

REVISED INTENTIONS: JAMES BUCHANAN AND THE ANTEBELLUM WHITE HOUSE IN CANTO CIII

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Canto CIII was written in 1958 and is perhaps the last sustained insistence of Pound's theory that economic and financial corruption, brought about by the insidious actions of large capitalists, is responsible for the majority of wars in modern history. Poundian criticism has only rarely touched on Canto CIII, and it has not been given extended treatment on its own terms, although individual lines have been considered in relation to wider discussion of *Thrones de los Cantares*. Massimo Bacigalupo links the canto to the opening of Canto C in its discussion of American history and the function of the American political machine, but also suggests that Pound's capacity for textual authority is reduced by the time he writes Canto CIII. Pound had trouble with two lines in particular, 'France, after Talleyrand started/ one war in Europe' (CIII/753), which originally read 'France, after Talleyrand started/ no war in Europe', and then 'no war in Europe until '70'. Unable to prove this belief (or uncertain of his claim), Pound changed it to its current form for publication.¹ For Bacigalupo this casts doubt on Pound's capacity for providing a chronicle that supports the very theory he is espousing, writing that 'Pound's reading of old annals and his doubtful insights into modern times will not coalesce, for the latter lack textual authority'.² In many ways, Pound's intention to present a chronicle in Canto CIII strains against the more discursive argument that drives his choice of subject matters. However, Canto CIII is well-balanced in its historical material, maintaining a relatively consistent temporal location in the nineteenth century, with fragments of ancient

¹ Massimo Bacigalupo, *The Forméd Trace: The Later Poetry of Ezra Pound* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 417

² Bacigalupo, *The Forméd Trace*, p. 417

Lombardy and the modern day breaking the chronicles up.

At first reading, then, Canto CIII seems out of place in the sequence of thrones. It lacks the lyricism of its predecessor and successor, and is perhaps best seen as a recapitulation of *The Cantos*'s dominant political and economic theses. Its specific central theme is that rulers with good intentions have had their plans or legacies ruined by external forces beyond their immediate control. The most prominent example given in the canto is President James Buchanan (1857-1861), whom Pound believes to have been a good man whose ideas were either ignored or were failed to be implemented. He also refers to the work of Talleyrand and Bismarck in establishing and maintaining the balance of power in Europe; a position contrasted with subsequent states of war on the continent in the century that followed the partition of Belgium. There are also references to Mussolini and the ancient Lombard King, Agelmund.

From a structural perspective, Canto CIII is relatively simple. It revolves around one of Pound's main theses: Pound draws examples of financial and political corruption from both America and Europe in the nineteenth century, with interjections from ancient China, Dark Age Lombardy, and the present day. Broadly, the canto may be divided into three discrete parts: the first part of the canto details political intrigue in The White House between 1850 and 1856; second, Pound looks at the balance of power in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century and the late career of Charles Maurice de Talleyrand; and a third, longer section about the career of James Buchanan up until his election as President. The Canto concludes with a short passage about Lombard history, primarily drawn from Pound's reading of Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards*, and Alexander del Mar's *History of Monetary Systems* (1895).

The canto is written in a mode combining the chronicle and the conversational, with the former in particular recalling the mode of presentation employed in the Malatesta cantos, the China cantos, and the work of Paul the Deacon and Jacques Paul Migne as appropriated throughout *Thrones*. It is a style of writing that Pound uses to great effect when channelling the historical vision of sources such as the archival material in Rimini he used for those treatments of Sigismundo Malatesta in cantos VIII-XI, his application of de Mailla's *Histoire general de la Chine* (1777-1783) in *Cantos LII-LXXI*, or, more formally, the style of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in his frequent use of 'and in that year' throughout the *Cantos*. According to Michael Andre Bernstein, the ability to synthesise such

documentary material within his long poem is one of Pound's most impressive achievements:

In spite of Pound's "mystical ear" (to borrow Williams' phrase) for the invention of new musical and rhythmical patterns, it is the daring confidence with which *The Cantos* are able to absorb so much prose narrative and historical documentation that remains one of their most decisive technical accomplishments.³

