

RONALD L. BUSH

The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos



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The Genesis of Ezra Pound's
C A N T O S





The Genesis of Ezra Pound's
CANTOS

RONALD BUSH

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To Marilyn

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i> by James Longenbach	ix
<i>Preface to the Paperback Edition</i>	xi
CHAPTER I. Red Herrings	3
CHAPTER II. A First Set of Structural Terms	21
CHAPTER III. The Growth of <i>Three Cantos</i>	53
CHAPTER IV. Toward a New Narrative Voice	142
CHAPTER V. Stages of Revision	183
CHAPTER VI. "Murmur of Old Men's Voices"	264
APPENDIX A. A Guide to the Publication History of the <i>Cantos</i>	301
APPENDIX B. The <i>Future Cantos</i>	304
APPENDIX C. The Original Canto VI	313
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	317
<i>General Index</i>	319
<i>Index of Pound's Works</i>	329

INTRODUCTION

Late in his life, when Pound wrote the foreword to his *Selected Cantos*, he chose a passage from "Three Cantos" (1917) as the "best introduction" to his fifty-year epic: "the modern world/ Needs such a rag-bag to stuff all its thoughts in." Along with the early version of Canto I, only a few lines from the aborted "Three Cantos" survive in Pound's long poem; but today we may find these cantos complete in *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos*. Ronald Bush's account of the gestation and subsequent revision of these poems offers not only the best introduction to the *Cantos* but to Pound's career at large. *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* is too modest a title, for the book is really an intellectual and artistic biography, the place to find out about Pound's understanding of Homer, abstract painting, or French realist prose.

Pound is an author difficult to see whole. The *Cantos* themselves are disparate enough, and in his early years, Pound's enthusiasms ran wild—from Propertius and the Nōh to Browning and *Ulysses*. In his story of Pound's career to 1925, when *A Draft of XVI Cantos* was published, Bush accounts for Pound the imagist and vorticist, but he rightly sees that from the very start, all Pound's energy was directed toward the long poem that would become his life's work. "I resolved that at thirty I would know more about poetry than any man living," said Pound in "How I Began" (1913), and in the thirtieth year of his life he began drafting the early "Three Cantos." By placing such roughly contemporaneous (but vastly different) works as *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and Canto IV in the context of Pound's long-range struggle to realize his aspirations, Bush reveals the continuities of Pound's efforts. By placing Pound's struggle in the context of his literary and political milieu, he reveals the conventionality of some of Pound's more notoriously idiosyncratic achievements.

Introduction

Which is not to say that Bush offers anything like a schematic reading of Pound's career. For years, scholarship on the *Cantos* was dominated by Pound's own commentary. His seductive explanations of the ideogrammatic method, the fugal structure, or the historical "rhyme" led readers to believe that a single formula could account for the *Cantos* at large. *The Genesis of Ezra Pound's Cantos* remains such a valuable introduction to Pound's career precisely because it so strenuously resists this misguided effort to see Pound whole. Bush was the first of Pound's readers to understand fully that the descriptions of the so-called ideogrammatic method published in the 1930s will not account for cantos written fifteen years earlier. Nothing in *A Draft of XVI Cantos* could have prepared for the *Pisan Cantos* because Pound's work includes the history of his own life and time. Bush describes the early cantos as "the dramatization of a sensibility in the process of understanding itself." That may be as close as we can come to a reading of the *Cantos* at large, and it is a presupposition on which all of the most valuable Pound scholarship of the last decade has been based. Aided by a critical climate that encourages readers to search for discontinuity and multiplicity in a literary text, Pound's critics have found a vocabulary to describe the *Cantos*. Bush's work on the particular shape of Pound's development first showed why the *Cantos* demand such an approach.

Unlike some of Pound's recent critics, however, Bush is adamant about reading the *Cantos* as (to borrow Eliot's description of "Three Cantos") "an objective and reticent autobiography." For Bush, the issue of Pound's presence in the poem is paramount, and what is clear in the personal reverie of the *Pisan Cantos* is for him implicit and problematic at all other moments in the poem. Even as he understands the multiplicity of the *Cantos*, Bush does not forget that the "poem including history" was itself written in history. The implications of Bush's work stretch beyond the *Cantos* not only to literary modernism but to the economic and political world the modernists engaged.

—James Longenbach

PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

This book was first published in 1976, four years after Ezra Pound's death. It was a moment of transition in modern literature and a useful time to reassess the *Cantos*. Over the years, Pound volunteered contradictory explanations of what he had written, and by the early seventies this accumulated body of remarks had generated considerable confusion. It therefore seemed worth attempting an experiment—to disregard the global descriptions of the *Cantos*, including Pound's own, and look at how the poem got written. And so, with the help of all the textual and historical and biographical scholarship I could manage, I set about recording the conflicting impulses of Pound's project. I looked at the opportunities that—early and often—tempted him in unexpected directions, and I plotted the zigzag pattern of his revisions. Throughout I followed one rule: that a work of art grows out of mixed motives and only looks seamless in retrospect. Given the facts of Pound's fifty-years' progress, the precept seemed inescapable.

