

SHIPWRECKS AND MOUNTAINTOPS: NOTES ON CANTO CII

Mark Steven

...the fish was in an advanced state of decomposition, but
the student knew something about it.

– Ezra Pound, 1934

PART I – INTRODUCTION

“Music,” wrote Theodor Adorno, “shows a further resemblance to language in the fact that, as a medium facing shipwreck, it is sent like intentional language on an odyssey of unending mediation in order to bring the impossible back home.”¹ The impossible aqueous odyssey has always been a fascination for poetry, that function of language most emphatically invested in its own musicality. This has been true from poetry’s beginnings in Sappho and Homer right on through our own present. A brief toss upon the waves of literary history should instantiate this truth. Perhaps most famously, an ancient mariner regales us with the archetypal account of being stranded at sea. That poem’s author, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, was originally drawn to verse by Christopher Marlow’s recitation of Leander swimming the Hellespont. Barely less heroic but twice as amorous as Leander, Walt Whitman imagined himself swimming alongside the Brooklyn Ferry. Margaret Cavendish surveyed tempestuous seascapes, as did Alfred Lord Tennyson, albeit from below. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and William Falconer each wrote long, narrative poems about shipwrecks. Arthur Rimbaud gave voice to the sinking, inebriate boat. The Comte de Lautréamont defines Maldoror’s character through maritime

¹ T. W. Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), 4.

warfare and copulation with a shark. Wallace Stevens sent Crispin on a voyage from Bordeaux to North Carolina by way of Yucatán. Milton's *Lycidas*, Mallarmé's *Master*, and Eliot's *Phoenician* all drowned at sea. Percy Bysshe Shelley's bizarre death seems strangely appropriate, at least from within this context. Hart Crane and Robert Lowell both visit sailor's tombs—the former drowned, too, after drunkenly flinging himself overboard and into the Gulf of Mexico. And perhaps all of this contributed to John Ashbery's infatuation with *Popeye the Sailor*, whom he honors with a glorious sestina, that most burnished of all poetic forms. Here, in these various instances, poetry has envisaged itself as what George Oppen once phrased as “the bright light of a shipwreck,” reifying that image into the regulatory form of a literary tradition.²

Ezra Pound enters this tradition in 1911, with his translation of “The Seafarer,” an Old English elegy whose eponymous speaker meditates on the pre-modern life aquatic; and he exits it in 1958, with a translation from Dante: “You in the dinghy (*piccioletta*) astern there!”³ What follows is a reading of Canto CII, one of the central poems of *Thrones*, the finished volume written closest to the end of Pound's literary career. Because it is a late poem, that artistic aspiration “to bring the impossible back home” is at its most pronounced. As Peter Nicholls has argued with reference to *Thrones* in general, “desire for an ending may explain the impatience that so often attaches to Pound's handling of his materials here. It is as if, after the labour of hunting them down, he must present them in a deliberately offhand way...”⁴ Perhaps this desire also motivates the fastening of Canto CII onto a well-known episode from Homer, wherein Odysseus is stranded at sea, shipwrecked, but with an impossibly distant land firmly in sight. Here aesthetic reflexivity finds its mythic analogue in the interactions between Odysseus and *Leucothea*, at the scene of a sinking raft, all of which provides a narrative frame for the poem and suggests a way for us to read it. That Canto CII is indeed reaching for something impossible, that it has grown impatient with its own textual materials, shows through

² George Oppen, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975), 152.

³ He will, however, invite us to recall ocean voyages in the *Drafts and Fragments*: “Hast'ou seen boat's wake on sea-wall,” asks Canto CX, “how crests it?” Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, 797. All further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the body of the text.

⁴ Peter Nichols, “‘2 doits to a boodle’: Reckoning with *Thrones*” *Textual Practice*, 18:2 (2004), 235.

both thematically and as form. In Ronald Bush's estimation, the style of Cantos XCVI through CIX "is inappropriate to the point of absurdity," and their substance "is so abbreviated as to be unreadable."⁵ This may be the case for Canto CII, but one of the reasons for its absurd and abbreviated form is that, to complete this final part of its odyssey, the epic decides to reevaluate once more the formal materials on which it depends and to simultaneously reassert a very specific technique for composition.

The technique Canto CII reasserts will be familiar to all inveterate as well as most apprentice readers of Pound, and so it requires only brief introduction. According to Pound, the Chinese ideogram is "the picture of a thing; of a thing in a given position or relation, or of a combination of things. It *means* the thing or the action or situation, or quality germane to the several things that it pictures."⁶ Derived from this extreme simplification of Chinese writing, what Pound called the ideogrammic method comprises two overlapping strata. First, the ideogram implies a motivated relationship between sign and sense, between the ideogram and the referent it seeks to represent, such as how 人 pictographically represents man, 木 tree, and 日 sun. As such, Pound conceives of the ideogram as a medium for clarity. Second, the ideogram implies what Pound elsewhere describes as "heaping together the necessary components of thought,"⁷ combining seemingly disparate signs into a visualization of the coherent whole, such as how the individual ideograms for man, tree, and sun combine into 東, or what Pound translates as "sun tangled in the tree's branches, as at sunrise, meaning now the East."⁸ As a strategy for composition, the ideogrammic method developed from a resonance between Pound's evolving poetic in the first two decades of the twentieth century—especially as it evolved through the overlapping programs of imagism and vorticism—and his defining encounter with the notebooks of Ernest Fenollosa in 1913, from which he first learned about the Chinese written character. The ideogram would maintain

⁵ Ronald Bush, "Late Cantos LXXII–CXVII" in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123.

