

*THE CANTOS: LANGUAGE OF SENSATION AND
METAPHORS OF IDENTITY*

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There is a certain clumsiness about the expression of emotion in the early poems of Pound we do not find in Coleridge, Wordsworth and Keats, or Tennyson, or Whitman and Dickinson. They are able to meet their feelings head-on and have no hesitation about speaking for themselves in the first person. From the very beginning Pound has difficulty in being himself. As Hugh Kenner points out, the first poem in *Personae* is about what it feels like to be a tree, and it is followed by “La Fraisne,” “Cino,” “Na Audiart” and the two “Villonaud,” in all of which Pound speaks through another person.

As far as poetry is concerned, Browning is the one who fully develops the idea of persona, although it can be seen forming in “The Female Vagrant,” “The Thorn” and “The Complaint of a Forsaken Indian Woman” of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798). Talking about “The Thorn” to Isabelle Fenwick (1834), Wordsworth is very specific about his imaginary speaker:

The character which I have here introduced speaking is sufficiently common. The Reader will perhaps have a general notion of it, if

he has ever known a man, a Captain of a small trading vessel for example, who being past the middle age of life, had retired upon an annuity or small independent income to some village or country town of which he was not a native, or in which he had not been accustomed to live. (139)

And he goes on to describe the speaker's psychology. Moreover, it is useful to remember that the early Waverley novels were published anonymously, that Balzac's first eight novels were published under pseudonyms (1822-1825) and republished in 1836 as by Horace de Saint-Aubin, and that Stendhal uses 179 pseudonyms in his various works, published and unpublished (Lacouture 42). The purpose of the assumed identity is to free the imagination and enable an inner monologue-dialogue to establish itself.

A persona or mask is used to hide one's identity, but it can also be used to try out other identities and to become someone else (Yeats develops this notion in *A Vision*). It is also a way of living vicariously, as Pound states in his early poem, "Histrión" (1908): "The souls of all men great / At times pass through us, / And we are melted into them, and are not / Save reflections of their souls." For a moment, he says, we are someone else, "cease we from all being for the time" (CEP 71). Pound (and Browning), however, appear to use the *persona* not only to hide from others, but to hide from themselves, a way of creating a distance between themselves and their feelings and of not having to take responsibility for them. This means that they can see their emotions more clearly and not have to feel them so deeply. Unlike Browning, Pound is not interested in analyzing feelings, his or anyone else's. Flory comments on his "habitual and deeply rooted reluctance to be open about his true feelings ... His aversion to introspection seems to be not simply a matter of personal choice, but a fundamental part of his personality," and he tried to "hide his emotional evasiveness from himself" (*Cantos*, 4-5).

This aversion to introspection is confirmed by his daughter Mary. Reflecting on the last cantos and the conclusion of her father's life, she quotes canto 80:

Les larmes que j'ai créées m'inondent
 Tard, très tard que j'ai connue, la Tristesse,
 I have been hard as youth sixty years (533)

and comments: "Until then the attitude toward personal feelings had been somewhat Henry Jamesian: feelings are things other people have. One never spoke of them or showed them" (D 258). The sixtieth year when his youthful hardness ended for Pound (born in 1885) is 1945. At Pisa his feelings caught up with him. He was forced to face the reality of his life as never before and as a result wrote some of his greatest poetry. Another example of Pound's trying to keep his feelings at a distance is his daughter's remark that he and Olga Rudge usually spoke to each other in the third person (D 117-18).

His daughter, Mary, also comments on the divided nature of his life during the war. He seems almost two persons. Pound "spent every second afternoon in Sant'Ambrogio" with Olga and Mary and the rest of the time in Rapallo with Dorothy (D 149). When in 1941 he started to broadcast on Rome radio, he read them his talks (which they also heard on the radio) and then he would read five lines from the *Odyssey* for Mary to translate:

And it seemed as though he possessed two voices: one angry, sardonic, sometimes shrill and violent for the radio speeches; one calm, harmonious, heroic for Homer, as though he were taking a deep, refreshing plunge into the wine-colored sea after a scorching battle. (D 150)

As the world war continued, in 1943, she sees in retrospect that:

There was an inner, metaphysical war going on at the same time, over which he had no power. The usury of time was at work inside

him.... He was losing ground, I now see, losing grip on what most specifically he should have been able to control, his own *works*. (D173)

Although, in her memoir, she never questions her father's sanity, she does present him as out of control:

"lord of his work and master of utterance" [74/462] – he was that no longer and perhaps he sensed it and he more strongly clung to the utterances of Confucius, because his own tongue was tricking him, leading him into excess, away from his pivot, into blind spots. I know no other explanation for some of his violent expressions – perhaps he felt the exasperation of not being able to get his real meaning across. (D 171-2)

