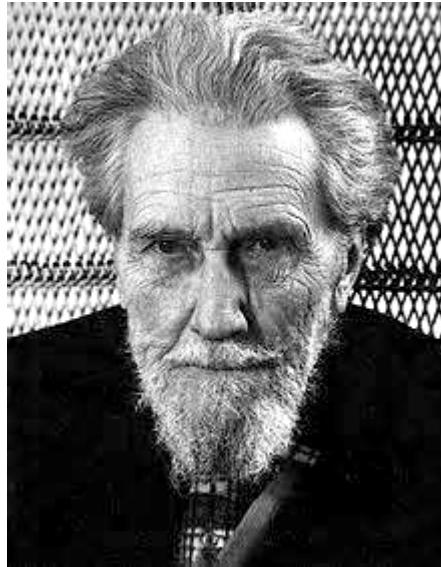


ANALYSIS

The Cantos (1919-70)

Ezra Pound

(1885-1972)

...nervous obsession, nightmare, stammering confusion.

W. B. Yeats

The long, fluid body of poetry by Ezra Pound. Begun with the publication of the first three segments in *Quia Pauper Amavi* (1919), the work occupied Pound for most of the rest of his life. Succeeding volumes adding to the work are *A Draft of XVI Cantos...for the Beginning of a Poem of Some Length* (1925), *A Draft of XXX Cantos* (1933), *Eleven New Cantos, XXXI-XLI* (1934), *The Fifth Decade of Cantos* (1937), *Cantos LII-LXXI* (1940), *The Pisan Cantos* (1948)—a particularly unified segment of ten sections based on Pound's incarceration in an Italian prisoner-of-war camp, in which he views himself as a romantic hero whose sensibility will bring order to a world of chaos, *Section: Rock-Drill, 85-95 de los Cantares* (1956), *Thrones; 96-109 de los Cantares* (1959). The writing begun in 1915 was finally collected in *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (1970), but the work was not brought to any conclusion and simply trails off with fragments of Cantos 110 to 117.

In kaleidoscopic manner, lacking an evident overall plan or continuing narrative, the cantos move with very free association over diverse aspects and eras of history, American, European, and Oriental, for all time is treated as contemporary. Similarly there is no distinction made in the use of diverse languages, and the English is often peppered with Greek, Latin, Provençal, Italian, and Chinese, according to the subject of the passages of frequently shifting topics. Not only are subject and language very varied, but the elliptical style ranges from laconic and esoteric juxtapositions to lengthy allusive associations.

Among all this variety there are, however, relationships which apparently are meant to evaluate history by comparison, and to present a morality for the individual based on Confucian thought and one for society depending upon the ostensibly humanitarian use of state-controlled credit and money. The *Cantos* are filled with esoteric lore, recondite theories, personal allusions, and the author's own crotchets so that they are extremely difficult to follow in their entirety, no matter how evocative or effective limited passages or particular images may be, with the result that the whole body of work breaks into fragments that are often not only pedantic but confusing. Nevertheless, the work, particularly in its earlier sections, has had a tremendous impact on modern poetry.

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
 (Oxford 1941-83)

With Pound, we come closer to Eliot and the closeness sharpens the difference. Pound is an American in Europe too, and Pound, not Eliot, was the first to grasp the historical and international dimension of experience, as we can see in an early effort of his to explain the method of the *Cantos* and the internal structure of each *Canto*: “All times are contemporaneous,” he wrote, and in the *Cantos*, he attempts to deal with all history as if it were part of the present. But he fails; he remains for the most part an American in Europe, and the *Cantos* are never more than a book of souvenirs of a tour of the world and a tour of culture.

Delmore Schwartz
 “T. S. Eliot as the International Hero”
Partisan Review
 Vol.12 (1945) 199-206

Two master craftsmen of the age spoke of the *Cantos* with great respect. Eliot cited them as the chief evidence that Pound’s poetry “is an inexhaustible reference book of verse forms.” Yeats accepted, at the end of the twenties, Pound’s contention that when “the hundredth canto is finished,” the whole would “display a structure like that of a Bach fugue.” Certain recurrent themes, the Homeric descent into hell, one of Ovid’s metamorphoses of men into beasts, passages from the history of the Renaissance and Chinese courts and the American Revolution are meant to be counterpointed against passages dealing with the modern world to compose a musical pattern and to display persistent continuities between past and present. Pound kept repeating that “an epic poem is a poem including history,” but neglected to remember that an epic poem also builds upon a narrative structure.

On the basis of the seventy-one cantos that had been issued by 1940, it seems no longer necessary to believe that the whole could be more than the sum of the parts. And the parts are best described in the opening line of the eighth Canto, “these fragments you have shelved,” a variant of the phrase Eliot used at the close of *The Waste Land*.... There is no denying the virtuosity of the sustained speaking voice, even though it divagated into seemingly endless monologue, and often left the reader dazzled by the surface texture of the language, but with the sensation that it was hardly saying anything....

