

POUND'S FASCIST CANTOS REVISITED

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Nearly ten years ago now, I published a chapbook called *Pound's Fascist Cantos* (or, to be precise, *Ezra Pound's Fascist Cantos (72 & 73) together with Rimbaud's "Poets at Seven Years Old."* Auckland: Perdrix Press, 1997). As the title suggests, the book included an annotated translation of Pound's two Italian Cantos, with a fairly extensive afterword. Only a few copies were issued – for reasons I will go into below – and it attracted only one review. John O'Connor said of it:

Of these two cantos "Provisions" (No. 72) is the more substantial, yet both are of real interest. Of course there is a good deal of Fascist propaganda in them, but there is also a good deal of humanity and insight. Not a little of Pound's strictures on "Usura" (international capitalism) rings true at this point in history.

That Pound promoted the rest of his ideology of hate in these poems is to be regretted. Yet he is one of the major figures of twentieth century poetry. However odious some of the contents may be, we need these translations to form a complete picture of his major work. Be it said that Ross's versions are alive with Pound's energy and convictions; they spark and jar as only he can when presenting his mishmash of incompatibles forced into a type of coherence by the intensity of his poetic genius. It is a tribute to Jack Ross and an indication of his capability as a translator that these pieces stand fresh and intelligent even in their perversity, a perversity of which Ross is acutely aware (O'Connor, 126).

"A perversity of which Ross is acutely aware." The idea of this essay is to go a little more deeply into my reasons for undertaking such a perverse project in the first place, to mention various subsequent developments in the field of Pound scholarship (such as the recent publication of an English translation of Canto 72 by Pound himself), and finally to discuss the continuing significance of the poems themselves.

Background

“*Costa più della Divina Commedia*” (Kenner, 306).

It seems that one day in the 1930s Ezra Pound went into a chemist’s shop in Rapallo (where he lived at the time), and noticed that they had American toilet paper in stock. The chemist was indignant that the toilet paper cost more than a local edition of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* which was also on sale. Pound saw this as the “epitaph on Anglo-Saxon civilization” – a stunning illustration of the difference between what a thing *costs* and what it is *worth*.

The Wall Street Crash and the Great Depression led a great many people to question orthodox economics, so Pound was certainly not alone in being fascinated by the subject. Characteristically, though, he took it further than most. The founder of Social Credit, Major C. H. Douglas, was his first mentor, but the train of thought which started there led eventually to a conviction that Benito Mussolini, Italy’s man of destiny, was the only world leader who could really reverse the mess that Capitalism (or, as Pound preferred to call it, *Usura*) had made of the world.

Since perhaps 1903, Pound had been working on and off on a “poem of some length” to be called *The Cantos*. Loosely modelled on Dante’s *Commedia*, it was to be a “poem containing history,” which meant in practice having to be loose enough to contain almost anything that Pound chose to put in there. Except for a few extractable lyric portions, it’s never been a particularly easy poem to read – nor, one would imagine, to write: and the various instalments which he published between 1924 and 1940 had taken it only up to Canto 71 of an eventual 117.

In Italy, during the war, as a supporter of Mussolini and critic of the arch-usurers Churchill and Roosevelt, Pound wrote and broadcast extensively on behalf of the Axis powers. Among many other things, he wrote two poems in Italian, entitled, respectively: Canto 72: *Presenza* [or “Presence”] and Canto 73: *Cavalcanti – Corrispondenza Repubblicana* [“Cavalcanti – Republican Dispatches”]. They were first published (in part) in the Fascist newspaper *Marina Repubblicana* on (respectively) January 15 and February 1, 1945. Pound was close to a mental breakdown at the time (worried for the safety of his family, among other things), and when he finally went to give himself up to the invading Allied forces, he was surprised to be told that he was regarded as a war-criminal, and would shortly be facing charges of treason. In the meantime they shut him up in a cage.