⁶ Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 21.

⁷ Pound, *ABC of Economics*, 27.

⁸ Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 22.

its influence of Pound's thought, his poetry, and—importantly for us—his recommended strategies for reading.

In Pound's estimation, the good, intelligent reader of poetry interprets through "careful first-hand examination of the matter," and, rather than describing the poem in abstractions, that reader "picks out what is necessary for his general statement. Something that fits the case, that applies in all the cases."⁹ To read ideogramatically, then, is to read against abstraction, attending to "the objects or facts" that have been "heaped together," and finding their points of mutual illumination.¹⁰ We can conclude these opening remarks by recalling Nicholls' principal caution for readers of *Thrones*, not least because it harmonizes with Pound's criticism of abstract arguments in general, against which he advocates the ideogrammatic method. "As usual here," writes Nicholls, "it is often easier to specify his larger purpose than it is the function of the local detail."¹¹ In other words, it is more difficult to read Pound as he would have us read all poetry than it is to read him through precisely the optics he decried. And so, a challenge asserts itself: to what extent is it possible to follow Pound's own recommendation—which, as we will see, also develops from within Canto CII—and read ideogramatically? In attempting to meet that challenge, the commentary to follow is in part an exercise in ideogrammatic reading; it is an interpretation that arranges itself as both parallel and perpendicular to Canto CII's own clustered components, and it simultaneously describes the internal forces binding them into a coherent whole. Whatever those forces might be, they can only emanate from clustered, local details, but as they do, materials from elsewhere gravitate into the constellation and are transformed by their relation to this new field. Therein the dialectical tension that pervades this commentary: as we read the local details we are reading them simultaneously both against and as part of the "larger purpose," in relation to that "unending mediation" of the epic, from within which Canto CII strives to obviate against shipwreck.

⁹ Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 22.

¹⁰ Pound, *ABC of Reading*, 22.

¹¹ Nicholls, 234.

knowledge” (XLVII/236).¹² But, soon after departing from the shores of Ogygia, we quickly learn that knowledge really has become an epiphenomenal “shade of a shade,” that it is no longer accessible through its material forms. Indeed, there is little hope of finding ourselves steadied upon firm shores. Consider the first two lines, in which the replacement of “heard” by its near-homonym “had” transforms the object of that sentence from something conveyed or learned into something obtained and possessed. While in either case the verb’s object is received by the speaker, its relegation into the past tense, “had” instead of “have,” suggests that knowledge of this kind has somehow been lost (although, if “had” is meant as a synonym for “heard,” that which has been heard need not imply having subsequently lost). Against the broader arc of Pound’s epic this reads as a moment of reevaluation. Since our first encounters with the Andreas Divus edition of Homer’s *Odyssey* in the Ur-Cantos (“Gave him in Latin, 1538 in my edition, the rest uncertain...”¹³) and again in Canto I (“In officinal Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer,” 5), knowledge has been predicated on objective, material documents, which allow the poem to shelve the Eliotic fragments of history by “including” indexical proof of historical events—but, now, the implied objectivity of documentation is no longer a viable source of knowledge, historical or otherwise, and so the epic’s principal medium appears to have been seriously compromised. Or so we suspect. The subsequent eight lines confirm that suspicion, both in form and content. Formally, these lines are emphatically musical as opposed to silently textual. They are phonemically bound together by the alveolar /l/, which alliterates “Kalupso” with “eleven literates” and “L. Morrow,” with “elected” and “England,” and with “lied” and “line.” There is considerable assonance on the /aɪ/ between “Dwight,” “required,” “iron,” “lied,” “why,” “line,” and “9” (the last two of which internally rhyme), not to mention the presumably unstressed “I” in “I suppose.” The “ei” of “waited,” assonates with “keinas” and “Orgei”; the /e/ in “elected” with “residence” (as well as, unstressed, in “required”); and the /p/ in “Pallas” alliterates with “Penelope.” Thematically, note how the five lines justified to the left margin as well as the line beginning with the conjunction, “and,” all comprise either a textual object or

¹² Massimo Bacigalupo, *The Forméd Trace: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 404.

¹³ Pound, *Early Writings: Poems and Prose* (London: Penguin, 2005), 159.

contain reference to a textual object, and also notice how the second line of each couplet expeditiously ironizes the line before it. The deictic “this,” which should refer to Zeus’ message for Odysseus, or even the story or message to follow, is refused determination by its recasting as the grammatically indefinite “it.” The quotation from Pound about American senators, “eleven literates and, I suppose, Dwight L. Morrow,” is tonally sardonic, and that tone is amplified by its implication that the tentative inclusion of “Morrow” within the literate elect is owed solely to the fact that his name shares its end-sound with “Kalupso” and assonates with the final syllable of “suppose,” therefore cohering with the musicality of these lines. While the subsequent two lines refer to the constitutional law that American senators must have legal residence in the state for which they run, the authenticity supposedly conveyed by the presence of that “body” is made arbitrary by the fact that this law does not apply to members of the English Parliament (that Pound anachronistically nominates England as opposed to Britain speaks forward to the English history Cantos, CVII, CVIII, and CIX, with their own emphasis on legal proceedings and their valorization of Sir Edmund Coke). The words of Pallas Athena, “A cargo of Iron,” taken from the episode in which she disguises herself as the merchant Mentès sailing for Temesa, are immediately revealed as “lies.” And, finally, the answer to Pound’s riddle, “as to why Penelope waited,” is erroneous: “keinas . . . e Orgei,” a transliteration of “κεῖνος . . . ἐώργει,” from a line stating that Odysseus harmed no man, derives from line 693 as opposed to line 639 of Book 4 of Homer’s text.¹⁴ That the quote from Homer only takes up the first and last words of the original text, to produce a fragment like “that... did,” might characterize Odysseus as a factive personality, as a man of action, that characterization will be echoed and amplified bellow in Minerva’s words to Telemachus. But the activity presumed in that characterization is, to be sure, impeded by the very text through which it is conveyed; Odysseus, a textual object, only exists by way of a text that is in this context marked as mutable. If documents are the poem’s means to knowledge, the very substance of its epic and the form that has been carrying our hero homeward, upon what might we sail when those documents cease to be reliable?