Eliot could envisage the modern metropolis as an Inferno more affectingly than Pound could in the *Cantos*, since, as he observed, Pound’s “is a Hell for the other people, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one’s friends.” This complacency, this lack of feeling implicated in the struggle with evil, necessarily rendered much of Pound’s observation of human beings “trivial and accidental.” Eliot’s peculiar intensity comes from his conviction that poetry must spring out of suffering.... He gave voice to this awareness in *The Waste Land*, the most ambitious long poem of the period. Its structure is the opposite of the diffusion of the *Cantos*, since Eliot attempted to compress the essence of an epic into a poem of hardly more than four hundred lines.

F. O. Matthiessen
The Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
 (Macmillan 1946-63) 1339, 1343

The *Cantos* are a kind of epic, an attempt to revive the tradition of heroic narrative verse that will at once tell the “tale of the tribe” and keep the pride and courage of the tribe alive. But Pound’s epic hero is not one particular man, like Odysseus, in quest of one particular place, Ithaca. It is man as such, or multifarious examples of him, in search of civilization. This quest Pound sees as something like Odysseus’s; Odysseus took ten years to get back to Ithaca, but Ithaca was where he had started from. And man’s search for civilization is, for Pound, a perpetual attempt to return to the first springs of skill or of delight. He celebrates, particularly, founders; the Provençal and early Italian poets, who created the tradition of European lyric poetry; the founders of modes of government or codes of behavior, like Jefferson or Confucius; the kind of natural or primitive religious awe that is expressed, say, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, rather than the subtleties of Christian theology; the pioneering and reforming spirit, the

spirit of individual adventure, rather than the sedateness of a mature society; the sages who tell anecdotes or utter precepts, like Confucius, rather than the sages, like Socrates, who engage in dialectic.

The *Cantos* are thus a highly selective view of history. Though he is celebrating civilization, and high achievements in the arts and in other human skills as a mark of civilization, Pound does not like, for instance, Elizabethan England (except for the song-writers), the age of Louis XIV, England or (except for Voltaire) France in the eighteenth century, or the nineteenth century much. The processes which have made civilization growingly complicated, abstract thought, for instance, specializations of various sorts, strike him as on the whole corrupting; he feels this specially, of course, about the power of finance, the international arms traffic, usury.

A true civilization, for Pound, respects the traditional rites and gods; sticks by sound laws and customs; its manners are marked by simplicity and directness, by naturalness, rather than pomp or artifice; it produces men with natural passions of which they are not ashamed, but also with public spirit, open minds, an alert curiosity. It creates stories and it creates, and fosters, art: it makes for a kind of abundance of life, and for the sense of natural magic. Odysseus, in his quest for this Ithaca, will confront many enemies, and many temptations; but some temptations, those which Pound typifies by Circe, are also rewards, and a kind of education. Ideally, the hero triumphs over difficulties, settles down to rule Ithaca justly, becomes a kind of cult hero for his tribe. But the tribe can never afford to stagnate. Man's task, as tribal hero, is one of perpetual renewal; and Pound, for instance, has no respect at all for an Austrian, a Metternichian kind of Conservatism. His heroes are renewers.

But the *Cantos* are not merely an attempt to create, say, the equivalent of Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* in verse. Pound's deepest mood is, I think, that of the Jeffersonian American radical; and in the *Cantos* that mood, with its simplicity and hopefulness, is confronted with the splendor, yes, but also with the violence, wastefulness, and destructiveness of European history. It is confronted, in some of the earlier cantos, especially with the impact of the Great War. Pound, it should be noticed, repeatedly uses *The Odyssey* in the *Cantos*, a tale of individual courage and resourcefulness; he makes no use at all of *The Iliad*, which Simone Weil calls "the poem of force." *The Iliad* suggests a tragic view; Pound has translated a play by Sophocles, but he does not like either Shakespeare or Racine, and the most centrally American thing about him is that the tragic view of life is alien to him.

Tragedy was also an alien concept to the Middle Ages, except in so far as a "tragic" story illustrated falls from great estate, the turns of fortune's wheel. And Pound, using *The Divine Comedy* as he uses *The Odyssey*, can present with great honesty and huge impact an image of the violence, evil, decay in the world and yet move on to hope. In the earliest batch of *Cantos* there is a filthy hell of profiteers in which Pound seems personally trapped; but with the help of Blake, who acts suddenly as a kind of Virgil, he escapes; and the cantos immediately after the hell cantos, with their reminiscences of the Great War, and friends killed then, and their anecdotes about the arms traffic, represent the personal pressures behind the vivid horror of these cantos.