Treason carried the death penalty, so the only way Pound's old friends and colleagues in America were able to save him was to have him declared insane. It wasn't a particularly difficult diagnosis to sustain, given some of the eccentricities both in Pound's behaviour and his wartime propaganda, so he was duly shut up in St. Elizabeth's Mental Hospital near Washington DC. There he stayed for the next twelve years, from 1946 to 1958. During this period Pound published two new instalments of his long poem, among many other works. The interesting thing, though, was the numbering of the new cantos: there was an unfilled gap between the "John Adams" *Cantos* (1940), Nos 62-71, and the *Pisan Cantos* (1948), Nos 74-84.

The subject was, understandably enough, a sensitive one; so there the gap stayed in all editions of *The Cantos* until 1987, fifteen years after the poet's death. The Ezra Pound Estate (he has a surviving son and daughter, as well as many literary trustees) sponsored, for copyright reasons, a private printing of the two Italian Cantos in America in 1973, but this had a very limited circulation. Only when the world of scholarship began to reveal more and more details about the missing sections in Pound's masterpiece (Eastman, 1979; Bacigalupo, 1984) were his publishers (New Directions Press in New York and Faber in London) allowed to include them, in Italian – without translation or notes – as an appendix to the fourth collected edition.

Opinions

So what exactly *is* so shocking about these poems? The answer is quite a lot. To give an idea of the controversy, let me quote a few of the opposing opinions.

First Pound's daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz, in her 1971 memoir *Discretions*:

By the end of the year [1944] he had written Cantos 72 and 73 in Italian ... Full of vigor and images, exalting his old friends ... Marinetti, the founder of the Futurist movement, who, true to himself and his "interventism," had gone to fight in Russia. And Admiral Ubaldo degli Uberti, whose phrase *chi muore oggi fa un affare* – untranslatable: dying today is a good bet – sums up the state of mind of the loyal Italians as defeat inevitably approached. Idealism and heroism were by no means all on the side of the partisans. [Pound] was infected by a desperate fighting spirit and faith. It is hard these days to define that faith or that spirit; it no longer seems a component of the air one breathes (197).

Second James Laughlin, from his collection of reprinted pieces *Pound as Wuz*:

Canto 73 ... is, to say the least, unappetizing. It tells the story, which Pound must have gotten from a newspaper clipping, of a “heroic” young Fascist girl scout, “una contadinella, un po’ tozza ma bella” (“a little peasant, a bit chunky but beautiful”) who leads a company of Canadian soldiers into a minefield and they are all blown up ... What a sad and tragic poem, considering what Pound once had been. I see it as a sign of incipient dementia (134).

Third Massimo Bacigalupo, from his 1984 essay, cited above:

Cantos 72-73 of 1944 ... are certainly a tour de force, bearing all the signs of Pound’s energy, though his command of Italian is not really up to verse that one can take seriously (given that even in English he can be unintentionally funny); and the misjudged politics of the broadcaster are much in the fore throughout. However, all poetry requires a certain suspension of disbelief and of schoolboy tendencies to snicker – and the spectacle of the old sculptor hewing off his bit with the usual conviction in the scarcely mastered tongue is well worth watching. (70-71)

Mary de Rachewiltz, Pound’s daughter, who has supplemented her own translation of *The Cantos* into Italian with a translation of these two into English prose is the most enthusiastic about the poems – but her recommendation extends only to the comment that they are “full of vigor and images.” Besides that, the two poems serve mainly as a pretext for her last-ditch defence of the *bona fides* of the German-dominated Salò Republic: “Mussolini had drawn up a new program, clear and strict.” She does, however, admit that “the dream of the ideal republic had materialized too late and under bad auspices” (de Rachewiltz, 1971, 196).