Nonetheless, Pound, like all of us, needed to be in touch with his feelings and this desire for sanity and mental health is, in part, responsible for his enormous creativity and its specific structures, why he kept the obsessive craziness of his political and economic views out of *The Cantos* as long as he did and the use he makes of Adams and Confucius. James Laughlin states that he was triouled by Pound's anti-semitism when he stayed with him in Rapallo in 1934-35 (4-5). Although there are anti-Jewish remarks in passing in the cantos of *The Fifth Decad* (1937), the first outburst of nasty, angry ranting occurs in canto 52, the first of *Cantos LII-LXXI* published in 1940 (see Flory, *American Pound* 80, and "Antisemitism"). It is worth noting that it is in this series that Pound introduces for the first time major blocks of Chinese history (52-61) and citations from the John Adams letters (62-71) as if somehow to counterbalance his obsessive hatred.

Pound begins canto 2 by addressing Robert Browning, thereby acknowledging one of his sources, Browning's *Sordello*. He constantly speaks in his own voice. His comment that "there can be but the one 'Sordello'" is a recognition that there is a single historical reality and an acknowledgement of the fictional nature of his and Browning's per-

sonae. The existence of the real Sordello is affirmed by the citation in the original Provençal from the earliest *vida*: “Lo Sordels si fo di Mantovana” (2/6). The citation, like all the quotations in *The Cantos* (and all of the naming), is Pound’s way of trying to get as close as possible to reality. The citation is an object and by including it Pound is making contact, touching something real. This is why he refers to “Schoeney’s daughters” (2/6). He is using Golding’s *Metamorphoses* and Golding’s spelling is *Schoeney* for Atlanta’s father, *Schoeneus* (T I.6). Similarly, he employs the French forms for Chinese emperors, because he is taking the material from de Mailla’s *Histoire Générale de la Chine* (1777-85). He always prefers the hard to the soft.

Quotations in *The Cantos* function as objects. They are bits of reality in-corporated in the poem. They tell the truth about his sources, the actual text consulted and hence about the moment of composition. This need for definiteness, solidity and the palpable pervades the whole of *The Cantos* and motivates Pound’s next line after the reference to Sordello: “So-shu churned in the sea” (2/6). This is an allusion to Li Po’s criticism of Ssu-ma whose poetry (Pound quotes from Fenollosa’s notes) “stirred up decayed (enervated) waves. Open current flows about in bubbles, does not move in wave lengths” (T I.5). This returns the poem to the sea and the notion of metamorphosis and makes the wonderful line “And the wave runs in the beach-groove” more than merely descriptive (2/6).

Pound, especially in the early *Cantos*, loves the compactness, weight and metrical force of compound words, most of which are, like *beach-groove*, of his own coinage. Along with the suppression of articles, prepositions and subordination, he uses them to establish a strong, irregular rhythm with many spondees and trochees, which, as he had used the same in “The Seafarer,” has for him connotations of the archaic, Anglo-Saxon and Greek.

This image of the wave immediately marks the difference

between Pound's poem and the superficial churning of So-chu. There is no foam, no adjectives. The *wave*, although one of many, is a single unit, event and moment. *Runs* is the speed. *Beach-groove* is form. "The wave washes up on the beach" is too diffuse for Pound. The *beach-groove* contains, shapes, the fluidity, suggesting direction and a sense of purpose. Pound likes the line and repeats it in canto 7:

The sea runs in the beach-groove, shaking the floated pebbles
(7/25)

The addition is perfect. "Floated pebbles" perfectly balances the force of the wave and the small size of the pebbles. The idea of something as solid and heavy as stone floating holds the imagination. The *shaking* is made delicate by the smallness of the pebbles and the steadiness of *floated*, and offers a hint of intentionality. The onward running of the wave is set against the upward and tremulous buoyancy of the pebbles. The image fuses their several energies. This is Pound's greatness.

A few lines later in canto 2, the image returns condensed into a single word: "And by the beach-run, Tyro" and there is a reprise near the end of the canto: "In the wave-runs by the half-dunes", and another version in canto 92: "The pebbles turn with the wave." Repetitions such as this hold the poem together. Rather than explain, Pound repeats. The disconnectedness of things becomes familiar. The recurring images and repeated allusions become like ideograms, signs, acts of interpretation, instead of questions.

The poet speaks in the first person once in the first canto, at the end, when he explains the reference to Divus: "I mean, that is Andreas Divus," whose Latin translation of Homer was published in 1538. All the many other first persons are Odysseus speaking and it is characteristic of Pound in *The Cantos* to slide without warning or any spec-

ification from one speaking voice to another. He also presents his experience without any indication that it is his, as he does his memories of Paris in canto 7. Here he employs the first person plural. He seems at once to want to separate himself from his experience *and* to get closer to it, to make it more definite. For him, greater definition involves impersonality.

