

**Correspondence: Pound's Italian Cantos**

Massimo Bacigalupo and Jack Ross refine some matters raised in the latter's essay, [Pound's Fascist Cantos Revisited](#), **kmko #3** (March 2007).

**Massimo Bacigalupo to Jack Ross**

I have just reread your translation of Canto 73, and it's really great fun. I must send it on to some friends. There are some small points I may mention.

*he was surprised to be told that he was regarded as a war-criminal, and would shortly be facing charges of treason.* Pound was quite aware of the charges against him (not perhaps as 'war criminal' but as traitor).

*in St. Elizabeth's Mental Hospital near Washington DC.* The correct spelling is St. Elizabeths.

*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.* I don't know about this. Certainly her English translation is not included in the 1985 Italian bilingual edition of the Cantos. (Which by the way comprises 72-73 in their rightful position.) I confess that to some extent I share Mdr's enthusiasm, for 72-73 are really a tour de force, and Pound's most passionate 'dialogue with Dante'.

*waking in the wasted air.* 'aer perso' is 'black air' in the Temple Dante, though I grant that 'wasted' is attractive.

*Raped by the first of that canaille.* 'Po' prima' is short for 'un po' prima': 'a little earlier' – this could be one of many instances where Pound's use of colloquialisms interspersed with archaisms may sound 'funny' to the common Italian reader.

*Brave kid! A real cutie! / She played that prank for love* As printed the line means 'she gave a trinket' (or perhaps 'a caress'). But 'lei dava' is probably a misprint for 'le davo', ('I would have given her a trinket/caress'). Pound's use of the imperfect 'le davo' in lieu of the conditional 'le avrei dato' betrays the non-Italian author. This does not lessen his achievement in these cantos.

*Death-threats arrived too late* 'Sfidava la morte': 'She defied death'

*And lend him some balls (not to mention some brains) / As if Italia needed one more bloody hero!* The translation sounds ironic, but this is not the import of the original. Pound is praising (for the benefit of his Italian audience) the many Italian heroes.

*of Placidia, Dante's Pia* I'm sorry my observation was equivocal. Pia is Pia de' Tolomei, a famous Dante character ('Siena made me, Maremma undid me') and has no relation to Galla Placidia. What I meant was that Pound presents Galla Placidia somewhat in the way Dante presents Pia, i.e. with a few short lyrical and melancholy phrases.

Your final quotation of Cockram doesn't seem to make it clear enough that she is misguided in faulting the moral stance of these cantos. I find it strange that many readers insist that they are inexcusable, when passages like the Jew-baiting in canto 52 are much worse than anything to be found in them. Written as they were in a turbulent period, they may be said to exhibit moderation. I would also question your calling them 'fascist cantos'. 'War Cantos' or 'Italian Cantos' would be more appropriate. Pound's take on Fascism was very peculiar, in fact he thought he had to explain its merits to Italians! Besides, cantos 31-71 and 74-84 are no less fascistic than these. Anyhow, I find your commentary very astute, especially concerning the opening of the Pisan cantos and Pound's use of persona.

As for James Laughlin's comments on my 'piracy': far from being offended, I was amused by them, for he was to some extent speaking tongue-in-cheek. As I recall, he first wrote me a stern letter demanding a (reasonable) fee for the use of the material. Later he even found a way of reimbursing me, saying that he used my annotations (in the contested article!) when he printed Pound's own translation of 72 in *The Paris Review*.

I have now read your translation of 72, and can add the following comments.

*the twenty-first of September*, This should be 'The twenty-first September', or 'in September of year XXI'. Pound is referring to the 'Era Fascista' calendar.

*though I was hollow* 'I failed the inward life'

*Until from another turn of the dial / A voice issued from the hollow receiver:* Perhaps too free a translation – Pound is attempting a Dante/Guido language, not modern similes.

*heard a rattling sigh / Of discharged breath (or on a sick- / Bed, when a man's about to die):* OK but this is Ross not EP: the scrocchio of the submarine (?) comes before (precorre) death etc. 'Then he heard this crying and yelling' ('in strido crepitare' – another 'funny' bit to Italian ears, because unidiomatic). In modern Italian 'crepitare' is used only for the sound of burning wood in the hearth.

*See horses stand / In darkies fetlock-deep as in a river,* It should be: 'in the horse's bath (you know, Bagnacavallo) / are Maroccans...' I am here Rossizing. Bagnacavallo is near Ravenna, so the reference could be said to anticipate Placidia later in the canto.

*In Ixotta's pied-à-terre – goddess* Does pied-à-terre have the sexual implications of 'arcane bed'? In any case, Ezzelino's tone here is solemn. He's talking of 'in coitu inluminatio' (Pound's phrase) etc.

*Aimed to deny him worthy followers;* Actually, 'worthy followers of the denier Peter'. (I suppose you remember that Peter 'denied' Jesus three times before the cock crowed).

*a pig* Granted this sounds better than 'pigeon', but why pig?

*(Students of Aesop's Fables will complain / That animals can't do arithmetic).* I'm not sure what EP is trying to say, but this isn't it.

MB

[Massimo Bacigalupo is Professor of American Literature at the University of Genoa, Italy.]

### **Jack Ross replies**

I feel a bit embarrassed at having made so many blues and gaffes (some of them intentional pieces of poetic license, admittedly), but it's certainly useful to have them pointed out by Professor Bacigalupo.

His comments on Canto 72 come in response to having read my online translation at <http://www.mairangibay.blogspot.com/2007/03/poetry-live.html>

Concerning the existence or otherwise of Mary de Rachewiltz's English prose translation of 72 and 73, I think I read about this in the Humphrey Carpenter biography, but I've never managed to access a copy. Perhaps a phantom.

Re: Bacigalupo's point about calling them 'Italian' rather than 'Fascist' cantos, I take the point about official 'fascism' having ended with the deposition of Mussolini in 1943, but Mary de Rachewiltz's remarks about Saló seem to imply that some people, at any rate, took it as a Fascist state redivivus, 'as it should have been' ... Italian Cantos is certainly more descriptive, though.

And, yes, James Laughlin sounded like an awfully nice chap, even in the brief correspondence I had with him. That reimbursement sounds just like the kind of thing he would do.

JR

[Jack Ross teaches Academic and Creative Writing in the School of Social and Cultural Studies at Massey University, Auckland.]

Ed. – Our thanks to Professor Bacigalupo and Jack Ross for bringing their correspondence to our attention and giving permission for it to appear in **kmko #4**.