The first thirty cantos are the portion of the poem most likely to captivate a reader utterly indifferent to Pound's ideas. They contain some of Pound's most splendid translation or adaptation, from *The Odyssey* and from Ovid, and a beautifully vivid response both to the Mediterranean scene, effects of light and colour particularly, and to early Renaissance history, and Renaissance art. But the "matter of Europe" which they are mainly concerned with does end in the crack-up of the Great War; and in the subsequent cantos, up to *The Pisan Cantos* of 1948, Pound is increasingly didactic in his manner of procedure. He gives us cantos full of scraps of letters and official documents, lots of details about the Monte de Pieta in Siena or the fiscal reforms of the Grand Dukes of Tuscany, the Habsburg-Lorraine successors of the Medici, in the later eighteenth century.

He devotes a whole set of cantos to the annals of China, as a country which has remained civilized for a very long time, because taxation has not been excessive, usury has not flourished, men have respected the Confucian code; and he devotes a similar long section to John Adams, the second President of the United States, and in a sense almost the father of a dynasty, as an example of what the good ruler, seeking to lay the foundations of a stable community, should be. These Adams cantos, which came out in 1940, are a

great expression of American patriotism; it is tragic to think that their author, five years later, was nearly put on trial for his life for high treason.

The Pisan Cantos had been roughly drafted during Pound's imprisonment at Pisa, and were published when he was an inmate of St. Elizabeth's Hospital in Washington, in 1948. They did much to regain for Pound a general sympathy and interest which his political record had lost him. If one thinks of the pattern of *The Divine Comedy*, they are a kind of Purgatorio. Pound does not renounce any of his political ideas but his sufferings, and the collapse of all his hopes and fantasies, together bring out a human and personal note that is new. Pound's *personal* situation now is heroic, he is Odysseus; neither in Circe's island nor back in Ithaca nor making pleasant conversation with Nausicaa and her father; but, let us say, in Polyphemus' cave.

He endures suffering and isolation not only bravely, but cheerfully, and gracefully; and in his isolation his mind goes back tenderly to old friends, Yeats, Elkin Mathews, Maurice Hewlett. He notices the birds—a great passage—perched on telephone wires like notes on a stave. He is grateful to the negro soldiers who give him a table and writing materials. There are passages of sustained and concentrated power (the elegy, in the metre of the Rubaiyat, for medieval and Tudor England, the portrait of Yeats, the great homily, "Cast down thy vanity") unmatched since the first thirty cantos; and there is a new humility, a touching realization on Pound's part that he has not had enough pity for other people. There are the same old stubborn politics, but, however much one hates these, one almost admires Pound for not renegeing, *then*.

Purgatorio should be followed by a Paradiso, and many admirers of Pound see the subsequent two volumes of cantos, *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*, as just that.... Compared to *The Pisan Cantos*, *Rock-Drill* seems to me the writing of an old man, with a very full mind, but a mind that is perpetually betrayed into digression, and digression within digression; a single subject is rarely kept up for more than three or four lines at a time; and Pound is relying now much less on vivid evocation of scene and incident than on our remembering such evocations earlier in the *Cantos*. In one of his interviews with D. G. Bridson Pound did, in fact, admit that *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones* would not make much sense to a reader who had not gone on the train earlier. Pound's voice is a wonderful voice to listen to even when it seems to be rambling on, without much direction, about anything that comes into Pound's head... The paradisaic element in them [is] mainly the placidity, the easiness of voice and tone...

Any first reading of the *Cantos* is likely, even for many reasonably well-educated readers, to issue in bewilderment. The bewilderment (apart from one's ignorance of foreign languages) is often concerned more with what Pound is talking about than what he is saying.... It is useful to have read something about Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton, and about the conflict between an ideal of agrarian democracy and a financial oligarchy centered in the cities which rises even at the beginnings of American history; one should know also about Andrew Jackson and Martin van Buren and their fight with the bank.... Many of Pound's ideas about history and economics can be found...in Brooks Adams's *The Law of Civilization and Decay* [1896]...R. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* has its relevance to Pound's views on usury... It is useful, also, to read the *Cantos* with a prose translation of *The Odyssey* and of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* handy; to have read an American muck-raking journalist like Lincoln Steffens; to have read Pound's own letters and Ford Madox Ford's various volumes of reminiscences, and Hone's biography of Yeats...[etc.]

The more one has mastered at least part of Pound's material, the less puzzling at least some main lines of development in the *Cantos* will look; though there will always remain details to provide employment for young men doing Ph.D. theses. What would be very wrong would be to say, as some critics have said, that you can ignore the meaning and still get the poetry; Pound himself cares passionately for the meaning; and there are, indeed, many passages in the *Cantos* as dull (if you are not interested in the subject) as a school textbook....Most of the names in the cantos on the history of China have no sort of reverberation, or resonance, for an English or American reader...you ought to read them alongside a short history of China.... A poet of the stature and of the gifts of Pound has the right, I think, to demand a certain amount of sheer hard work from us....