There is indeed, as James Laughlin remarks, something rather abhorrent in Pound’s hymning the casual slaughter of the Canadian soldiers – and his identification of them as rapists does not do much to palliate the offence. Nevertheless, it’s hard to see it as much worse than the Tudor poet John Skelton’s poem on the Scottish defeat at Flodden (“Gup, Scot, / Ye blot”), or Alexander Blok’s Bolshevik hymn “The Twelve,” or – for that matter – Shakespeare’s uncritical celebration of violence in *Henry V*. In short, one suspects that Laughlin’s disappointment in the two cantos (like de Rachewiltz’s enthusiasm for them), boils down in the end to a matter of politics.

It is Pound’s lack of “historical consciousness” (Bacigalupo, 1984, 79) which makes the Italian critic Massimo Bacigalupo most indignant. Since Pound is (at any rate on the surface) one of the most historically conscious poets of the twentieth century, one

is forced to interpret this as yet another – again, perhaps justified – reaction to Pound’s failure to see through the Fascist régime before it was too late.

Bacigalupo is also rather dubious about Pound’s Italian: “the spectacle of the old sculptor hewing off his bit ... in the scarcely mastered tongue” (70-71). The footnote supporting this contention cites, first, a “hilarious parody of the *Cantos*” in James Joyce’s *Selected Letters*; and, second, a “superfluous apostrophe ... in Canto 72, line 49 (‘un’altro tono’)” – an error which has in fact been removed from the 1987 edition. It would be pointless to doubt Bacigalupo’s sensitivity as a judge of the language, but it is rather disturbing to find that he is unwilling to provide examples of Pound being “unintentionally funny” in either tongue. After all, as he admits, “all poetry requires a certain suspension of disbelief and of schoolboy tendencies to snicker.”

It’s easy to see how taking a position on the “poetic merit” of these cantos has become tantamount to committing oneself to an opinion on Fascism. Hence the basic agreement of Bacigalupo, Laughlin, and Pound’s most recent biographer Humphrey Carpenter (“there is nothing even faintly ambiguous about the political stance of this canto [72], but its support of Fascism and the Axis seems mild by comparison with Canto 73, the second of this Italian pair”(639)). Hence, too, the disagreement of the believer Mary de Rachewiltz.

Foreground

Which is where I come in. I bought a copy of the 1987 edition shortly after it came out, as I was very curious to read the new cantos 72 and 73. Having studied Italian at university, and especially read quite a lot of Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch and other Medieval and Renaissance writers, I thought that I could understand the poems better than most. Even an Italian native speaker unacquainted with Pound’s characteristic style in English might miss certain points about them.

Purely for my own interest, then – to fill a gap in my understanding of the *Cantos* as a whole – I set to work and produced a verse translation of the two Italian (or “Fascist”) cantos. Having done so, though – especially as I’d had to annotate the poems in detail in order to be sure of their meaning, I thought I’d check out the possibility of publication. I knew that this was unlikely to be successful, but thought it would be interesting to see what the situation actually *was*. I accordingly wrote to James

Laughlin, Pound's American publisher and one of his last remaining associates, enclosing a copy of the translation, and received the following, very polite, reply:

For reasons which I am sure you can guess, the Trustees of the Ezra Pound Literary Property Trust are opposed to the dissemination of English translations of Cantos 72 & 73. In our most recent printing of the Cantos we were permitted to include the Italian text, but not an English version.

... I was down skiing in New Zealand, at Ruapehu and Mount Cook, in 1934. I have fond memories of Timaru beer. (Laughlin, 4/8/91)

This letter took some time to reach me, and in the meantime, after waiting a month, I had written to the editor of the principal Pound journal, *Paideuma*, asking if he had any interest in my version, pending word on copyright from New Directions Press. The next letter I received, though, was not from *Paideuma* but from James Laughlin again:

If you have received the latest number of PAIDEUMA, you will think me quite mad because there you will find Massimo Bacigalupo's translation of 72 & 73, with commentary, and outright theft of 14 pages of related Canto drafts from the Pound archive at Yale. Complete piracies.

This happened because dear old "Terry" Terrell, the editor-publisher of PAIDEUMA, is deathly ill and his work is being carried on by indentured students who know nothing of literary law, copyrights, or the policing of the Pound trust.

