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America in Ezra Pound’s
*Posthumous Cantos*

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In 2002 I published a selection of drafts of *The Cantos*, from Ezra Pound’s manuscripts, typescripts and magazine publications, under the title *Canti postumi*.1 Some questioned this title, “Posthumous Cantos,” which clearly indicates a posthumous collection of material related to *The Cantos*. Similarly, Wallace Stevens’ *Opus Posthumous* is a book of uncollected and rejected prose and verse written by Stevens over his long life.2 Perhaps I stretched the title by calling “cantos” what are in fact drafts and fragments of cantos, to use a well-worn phrase, and alternate versions and rejected passages, but this is largely justified by Pound’s own practice and by editorial expediency.

Thus *Canti postumi* presents material written by Pound over fifty years, from the “Three Cantos” of 1917 in the *Poetry* text, to some “Lines for Olga” that he composed not long before his death in homage to his loyal companion. Therefore, as one reviewer suggested,3 *Canti postumi* is a sort of *Cantos* in a nutshell, since we are confronted with Pound’s various ways of writing, from the more discursive style of circa 1915, to the visionary allusiveness of the 1920s, to the toughening of the 1930s to the breaking down and recovery of the 1940s, to the “atomic” style of the 1950s and the final softening as “Old Ez” approaches death. These are styles that readers of *The Cantos* are familiar with, as they are familiar with the historical and mythical material that engages Pound. So one could ask why publish these left-overs of the feast of *The Cantos*? The answer is that *The Cantos* are finally neither well-known nor widely read, and this volume could be used as a compact guide to their phases; no new poetry by Ezra Pound has appeared since his death,4 only letters and

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polemical writings that have in some cases detracted from his image as a poet of genius. Therefore a selection of unpublished and uncollected drafts of intrinsic value (i.e., not merely of documentary or academic interest) would remind readers of the stature of Pound the poet. Judging from responses from readers in Italy and abroad, my project has been successful. I have tried to rescue Pound from the archives and their frequenters and to present him once again in front of his natural audience, the readers of poetry.

To this a footnote must be added. It is strange that this new collection of poetry by a major American writer of the twentieth century should appear not in the United States but in Italy, with an Italian translation opposite the English original (except for those drafts that Pound wrote directly in Italian). But Pound spent most of his life in Italy, wrote extensively in Italian, and in fact published in Italy the original editions of two volumes of cantos, *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*. So, though I am not averse to preparing an expanded American edition of posthumous cantos, this is only yet another curious turn of Pound’s checkered publishing history. Even his posthumous verse has to come to America by way of Rapallo . . .

Indeed there is not much about America in *Canti postumi*. I will distinguish my edition, using the Italian title, from the plentiful drafts to be found in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. It goes without saying that all the drafts related to the American cantos of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s are steeped in American materials, observations, notes from Pound’s reading in Rapallo and Washington D.C. As these are mostly rather arid stretches of cantos, it will be no surprise that they contribute little to my selection in *Canti postumi*. When we think of America in *The Cantos*, we think of Jefferson, the Adamses, Van Buren, and John Randolph — all of which stand out with some memorable trait or saying. Contemporary America is mostly absent from the cantos written in Washington during Pound’s confinement. Arguably the most “American” section of cantos is *The Pisan Cantos*, because of the large presence there of American inmates and guards at the prison camp near Pisa. Pound is intrigued by their doings and comments, by the songs they croon and their down-to-earth and un-heroic take on the war for democracy. Since he did not believe that this had been a war for democracy, he was quite willing to record the misgivings and jokes of the common soldiers. They proved his point, howbeit indirectly. And they injected the patterns of American speech (some of it Negro) into the fragmented page of Pound’s poem.