¹⁴ Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 659.

rid of parapernalia” (XCI/635). But what does Leucothea give our hero to replace those materials in this specific instance, in Canto CII? There is no mention of the life-saving Κρήδεμον or veil from Cantos XCV and XCVI, with which Odysseus replaces the clothes, axe, and raft provided by Calypso (“My bikini is worth yr/ raft’ Said Leucothea,” 665). Instead, she comes bearing Leucothoe who, in this iteration, has transformed into an incense bush. Perhaps we should return to that line, “rose as an incense bush,” if we are going to determine what, exactly, Leucothea has given to our hero, if anything at all. Of course, it makes good sense that, after her transformation, Leucothoe would literally rise, either emerging from the soil in which she takes root or as a plume of scented smoke, but, within this context, it will also be valuable to recall that, for Pound, the rose is a master-trope for literary technique. In its most celebrated formulation, which concludes Canto LXXIV–“Hast ’ou seen the rose in the steel dust” (469)–the rose signifies what Hugh Kenner once described as the “patterned integrity” or “patterned energy” of the vortex or the ideogram:¹⁷ a unified rose made of individual metallic filings, a coherent shape discernable in the steel dust, just as how 人, 木, and 日 combine into 東. And, if the rose is a master-trope for ideogrammic technique, the wave will be its distinctly aqueous object correlative. Recall, for instance, Pound’s first example of the vortex, in his manifesto from 1914, which quotes from H. D.’s “Oread”:

Whirl up sea–
Whirl your pointed pines,
Splash your great pines
On our rocks,
Hurl your green over us,
Cover us with your pools of fir.¹⁸

The oceanic setting of the vortex comes together with the word “rose” as early as Canto II, with its description of the depths (“the coral face under wave-tinge, / Rose-paleness under water-shift,” 9); later, in Canto LXXIX, the association between roses and waves is extended to goddesses, when Aphrodite is described as a “a petal

¹⁷ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era: The Age of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), 145-162.

¹⁸ H. D. in Pound, “Vortex. Pound.,” *Blast* 1 (1914): 154.

lighter than sea-foam” (512); and, in Canto XCVI, Leucothea inaugurates *Thrones* by merging with the vortex: “and the wave concealed her, / dark mass of great water” (671). If Leucothoe and Luecothea convey the vortex or ideogram, if Luecothea’s gift to the hero is what replaces his raft and sees him ashore, and if the hero’s raft is here made of documents, then perhaps the vortex or ideogram will serve as the medium to revitalize Pound’s epic. Leucothea’s divine blessing—which, at the end of Canto XCV, saw the hero to shore—once again directs us toward land, preempting the climax of Canto CII. In these lines, the adverbial “here” prematurely gestures toward its destination, which simultaneously indicates the current point on the journey, and the nominated space-time similarly combines “snow’s lace” with “sea-foam.” The combination is not a unitary ideogram, which would close the distance between the two and see our hero safely to shore; rather, it is a simile, a figure that wills the two locations together while nonetheless conceding the irreducible gap between them. The resulting image represents neither here (somewhere off of the Phaeacian coastline, on the Mediterranean) nor there (the snowcapped Himalayans, which we will soon visit), but both at once. Hero, we might paraphrase Leucothea, replace thy paraphernalia with an ideogram.

III.

不

But the lot of ’em, Yeats, Possum, Old Wyndham
 had no ground to stand on
 Black shawls still worn for Demeter
 in Venice,
 in my time,
 my young time
 OIOS TELESAT ERGON ... EROS TE
 (CII/748)

And so, with astonishing punctuality, the ideogram presents itself. 不 negates, and it visualizes the very specific negation to follow. W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Wyndham Lewis “had no ground to stand on.” It is not just the poem’s hero but literature itself that has been cast adrift, made to tread water. However, the ideogram for groundlessness also contains the potential for salvation. Its divine virtue is both an example of the ideogrammic method and a local