In 1989 my provisional map is I hope still of some use. Yet, were I beginning the same study today, I would want to respond to a number of developments this preface can only acknowledge. There is, to begin, the source material that has swelled our knowledge of Pound and has helped generate a decade of glosses, commentaries, and scholarship. In the mid-seventies a major portion of Mary de Rachewiltz's Pound holdings was transferred from Brunnenburg to Yale, and more recently much of Omar Pound's collection has found a home at the Humanities Research Center in Texas or at the Lilly Library in Indiana. This material has enabled studies of the late seventies and early eighties to flesh out and modify many of the details presented below. Worth mentioning here are Peter D'Epiro's work on the Malatesta drafts,

Preface to the Paperback Edition

A Touch of Rhetoric: Ezra Pound's Malatesta Cantos (1983), Christine Froula's study of Canto IV, *To Write Paradise: Style and Error in Pound's Cantos* (1984), and James Longenbach's *Modernist Poetics of History: Pound, Eliot, and the Sense of the Past* (1987) and *Stone Cottage: Pound, Yeats and Modernism* (1988). Longenbach's studies rely, as must all future work, on volumes of Pound's correspondence, which now supplement the previously available *Letters 1909-1941*, selected by D. D. Paige, and *Pound/Joyce*, edited by Forrest Read. Regarding the early Cantos the most important of these collections are *Pound/Ford*, edited by Brita Linberg-Seyersted (1982), with its long letter on Canto II, and the extraordinarily interesting premarital correspondence between Ezra Pound and Dorothy Shakespeare, edited by Omar Pound and A. Walton Litz in 1984. The Pound/Lewis letters, edited by Timothy Materer (1985), disclose less about the *Cantos* than one might have hoped, but they will soon be augmented by Emily Wallace's edition of the Pound/Williams correspondence, by the selected letters of T. S. Eliot, and by the letters Pound wrote to his parents, currently being edited by Mary de Rachewiltz. Finally and indispensably there are the two-volume *Companion* to the *Cantos* published by Carroll Terrell (1980 and 1984), the extensive notes accompanying Mary de Rachewiltz's translation of the *Cantos* into Italian (1985), and biographies including J. J. Wilhelm's *The American Roots of Ezra Pound* (1985) and Humphrey Carpenter's *Life* (1988).

Critical use of unearthed source material, however, has been complicated by an escalating reevaluation of Pound and of modernism. Especially after Robert Lowell's death, the link between Pound's generation and the present began to look more tenuous, and recent criticism has sometimes vociferously dissociated itself from the modernist view of the world. In a sense, the situation could hardly be otherwise. As T. S. Eliot said, once divorced from the pressures of the present, "the past would cease to be fully *our* past: it would become the past of a dead civilization."

The first and still the most convincing attempt to retheorize the project of the *Cantos* in the light of postmodern values pursued a scrupulous interrogation of the past. Self-conscious of the

Preface to the Paperback Edition

ambiguities of a “poem including history,” Michael André Bernstein’s *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (1980) transformed my tentative attempts to define the *Cantos*’ epic affiliations by situating history and the epic in the discourse of Lukács and Foucault. Yet, given the intensity of the reaction against modernism, it was probably inevitable that Bernstein’s analysis of Pound would to some appear too sympathetic. And so since 1980 two tendentious and opposing accounts of the *Cantos* have emerged to assert the claims of a new generation. Viewing literature as ideological practice, one of these condemns the politics of the first half of the century and rejects the assertion of continuity between Pound and contemporary writing. Robert Casillo, for example, protests “the limitations of explaining Pound chiefly according to the terms that Pound himself provides” and would redirect Pound criticism “from its more usual focus on formalist analysis . . . to broader and more urgent questions of politics, society, and morality.” Casillo deeply distrusts the power of the historical imagination to re-create sympathy for the dilemmas of another age. For him the evils of Pound’s ideology overshadow all other considerations, and, preceded by Peter Nicholls’s *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics and Writing* (1984) and Maud Ellmann’s *The Poetics of Impersonality: T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound* (1987), his *The Genealogy of Demons: Anti-Semitism, Fascism, and the Myths of Ezra Pound* (1988) insists on an essential connection between fascism and Pound’s aesthetics.

Meanwhile another school of critics, no less sensitive to Pound’s excesses but reluctant to discard his poetry, has stressed formalist issues and has located the beginnings of contemporary writing in Poundian procedures the poet never articulated. In different ways Massimo Bacigalupo’s *The Formèd Trace* (1980), Marjorie Perloff’s *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), Christine Froula’s already mentioned *To Write Paradise* (1984), and Kathyne Lindberg’s *Reading Pound Reading* (1987) argue that the apparently fascist aesthetics of the *Cantos* are qualified by the poem’s fundamental openness. (Perloff, for example, roots Pound in the Avant-Garde and argues that the *Cantos* resist

Preface to the Paperback Edition

the inherited structures of literary authority as successfully as the work of the Dadaist poets Pound befriended.) For these critics, the *Cantos*, however politically misguided, should be seen as the foremost precursor of postmodern style and as a still unappreciated source of literary vitality.

This is hardly the place to speculate about the future, but it is perhaps worth mentioning that the debate just alluded to helps explain why the events of Pound's brief residence in Paris now take on such interest. It was in Paris between 1920 and 1924 when he was reorganizing the first volume of *Cantos* that Pound encountered Mussolini and Dada. His involvement with the latter has been tentatively explored in articles by Andrew Clearfield and Richard Sieburth and will stimulate much more scholarship and reflection in the years to come. In the meantime Lawrence Rainey in as yet unpublished work has begun to examine the ideological nexus linking Malatesta, Mussolini and the ideal of the "new man" in the Europe of the early twenties.

