

The Design of the *Cantos*: An Introduction* · Richard Sieburth

for James Laughlin

"I HAVE BEGUN an endless poem, of no known category," Ezra Pound writes to James Joyce in early 1917. "Phanapoeia or something or other, all about everything. 'Poetry' may print the first three Cantos this spring. I wonder what you will make of it. Probably too sprawling and unmusical to find favor in your ears. Will try to get some melody into it further on." Although the poem here referred to as *Phanopoeia* would eventually evolve into something called *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, its title is not really helpful in identifying what "known category" the work belongs to, designating as it does an entity which, like the Bible (*la biblia*), is both singular and plural, both One and Many. If we try to classify Pound's work at all, we tend to place it under the rubric loosely termed "the long poem," and to situate it next to such texts as Williams' *Pater-son*, Olson's *Maximus Poems*, or Zukovsky's *A*—as if the mere fact of length were sufficient to constitute an adequate criterion for the determination of poetic genre. Edgar Allen Poe, for one, considered the very notion of a long poem an aesthetic impossibility: "I hold that a long poem does not exist. I maintain that the phrase 'a long poem,' is simply a flat contradiction in terms." As Poe goes on to explain in "The Poetic Principle," since "a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul," and since "Unity of Impression" is absolutely essential to its effect, a poem's duration must of necessity be brief; after half an hour, at the very utmost, the reader's intensity of involvement will inevitably flag. In this sense, even Milton's *Paradise Lost* is, according to Poe,

* Originally delivered as a lecture to the undergraduate members of James Laughlin's Pound/Williams course at Brown University, April, 1983. Since this is intended as an introductory essay rather than as a scholarly article, I have preferred not to clutter it with footnotes. But my debt to the community of Pound scholars, and particularly to the work of Bernstein, Bush, Davie, Kenner, Nanny, Pearlman, and Schneidau, will be evident to anyone who has worked on the *Cantos*.

Or we get something like Pound's edition of the *Selected Cantos* in which the poem has been reduced to approximately one seventh its original length—though, significantly enough, in making this selection Pound refused to excerpt only the poetic gems (indeed, some of the finest passages of the *Cantos* are not represented), but instead insisted on including portions of the poem which most readers would not consider of the highest intensity, but which are nonetheless important to the articulation of the poem's overall design.

Now this is not to imply that anthologization falsifies or does irreparable violence to the text of the *Cantos*. Pound himself, after all, is an inveterate anthologizer. Such works as the *ABC of Reading*, *Guide to Kulchur*, *Confucius to Cummings*, rely heavily on the excerpt, the exemplary quotation, the digest, or the list as fundamental didactic (and heuristic) devices, and the very poetics of the *Cantos* may be seen as an extension of the strategies of citation involved in all anthologizing. If, moreover, any act of reading inevitably entails selection, demarcation, segmentation—in short, privileging one aspect of a text over another, editing what lies before our eyes and ears—the question then arises: how do we go about reading a work the length or scope of the *Cantos* as a *whole*? And, more importantly, how are we to read it as a whole *poem*, especially given our post-Symbolist tendency to define our pleasure in poems in proportion not to their *extensiveness* but rather to their *intensiveness*? Or as Pound put it: Dichten = Condensare. Poetry equals condensation.

Indeed, it is one of the many paradoxes of Pound's career that the very man who taught an entire generation to appreciate the minimalist grace of Imagist or Chinese poetry, who managed to attune post-Victorian American and English sensibilities to an aesthetic of ellipses, to a poetics based on the principle that less is more, should give up writing these kinds of poems altogether around 1920 (age 35, *nel mezzo del cammin*) and turn to the maximalist enterprise of the *Cantos*—a single, ongoing poem to which he would devote the rest of his life and on whose success or failure he would risk his entire poetic reputation. Although Pound apparently began actively working on the *Cantos* in 1915, it was not until 1920 that he decided to plunge himself into the poem altogether. "Hugh Selwyn Mauberly," published that same year, was not only Pound's farewell to London, but also his farewell to a certain concept of poetry. After "Mauberly," Pound would in the strict sense write no more poems (in

the plural), no more isolated gems. Instead (like Odysseus), he would set out on a journey, or a poem, on a risk “of no known category”—and one might add, of no known design and (unlike the *Odyssey*) no known end.

Whether or not the *Cantos* are a “colossal failure,” as even some of Pound’s most ardent admirers have concluded (and as even Pound himself was inclined to admit in the despondency of old age, referring to the *Cantos* as a gigantic “mess” or “botch”), and regardless of how we eventually evaluate Pound’s achievement, it is important to keep in mind that this poem, growing as it does out of the climate of the avant-garde immediately following World War I, is first and foremost an *experiment*—and experiments, as Pound reminds us in *Guide to Kulchur*, have certain rights, among which is the right to succeed or fail. Having now become something of a modernist classic, thoroughly annotated and institutionalized, the *Cantos* may have lost some of their experimental aura. Still, it is vital not to forget what a radical—and what a problematic—enterprise they constitute. Read seriously, they can still cause us to place some of our most basic assumptions into question, asking us to reassess our *idées reçues* as to what a *poem* is, what *poetry* is, and, ultimately, what constitutes *literature*.