instantiation of that method's power. According to Ling Shou-wen, 丌 is the graphic depiction of a bird in flight, with the horizontal stroke representing the sky and the two diagonal strokes its wings.¹⁹ Leucothea is with us, but in a different form. The mythic seagull has transformed into the very quintessence of her gift to our hero: an ideogram. But what can be said about the fact that these lines are almost identical to lines that appeared in Canto XCVIII, with only one major difference? That earlier Canto provided another name, which—unlike Yeats, Eliot, and Lewis—was said to have “had” ground. The name belonged to A. R. Orage, editor of the magazine wherein Pound first began to generate the tropes and techniques that would eventuate as literary vorticism and help pave the way for his ideogrammic method. The poem's change in register from heroic narrative into personal recollection allows for its speaker to singularize himself from the coterie, to replace Orage as the solely grounded impresario, and to simultaneously foreground that moment of collective literary invention. But unlike “Old Wyndham” and the other two, the speaker recalls that in his youth, “my time, my young time,” he seemed to have had a ground. Seemed, because the speaker's ground is triply ironized. First, “Black shawls still worn for Demeter” refers to the lost Italian custom in which mourning women adorn themselves in black, believing the cloth to be cut from Demeter's gown. The custom is commemorated in Canto XCVIII and referred to again in Canto CVI. Yet to transpose this practice into autobiographical memory, which is a gesture distinct to Canto CII, is to simultaneously falsify the memory and to mourn a lost object twice over, given the practice itself is a lost one. Second, Pound really did travel to Venice in his youth—first, with his parents; second, with his aunt; and third, in 1908, alone. The third visit confirmed to Pound that Venice was no ground in the sense of firm soil or formed earth on which to stand: “nothing but a small wet village,” he called it; he initially tried finding work as a gondolier; and, later, he lived in “airy quarters overlooking 3 canals.”²⁰ For Pound, Venice is more aqueous than earthy. And third, Lewis was only three years senior to Pound, and to call him old is more than just a playful jab. It also concedes the speaker's own age and so his

¹⁹ See Dileep Rajeev, *Learning Chinese Characters: An Ideographic Approach* (2010). Ebook.

²⁰ Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), 92-3.

leaving that youthful ground behind, and it does so in a rhetorical movement that accords with the poet's biography, in that he left Venice for London where he met the three writers listed here. "The summer of 1908 in Venice had been a crucial pause for him in the headlong events of recent months," writes Humphrey Carpenter, "a stocktaking, a chance not just to get his poems into print but to reassure himself about his own mission, to build up the self-confidence that would be essential if he were to make any kind of splash in London."²¹ The Venetian atoll is already receding into the past, and the poem's author, now identified with our hero, is cast adrift. The first part of the final line, transliterated from Athene's conversation with Telemachus, comprises an injunction "to finish the job," to make it ashore, but the line's second part reinforces Canto CII's skepticism toward its own linguistic medium, the raft on which its hero sails. The original line, from Homer, contains "ἔπος" or "word" which, in this, has become "EROS" or "love."²² What can this mean, so late in the journey and at a moment of formal reevaluation, to replace "word" with "love"? There is more at work here than the obviously ideogrammic eye rhyme. Love has been a focus of Pound's, and especially since *Section: Rock-Drill*, which follows Dante to affirm love as the force responsible for "moving the stars," (632) as it is written in Canto XCI. Consultation with the poem's typescript reveals that ἔπος was initially translated as "EPOS," which makes much more sense, connecting "word" and "epic," emphasizing a relationship between that genre and the material sustaining its hero's voyage.²³ Irrespective of whether the second mistranslation is intentional or not, we still need to account for one and possibly two deformations of the Homeric text. Presuming a degree of intentionality, which is fair given the multiple deformations, the most probable motivation for this lexical contortion is a desire for critical reinvention through the interpretive modification, for creative distortion of the original text, so as to reanimate archaic words. Less akin to Keats' immortal encounter with Chapman's Homer, this way of reading and writing is what Pound admired in James Joyce and which he considered the only means of completing one's "job" as literary writer. Perhaps that should be our key to an interpretation of the following lines.

²¹ Carpenter, 96.

²² Terrell, 659.

²³ YCAL MSS 43. Box 78, Folder 3452. Ezra Pound Papers.

one of the provisions needed if Telemachus is going fulfill his own voyage, taking after his heroically wayfaring father. But, for Pound setting out in the early twentieth century, provisions were much harder to come by. As Bacigalupo has put it (rephrasing Canto III), 1908 “was the year in which gondolas cost too much and in which the young gourmet had to live upon barley soup,”²⁶ and, whilst in Venice that meal cost “40 centess” for an “orzo,” 1920s Paris would similarly relegate the poet to Café Procope, not only because of its history of attracting writers but also because of its reputation for cheap food, with prices set at “one franc fifteen for a luncheon / and ten centimes tip for the waiter.” If the task, inspired by Joyce and allegorized by the journey from Ogygia to Phaeacia in Canto CII, and especially in the lines that follow, is to extend literature—“to do the next job”—then literature itself appears to be obstructed by economic unevenness. Common writers, “Noi altri borghesi,” have been debarred from “the piazza” and other cultural epicenters. In 1933, Pound would bemoan a society wherein the literary imagination was forced to shelter “in cheap restaurants and not in official circles or in the offices of rich periodicals.”²⁷ This is a world that neither the poet nor his wrong-headedly idealized paragons of economic governance (here, Mussolini, who is named in a different version of these lines, in Canto XCVIII, as well as in the draft typescript²⁸) could ever successfully “control.” If Poseidon, Lord of the Earthquake and God of the Sea, blew Odysseus’ raft from its course, necessitating the graceful intervention of Leucothea and the reevaluation of the hero’s materials, here it is capital that reroutes the modern epic. When, in 1912, Pound prayed for a literary intelligence that would “define today,” it was a humorless misreading of Joyce that provided the answer. “Ulysses,” wrote Pound, “is the end, the summary, of a period,” but, as history progresses, so too must literature.²⁹

V.

And that ye sail over lithe water . . .
under eyelids . . .

²⁶ Bacigalupo, 408

²⁷ Pound, *Selected Prose 1909-1965*, 228.

²⁸ YCAL MSS 43. Box 78, Folders 3452 and 3455. Ezra Pound Papers.