I am simply amazed by this piracy.

... Since the "cover is blown," I take the liberty, on behalf of the Trustees, to withdraw objections to your project. (Laughlin, 10/9/91)

With this "permission," I felt emboldened to pursue the matter further. But the next letter I received was from the recovered editor of *Paideuma*, and it was far from encouraging:

It cost \$750 to publish Massimo Bacigalupo's translation of Cantos 72 and 73. Unless you are prepared to pay a similar sum to the Ezra Pound Literary Property Trust, you should not consider publishing your work elsewhere. Even if you could make such arrangements, you must not do so without written permission from the Ezra Pound Literary Property Trust. (Terrell, 6/11/91)

This made me feel like giving up altogether – but I thought I'd better at least write to James Laughlin again to see if he agreed with Professor Terrell's interpretation of the position. This was his reply:

I'm sorry that the matter of your publishing your version of 72 & 73 has become so complicated. I fear that some imprecision of signs on my part may have contributed thereto. Bref, there are too many cooks in this pot of broth.

... Terry, who is the authentic salt of the Poundian universe, has a point. The Trust lawyers are dunning him for \$750 for Bacigalupo's piracy, but he has no money because U Maine is a cow college and only gives him free office space for *Paideuma*. He is hoping to extract the fee from the Ligurian savant on the grounds that a contributor should submit only material on which permission has been cleared.

John Bodley has every right to give permission for down under because Faber is the Trust's agent for UK and the empire on which, alas, the sun has gone down.

... If you publish down there, I should add that the Trust will want a letter signed by you and the magazine publisher that no claim is made to world rights. (Laughlin, 24/11/91)

In other words, Laughlin appeared to have given me permission to publish my version in the Antipodes, provided that "no claim was made to world rights." I suspected that this was more out of kindness and (perhaps) a lingering fondness for Timaru beer than a sound business proposition, though, and the various journal editors to whom I submitted it took a similar view.

The editor at Faber to whom I wrote, quoting from Laughlin's letters, had, however, confirmed that they had no objections *per se* to my publishing the translation for circulation "down under," so I finally decided to put the whole business behind me by issuing it as a chapbook (though I was careful to stipulate on the copyright page that this was for "private circulation only," and that no claim was being made to "world rights").

Recent Developments

"Pound's English translation of Canto LXXII was first published in the fall 1993 issue of *The Paris Review*, and was included for the first time in the thirteenth printing of *The Cantos*." So begins the small section entitled "Acknowledgments" in the latest edition of Pound's *Cantos*. What's more, Cantos 72 and 73 are no longer

Of our *città dolente*

(*Firenze*)

which breeds

Not men, but a vain and touchy

race of slaves!

Passing through Arimino

I met a gallant soul

Singing as though her heart would break

with joy!

A young *contadinella*

– Big-boned girl, but *bella* –

with a German on each arm;

And she sang,

she sang of love

without thought of

heaven above.

She had led some Canadians

into a field of mines

Where the *Tempio* of Ixotta

used to stand.

They were coming in fours and fives

– I felt a wave of passion

steal over me again

as if I were still alive.

That's the way girls are

in the Romagna.

The Canadians had come

to 'mop up' German scum,

To pull down the remains

of Rimini;

They stopped to ask the way

to the Via Emilia

of a girl,

a poor young girl

Raped by the first of that *canaille*.

– Be'! Bene! soldiers,

follow me.

Let's all go together
to *Via Emilia!* –
She showed them – where to go.
Her brother had dug the holes
For that mine-field,
there beside the sea-side.
Towards the sea-side, she
(big-boned, but a beauty)
Led the boys.
Brave kid! A real cutie!
She played that prank
for love:
acing 'em all for poise!
Death-threats arrived too late,
Defying Fate
she died –
That big-boned girl –
with pride,
hitting the target straight!
To hell with the enemy!
Twenty of them lay dead
The girl dead, too
in the midst of that *canaille*.
Everyone *except* the prisoners.
A real hard-case
that kid
Singing, singing
with joy
Along the road that leads
beside the sea.
Gloria della patria!
Gloria! the glory
Of dying for one's land
in the Romagna!
The dead are not all dead,
Myself I have returned
from the third sphere
to see Romagna,

Francesca da Rimini's first words when she greets Dante in the circle of the lustful.

