



Mussolini's empire was in shambles when this was written, yet Pound reaffirms his poetic-historical dream of an ideal city. And he stresses his polytheism, his idea of free worship, quoting a passage from the prisoners' Bible:

For all people will walk every one in the name of his god, and we  
will walk in the name of the LORD our God for ever and ever.  
(Micah 4:5)

Pound dropped the latter part, as always quoting selectively.

It is no surprise that Pound should respond to the Bible. The King James cadences were familiar to him since childhood and his poetry early and late has a biblical ring. *Lustra* includes "Dance Figure: For the Marriage of Cana of Galilee," which is in part a variation on the Song of Songs. The *Usura* cantos are spoken by a new prophet called Ezra, and he reverts to King James with "Pull down thy vanity" in the Pisan sequence. (The "vanity of vanities" passage from Ecclesiastes is included in *The Pocket Book of English Verse* that Pound rifled in the Pisan cantos, having picked it up, it will be remembered, "on the jo-house seat" – 80/533.)

Thus, though in the climate of the later 1930s Pound became obsessed with Jews and usury and unfortunately allowed these themes to enter his poem (and play a large part in his correspondence and broadcasts), he never weaned himself from his early religious-poetic training. *The Cantos* is a sort of new Bible or anti-Bible, divided (like its model) in prophetic, historic and lyrical books. It is a sacred book which purports to record all that matters of world history and to "include" by reference the other works a person needs to know: Homer, Dante, Ovid, Cavalcanti, Confucius — and the Bible.

to redeem Zion with justice  
sd/ Isaiah. Not out on interest said David rex  
the prime s.o.b.

The last quip was omitted in the London (Faber) edition of *The Pisan Cantos*. While praising King David for being against usury, Pound is also reminding us (I believe) of his villainous behavior towards Uriah, Bethsheba's husband (2 Samuel 11), of which David repented after Nathan denounced it to his face. By the way, the lines are typical of Pound's shorthand, of his style, which is always close to a conversation or a letter. The act of writing is foregrounded, and there is the aside, "the prime s.o.b." We are expected to know about David, Uriah and Bethsheba:

And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself; and the woman was very beautiful to look upon... (2 Samuel 11: 2)

David lived many centuries ago, and he was mastered by his impulses just as much as Homer's Achilles. Still, times don't really change, and human wishes are just as unpredictable and culpable over the whole course of history. ("Charges of sexual harassment swirl around Israeli leader" – Associated Press, 11 July 2006.) That is one of the ideas on which Pound bases his psychology. David committed a grievous sin; he repented, though he could not call back to life the murdered Uriah. Bethsheba bore him Salomon. History is devious and paradoxical:

... deceives by whispering ambitions,  
guides us by vanities.

This is T. S. Eliot's Gerontion speaking a Jacobean dialect, which in turn is not too far from the King James Version – not for nothing do we speak of "Jacobean" plays.

In the opening chapter of *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach discusses the episode of "The Scar of Odysseus" which leads

to the wanderer's recognition in Ithaca by the old nurse who washes him. Auerbach contrasts Homer's even style, which breaks the narrative to recount the origin of the scar in a hunting expedition of the hero's youth, with Biblical narrative, for example the story of Abraham and Isaac, which is told in flashes and essential actions, and is based on contradiction within the characters (as in the case of David, see above):

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Morah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.  
(Genesis 22:1-2)

Auerbach points out that we know nothing of the reason for God's cruel "temptation," and that no background is provided for the encounter between God and Abraham: only the bare command, as if in a void. But the scene is impressive, and the author by having God say that Isaac is Abraham's "only son . . . whom thou lovest" is telling us indirectly how big a sacrifice God is asking of Abraham. These stylistic differences between the *Odyssey* and the Bible are accompanied by a profound difference of intention. While it doesn't matter if Homer's story really happened, the author of Genesis believes passionately in his tale, so far as "to exclude any other claim": his is the one true history, including all others. The point of the narrative is not to entertain but to command belief, and if we refuse assent we are rebels.

Now this seems very different from Pound's defense of freedom and independence of choice. On the other hand, "each one in his god's name" is one of Pound's ten commandments, to which we are expected to give assent. ("Thou shalt have many gods!") *The Cantos* is a fragmentary history of the world that purports to convey all that is essential,

and it does so by allusion and vivid scenes, like those in Genesis, not by carrying us along in an extended narrative as, say, in Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, or even in *Paradise Lost*.

