

“A CERTAIN CONCORDANCE OF SIZE”:
POUND’S VENICE IN *THE PISAN CANTOS*

John Gery

Within Pound’s poetic oeuvre, surely the appeal of *The Pisan Cantos* lies in their candor. After the inexhaustible variety of personae Pound employs in earlier poems and cantos, here at last the poet seems to speak as “noman” (74/445), if not himself. Indeed, the impressive, though often elusive catalogue of names, places, quoted lines, snippets of conversation, phrases from diverse languages, and fragments of images Pound packs into the *Pisans* might not in themselves be so moving, were it not for the spontaneity, lack of pretension, vivid imagery, and powerful memories that permeate this section of *The Cantos*. While lying under the sun in the small cage where the U.S. Army housed him for several weeks near Pisa or sitting in his tent later, Pound evoked for himself cityscapes, encounters, lines of poetry, and conversations from his past, which he arranges “[p]ly over ply” (4/15) in the *Pisans*. As A. Walton Litz has observed, “[T]he more one reads Pound’s poetry against his other writings (including his letters), the more one realizes that he was the most occasional and particular of poets” (34). Is it not these intimate

passages (some intensely private, others expressing the quintessence of Pound's aesthetics) that lend the *Pisans* their emotional power? As Dorothy Shakespear wrote him in a letter dated 13 October 1945, after having seen passages from cantos 74, 75, and 76, "all these last, apparently, scraps, for cantos, are your self, the memories that make up yr. person" (Ezra and Dorothy Pound, *Letters* 131; Bush 136).

However, the irony of this view is that, despite the highly restrictive conditions, not to mention the unstable state of mind, under which Pound composed these cantos at the Disciplinary Training Center (DTC), their design still remains as carefully wrought as those poems more often associated with his predilection for masks. While the closing lines of canto 81, for instance, powerfully convey a sense that here, at last, we find the "real" Ezra Pound, in fact, that voice turns out to be as charged and double-edged as, say, the voice of the Hell cantos 14-15 or the "translated" lines from Cavalcanti's *Donna mi prega* in canto 36. It is precisely Pound's double-edged voice – the same voice in canto 81 that expresses both the poet's repentance for his own arrogance and his revulsion at others (namely, governments) for theirs – that is the "real" Ezra Pound, since evidence of that paradoxical voice can be found throughout his oeuvre, from "Apparuit" to *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* to canto 113.

One critical debate about the design of *The Pisan Cantos* since its initial publication in 1948 has centered on whether, while working without most of his sources at the DTC, Pound relied mainly on his own memory in composing the poem, resulting in an intensely private, elusive sequence, or, despite the unanticipated hardships of his incarceration, he exercised a poetics consistent with his design for earlier cantos. While (thanks to Ronald Bush and others) it is now clear that his original plan for the cantos to follow the Chinese-Adams section was to portray "paradiso" and bring *The Cantos* to closure, it also seems that even before completing cantos 74-84, Pound began to understand he was not finished with the whole (Sieburth xvi-xviii).

Critical responses after the initial appearance of *The Pisan Cantos* include, on one side, Reed Whittemore's remark that they have "the finish and the texture of a diary," coupled with the regret that "So little is Pound any longer engaged by the 'details' of expression" (Homberger 370), and C.M. Bowra's complaint that the *Pisans* have "no pattern" save "comments on life [that] are peculiarly tedious": "The unceasing rattle, the chaotic flow, the pointless gossip, the feeble generalizations, the 'knowing' air, the inside information, the culture," Bowra laments, "these things are known and give no pleasure" (Homberger 374). In a similarly dismissive piece, Richard Eberhart labels the *Pisans* as "squib-writing" with "scarcely. . . three pages of unbroken coherence," incapable of "penetrating . . . the depths of life".¹ On the other side, Louis Martz, while not disagreeing with Whittemore, describes the *Pisans* as "a brilliant note-book held together by the author's personality" (Homberger 367), and Robert Fitzgerald reiterates that view, calling them "more exhilarating sketch books . . . than can be found elsewhere in our literature," their details "minutely melodic."²