The Cantos are a coalescence of styles, rather than one single style, and Bernstein emphasises the importance of critical awareness of all of the poem's components by drawing on the virtues of the more prosaic elements. Canto CIII is dominated by the rhythms of prose and speech, and it is the flexibility of Pound's poetry, on both verbal and rhythmical levels, that allows him to draw different styles together. Subtle changes of tone and rhythm are brought about by careful and deliberate changes in perception and content. The fragmentary chronicles and historical visions that meet in Canto CIII can still be seen as a monument to Pound's poetic intentions and successes, as much as they may be symptomatic of his failures, even if they perhaps lack, as Bacigalupo has noted, the textual authority of earlier poems.

In order to situate Canto CIII in relation to Pound's general thought on the relationship between financial corruption and war it is useful to trace the development of this point throughout *The Cantos*. During the last forty years of his career, Pound pursued a line of opposition to finance capitalism as he believed it had developed by the time of the early twentieth century. In turn, the corruption of financial institutions by usurious activity, which in turn he believes corrupts political offices, is one of the dominant themes of *The Cantos*, becoming increasingly central to the project with the publication of *Eleven New Cantos XXXI-XLI* (1934), and in Pound's writing for the Social Credit journal, *The New English Weekly*.

Canto XXXVIII, for example, details the way in which Pound believed arms dealerships were able to manipulate conflicts for the sake of financial gain. Canto XXXVIII was written in 1933 and is

³ Michael Andre Bernstein, *The Tale of the Tribe: Ezra Pound and the Modern Verse Epic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 279

certainly the most significant in the *Eleven New Cantos* sequence from an economic standpoint. It is also a celebrated demonstration of Pound's much-discussed 'ideogrammic method', with instances of financial and political corruption placed one after the other, without a discursive link between them. The underhand and surreptitious methods by which Pound believes armaments corporations exploit peacetime business relations in order to manipulate wars are uniquely evoked by Pound's referential combinations. The essential fragments of various examples are presented in a kind of litany with little or no narrative explanation. Economics certainly dominates Canto XXXVIII, and the majority of it is dedicated to the revelation and litany of sins. The primary example is a character named Matevsky, who was a veiled reference to the arms dealer Basil Zaharoff. Pound highlights how language, and in particular conversation, is used to manipulate economic dealings and to encourage corruption:

Don't buy until you can get ours.
 And he went over the border
 and he said to the other side:
 The *other* side has more munitions. Don't buy
 until you can get ours.
 And Akers made a large profit and imported gold into
 English
 Thus increasing gold imports.
 The gentle reader has heard this before.
 And that year Mr Whitney
 Said how useful short sellin' was,
 We suppose he meant to the brokers
 And no one called him a liar.

(XXXVIII/187-188)

While we must, of course, differentiate between language itself and the use of language, Pound clearly makes the point that language is the medium by which corruption is transmitted. Usurious and corrupt political activity, in this canto, is upheld by conversation, discourse and argument. Thus, in response, Pound formulates a different mode of presentation in order to reveal the corruption inherent in the language of business, politics and economics. It is this method of juxtaposition that Pound employs frequently when delineating the links between corrupt practices and historical events.

22nd May of the same year, Preston Brooks, a Democratic representative of Southern Carolina, physically attacked Charles Sumner, a Free Soil democrat who had two days previously delivered an impassioned anti-slavery speech denouncing the Fugitive Slave Act and the Kansas-Nebraska Act in response to violence between pro- and anti- slavery factions in Kansas. Brooks, a fierce defender of Southern slave powers beat Sumner with his cane, nearly killing him.⁵ ‘The White House’ in this sense refers not only to the office of the President, but also to Washington’s political class more generally, with Pound taking the view that political infighting diminished and undermined the role of the president, as well as individual states’ rights; a corruption that he takes to be ultimately responsible for secession and war, rather than slavery. As if to emphasise this point, 1850 was also the year in which Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, which allowed by law the capture and return of slaves who had escaped to northern, Free states. It is perhaps to support his interpretation of the causes of the Civil War that Pound chooses to focus on political infighting as the significant historical event of 1850, rather than the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act.

