Ezra Pound

(1885-1972)

from “Canto LXXXI” (1940)

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage
Whose world, or mine or theirs
or is it of none?
First came the seen, then thus the palpable
Elysium, though it were in the halls of hell,
What thou lovest well is thy true heritage

The ant’s a centaur in his dragon world.
Pull down thy vanity, it is not man
Made courage, or made order, or made grace,
Pull down thy vanity, I say pull down.
Learn of the green world what can be thy place
In scaled invention or true artistry,
Pull down thy vanity,
Paquin pull down!
The green casque has outdone your elegance.

“Master thyself, then others shall thee beare”
Pull down thy vanity
Thou are a beaten dog beneath the hail,
A swollen magpie in a fitful sun,
Half black half white
Nor knowst’ou wing from tail
Pull down they vanity
How mean thy hates
Fostered in falsity,
Pull down thy vanity,
Rathe to destroy, niggard in charity,
Pull down thy vanity,
I say pull down.

But to have done instead of not doing
this is not vanity
To have, with decency, knocked
That a Blunt should open
To have gathered from the air a live tradition
or from a fine old eye the unconquered flame
This is not vanity.
Here error is all in the not done,
all in the diffidence that faltered

ANALYSIS

The seriousness of a sermon, the magic of incantation, and largeness of poetic imagination combine in this passage from Ezra Pound’s “Canto LXXXI.” The message is a simple one: Only that endures which

man has wrought with the concentration of love; the rest, like the shattered statue of Shelley's Ozymandias, is vanity and dross. Framed between two positive statements of this theme is an exhortation to man to pull down his vanity and learn humility by comparing himself to the insect world. Love and vanity (self-love) are the point and counterpoint of Pound's theme. The poem sings itself. The iterations of "What thou lovest well" and "Pull down thy vanity" (with its several variations) weave themselves into a chant, the more attractive because they are not repeated with mechanical regularity. The point and counterpoint of the sermon are sounded in those two repeated phrases.

The phrase "Pull down" implies that man's pride is towering. The change of scale accomplished by comparing man's achievements with those of the insect world is thus breathtaking. The initial contrapuntal statement, "The ant's a centaur in his dragon world," has the effect of both magnifying the insects (by comparing them to dragons) and reducing man (by making him look up to them). Then follows the implication that man's courage was anticipated and is duplicated by the animals, his artistic accomplishments outdone by the intricacies of the honeycomb, the scales of the lizard, the song of the nightingale, or the green casque of the grasshopper. (Notice how versatile a word is *scaled* in this context: it may mean carefully proportioned, as in architecture; covered with scales, as a snake or lizard; or constructed on a musical scale. All three meanings fit.) Man has no more reason for pride than a magpie, though, like the magpie, he swells.

Pound implements his theme with allusion. *Paquin* was a famous Parisian dress designer and thus a caterer to man's pride. "'Master thyself, then others shall thee beare'" is adapted from a line in Chaucer's "Ballade of Good Counsel." Wilfred Scawen Blunt (1840-1922), English poet, diplomat, and man of action, was noted for his love of beauty, his devotion to truth, and his stalwart independence of mind.

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