Of course, invaluable work has gone into examining the method of *The Pisan Cantos* in the last half century to counter Pound's first reviewers, nor do I wish to propose a novel approach. Rather, in characterizing the subtle persona in the *Pisans*, I want to explore Pound's vision of Venice in particular, how the plethora of images, locales, memories, and objects of art find their place in the poet's memory and imagination. For example, in contrasting the accelerated pace (especially of the Chinese-Adams cantos) and "inner shape" (*Forméd Trace* 107) of the *Pisans* to earlier cantos, Massimo Bacigalupo notes a change in the way Pound presents autobiographical references:

The *Cantos* are largely autobiographical throughout, but heretofore personal materials were used out of context in order to suggest some ideogrammic inference. In PC, however, Pound gives us his world

for its own sake, because he is attached to it, as Villon had done in *Le Grand Testament* . . . Previously events were coordinates defining some concept, now they define an individual. It is the Contacts of E.P [from *Mauberley*] once over, on a larger and more moving scale, and with less of an ax to grind. The moment the person stands revealed, we feel that through him we are dealing with an entire culture. . . . (*Forméd Trace* 108)

Elsewhere, Bacigalupo argues how, in the *Pisans*, Pound deliberately manipulates his “personal materials” toward aesthetic ends, despite what his incarceration might suggest. Pound composed this section of cantos, he asserts, “not only as self-therapy and testament . . . but also as a concerted poetic effort, just as he had written throughout his life” (“Pound’s *Pisan Cantos*” 96) . In fact, Bacigalupo goes further to point out that, while the earlier *Pisans* may be mostly occupied with the poet’s “political self-defense and account of himself and of the war,” cantos 79-84 “enter a more lyrical phase” in which “memories . . . are pursued for their own dear sake, only to return full-circle to a stronger political stance in canto 84” (“Pound’s *Pisan Cantos* 98). It seems, in other words, that the more intimate the subject matter, the more it is encompassed by Pound’s epic vision.

By adopting Bacigalupo’s perspective on the *Pisans*, we can, I believe, develop a correlative, though distinctive reading of the role of Venice throughout *The Cantos*, with the important disclaimer that, to be sure, not all references to, nor portraits of, Venice are merely autobiographical. Indeed, throughout the epic, Venice, as the poem’s most prominent city (as well the city, with Rapallo, where Pound spent more time than any other), remains – literally – a touchstone by which to measure Pound’s evolving vision. For the poet of the early *Cantos*, who records everything from “the azure air” (3/11) to the “smoky light” (4/13), the “Flat water before me, / and the trees growing in water, / Marble trunks out of stillness” (17/76) to the “Wind on the lagoon, the south wind

breaking roses" (26/125), Venice is not, despite Pound's obvious infatuation with its beauty, the Venice of postcards. Nor is it a source of soulful regret, nor a haven of delight, nor a place of decadence, so much as it is a shimmering matrix "taking light in the darkness" (26/121), a *paradiso terrestre* that comes into being before our eyes, as it does for the poet. Though lacking, perhaps, the Vorticist energy of Pound's London poetry before World War I, his portrait of the "visual culture" of Venice beginning in canto 3 comes across less as a picture recalled (Wordsworth-style) than as an image finding its own form: Pound frequently presents the city with Imagistic immediacy. Then in the "middle" cantos, including cantos 25, 26, and 35, Venice is more often portrayed as a center of mercantile exchange – "luogo di contratto" (35/175) – seen in contrast to, say, Siena, home of the Monte dei Paschi bank.

But in *The Pisan Cantos*, Pound's evocation of Venice loses its Eleusinian nature, when, instead, he catalogues churches, campi, restaurants, canal corners, conversations, and art works by their specific names, usually drawn from his direct experience of them, as he recalls them from a distance of both time and place. While the specificity of the Venice of *The Pisan Cantos* may at moments strike readers unfamiliar with Pound's life as obscurely personal – suggesting a poetry of mere "self-expression" counter to the poetics of masks so prevalent earlier – what Venice really provides is an opportunity for metonymy, with an economy *and* fidelity of expression that allow each phrase or image to project "the depths of life" (to recast Eberhart's phrase). *The Pisan Cantos* consist of a poetry not merely "held together by the author's personality," "pointless gossip," "feeble generalizations," or a "'knowing' air," but sealed by a "certain concordance of size" (79/505) not so evident in earlier cantos. Here Pound's method of naming the Giudecca Canal, praising small carvings in the Miracoli church, or quoting a phrase heard on the street works with the

power of an epic trope, not unlike various tropes he lifts from *The Odyssey* and *The Divine Comedy* elsewhere, in order to create, in Pound's characteristically double-edged voice, a poem both intimate and surprisingly elevated. In the last of the cantos, especially *Drafts & Fragments*, Venice again changes, as it takes on an even more dignified character for Pound, in a cavalcade of the beautiful and (arguably) true; here glimpses of the city become even more cryptic than in the *Pisans*. Yet is there any other locale in *The Cantos* that extends from canto 3 to canto 116, participating in each phase of the epic?