Pound’s treatment of the Civil War is complex and unorthodox. He seems to relegate the importance of the war itself to a secondary concern, as well as its destructive effect on American society, culture and identity, preferring to focus on what he saw as its causes: political intrigue in The White House and, more importantly for Pound, the insidious machinations of international banking institutions. Thus, the specific war becomes a link in a long chain of conflicts brought about by vested financial interests around the world, arguably diminishing individual instances of atrocity and suffering in its generality. This differs greatly, of course, from Pound’s belligerence in favour of American intervention on the side of the Allies in World War One, and his recorded support for the war effort as a whole, as well as from his outrage at the suffering and bloodshed brought about by the war in *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and *A Draft of XXX Cantos*.

Indeed, in 1915 Pound wrote an article entitled ‘This Super-Neutrality’ in which he argued in favour of American involvement

⁵ For a full account of the conflict between Brooks and Sumner, see Manisha Sinha, ‘The Caning of Charles Sumner: Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War’, *Journal of the Early Republic*, 23:2 (2003), 233-262.

in the war effort. Here, Pound questions American neutrality, and explains the constitutional role of the United States across the nation's history. He identifies two phases in the development of an American 'ideal' (which he believes President Woodrow Wilson to have misunderstood): the first was Washington's and Hamilton's development of the young republic as an 'asylum in the West'; the second phase includes the events surrounding the civil war. Pound defends the right of the South to secede from the union, but does praise the abolition of slavery (though one should point out that Pound is unconvinced by the legality of the Union's war effort).⁶ He then recognises the need to expand the American ideal or principles of freedom to a worldview. Pound's position can thus be read as a third way. He defends the right of the confederate states to secede from the union, as well as their right to self-determination in their own economic and political affairs, whilst praising what he saw as the coincidental end of slavery. Rather than comment on slavery, then, he purports to chastise political machinations in Washington, unearthing corrupt institutions and exposing vested interests. He returns to this point in Canto XLVI, written in 1935 and published a year later in *The New English Weekly*:

Debts of the South to New York, that is to the
banks of the city, two hundred million,
war, I don't think (or have it your way...)
about slavery?

(XLVI/231-232)

The line 'the Slaves were red herring', therefore, is by no means an endorsement of slavery, nor a defence of inaction in removing its institutions, but rather it is Pound's attempt to emphasise other causes by dismissing the orthodox view, even if the tone with which Pound makes his point is disturbingly callous in referring to a practice that caused the deaths, torture, displacement, suffering, and oppression of millions of people—a number of whom still accounted for a sizeable portion of the population of the United States when Pound was born in 1885. Rather, in Canto CIII, he seems to wearily refer back to a point he had made twenty years previously, and which was not the general view.

⁶ Ezra Pound, 'This Super-Neutrality', *The New Age*, 17:25 (21 October 1915), p. 595.

Pound's interest in the causes of war, as well as his dedicated interest in his country's history, means that it is unsurprising that James Buchanan features in *The Cantos*. It is perhaps surprising, however, that Pound exonerates Buchanan from blame in the development of the Civil War. James Buchanan was born in Pennsylvania on 23 April 1791, entering the Pennsylvania House of Representatives as a member of the Federalist Party in 1814, before serving as a Member of Congress from 1821 to 1831. He served as Minister to Russia from 1831 to 1832, and Minister to the United Kingdom from 1853-1856, before being elected President of the United States in 1857. He served one term, and did not seek re-election, leaving office in 1861 after Abraham Lincoln's victory, and died at home in Pennsylvania on 1 June 1868. He is generally portrayed as an ineffective president, whose desire to appease Slave powers undermined what he saw as his moral position. A large portion of blame for the Civil War was laid at Buchanan's door. Pound's primary source for Buchanan's life and administration is George Ticknor Curtis' *Life of James Buchanan* (1883), both volumes one and two. Curtis' account of Buchanan is sympathetic, decrying in his concluding chapter the 'misconception and misrepresentation' that plagued his legacy.⁷ Curtis' account is extensive and detailed, providing transcripts of Buchanan's speeches as well as large amounts of his correspondence. However, doubts have been cast over the arrangement and presentation of the documents in the biography. William MacDonald, reviewing John Bassett Moore's edited collection of Buchanan's speeches, letters and papers for *The American Historical Review* in 1908, wrote that 'it is disturbing to find that Curtis should often have printed his documents carelessly or fragmentarily'.⁸ Nevertheless, the biography provided ample material for Pound to draft Canto CIII in St Elizabeth's.