Dante the *poet's* view of the souls he depicts in *Inferno* must always be distinguished from Dante the *character's* reaction to them. The latter feels considerable pity for the miserable Francesca, for which he is rebuked by his companion Virgil. Dante the poet is concerned here to point out the dangers of romantic love – just as his portrayal of Ulysses and his “folle volo” (Inf. XXVI, 125) is designed to warn us of the dangers of restless curiosity.

It's interesting, despite this, that generations of readers have persisted in reading both Francesca and Ulysses as attractive, even admirable characters. The poetry, in this case (as in so many others), seems to contradict its author's deliberate intentions. Could this be true of Pound also? Hardly – the unedifying tale of the minefield is *actually* told by him, even if mimed through in the mouth of a ghost, but the Dantean parallel should at least make us ready to take the words of his visitors with a grain of salt. Just as in the *Commedia*, they are meant to be queried and interpreted, not simply taken straight.

Secondly, Cavalcanti is only the last in a succession of apparitions. It makes sense to read his sabre-rattling, jingoistic reaction to the Allied invaders in the light of the other “witnesses” who have already appeared in the earlier canto.

They are, in order:

72: 9 – 'Filippo Tomaso'.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1875-1944), Futurist poet and publicist, converted later to Fascism. Loyal to the German-backed Republic of Salò, 'he participated in the Ethiopian war and was on the Russian front for a period in 1942-43' (Bondanella, 1979, 318). His death in 1944 seems to have been one of the things that prompted Pound to write the two Italian Cantos.

72: 53 – 'Torquato Dazzi'.

Manlio Torquato Dazzi (1891-1968), was 'first librarian in Cesena, where Pound met him while researching Malatesta; he was then director (1926-57) of the Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice' (Bacigalupo, 1984, 75). His translation of Mussato's *Ecerinis* was published in 1914, thirty years before Canto 72 was composed.

72: 80 – 'Eccerinus'.

Dazzi's quotation from Mussato's play at l.79 proves sufficient to call up its hero, Ezzelino III da Romano (1194-1259), head of the Ghibellines, included (as 'Azzalino') among the tyrants in Circle VII of Dante's Hell (Inf. XII, 109-10).

72:173 – 'Placidia fui, sotto l'oro dormivo'.

Galla Placidia (c.388-450), Empress of the Western Roman Empire, buried in Ravenna. Cookson (29), describes her tomb as 'one of the sacred places in the Cantos'. Bacigalupo (1984, 77), remarks that 'Out of the chorus [of birds] ... a woman announces herself, somewhat like Pia in Purgatorio V'.

Marinetti's demand is for more heroes, more fighting, more war. Pound (the character), though, is tired of all that:

*Ma ti darò posto nel Canto, ti darò la parola, a te;
Ma se vuoi ancora combattere, va; piglia qualche giovanotto;
Pigiate hualche ziovanozz' imbelle ed imbecille
Per fargli un po' di coraggio, per dargli un po' di cervello,
Per dare all'Italia ancor' un eroe fra tanti ... (15-19)*
[I'll give you a spot in my Canto, I'll give you the mike; / But if you just want to fight, scram – get hold of some kid; / *Gedda holda* some *keed* – some dumb scaredy-cat / And lend him some balls (not to mention some brains) / As if Italia needed one more bloody hero! ...]

The ghost finally departs with the thought:

*Io cantai la guerra, tu hai voluta la pace,
Orbi ambidue! (41-42)*
[I praised war, you wanted peace / Blindmen both!]