Pound implicitly states the perpetual need for renewal of our cultural heritage, and yet the need to base the effort to renew on attempts at renewal in the past... Pound's gods are just as real in the context of the *Cantos* as his human figures, and should not be taken in any sense as mere "literary ornament"... Pound has something in common with D. H. Lawrence whom, on the whole, though admiring some of his poems, he very much dislikes; and something in common also, though nothing like such a learned mythographer, with Robert Graves, who very much dislikes him. He does not invoke a personal "high god," Jupiter or Jehovah; but he does frequently invoke a Neoplatonic image of the divine intelligence as mind or light. Mind, in a sense, for Pound, makes the world: there is a strange, revealing phrase somewhere in the *Pisan Cantos*: "that the drama is wholly subjective."...

Pound is a difficult poet in the *Cantos* for two reasons, and for two reasons only. He is very elliptical, he jumps from one thing to another, leaving the reader to fill in connections or see relations for himself. And he always refers to any person, place, or episode he is talking about as if the reader were already familiar with it. He makes an unconscious equation of what he happens to know and what is or should be common knowledge. His digressiveness, his going off at a tangent, is sometimes mere wandering, mere free association; but in the first thirty cantos, at least, and in *The Pisan Cantos*, it is sometimes genuinely, in his own sense, ideogrammatic: Two juxtaposed particular images, or episodes, apparently completely disparate, suddenly spark off a sense of a relationship between them; or a theme which has had little apparent significance when first introduced gains significance when brought in again in a different setting (this effect might be called fugal rather than ideogrammatic). As for the difficulty of his references, this can usually be cleared up by, say, a volume of Italian or American history or a textbook about economics or a dictionary of mythological figures or sometimes his own letters or essays. The meaning is always very clear once one has grasped *whom*, or *what*, he is talking about; he is not a difficult poet in the sense that Donne or Empson is difficult, he does not say abstruse or riddling or complicated things.... He is, behind the formidable façade of learning, a simple-minded man....

The first thirty cantos seem to be a genuine aesthetic experiment; thereafter the interest gradually becomes less and less primarily aesthetic, more and more expository or didactic.... The coherence within incoherence, the obstinate sense of direction masked by wild distractability, of the *Cantos* is...his mind. If we look at the *Cantos* in this way, even passages that seem failures, or of merely documentary interest, may well suddenly re-acquire for us the interest of art...what the *Cantos* in the end are "about" is the isolated artist, and his struggle through an idea of tradition and community, towards sanity; what almost but not quite destroys the sanity of the artist...is the brutal failure of facts or "reality" to correspond to the "idea." When in the teeth of this failure of the world to be his idea of it, the artist clings to his idea, the clinging acquires a pathos, a dignity, a representative human value which the idea as such, unassaulted, might not have possessed.... Even readers who consider the *Cantos* a momentous failure on the whole, would have to admit the presence in it, the frequent presence in the earlier cantos, of passages of masterly poetry: masterly above all in rhythm... Pound as a poet is at once at times the most purely aesthetic and at other times the most purely didactic of modern poets.

G. S. Fraser
Ezra Pound
 (Grove 1960) 67-78, 81-2

The principal of form and technique in the *Cantos* is so deliberately opposed to that in Whitman's poetry that the one is vitalized by the other, if only by virtue of a certain resistance. The opposition is between a poet who would infuse his world with a sense of self and then, and only then, accept it, and a poet who would infuse his self with a sense of his world. Where Whitman would include, Pound would discriminate. Where Whitman would energize so as to define, Pound would define so as to energize. "Song of Myself" is phrased according to the movement of a creative, expressive sensibility; the *Cantos* are constellated according to the ordering of a precision-grinding, exacting sensibility. In Whitman it is too often impossible to distinguish expression from mere response; in Pound, expression from mere observation.

Allen Tate's pronouncement that the *Cantos* "are not about anything" is true, because... Pound tries to make them into the substantial center of culture, his Paideuma; everything—at least everything worthwhile—is about the *Cantos*. He would make them into a convenient crossroads of the universe where

everything (of importance to him, to be sure) is revealed and illuminated in its total relatedness. It follows that the poet's great gift is to perceive, select, assemble, judge, evoke, refresh, make new. By Pound's time, the Whitmanian model had spent its force—on the one hand in the reduction ad absurdum foolishness of the Fellowship, on the other hand in the maunderings of the imitators... The sad end of such Whitmanianism, as Pound pointed out, marked the end of a great era in the history of the American imagination. In setting himself in opposition to outworn, because too directly imitative Whitmanian modes of conception and expression, Pound was indeed taking up Whitman's burden....

The *Cantos* consist of a complex of centers, the perception of which is ordered by the absolutely decorous management of "degrees and weights of importance." (I speak here as much of what the *Cantos* are intended to do as what they *do* do. No one, so far as I know, has yet reported on a mastery of them adequate enough to guarantee his interpretation of their substance and their theory. In effect, they evoke not a single sensibility (writer-reader) which will make itself one with its world, but rather a group of sensibilities which will be the means whereby one sensibility (the writer) will teach another sensibility (the reader) how it may relate itself to its world and so know and control its destiny. What should emerge from the *Cantos* is a sense of propaedeutic control; the assemblage of centers that is the poem is, for Pound, the only proper Paideuma. It constitutes a rediscovery, a making new, of what are for Pound the noblest, truest, and surest elements in culture, a rediscovery so powerful in its stylistic precision that it will irresistibly reconstitute the sensibility, and thus the political morality, of him who would give himself over to reading it...

