohesive principle of the heterogeneous *Cantos* that Pound knew what materials belonged in his poem exactly as one knows what books would belong in one's ideal library. (1985, p. 84)

To many, the list was a rather complicated one, drawing parallels between men who shared very little; to Pound, however, they were instances of similar nature, so much so that he could, in the year of 1933, pen a book entitled *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*; drawing a mysterious parallel between Thomas Jefferson and the leader of Italian fascism, with regards to their understanding of state and productivity. To Pound these

people he wanted us to know about were a group of misfits perfect for the making of a society filled with knowledge, art and functionality, where government, individual and nature aligned as neatly as his characters did.

As *Comedy* aimed for a better world by showing what should be done about it, *The Cantos* aimed for change through exposing the human mind to better specimens of intended structures; better economies, better governments, better understandings of art. Pound's aversion to immobility, and abstraction, formed a worldview where actions were valued much higher than words and theories; where order can be achieved through honest finances, widespread intellectuality, and flourishing arts. His ideas-in-action, the key binder of most of poem, caused him to further focus on particular storylines; as one would choose, say, cherry and rust in the ideogram of red—an example used by Fenollasa himself—not to just *tell* what should be done, but to show it as well. In *Guide to Kulchur*, he writes, "The history of culture is the history of ideas going into action" (1970, p.44). It was through this filter that men like Mussolini, Sigismundo, Van Buren, Confucius and John Adams ended up becoming part of his cultural artifact. "Knowledge is seldom lacking in the degree that will is lacking," he says in "Kung" (GK, 1970, p. 272). So he moved on to find his individuals filled with will and action, and hoped to use them to transfer to the reader a general portrayal of goodness based firmly in particulars. To Pound, these were all "factive"[20] personalities (GK, 1970, p.194).

"All that a single man could," Pound writes on Sigismundo Malatesta, "Malatesta managed *against* the current of power" (GK, 1970, p.159). We are provided by the vision of a doer, of a man who fights, builds and lives in the present minute. He is

[20] The word "factive" comes from the Lation word "facio" which means "to do". In modern use, we use factive when defining words that signal an incident that has already happened; such as *know* or *realize.*

connected to the land, as he is connected to his actions. His life's work is the Tempio, a shrine he put up, along with his own sweat and intellect, for his beloved wife. In Canto IX, talking about a young Sigismundo, Pound writes:

> And he, Sigismundo, was Capitan for the Venetians.
> And he had sold off small castles
> and built the great Rocca to his plan,
> And he fought like ten devils at Monteluro
> And go nothing but the victory (p.34)

In the next canto, we see how Sigismundo is viewed by most:

> and that he rejected the whole symbol of the apostles,
> and that he said the monks ought not to own property
> and that he disbelieved in the temporal powe,
> neither christian, jew, gentile,
> nor any sect pagan, *nisi forsitan epicurae*[21] (Canto X, p.44)

So there we have a man who is as capable by hand as he is by his thoughts. A man who builds, breaks, resists and fights against the mainstream powers of the age; who, just like the other Italian man of might and action, Mussolini, is a particular instant in the spread of Pound's theories. After all, Pound writes in *Jefferson and/ or Mussolini,* "The Duce did not call on his hearers for either more knowledge or more intelligence, he asked for '*energie e volonta'*[22]" (1935/ 1970, p. viii). The Boss, as Pound calls him, was the very man who dried Italy's swamps—an issue which "from the time of Tiberius the Italian intellengtzia has been *talking* about" (JM, 1935/ 1970, p. 23). In Canto XLI, he writes:

> "Ma qvesto"
> said the Boss, "e divertente."[23]
> catching the point before the aesthetes had got there;
> Having drained off the muck of Vada
> From the marshes, by Circeo, where no one else wd. have drained it.
> Waited 2000 years, ate grain from the marshes;
> Water supply for ten million, another one million "*vani*"

[21] "Unless perhaps a follower of Epicurus" (Terrell, 1980, p. 52).
[22] Roughly translated as "energy and will."
[23] "But this is amusing" (Terrell, 1985, p. 167).

that is room for people to live in.

Mussolini has, Pound believes, "the passion for construction" (JM, 1935/ 1970, p.34). Throughout *The Cantos* we are provided for Mussolini, just as we are for Sigismundo, an image of an enigmatic, energetic life force; a man that is not only himself capable of getting things done, but with a keen eye for the practical benefits for the long-struggling masses of Italy. Dictatorship tendencies aside, there was some merit to that view: Mussolini, along with his fascist party, did indeed launch several agricultural initiatives that helped rejuvenate the productivity of the land. Pound, infamous for his joy at finding something to support which often leads him, subsequently, to ignore quite a few more, viewed Mussolini much like he did Sigismundo: a man against the mainstream economic injustice and power (the banks, and Western usury), struggling to not simply talk of things, but to do them. There was probably some self-indulgence involved with it as well; after years of being ignored by American and Europeans alike for his more than willing input on economics, having exchanged some words with a man at the highest position in his respective community must have had an influence on how Pound viewed Mussolini.

It isn't just individuals that deserve praise; but rightful institutions also carry weight as a piece of Pound's bigger picture. The use of the Bank of Siena, Monte dei Paschi, serves to realize the exact same ambitions: by presenting a particular example on good finances, Pound hopes to support his general aversion against dishonest usury. "There we find discovery," he writes in *Guide to Kulchur*, "or at any rate the establishment, of the true bases of credit, to wit the abundance of nature and the responsibility of the whole people" (1970, p. 194). A "damn good bank", according to Canto XLII (p.209); Siena was built through the efforts of Pietro Leopold, who, Pound

writes enthusiastically, "declared against exportation/ thought grain was to eat" (Canto XLIV, p.223). The end of Canto XLIV reads: "The foundation, Siena, has been to keep bridle on usury" (p.228). The next canto launches into the defamation of usury; and through which we see, once again, the proper way to conduct the business of credit in the ways of Monte dei Paschi, with one foot firmly on agriculture and abundance, as opposed to the abstract illusion of usury as means of income. In the opening of LII, Pound writes: "And I have told you of how things were under Duke/ Leopold in Siena/ And the true base of credit, that is/ the abundance of nature/ with the whole folk behind it" (p.257).