Before specifically addressing the design of the *Cantos*, it seems to me that we still have to ask ourselves what *kind* of text we are dealing with here, that is, what sort of category it falls into. Not out of a mere academic interest in literary taxonomy or typology, but because our reading of *any* text depends on the sorts of assumptions we make about it, on the horizon of expectations we bring to it, on the various conventions to which we expect that text to adhere—or violate. Many of the negative judgments made about the *Cantos*—say, that they lack a “major form” or are deficient in “unity”—may be applying criteria or expectations to the *Cantos* that are not entirely relevant to the poem, and thus are implicitly demanding that the *Cantos* be something *other* than they are. Even as perceptive a critic as Geoffrey Hartman can dismiss the *Cantos* as a “nostalgic montage without unity, a picaresque of styles”—as if Unity (and here we return to Poe and, behind him, to Coleridge) were the sole measure of a work’s success or failure. What kind of unity, one might ask, does Rabelais’ work have? Or Montaigne’s? Or Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*? Wouldn’t it make more sense to approach the *Cantos* as we

would these works (or those various “carnavalesque” examples of Menippean satire discussed by the Russian critic Bakhtin), rather than trying to evaluate them according to the norms of lyric or of epic poetry? In other words, our reading and eventual evaluation of the *Cantos* is very much linked to the kind of text we expect and to the genre we situate it in or against.

Walter Benjamin writes: “A major work either establishes a genre or abolishes one; masterpieces do both.” Benjamin’s aphorism is relevant to the *Cantos*, for in a sense they establish a new kind of poem, while abolishing previous distinctions between lyric and epic, poetry and history, literature and non-literature; and to this extent, they deserve to be placed in the same category as such other modernist experiments as *Ulysses* or *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. Unlike Joyce or Proust, however, Pound didn’t really know *where* he was going when he set out on his Odyssean voyage, nor did he know exactly what *kind* of a poem he was writing. He certainly had no map to help him chart his course—Joyce at least had the outline of the *Odyssey* to guide him, and Proust from the very outset knew how and where his novel had to end. Pound, by contrast, had no ending in sight. Nor, as it turns out, did he have a beginning.

The history of the genesis of Pound’s *Cantos* is a record of false starts, hesitations, doubts, and revisions, a story of a poem in search of a Beginning. Pound apparently starts writing his poem in 1915; the “Three Cantos” which are alluded to in his letter to Joyce (and which are largely modelled on Browning’s *Sordello*) are published in *Poetry* magazine in 1917. No sooner published than Pound begins revising these texts, cutting passages out, rearranging sequences; most of them will eventually be scrapped altogether. Four more cantos are published in 1919, with Pound writing to his father, “each more incomprehensible than the one preceding; don’t know what’s to be done about it.” Barely underway, the poem already seems to be running away from him. Little more is heard of the poem until mid-1922; this caesura or silence in the progress of the *Cantos* coincides not only with Pound’s reading of the manuscripts of Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Eliot’s *Waste Land*, but also with his brief transit through Dada in Paris. It is only in mid-1923 that Pound finally revises the opening sequence of his poem, now placing Odysseus’ descent into the Underworld (the *nekuia* of Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, considered by Pound to be the “oldest” or most archaic episode in Homer’s poem) as

the first canto—an opening which reaches back to recover the ritual beginnings of Homeric epic. In other words, it took Pound nearly eight years to discover how his poem should begin. And it is an inception which, appropriately enough, sets out in the middle of narration, *in medias res*, the initial “and” referring back to something already inaugurated, already in progress:

And then went down to the ship,
Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
We set up mast and sail on that swart ship. . . .

Although he had finally discovered a beginning, Pound still did not know exactly what type of poem he was engaged in—or at least he remained very reluctant to tie himself down to any precise definition of his enterprise. In the original “Three Cantos” (sometimes referred to as the *Ur-Cantos*), he had hinted that he was writing a “meditative/Semi-dramatic, semi-epic” poem, but in a 1924 letter he explicitly stated, “It ain’t an epic. It’s part of a long poem.” And when the first installment of the *Cantos* was published in a deluxe edition in Paris in early 1925, it appeared under the title *A Draft of XVI Cantos of Ezra Pound for the Beginning of a Poem of Some Length*. Which, as titles go, is teasingly tentative, since it is careful to announce that this is not a final, definitive text, but merely a provisional version, a preliminary sketch or outline, not of some finished work, but merely a draft for the *Beginning* of “a Poem of Some Length.” Some length indeed—this, as would later turn out, meant a text of some eight hundred pages, composed more or less continuously over nearly half a century.