²⁹ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 96.

the typescript)³⁰ reworks Gallic verse. Belgians revive Shakespeare (“Jacque Père”) in their own elocution. And Pound’s German translator improves upon Canto LXXIV by rewriting “that free speech without free radio speech is as zero” as “dass Redefreiheit ohne Radiofreiheit gleich null ist.”³¹ While these are distinct procedures, ranging from aesthetic criticism through poetic adaptation to idiolectic deformation and traditional translation, what unifies them is that all four are nonetheless critical interventions on the order of that which Joyce enacted on Homer, comparable to Pound’s seemingly willful mistranslation of ἔπος as epos and eros. They also emphasize that, before continuing forward, one must return to the achievements of the past and study them closely. Finally, and with a shift in verbal modality from active to subjunctive and so from actuality to possibility, is the recollection that if Confucius were granted many more years of life he would have spent at least half a century reading *The Book of Changes*, the *I Ching*, “and might therefore manage to avoid great mistakes.”³² Is this the lesson: that we must reinvent the classics in order to prevent our mistakes? If our hero were a better reader might his odyssey have held to course?

VI.

Swan broke his knee cap on landing
 having scaled that 30 foot wall,
 and maintained his serenity,
 another chap hung all night in the trail ropes
 and saw two other men fall.

Took the Z for the tail of the KatZe
 vide Frobenius on relative Dummheit of pupil and teacher
 “The libraries” (Ingrid) “have no Domvile.” Jan 1955
 as was natural

 “psuedos d’ouk . . . ei gar pepneumenos”
 seed barley with the sacrifice (Lacadaemon)
 But with Leucothoe’s mind in that incense
 all Babylon could not hold it down.

(CII/749-50)

³⁰ YCAL MSS 43. Box 78, Folder 3455.

³¹ Terrell, 660.

³² Terrell, 660.

But mistakes have already been made and we will continue making them. “I am writing,” said Pound in 1960, “to resist the view that Europe and civilization is going to hell.”³³ More significant, then, is how those mistakes are dealt with in real time. Here are two examples of good conduct in the face of catastrophe. B. Swan is Pound’s oil-boat-working “murderer friend,” as the poet wrote to Ingrid Davis in 1955.³⁴ Despite enormous physical pain, Swan “maintained his serenity,” just as “another chap,” Apprentice Seaman Charles Cowart, performed admirably in 1932 when caught in the mooring ropes of a navy zeppelin and hoisted skyward, a disaster proving fatal for two others. That both Cowart and Swan were sailors who demonstrated good conduct when literally groundless recalls the Homeric setting with which Canto CII began and which has stayed with us via Joyce, and we are directed back there by way of two more modern figures, both of whom Pound admired not least because he considered them intransigently intelligent despite the apparently corrupt culture against which they wrote. In Pound’s view, Leo Frobenius was one of those gifted thinkers capable of seizing upon the luminous detail. “He saw nothing ridiculous,” writes Pound, “in a child’s wanting to know if the last letter of the word *Katz* stood for the cat’s tail, and the first one for its head. But to the school teacher, who cared little for intelligence or lively curiosity, the child seemed stupid.”³⁵ By adopting that child’s approach—itself a form of Pound’s ideogrammic method—Frobenius “brought the living fact to bear on the study of dead documents,”³⁶ and yet the ignorant teacher remains oblivious to its potential. If the Germanic word, “Dummheit,” associates that stupidity with Frobenius’ native tongue, the reference to Davis indicates that Londoners are equally oblivious to what Pound revered as valuable thinking. The missive from Davis refers to Barry Domvile’s autobiography, which Pound assumed had been conspiratorially suppressed because of its world-shattering intellectual strengths. While Domvile’s politics would have appealed to Pound (in Noel Stock’s assessment, the autobiography is little

³³ Pound in William Cookson, *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Anvil, 1985), xxix.

³⁴ Terrell, 650.

³⁵ Pound, *Selected Prose*, 328.

³⁶ Pound, *Selected Prose*, 328.

more than “a comparatively mild piece of anti-Semitism”³⁷), perhaps equally relevant to Domvile’s appearance in Canto CII is the fact that he was an admiral in the Royal Navy, thus keeping with the poem’s marine setting, where he joins the ranks of Swan and Cowart, and ultimately returns us to Homer. The dismayingly generous comparison between Domvile and Nestor, the assertion that both are “psuedos d’ouk . . . ei gar pepneumenos” or “too intelligent to prevaricate” (as Pound translated the same text in Canto XCIX, 717), suggests the former has been censored because he was too clever for his society and as such the author of controversial truths, comparable to how the child was too clever for her teacher in the anecdote about Frobenius. For Pound, these intelligences have been sacrificed—to “barley,” no less, the cited means of epic subsistence—in similar manner to how, for Homer, the Spartans of Lacadaemon would sacrifice horses to Apollo. And yet, given Pound wants to identify those intelligences with his own sense of literary vocation, of persistent innovation in spite of world-historical mistakes, it should make sense that he also likens their thinking to the mind of Leucothoe, an “incense” that, upon its sacrificial conflagration, proves utterly indomitable: King Orchamus of Babylon could not restrain his daughter, Leucothoe, both despite and because of her punishing transformation into “incense,” and that incense is what Leucothea has already conveyed to the hero of CII, which has been read here as a manifestation of the literary technique that now serves as a divine blessing, guaranteeing the hero’s passage ashore. But of these two intelligences, belonging to Domvile and Frobenius, it is the German ethnographer and not the British sailor that seems at home within the poem’s setting and ambition. Several lines above, μάω became the cat’s mao (or, for the Joycean Odysseus, its “Mkgnao” or “Mrkrgrnao”) and now, several lines below, KatZe becomes the cat itself, from tail to whiskers, just as Leucothea transformed into ἄ or ἔπος into both epos and eros. Moreover, within the context of Canto CII, positive comparison between Domvile and Nestor is surcharged by a decisive irony, given the words, “psuedos d’ouk . . . ei gar pepneumenos,” intended here to emphasize Domvile’s truthful intelligence, are uttered by Athena, whom this Canto has already branded a liar. Once again, the ideogram provides a more powerful alternative to the document – Frobenius’ ideogram is pleasingly resonant whereas Domvile’s