*Canti postumi*, though I had no other end when making my selection than to present a volume of significant verse by Pound, confirms the above. If we look at the “Three Cantos” of 1917 we only find a grudging American episode, the story of the failed painter in Indiana who had been to Paris, had begun to be recognized, but had been recalled to the American waste land only to vanish into anonymity, “acting as usher in the theatre, / painting the local drug-shop and soda bars.” The moral is all too clear. Pound will not return to be reduced to a nobody. “Take my Sordello!” he exclaims. That is, these “Three Cantos” are proof of his independence and success in refusing to conform. Pound’s bragging is so candid, and his example so obvious, that one is tempted to remind him that “Sunday Morning” and “After Apple-Picking,” arguably more successful than “my Sordello,” certainly much more widely read not only in America, were written in the same years by writers who stayed at home or returned. But this is an old controversy, and were it not for Pound’s certainty that

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he has chosen the right path, the only path, we would not have his tales of an untiring Odysseus, exploring everything, sometimes even America.

This image of the explorer, which has an American connotation, is evoked in a rejected version of what is now canto 2:

Dissatisfaction of chaos, inadequacy of arrangements,
At les Eyzies, nameless drawer of panther,
So I in narrow cave, secret scratched on a wall,
And the last reader, with handshake of departing sun
drifts from sorrowful horizon, patient thus far, now impatient
e tu lettor, with little candle long after,
have pushed past the ruined castle, past the underbrush
tangled and netted
past the ant-hive, in narrow dark of the crevice
On the damp rock, is my panther, my aurochs scratched
in obscurity

*(Canti postumi, pp. 60–62)*

Pound is thinking of the cave-dwellers in Périgord and compares his writing to their drawing of aurochs in the darkness. The civilized American poet identifies with primitive man: time is meaningless for the artist. This is a notable passage of which nothing has remained in *The Cantos* as we have them, except for a much later reference to “aurochs,” as if the unusual word had stayed in his mind. But the context of the cliff-dweller etching in the darkness, though self-dramatizing as is common with Pound, is a passage that we would be sorry to have lost. In fact, Pound usually did well in selecting what to preserve from his drafts, but there are passages like this which I think prove the value of my selection.

Since a “canto” is a consecutive piece of writing, however fragmented Pound often is, sometimes fine passages are sacrificed in the cause of general effect. This is the case with the two original verse prefaces to canto 49, the “Seven Lakes Canto,” one of which bears indirectly on America since it criticizes a passage in *Italian Hours*, where Henry James presumes to mock Byron. Pound comes to the defence of the more virile Byron, whom he cannot but admire for his Poundian confusion of life and art and his battle for freedom and involvement in foreign affairs and international perspective. I will not quote this extremely interesting passage again, since I have commented on it in various occasions6 and it can be found in *Canti postumi* (p. 92). The Byron/James opposition is another version of the Pound/Mauberley contrast. And as we know, though Pound is all on the side of Byron and EP, he does not lack sympathy for the decadent and “effete” Mauberley and James. They represent his aesthetic side.

A selection like *Canti postumi* makes it possible to exhibit brief passages in isolation, giving them the prominence that poets usually avail themselves of, while Pound had to sink “his jewels of conversation” (*“Three Cantos III,” Canti postumi*, p. 38) in the flow of the canto. Take this very succinct note jotted in Washington:

and my gt/aunt’s third husband
received in ms/from a friend
the 49th canto —
you do not Hsin JI dip twice in one stream
sd/Ocellus
(Canti postumi, p. 216)

This is private history, but Pound is evoking the process of transmission of texts so important to his work. Canto 49 is based on a series of Chinese poems in a manuscript volume of paintings and poems that came down to Pound from his parents, to whom it had come through relatives. By a series of coincides the “form” of canto 49 travelled from Japan to America to Rapallo where it was realized, but in some way it was always there: “For the seven lakes, and by no man these verses.”

