

‘TO THE KING ONELY TO PUT VALUE’:
MONARCHY AND COMMONS IN POUND’S
CANTO CIX

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Canto CIX, the last in *Thrones de Los Cantares*, is an evocative conclusion to the sequence. For several years also the endpoint to the *Cantos* as a whole, Canto CIX offers a taut summary of its parent-work’s main themes, even if it never quite achieves a moment of paradisaic breakthrough. Moving from the survey of legal history first seen in the preceding two ‘Coke Cantos’, through historical vignettes and restatements of familiar motifs, the poem arrives finally at a lyrical climax that is one of the strongest passages in the later *Cantos*—a synthesis of the historical cut-up of the Adams Cantos and Pound’s sun-drenched imagery of the 1910s and twenties. This is a quintessentially Poundian poem that goes some way toward vindicating Pound’s long-running interest in motifs of order, moral rectitude, and civic construction. At the very least, it complicates Donald Davie’s view that the writing of *Thrones* is “inexcusable”, and should be treated as something more than a late-period bagatelle.¹

The canto is concerned with monarchy and right governance, in keeping with the underlying premise of *Thrones*. Yet there is ambivalence in Pound’s handling of the theme. Aside from providing a step-by-step exegesis of the poem, the main thing I want to draw out in what follows is the tension between Pound’s advocacy of Coke’s attempts to preserve democratic structures in early modern England, and his countervailing interest in benevolent forms of English kingship across the centuries. Herein lies the tangled core of Pound’s political identity. One the one hand, he cleaved to populist ideals broadly in keeping with his American

¹ Donald Davie, ‘Sicily in the Cantos’, *Paideuma* 6:1 (1978), p. 107. It should be noted, however, that Davie judged the conclusion of Canto CIX a qualified success (see page 106 of the same article).

[...] That after the end of this Session of Parliament, no person shall within this Realm of England, make, build, erect, or cause to be made, builded, or erected any manner of Cottage for habitation or dwelling, nor convert or ordain any building or housing, made, or hereafter to be made, to be used as a Cottage for habitation or dwelling, unless the same person do assign and lay to the same Cottage or Building four acres of ground at the least, to be accounted by the Statute or Ordinance *de terriis mensurandis*, being his or her own free-hold and inheritance, lying near to the said Cottage, to be continually occupied and manured therewith, so long as the same Cottage shall be inhabited, upon pain that every such offender shall forfeit to our Sovereign Lady the Queens Majesty, her heirs and successors, ten pound of lawful money of England, for every such offence. (736)

Pound picks freely from pages 736 to 745 of the second *Institutes* as he underlines his central argument: that these new buildings have been provided with appropriate breathing space (the crucial “four acres of ground” already alluded to in Canto CVIII) because of the just legal precedents set down to guide their construction. “Curtiglia teneant” means literally “cottage dwellers”, and is from Coke, page 736; “enough land about each of them” is Pound’s paraphrase of the gist of the statute; “16 and a halfe to the pole” is from Coke 737, the first of four “incidents” or guidelines intended to aid implementation of the four acres rule (“these acres must be accounted according to the statute or ordinance *de admensuratione terrae, anno 35. E. 1*, which is after sixteen foot and an halfe to the pole”).

Pound then condenses a long list of “exceptions”, which in Coke extends—*inter alia*—to cottages “within a mile of the sea”, “upon the side of such part of a navigable river, where the Admirall ought to have jurisdiction, so long as a sailer shall dwell there”, “cottages erected or converted for the necessary habitation of any labourers in any Minerall workes, Cole-mines, Quarries, or Delfes of stone or slate”, and “any cottage made for a common herdman” or “for a common shepherd”. This opening passage concludes with a luminous detail, a more lyrical phrase (“Idlennesse, mother of pickings”) drawn from Coke 740, where we find a moral gloss on the four acres rule:

The inconveniences that grow by unlawful Cottages, and Inmates in Cottages against this statute, as appear by the Preamble, are great, being nests to hatch idleness, the mother of pickings, theeveries, stealing of wood, &c. tending also to the prejudice of lawful Commoners; for that new erected Cottages within the memory of man, though they have four acres of ground, or more land to them, according to this Act, ought not to common in the wastes of the Lord; but the greatest inconvenience of all is, the ill breeding and educating of youth, which inconveniences may be easily helped and remedied by the provisions of this excellent Law ...