Whatever the upshot of these investigations, and of the critical and theoretical ferment that is bound to accompany them, the next decade of modernist studies will be anything but dull. I am grateful to Princeton University Press for bringing this book out in paperback so that it can continue to take part in that dialogue.

Ronald Bush
Pasadena, California

The Genesis of Ezra Pound's
C A N T O S



things have ends (or scopes) and beginnings. To
know what precedes and what follows

先 後

will assist yr/ comprehension of process

— Canto 77

RED HERRINGS

In January 1925, after a false start and ten years' work, Ezra Pound published *A Draft of XVI Cantos for the Beginning of a Poem of Some Length*. Since 1915, the *Cantos* had shared space on Pound's triangular table with the manuscripts of *Ulysses* and "Gerontion," and had come to incorporate much of what he learned from his contemporaries. Nor did the *Cantos*' evolution end in 1925. Once underway, Pound almost immediately began to alter the manner of the first volume of the *Cantos*, and the poem continued to change over the next forty years. We have only to note the difference between the chronicles of China and John Adams in Cantos LII-LXXI and the personal reverie of the Pisan Cantos to understand how much Pound's succeeding preoccupations could affect the development of the *Cantos*.

And yet, it is rare to read an account of the *Cantos*' organization that acknowledges any development. The reason is not hard to find. In the belated remarks he made about the poem, Pound spoke as if his method had never changed. And even though he explained his procedures in varying and eccentric ways, his remarks were sufficient to mislead several decades of admirers.

At first, Pound hesitated to sanction an authoritative account of the *Cantos*. In 1924, on the eve of the publication of *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, he wrote to R. P. Blackmur that "I do *not* want them commented on, *yet*" (L, p. 190). But the temptation to answer charges of formlessness became too great, and Pound, living in Rapallo, issued two *pronunciamientos*. In 1928 he explained to Yeats that the *Cantos* would eventually "display a structure like that of a Bach fugue."¹

¹ W. B. Yeats, *A Vision* (New York, 1938), p. 4.

Red Herrings

And in the 1933 *New English Weekly* he declared the poem's "ideogramic method."² These two formulations, as Eliot said about phrases of his own, had a truly embarrassing success in the world. With their promise of exotic symmetries, they imposed a false set of expectations onto the work and made it nearly impossible to trace the poem's actual genesis. If we are ever to understand the place of the *Cantos* in modern literature, the context of Pound's pronouncements now needs to be restored. Being only critical hindsight in relation to the beginnings of the poem, these statements should no longer be taken as definitive instruction about the *Cantos* as a whole.

Pound's original notion of the *Cantos* can be guessed from hints he left before moving to Italy. In the crevices of his London prose, he described his intention to write a "long imagiste or vorticist poem" (G-B, p. 47), and in the opening of *Three Cantos I* he indicated his desire to write a modernized *Sordello*. The background of Vorticism and the narrative mode of *Sordello*, which will provide the points of departure for the rest of this study, were in 1917 uncomprehended and ignored. Pound made another suggestion, however, which was assimilated by his contemporaries and which ought to supply a corrective to today's prevailing view of the early *Cantos*' ideogrammic objectivity. In June 1917, *Three Cantos I* addressed Robert Browning, and described the "use" of the *Cantos* and of *Sordello* as the rendering of "our life, your life, my life extended." Between June and October 1917, when a revised set of *Three Cantos* was published in the American edition of *Lustra*, Pound discussed the poem with T. S. Eliot³ and communicated his plan to connect meditation and action. Eliot, we know, in reviews of the next two years informed his readers that the poem's autobiographical status affected its organization. Writing in *To-Day*, Eliot noticed "Pound's recent unfinished epic," and commented:

² *The New English Weekly*, III, iv (May 11, 1933), p. 96.

³ See L, p. 115: "the version [of *Three Cantos*] for the book [*Lustra*] is, I think, much improved. Eliot is the only person who proffered criticism instead of general objection."

Red Herrings

"In appearance, it is a rag-bag of Mr. Pound's reading in various languages. . . . And yet the thing has, after one has read it once or twice, a positive coherence; it is an objective and reticent autobiography."⁴ A year later, in the *Athenaeum*, Eliot wrote that the *Cantos* showed what "the consummation of Mr. Pound's work could be: a final fusion of all his masks."⁵

What Eliot understood by "reticent autobiography" (a question considered by Chapters Four and Five) may here be summarized as the dramatization of a sensibility in the process of understanding itself. His notion was based on an extension of the narrative techniques of a novel like Joyce's *Portrait* to the writing of poetry. Although Eliot's critical contemporaries were usually not subtle enough to catch his exact meaning, many of them remained reasonably faithful to Pound's intentions. Reviewing the *Cantos*, Maxwell Bodenheimer,⁶ Babbette Deutsch,⁷ Delmore Schwartz,⁸ Allen Tate, and R. P. Blackmur, among others, put the unity of

⁴ "Ezra Pound," *To-Day*, IV, 19 (September 1918), pp. 6-7.

⁵ "The Method of Mr. Pound," *The Athenaeum*, October 24, 1919, p. 1,065.

⁶ Bodenheimer wrote in "Isolation of Carved Metal" (*The Dial*, LXXII, January 1922, p. 91) that *Cantos* IV-VII "contain the subconscious matter deposited by years of reading and observation in one man's mind, and in their residence in this subconscious state they have . . . undergone a metamorphosis. . . ."