This opening line is all that remains of the prologue in which James and Byron were set against each other and which Pound omitted probably as too distracting and unrelated to the Chinese imitation that follows. By 1935 he was seeking a “totalitarian” simplicity and directness, and the obscure anecdote about Byron and James had to go out, though I am glad I recovered it and gave it the prominence it deserves, for it is a fascinating reflection. As for the reference in the close to “hsin ji,” i.e. Pound’s motto “Make It New,” on one hand it is clear that by translating/creating canto 49 Pound has made it new, on the other hand the line is a fascinating variation because it brings together the oriental motto about the river never being the same, the Confucian “Make It New,” and Platonism via Ocellus. Pound was to use this conflation as a close to canto 94, but left out the bit about the stream. The point seems to be that Making It New has become inevitable. The world is in flux. Things change. The Japanese heirloom “becomes” or “is” canto 49. We that look on but laugh in tragic joy. So this is another fragment that is worth pondering on its own merit, and is self-contained.

_Canti postumi_ includes some interesting variant versions of the fertility cantos 39 and 47, and a long passage of denunciation of usurious practices that was originally part of the Seven Lakes Canto but that Pound deleted for the same reason that he cancelled the Henry James-Byron introduction: to make his visit to the Seven Lakes brief and unified in tone. In working towards canto 47 he devoted many notes to the theme of woman, the eternal feminine, the counterpart of Ulysses. “She has a mind in her middle / therein is her comprehension.” The totalitarian bard that Pound would like to be identifies woman with her sexual organs, quite in accord with the machismo of Fascism, for which woman’s role was subordinate and confined to the home and to rearing more fighters for the fatherland. But as many party officials may well have been henpecked husbands, so Pound in his heart knows better: “By her dost thou mount the stars / in her is thy liberation” (p. 82). No one can claim that these lines are of great value, but they show us Pound in the coils of a very human contradiction, between ideology and reality. So he puzzles over woman, and knows that he is dependent on her favor. Certainly Dorothy Shakespeare and Olga Rudge were two strong-minded ladies that could not easily be ignored, and who gave much to Pound, in some ways could be said to have given him the contours of his life.

Of course the fertility cantos are largely about Pound’s fascination with the natural and human world of Liguria, which becomes a model of the earthly paradise. A beautiful passage evokes early summer nights with the fireflies that enchanted Charles Dickens when he visited the same hills in 1845, one hundred years before Pound:
when the winged sparks of an evening
flow under boughs, come to rest on the grass
under cypress, float between
high bough and the lower branch of the olive trees
for the calm night, by St John’s Eve.

(Canti postumi, p. 86)

St. John Eve’s is the Summer equinox, Midsummer night, which in the 1930s was still celebrated along the Ligurian coast with bonfires. Pound goes on to contrast this habitable world with the plains, where it is suggested no humane culture can develop:

But your wheat, kubanka, red Kharkov;
that you will sow in the plain land,
that you will sow in the far level country,
with no sea under your eaves;
with no grey of the branch, no light thrown and ret[o]rted
by the trees of good council,
green by the over leaf, and gray under . . . But your wheat that
Carleton brought out of Kharkov
and for which he was never paid . . . in this world.

(Canti postumi, pp. 86–88)

The reference to Mark Alfred Carleton, who imported Russian wheat to the United States, was to resurface in the context of the grain rites celebrated fragmentarily in Pisa (canto 80). Here there is a suggestion that Carleton is another unacknowledged Poundian explorer and legislator. One of the many forgotten heroes onto whom Pound projects his own image and whom he memorialized in his poem. In these lines he apostrophises the people of the plains, the Russians but also the Americans, who live an impoverished life:

for this you will do your plowing. and give no thanks to the god.
Sitalkas will not walk in your harvest . . .
nor will the gift of healing be found there . . .
Nor will the lights float in your harbor

(Canti postumi, p. 88)