There is no plot. There is no necessary beginning or end, except as Pound's perceptions make them necessary. Process is as central a concept for him as it was for Whitman: as it has to be in an epic which would make rather than commemorate. The process must be kept going, for the centers of reality which it would constellate are themselves in process. The core is a living core, to be understood in terms of effect, not of cause. Hence, it seems proper for Pound to say that Canto 10 will likely not be the end and that one cannot yet conceive of the "total organism"... Pound concluded: "As to the *form* of the *Cantos*: All I can say or pray 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. I haven't an Aquinas-map; Aquinas *not* valid now."

He would, in short, lay bare the roots of heroic characters through a rendering of universal history. The character is that of a group of Pound's own heroes who have in common the fact that they went adventuring (in time and space, or in mind, or in both) and sought...to bring their empires into equilibrium. All were bearers of the sun's lance. What they did and what they said—these are for Pound ideas in action. He would represent his heroes—Odysseus, Sigismundo Malatesta, Jefferson, Adams, Frobenius, Apollonius of Tyana, rulers out of the great periods of Chinese history, many artists—in such a way that their deeds and sayings are not values but modes of valuation. We are to be brought face to face with those deeds and sayings, are not to be allowed to have such perspective on them as will let us use them as mere counters. Biographical details, quotations from an ever-widening range of authorities, intruded quotations, translations, imitations, ideograms, and pictograms, and all the other *disjecta membra* set down in the *Cantos*—these are rendered and arranged so that we will soon give up hoping to put them back into their context in historical actuality; willy-nilly, we are to grant the poet's claim that in such contexts their meanings have come to be hopelessly tangled and confused. Our comprehension of them is to be controlled by the juxtapositions the poet makes and by the possibilities for metered progression which he discovers. We are to know them for what they do. They are propaedeutic to our struggle to define ourselves anew....

In the first seventy-one *Cantos*, ideograms (which lead to centers and cores of *prezzo gusto* and its contraries) are developed in rich and proliferating detail. Historical emphasis is on the achievements of Malatesta, and of early national American culture and Chinese culture—all counterpointed against the initial narrative of Odysseus' voyage. Again and again the matter of usury, with its alienating effect, turns up. Language shifts suddenly, even to Chinese ideograms themselves; historical records are quoted directly or are paraphrased; movement is freely back and forward in time. The total effect is vertiginously clear. One is often at a loss to relate one item to another, yet he is (whenever he can supply himself with the right learning and information) crystal-clear as to the specific quality of each item.

(Pound himself furnishes a useful gloss to him who first looks into the *Cantos*: “Very well, I am not proceeding according to Aristotelian logic but according to the ideogramic method of first heaping together the necessary components of thought.”)... The *Pisan* section (74-84) centers on Pound himself as he pulls out of the world he has created material whereby he may comprehend his own destiny, and through his that of modern man. These are, in the perhaps Dantesque scheme of the poem, the purgatorial *Cantos*; it is here that Pound breaks through to the great statements he has (according to the scheme of the poem) earned the right to make... *The Pisan Cantos* stabilize the whole, in preparation for the series of almost Mosaic pronouncements of the *Rock-Drill Cantos* (85-95). Here, as the working title indicates, Pound would drill holes for explosives, so as to move mountains and collect that part of them worth making new. These *Cantos* move with a rush of new insight; the ideogrammatic mode achieves its fullest and richest and most literal use....

The distortions and perversions of historical fact and the violence and hatred which so often emerge in the *Cantos*—these demonstrate at the very least that the light can be blinding.... Perhaps he will turn out to have been the Ossian of the twentieth century. The important point for the history of American aspirations toward an epic, for Pound’s search for a new *Paideuma* in which substance and the means to comprehend substance would be identical, is that betrayal has been a necessary condition for discovery of truth, hatred a necessary condition for love. As Whitman’s love for himself would drive him to transforming all other selves into aspects of himself in order that he might love them, so Pound’s love for himself would drive him to destroy all other selves whose existence his idea of love will prevent him from loving. Whitman’s and Pound’s means to making an American epic are thus diametrically opposed, but they have at least this in common: they ask that their poetry lead to a totally unifying sacramentalism. To know, is for Whitman, to become; for Pound, to become or be destroyed.