⁷ Babbette Deutsch, in "Ezra Pound's Spars of Knowledge," wrote that "to read the *Cantos* is not so much like listening to good talk . . . it is far rather like over-hearing a soliloquy by a man, who, talking to himself, feels no need to finish a sentence." *The New York Herald Tribune Book Review* (March 26, 1933), p. 4.

⁸ Schwartz was more sympathetic. He wrote in "Ezra Pound's Very Useful Labors," *Poetry*, LI, 6 (March 1938), pp. 324-339, that "The *Cantos* have no plot, although as the poem continues, the repetition of key phrases, characters and situations, makes more and more clear the kind of unity which the *Cantos* do have, a wholeness based on certain obsessions or preoccupations, deriving itself from the character of Pound's mind . . . we have a long poem without a hero . . . or if there is a hero . . . it is, in fact, Pound himself, the taste of Pound, above all his literary taste. . . ."

Red Herrings

the poem in the character of Pound's mind. Of these critics, Tate and Blackmur were the most eloquent. Tate, in a review famous for its description of the "conversational form" of the *Cantos*, wrote: "The ostensible subjects of *The Cantos* — ancient, middle, and modern times — are only the materials round which Mr. Pound's mind plays constantly. . . . It is this tone . . . which is the meaning of the *Cantos*."⁹

Blackmur went further and defined a functional relation between the *Cantos*' speaking voice and the elliptical quality of the subject matter. In "The Masks of Ezra Pound," he explained that the *Cantos* render the voice of an anecdotalist who is searching for the point of familiar stories.¹⁰ By characterizing the historical material of the poem as anecdote rather than narrative, Blackmur implied that the importance of the action per se was secondary to its importance as the reflection of an anterior consciousness.

After Pound went on to emphasize other facets of the poem, the meditative or autobiographical view of the *Cantos* grew unfashionable. Ironically, its last and perhaps most perceptive proponent had little taste for Pound's accomplishment. In the early forties, Yvor Winters discussed the *Cantos*' meditative conventions as evidence in an attack on literary modernism. According to Winters, Pound

is bent on fusing his impressions into some kind of whole, and he seems to desire a whole which shall not falsify them or violate their essential quality: only one convention is plausible, the convention of remembered impressions, or reverie. Thus we get the *Cantos*, poems in which a poet remembers his past experience of all kinds, literary, personal, and imaginative, and moves from recol-

⁹ From "Ezra Pound's Golden Ass," *The Nation*, 132, 344^o (June 10, 1931), pp. 632-634. Tate also called the poem a "many voiced monologue."

¹⁰ See R. P. Blackmur, *The Double Agent* (New York, 1935), pp. 48-49. The essay was reprinted from the January-March 1934 *Hound and Horn*.

Red Herrings

lection to recollection purely and simply by means of suggestion . . . Pound at maturity, then, sees life primarily as a matter of remembered impressions, and his art is an art of reverie: he is a sensibility without a mind, or with as little mind as is well possible.¹¹

Donald Davie has called these remarks more applicable to *Three Cantos* than to their revisions,¹² but I do not believe that the Pound who wrote *A Draft of XVI Cantos* would have objected. Winters' phrase "a sensibility without a mind" was not meant as a compliment, and yet it corresponds, as we shall see, to Pound's 1919 admiration for the way Remy de Gourmont differentiated personalities "by the modes of their sensibility, not by sub-degrees of their state of civilization" (LE, p. 340). "Mind," in the sense that Winters used it, meant very little to Pound, who wrote in the same essay that "An 'idea' has little value apart from the modality of the mind which receives it" (LE, p. 341).



In the twenties, when the *Cantos'* reviewers were beginning to elaborate Pound's early hints, Pound himself rethought his procedures in musical terms. Heretofore, a technical imitation of music had played only a negligible role in the composition of Cantos I-XVI. In his criticism Pound endorsed Pater's musical paradigm for poetry, but during his first decade in London he wrote about musical structure with the imprecision of an amateur. In a 1915 note to "The Classical Stage of Japan," he admitted: "This looks like a sort of syncopation. I don't know enough about music to consider it musically with any fullness, but it offers to the student of metric most interesting parallels, or if not parallels, sugges-

¹¹ *In Defense of Reason* (Chicago, 1947), pp. 495-496. Reprinted from *The Anatomy of Nonsense* (1943).

¹² See Donald Davie, *Ezra Pound: Poet As Sculptor* (New York, 1964), p. 78.

Red Herrings

tions for comparison with sapphics and with some of the troubadour measures. . . ."¹³

When the foundations for the *Cantos* were being laid, then, Pound (as he later said of Yeats) hardly knew "a fugue from a frog." However, from late 1918 to early 1921, Pound reviewed music for *The New Age* under the pseudonym of William Atheling, and in the process developed a knowledge of musical expression. It was during this period that he first met the young violinist, Olga Rudge. And around June 1923, he made friends with a budding composer named George Antheil, who assured him that his (Pound's) musical instincts were sounder than most professionals'.¹⁴ In 1924, Pound published defenses of Antheil in which his descriptions of structure shifted away from phrases derived from Vorticist painting toward a technical musical vocabulary. In an essay entitled "George Antheil," he began to write about "horizontal music"¹⁵ and remarked about Antheil's "analogies to [the work that had been Pound's touchstone for modernist structure] Lewis' 'Timon.'"¹⁶ The essay was revised for book form in *Antheil and the Theory of Harmony* (1924), where Pound crystallized what became the theory of the great bass. In 1928, Wyndham Lewis wrote (only half facetiously) that Pound was "giving up words" and "taking to music."¹⁷ It was in 1928 that Pound explained to Yeats that the *Cantos* would display "a structure like that of a Bach fugue," and in 1929 that he wrote to his father:

Afraid the whole damn poem is rather obscure, especially in fragments. Have I ever given you outline of main scheme : : : or whatever it is?