It was a similar sensibility that gave way to two of the most controversial aspects of *The Cantos*: the Chinese, and the Adams cantos. These perhaps highlight the ideogrammic method even more so than any other; with their mismatched patches of journal entries, historical accounts, and strange, detailed presentation that come together to represent what Pound envisioned for a better society. Michael Alexander writes:

> the Chinese and American Cantos, whether o not they were originally planned, have a clear purpose, coming where they do in the middle of the poem, as Enlightenment examples of just societies, and the intended *Commedia*-like progression of the poem is increasingly evident as we proceed. (1998, p.129)

These pages, as Alexander states, aim at reflecting a mixture of better government and economics tied to productivity. They do not appear out of nowhere; nor do they seem unfit in any way. Their longevity, and their strange use of history, diaries and anecdotes do present an unfamiliar structure; but not without function. They are the bank account upon which the integrity of Pound's check depends; they are his examples, as were Dante's men and women in the levels of paradise, which prove and strengthen the social and political ambitions of the poem.

The Chinese cantos are often infused with the ideas of Confucius, whom Pound uses to highlight the right attitudes in governing and principles of life. Called Kung throughout most of the piece, we are allowed an insight to the ethical principles of Confucius, and those that choose to follow him; and the demise of those who choose not to. Order, loyalty, functionality all come up as Pound goes through his historical account of several dynasties that rise and fall according to how much they adhere to Kung's light in order, nature and work ethic. He possessed, according to Pound, "a great sensibility" (GK, 1970, p.232). In an earlier Canto that dwells into the principles of Kung, we witness a scene where several men are discussing what they would do first if each came to power. After each finishes his statement, they ask Kung which answer was the best among them. Kung answers that "They have all answered correctly/ That is to say, each in his nature" (Canto XIII, p. 58). Few lines after, we take a deeper look into a key passage on Confucius:

> And Kung said, and wrote on the bo leaves:
> If a man have not order within him
> He can not spread order about him;
> His family will not act with due order;
> And if the prince have not order within him
> He can not put order in his dominions.
> And Kung gave the words "order"
> and "brotherly deference"
> And said nothing of the "life after death."
> And he said
> "Anyone can run into excesses,
> It is easy to shoot past the mark,
> It is hard to stand firm in the middle." (Canto XIII, p.59).

The Chinese cantos follow one dynasty to the other, as principles of taxation, currency and governing make or break them. For instance we get Chao-Kong, prior to Confucius, yet of a similar mindset, who:

> Gave each man land for his labour

and not by plough-land alone
But for keeping of silk-worms
Reforested the mulberry groves
Set periodical markets
Exchange brought abundance, the prisons were empty.
'Yao and Chun have returned'
sang the farmers
'Peace and abundance bring virtue.' I am
'pro-Tcheou[24]' said Confucius five centuries later. (Canto LIII, p.268)

It is, according to Pound, a combination of good ethics, moderation, good use of nature, low taxes, decent minds, an understanding of the arts—Confucius, like Mussolini or Sigismundo, is presented as frequently involved with the arts—good agriculture, and no usury of any sort makes a good society, and such examples can be easily found in the Chinese dynasties. There is also an organic relation between the individual, the family, the government and the nation in the Chinese cantos; one fails to function without the other. The "ideal of a state as natural as in the family and as harmonious and closely knit" was something Pound hoped to translate to the broken Western world. (Kimpel & Eaves, 1979, p.234). To Pound, none of Kung's ideas are buried in anything but practice; Confucius "avoids the blather of rhetoric and the platonic purple patch (i.e. inferior poesy)" (GK, 1970, p.12).

The Adams cantos also work towards the same end. As a piece of the puzzle, they are put together to reflect, somewhat in a different fashion than Dante's saints with their minute details and journalistic content; the good version of the intended change. Here we have a look into the writings of John Adams and several others, as various American statesmen work through a variety of issues, including monetary and political problems. Adams is often highlighted as the opposition to Alexander Hamilton, the

[24] The Chinese dynasty to which the emperor mentioned belonged.

founder of the first bank of United States of America—hence, almost a natural enemy to Pound. Adams is shown as a rational, enlightened leader struggling to maintain a sense of function, decency and integrity to his politics. In Canto LXII, Pound writes:

> and as for Hamilton
> we may take it (my authority, ego scriptor cantilenae)
> that he was the Prime snot in ALL American history
> (11th Jan. 1938, from Rapallo)
> But for the clearest head in the congress
> 1774 and thereafter
> pater patriae
> the man who at certain points
> made us
> at certain points
> saved us
> by fairness, honesty and straight moving
> ARRIBA ADAMS (p. 350)

The animosity between Adams and Hamilton is touched upon several more times; in a bid to further prove the vast difference between their ambitions. "They wanted Hamilton for vice president/ I said nothing," Adams says in LXVI (p.381). Some of the other American figures we run into throughout the entirety of *The Cantos* include Jefferson, John Quincy Adams and Martin Van Buren—and they all follow somewhat a similar route: they appear to represent examples of behavior induced with integrity, particularly on currency and debt, either acting upon rightful principles, or attempting to prevent harm from bad ones. There are comments of foreign trade, diplomatic relations, currencies, armies, elections and the corrupt nature of some of the leading figures of the time; all brought together to give Pound what he hoped to take from them. Closing Canto LXX, Adams says:

> aim of my life has been to be useful, how small in
> any nation the number who comprehend ANY
> system of constitution or administration
> and these few do not unite.
> Americans more rapidly disposed to corruption in elections

than I thought in ‘74
fraudulent use of words monarchy and republic
I am for balance (p.412-13)

These lines are quickly followed by the ideogram of “the middle”, made up of signs representing precision and directness; a reminder of the balance and moderation in Confucius; where shooting past the mark in any matter of life was frowned upon (Terrell, 1980, p.347). Thus we are, once again, made aware of the connection between Pound’s particulars.