Pound took his role as Ezra the younger seriously and humorously:

And God the Father Eternal (Boja d'un Dio!)  
 Having made all things he cd.  
 think of, felt yet  
 That something was lacking, and thought  
 Still more, and reflected that  
 The Romagnolo was lacking, and  
 Stamped with his foot in the mud and  
 Up comes the Romagnolo:  
     "Gard, yeh bloody 'angman! It's me".  
 Aso iqua me. (28/133)

Curiously, Pound reverted again to Genesis in a similar passage at the beginning of his Italian cantos, where God, after creating sky, earth, volcanic sunsets, rocks with lichens, "shat the great usurer Satan-Geryon, prototype of Churchill's masters" (72/425). Pound goes out of his way to rewrite Genesis, because canto 72 proceeds to report his encounters with the ghosts of Marinetti and Ezzelino, so the connection between the opening creation-scene and the rest is tenuous.

Thus, behind the many sacred books of *The Cantos* (chiefly Homer, Ovid, Dante and Confucius) there is a secret, unacknowledged and even unconscious source, of subject matter, structure, intention, and language, i.e. the Bible. This is only appropriate since Pound was a man of contradictions. It will be remembered that in 1942 he accused Eliot's *After Strange Gods* (a pamphlet that Eliot came to regret) of being "contaminated by the Jewish poison":

In these essays Eliot falls into too many non sequiturs. Until he succeeds in detaching the Jewish from the European elements of his

peculiar variety of Christianity he will never find the right formula. Not a single letter of the Hebrew alphabet can enter a text without danger of contaminating it. (*A Visiting Card, Selected Prose* 320).

In *After Strange Gods* (1934) Eliot had mildly criticized Pound's hell cantos as being "a Hell for the *other people*, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one's friends" (43), so this passage in *Carta da visita* (1942) is a belated response to the charge. In fact, Eliot, from his Anglo-Catholic perspective, had astutely accused Pound of "post-Protestant prejudice" (41) as exhibited in his preference for the outcast as against the established figure (Cavalcanti rather than Dante, Ford rather than Conrad, Sigismondo rather than Lorenzo de' Medici, Mussolini rather than Roosevelt). Whereas, as the title *After Strange Gods* suggests, Eliot comes out as a believer in orthodoxy, in *unam sanctam catholicam apostolicam ecclesiam*.

Pound responds in the same vein accusing Eliot of not having rid himself of the "Jewish poison," by which he really means the exclusivity and monotheism of Judaism and Protestantism. The two friends are accusing each other of the same failure, i.e. of sharing Protestant prejudice. Pound goes on to say as much:

It is amusing, after so many years, to find that my disagreement with Eliot is a religious disagreement, each of us accusing the other of Protestantism. (*Selected Prose* 321)

Yet, as I have tried to demonstrate, only Pound went so far as to try (unconsciously) to create a new (Protestant) Bible, which is to some extent what Whitman wanted to do in the previous century. But Whitman is a didactic poet only insofar as he wants to teach us an attitude to life and reality and an admiration for the things he loves, like America and Lincoln. Pound is much more "Protestant" in that he rewrites

the entire span of recorded history from his personal findings and beliefs, and will hardly tolerate a non-believer among his readers, who form a sort of religious community. The rituals of Spring and Autumn are established in many beautiful cantos, like 39, 47, 79 and 90. Other sections report Ezra's true history of man and his efforts to free himself from oppression and penury. Bigots, profiteers and fools are the main obstacles to the creation of an earthly paradise. This worldview can be compared to that of several Victorian Protestant sages, like Ruskin, Carlyle, Whitman, and even Charles Dickens.

In these writers we always hear a personal voice addressing us, often preaching to us. Likewise, behind the many masks or personae of *The Cantos*, we always hear Pound expressing his beliefs, his loves and hates. True, he often likes to work by selective quotation. But his personality is apparent both in the selection and in the voice. A canto is to be read by a single voice, that includes all the others, just as we can report in discourse what others have said, tell stories, remember details, make allusions. Does this mean that the theme of "persona" in Pound is a red herring? The answer to some extents is yes. It has often led readers astray rather than being helpful.

Take the vexed question of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. This is a poem in two parts, the first a self-portrait of E.P., spoken unmistakably in his voice; the second a portrait in the third person of the effete poet Mauberley, a Poundian version of Eliot's Prufrock. It's unlikely that Pound even thought of the character Mauberley before finishing the first part of the poem, which is really about his own "Life and Contacts." Since the first part includes a series of portraits of writers, some pseudonymous (Mr. Nixon, Brennbaum, M. Verog), Pound added a sequence of poems about a part-imaginary figure (the young Yeats, the young Pound) and called him Mauberley. He then used the name as a title for the whole

sequence, suggesting that the serio-comic trials of the artist and his destiny are its chief concern (probably also influenced by and responding to “J. Alfred Prufrock,” a name much like “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley,” and a work Pound loved and to some extent considered his own discovery). That is really all we need to know to read Pound’s *Mauberley* competently.