¹³ "The Classical Stage of Japan: Ernest Fenollosa's Work on the Japanese Noh," ed. by Ezra Pound, *The Drama*, v, 18 (May 1915), p. 229.

¹⁴ See Stock's *Life*, p. 252.

¹⁵ "George Antheil," *The Criterion*, II, 7 (April 1924), p. 323.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 331. For the importance of Lewis' "Timon," see below, Chapter Two.

¹⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (Boston, 1957), p. 40.

Red Herrings

I. Rather like, or unlike subject and response and counter subject in fugue. (L, p. 210)

Given Pound's relatively late education in musical composition, these pronouncements comprise an extremely unlikely description of the *Cantos*' "main scheme" from the beginning. At best Pound's ascription of musical structure to the *Cantos* helps to explain a change in emphasis in *Cantos* XVII-XXX, written during the mid-twenties. It was in 1928's *A Draft of the Cantos 17-27* that he modified the *Cantos*' Vorticist repetition of design units¹⁸ in a way that reflected his increased appreciation for the qualities of counterpoint and harmony in music.¹⁹ Canto XXV, for example, sounded and developed the theme of Tibullus' "*pone metum, Cerinthe; deus non laedit amantes*" (Put fear aside, Cerinthus. God doesn't harm lovers), playing it off against themes of venality and finally resolving it into an apotheosis (the story of Anchises and Aphrodite). To make sure that his readers were aware of the aesthetic behind these variations, Pound inserted musical references into the epiphany of Anchises, who

saw the waves taking form as crystal,
notes as facets of air,
and the mind there, before them, moving,
so that notes needed not move.

¹⁸ See below, Chapter Two.

¹⁹ Several writers close to Pound took his cue and explained the riddle of the *Cantos* by means of musical analogies. Yeats wrote that the impressions of the poem were "related like the notes of a symphony," but remained skeptical about Pound's success. (See *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, London, 1936, p. xxiv.) Louis Zukofsky, in "American Poetry 1920-1930" (*The Symposium*, January 1930), and "The *Cantos* of Ezra Pound" (*The Criterion*, April 1931), argued that the *Cantos*' structure resembled not so much a symphony as one of the horizontal melodies that Pound had described in "George Antheil." In "Music Fit for the Odes" (*The Hound and Horn*, January-March 1931), Dudley Fitts cited long passages of the "Antheil" piece and wrote what remains the most satisfying description of the *Cantos*' musical affinities. It was Fitts who first called attention to the lines from Canto XXV cited above.

Red Herrings

If Pound's pronouncements about the *Cantos'* fugal structure are inappropriate to a consideration of *A Draft of XVI Cantos*, his remarks about the poem's ideogrammic surface are even more so. In his collected and uncollected prose, no programmatic use of the term "ideogram" or "ideograph" appears until 1927. It is true that, in 1915, Pound touted Fenollosa's essay, "The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry," as "a whole basis of aesthetic" (L, p. 61). However, as Herbert Schneidau noticed,²⁰ he qualified that statement a year later by writing about "Fenollosa's big essay on verbs, mostly on verbs" (L, p. 82). In 1919, when the "Chinese Character" essay was first printed in the *Little Review*, Pound appended a note (later removed) that made it clear he endorsed the spirit of Fenollosa's remarks about oriental logic, and not their letter: "These precautions should be broadly conceived. It is not so much their letter, as the underlying feeling of objectification and activity that matters."²¹ And in *Indiscretions* (1920), Pound suggested that Fenollosa's essay was perhaps a less important poetic tool than the Jamesian novel, to which he was paying tribute: "The sentence being the mirror of man's mind, . . . [we have] long since passed the stage when 'man sees horse' or 'farmer sows rice,' can in simple ideographic record be said to display anything remotely resembling our subjectivity" (PD 2, p. 3).

Finally, in a famous 1921 review of Cocteau's *Poésies*, Pound described Cocteau's poetry as "ideographic" in a tentative and unflattering way that made it difficult to believe he had already appropriated the term for himself. He said of Cocteau's "ideographic representation" that it was "hurrying" and that "it is sometimes incomprehensible [even] if one does read every word and try to parse it in sequence." In contrast, Pound wrote, "I, 'we' wanted and still want a

²⁰ See Herbert Schneidau, *Ezra Pound: The Image and the Real* (Baton Rouge, 1969), pp. 58ff.

²¹ *The Little Review*, vi, 8 (December 1919), p. 69.

Red Herrings

poetry where the reader must not only read every word, but must read his English as carefully as if it were a Greek that he could not rapidly be sure of comprehending.”²² Considering this ambivalence on Pound’s part toward Cocteau’s “ideographic” style in 1921, it is highly unlikely that he thought of himself as using such a technique in 1919, when Canto IV was published and the idiom of *A Draft of XVI Cantos* was established.