As Pound would have known, Buchanan's reputation has been greatly disputed since the Civil War. The year before Pound came to write Canto CIII, Robert E. Carlson published an appraisal of Buchanan's political career in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*. Carlson presents Buchanan as a reluctant statesman by

⁷ George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan: Fifteenth President of the United States*, vol. II (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1883), p. 667.

⁸ William MacDonald, 'Review of James Buchanan; John Barrett Moore, *The Works of James Buchanan: Comprising his Speeches, State Papers and Private Correspondence*', *The American Historical Review*, 14:1 (1908), p. 147.

the time of his appointment to London, using extensive passages from his correspondence to support his account. Carlson suggests that this reluctance extended to the presidency, and that it was only when Buchanan's supporters appealed to him as a candidate 'based on the party rather than [an] individual' did he relent.⁹ The article does not go into detail about Buchanan's presidential administration, but the representation of Buchanan as an intelligent, well-intentioned, yet reluctant statesman who accepted the role of president for reasons other than personal gain certainly supports Pound's claim that '*Thrones* concerns the states of mind of people responsible for something more than their personal conduct'.¹⁰

However, the accuracy of this reading must be called into doubt. James L. Huston notes that the historical assessment of the Buchanan administration has often pointed to the power and influence that Southern Slave Powers held over the Democratic Party's political attitudes. He also suggests that the Buchanan administration was affected greatly by political corruption and underhanded deals, though the extent to which Buchanan himself was involved is unclear, beyond, of course, his general sympathy and preference for Southern attitudes towards slavery and trade.¹¹ Discussions of Buchanan's presidency such as Huston's take into account the considerable political and economic complexity of his administration. In a retrospective account of Buchanan's presidency in *The Journal of Pennsylvania History*, Allen Cole goes further and concludes that he was 'a convenient scapegoat with the misfortune of occupying the Executive Mansion during the crucial months leading up to the Civil War'.¹² It is the complexity of this period that Pound attempts to delineate in Canto CIII.

Although he dedicates more space to instances from Buchanan's time as a diplomat in Russia and Britain during the

⁹ Robert E. Carlson, 'James Buchanan and Public Office: An Appraisal', *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 81:3 (1957), p. 275.

¹⁰ Ezra Pound, Donald Hall, 'Ezra Pound: An Interview' in *Ezra Pound's Cantos: A Casebook*, ed. Peter Makin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 259.

¹¹ James L. Huston, 'James Buchanan, the Slavocracy, and the Disruption of the Democratic Party' in *A Companion to the Antebellum Presidents*, ed. Joel H. Silbey (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), p. 429.

¹² Allen F. Cole, 'Asserting his Authority: James Buchanan's Failed Vindication', *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies*, 70:1 (Winter 2003), 81-97, 82.

middle of his career is by far the longest part of his treatment of the president, it is really the few lines referring to his administration that are the most significant.

that men have sunk to consider the material value
of the Union
a grant from States of limited powers
nec Templum aedificavit
nec restituit rem
but not his fault by a damn sight.
(CIII/756)

The two lines of Latin, which translate as ‘he neither built the temple/ nor restored anything’, separate the two paraphrased lines from Buchanan’s inaugural address from Pound’s assessment of his presidency. The use of ‘Templum aedificavit’ compares Buchanan unfavourably with Sigismundo Malatesta, to whom the phrase ‘Templum aedificavit’ is memorably applied in reference to his restoration of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini (VIII/32). Yet, Pound argues, Buchanan was prevented from achieving his aims, implying that this was due to the failures of the political class more generally.