The title *A Draft of XVI Cantos*—or in its 1930 version, *A Draft of XXX Cantos*—nevertheless gives us an important indication of the ongoing provisionality of Pound’s poem. What now appear to us as final versions of his *Cantos* were originally intended merely as a rough scaffolding which would presumably be filled in later. In a 1937 letter, for example, Pound writes that “by labelling most of ’em draft, I retain the right to include necessary explanation in [subsequent Cantos] or in revision.” From the very outset, then, the *Cantos* explicitly presented themselves as incomplete, as mere preliminaries to some ulterior, and presumably more definitive, text which is always being deferred, always being postponed

to a later date. Responding to a correspondent's query about the meaning and form of the *Cantos*, Pound writes in a 1939 letter that eventually, when completed, all the apparent obscurities in the poem as well as all its foreign phrases would make sense. And: "As to the *form* of the *Cantos*: all I can say is: *wait* till it's there. I mean wait till I get 'em written and then if it don't show, I will start exegesis." This notion of deferred form or meaning curiously resembles some of the ideas Pound picked up from Major Douglas' economics of Social Credit. And in a sense the *Cantos* is a poem written on credit—not only on the credit of Pound's early reputation as *il miglior fabbro* but more crucially, on the hypothesis that although the poem might lack form or finish *now*, there are nevertheless funds backing it or somewhere held in reserve which will eventually cover all the debts and tie up all the loose ends which the poem is accumulating over the course of its development.

This concept of a forever deferred form or conclusion is also a profoundly eschatological belief, a belief on the part of Pound that somehow, some way his wandering Odyssean poem would be redeemed from its provisionality and temporality and be granted the grace of an ending—a Final Judgment, as it were, which would at last Make It All Cohere—and that the true form of his poem, as of yet still hidden in the body of the text, would not be released until the world (or the poet himself) had undergone apocalyptic regeneration. Contrasting the closed, cyclical universe of Eliot's *Four Quartets* with the open-ended (and, one might add, radically chiliastic) design of the *Cantos*, Hugh Kenner finely observes: "Pound was working instead from within a poem whose end he did not clearly foresee, in the faith that secular events, and the shape of his own life, would supply a proper finale when it was time. Secular events supplied instead Mussolini hanged by the heels, and a cage [at Pisa] and fourteen years in a madhouse, and inexorable old age at last in which to reflect how he had 'tried to write Paradise.'"

Do not move.
Let the wind speak.
that is Paradise

Let the gods forgive what I
have made

Let those I have loved try to forgive
what I have made.

(120/803)

In recent editions of the *Cantos*, it is with these lines that the poem now ends; they are the final fragment in a section entitled *Drafts and Fragments* (1969), and appear under the title “Notes for Canto 117 et seq.” *Et sequens*: the work remains open, incomplete, provisional down to its final page.

Pound quotes the sculptor Brancusi in one of the later cantos:

Je peux commencer une chose tous les jours,
mais fi---nir!

(97/677)

One reason Pound can't end his *Cantos* or seems to defer the question of their termination is because he is forever involved with beginnings—and this in several senses. On one level, the *Cantos* are difficult for many readers to follow because they seem to be constantly starting afresh. Just as we think we've mastered what's going on in the text, the poem seems to veer off into entirely new directions, abruptly introducing new issues, new characters, new languages. Even in the final portions of the *Cantos*, in *Section: Rock Drill* and *Thrones*, at a point where one would expect the poet to begin pulling together the various strands of his poem as it moves toward presumable conclusion, Pound is still venturing into new fields, adducing additional material—Byzantine currency reform, the evolution of the British legal system, Na Khi suicide rituals of Western China, Talleyrand's *Memoirs*, Egyptian hieroglyphics . . .

Now it is very easy to dismiss Pound as the Eternal Neophyte or Tyro—over the course of his career, he begins to become a sculptor, he begins to become a bassoonist and composer, he begins to become an expert on this or that, but appears too much in a hurry to stay with one thing for any length of time. But it is precisely this orientation towards beginnings and rebeginnings which makes Pound such a profoundly American poet, as is indicated by the Chinese motto he shares with Thoreau—Make It New. And to the extent that the *Cantos* seem to be always

moving on to something *else*, always restless with where they are at the moment, they are a singularly nomadic poem. Eliot remarked that Pound seemed to be “a squatter everywhere, rootless, ever ready to depart,” and the same could be said of the *Cantos*. It is therefore appropriate that one of the major subjects of the poem should involve the nature and condition of beginnings. Malatesta embarking on the construction of his Tempio in Rimini, Jefferson establishing a university, the onset of the American Revolution, John Adams siring the Adams Dynasty, the foundation of the Sienese Monte dei Paschi Bank, these are among the inaugural events celebrated by the *Cantos*. Such beginnings, however, should not be understood as absolute inceptions *ex nihilo*, but rather as *rebeginnings*, as repetitions of some origin that has always gone before—say, as the American Revolution begins something already begun in the French Enlightenment or in the tradition of English common law, or as the founding of a Chinese dynasty merely repeats an order already established by the legendary emperors of the mythic past.