Roy Harvey Pearce
The Continuity of American Poetry
(Princeton 1961) 90-4, 96-101

The *Cantos*, his immensely long “history of the world,” as he once called them, are what Pound must finally stand or fall by as an original poet—though his creative translations may well contain his best verse. The *Cantos* are extremely uneven—uneven between groups of *Cantos*, between individual *Cantos*, and within single *Cantos*. It is doubtful that anyone, even the critics who write about them most enthusiastically, has ever read them all straight through, without any skipping. Large sections of them are indeed, in a quite literal sense, unreadable—toward the end, in the “Rock Drill” *Cantos*, intentionally so, apparently, being arranged on the page in such a way as to suggest not poetry, which exists in time, but sculpture, which exists in space.

Pound has always held that he was too far ahead of his time to be understood; that not until his revolutionary “ideogramic,” or “ideogrammatic,” method is understood will the *Cantos* be appreciated. But though the poems themselves are often opaque, the method they are meant to illustrate is not in the least difficult to understand. It is simply an expansion of the implications of Pound’s early definitions of Imagism, undergirded now, given support but not essentially changed, by Pound’s discovery of oriental poetry and by an explicit “scientific” rationale in place of the implicit one of the early Imagist definitions. When other poets moved on beyond Imagism, Pound held fast to his ideas. He merely found new words for them and new “evidence” of their truth. Pound’s psychic growth stopped, I should say, not much later than 1920....

The *Cantos* are longer than “Song of Myself,” which might have been a good title for them, in one sense—for despite Pound’s claims for their objectivity, they are in fact highly subjective. They are more ambitious in scope than Taylor’s “Metrical History” or Melville’s *Clarel*. But despite some brilliant passages and the relative success of a few whole *Cantos*, especially the early ones, when we think of them as the parts of a single immense poem, we can only judge that poem as less successful than any of those it competes with in length—except possibly Taylor’s, which it reminds us of in its obsessiveness, its moral insensitivity, and its unreadableness.

The *Cantos* are a poem about history, *literal* history, not mythic history, the same history the historian tries to recreate and understand; but no professional historian has ever thought that they do anything at all,

in any way, to illuminate his subject. They are full of obscure facts and figures and quotations, but no responsible historian supposes that the documents and artifacts that make up his evidence have “self-evident” meaning. Whatever may be the case with a short Imagist poem, *history* cannot be responsibly treated in this fashion. The appearance of objectivity in the poem is wholly misleading. What the ideogrammatic method, as it is operationally defined in the *Cantos*, means, in effect, is that the assumptions that guide the selection and control the treatment of the historical material are simply never acknowledged. The *Cantos* are a didactic poem. Of a didactic poem we have a right to expect that the content of its teaching will strike us as wisdom, and the manner of its teaching will be humanly responsible. We do not want to be “manipulated” by poets any more than by the “hidden persuaders.”

The *Cantos* is a poem about the history of the world in which there are no people, only the names of people and allusions to them—and the typing of them as “good” and “bad.” Even some of Pound’s staunchest admirers and most loyal beneficiaries have admitted this deficiency in the poem—though without going on to draw the conclusion it suggests, which would be that a poem about history that does not show us people acting and suffering fails at the very center. Even Eliot said that the Inferno Pound presents in the *Cantos* “is a Hell for the other people, the people we read about in the newspapers, not for oneself and one’s friends.” And Yeats once said of Pound’s treatment of the villains in the *Cantos* that he presents them as “malignants with inexplicable characters and motives, grotesque figures out of a child’s book of beasts.” The poet whose best-known slogan was “MAKE IT NEW!” would have written better perhaps if he had been more concerned with attempting to “make it human.”

It could be argued, of course, that the *Cantos* are in the main stream of American long poems. Like Taylor’s “Metrical History,” Barlow’s *Columbiad*, Melville’s *Clarel*, and Williams’ *Patterson*, they take history as their subject and attempt to reinterpret it to find a clue to the meaning of present experience. Like “Song of Myself,” they dare to write the poet’s autobiography—or at least the record of his reading and his response to it—“in colossal cipher, or into universality,” as Emerson advised; they do this in fact, whatever Pound claimed about their “scientific” objectivity. Like both “Song of Myself” and Williams’ *Patterson*, they make poetry out of supposedly antipoetic or nonpoetic materials, they heap up masses of detail, and, again as Emerson advised, let the fact create the form.

All this is interesting and may suggest that we have not thought enough about the peculiarly American quality of the *Cantos*, their place in a long tradition. But what *readers* of poetry are likely to carry away from any extended attempt to read the *Cantos* is not so much an impression of their centrality in the tradition of American long poems, or their exemplification of some of Emerson’s poetic theories and Whitman’s practices, as it is an impression of what they have said to him, their “interpretive power,” when they have said anything about him at all. And what they have said, after all the crackpot monetary and historical ideas have been forgotten, their “truth,” is that earlier ages and other cultures were nobler, more heroic. They always invert Emerson’s and Whitman’s deepest meanings even when they seem to be closer to Transcendental poetics.