To characterize the metonymic mode in the *Pisans*, before considering Pound's Venice in representative sections of canto 76, I want to examine the phrase "a certain concordance of size," found near the beginning of canto 79, where, amid various observations of the grounds of the DTC, including those of the guards Edwards (who provides the poet with a table) and Whiteside (addressing a dog), as well as "8 birds on a wire / or rather 3 wires" (79/505), Pound juxtaposes several remarks: "[T]he new Bechstein [piano] is electric / and the lark squawk has passed out of season / whereas the sight of a good nigger is cheering / the bad 'uns wont look you straight." Then, thinking of contrasts by virtue of their scale, he consciously measures the dynamic interplay between the microscopic and the grand, between lyric and epic, when he writes:

Guard's cap quattrocento passes *a cavallo*
 on horseback thru landscape Cosimo Tura
 or, as some think, Del Cossa;
 upstream to delouse and down stream for the same purpose
 seaward
 different lice live in different waters
 some minds take pleasure in counterpoint
 pleasure in counterpoint
 and the later Beethoven on the new Bechstein,
 or in the Piazza S. Marco for example

San Marco “finds a certain concordance of size / not found in the concert hall”: whether his music is performed on an electronic instrument (one that surely appeals to the author of “The Machine Age”) *or* performed in the huge Venetian piazza where the orchestras still battle each other for attention, both contexts provide the appropriately grand scale for the music’s high drama, as Pound characteristically plucks three notes at once, across time *and* space. This triple chord is then reinforced by a further cross-temporal juxtaposition, in which Pound jokes about a “papal major sweatin’ it out to the bumm drum,” then wonders what Roman military camp might have once stood on this same spot, “what castrum romanum, what / ‘went into winter quarters’/ is under us?” (79/505).

Although heavily layered, this passage, in fact, exemplifies its own method, acting metonymically so that a few scant phrases comprise the poet’s thought on the matter without having to reduce the tensile ambiguity of “defects inherent in a record of struggle.” In striking “a certain concordance of size,” Pound’s unique harmony among varying scales – the particular in harmony with the self, the grand sweep of things in harmony with the larger world outside the DTC, *and* the poet’s self in harmony with that world – *The Pisan Cantos* establish their literary place, regardless of some almost indecipherable passages. For (as Pound suggests) in the same way that a space as majestic as Piazza San Marco may be needed to realize the ambitious scope of Beethoven’s late music, so only in a poem writ as large as *The Cantos* is there sufficient room for an individual poet’s most intimate emotions. In fact, as Pound’s unique representation of Venice in canto 76 aptly illustrates, it is from the poem’s “pleasure in counterpoint” that we are drawn into its details. Yet once we enter that intimate world, we discover how Pound’s individual struggle is bound to our own larger, communal or global one. In other words, paradoxically, it is by virtue of the poem’s very candor that it finds its epic scope.