The fact that the *Cantos* are always rebeginning, always setting out for something new, also means that the poem is continuously leaving things behind, continuously accumulating a past. And if the *Cantos*, as we saw, may be described as a poem written on credit, then the economic analogy for the way in which they keep on accreting material as they grow in length would probably be *capital*—a kind of textual capital on which the poem can draw as it proceeds, a growing fund of material which has been banked or invested, and which can be cashed in at later points in the poem through references to, or recalls of, earlier portions of the text. The poetic capital which the *Cantos* amass over the course of their development functions, moreover, as a memory bank in which various items (ranging from single words or names to longer passages) can be stored and then retrieved, usually through the device of repetition (one tag phrase, one cluster of lines in a later canto will repeat, and thereby release, an identical item which has been stored hundreds of pages back). Such repetition works very much like rhyme, and Pound frequently deploys subject-rhyme as a way of activating the echo-chamber of memory: thus, the Jefferson-Adams correspondence in Canto 31 echoes Malatesta’s post-bag of letters in Canto 9, the descent of a small wasp into the earth in Canto 83 echoes the Odyssean descents of Cantos 1 and 47, and so forth. In short, the poem is forever citing (and re-citing) itself, forever

remembering itself and, most crucially, causing the reader to remember. Its fundamental locus therefore lies, as Pound discovered in the “Pisan Cantos,” “dove sta memoria” and in the injunction:

remember that I have remembered,
mia pargoletta,
and pass on the tradition

The vast mnemonic system of the *Cantos* is nothing less than an attempt to create, within the space of a single poem, a simulacrum of that Great Memory which Pound (like Yeats) believed was as essential to the survival of culture as instincts are to the survival of the body. In a world ever more afflicted by collective amnesia, the *Cantos* (and in this way they most resembled Proust’s masterwork) will at least supply a record of what it is like still to be able to remember. This is the real function of all the allusions and all the citations in the poem: to activate our memory (if only prosthetically), to remind us that something has always come before, to make sure that the accumulated wealth of our cultural heritage, as well as the accumulating poetic inventory of the *Cantos* themselves, will constantly be recirculated. This continual recirculation and redistribution of wealth, however, entails a form of fluid expenditure which is utterly divorced from the retentiveness of the “hoggers of harvest” or the hoarded gold of monopoly-capitalism. Value, in the economy of the *Cantos*, is always a function of exchange—between present and past, presence and absence, poet and reader, poem and the world.

The emphasis on economic, mnemonic and textual circulation throughout the *Cantos* makes this a poem whose existence is a perpetual becoming; like the early version of *Finnegans Wake*, it might appropriately be entitled *Work in Progress*. The radically processual dimension of the *Cantos* tends to be obscured by the fact that when we consider this poem, we think of it as a book, as an object, as a monument—or a ruin. It probably makes more sense, however, to think equally of the *Cantos* as an event, as both product and process—a process which involves not only its author but its reader as well. To borrow an analogy from grammar, one might say that the *Cantos* are both noun and verb. As Ernest Fenollosa observes in his essay on “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry” (1914):

A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points, of actions, cross-section cut through actions, snapshots. Neither can a pure verb, an abstract motion, be possible in nature. The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things, and so the Chinese conception tends to represent them.

Words in motion, motion in words: as it moves nomadically toward a destination that is always being deferred, as it alludes back to ground that always threatens to recede into utter loss, the *Cantos* are a poem which must improvise both its past and its future.

One might argue that this is the kind of situation that many modernist texts find themselves in; but what makes the *Cantos* so singular (and so risky) is that the progress of the poem has been deliberately inscribed into the very process of history. Pound observed that an epic is a “poem including history,” and this is certainly borne out by the amount of history the *Cantos* encompass—Renaissance history, the history of the Leopoldine reforms in Tuscany, the history of China and America, the contemporary history of Europe between the wars, etc. But there is also a sense in which the *Cantos* are included *in* or *by* history, that is, are determined by the shape of current historical events. Pound wanted to write a poem which would be (in Eluard’s phrase) *poésie ininterrompue*, a text which could be elaborated on a day-to-day basis, regardless of the whims of poetic inspiration or the vagaries of personal crisis. And to this extent the *Cantos* site themselves *in* the flux of history, in the unfolding present, as a species of diary or journal which registers whatever it is that happens to come to hand. There is no way that Pound at the outset of his poem could have foreseen the “Pisan Cantos”: his incarceration is an event that enters into the work through the ineluctible interplay of personal biography and collective historical forces. But as a poet-historian, Pound did not simply want his poem to interpret or record history from the outside, but rather to become *part* of that history. Indeed, there are indications that he even went so far as to believe that his poem could in effect *make* history, that is, could exercise a significant impact on the direction of public events (hence his presentation of a copy of the *Cantos* to Mussolini). Pound was fond of quoting Flaubert’s comment to Du Camp upon surveying the wreckage of Paris after the Commune: “If they had read my