“Juxtaposed things illuminate one another, and gear dramatically with juxtaposed (i.e. complex emotions),” writes Kenner (1985, p.90). Placed together the ideas of the likes of Adams, Jefferson, Confucius and Leopold do present a unity of principles in the act of governing and providing for nations. Fenollosa’s ideogram in which “the group holds something of the quality of a continuous moving picture” becomes a vital clue in understanding how Pound seeks to bring together these luminous little pieces against the dark matter of the poem to create a skyline of his own (EW, 2005, p.309). Right in the middle of a heated historical section on American politics, we may get an Italian phrase or a Chinese ideogram—they are all parts of the same moving picture, as Fenollosa puts it. These parts have a purpose; Kenner writes, “Dante’s store of similes works to a similar end, Milton’s elastic medium defeats it. This freedom is characteristic of the ideogrammic method in action” (1985, p. 93-4). In a more poetic sense:

> The periplum, the voyage of discoveries among facts, whose tool is the ideogram, is everywhere contrasted with the conventions and artificialities of the bird’s eye view afforded by the map. Forms grow out of data. They are not to be imposed upon data. (Kenner, 1985, p.103)

The ideogram is almost an organism, as opposed to a frozen instant in time; and this rather direct, precise, and dynamic quality of it coincides perfectly with what Pound

hopes to achieve; just as Dante does through his host of examples and actualities that work to teach mankind a better way.

Yet what keeps all these together is not simply the idea; and however both men perhaps aimed at some sort of objectivity (Pound, of the journalistic age, perhaps more), the poet often intervenes almost reflexively, or if nothing else, lurks somewhere in the back. Dante, in this manner, has the easier end; his Everyman mask allows him to walk through hell and heaven as the glue that holds all his particulars together. Pound hopes to find himself a little less involved—but as men of strong convictions are, he becomes, if nothing else, a translucent background onto which all these ideas are projected. Michael Alexander says that "where Pound is the hero as well as the speaker of the *Cantos* we have a curious naked presentation of the self" (1998, p.42). A mask, much like Dante's, Pound uses to ease our access to his stories; but there is still the personal in there—almost as a part of the ideogram:

> Putting it more crudely, it is the presence of Pound which unites the *Cantos* or gives them what coherence they have; our awareness of the poet himself, shy through he is, rather than the professed rational and narrative designs he has on us. … Dante supplies a disdainful persona, an omnivorous system of moral philosophy, a hell, a purgatory, an earthly paradise, a Ulysses, and a firm episodic structure. Beyond these there is the chaos of the author's personal experience, of modern life and of recorded history. (Alexander, 1998, p. 160)

The poet too becomes a particular; he, too, contributes to the picture of the times he so wishes to present the reader with. It comes as no surprise that as the chaos intensifies so does the personal inclusion. This is why perhaps so many people find *Inferno* the best of Dante's journeys, filled with strife and the petty anger of the poet; or why they prefer the tragedy of *The Pisan Cantos* sections over the distanced chatter of the Chinese or the Adams cantos. We like our writings to be filled with convictions; and we like them even

better when those convictions fail against the real world. There is something perhaps reassuring in the failures of others that allow us to make peace with of failures our own.

The specificity of such precision may cause the reader to feel detached from the overall theme of both poems. What we need to keep in mind here is that Dante, and Pound, intertwined these bits of action, thought and ideals with a grand scheme of change and betterment. It was through such clarity and directness that they wished to communicate their thoughts: Dante wanted each idea to be rooted in a historic actuality; Pound wanted to weave a likeness through the ideogrammic method. As a result, both works avoid meaningless rhetoric, and are, instead, charged with an organic force of impact.

CHAPTER 5

MANKIND'S POTENTIAL: LIGHT, INTELLIGENCE AND PARADISE

"Another has usurped my heaven."
Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

The ambition lies not only in what you hope to alter, but in what you hope to alter it to. Dante's salvation of the spirit is riddled with Christian dogma; Pound's myths sometimes give way to curious pagan gods. When you look at them from afar, the two cannot be any more different: Pound is a strong non-believer in ways of religion in the improvement of the soul; Dante casts just about everyone who isn't a devout Christian to doomed destinies. Yet a closer inspection reveals that underneath the chosen myths, both men gear towards a similar destination: a better social order, en route, to the nurturing of mankind's potential. Dante sees the fulfillment of man's potential through the acknowledgement of a strong, perfect-willed deity; who calls for the intellectual elevation of its subjects, rather than earthly riches. Pound sees it in a justified economic system that favors the arts and the artist, where men and women can pursue intellectually rewarding existences. Either way, both men believe in the ambition of an intellectual greatness, a perception unique to mankind, and intelligence, as the ultimate goal. *The Divine Comedy,* as well as *The Cantos,* is written to show men the way to a brighter light; made of intelligence and love, infused with whichever gods their respective authors choose.