The first example of what would become Pound’s characteristic shorthand use of the term ideogram to mean “heaping together the necessary components of thought”²³ occurred in 1927. In the first number of his own journal, *Exile*, he wrote that Rodker’s *Adolphe* 1920 was “a definite contribution . . . in that perhaps minor, but certainly far from negligible form whose ideogram has been composed by Longus, Prévost, Benjamin Constant.”²⁴ It seems that by 1927 Pound had picked up the word “ideogram” to redefine once again his intuitive affinity for description by particulars. Like every expression starting with the “image” he adopted for that purpose, the ideogram soon developed its own peculiar connotations. If we are to trust Pound’s most famous explanation in the *ABC of Reading*, the disparate elements of an ideogrammic character may be conceptually and emotionally unrelated as long as they overlap in one quality and they combine in a manner that is more spatial or simultaneous than sequential:

when the Chinaman wanted to make a picture of something more complicated, or of a general idea, how did he go about it?

He is to define red. How can he do it in a picture that isn’t painted in red paint?

²² Ezra Pound, “Poésies 1917-1920, Jean Cocteau,” *The Dial*, LXX, 1 (January 1921), p. 110.

²³ *ABC of Economics* (London, 1933), p. 37.

²⁴ *The Exile*, ed. by Ezra Pound, No. 1 (Spring 1927), p. 88.

Red Herrings

He puts (or his ancestor put) together the abbreviated pictures of

ROSE

CHERRY

IRON RUST

FLAMINGO²⁵

Around 1929, the ideogrammic method became one of the most frequently used phrases in Pound's critical repertory. In 1929's *How To Read*, for instance, he asserted that the first job of the critic was to present his "ideograph of the good" (LE, p. 37). Concurrently, he began to translate his old critical tenets into terms of the ideogram. In 1933's *ABC of Reading*, we can recognize earlier comparisons between the exactitude of science and the procedures of poetry transformed into the following: "By contrast to the method of abstraction, or of defining things in more and still more general terms, Fenollosa emphasizes the method of science, 'which is the method of poetry,' as distinct from that of 'philosophic discussion,' and is the way the Chinese go about it in their ideograph or abbreviated picture writing."²⁶

The same process was evident in the "exhibits" at the back of the volume. Below a series of comparative examples first published in 1913, Pound placed this note: "Example of ideogrammic method used by E. P. in *The Serious Artist* in 1913 before having access to the Fenollosa papers."²⁷

In *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, written in 1933, Pound informed his readers that the ideogrammic method was not only the subject but also the form of his criticism: "I am not putting these sentences in monolinear syllogistic arrangement, and I have no intention of using that old form of trickery to fool the reader, any reader, into thinking I have proved anything, or that having read a paragraph of my writing he KNOWS something that he can only know by examining a dozen or two dozen facts and putting them all together" (p. 28).

Inevitably, the ideogram had its impact on the *Cantos*.

²⁵ I cite from the paperback republication. Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New Directions: New York, 1960), pp. 21-22.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Red Herrings

Parts of "Eleven New Cantos, XXXI-XLI," published in 1934, revealed yet another shift in emphasis, this time toward spatial configurations and away from the expressive movement of an anterior sensibility or of a controlling music. It is easy to see Pound's new emphasis on juxtaposing whole blocks of material in this excerpt from Canto XXXVII:

"Thou shalt not," said Martin Van Buren, "jail 'em for debt."

"that an immigrant shd. set out with good banknotes
and find 'em at the end of his voyage
but waste paper . . . if a man have in primeval forest
set up his cabin, shall rich patroon take it from him?
High judges? Are, I suppose, subject to passions
as have affected other great and good men, also
subject to esprit de corps.

The Calhouns" remarked Mr. Adams

"Have flocked to the standard of feminine virtue"

"Peggy Eaton's own story" (Headline 1932)

Shall we call in the world to conduct our
municipal government?

It would be wrong, however, to interpret a change in stress as a genuine new beginning. The ideogrammic method changed the *Cantos* more in theory than in fact. And while the *Cantos'* technique altered slightly, the new theory achieved the prominence of an official program. In a 1933 letter to the *New English Weekly*, Pound made what Blackmur called "a provisional declaration of principles"²⁸ and announced the *Cantos'* "ideogramic method":

MR. EZRA POUND'S "CANTOS"

Sir, — I am convinced that one should not as a general rule reply to critics or defend a work in process of being written. On the other hand, if one prints fragments of a work one perhaps owes the benevolent reader enough explanation to prevent his wasting time in unnecessary misunderstanding.

²⁸ Blackmur, p. 59.

Red Herrings

The nadir of solemn and elaborate imbecility is reached by Mr. Winter in an American publication where he deplores my "abandonment of logic in the Cantos," presumably because he has never read Fenollosa or my prose criticism and has never heard of the ideogrammic method, and thinks logic is limited to a few "forms of logic" which better minds were already finding inadequate to the mental needs of the XIIIth century.

Your reviewer has understood so much and is so far above the American weepers who can't see that there is any main principle of coherence in the poem, that I should like to put him right on one matter.

The poem is not a dualism of past against present. Monism is pretty bad, but dualism (Miltonic puritanism, etc.) is just plain lousy.