Education Sentimentale, this sort of thing wouldn't have happened." There are similar intimations from Pound in the late 30s: if people only paid attention to the economic doctrines and historical diagnoses set forth in the *Cantos*, another World War might be averted . . . And if (as Pound was undoubtedly aware) the *Cantos* were still imperfectly understood by their audience (or if they had yet to find an audience), it was because the time had not yet come in which their underlying truth would finally be revealed. Here again we encounter the eschatological or messianic conviction on Pound's part that somehow History would in the end prove the *Cantos* and its author to be right, and that in the course of events an Order (Mussolini's Italy?) would emerge to provide Pound with the ultimate form and moral justification his poem had been searching for. Which is of course precisely *not* what happened. If the *Cantos* include history, it is only as the grimmest of ironies.

It is nonetheless important to underscore the fact that Pound did not merely see his *Cantos* as a poem, as an aesthetic object, but also conceived them as a means of action in and on the world. It was during his brief association with Dada in Paris in the early 20s that Pound developed the notion that one should not speak of *works* of art, but rather of *acts* of art—and this deliberate blurring of the boundaries between artistic production and performance (which implies an equation between the aesthetic and political realms, between art as the making of objects and art as the execution of actions) is perhaps Pound's most significant inheritance from the avant-garde ideologies of the teens and 20s, and may in part explain many of the controversies surrounding the *Cantos* and their author. Indeed, the celebrated flap occasioned by the award of the Bollingen Prize to the "Pisan *Cantos*" in 1948 revolved precisely around these questions. Were the "Pisan *Cantos*" to be considered purely as intransitive poems, that is, as autonomous art works divorced from the contingencies of history or politics, and therefore to be judged solely by aesthetic criteria? Or were they instead to be construed as political acts or transitive gestures committed *in* history, and thereby susceptible not only to aesthetic evaluation, but to moral and ideological assessment as well? There are of course no easy answers to these questions; the point is simply that the *Cantos*, taken seriously, ask us to confront them again and again.

To define the *Cantos* as a protracted Action Poem (much as one might speak of an Action Painting by Pollock) is not to imply that this text or event is utterly without analogies in the history of literature, nor that it is completely devoid of form or structure—if that were the case, the *Cantos* would be totally unreadable. One of Pound's most suggestive statements concerning the question of "form" occurs in an essay on "Dr. Williams' Position" published in *The Dial* in 1928. He might just as well be describing his own *Cantos*:

Very well, he does not "conclude"; his work has been "often formless," "incoherent," opaque, obscure, obfuscated, confused, truncated, etc.

I am not going to say: "form" is a non-literary component shoved on to literature by Aristotle or by some non-litteratus who told Aristotle about it. Major form is not a non-literary component. But it can do us no harm to stop an hour or so and consider the number of very important chunks of world-literature in which form, major form, is remarkable mainly for absence.

There is a corking plot to the *Illiad*, but it is not told us in the poem, or at least not in the parts of the poem known to history as *The Illiad*. It would be hard to find a worse justification of the theories of dramatic construction than the *Prometheus* of Aeschylus. It will take a brighter lad than the author of these presents to demonstrate the element of form in Montaigne or in Rabelais; Lope has it, but it is not the "Aristotelian" beginning, middle and end, it is the quite reprehensible: BEGINNING WHOOP and then any sort of a trail off. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* wasn't even finished by its author.

The component of these great works and *the* indispensable component is texture; which Dr. Williams indubitably has in the best, and increasingly frequent passages of his writing.

"Texture," like "text," derives from *textus* or "tissue," a term used by Quintilian to designate the style of a literary work; a further etymological root relates it to the activity of *texere* or weaving. By proposing "texture" as the indispensable component of a literary work, Pound seems to be privileging the particular wovenness or interwovenness of any given piece of writing, regardless of whether it possesses "major form" or not.

In today's critical idiom, one might say that Pound is above all drawn to the textuality (and by extension, the intertextuality) of writing. It is enough to look at almost any page of *Section: Rock-Drill* or *Thrones* to realize what Pound intends by "texture." The elaborate intertextual play of allusions and citations, the calligrammic interweaving of Chinese ideograms and Egyptian hieroglyphs with Greek, Latin, Italian, and English—all this calls attention to the text as *texture* and serves to underline the physical palpability of the signifier, over and beyond what it might actually signify. By repeatedly insisting that the *Cantos* be read *à la lettre* "for what is *on the page*" (his emphasis), Pound further underscores the poem's sheer materiality. It is perhaps also what Williams is referring to when he perceptively remarks in 1931 that the *Cantos* should be seen "in relation to the principle move in imaginative writing today—that away from the word as symbol toward the word as reality," that is, away from the word as a *medium* of representation and toward the word as the very *object* of representation.