In *On World Government (De Monarchia),* Dante tells the reader that a single unit government is necessary for peace, which is, in turn, necessary for the ultimate

intellectual enhancement of mankind. But what is that potential, and what does it entail? Early in the book, he writes:

> Accordingly, man's basic power is not mere being, for he shares being with the elements; nor is it to be alive, for so are plants; nor is it to be sensitive, for other animals share this power; but it is to be sensitive to intellectual growth, for this trait is not found in beings either in above or below men. For though there are angelic beings that share intellect with man, they do not have intellectual growth, since their very being is to be intellect and nothing else and hence they are intellectual continuously, otherwise they would not be changeless. Therefore, it is clear that man's basic capacity is to have a potentiality or power for being intellectual. (1957, p.6)

If we were to ignore the mention of angels midway through, or interpret simply the fact that divinity is of an intellectual quality, there is quite a lot here that follows Pound's favoring of the mind. Given that *Comedy* seeks spiritual salvation, it says quite a lot on Dante's emphasis on intellectuality that divine beings *are* intellect themselves. These intellects, however, follow the divine will; so Dante never favors one over the other, but sees them as connected, as one. In assigning "final goals" to humanity, Dante states that mankind should firstly achieve an earthly paradise before the ultimate divine destination. Such an earthly paradise can be reached only by following "philosophical teachings, applying them according to our moral and intellectual capabilities" (1957, p.78). Men, for Dante, are led by "a double driver":

> Thus the reins of man are held by a double driver according to man's twofold end; one is the supreme pontiff, who guides mankind with revelations to life eternal, and the other is the emperor, who guides mankind with philosophical instructions to temporal happiness. (1957, p.78)

We have previously talked of Dante's desire for social and political unity; his experience of exile and agony that provoked his devotion to a strong monarch. Considering the importance of the emperor in his overall scheme, unhindered by greedy clergy and

power-grabbing city states, the key role intellectual development plays on Dante's hopeful world becomes even clearer.

The entirety of Pound's life ambition is built on the intellect. Much like Dante's merging of will and intellectuality, Pound is a firm believer on the betterment of human species through an emphasis on intellectuality; most of which he places in the field of arts. Thus the arts to him is a crucial component of society; one that is set to lead the masses to a form of intelligent salvation. In *Guide to Kulchur*, he writes:

> The worship of the supreme intelligence of the universe is neither an inhuman nor bigoted action. Art is, religiously, an emphasis, a segregation of some component of that intelligence for the sake of making it more perceptible. The work of art (religiously) is a door or a lift permitting a man to enter, or hoisting him mentally into, a zone of activity, and out of fugg and inertia. (1970, p. 198/90)

The arts, as he puts it in "The Serious Artist", "gives us our best data for determining what sort of creature man is" (EW, 2005, p.238). They are products of an intellectual prowess, a self-searching process of intelligence that unlocks the world, as well as the individual creature. Through intellectual adventure, we can gain a better perspective on our lives, and on our worlds. The arts, with their inherent special position in merging intellectuality with activity, are the key fortresses of human civilization. When they fail, we fail—earthly paradise falls. "A nation which neglects the perception of its artists declines," Pound writes in *ABC of Reading*, "After a while it ceases to act, and merely survives" (1934/ 2010, p.82). Intelligence is a higher purpose. To Harriet Monroe, he writes, "The intelligence of the nation more important than the comfort or life of any one individual or the bodily life of a whole generation" (TL, 1951, p.317).

As the emphasis on intellect gets more and more intense, both works reveal something in common: the use of light. We see it weaved throughout *The Cantos* as a

near-holy thread; Dante builds his divinity out of it. With precision and sight playing the lead characters, we get a chance, in both poems, to follow light as a key transformer; a strong push towards the better way.

5.1 Light and vision

When Dante and Virgil see the Roman poet Statius in *Purgatorio*, there is an amorous exchange of praise between the latter two. In speaking of his intellectual enlightenment, Statius tells Virgil: "You did as one who, walking by night/ Carries the light behind him, where it does him no good/ But is of advantage to those who come after him" (PUR XXII, p.294). Virgil, despite his unfortunate placement in Hell, is the voice of reason and intellectuality all throughout *Comedy*, serving to enrich Dante's perception as he faces things he cannot always make sense of. The association of Virgil with light can be seen as the simplest example of Dante's reliance on light as representative of intellectual force; and vision, as the outcome of it.

In Canto XVI of *Purgatorio,* we are told that "the world is blind" and "there is a light to tell good from evil "(p.268). Dante always relies on vision, and the sight as the prime experience; visual perception as the ultimate road to consciousness. Joseph Anthony Mazzeo states that "in one way, the poem is a gallery of modes of vision correlated to the ever expanding consciousness and awareness of the pilgrim" (1966, p.69). Therefore, the vision intensifies as Dante proceeds upwards, as the pilgrim approaches divinity: the light is even more frequently referred to, and Dante's consciousness expands accordingly. According to Mazzeo:

> Throughout the final cantos of the poem Dante repeats some form of the verb "to see" or the noun "light" with such insistence that the effect would have been absurd were he not signifying the divine. … And vision expands with an

> unexpected result. Paradise, which for so many cantos was always about to dissolve into ecstasy, is suddenly gathered into absolute concreteness. … The divine has been approached through poetic veils and masks, progressive symbols, until in a sense, language is gone and replaced by vision. (1966, p. 78/79)

The vividness with which the *Inferno* is endowed, gives way to something slightly harder to access but equally stunning in *Paradiso.* It is here we get the "radiance" of the "divine will" (PAR XIX, p. 434). The "thrones", hosts of angels closest to god, are explained as "mirrors above… from which God's judgment shines upon us" (PAR IX, p. 388). In Canto XXX of *Paradiso,* Dante writes:

> 'Intellectual light, full of love;
> Love of true good, full of happiness;
> Happiness which transcends any sweetness.
>
> Here you will see both the battalions
> Of paradise, and one with the appearances
> That you will see them wear on Judgment Day.'
>
> Just as a flash of lighting which scatters
> The powers of sight, and so deprives the eye
> Of the power to apprehend even prominent objects,
>
> So did divine light shine about me;
> And left me wrapt in such a veil of glory
> That nothing was visible to me. (p.482/83)

Lines after his earthly vision falters, Dante receives his sight again: "And I was so strengthened with new sight/ That there was no light, however clear/ Which my eyes could not have stood up against" (PAR XXX, p.483). And once the vision is restored, there is further light-play:

> And I saw light in the form of a stream
> Of resplendent brilliance, in between two banks
> Painted with all the marvels of the spring.
>
> From this river there issued live sparks
> Which everywhere settled themselves in the flowers
> Like rubies which have been set in gold. (p.483).