Of the 337 lines of canto 76, most (though not all) of its invocations of Venice occur after line 250, on the last several pages, suggesting that even within this canto the poet feels compelled to create a larger context in which to situate his individual memories as concordant to the whole. Opening with an image of “the sun high over horizon hidden in cloud bank / lit saffron the cloud ridge,” the poem clearly announces itself, through its Cavalcanti “rhyme” with canto 36, “dove sta memora,” as a poem about love – most notably, where love “hath birth” (36/177), namely, “Where memory liveth,” taking its state “formed like a diafan from light on shade”; the image exactly matches the Pisan sunlight blocked by, yet penetrating the cloud that conceals it. Then, unlike other Pisans, 76 is neatly divided into discrete strophes that document the poet’s shifting mind, as he names various spirits (“Dryas, Hamadryas ac Heliades / . . . / Dirce et Ixotta e che fu chiamata Primavera”) that “suddenly stand in my room here / between me and the olive tree.” As others (mostly female) join this assemblage, the poet also thinks of various places important to him – for instance, the old road (“la vecchia”) in Rapallo where Sigismundo passed on his way from Pisa to Genoa, and “il triedro,” referring to comparable junctions in both Provence and Rapallo, as well as of places mentioned earlier in canto 74. Eventually, in a humorous allusion to the popular 1927 song, “Ain’t She Sweet,” the poet “very confidentially” asks “who’s dead, and who isn’t / and will the world ever take up its course again?” As an expression of his doubting that it will do so, he then catalogues various restaurants (none in Venice) that have undoubtedly closed, and wonders whether Yeats’s poetry has been reprinted since his death in 1939. Then he speculates that the “bricabrac” of the French poets Théophile Gautier and Jean Cocteau has been “snow[ed] . . . under” by a “seadrift.” Instead of reading the poets, as it were, “every man” will now head to “his junkshop” for souvenirs of the world.

The canto next offers a variety of directives, as it heads toward its own set of “bricabrac,” in an attempt to name, therefore preserve, that which the poet has decided to protect from extinction, including: “la pigrizia [meaning “laziness” or “sloth”] to know the ground and the dew”; the Chinese ideogram “Chung” (balance, or the middle way); the statement, “the word is made / perfect,” juxtaposed with the complex ideogram for sincerity; praise for Kung fu Tseu (Confucius) as a model ruler, together with a side swipe at Western rulers during the war, when he writes, “(b . . . h yr/ progress)/ each one in the name of his god”;⁵ acknowledgment of how “the sense of humor seemed to prevail” in “the synagogue” in Gibraltar; and the advice that Christians need not claim credit for Leviticus 19:35 in the Bible, which Pound earlier cites (probably from the DTC’s Bible) in canto 74: “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in meteyard, in weight, or in measure”.⁶ On the heels of this brief exegesis, the poet returns his attention to the DTC, asking, “Criminals have no intellectual interests?”, after which he records a conversation overheard between inmates about their education and the names of the books of the Bible. The following strophe breathes in again “the timeless air over the sea-cliffs,” bringing again to the poet’s mind “the roads of France.” The idea of measuring places for their size and “weight” prevails throughout this passage, granting privilege to “the *to whom* it happens / and to what, and if to a work of art / then to all who have seen and who will not.”

But at this point the memories begin to accelerate, starting with the poet “recalling the arrival of Joyce et fils / at the haunt of Catullus,” a passage which refers to the time James Joyce and his son visited Pound at Sirmione, only to result in Joyce’s diving under the table at a restaurant to hide from the thunder and lightning that swept across “Gardasee in magnificence.” Pound then notes Joyce’s ability to retain “the conversation / (or ‘go on’) of idiots” as remarkable, though

(somewhat surprisingly) *not* as impressive as that of “Miss Norton.” The daughter of the eminent writer Charles Eliot Norton, Sara Norton was, more significantly for Pound, also one of the two American women he befriended in Venice in the summer of 1908 who, because they were departing from the city earlier than anticipated, offered Pound their upstairs room at Calle del Frate, 942, just across the Rio di San Trovaso from a gondola workshop in Dorsoduro.

The introduction of Miss Norton here precipitates the remarkable string of Venetian memories that follow. The wistful French line, “Tout dit que pas ne dure la fortune” (“Everything says that fortune does not last”), may well regard the poet’s memory of his *good* fortune at the age of twenty-two at being bequeathed lodging, two months prepaid, where he could stay as long as his own meager funds held out, while he awaited the printing of his first book (Carpenter 93).