The poem should establish an hierarchy of values, not simply: past is good, present is bad, which I certainly do not believe and never have believed.

If the reader wants three categories he can find them rather better in: permanent, recurrent and merely haphazard or casual. (E. Pound)²⁹

Pound did not mention how important the voice and the music of the poem had been to him, and the commentators did not afterwards insist. Above all, he declared his intention to vilify any critic who did not see the poem's "ideogrammic" logic. To submissive reviewers he tossed two bones: the poem would "establish a hierarchy of values" and it could be divided into categories of "permanent, recurrent and merely haphazard or casual." The latter established the parameters of the next three decades of *Cantos* criticism.



The greatest disservice done by Pound's avowal of the ideogrammic method was to distort our perception of the *Cantos* so that a structural device seemed more prominent

²⁹ *The New English Weekly*, III, iv (May 11, 1933), p. 96.

Red Herrings

than the form of the whole. Those who accepted Pound's assertions viewed the *Cantos* as a non-comparable experiment rather than as a long poem belonging to a tradition of long poems. In 1928, Eliot had defended Pound against the charge of objectionable originality, writing that "the poem which is absolutely original is absolutely bad; it is, in the bad sense, 'subjective,' with no relation to the world to which it appeals," but that Pound's poetry possessed a "true originality" which "is merely development."³⁰ Yet R. P. Blackmur, convinced by Pound that the *Cantos* possessed an original ideogrammic structure, wrote in 1934 that it was a "mistake" to assume "that the *Cantos* make a good part of an ordinary, complex, logically and emotionally arrayed long poem, having as a purpose the increasing realization of a theme. The *Cantos* are not complex, they are complicated."³¹

Under the influence of Pound's instruction, Hugh Kenner disagreed with the normative judgment of Blackmur's statement, but agreed on its substance: "It is usual to search for a subject-matter, a plot, a line of philosophic development, such as it has been Pound's principal achievement to dispense with."³² Kenner held that all one can say about the development of the poem is that its proportional series of metaphors combine to form patterns of recurrence:

Pound, quite consciously, never thinks of using two motifs, two blocks of rendering, except as parts, integral parts, of a larger rhythm of juxtaposition and recurrence. This balancing and recurrence of motifs is what holds together single cantos. It also holds together the entire work, the temporarily unfinished condition of which doesn't diminish the structural solidity of the portion existing. . . . Metaphor, conceived in Aristotle's way as a proportion among proportions, becomes in the *Cantos* the principle of major form.³³

³⁰ See Eliot's introduction to *Ezra Pound: Selected Poems* (London, 1928), p. 10.

³¹ Blackmur, pp. 44-45.

³² Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (London, 1951), p. 252.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 280-281.

Red Herrings

Thus Kenner maintained that the *Cantos* have no final end. In Daniel Pearlman's words, Kenner was not "concerned to reveal a pattern of thematic development that arises out of some inner necessity, or entelechy, which accounts for the elaboration of structure which he endeavors to describe."³⁴ By denying the *Cantos* "a line of philosophic development," Kenner denied them exactly that *entelechy* which we take to be the sign of an accomplished work of art.

Pound's readers are still waiting for a description of the *Cantos'* major form that will assimilate into one whole the poem's structural idiom, its generic characteristics, and its hierarchy of psychological values. It seems likely that when such a description is realized it will depend less on Pound's experimental method than on certain deep structures of the epic. Pound intended his long poem to be the latest in a line of transformations that began with the way Virgil altered the narrative inflections and the symbolic associations of the *Odyssey's* tale of return. He consciously modeled his work after Dante's *Commedia*, and he did not neglect the many levels of continuity that bind the *Commedia* back to its predecessors. The *Cantos'* inferno,³⁵ for example, corresponds not only to Dante's *Inferno* but to the presentation of life-killing experience in both the *Odyssey's* Telemacheia and in the Troy and Carthage related incidents at the beginning of the *Aeneid*. Just as Homer, Virgil, and Dante began their epics with characters cut off from the vital forms that sustain spiritual growth, so Pound begins his *Cantos* with an array of similarly arrested figures. As in the case of the *Cantos'* three most famous prototypes, major form grows out of a

³⁴ Daniel Pearlman, *The Barb of Time: On the Unity of Ezra Pound's Cantos* (New York, 1969), p. 9.

³⁵ Although Pound insisted that the integrity of Dante's canticles could not be maintained in a modern poem of doubt, he nevertheless allowed a minimum of light to enter the opening section of the *Cantos*. This section, composed of Cantos I to XXX (or perhaps to XLI) may thus fairly be termed the poem's "inferno."

Red Herrings

movement from a stifled order of existence to a real order, mythologically indicated as divine, in which the individual, society, and nature are in harmony.

The *Cantos*' most thoroughgoing unity is provided by patterns of imagery grounded in the epic's quest for reconciliation with what Pound called the "vital universe" (SR, p. 93). From the beginning, he planned a poem of spiritual education, a modern *Commedia*, and the *Commedia* remains the single best reference for understanding the *Cantos*. That is not to say that Pound wrote a Christian poem. Pound's humanist sense of truth led him to write in *The Spirit of Romance* that "art and humanity, remaining ever the same, gave us basis for comparison of [Shakespeare and Dante]" (SR, p. 157). He saw Dante's epic as a metaphor in the Aristotelian sense of the truth of "nature and the beauty of the world and of the spirit" (SR, p. 163). Pound rejected the *Commedia*'s doctrine as "ecclesiastical lumber" (SR, p. 146), but he joined his contemporaries in replacing the authority of the church with the authority of the poetic tradition.