To even see God, one needs light: "There is light up there which makes visible/ The creator himself, to his creature/ Who finds his own peace in seeing him" (PAR XXX, p. 484). If we are to remember that paradise-bliss of the afterlife depends on the establishment of an earthly one—which is only possible through intellectual progress—the use of light in illuminating, as well as constituting, god becomes a clear representation the fulfillment of the intellectual clause of the divine contract.

Light leads to vision, which leads to a brand new consciousness that allows Dante to understand what happens around him. As Dante proceeds from the dark storm to the way of light, "correction of the pilgrim's intellectual error" takes place:

> While the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio,* in their respective ways, are concerned with the correction of moral error, the *Paradiso,* as a journey through the intelligible universe, celebrates truth and involves primarily the correction of the pilgrim's intellectual error. The *Paradiso* is philosophical poetry in the obvious meaning of the term in that it is passionately involved with ideas, but is also philosophical poetry in a more precise sense: it renders systematically ordered world of pure thought in terms of images and events. (Mazzeo, 1966, p. 76).

So the divine circles are where intellectual perfection is achieved, made of light, vision and proper perception. The closer Dante gets to it, the more intellectually capable he becomes. In the intermediary *Purgatorio,* where ascension is possible, Dante "slowly becomes aware of the processes of the intellectual growth of his own being" (Ferguson, 1965, p.69/70). It isn't simply our moral failings that shut us out, but our intellectual shortcomings as well; as Dante overcomes them, he moves closer towards the divine will.

The monotheistic worship is shattered in Pound's journey; but the love of the intellect, and its representation by light remains. Here we are faced with a sort of worship of the mind—which in itself is what the nature intended in mankind. There is

still a divine will in Pound, except that it's naturalistic, and follows the fulfilling of function of each of its counterpart. Grace is divided amongst the mind, the myths and the natural order that sustains them. Michael Alexander calls *The Cantos* "the epic of knowledge", and for good cause (1998, p.143). All through it Pound fights against anything that derails the purity of thought and act, anything that muddles the ideas, and disgraces the intellectual apparatus. We are often directed to a certain shade or angle of light in understanding a higher perception. In Canto LXXXIII, we have "Dryad, thy peace is like water/ There is September sun on the pools" (p.550). Twice the poet asks for "plura diafana", which means, according to Terrell, "more things diaphanous" (1980, p.460). In Canto XCI, we have:

> that the body of light come froth
> from the body of fire
> And that you eyes come to the surface,
> from the deep wherein they were sunken,
> That your eyes come froth from their caves
> &light then
> as the holy leaf
> qui laborat, orat[25] (p.630)

A few lines after, Pound writes:

> Light & the flowing crystal
> never gin in cut glass had such clarity
> That Drake[26] saw the splendor and wreckage
> in that clarity
> Gods moving in crystal
> ichor[27], amor (p.631)

[25] The one who works, prays.
[26] Sir Francis Drake, "the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe" (Terrell, 1980, p.549)
[27] Blood of gods in Greek mythology.

Here we have a mixture of Greek myth, Western science and divinity by way of crystal and light. There is clarity, and splendor. Again, in the same canto, we find, "& from fire to crystal/ via the body of light/the gold wings assemble" (p.635).

Pound even stretches forth to make sense of Dante's light; as *The Cantos* reaches closing time. He attempts to find an overlap between the religious deity of Dante's, and the naturalistic holiness of his work. In Canto CVII, he tells us, "Light, cubic/ by volume/ so that Dante's view is quite natural" (p.776). It is less divine, for Pound, and more intellect: "So that Dante's view is quite natural: this light/ as a river/ in Kung; in Ocellus, Coke, Agassiz/ ῥεῖ, the flowing/ this persistent awareness" (p.782). This brings together several threads for Pound; first off, it shows us why he chooses some of his men and women in *The Cantos;* and then connects them to the wider scope of intellectuality, which he finds in Dante's light. The river of light, as he calls it, runs through the whole of *The Cantos,* through Sigismundo, Mussolini, Kung, Adams, Jefferson, and even some of his contemporaries, like Gaudier. These people, and others like them, as is the sun god Ra, whose boat "moves with the sun"; try to "build light" (XCVIII, p.704). That light stands between Pound and his failures: "Lux enim," he writes, "versus this tempest" (CX, p.801). It also stands between us and our miserable shortcomings: "God's eye art 'ou, do not surrender perception" (CXIII, p.810).

Closer to the end of the *Drafts and Fragments of Cantos CX-CXVII,* we begin hearing more and more of the light. In CXVI, he declares, "I have brought the great ball of crystal/ who can lift it/ Can you enter the acorn of light?" (p.814). In CXVI, we find, referring to Dante, "to 'see again'/ the verb is 'see,' not walk on" (p.816). As he nears the end he tries to explain what the work has been trying to do: "A little light, like a rushlight/ to lead back to splendor" (p. 817). As Dante's perception deepens and his

consciousness is altered by the vision; so is Pound's. His journey towards the light makes it denser and denser as he grows old; perhaps not in a make-shift paradise, but in the mind—where he had his fair share of hell, purgatory and heaven. As Dante hopes to showcase heaven's light as the divine ultimate, Pound plays on the intellectual fulfillment; treating it much like a divinity of its own.