The next strophe in canto 76 then focuses exclusively on Venice:

and the Canal Grande has lasted at least until our time
 even if Florian’s has been refurbished
 and the shops in the Piazza kept up by
 artificial respiration
 and for La Figlia di Jorio they got out a
 special edition
 (entitled the Oedipus of the Lagunes)
 of caricatures of D’Annunzio (76/476)

Though alluded to numerous times in earlier cantos, the Grand Canal has been twice named before this passage – in canto 10, in an account of Borso d’Este having had an arrow shot at him (10/46), and at the end of canto 25, in the edict from the Council Major of Venice demanding that the painter Titian repay his advance for the “picture of the land battle / in the Hall of our Greater Council on the side toward / the piazza over the Canal Grande” (25/120), a commission which had

remained unfinished for twenty-four years. Now in canto 76 the Grand Canal has reached “our time / even if Florian’s has been refurbished,” obviously an echo of the earlier catalogue of restaurants closed. While the others are gone, Caffé Florian still limps along, together with the shops “kept up by artificial respiration,” a phrase which, while it expresses the poet’s disappointment in the commercialization of Piazza San Marco, also recalls the “junk-shop” in line 51 above and anticipates Pound’s variation on Baudelaire’s famous phrase about drug-induced experience that comes 101 lines later, “Le paradis n’est pas artificiel.” Again, by invoking almost incidentally here what will become a central tenet in his characterization of Paradiso later, Pound has struck a double chord, even as it seems he is only reminiscing to himself about a restaurant he frequented during the time he knew Sara Norton. Similarly, his recalling Gabriele D’Annunzio’s 1904 play, *Jorio’s Daughter*, anticipates the remembered question about D’Annunzio 143 lines later, “Does D’Annunzio live here? / said the American lady, K.H.”

Certainly, one of canto 76’s most memorable strophes, whose lines Olga Rudge considered “the most important thing of *The Cantos*” (Conover 271), serves as its turning point, since it both returns to the Cavalcanti line at the opening and rectifies the sequence of memories (especially of Pound’s Venice) that follow:

nothing matters but the quality
of the affection –
in the end – that has carved the trace in the mind
dove sta memoria (76/477)

While a reader may suspect that the intricate translation of Cavalcanti’s poem in Canto 36 is deeply private for Pound the man, not just Pound the poet, these few lines coming forty cantos and three hundred pages later finally confirm that suspicion.⁷ Following this restatement of canto 76’s theme, the

poem returns us to the poet in his idyllic pose “in the soft grass by the cliff’s edge / with the sea 30 metres below this [measured by the meteyard?]/ and at hand’s span, at cubit’s reach moving, / the crystalline, as inverse of water, / clear over rock-bed.” The ensuing pause, so beautifully lyrical through the next sixty-five lines, brings us closer than before to this poet’s private experience of love. At first, we get only the Ligurian landscape itself, yet the poet’s self-consciousness of his idleness and engagement with nature leads him, somewhat uncharacteristically (more like Wordsworth, say, than like H.D.) to *comment* on his condition: “nor is this yet *atasal* / nor are here souls, nec personae / neither here in hypostasis, this land is of Dione / and under her planet.” For a moment we get a definition, not an account (namely, the “union with the divine,” as Pound defines the Arabic term “*atasal*” in *Guide to Kulchur* [328]), but to be sure, it is a definition of what “this” is not.

After the ellipses (punctuation rarely used in *The Cantos*), the poem centers on more recent memories: of the poet in the Tirol, quoting a story his daughter Mary told him; of the Prefetto at Gardone on Lago di Garda with whom Pound sat (with the doomed Mussolini ensconced nearby in Salò) and watched “as the cat walked the porch rail,” an image of precarious motion introduced in canto 74 that surely figures Pound’s notion of grace under pressure; of the ouster of the British Minister of Information, Brendan Bracken, meaning only that the B.B.C.’s lies might change for awhile (“a different bilge”). The last of these details prompts the epic poet to portray himself as a different kind of writer: “As a lone ant from a broken ant-hill / from the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor,” while he also re-places himself back into his surroundings, setting up a complete “union with the divine”:

spiriti questi? personae?

tangibility by no means *atasal*

but the crystal can be weighed in the hand

formal and passing within the sphere: Thetis,
 Maya, Αφροδίτη (76/479)