Thus we find in the *Cantos* an understanding based on the terms of earlier poems, but cut off from the foundations upon which those poems rested. According to Daniel Pearlman, "the very core of what the *Cantos* are all about" can be explained by examining man's relation to "the temporal order of nature."³⁶ Pearlman might with more justice, however, have described that order with a literary phrase like "the golden world," or with Dante's "metaphor" of the divine will. The *Cantos* describe a process of learning to direct the energy of the will so that it is in harmony with the energies of what Canto LXXXI calls the "green world." Awkward as it may seem, the best gloss for the *Cantos*' sense of ordered will is *Paradiso* III: "E'n la sua voluntade è nostra pace — it is the very quality of the blessed state that we keep ourselves

³⁶ Pearlman, p. 297. Pearlman made the remark in response to George Dekker's *Sailing After Knowledge: The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, from which the phrase "temporal order of nature" was cited.

Red Herrings

within the divine will, so that our wills are themselves made one; therefore our rank from height to height through this kingdom, is pleasing to the whole kingdom, as to the King who wills us to His will. *And in His will is our peace.* It is that sea to which all things move. . . .”

A full study of the *Cantos'* epic form would begin with the iconographic ramifications of “that sea to which all things move.” It is on that sea that Pound and his characters ride on their “picciotta barca” (Canto VII, taken from *Paradiso* II), and it is the act of fighting that sea that causes the catastrophes of the *Cantos'* inferno. The poem begins, not accidentally, with the Ulysses of *Inferno* xxvi, whose “mad track” Dante observed from the heights of *Paradiso* xxvii. In the *Cantos*, as in the *Commedia*, the sea of the divine will is the source of both nourishment and disaster:

The nature of the universe, which holds the centre still and moves all else round it, begins here as from its starting-point, and this heaven has no other *where* but the Divine Mind, in which is kindled the love that turns it and the virtue which it rains down . . . and how time should have its roots in that vessel and in the other [the natural world] its leaves, may now be plain to thee. O covetousness [*cupidi-gia*] who so plungest mortals in thy depths that none has power to lift his eyes from thy waves! The will blossoms well in men, but the continual rain turns the sound plums to withered. (*Paradiso* xxvii)³⁷

If we are to gloss the *Cantos* by the “equations” of the *Commedia*, though, we must be aware that Pound interpreted Dante by modern lights. In 1913 he called Allen Upward’s *Divine Mystery* “the most fascinating book on folklore that I have ever opened” (*Selected Prose*, p. 373), and he seems to have used something like Upward’s primitivism

³⁷ Translated by John B. Sinclair in “The *Divine Comedy* of Dante Alighieri” (New York, 1961), Vol. III, pp. 391-393. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Dante are from this edition.

Red Herrings

to reinterpret the religious, emotional, and psychological system that in Dante stands behind the drawing of the soul toward God. It was through such an anthropological view of Dante's Christianity that in *The Spirit of Romance* Pound traced the "pagan lineage" of the quest for Beatrice:

The rise of Mariolatry, its pagan lineage, the romance of it, find modes of expression which verge over-easily into the speech and casuistry of Our Lady of Cyprus, as we may see in Arnaut, as we see so splendidly in Guido's "*Una figura della donna miae.*" And there is the consummation of it all in Dante's glorification of Beatrice. There is the inexplicable address to the lady in the masculine. There is the final evolution of Amor by Guido and Dante, a new and paganish god, neither Erôs nor an angel of the Talmud. (SR, pp. 91-92)

Out of Pound's conflation of Dante and contemporary primitivism grew *Three Cantos*, a poem that started to describe a Dantesque journey from misdirected will toward a re-acquisition of archaic man's harmony with the vital universe. The poem was to be a ritual awakening of ancient truths. Although it began in a modern inferno, Pound altered Dante's linear progression by adapting the repetitive strategies of ancient ritual and ritual drama. He even found a precedent for this experiment in Fenollosa's remarks about the Japanese Noh cycles, which Pound edited at the same time he began *Three Cantos*. Fenollosa had written that the Noh plays gather "the Shinto god dance, the lyric form of court poetry, the country farces, and a full range of epic incident" (*Translations*, p. 278). In his notes, Pound added that the Noh cycle "presents, or symbolizes, a complete diagram of life and recurrence" (*Translations*, p. 222). *Three Cantos* proclaimed itself a "meditative/Semi-dramatic, semi-epic story," and went on, not gratuitously, to allude to Dante and the Noh drama in quick succession. Pound's fusion of Dante's epic and the Noh's "diagram of life and recurrence"

Red Herrings

was connected in his mind with early comparisons between the *Commedia* and European mystery cycles,³⁸ and remained constant throughout the *Cantos*.

There is, then, no simple solution to the problem of what the *Cantos* are about. In the remainder of this study, I propose to outline some of the intricate and sometimes surprising ways in which Pound's literary and intellectual preoccupations combined between 1912 and 1925 to produce the germ of the *Cantos* and the poem's first fruit. I will begin with the problem of poetic organization.

³⁸ Cf. *The Spirit of Romance*, p. 154: "The *Commedia* is, in fact, a great mystery play, or better, a cycle of mystery plays."