5.2 Paradiso terrestre[28]

Intelligence, or the intellect as the core, was the building block of the civilization both Dante and Pound wanted to usher in. As they wish to force change in their respective societies, they both refer to the construction of paradise, albeit in different perceptions. It is no secret that *The Cantos*, or Pound's any other work, does away with any sense of afterlife. After all, while putting down his immaculate morals, Kung had "said nothing of the 'life after death'" (Canto XIII, p.59). Yes, there are frequent references to paradise throughout *The Cantos*, but they don't necessarily constitute a place: in a very modernist fashion, it can be said that Pound's paradise is a way of living—an experience, or more so, a perception. It isn't about some unachievable future; it is about changing the way things are as of now.

The desire to change infuses not only Pound's paradise with a sense of the present, but Dante's as well. There is something peculiar about Dante's ever-blessed afterlife; it is never rhetorical—it is often rooted in actualities of the real world. Els Jongeneel writes:

> Dante's worldly concerns become most apparent in the third cantica, *Paradiso.* Although nothing here should remind one of earthly sorrow, as all the beatified souls have passed through the river Lethe, earthly matters persistently pervade

[28] An earthly paradise.

> the heavenly spheres. Notwithstanding the holiness of the spot, even the most elevated subjects which are discussed here are translated into terms of common life, or are mingled freely with profane subjects. (2007, p.133)

As Jongeneel highlights, most of Dante's *Paradiso* follows the real world; its lessons are of experience, not empty ideals. This is exactly why Henry VIII has a seat served up the divine ranks; he is the man "who will come to Italy/ To put her right before she is so disposed" (PAR XXX, p.485). Though Dante is occasionally scorned for looking through his earthly eyes, most of *Paradiso'*s speeches are still involved with the betterment of earthly behavior. The underlying ambition of *Paradiso* is not to construct a self-sufficient praise to the divine; it is to set out a better map for the mortal. The process serves as a guideline for the *living*; it is not a rhetoric tale of paradisiacal bliss, but a wake-up call to those who are still walking the earth. Unless man's potential is fulfilled on earth, there is very little to do to please the divine will. The Christian shades of the poem are so dominant that it often becomes suppressive of the real aim: changing human lives. Thomas M. Greene sees the entire work as a journey of hope:

> The argument of the *Comedy* rests upon hope, upon the capacity of every man for conversion and redemption, and the pilgrimage of the poet symbolizes, as we know, this universal alternative. He comes to represent the self within each man which can escape this dark wood about us, the self which can *turn* and change. … Hope depends upon a psychic flexibility, a disposition to renew the self without denying the self. (1967, p.109)

Paradiso less of an endgame and more a step towards the end Dante hoped to achieve for those still walking the earth. It is less preaching; and more constructive criticism.

Pound's paradise proves slightly trickier. It is most certainly harder to grasp than Dante's; and without the unquestionable dogma that pulls its ranks, paradise ends up being, much like any human experience, a brief, fleeting turn of the moment. Paradise is

almost in the act of yearning: it is the ability to dream for a better self, a better mind, a better heart, even; uncorrupted by greed, usury and cruelty. Dante's paradise people are done, but those who look up to them aren't; both ends of Pound's communicative lines are ever changing. It is also never really *there.* Those expecting the foundation of a paradise in Pound are left wondering: the *Drafts& Fragments* section only adds more to what the paradise should be, or is, without ever really bringing it about.

Pound does, however, use paradise in a similar manner to Dante's: as a force of change, rather than perfection. The notes to CXI reveal, "A nice quite paradise/ Orage[29] said the basic was pity/ *compassione*/ Amor" (p. 803). There are things that make the human world better: love, intelligence, order, nature and so forth; that are themselves paradisiacal. "Pity, yes, for the infected," he writes in Canto XCIV, "but maintain antisepsis/ let the light pour" (p.655). Near the end, which was brought on by his death rather than the finality of the work, we are introduced to the *Thrones de Los Cantares* section, the last section of the poem to begin and end in a planned structure. The idea of *thrones* is, for Dante, introduced through the Christian theology that defines one of the closest groups of angels to God; and Beatrice explains that through them the lower ranks receive God's bidding. Pound takes on the thrones much like he takes on any other intellectual strain: he thinks of them as the essence of intelligence running through various times and places, making the necessary paradisiacal qualities not only possible, but existent in human history. This is why we return, in that section, to currency, banking, and law; where through several different stories, we are reminded of how

[29] Alfred Richard Orage, editor of *The New Age*, and long-time friend of Pound. He was closely involved in the ideas of the social credit movement.

things decay: "The mind at the start had/ cheng[30]/ Greed defrauds it/ Some want more than they get in a life time" (Canto XCIX, p. 721/ 722). We are, again, reminded of a Chinese sensibility of stripped back existence: "But to live as flowers reflected/ as moonlight/ free from all possessiveness" (Canto XCIX, p.723). Dante's thrones may be filled with angels; Pound's are filled with those who have, in their minds, the necessary essence:

> Compassion, tree's root and water –spring;
> The state: order, inside a boundary,
> Law: reciprocity.
> What is statue save reciprocity?
> One village in order,
> one valley will reach the four seas. (Canto XCIX, p. 728/ 729)

These thoughts of harmony, functionality, straightness and the likes continue to flow through the thrones, and the struggles to achieve them are presented to us, much like those in the earlier cantos, as where the light truly shines.

There is however something different about Pound's paradise: whatever heaven he hopes to achieve, it is always rather momentary. For a man who spends a good amount of time among ancient poems and long-gone ideals, Pound's paradise is a very modernist, fragmented construction. In Canto XCII, he writes:

> Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel[31]
> but is jagged,
> For a flash,
> for an hour.
> Then agony,
> then an hour,
> then agony. (p.640)

[30] Upright. (Terrell, 1980, p.633).
[31] "The paradise is not artificial." A reference to Charles Baudelaire's *Les Paradis Artificel.* (Terrell, 1980, p.378).