In the Introduction to his recent edition of *The Pisan Cantos*, discussing what he calls “the erotico-mystical encounters of the wandering Odysseus-Dante-Pound,” Richard Sieburth argues: “as magic as they might be . . . these moments of goddess-induced transcendence may be the least convincing passages in *The Pisan Cantos* – less because of their Parnassian classical garb . . . than because they somehow feel too programmatic, emerging as they do from Pound’s preconceived plan for his *Paradiso* in the Italian drafts of early 1945” (xvii). Citing Charles Olson’s criticism that in such passages Pound “goes literary,” Sieburth finds more charm in Pound’s description of “the quotidian actualities of the stockade at Pisa,” and he later contends that the voices (many of them African-American) of the DTC personnel and inmates comprise the “crucial informing presence” (xxi) of the *Pisans*. Without wanting to detract from Sieburth’s emphasis on these other two elements, I would argue nonetheless that Pound’s invocations of goddesses, as well as his use of phrases from Greek, Latin, Italian, French, and other languages, are by this time in *The Cantos* virtually second nature; to assert that they have therefore become stylized raises a challenging question, namely, would it have been possible for Pound to achieve the same level of elevation, the same “concordance of size,” in the *Pisans*, had he *not* maintained his predilection for such tropes? For me, at least, his repetition of the Greek term, “Dakruon” (“weeping”), for instance, three times at the end of this passage – the same passage that recalls the “wing’d fish under Zoagli” near Rapallo, the destruction done to Sigismundo’s Tempio in Rimini by “hoi barbaroi,” and the poet’s frustration at not being able to write “La Cara,” leading him to ask the “white-chested martin” to carry the message, “amo,” for him – expresses his anguish more accurately

ly than less “literary” language would. True, his admission of his own lack of compassion for others, being stated partially in French (“J’ai eu pitié des autres / probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own convenience”), may seem evasive. But the inverse of Sieburth’s contention that Pound by 1945 had been out of touch with American idiomatic speech for more than thirty years is that he had during that same period been *in* touch with several European languages. Such multilingual diction by contemporary writers is now widely considered a mark of multiculturalist authenticity, not a literary affectation. Might not the same principle apply to Pound?

After this intensely personal immersion, resulting not only in his confession but in the line, “States of mind are inexplicable to us,” and thoughts of “gli onesti” (“the honest ones”),⁸ canto 76 fully plunges into its Venetian memories, loaded on each other ply over ply in a compressed recreation of Pound’s life there, especially in the summer of 1908. Although the passage covers only about fifty-five lines, it works with the power of Beethoven played in Piazza San Marco to resonate throughout *The Cantos*. Indeed, looked at one way, despite its quickly shifting foci, it offers one of the more sustained passages of the *Pisans*, with only five lines (on the spider and butterfly in the poet’s tent) interrupting the flow of memories. It begins:

under the two-winged cloud
 as of less and more than a day
 by the soap-smooth stone posts where San Vio
 meets with il Canal Grande
 between Salviati and the house that was of Don Carlos
 shd/ I chuck the lot into the tide-water?
 le bozze “A Lume Spento”/
 and by the column of Todero
 shd/ I shift to the other side
 or wait 24 hours,

free then, therein the difference
 in the great ghetto, left standing
 with the new bridge of the Era where was the old eyesore
 Vendramin, Contrarini, Fonda, Fondecho (76/480)

“As of less and more than a day,” writes the confined poet, seeing no doubt a direct parallel between his idle days as an unemployed poet in Venice in 1908 and his long days in Pisa, thinking of a moment thirty-seven years before when, contemplating his future, he almost called it quits and dumped the proofs (“le bozze”) of *A Lume Spento* into the Rio San Vio where it “meets with il Canal Grande.”

In a second parallel to the same period, much as the poet later “[l]ay in soft grass by the cliff’s edge,” as a young man in Venice he lay at the entrance to San Marco on the steps under the column of San Teodoro slaying the crocodile, where he frittered away the hours, as he describes it fifty cantos earlier:

And
 I came here in my young youth
 and lay there under the crocodile
 By the column, looking East on the Friday,
 And I said: Tomorrow I will lie on the South side
 And the day after, south west.
 And at night they sang in the gondolas
 And in the barche with lanthorns;
 The prows rose silver on silver
 taking light in the darkness. “Relaxetur!”
(26/121)

Again, despite the autobiographical nature of the memory here, the ironies abound: Not only does the reference in canto 76 to the poet lying under the “Todero” column in 1908 rhyme with canto 26, placing the poet back into the context of Venetian history in the same way that the earlier reference does as a transi-

tion from canto 25 to 26, but it cannot be lost on Pound in Pisa that the original use of that column was for public executions – for instance, of Carmagnola, as noted in cantos 10 and 17, the condottiere beheaded for treason, no less, by being hung between the columns! Indeed, while the Latin phrase, “Relaxetur,” may seem to prompt the poet to “relax,” it literally means “Let him be released” (Terrell 103), a meaning surprisingly relevant at the DTC.