The librarian Dazzi trembles in and out of contact, just long enough for Pound to mention his “double-act” with Marinetti:

*Ambi in eccesso amaste, lui l'avvenire
E tu il passato. (57-58)*
[Both over the top, he for the future / And you for the past.]

Do we sense here the two warring halves of Pound's own nature – aesthete and ideologue? In any case, Dazzi is a mere herald of the next substantial presence, Ezzelino.

Ezzelino, once again, appears to stand for a certain aspect of 'Ez' himself, as Humphrey Carpenter speculates in his biography *A Serious Character* (1988, 639): "he defends having 'made fun of reason' [l.147], and says that 'one single falsification' [l.152] does more harm to the world than 'all my outbursts.'" This particular outburst consists mainly of abuse of King Victor Emmanuel for having concluded a treaty with the Allies, and also of Pope Pius XII, for being a friend to usury and international capitalism.

As the atmosphere darkens, however, all is momentarily transformed by a burst of birdsong and the presence of Placidia, Dante's Pia:

*E come onde che vengon da più d'un trasmittente
Sentii allora
Le voci fuse, e con frasi rotte,
E molti uccelli fecer' contrappunto
Nel mattino estivo,
fra il cui cigolar
In tono soave:
«Placidia fui, sotto l'oro dormivo.»
Suonava come note di ben tesa corda. (166-174)*

[Like waves that come from more than one transmitter, / The rippling voices / Fused (in broken phrases), and I heard / A skein of birds who sang in counterpoint / As in a garden / on a summer's day, / 'Mongst whom, most softly: / "*Placidia fui, sotto l'oro dormivo.*" / "I, Placidia, sleeping under gold" – rang from a well-tuned string.]

Pound begins to speak to her in the tones of his earlier love poetry, but is abruptly shouldered aside by Ezzelino, who concludes with one more prophecy of victory.

Pound as character, then, in these two cantos, is constantly chided by his visitors for his *lack* of devotion to the cause and to war in general. It's not (presumably) that he doesn't agree with them in theory, just that he has to constantly work himself up to feel enthusiasm for "one more hero" [*un eroe fra tanti*].

Cavalacanti, his next "presence", allows him even less room for manoeuvre. There is no interaction here, only a single ranting voice celebrating the *patria*. When Pound himself next begins to speak, *in propria persona*, we are in Canto 74, the first of the *Pisan Cantos*. His words turn out to have been worth waiting for:

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the peasant's bent shoulders

If at least one of those dreams was the collective, the ideal of Fascism, then he is right in saying that it was the people who ended up paying for it. A tragedy on this scale ends up drawing in even the privileged, though.

Thus Ben and la Clara *a Milano*
by the heels at Milano

The only thing that remains to be said for this particular mad, misguided, utopian dream, is that it ended with “a bang, not a whimper.”

Taken as a whole, then, Pound’s two cantos 72 and 73 are much more of a piece with the rest of the poem than readers have hitherto felt comfortable admitting. He doesn’t miraculously *come to* at the end of 1945 and resume his former course. What has always been disconcerting about *The Cantos*, their tone of ill-digested rant, is certainly visible here. What is (I’d like to think) lastingly valuable about Pound’s work, the author’s ability to do justice to all his different poetic moods, inconsistencies and shifts of opinion, is also on display, however.

There seems little purpose here in rehashing the details of Patricia Cockram’s recent (2000) astute summary of the immediate political context of the two Italian Cantos, but I’d like at least to concur with her introduction:

These poems, written in a time of terror and confusion, are interesting for their political, philosophical, and aesthetic relation to the larger work; they may be considered as important for their poetic failings as the *Pisan Cantos* are for their merits, for despite those failings, they bring Pound back to poetry after a long hiatus, and the ethical and aesthetic collapse which they represent makes the exquisite recovery that occurs in the *Pisan Cantos* both necessary and possible. (535)

Canto 73 will always remain a hard nut to swallow, but in the context of the self-questioning dialogues of 72, it takes its place in the tapestry far less obtrusively.

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