Although Pound speaks in his own person from time to time throughout *The Cantos*, he never analyzes his feelings. He presents his ideas and perceptions, but there are no descriptions of feeling, even in the *Pisan Cantos*, the most explicitly autobiographical section of the poem. What Pound offers is items of sense-data:

And the sun high over horizon hidden in cloud bank
lit saffron the cloud ridge (76/472)

the olives grey over grey holding walls
and their leaves turn under Scirocco (76/473)

and brief, minimal, summary statements of feeling (note the impersonality of the statement):

but that a man should live in that further terror, and live
the loneliness of death came upon me
(at 3 P.M., for an instant) (82/546-47)

Nor can who has passed a month in the death cells
believe in capital punishment
No man who has passed a month in the death cells
believes in cages for beasts (83/550)

Oh let an old man rest (83/556)

Sometimes the two are combined:

Will I ever see Giudecca again?
 or the lights against it, Ca' Foscari, Ca' Giustinian
 or the Ca', as they say of Desdemona
 or the two towers where are cypresses no more
 or the boats moored off le Zattere (83/552)

When the mind swings by a grass blade
 an ant's forefoot shall save you
 The clover leaf smells and tastes as its flower (83/553)

It is as if Pound has adapted Williams' imperative to be: No feeling but in things.

The various figures in *The Cantos* are not exactly personae. They are sometimes persons with whom Pound identifies: Odysseus, Malatesta, Confucius, John Adams, and he tells his story by telling theirs. At the same time they stand for themselves and thus for the other, the not-me. Although they frequently express views with which Pound agrees, he does not speak through them. They speak for themselves in their own words – in their own languages. They are metaphors of identity.

The Cantos is an act of unification that does not quite work, a fallen empire, an unfinished story, unfinished perhaps for some of the same reasons that Wordsworth could not quite finish his autobiographical poem. He could not end the poem, because it was his life. Unlike most long poems, *The Cantos* is a poem without a plan. Pound in his letters says repeatedly that it will all become clear in the end. He writes to Felix Schelling (9 July 1922): "Perhaps as the poem goes on I shall be able to make various things clear." "I hope, heaven help me, to bring them into some sort of design and architecture later." "When I get to the end," he writes John Brown (April 1937), "pattern *ought* to be discernable." To Hubert Creekmore (February 1939), he declares: "As to the *form* of *The Cantos*: All I can say or pray is: *wait* till it's there" (*Selected Letters* 180, 293, 325). The form is something that will come later.

Pound appears continually to change his mind about what he is doing. He starts with *Sordello*, but then changes to the *Odyssey* and then to the letters and documents concerned with Malatesta. He briefly tries to imitate the *Inferno* (in cantos 14-16), but after several outbursts of invective, he is ready to move on, and when he is trying to conclude, he thinks about the *Paradiso*. Unlike Dante he is not interested in the discrimination of sins or their psychology. Significantly he omits *Purgatorio*, except for a passing reference at the beginning of canto 16, as that would involve self-analysis, repentance and character change, but the thorough-going order of the *Commedia* is the antithesis of the improvised form of *The Cantos*.

The Cantos is an unfinished autobiography by a man who resisted self-analysis and who tells his story by telling the story of other people. The constant identification with other persons is an effort of self-definition. The participation in the life of the other and realization of the separateness of the other recreates the original process of identity formation. His models were the *Odyssey*, the *Commedia*, the *Metamorphoses*, *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, but the form is that of the author's life. The fragmentary nature of the poem is due to the incompleteness of his self-knowledge and the limits of his belief. The poet can be compared to the historians Kung admires, who "left blanks in their writings, I mean for things they didn't know" (13/60). The poem coheres even if imperfectly, because, among other reasons, the difference between the poet's intentions and achievement is *clearly marked in the poem*. The poet's "I cannot make it cohere" (116/816) and failure "to write paradise" (117/822) are part of the form, and, however flawed, there is enough form for a great poem. Two comments by Kung in canto 13 can serve as a conclusion:

If a man have not order within him
He can not spread order about him;

And:

“Anyone can run to excesses,
It is easy to shoot past the mark,
It is hard to stand firm in the middle.” (13/59)

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Works Cited

All citations from Ezra Pound's *The Cantos* are from the New Directions paperback edition, New York, 1996, third printing. The references are given in parentheses where the first number is that of the canto and the second, the page. For the other references in parentheses D is Mary de Rachewiltz, *Discretions*, and T is Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*. The Arabic numbers refer to the page numbers. I have also used some material from my paper, “What is the Form of Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*?” presented at the University of Salzburg conference on “Fiction and Autobiography” (29 October 2004).

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