In canto 76, without having to delineate these intricate connections, the poet instead qualifies them: “free then, therein the difference / in the great ghetto.” The poet in his “young youth” was afforded a privilege not granted in earlier centuries to Jews in Venice’s Ghetto. Yet the poem turns quickly through this geographical reference to post-World War I Venice, when Mussolini replaced the iron bridge erected across the Grand Canal in 1854 (“the old eyesore”) with “the new bridge of the Era.” This civic improvement Pound goes on to catalogue with four palazzos on the Grand Canal which he especially admires, juxtaposed against the one artwork in Venice he praises more than any other:

and Tullio Romano carved the sirenes
 as the old custode says: so that since
 then no one has been able to carve them
 for the jewel box, Santa Maria Dei Miracoli (76/480)

Comprised of inlaid marble and completed in 1489, the small Santa Maria dei Miracoli church was built from a masterful design by Pietro Lombardo. John Ruskin considers it one of the “two most refined buildings” of the “exceedingly beautiful” Renaissance architecture in Venice incorporating Byzantine models (230-31). More importantly, inside, on each side of the choir is a marble balustrade lined with half-sized figures, probably carved by Lombardo’s son, Tullio Lombardo. These delicate, yet austere figures – perhaps angels, perhaps sirens – captivated Pound’s imagination from

the time he first saw them, no doubt in 1908, and they remained in his imagination the epitome of artistic achievement. In May 1913, when H.D. arrived in Venice for a visit, Pound immediately whisked her off to the Miracoli to see Lombardo's carvings; in 1958, she could still recall the scent of incense from the church (46).

In *Guide to Kulchur*, Pound includes Santa Maria Miracoli on his list of the essential works of European Civilization and records a fragment of his conversation with the custodian there about Lombardo's carvings:

The old guardian at Sta Maria dei Miracoli says of the carving "It just seems that nobody *has* been able since. . ."

That refers to a culture. The perception of a whole age, of whole congeries and sequence of causes, went into an assemblage of detail, whereof it wd. be impossible to speak in terms of magnitude. (*Guide* 136)

It is this "perception of a whole age" permanently expressed in "an assemblage of detail" (the carvings themselves) that enacts "culture" for Pound. Although he may feel uninhibited in asserting his *own* judgment about *which* details matter and which do not, the principle that a culture's identity is found not through socio-political or ideological ascendancy, but in particulars such as those found in the Miracoli, prevails. In canto 45, Pietro Lombardo is named as one of the artists whose work "came not by usura," and in canto 74 Pound recalls the Miracoli's ingenious marble foundations, "where Pietro Romano has fashioned the bases" (74/450). Yet what is tellingly imprecise in both cantos 74 and 76 is the surname of father and son, as Pound confuses Tullio *Lombardo* with another Tullio (*Romano*) and then transfers that same mistake onto the father. Is not this slip Pound's Cortez, one which, like the famous mistake in Keats's sonnet, serves finally to accentuate the "concordance" of Pound's Venice? It does not seem to matter that the artist is misnamed, since a careful

seeker will discover the correct reference. Put another way, might Keats not have inadvertently done Balboa an historical favor by misidentifying him as Cortez?

As I hope these few passages suggest, interpreting the Venetian passages in *The Pisan Cantos* requires “a certain concordance of size” in our response in order fully to realize their reach and power. Certainly, their intimacy can be sublime, with the poignancy of any memory of a private encounter, beautiful image, or illuminating moment. But, at least with the hindsight we now have, I would argue that when he “goes literary” (to reiterate Olson’s criticism), rather than depersonalizing *The Pisan Cantos*, Pound informs them with the detail, depth, and dimension necessary to accomplish his task of making a world capable of attending to both the minute intricacies of individual experience and the shared perceptions of the human community, in language sonorous as the acoustics in San Marco. “Beauty” is surely difficult, and agony and weeping have cognates in every language. But to weigh in our hands the crystal that emanates from both these dimensions of life simultaneously is a privilege rarely afforded, a privilege which we can thank *The Cantos* for granting us.