While Coke here tends toward authoritarian stereotype (imagining a mob of aberrant “Commoners” who will brawl and steal if unchecked by *cordons sanitaires*), for Pound the four acres rule is an example of good governance ensuring harmony in the social realm.

‘Idleness’, of course, had been a major bugbear since at least as far back as the recruitment of Homer’s lotus-eaters in Canto XX; Pound’s treatment of it here is an attempt to contrast human creativity with the negative effects of poor social planning and poor aesthetic taste. If Coke’s gloss is conservative in its portrait of an ill-bred populace, there is little trace of such condescension in Pound’s treatment of the source. Indeed, the emphasis here and elsewhere in *Thrones* on sensitive town planning chimes with the progressive spirit of the era. The forties and fifties saw widespread discussion across the Keynesian West on the merits of a humane civic architecture, and though Pound was certainly no social democrat, it is worth noting the timeliness of his interest in Coke’s blueprint for a well-ordered, well-planned city. In one sense at least—in its pre-occupation with the pragmatics of building and rebuilding—Canto CIX is a work in step with its historical moment.

II.

After a reintroduutory glance at the EPARXON or *Book of the Eparch*—treated earlier in Cantos XCVI–CIX proceeds to rehearse more fragments from Coke. Lines 9 through 11 are taken from Coke 741, and deal with matters of currency, specifically attempts in the Elizabethan period to revitalise the English economy after it had reached its nadir in the reign of the boy-king Edward VI (1547–1553). Here we are reminded that Canto CIX is among other things

one of Pound's 'English' cantos, part of a series in the later stages of the work that climaxes with *Thrones* and its pantheon of English monarchs. One of the major assertions here and elsewhere in the sequence is that an ideal legal framework will provide the necessary checks and balances on a corrupt monarchy. Coke's own struggles against James I are at the forefront of his character sketch here. However, Canto CIX is elsewhere sympathetic in its treatments of British kings and queens. Pound's intention is to herald the approach to an idealised summit where the 'good' monarchs are seated on thrones of righteous governance alongside equally righteous lawmakers like Coke. But his portraits of eminent Englishmen can combine with the finance theme to tip over into atavistic jingoism. There are recommendations here to "buy English" and "not carry coin, plate or masse out of the country", faintly recalling the racial sub-texts of Pound's earlier economic tirades. Lines 12-14 rephrase further statutes from Coke that continue the anti-usury theme.

The discussion then veers from the economic to the aesthetic, as Pound invokes Coke's quotation of Chaucer's "Sergeant of the Law": "No wight could pinch at his (Littleton's) writing / long in the making". Another luminous detail arrives in the form of Coke's "vocabula artis" (the vocalities of art) taken from the "Proeme" to the first *Institute*, before a further layer of quotation arrives in the form of Coke's treatment of Henry Bracton's "Uncivil to judge a part in ignorance of the totality", taken from his *De Legibus et consuetudinibus Angliae*. This phrase, which is juxtaposed with Coke's maxim "nemo omnia novit" ("without knowing all the details") is in keeping with the Poundian notion of a worldhood comprised of specificity—what is in Canto VIII called the *concret Allgemeine* (concrete Universal) after the German Hegelian philosopher Fritz Schultze. In David Gordon's account, however, more distinctive notions of organic unity underpin this avowal of the general and particular acting in synergy:

Thrones is a culminating discovery of human happiness on earth by means inherent in the vital relationships in these constitutions. The discovering process takes place in the manner of botanical observation of a garden, one however that doesn't damage the life of the plants. From the pattern of veins in the leaf and arrangement of leaves we

learn of the inner structure of the plants, thus the metamorphic and metaphoric structure as well.⁴

These ideas are only lightly touched upon at this stage, but they will become gradually more and more central to the canto as it progresses.

From line 23 the poem departs somewhat from the Coke fabric to become more eclectic in structure:

and they could not have been
 “excused jury service”
 had there been no juries in his, The Confessor’s, time.
 Amenities are from Ambracia
 veigne en Court
 and Sellaio
 painted that goddess
 le Concord del fine
 Coke ...