³⁷ Noel Stock in Terrell, 660.

book is undermined by another document—but this also reveals something about the political coordination of modern literature: it is as though poetry, or at least ideogrammic poetry, recognizes the intellectual and aesthetic insolvency of fascism, because here the poem actively reacts against that ideology irrespective of the poet’s own commitments.

VII.

“for my bitch eyes” in Iliion
 copper and wine like a bear cub’s
 in sunlight, thus Atalant
 the colour as *aithiops*
 the gloss probably
 oinops
 as lacquer in sunlight
 haliporphuros,
 russet-gold
 in the air, extant, not carmine, not flame, oriXalko,
 le xaladines
 lit by the torch-flare,
 and from nature, the sign.
 (CII/750)

The poem reminisces on the prehistory to its odyssey and simultaneously gestures toward the classical beauty to which it momentarily aspires. The quotation from Helen of Troy (“Iliion”) about her “bitch eyes” recalls the virgin huntress, Atalanta, who was suckled and raised by a bear after her father, King Iasus of Argos, abandoned her to the wilds. Atalanta is another embodiment of transfigured femininity, much like Leucothoe and Leucothea, but the real interest of these lines is in visualizing the sea upon which our hero remains adrift—and which, it will be useful to recall from several lines earlier, shares its topography with the anterior space found “under eyelids.” In short, the eyes and sea of Canto CII are wine-dark “as lacquer in sunlight,” but with a “gloss” that burns luminously. “Haliporphuros” or “sea purple” and “russet-gold” elaborate the visual theme as though, through lexical permutations and semantic abundance, language wants to capture the colorful referent that ultimately refuses translation into glyphic symbols or spoken sounds—to overcome the insoluble fact that the written

document is an obstruction between the sea and the eye. Canto CII follows XCVII in referring back, from this exercise in the diction of color, to the aforementioned rose of vorticism and to the ideogram, which has variously been embodied and conveyed by Leucothoe and Leucothea. Bacigalupo points up that these lines are also consonant with a sentence from Pound's essay on Guido Cavalcanti: "The rose that his magnet makes in the iron filings, does not lead him to think of the force in botanic terms, or wish to visualize that force as floral and extant (*ex stare*)."³⁸ Here, in Canto CII, what matters is not the color—"not carmine, not flame"—but, rather, the ideogrammic energy that combines the various lexemes that collectively fail to convey color into a whole new brilliance. We will encounter that combustive energy, "lit by the torch-flare," before Canto CII is through, but not here and now before its moment of well-earned ignition. The final line of this part, "and from the nature, the sign," recalls John Heydon's Neoplatonic theory of signatures, according to which every natural form is indexical to the forces that produce it, so that all nature is testament to the productive force of divine intelligence. Cited here, the theory posits an iconic motivation between the sign and its referent—between lexical power and the ocean on which it sails, the natural majesty that no lexemes will ever properly convey, but which is pictographically accessible with the ideogram. It must be significant, then, that in this meditation on signification the accompanying ideogram (which appeared beside similar lines in Canto XCVII and which would provide a formal solution to this) has been subtracted or suppressed: why, in this restatement of Heydon's theory, has Pound removed Canto XCVII's accompanying ideogram, 靈, or Ling, which graphically locates heaven over cloud over three raindrops over some earthbound ritual? Canto LXXXV opens *Section: Rock Drill* with a strikingly large 靈, which takes up several lines and is glossed as the "great sensibility" (563) upon which the Shang Dynasty (of 175–121 B.C.) was founded. Elsewhere, as in Cantos LXXXVI and CIV, 靈 is conjured but only in preterition, as though to mark an absent quality, which, if present, would restore the harmony those Cantos desire. For all this moment's intricate beauty, for all the power of its diction, Canto CII wants for something it does not or cannot possess. The raft made of words is sinking, fast, and the seascape is not offering anything graspable

³⁸ Bacigalupo, 413.

VIII.

Small lions are there in benevolence
to the left of San Marco
AISSOUSIN,
the spirits,
Berenice, a late constellation.
“Same books” said Tcheou
they ought to be brother-like.

(CII/750)