But some commentators have wasted their time trying to prove that Mauberley is the speaker of Part 1, which makes no sense. But then, they ask, why is “E.P.” dismissed in the first poem? Well, irony is nothing new. Pound in the first poem writes a mock-epitaph for himself. This is something he went on doing through his life, assessing his own work and career more or less seriously and passionately. *The Cantos* are in essence self-portrait and self-assessment. The *Pisan Cantos*, in particular, are an extended scrutiny and defense of their author, at the end of a period of his life (and in his 60th year), just as *Mauberley* is an account of Pound’s life at the end of the London period, written ideally (though not in fact) in his 30th year (“l’an trentiesme de son eage”).

Therefore a reader of *Mauberley* and *The Cantos*, will not go far amiss if he takes Pound to be the speaker, or occasionally the actor who dons the masks of Propertius, Odysseus or Acoetes (cantos 1 & 2). But we are always listening to Pound’s “great bass.” The characters Pound evokes are means of expressing his attitudes. In *Homage to Sextus Propertius*, the genial sequence written before *Mauberley*, there is no preamble in which a narrator tells us, “Here is what Propertius said in the first century BC” – but it is implicit. (Pound claimed repeatedly that Propertius was a feat of criticism, that it implicitly commented on the real Propertius.) In *The Cantos* frames are more frequent. For instance, the Confucius “persona” in Canto 13 is presented in a reported narrative:

Kung walked  
     by the dynastic temple  
 and into the cedar grove,  
                     and then out by the lower river...       (13/58)

Who else but Pound is the speaker?

Pound's eccentric use of language(s) is everywhere evident. He liked foreign sounds, and the associations that a partly-understood word could evoke, like a nugget, a precious stone. (Thus he had much in common with his *bête noire* John Milton.) His use of languages is also a way of exhibiting masterful familiarity with the cultures and places he is instructing us about. Our poet-correspondent is "in the know," he likes an inside joke and wishes us to become a part of his tribe of cognoscenti. Too bad that often the associations are strictly private. The real Pound was actually only an intelligent foreigner in Italy, France, even in England, and never really became a part of these cultures, nor would he have liked to. He was busy creating his personal myth, and the less reality there was to contradict it the better. Like the protagonist in Henry James's story, he worshipped at "The Altar of the Dead," and when Fascism was finally buried he was able to make a place for it on the altar of *The Cantos* as one of the failed noble dreams of history, with the Albigensians and the rest. Until Fascism was in power and unquestioned at home and abroad, Pound's interest in it was relatively mild, and certainly produced no poetry of value.

Any speaker of the many foreign languages cited in *The Cantos* will confirm that Pound was an imperfect linguist. This is of no great importance. Also the Italian phrases in Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms* are mostly misspelled, when not completely wrong. I often wonder why Hemingway always writes "ciaou" for "ciao." Couldn't he or his editors check a dictionary? The Italian of these two writers is an Italian for foreigners. (Though of course Pound came to speak Italian much more fluently and competently than

Hemingway, and cantos 72-73 are an extraordinary tour de force.) *The Cantos* are in a way one of the many books written by British and American residents about houses in Tuscany and Italian neighbors. They present an inside view of Italy by someone who is not really an insider, and that is part of the fun.

For example, in the line quoted above:

And God the Father Eternal (Boja d'un Dio!)

we take it that Pound was amused by the ingenious Italian blasphemy, "hangman God," and is reporting to his readers this supposedly juicy bit. "This is how the Catholic Italians (or some of them) address their God!" Just a few lines below he renders this as "Gard, yeh bloody 'angman! It's me". (Here some may even question his English ear.) Then he translates the latter phrase in Spanish: "Aso iqua me."

The reader has little doubt that all of this is meant to be playful banter, though there may be some deeper intention. Mussolini was a Romagnolo, after all. But chiefly Pound is celebrating the value of "the personal" as he called it. Not the persona, but the personal. The Romagnolo is an example of the individuality which is a touchstone of *The Cantos*. The English reader has also learned about Italian swearing and a Spanish phrase which Pound must think significant. Is it correct? We don't know.

We probably need a hypertext of *The Cantos* in which by clicking on a word we will hear how it is pronounced. For an Italian, Frenchman, Spaniard or German, it is usually farcical to hear an English speaker try to read any passage from *The Cantos* in which these languages are called upon. Whether Pound himself knew the correct pronunciation is another question.

We can conclude that Pound's fascination for foreign tongues was part of his nomadic habits and his Hemingwayan

wish to be part of things, to show his guests around in Madrid, Paris or Rapallo. In *The Cantos* we are his guests. And, it must be said, he usually gives us a good time for our money.

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