Alienation from both the social and the natural worlds, an alienation that finds expression as an intense and all-pervasive nostalgia for a better time and place, is at once the structuring principle and the latent meaning of the *Cantos* as a whole. I suspect that a good many readers of poetry today besides myself find themselves bored by poems the chief meaning of which is nostalgia.... Even if every line in the *Cantos* were to be admitted as demonstrating unequalled mastery of prosody, the *poem* might still be a failure.

Hyatt H. Waggoner
American Poets: From the Puritans to the Present
(Houghton 1968) 394-95, 403-04, 407

The great work of his life, the *Cantos*, turned out for some of us to be the great failure as the epic it proclaimed itself to be—and ultimately a work of such obscene hatred as to make one weep over the manic flaw in Pound, his overbearing illusion that through his innate tie to poetry he could instruct a disordered world. Edgar Allan Poe said that a long poem could not sustain itself, especially, he might have added, at the hands of lyricists like himself and Ezra Pound, with an ideal vision not only of the classical world but of their own intellectual powers. The *Cantos* are full of miraculously beautiful lyrics; the work as a whole, if

you can call it a whole, proceeds from Pound's inner ecstasy at poetry in all languages rushing out of each other into a mind driven to frenzy by the acceleration of words and images within it. What you find in the *Cantos*, above everything else, is this inner vortex of sounds and associations, all these buried quotations and anecdotes, these pages and pages lifted without discernible order from Renaissance history, American political documents, the conversation of Benito Mussolini, newspaper articles, economic lore, etc.

If an epic "is a poem including history," we had better remember that as we drift through the *Cantos*. History turns out to be anything that interests Ezra Pound, that he suddenly thinks of in connection with something else that he has read, that he can quote, that he can in fact *repeat*. But this total recall and assemblage is the reverse of arbitrary; it is as natural to Pound as eating drinking copulating defecating, and it slides onto a page as if he were doing just that.

The great epic—the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*—is the poem of a whole civilization. Pound assumes the authority behind such an epic, and although the *Cantos* are at times not so much written as accumulated, Pound does take on more than one civilization. Which is not why he fails as an epic poet: there he fails, as long poems in America mostly fail, because they are not content with great narratives of the existing world; they want to leave that world. Pound wants to take us out of the wasteland, the charnel house, the Heartbreak House of finance capitalism.

His way of doing this is to stun us: the language museum without walls; the past of China, Greece, Latin Europe in all the culture-splendor of their original words. The infliction of obscurity is so unyielding that sometimes, if he is honest, the reader of the *Cantos* must ask (a) how much all these quotations and references are just disdain for the ordinary world in which we live, (b) how much the poem therefore corresponds to the gap between the shaman and the tribe, (c) how much, in fact, none of this is consciously demonstrative, but Pound's language intoxication. In the *Cantos* this process rises to a delirium of cross-references just as in *Finnegan's Wake* Joyce is so absorbed in a language entirely his own that it becomes self-reproducing.

Knowing that this intoxication is the essence does not relieve us from the attempt that shines proudly through the brilliancies of *Mauberley*. There is a frivolity in great artists—Joyce and Picasso come to mind—who take their endlessly inventive hand as the measure of reality.... It is true that Pound was an only child, famously spoiled, who kept his parents with him in Europe. But his belief in his own rightness was not just psychological, for like Beethoven, he finally heard nothing but what he remembered. To this extent, not being deaf, he was "mad." We can see the extent and limits of this "madness" in the *Cantos* as well as in his Fascist pamphlets and radio broadcasts from Italy during the war.

Pound's problem was never conflict with himself but an excessiveness, an incessancy of verbal self-stimulation; isolated in Rapallo from much of what was happening in the great cities of Europe, and as always living on his reading, he could be more excited by anything in print than by strong drink. There has simply been no other mind like Pound's for the energy with which he assimilates, the sputtering impatience with which he turns from episode to quotation to anecdote. The shiftings of his mind are such that one feels changed by the extraordinary lyric bursts, usually in a water context which provides an extension of ordinary human sight....

The difficulty lies not in the huge blocks of Greek, Latin, Provençal, and Chinese flung at us—or in the elusive garbled quotations relating to the plunderings and escapades of the Renaissance swashbuckler Sigismundo da Malesta, obviously admired for his cruel Renaissance "energy." Even if we knew everything Pound knows, we still would not know why in Canto VII we go from Eleanor (presumably of Aquitaine) to "poor old Homer blind"... All we know is that this is the order in which the voices of Pound's cherished inscriptions, memories, etc., are heard by him. They occur on the page as they occur to Ezra Pound. If the reader, informed with all of Pound's references, nevertheless asks of this automatic writing, Where am I going with all this?—the answer is something that has to be given him by a critic, he will not decipher it himself from the dizzily shifting references....