(CIX/792)

Pound’s own voice takes centre stage in the canto for the first time (“and they could not have been ...”) to gloss Coke’s researches into the legal culture of Edward the Confessor, the last Anglo-Saxon King of England, whose reign immediately preceded the Norman invasion of 1066. The basic point being made here is that jury service, a key element of just governance for Pound, must have existed in Edward’s reign. But the deeper implication is of a long-running Anglo-American tradition of progressive lawmaking reaching back into the early-medieval period. Again, crucial here is the sense that this legal continuum is being encouraged, or at least in some indirect way safeguarded, by the wise overlordship of the good monarch: in this case Edward the Confessor, who is contrasted positively with the ‘bad’ king Edward VI, and also another later namesake, Edward VIII, a more ambiguous figure, who we will soon encounter. Pound is describing a thousand-year lineage of English kingship stretching from circa 1000AD to World War II, girded by successive renewals of a just legal order.

⁴ David Gordon, ‘Edward Coke: The Azalia is Grown’, *Paideuma* 4:2-3 (1975), p. 246.

As the canto becomes more elliptical and ideogrammatic, the “3 King Edwards” subject rhyme is joined by increasingly exotic paraphernalia. First there are the “amenities from Ambracia / veigne en Court”, Mediterranean presences which immediately recall a more striking object, the painting “Story of Cupid and Psyche” by the late-fifteenth century Florentine artist Jacopo da Sellaio (c. 1441-1493). Sellaio’s exquisite high-renaissance work depicting the marriage of Cupid and Psyche was painted onto a wedding chest given to a Florentine bride in the 1470s. Pound’s allusion to it here reinforces his theme of a cosmic unity embodied in well-made artefacts, though the underlying moral of the Cupid and Psyche story—that wives should honour their husbands or face the wrath of Venus, goddess of marriage—may also be relevant for its connotation of obedience to the law. At any rate the central image is of a perfectly harmonious social contract, which reappears in the ensuing lines with the return to Coke.

The phrase “Le Concord del fine” (harmony through fines), taken from Coke’s first *Institutes*, again suggests an ideally balanced financial or legal system free from imperfection or superfluity, a sentiment echoed in the exclamation from *Women of Trachis*, which in Pound’s earlier translation became “splendour, it all coheres!” Pound then reels off a string of old French phrases from Coke 706 that are intended to convey the solidity of the law and its importance as a foundational basis of the natural order, though the jagged form here works against the sentiment. Thankfully, another luminous detail taken from the end of the “Proeme” to the second *Institutes* glosses the entire section powerfully: “certainty engenders repose”. This is taken from Coke’s more expansive peroration:

And our Expositions or Commentaries upon *Magna Charta*, and other Statutes, are the resolutions of Judges in Courts of Justice in judicial course of proceeding, either related or reported in our Books, or extant in judicial Records, or in both, and therefore being collected together, shall (as we conceive) produce certainty, the Mother and Nurse of repose and quietness, and are not like to the waves of the Sea ...

There are premonitions in Pound’s treatment of this material of the paradisaical post-Canto CIX works, in which stillness and the yearning for an elusive fixity become leitmotifs.

More phrases from Coke (lines 40-42) emphasise the “clarity” that arises out of good legislation. The “Time mother of Manors” fragment underlines that these legal initiatives were part of a deepening process across the centuries, and the notion that just legality can provide a check on the power of ‘bad’ monarchs is baldly stated:

Nor can the King create a new custom
in the fine print
tempora non regum ...
(CIX/792)

The concluding motto, “time is not the King’s”, bears out the emphasis in the preceding line on a sort of ineffable temporal process guiding civic history. Yet there is considerable vagueness here, and some internal contradiction given the surrounding sense that it is good rulers rather than time itself that dictates law-making. Perhaps because he has stumbled into a slightly confused line of suggestion, Pound then retreats into matters of linguistic precision:

by a hawk, a pair of gilt spurs or similia
Cope is a hill
dene: a valley, arundinetum
drus is a thicket
Si nomina nescis perit rerum cognition
nemo artifex nascitur ...
(CIX/792)

Pound condenses glosses by Coke on a series of *recherché* words, probably chosen here because they also happen to be euphonious monosyllables—“cope”, “dene”, “drus”—but also because they convey human attempts to charter a natural landscape with exacting sensitivity. The latin couplet from Coke’s first *Institutes*, “A thing perishes if it is not named / no man is born an artefact”, supports the classically Poundian argument for right-naming.