The notion of texture also describes the design of the *Cantos* as a web or system of *relations*—Pound (like contemporary structuralists) tends very much to think of form as a manifestation of relationality. As early as 1915, he was defining Vorticist sculpture or painting as "planes in relation," a formulation which owes a great deal to Fenollosa's insight in his essay on *The Chinese Written Character*:

Relations are more real and more important than the things which they relate.

Which Pound footnotes: "Compare Aristotle's *Poetics*: 'Swift perception of relations, hallmark of genius.'" Such "swift perception of relations," associated by Aristotle with the intuition of metaphor, is closely akin to what Pound termed the ideogrammic method:

The ideogrammic method consists of presenting one facet and then another until at some point one gets off the dead and desensitized surface of the reader's mind onto a part that will register.

Pound called this method ideogrammic because he followed Fenollosa in believing (rightly or wrongly) that Chinese characters were structured by a similar relationality:

For example, the ideograph meaning “to speak” is a mouth with two words and a flame coming out of it. The sign meaning “to grow up with difficulty” is grass with a twisted root. But this concrete verb quality, both in nature and in the Chinese signs, becomes far more striking and poetic when we pass from such simple, original pictures to compounds. In this process of compounding, two things added together do not produce a third thing but suggest some fundamental *relation* between them. For example, the ideograph for a “messmate” is a man and a fire.

The seeds of Pound’s ideogrammic method are already present in his celebrated distych, “In a Station of the Metro” (written in 1913, before he had read Fenollosa on the Chinese character). The original printing emphasized the intervals which punctuate the poem:

The apparition of these faces in a crowd :
 Petals on a wet, black bough.

Two lines, two breaths, two units of perception, organized around the binary opposition of several semantic categories: human vs. vegetal, culture vs. nature, light vs. dark, background vs. foreground, singular vs. plural, part vs. whole. Juxtaposed without authorial comment, connected only by a colon, the two lines exist to provoke an event in the reader’s mind, “A swift perception of relations” which will fill in the gaps which the poem has so carefully opened.

This technique of ideogrammic juxtaposition, still relatively simple and straightforward in Pound’s “Metro” haiku, is applied at a number of levels in the *Cantos*. The units which are set into relation can range from single words or names or tag phrases to complete lines or blocks of lines, or can involve entire cantos or clusters of cantos. A particularly clear example of how this method functions on a large scale is the sequence of Cantos 52 to 71 (first published in 1940). The first ten cantos in this installment provide an elliptical survey of five millennia of Chinese history, ending in the year 1735. The second decade picks up the historical thread at this same year (which marks the birth of John Adams) and goes on to deal, in roughly the same amount of pages as the previous group, with American history from the Boston Massacre to the end of John Adams’

administration (a span of some thirty years). The juxtaposition of the Chinese History cantos and the Adams cantos is meant to provoke the reader into a perception of the metaphoric relations of similarity and dissimilarity that exist between China and early America—two models of enlightened civic order, one nation stretching back into a mythic past, the other recently born out of Revolution, with the Adams family providing an implicit parallel to the great dynasties of China whose Confucian values may be compared to the Enlightenment ideals on which the American Republic was founded. As a single whole, the China/Adams Cantos can in turn be contrasted with the fifty cantos preceding them, inasmuch as the twin attempts of China and America to establish a civic *paradiso terrestre* stand in marked opposition to the various failures of European culture which have been chronicled in the earlier portions of the poem. As Pound would later explain, China and America presented examples of “constructive effort,” of “people struggling upwards,” in distinction to the “people dominated by emotion” who inhabit the first fifty cantos.

Pound’s reliance on juxtapositional montage throughout the *Cantos* creates a verbal texture that is very similar to that of a list, an inventory, or a catalogue. Rather than explicitly articulating the syntactical connectives between items, rather than subordinating one phrase or clause to another (*hypotaxis*), he instead situates his material side by side on the same surface as equivalent units of design (*parataxis*). As in the “Metro” epigram, what makes the poem work (in the reader’s mind) are the intervals which it establishes. These blanks, these spaces in between, serve to draw the reader into the making of the poem and into the production of its sense. In other words, the very structure of the *Cantos* is in itself a didactic device, designed to teach us to become *active* readers, alert to the “swift perception of relations.” The many references and citations in the poem serve a similar didactic function. If they often seem maddeningly elliptical or fragmentary, it is because Pound’s tactic is to tease us with isolated parts so that we will take the initiative to discover (or recover) the missing wholes from which they have been drawn. If he gives us snippets of the Adams/Jefferson Correspondence, for example, it is not merely to epitomize their sensibilities, but also in order to instigate the reader to leave the *Cantos* and read the original letters from which the poem has been quoting. In an age of the “autotelic” modernist poem,

this ongoing invitation to go *outside* the text, to complete it, as it were, by reading the “sources” behind it, is not the least of the *Cantos*’ paradoxes.