Paradise is also much less dependent on rules and regulations, for Pound, and more so on the internal, naturalistic fulfillment of functionality of each individual. It is almost identical to Dante's intellectual premise, minus the monotheistic construction. "To see the light pour," he writes, "that is, towards sinceritas" (XCIX, p. 714). *Sinceritas,* can be translated as sincerity, but also in its Latin meaning, integrity and honesty. In the same canto as sinceritas, we get, from Khati, "a man's paradise is his good nature" (p.719). Paradise is rooted in man, not in God; therefore, paradise is, as man is, ever changing. But man is not alone in possessing paradise. Pound writes, in one of the very last moments of *The Cantos*:

> I have tried to write paradise
> Do not move
> Let the wind speak
> that is paradise. (p.822)

In a way, we are reminded, by the closing pages, that man is unique in his sense of intellectuality, but nature too is made up of order, function and sensibility; and hence is a part of paradise; perhaps, even the better part of it.

Ultimately, Pound's paradise in built on part ideals, part failure; but on pure thought and action in the present. The idea of an afterlife as an endgame is strange to Pound, but he sees, to some complexity, its uses. He writes in Canto LXXIV, "I don't know how humanity stands it/ with a painted paradise at the end of it/ without a painted paradise at the end of it" (p.456). That paradise bears somewhat more of a resemblance to Dante's. The idea here is not to say that Pound is searching for a paradise fashioned after Dante's; it is to say that both men use the concept of paradise, in complete different incarnations, to have an impact on the present—Dante by showing examples of perfection, Pound by explaining the required sense of perception.

One other point of concern for both men, as should be noted, is that of love; particularly in the context of paradise. We have previously talked of love being always without error for Dante when it follows its natural course; that is, God's will. By the time the pilgrim reaches paradise, love and intellectuality merges in natural harmony in divine reflections, as previously mentioned, intellectual light is "full of love" (PAR XXX, p.482). The impregnation of Virgin Mary is described as:

> In your womb was lit again that love
> By whose warmth, in the eternal peace
> This flower has germinated us
>
> For us here you are a midday blaze
> Of love; and down there, mortals,
> You are the ever-living spring of hope. (PAR XXXIII, p. 495).

Love is embedded in Dante's divinity. Intellectuality is also a fulfillment of love; hence the divine will. This is what brings Dante to the end of the poem, in seeing God, he states that his will was "being turned like a wheel, all at one speed/ By the love which moves the sun and the other stars" (PAR XXXIII, p.499). Love is an extension of the natural and intellectual order, created by god. For Pound, it is not that really about following the divine design, but to elevate human spirit in itself—to create a better nature, within where man's paradise really resides. "If love be not in the house there is nothing" he writes, in CXVI (p.816). When he talks about making a "paradiso terrestre" he asks himself, "M'amour, m'amour/ What do I love and/where are you?" (Notes for CXVII, p.821). It isn't about fulfilling God; but fulfilling men. But either way, for Pound, as well as for Dante, it is something they wish to imprint on the face of the earth; to merge with intelligence and will. Close to the end Pound repeats after Richard of St. Victor, "ubi amor, ibi oculus"; where there is love, there is sight; if we are to recall Pound's declaration that we are perception, "God's eye", the harmony between love and

intellectuality becomes even more clear. Love is intertwined in mind and matter, and in what man is to become: “What thou lovest well is thy true heritage,” he writes in Canto LXXXI (p.541).

Made up of love, light and intelligence; both works hope to use the idea of paradise—as a place of divinity for Dante, and a way of elevated perception for Pound—to force an impact on earthly matters. Both these conceptualizations are directly related to our earthly ways, and both aim at making those ways better. This is much easier to detect in Dante’s heavenly spheres because the idea is one we are already accustomed to: religion, providing perfection and divine will, as something to strive for, or better yet, as something to regulate the human spirit. The ambition is slightly more nuanced, and subtle, in Pound’s case. Here we do not have an all-powerful god to move the sun and the stars. We have, instead, an experience; led by nature and mind, through art, fairness and order, we have truly an earthly paradise, but not as a place, as a consciousness. We have, the same essence flowing through the likes of Pound’s factive men, where a lack of greed, corruption, cruelty and indifference gives way to strong minds, functioning wills, building of worlds and making of myths. Firmly rooted in the present, colored by different shades, both these paradises serve as part of the works’ dynamic legacy; they are not bedtime stories with beginnings and ends, but guiding lights of intellectual empowerment that, with each new reading, and in each new era, seek to alter the wrongs of human societies. They are never to become things of the past, but always a matter of the present. They will never be done carrying the light behind them.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Laws of physics dictate that only stars very large can collapse and become black holes, transforming themselves into mysterious parts of the galaxy where gravity is so strong that even light cannot break free. The bigger the star, the greater the blackness. As Pound collapsed on himself, alone and embittered, the black hole of his political and personal shortcomings tugged onto his light even stronger; and his brilliance became harder and harder to reach. Years of readership, and literary criticism, opted to emphasize his anger, not his awareness; his obscurity, not his precision; his tragedy, not his hope. And amid that chaos a work like *The Cantos* attempted to survive, struggling, fighting against the forces of gravity—within itself, and without—to let the light escape.

According to Pound, Dante's work provided "keys or passwords admitting one to a deeper knowledge, to a finer perception of beauty" (SR, 1952/2005, p. 154); that it gave way "to the deeper understanding of nature and the beauty of the world and of the spirit" (SR, 1952/ 2005, p.163). Embedded in a work like *The Divine Comedy* is a lot of faith; faith in the powers of poetry, in the righteousness of ideals, in the love of intelligence, and most of all, in the potential of humanity, where change is always possible, and sometimes even for the better. The poem serves to that deeper knowledge, that appreciation of nature, and of the human soul; it seeks to alter the world on its behalf. Pound's own work remains within similar parameters. For a work constantly interpreted as an elitist construction of overused references, *The Cantos* relies most on

the humanity of its readers; on that part of human nature that is open to becoming better, brighter, and kinder, without which works like *Comedy* and *The Cantos* are rendered useless. In a matter of speaking, these works themselves are filled with difficulties and moral contradictions, but within them, just as within their readers, is that strength and willingness to become better.