Pound draws his quotations directly from Curtis’ transcript of Buchanan’s inaugural speech, with slight adjustments of vocabulary either to paraphrase or to fit the poetic rhythm that Pound had in mind. While the alteration of these lines could be seen as an infringement on the authenticity of Buchanan’s arguments, Pound does represent his views well. In the speech, which Curtis transcribes in full, he places his faith in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and makes an impassioned plea for the protection of the Union, the first line of which Pound takes as his focus:

It is an evil omen of the times that men have undertaken to calculate the mere material value of the Union. Reasoned estimates have been presented of the pecuniary profits and local advantages which would result to different States and sections from its dissolution, and of the comparative injuries that such an event would inflict on other States and sections. Even descending to this low and narrow view of the mighty question, all such calculations are at fault. We at present enjoy a free trade

throughout our extensive and expanding country, such as the world has never witnessed. The trade is conducted on the railroads and canals—on noble rivers and arms of the sea—which bind together the north and south, the east and west of our confederacy.¹³

Buchanan appeals to a Romantic notion of nationhood in the face of secessionary movements. By letting the line stand outside of context, however, Pound allows for an alternative reading: implying that international capitalists constituted powerful lobby groups behind American federal power. Buchanan outlines his practical vision of the Union later in the speech, claiming that ‘the Federal Constitution is a grant from the States to Congress of certain specific powers’, which should, in Buchanan’s view, be a ‘strict construction of the powers of Government’.¹⁴ Pound’s paraphrase, ‘a grant from States of limited powers’ is thus a fair representation of this argument. Another point of attraction for Pound may have been the vision of America as a nation whose trade is built on ‘railroads and canals’. Pound’s grandfather, Thaddeus Coleman Pound, a U.S. Representative from 1877-1883, is memorialised in *The Cantos* as ‘that man [who] sweat blood/ to put through that railway’ (XXII/101), and is present in Canto CIII trying to keep ‘non-interest-bearing’ currency in circulation (CIII/753). Pound believed that his grandfather built railways, such as in Wisconsin, for public benefit rather than for public gain.¹⁵ Ultimately, Buchanan’s vision of America only serves to endorse Pound’s treatment of him as a man of good intentions who was ultimately unsuccessful. Those ‘rivers and arms of the sea’ that joined the Union soon separated it from the Confederacy; those railroads and canals became conduits for soldiers, armaments, and telegrams as the country mobilised the machinery of war only a few months after Buchanan’s term ended. It is difficult to see how, in light of how the Civil War transpired, Pound would allot a Dantescan throne for Buchanan. Canto CIII perhaps gestures towards a monument of intention, rather than achievement.

¹³ James Buchanan, Inaugural Address in George Ticknor Curtis, *Life of James Buchanan*, p. 190

¹⁴ James Buchanan, Inaugural Address, p. 192.

¹⁵ Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (London: Stanley Nott, 1935), p. 33.

Admittedly, Canto CIII lacks the recurrence of passages of paradisiacal lyricism that permeate the surface of *Thrones'* more documentary and prosaic sequences. There are, however, two notable fragments associated with paradise. The first fragment comprises four, short lines at the end of the opening passage of American history:

and the people (min) ate
caelum renovabat
animals dance,
manes come.

(CIII/752)

According to Carroll Terrell, the first line in this fragment is a central part Pound's notion of wise rule: namely, that the ruler provides food for all of his people; a notion implied later with 'on pouvait manger' in the middle part of the canto (CIII/753). 'Caelum renovabat' translates as 'and he restored heaven', an invocation of both the divine and terrestrial harmonies brought about by good government, in which 'animals dance' in accordance with divine forces, and 'manes' or 'spirits [of the dead]' are called upon. These spirits are of essential importance in particular, with Pound's long poem beginning with Odysseus calling upon the spirit of Tiresias in Canto I, and becoming reinvigorated with the memories of figures in Pound's own past in *The Pisan Cantos*. From a political perspective, the injunction here is that wise rulers pay heed to traditions of good government; this is an essential part of that which Pound believes himself to be chronicling in *Thrones*.