Finally, in a conclusion of sorts to this long opening section drawn from Coke, which comprises the entire first half of the canto, there is another cogent statement of the Poundian worldview: “Though the bishopric be dissolved / a city remaineth”. In Coke, Pound has uncovered an apothegm to rival his earlier avowals of idealised permanence—the “what thou lovest well remains”

(LXXXI/541) refrain in Canto LXXXI, and the lyrical affirmation of Canto XC: “Trees die & the dream remains” (XC/629). The assertion made here is that good laws will outlive the vanity of kings, as they did in the sixteenth century English context that was Coke’s immediate inheritance, where Henry VIII’s vanity in destroying the monasteries gave way to stronger civic tides that brought about the rise of the modern city (London). At the summit of this sketch of the *paradiso terrestre*, Pound places the Tuan ideogram outlining the four duties of Confucianism: love, duty, propriety, and wisdom. Crucially, “custom” becomes a fifth duty: this whole section, and indeed the Coke Cantos in general, have argued for the maintenance of humane customs across the *longue durée* of human civilisation. Though Pound’s supporting material from Coke has on occasion been collaged scappily, and though the legal fragments can be dry, the point comes through finally with some force and pathos.

III.

The caesura in the flow of the canto marked by the Tuan ideogram is followed by a long passage précising the *Charter of Connecticut*. This was a 1662 document in which the English king Charles II outlined a series of measures enabling just legislation for the people of Connecticut, apparently offered in response to the entreaties of local Governor John Winthrop. Before collaging phrases from the *Charter*, Pound alludes to the so-called legend of Charter Oak. The story goes that on the night of 31 October, 1687, Hartford resident Joseph Wadsworth absconded with the *Charter* from a local tavern, hiding it in a tree outside town to preserve it from the clutches of Sir Edmund Andros, an agent of the English crown. Obvious connotations are suggested by the tale: here is a representative of the people making a heroic intervention to safeguard the Anglo-American legal tradition, and in the face of a malign authority figure.

But there is a wider movement underway here. Pivoting on this historical vignette, the canto has crossed the Atlantic to discover the continuation of its ideal legal tradition in the foundational roots of the United States. This in keeping with Pound’s worldview, which usually maintained that England had gone awry at some point in the seventeenth century, perhaps with the strengthening grip of capitalist economic strictures, and that afterward the precepts of the earthly paradise went underground to be promulgated in isolated pockets throughout the world (just as the neo-platonists and

Albigensians maintained the obscure ancient wisdoms of the classical world in medieval Europe). The legend of Charter Oak, in other words, underlines that in the waste land of Western modernity, beauty exists only in fragments, in certain by-the-way enclaves where heroic individuals manage to preserve humane customs in the teeth of official barbarism.

The quotations from the *Charter* itself are mostly oblique and unremarkable. The writing here is redolent of the bare itemisation and factual montage of New-England history in Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems*, written contemporaneously with *Thrones* by a sometime visitor of Pound's at St Elizabeths. Amid the seemingly random bricolage, it is difficult to focus on details of particular interest, and there are no attempts to break up the *Charter* material with glosses or subject rhymes.⁵ We might point to certain standout phrases: "a Body politique" (393) underlines the metaphor of an organic social order; the references to ships and fishing chime with the central sea-voyage or "periplum" leitmotif seen throughout the *Cantos*; the mention of "Mynes, Mynerals Precious Stones Quarries" offers a subject-rhyme with Coke's itemisation of labour practices in the first lines of the canto. But really we must treat this as a copied-and-pasted fragment unto itself, one not especially suited to close reading.⁶

In addition to the transatlantic or international theme, the only other important thing to note about the *Charter* section is its affirmation of an English monarch, Charles II, who is implicitly alluded to here as a judicious ruler, presumably in contrast to his

⁵ Terrell's *Companion* quotes the relevant source passages from the *Charter* at length, so I do not think it profitable to do so here.

⁶ Indeed, this passage may well have been part of an aborted attempt to initiate a new "American section" that never materialised. In a useful discussion of the American element in the Coke *Cantos*, David Ten Eyck has recently suggested that Pound's use of the *Charter of Connecticut* in Canto CIX was intended as a bridge to a more extensive return to American themes. In examining Pound's manuscripts, Eyck concludes that it is "likely that Pound saw the Connecticut Charter not simply as an end in itself, but as a pivot between Sir Edward Coke and a broader consideration of early American history; one which would allow him to develop the connections between the legal framework of the American Republic and an ordered vision of natural process more explicitly than he had done in the Adams *Cantos*." David Ten Eyck, *Ezra Pound's Adams Cantos* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), p. 147.