Since the *Cantos* give us parts or fragments which we are in turn meant to locate in relation to (missing) wholes, to read the poem is often like solving some riddle through induction. The reader’s activity thus mimes one of the central “plots” of the *Cantos*, which involves Pound in the persona of a detective whose mission it is to sleuth out and unmask the root causes of economic evil—“19 years on this case,” he notes in Canto 46, “I have set down part of/The Evidence.” By the late 1930s, Pound had become so obsessed with his criminal investigation, so prone to overreading each scrap of new “evidence” that his poem threatened to degenerate into hermeneutic delirium. The synecdochic relation of part to whole (or of evidence to crime) is one of the constitutive tropes of the *Cantos*, and is in turn related to many of the metonymic devices Pound deploys in his poem—such as predicates divorced from their subjects, or attributes or modifiers which refer to missing nouns and verbs. Pound’s predilection for metonymic figuration is consonant with his desire to create a poetics based on “the luminous detail” or on the marshalling of a phalanx of particulars,” and no doubt derives from his deep distrust of abstraction or generalization. If he therefore prizes the 19th century French prose tradition so highly and considers the *Cantos* as an extension of this prose tradition into verse, it is probably because, as Roman Jakobson has so persuasively argued, realist prose fiction is characterized by a high incidence of metonymic relations, while poetry instead relies primarily on metaphoric relations of equivalence.

Although metonymy and synecdoche are the predominant stylistic figures in the *Cantos*—the poem contains remarkably few metaphors on its most local rhetorical level—the text as a whole is nonetheless organized in terms of large subject-rhymes, that is, in terms of metaphor. As in the early “Metro” poem or in the Chinese History and Adams sequence, relations of contiguity in the *Cantos* frequently seem to convert into relations of similarity and/or dissimilarity. The *Cantos* as a whole are accordingly bound together by an immense network of metaphors, homologies, and analogies in which the *same* is repeated in different guises. Napoleon equals Malatesta equals Jefferson equals Mussolini equals an emperor of China. Odysseus descending into the Underworld equals the mind of Eu-

rope recovering its ancient heritage equals the author of the *Cantos* descending into the past. The economic roots of the decadence of the Italian Renaissance equal those that caused the corruption of 19th century America and Europe and those that have led to World War II. Monopoly capitalism equals monotheism equals Judaism, etc. In short, even when Pound thinks he is working like an historian or a novelist, following the syntactic chain of cause and effect, he is always thinking very much like a poet, that is, in terms of the larger paradigms of metaphor and repetition. In the end, Pound began to take his metaphors literally, unable to escape from the circle of repetition which his poem had traced around him.

In an interview with Donald Hall in 1962, Pound was still trying to define what “known category” the *Cantos* belonged to and what sort of form his poem had taken.

The problem was to get a form — something elastic enough to take the necessary material. It had to be a form that wouldn't exclude something merely because it didn't fit. In the first sketches, a draft of the present first canto was the third.

Obviously you haven't got a nice little road map such as the middle ages possessed of Heaven. Only a musical form would take the material, and the Confucian universe as I see it is a universe of interacting strains and tensions.

The notion of “musical form” places the *Cantos* squarely within the Symbolist tradition, and affiliates them with other notably “musical” poems such as Eliot's *Four Quartets* or Zukovsky's *A*. The condition of music to which Pound's poem aspires, however, has less to do with acoustic design than with the Pythagorean (or Mallarméan) conception of music as pure form, as a sheer patterning of relations. This at least is what emerges from a letter of 1927 in which Pound compares the structure of his poem to that of a fugue:

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

1. Rather like, or unlike subject and response and counter subject in fugue.

A.A. Live man goes down into world of Dead.

C.B. the “repeat in history.”

B.C. The “magic moment” or moment of metamorphosis, bust through from quotidian into “divine or permanent world.”
Gods, etc.

This is essentially the same scheme of the *Cantos* which Yeats discusses in the “Packet for Ezra Pound” (1928) included in *A Vision*—a tripartite division of the poem into instances of descent into the world of the dead or the past, instances of repetition or recurrence in the continuum of history, and instances of ecstatic transcendence of space and time. Based on the frescoes painted by Francesco del Cossa for the Schifanoia Palace in Ferrara in honor of Cosima Tura, Pound’s three horizontal “fugal” elements correspond to the three vertical levels of the frescoes. Pound resorted to this model in order to explain the poem to his publisher, James Laughlin, in the early 1950s:

Schifanoia frescoes in three levels.