The word 'manes', which is associated memorably with Mussolini in Canto LXXIV, may also refer back to the final passage of Canto XCVII, which relies on Paul the Deacon's summary of Sextus Festus' *epitome* of the Roman Grammarian Verrius Flaccus' *De verborum significatu*. Pound himself read of these texts in Migne's *Patrologia Latina*, a project of language and knowledge passing through various eras and stages that would not be lost on Pound's conception of his own 'palimpsest' (CXVI/817) project.¹⁶ One of the central themes of Canto XCVII is the role of the precise use of language in good government, and Pound refers to the divine spirits

¹⁶ Terrell, *Companion to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Volume II (London: University of California Press, 1948), p. 636.

who remain in the air, writing ‘Manes Di, the augurs invoke them/ per aethere terrenaeeque’. The Latin phrase ‘Manes Di’ translates as ‘the spirits of gods’, and ‘aethere terrenaeeque’ as ‘earthly and heavenly things’, unifying human and divine law in a way that represents Pound’s vision throughout *Thrones*. We can thus situate this short fragment from Canto CIII amongst the divine passages of the section. If Pound is recalling his appropriation of Paul the Deacon’s work in Canto XCVII, then it also prefigures his reliance on *The History of the Lombards* in the final sequence of Canto CIII, which details Agelmund’s reign in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Thus the canto can be situated in the divine traditions of Pound’s long poem, and not simply be read as a recapitulation of the economic and political theories that he has developed during its production. It is worth noting, however, that, as Sean Pryor has eloquently suggested ‘the poem inhabits a paradise from which we are shut out’.¹⁷ Pound’s paradisiacal discussions tend to revolve around that would could have happened, or which happened in the distant past, always beyond the reader’s immediate reach.

What is certainly clear is that, even in Pound’s sympathetic appraisal, Buchanan does enter into a pantheon of divine rule that transcends national, religious, linguistic, and historical boundaries. The presence of Agelmund and Confucius, and to a lesser extent Mussolini, serve as successful counterpoints to Buchanan’s failure to achieve his aims. They also indicate that Pound’s vision of divine rule permeates even the densely historical passages of Canto CIII. The final sequence draws on subject matter that is recurrent throughout *Thrones*:

Agelmund reigned 33 years
“quae a thure
solebant sacrificiis”...
That was in Tuscany
In this province is Roma
Brennus came here for the wine
liking its quality
Lupus comes itineris. Rothar arianae haeresios
edictii prologo
dope already in use

¹⁷ Sean Pryor, *W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound and the Poetry of Paradise* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 178.

“Puteum de testiculis impleam clericorum”
dixit Alchis

would fill a well with preists’ balls,
heretics’, naturally,

Das Leihkapital.

(CIII/757)

The violence of Pound’s language is disconcerting and although there is much to support Robert Casillo’s argument that *Thrones* defines ‘a supposed Western tradition of political corporatism extending from Byzantium to Mussolini’, the main contention of the canto applies beyond that tradition, and is less celebratory than other passages celebrating good government.¹⁸ Pound ends the canto by referring to the ‘Mensdorf letter’. This letter was written by Albert Mensdorf (and, Terrell believes, partially drafted by Pound) and sent to Nicholas Butler Murray at the Executive Committee of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace:

And there is, of course, the Mensdorff letter
that has had (1958)

no publicity.

(CIII/757)¹⁹

The purpose of the letter was to recommend a study into the causes of war. Canto CIII performs part of the task of that prospective study, recapitulating the political and economical values of the *Cantos* by introducing new material into an argument to which Pound was dedicated and of which he was convinced. Yet, just as Buchanan’s presidency ended unhappily, Pound’s last insistence of his theory ends in a failure of communication. The canto is, however, no less significant for that fact.

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