Pound composes his Jeremiad for his fellow Americans, whom he looks upon as condemned to a life without spiritual and sensual significance, to an “air-conditioned nightmare,” as his friend Henry Miller called it. The Cantos is a moral tale from which Americans are to learn that a better life is possible for them. I had first thought that this passage was chiefly about Russia (a traditional contrast for Fascist Italy in which Pound was writing and imbibing the official ideology); but it is clear

that it is really America that he has in mind, the importer of Russian Kubanka wheat, and America
was also much discussed in Italy in those days: all were passionate about Hollywood and jazz and
Dos Passos, but the official party line was that America was a barbarian land, in fact “a half-savage
country.” So there was a curious agreement between Pound the critic of American mores and Fascist
stereotypes, which became more strident after the United States sided against Italy at the time of the
invasion of Ethiopia (1936). Emilio Cecchi, one of Italy’s foremost intellectuals, published a book
of travel notes called *America Amara*, in which pictures of lynchings were prominently displayed.
As if to say: Here are those who presume to criticize our treatment of Ethiopians. . . .
Pound was surely sensitive to all of this, but the passage about the benighted inhabitants of
the plains is somewhat earlier, and is chiefly plangent in its criticism of a lost American dream.
Culture is based on nature, and where are America’s Seven Lakes and olive-groves? Where is its
religion? Surely not in the Episcopalian church of Hailey Idaho in which Ezra Pound was baptized.
The Cantos purports (rather wildly) to be America’s new Bible, since the old one has done so much
damage. In his exaggerated way, Pound can be compared to other twentieth-century Jeremiahs like
T.S. Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, e.e. cummings, to mention only the poets. Even his young protegé
James Laughlin wrote tirelessly about the cultural deprivation and hypocrisy of the United States,
in his own humorous and indirect way:

A BIT DIFFERENT
Things are a bit different in
some other countries even in
some of the countries of poor
old broken down Europe not

long ago I was in Italy wait-
ting for a train in the station
restaurant in Bologna when a
young woman came in with a

baby and sat down at the best
table in the middle of the di-
n ing room (first class) from
the way she behaved with that

baby you could see that she
was proud of it all right and
an elderly man at another table
came over and played with

the baby letting it pull his
nose & his ears yes it was a
beautiful baby beautiful and
black as a negro baby can be.8

This is only an example, and could be multiplied. It refers to Italy immediately after the war, but is addressed to Americans as an object lesson. Laughlin is often more direct than this, but it is notable that even in such a little scene he should be urging a point for the benefit of his compatriots.

Pound was explicitly intent on presenting the model of a new religion, or “European Paideuma,” for the benefit of Americans, in the paradise of The Cantos that he was unrealistically planning in 1940, as his world was falling apart. Canti postumi includes many such notes and evocations of islands and forests and fountains with nymphs or villagers coming down to them for water and to hospitably receive travellers, the Ulysses of the day. This archaic utopia was to remain unchanged, only Pound was able to make it much more moving when he came to present it in the contrasting squalor of the American detention camp in the Pisan cantos. These constitute a Paradiso of sorts, but projected by a purgatorial soul, and this makes the narrator’s many visions more moving. It was a stroke of luck and of genius that allowed Pound to complete his project in the worst circumstances, which turned out to be the best for the sake of his poetry — as he very well saw, and grasped the occasion.

Canti postumi includes little of Pound’s Pisan verse because this is one of the sections on which Pound had fewer second thoughts. What he wrote during the summer of 1945 in Pisa went practically unchanged into The Cantos as published. He only cut several pages of notes towards the beginning of what became canto 74, and a few pages from the end of canto 84. To be more precise, since other versions of the genesis of the Pisan cantos are current,9 Pound wrote his poem in longhand and then typed it in the evenings. In typing canto 74 he skipped the pages of notes referred to above, so he never intended them to be part of the poem. Instead he did include in his typescript the final pages of canto 84, and only deleted them when he sent the text to the publisher. This later passage therefore I have included (pp. 202–212). It is one of the most trenchant in Canti postumi, since Pound at Pisa was in top form, and was writing with more forcefulness than ever before or after. On the other hand, these musings are a little repetitive, they touch upon private matters (even mentioning Olga Rudge by name), and in general probably would have weakened canto 84 by prolonging it. So Pound (as in canto 49) sacrificed some good lines, and the plangent opening testamentary message, to keep faith with his ideal of streamlined hardness. One could object that in the Pisan cantos there is a lot of repetition and redundancy. But this is mostly functional, and Pound chose to strengthen the close by making it shorter and less sentimental. No “Italy, my Italy, my God! my Italy / Ti abbraccio o terra santa” (I embrace thee, O holy land) in the close. There is a limit even to Poundian posturing. Actually, Pound’s longhand notes continued for a few lines after “terra santa” (the last words in the original typescript) with some notes and doggerel (marked “not in Cantos” just to make sure). I have printed this passage at the end of the deleted section of canto 84, and it is quite telling and moving.