But this is supposed to be an epic, and an epic is a poem that includes history! In fact the *Cantos* are Pound's diary, the record of his amazing reading, disgorge when and how he feels like it. So the final

authority of this epic belongs not to Ezra Pound but to his commentators. Whom we cannot choose but hear. The *Cantos* are not to be dismissed, bewildering as their many turns may be. To anyone sensitive to poetry and at the same time aware that “modern times” are equivalent to the sense of History as a problem inviting a solution—the Enlightenment legacy which only in our day has begun to discourage intellectuals—the *Cantos* are shattering in the insistency of Pound’s mind, and finally they are tragic. Tragic because, like all ambitious efforts to present History within a single book, they yield us just another image of ourselves.

Eliot told us that the order of the past is transformed by every new work; everything past becomes an aspect of present taste. The greatest effect of “Eliot-Pound” was to abolish among the literary all historicism and to coerce the whole past into the fashions of the present.... Confucius the perfect teacher becomes a metaphor of the “wise ruler” in Pound’s myth of the perfect society, Jefferson a counterpart to Mussolini, and his great hero John Adams becomes absolutely meaningless in the so-called Adams Cantos, 62-71. As Peter Shaw has shown in a devastating examination of what Pound did to the works of John Adams, Pound transcribed so mechanically that he reproduced even the misprints....The difference between us who nowadays accumulate too many impressions and Pound is that although he shares many of our touristy traits, he collects them at the pitch of genius...

Pound is visibly tormented. History has become his agony. Joyce said history is the nightmare from which I am trying to awaken. Joyce fled history into the interstices of language. Pound did just the opposite: he moved from the withinness of the poem out into the terror of twentieth-century history. Yet the terror is not the authoritarian state—Pound is noticeably indulgent to Lenin, as an admirer of Mussolini should be; he ignores the slaughter of so many innocents by Hitler-Stalin-Mussolini-Franco, he is obsessed by finance capitalism and the admitted lunacy and unfairness of the credit system. *Usura* (as he calls it) is his Inferno, not imperialism, racism, the ever-accelerating avalanche of war. The classical past, embodied in perfect language, has become the sacred icon. The present is by definition without value.

Pound the would-be epic writer has a driving sense of history but is really without history. Over and over again he refers in the *Cantos* to Mussolini’s draining the marshes and establishing corporate guilds for labor and capital; in *The Pisan Cantos*, written with gallantry in the appalling cage of an American army disciplinary unit, he refers to Mussolini as the “twice-crucified” and describes Italians as “maggots eating off a dead bullock.” Did he not know how little the draining of the Pontine marshes represents in the history of Fascism? That the so-called Fascist corporations never really existed?... The Second World War as most Europeans lived it and the war that Pound in Rapallo read about in Fascist newspapers bear no relation to each other. Pound was capable of saying in St. Elizabeth’s that no man named Ezra could be an anti-Semite. But in the great work of his life, the *Cantos*, that self-announced successor to the great epic poems of Western man, we read of “fresh meat on the Russian steppes” and that the slaughter of the Jews was unfair only because so many poor Jews had to pay for the guilt (Schuld) of the Rothchilds... “Poor yitts paying for / a few big jews’ vendetta on goyim.”...

Pound’s broadcasts on the Fascist radio are all available through the Library of Congress, and although the lawyers of the Pound estate have tried to keep people from quoting them, the broadcasts were published by the United States government and so are out of copyright. Hemingway said that Pound was crazy, “all poets are,” and it is a fact that Pound’s broadcasts were so disordered that one Italian official suspected that he was really an American agent broadcasting to the United States in code.... A student of Pound’s genius may properly affirm that the Pound case, taken entire, with the flood of commentary dripping over it, represents the last act in that nineteenth-century drama of the poet as the unacknowledged legislator, the poet who presumed, once, to lead us from history as blood and tears, *mere* history, to the delectable mountains....

Poor Ezra Pound, who believed in the authority of history as transmitted to us through the unique authority of literature... Pound spoiled his own dreams. But the anticlimax of his old age should not blind us to the radiance with which he started. Pound was the last to believe that the poet does have authority. His manic power reminds us why Plato feared the poets and wanted them out of the perfect Republic.

Alfred Kazin

An American Procession: The Major American Writers from 1830-1930
(Random House/Vintage 1985) 328-33

The Cantos has been variously assessed, by Pound and others, as a success or a failure in its accomplishment; it is, at least in ambition, based on an epic model and frequently messianic in impulse. Confused and confusing, it is often capricious in its use of juxtaposition without structural connection, the technique that Pound came to label in later years the ideogrammatic method. In its confusion, however, *The Cantos* too, like Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," contains multitudes—of ideas, insights, characters, and events—from the wide-ranging play of Pound's sometimes nobly impassioned, sometimes violently satiric personality. Though the theater of the poems is not the American scene and circumstance but world history, it was here that Pound came closest to living up to the egotism of his early comment about Whitman: "I honor him for he prophesized me."

Helen Vendler
The Harper American Literature 2
(Harper & Row 1987) 1593

Michael Hollister (2015)