"The struggle was, and still might be," Pound writes in the opening pages of *Guide to Kulchur*, "to preserve some of the values that make life worth living" (1970, p.8). Values of life not for a few, or for a nation, but for the whole of human civilization; a range of impact that can only be achieved through the help of extensive experiences, so wide and large that can only be properly called epic. *The Divine Comedy* is a fact of life now. Its significance, its beauty, its immensity is undeniable; it is one of those most beloved works of art, continuing to possess a certain force of impact regardless of regions, religions or generations. It is this very ambition of the genre of epic that is best preserved within *Comedy*, and subsequently *The Cantos*; the ambition to reach out to scopes unimaginable to other forms of arts, to impact humanity as a whole, or better yet, to never stop having an impact. Intelligence, love, morality and faith reside not in smaller groups, but in the fabric of mankind, irrelevant to time and space, and it can be tapped into anywhere, and in anyone.

To achieve such ambition *The Cantos* follow certain routes perceptible within the thematic and stylistic structure of *Comedy*. Both works seek to launch an awareness, to wake mankind from a state of inertia that allows evil to take root. Greed, in various forms, and a preference of material wealth over higher riches, such as intelligence and integrity, stands in the way of mankind's betterment, stalling our minds, stealing from us

the desire to be better within ourselves. Certain things change very little; if we were to embark upon writing another epic now, we would still find ourselves undeniable tangled within webs of consumption and financial cruelty. We are still being clawed, everyday, by banks, advertisements, loans, credit cards, exploitation and such, just to satisfy our thirst for material gratification. Our wars are fought over oil. Anyone who opens a page of *The Cantos* today can stumble across a line like "The temple is holy, because it is not for sale" (Canto XCVII, p. 696), or a line which explains that a man's heart is "a clear spring of rightness/ greed turns it awry" (Canto XCIX, p. 717), knows exactly what's at stake. In a similar manner, anytime you read Dante's "So that all the gold there is beneath the moon/ And all there ever was/ could never give a moment's rest to these tired souls" (INF VII, p. 74), you know exactly the kind of weariness it implies.

An awareness of the mistakes is not enough to bring in a better order. It is through *Comedy* and *The Cantos* we are introduced to ideas that would help humanity carry the torch even further. These ideas are presented to us in a clear, precise fashion; Pound's clarity of the language, and of the thought, can be traced back to the revolutionary style of Dante. *The Cantos* does not drown in rhetorical ambiguities. What it hopes to communicate, in ways of living, is fairly clear. Just like *Comedy*, Pound's work hopes to create a panorama of values by pinpointing particularities of history, myth and custom. If these specifics are explained without murkier, abstract deadweights; they have a better change of igniting a response. It should never be forgotten that both these works hope to initiate change; to make their societies better; and stiff minds, filled with stiff thoughts, cannot get the job done.

The ambition is to lead mankind to light. And light is the fulfillment of intellectual potential, the possibility of a growth in intelligence. If *Comedy* and *The Cantos* succeed in ways their creators hoped, they would not only become parts of that light, but would help carrying it forward; to illuminate the mistakes of those left in the dark, to create pathways to a better intelligent design. And with light, intelligence, and love, the human civilization will alter; it will become better in ways possible not only to dream of in the present, but to act upon as well. We are not all black holes. Light does win the struggle occasionally—in every pure act of the intellect, in every realization of an intelligent thought, in songs, poems, novels and paintings, and all else. *The Cantos*' light is a similar shade to *Comedy*'s. If directed at the darkness, both epics will allow for the betterment of human soul by enriching the human mind.

The fact that Pound was influenced by Dante is not a revolutionary thought. Often, in creative outputs, influence becomes so engraved in one's mechanism that after some time it completely eludes us. The idea here is to place the emphasis not so much in how much Dante made it into *The Cantos*, but in how much Dante *we* can use to better understand Pound's complex magnum opus. *The Divine Comedy* can serve as a key to unlocking the potential we have been ignoring in our dealings with *The Cantos*, to comprehend better that the work is not a historic artifact, a beautiful piece of writing with very little connection to our present minds; but as something ever-evolving, reforming, with every read; something that can influence audiences in every new generation.

The Cantos is not static. It is not about past tales, forgotten myths, and a world system nobody wanted in the first place. It is not a manifesto piece for fascism, for

Mussolini; it isn't just about usury or banking. It is about the fundamentals of human life: intelligence, love, compassion and morality. It deals with things that were then, and still now are, essential to our progression: government, economics, social order, the state of arts and education. It may not always get the specifics right, but the broader scope of life embedded in *The Cantos* should not—better, must not—be forgotten. That life is far from static; it moves, with rapid force, towards a better future. Reading Dante's masterpiece now, about 700 hundred years after its conception, regardless of its Christian dogma, its outdated political structures, its ancient list of names, one is still filled with a desire to change. All that becomes irrelevant, and the will to change our ways, to aim at a better form of civilization, comes forth. The same ambition to initiate such a dynamic response from the reader adorns the pages of *The Cantos* as well.

Is change possible? Yes, according to Dante and Pound. These men are hopeful, they are optimists; despite enduring failures of their own, and of others, despite suffering under wars and death, these men still believe in the essence of mankind. They believe there is something worth saving there. After all, the entirety of *The Cantos* ends on a single, hopeful thought: *To be men not destroyers*.

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