The St.Elizabeths cantos are on the whole less purposeful than the Pisan sequence, and Pound wrote many drafts and notes before the final text. But a distinction must be made. Rock-Drill, though based on notes of several years, was composed in a burst of activity not very different from the composition of the Pisan cantos. Especially cantos 90–95, whose principal muse was the mercurial Sheri Martinelli, were written as printed, with few changes from notes to typescript to volume.

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Bacigalupo: Pound’s Posthumous Cantos

Pound continued with the same élan in the opening cantos of Thrones (96–99), but then hit an arid patch from which he never quite recovered. So Canti postumi does not offer much from the St. Elizabeths period. In the Beinecke I have come across a long typescript copied directly from Pound’s notebooks, which Pound mined for these cantos. (According to Dr. Jerome Kavka, he always had his notebook at hand as he lay on his cot in the hospital.) From this, which contains much distasteful material related to Pound’s obsession with Jews, I have excerpted a number of passages, and called them, after Pound, “Prosaic Verses.” The passages I present I have left uncut, but I have made the decision of where to begin and end a selection. (In one case I have scrupulously presented a page of typescript in its entirety (pp. 218–20); clearly it was not my intention to avoid embarrassment by presenting a censored text; I only followed criteria of interest and quality and representativeness.)

Among these “atomic facts” America comes up, but not more prominently because of Pound’s residence there. The Pisan delight in American speech heard after so many years has subsided, and Pound is suffering because of his circumstances (no longer a natural paradise, with Pisan alabaster in the background, though the grounds of St. Elizabeths were quite beautiful). Here is Pound speaking sardonically to Americans (and quoting his own “Exile’s Letter”):

\[
\text{Juan Ramon has flattened out and Ivan S. taken to farming} \\
\text{Now I remember that you built me a special gorilla-cage} \\
\text{and that the foeter of Roosevelt} \\
\text{stank thru the shitpile that succeeded him} \\
\text{moon bright like water} \\
\text{water like sky} \\
\text{usury, monopoly, changing the currency} \\
\text{METATHEMENON} \\
(Canti postumi, p. 230)
\]

The condemned poet registers in his notebooks (and in his cantos) his protest against his captors and judges. He has not changed his mind, and is as strident as always. Who is to blame him, given the pitched battle — and his aging mind?

I will leave the final “Lines to Olga” to the curiosity of the reader of Canti postumi and of the possible American edition of this material. Pound left countless pages of notes and drafts, and some scholars may object that he would be better served by a photographic reprint of the archive. I do not deny that this would be useful, though one may just as well go and read the material at the Beinecke for oneself, but clearly it would in no way further Pound’s position as a poet worth reading in his own right. Therefore the only solution if one wants to reach a readership is judicious selection, the same principle he worked from in putting together The Cantos and making selections like Versi prosaici. Thus Canti postumi presents a volume of largely unknown poetry by Pound, excerpted and salvaged from thousands of pages, most of which are only of academic interest. I have done my best to present faithful texts and have annotated the selections in brief form. This is a book by Pound. A different selection could have been made, but I believe this to be faithful to the material and to Pound’s writing, and to make again the case for the pleasure of reading Pound. This is something easily forgotten in the proliferation of scholarly studies that address only fellow-scholars. Meanwhile the author becomes more and more arcane and his presence in college anthologies is reduced
from twenty pages to five — to one or two poems from Cathay. It was a pity that so much notable, howbeit somewhat specialized, material should remain tucked away in the archives and footnotes. There was a job to be done and I have tried to do it.

Judge ye!

Have I dug him up again?\textsuperscript{10}