University of New Orleans, Louisiana

Notes

¹ Homberger 378. Eberhart clarifies his impression when he writes, “either Pound has so much to say that he hurtles us along in his hectic, headlong pursuit of his exuberant, prolific world, as if his magic would break should we stop... to consider, say, these four lines. Or, Pound is not interested in penetrating, or cannot penetrate, the depths of life and will cast out these laconic lines, for instance,

for the sake of laconism” (*ibid.*).

² Homberger 363. Remaining true to his own sensibility as a classical translator, Fitzgerald considers the “key to much of the verse in the *Cantos*, and especially to the *Pisan Cantos*, . . . the hexameter” or the “basic six beat pattern, actually three and three, [which] Pound has modulated. . . ad infinitum, dropping the second half line, echoing it, slowing, speeding, or exploding the component feet, suspending and delaying the completion of the measure by parenthetical inserts, relieving it with the familiar English pentameter (blank verse) line, but returning often enough to the long line to keep it alive in the reader’s ear” (Homberger 361). In other words, despite appearances to the contrary, the rhythm and devices of the *Pisans*, argues Fitzgerald, are surprisingly conventional for an epic poem.

³ In 1930, the chemist Walther Nernst, a 1920 Nobel Laureate, collaborated with the C. Bechstein piano company (which had been manufacturing both grand and upright pianos since the nineteenth century) and the Siemens corporation to create one of the first electric grand pianos, which replaced the traditional sound board of a piano with radio amplifiers; using of electromagnetic pickups, the sound produced by the piano could then be amplified, modified and recorded electronically (“C.Bechstein Pianofortefabrik”). See also C. Bechstein Pianoforte-fabrik, “C. Bechstein: About Bechstein: Tradition.”

⁴ *Guide* 135. The relevant passage in *Guide to Kulchur*, under the section title, “RAPPEL a L’ORDRE,” reads:

Knowledge is NOT culture. The domain of culture begins when one HAS “forgotten-what-book”.

Boccherini Op. 8 N.5 (as played by the New Hungarian Four) is an example of culture. Bartok’s Fifth [p. 135] Quartet under same conditions (March 5th, 1937, Rapallo) is the record of a personal struggle, possible only to a man born in the 1880s.

It has the defects or disadvantages of my *Cantos*. It has the defects and disadvantages of Beethoven’s music, or of as much of Beethoven’s music as I can remember. Or perhaps I shd. qualify that: the defects inherent in a record of struggle.

Man is an over-complicated organism. If he is doomed to extinction he will die out for want of simplicity” (*Guide* 134-35).

As Pound goes on to argue, he praised the music of Boccherini “on the day before yesterday’s evening” as “utterly beautiful,” because its beauty

lies in the fact that “no trace of effort remained,” in contrast to the Bartok music (and thus, also the *Cantos*) which is “too interesting.”

⁵ Terrell 393 associates the ellypsis with words Pound attributes to Cesare Borgia in canto 30, in response to the d’Este family’s demand for a large dowry for the sake of its honour, at the time of Alfonso d’Este’s marriage to Lucrezia Borgia: “‘Honour? Balls for yr. honour!/ Take two million and swallow it’” (30/148). [But more likely the abbreviation (which appears also on the previous page) stands in for an obscenity, like “bugger”, with an “h” thrown in for effect. – Eds.] “Progress” in canto 76 seems to contrast “la prigizia” (or the “laziness”) that allows one “to know the ground and the dew” and to find balance.

⁶ 74/454; Terrell 374. It is easy to see why this verse appeals to Pound because of its literal equation of righteousness with measurements in carpentry and finance, which he links directly to “First Thessalonians 4, 11”: “And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you” (Terrell 374). The directive is Confucian.

⁷ The only other appearance of the phrase, “dove sta memora,” between cantos 36 and 76 is in canto 63, the second of the John Adams cantos, spliced into the middle of Adams’s diary entries recording his daily schedule; there the phrase works as a transition from an entry dated 1757 to one dated 1759, in other words, as an ideogram for Adams’s state of mind, that links him as well to Cavalcanti. See 63/ 352-53.

⁸ The Italian phrase derives from Dante’s *Purgatorio* VI.63, describing the eyes of Sordello. See canto 7/24 and Pound, *Literary Essays* 295, where Pound uses the phrase in a portrait of Henry James.

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