Another prehistory, a flash of memory: this time more biographical than textual. We are back in Venice, in the piazza, where two marble lions keep watch from their granite columns to the left of Saint Mark’s Square, immediately before the canal. That the focalizing noun for this space-time (“lions”) rhymes with the locus of Helen’s aforementioned speech about her eyes (“Ilion”) helps bind the two as a prehistory specific to this particular odyssey, once again conflating Pound’s biography with the myth of Odysseus. The following word, “AISSOUSIN,” from Circe’s description of the underworld, describes the flitting about of spirits whose shadowy mindlessness contrasts with the unimpaired faculties of Tiresias. If Canto I began Pound’s epic with Odysseus’ departure from Circe and a descent into the underworld (“...came we then to the place / Aforesaid by Circe,” 3), returning to Circe’s direction now, following hard on a return to Venice, combines another two moments of immediate antecedent, adding *The Cantos* as a whole to the multilayered conflation. These lines are significantly different from their earlier appearance (which follows from the abovementioned lines about color) in Canto XCVII, where instead of underworld shades and benevolent lions we encounter Kuanon, another goddess of mercy, who is surrounded by spirits, whose kinetic movement (what Canto CII translates as “AISSOUSIN”) remains in the untranslated Greek: “Kuanon, by the golden rail, / Nile δῦπετέος the flames gleam in the air / and in the air αἴσσοουσιν” (695). The lines from Canto XCVII attain to a beauty and lucidity that is completely absent from their redaction into Canto CII; they are accompanied by the visually impressive but now subtracted 靈; and their reference to the Nile provides a smooth segue into the following lines about Berenice that, when reprised for Canto CII, are more difficult to interpret. Berenice is yet another transfigured woman, Queen

they want to burst out of the universe
 ammis herbidas ripas

(CII/750-1)

For Pound, the crystal has always been an expression of both lucidity and liquid, and so it is when realized as the adjective, “Crystaline,” in Canto CII. Here, now, so close to the Canto’s end, we finally arrive at the prophesied destination, where “snow’s lace” really is the “sea-foam,” as was foretold during our encounter with Leucothea and as is encoded by the etymology of “crystal,” from κρύσταλλος, which not only to the hardened stone but also to ice. These lines have brought us to the Himalayan mountainside in southwest China, home to the Na-khi of Yunnan (which, coincidentally, Pound learned about from a book whose original manuscript was lost at sea, when the ship carrying Joseph Rock’s manuscript on the Na-khi was sunk in 1944). We have already visited these provinces in Canto CI and they will become a major focus in *Drafts and Fragments*. That the mountain’s “south slope” is covered in “juniper” enacts an ideogrammic intercalation of the two grounded locales from either end of Canto CII, on either side of Poseidon’s sea: Calypso’s island where, in Homer, juniper smolders on the hearth; and the mountains at which we have finally arrived, where the Na-khi also burn juniper-leaves, as is detailed in Cantos XCVI, CI, and CVI. The elegance of this compression is that it operates by way of the ideogrammic method previously conveyed to our hero by Leucothea with the “shrub” of Leucothoe’s “incense bush,” the rose of vorticism, a different version of that divine veil with which Homer’s Odysseus makes landfall on Phaeacia. The sea and the mountain are ideogrammically conjoined, with the wild goose now chasing the seagull, and with the oceanic substances, “salt, copper, coral,” appearing fathoms above any imaginable tidemark. What follows are, like those Homeric lexemes for divining the sea’s color, “dead words out of fashion,” incapable of capturing or conveying the elaborately constructed ideogram that manifests alongside and between them. The Homeric words transliterated from Greek reflexively describe their own limitations, by referring to (in William Cookson’s translation) “things which cannot be spoken, things beyond the reach of words,” and the “secret, inscrutable, unknown,” the veiled or invisible aspects of nature.³⁹ The subsequent image,

³⁹ Cookson, 242.

“the pine needles glow as red wire,” is not just a reference to the religious ceremonies of the Na-khi, in which pinecones and pine needles are burned (as we encountered in Canto XCVI, “& on hearth burned cedar and juniper,” 671). Here it also manifests the vortex (possibly alluded to by the pines, recalling the poem from H. D.) in delivering a “patterned integrity” or “patterned energy” that has very literally been “lit by the torch-flare.” Moreover, if 靈 depicts the heavens in relation to earthbound ritual, conjoined by clouds that may well be smoke, then these lines represent what that subtracted ideogram would have conveyed if it were present. The Canto’s final translation from Homer attests to the potential of the ideogrammic medium and method. “OU THELEI EAEAN EIS KOSMOU” is made into “they want to burst out of the universe,” in which Pound switches “EIS” or “into” for “out of” and neglects the negative “OU” or “οὐ,” as it appears without transliteration in Canto CV (“οὐ θέλει ἔην εἰς χοσμὸν,” 770). As Peter Liebrechts has explained, the Greek line’s inclusion alongside its English mistranslation, presents two antithetical realities, “in which the true nature of the divine can never appear to man or reveal itself directly in a shape we would call material, and in which man must go through contemplation beyond this sensible world to apprehend the universe not in terms of sensation.”⁴⁰ To apprehend it, perhaps, in terms of the divine energies this poem has sought to harness with the ideogram, and simultaneously to reinvent the “material” of documents through creative intervention, thus reinvigorating the words with which the Canto had grown weary. These lines, inseparable from those preceding them, are the poem’s victory over its own forms. The phrase signalling our transition from Greek to Latin, “amnis herbidas ripas” collapses the geological distance between sea and mountain by nominating a probable setting for their real intersection, the grassy riverbank, which also recalls the sheltered stream through which Odysseus reaches Phaeacia. Just as importantly, though, the new dialect anticipates the concluding lines of Canto CII, to which we must now turn, for it is this subsequent anticlimax that retroactively wants to impose a circumambient frame for the Canto as a whole.

⁴⁰ Peter Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2004), 361.

important for the present context, however, is Antoninus' contributions to maritime law. As Pound wrote:

In 138 A.D. Antoninus Pius was considering the difference between Roman Law and the Law of Rhodes, between agrarian usury and maritime usury, he was concerned as to whether the Roman State shd. profit by sailor's misfortune and batten on ship-wreck.