Top. Allegories of the virtues (Cf. Petrarch’s “Trionfi”)

Middle. Signs of the Zodiac. Turning of the stars. Cosmology.

Bottom. Particulars of life in the time of Borso d’Este. The contemporary.

Pound goes on to provide an additional gloss:

a) What is there—permanent—the sea.

b) What is recurrent—the voyages.

c) What is trivial—the casual—Vasco’s troops weary, stupid parts.

The Poundian world-view or hierarchy of values implied in this scheme is remarkably traditional. The Upper level is the focus of Eternal Values, the permanent realm of the divine *nous*, and represents the order of perception to which we accede in paradisiacal moments of vision; if Pound equates it with the sea, it is because he inevitably associates transcendent states of mind (or body) with an ecstatic liquidity:

This liquid is certainly a
property of the mind
nec accidens est but an element
in the mind's make-up
(74/449)

The middle realm is the site of patterned repetition and recurrence—the turning of the stars, the cycle of the zodiac, the rhythms of the seasons. Significantly enough, Pound assimilates “the repeat in history” into this rhythm of natural recurrence—hence the reference to the rhyming voyages of discovery of Odysseus, Hanno, and Vasco da Gama (the *Cantos* persistent confusion of the order of history with the order of nature seems to have been unaffected by Pound’s reading of Marx). The lowest level of Pound’s scheme corresponds to the world of the Fall: it contains what is merely local, topical, or contingent, and its inhabitants are not the heroes of epic voyage, but rather their disgruntled crews; this sphere contains all the “stupid parts” of human existence, and of the *Cantos*.

Pound’s cosmological scheme helps us sort out some of the different “thematic” strata of the poem, but it remains unclear how the Schifanoia fresco model actually describes the textual configuration of the *Cantos*. Are we to assume that these three levels are always simultaneously present in the poem (as, say, the different levels of allegoresis are simultaneously present in Dante’s *Commedia*)? Or do they merely function as a paradigm from which the various elements of the poem are selected and are then fugally redistributed? To complement this vertical, paradigmatic scheme of the *Cantos* Pound also suggested a more horizontal element of design: not only were the three levels of the poem to be fugally interwoven into various patterns of reoccurrence (thus giving the poem a kind of “spatial form”), but the *Cantos* would also progressively move (in sequence, in time) *through* the three levels, making their way from Inferno to Purgatorio to Paradiso. Pound writes in a 1944 letter:

For forty years I have schooled myself, not to write an economic history of the U.S. or any other country, but to write an epic poem which begins “In the Dark Forest,” crosses the Purgatory of human error, and ends in the light, and “fra i maestri di color che sanno.”

In his late interview with Donald Hall, he corroborates the (rough) analogy between the design of the *Cantos* and the *Commedia*:

I was not following the three divisions of the *Divine Comedy* exactly. One can't follow the Dantesque cosmos in an age of experiment. But I have made the division between people dominated by emotion [i.e. Cantos 1–51?], people struggling upwards [Cantos 52–84?], and those who have some part of the divine vision [Cantos 85–109?]. The thrones in Dante's *Paradiso* are for the spirits of the people who have been responsible for good government. The thrones in the *Cantos* are an attempt to move out from egoism and to establish some definition of an order possible or at any rate conceivable on earth.

Louis Zukovsky, always one of the most perceptive readers of the *Cantos*, similarly construed Pound's Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso as three distinct states of mind or three dispositions toward the world—hate, comprehension, and worship. He emphasized, however, that these dispositions do not exist in the *Cantos* as an ascending sequence, but rather always “next to each other, or continually intersecting.”

One should therefore be wary about applying the analogies between the *Cantos* and the *Divine Comedy* too rigidly, just as one should be cautious about assigning Pound's poem to the category of epic. To quote again from the interview with Donald Hall:

An epic is a poem containing history. The modern world contains heteroclite elements. The past epos has succeeded when all see a great many of the answers were assumed, at least between author and audience, or a great mass of audience. The attempt in an experimental age is therefore rash.

The *Cantos* cannot be an epic, Pound realizes, because they are written from a position of radical alienation, from the vantage point of an outsider and exile. A traditional epic can assume its audience; an experimental poem like the *Cantos* not only has to invent itself as it goes along, but has to invent its readers as well. Having commented on the rashness

of attempting an epic in an experimental age, Pound goes on to ask his interviewer:

Do you know the story: "What are you drawing, Johnny?"

"God."

"But nobody knows what He looks like."

"They will when I get through!"

That confidence is no longer obtainable.

And yet it was exactly that confidence, that presumption perhaps, which allowed Pound to undertake his *Cantos* in the first place. And even though they have now taken their distinguished place in the tradition of the new, we still don't quite know what they look like.