The lawcourts of Rhodes and Athens had of course thought about equity and about justice. They had questioned whether the capitalists shd. be allowed to seize ships for debt.⁴³

Governance that resists this kind of profiteering would have appealed to Pound; but, for Pound, the rule of Antoninus nonetheless marked the beginnings of Rome's economic corruption, which counterbalanced his otherwise laudable achievements. "The archeologist and serendipidist can wander back through Claudius Salmasius," writes Pound, "and find the known beginnings of usury entangled with those of marine insurance, sea lawyers, the law of Rhodes, the disputed text of Antoninus Pius on the limits of his jurisdiction."⁴⁴ The semicolon propels us two centuries into the future, where Emperor Julian, the "Apostate," has already proved himself on the battlefield and implemented fiscal reforms, notably decreasing taxation. That Julian "would not be worshipped" refers to the fact that his soldiers contentiously honored him with the title of Augustus, which he did not immediately accept, and perhaps also to the reason for his nomination as Apostate: he rejected Christianity as a mode of worship and, in its place, attempted to revive Neoplatonic paganism. The quoted descriptions of battle, which Pound attributes to the Roman soldier and historian Ammianus Marcellinus, are more examples of "dead" documents, to use their own recurrent term, the likes of which Canto CII has already reevaluated and revalued. Indeed, the document from which they derive is incomplete, missing the first thirteen of its thirty-one books. It is tempting to read the reference as a misattribution, like the answer to Pound's riddle about Penelope at the beginning of Canto CII, given Chapter 6 in the 23rd book of Marcellinus' is concerned

⁴³ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 40.

⁴⁴ Pound, *Selected Prose*, 272.

with the provinces of Persia—not a site of prosperity but, rather, of economic exploitation. However, “and there also” locates, within Marcellinus’ history, the site for what Pound admired most about this emperor. For Pound, Julian’s achievement was not in battlefield heroics as documented by Marcellinus but, rather, in the economic war of position that took place conterminously with his final military campaign, “Assyrios fines ingressus,” or that which passed through the frontiers of Assyria. The achievement mentioned here is that to obviate against famine in Assyria, Julian fixed the value of grain—not barley, this time, but corn—and constructed granaries using measures imported from Hierapolis, Chalcis, and Egypt. However, the imperial wheat was (as Edward Gibbon writes) “purchased by the rich merchants; the proprietors of land, or of corn, withheld from the city the accustomed supply; and the small quantities that appeared in the market were secretly sold at an advanced and illegal price,”⁴⁵ or, as in Canto CII, it was sold at “sueta annona” or the “usual high price.” Like Antoninus, Julian and his civic achievements are ultimately counterbalanced and corrupted by the profiteers. The line, “Quem mihi febricula eripuit,” refers to Julian’s inheritance of the Empire from his cousin, Constantius II, who died of fever. But note the grammar, which separates this statement from the previous lines’ account of Julian with an end-stop, and which conjoins it with the following lines by way of a comma. The inheritance also comes from Emperor Domitian, whose reign preceded that of both Antoninus and Julian. From 81 to 96, Domitian maintained a despotic rule of terror that ended in his own assassination and the official condemnation of his memory to oblivion. What made him “infaustus” or “unfortunate” is that he “tried to buy peace with money,” by revaluing Roman coinage through an increase of silver purity, an initiative made possible by increased taxation. Domitian’s faith in money is perhaps what damned both Antoninus and Julian, what the hero of Canto CII has obliquely struggled against, and what obstructs literature. To be sure, this retelling of the Homeric myth, an episode in which the hero is forced to reevaluate his materials, is consonant with the thoughts of Antoninus and Julian, as haunted by the legacy of Domitian, which they have come to inhabit, just as the speaker of Canto CII is cast adrift on a sea over which he has only minimal control. In clarifying

⁴⁵ Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1998), 511.

his intention for *Thrones*, Pound admitted that, by this late stage in both life and history, it had become “difficult to write a paradise when all the superficial indications are that you ought to write an apocalypse.”⁴⁶ The struggle of Canto CII is an attempt to reclaim paradise from within the apocalypse of the market, to rescue form before it sinks to the depths, and these final lines testify that their struggle has been playing out since ancient times.

WORKS CITED

- Adorno, T.W., *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998).
- Bacigalupo, Massimo, *The Forméd Trace: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound* (New York: Columbia UP, 1980).
- Bush, Ronald, “Late Cantos LXXII-CXVII” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound*, ed. Ira B. Nadel (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999): pp. 109-138.
- Carpenter, Humphrey, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).
- Cookson, William, *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: Persea Books, 1985).
- Doolittle, Hilda, “Oread,” *Blast* 1 (1914): 154.
- Gibbon, Edward, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1998).
- Joyce, James, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin, 2000).
- Kenner, Hugh, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: California UP, 1973).
- Liebregts, Peter, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (Madison, WI: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004).
- Nicholls, Peter, “‘2 doits to a boodle’: Reckoning with *Thrones*,” *Textual Practice* 18.2 (2004): pp. 233-249.
- Oppen, George, *Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1975).
- Pound, Ezra, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 2010).
- , *ABC of Economics* (New York: New Directions, 1939).
- , *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1996).

⁴⁶ Pound in Cookson, xxix.

- , *Early Writings: Poems and Prose* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
- , *Guide to Kulchur* (London: Peter Owen, 1966).
- , *Literary Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).
- , *New Selected Poems and Translations* (New York: New Directions, 2011).
- Rajeev, Dileep, *Learning Chinese Characters: An Ideographic Approach* (2010). Ebook.
- Terrell, Carroll F., *A Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: California UP, 1993).