The Sicilian rose of Cuilio D'alcamo has grown into the English azalea (*azalea procumbens* or *Indica* which originated in China) as we awaken from the 'bois dormant' of *Rock-Drill* reminding us that the legislative ability of Frederick II was known in the England of Henry III.⁸

It should go without saying that this floral motif underlines the 'England' theme, as well as recalling another good—or at least satisfactory—monarch, Henry III, the long-reigning English king of the thirteenth century (like his father John ten years earlier, Henry was compelled to agree to a limitation of his powers under the Great Charter of 1225). But other, more important locational notes are struck in these lines. In the recollection of the feldspar figure, there is an implied shift back to the colourful Mediterranean sea-world that is the *locus classicus* of the early *Cantos*, signalling a move toward recapitulation of earlier images that will accelerate toward the close of the poem. As well as marking a return, these lines point forward, deriving from Pound's researches into the ancient Chinese Na-khi kingdom, as powerfully evoked in the works of the Austrian-American explorer and botanist Joseph Rock (and picked up by Pound in Canto CX). The geographical scope of the poem is rapidly expanding to pan-global proportions after the narrower Anglo-American focus of the previous sections.

There is then a brief return to the matter of England and its rulers, as the line is drawn from the earlier appearance of the first English King Edward (the Confessor) and an intermediary (Edward VI) to mention here of the last or latest Edward (VIII). The fragment betrays the continued influence of the fascist mythos in Pound's worldview during this period. Edward VIII, a Nazi sympathiser who visited Hitler at his Obersalzberg retreat in 1937, is presented here as an idealised figure determined to oppose the hell of World War II before he was forced to abdicate in 1936; apparently, Pound suggests, at the behest of the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin, then beginning to mobilise the armed forces in preparation for conflict. That Pound should choose to celebrate Edward, a nefarious character who in Gore Vidal's assessment "always had something of ... riveting stupidity to say on any subject", is unfortunate.⁹ Clearly,

⁸ Gordon, as above, p. 249.

⁹ Gore Vidal, *Palimpsest* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 206.

although Pound's fascist commitment might have abated superficially by the late 1950s, in essence it was unreconstructed, a fact that must colour how we view the wider argument in Canto CIX and *Thrones* in general for an elite kingship based on enlightened autocracy.

After a brief nod at the existence of trial by jury in fifth-century BC Aeschylean Athens, which repeats lines from Canto LXXXVII, there is a return to Coke, with more or less exact repetitions of fragments from Canto CVIII underlining the "four acres" rule for house building and precepts for maintaining the value of the English currency. The *accelerando* marking the conclusion to the poem and to the sequence is now fully underway. We quickly weave back to the Mediterranean, to Taormina in Sicily, which in Canto XCI provided the setting for the Neoplatonic visions of Appolonius of Tyre. Pound's concept of a Pythagorean or Platonic harmony is being invoked as we approach the pinnacle of *Thrones*. There is then a recapitulation of a couplet from Canto LXXXI, the climax of the *Pisan Cantos*, so that the earlier "Has he curved us the bowl of the lute?" morphs into "form is cut in the lute's neck, tone is from the bowl" (CIX/794). In addition to this backward glance, there are strong echoes throughout this whole passage of the ideal forms observed on the Mediterranean coastline in early cantos (see, for example, 2, 7, and 17).

The final fourteen lines of the poem are a tumbling avalanche of allusion. Canto LXXXVII is recalled in the allusion to the Selloi, a secret society from Dodona in Greece, which sheltered an oracle whose prophecy is "breathed out" of an oak tree in Pound's translation of *Women of Trachis*. We are moving from the historical "concrete universal" to a more abstract world of myth and neoplatonism. The feldspar figure from a few lines earlier is repeated, before a standalone line mentions one of the central guiding concepts of the poem: "phyllotaxis". From the assertion that house construction must allow for surrounding fields, through Coke's itemisation of hills and thickets, to the valorisation of the Charter Oak, the canto has continually returned to images of organic order and natural harmony. Now the mention of phyllotaxis—the arrangement of plant leaves such that they are able to attract sunlight—puts a seal on this leitmotif. As so often in the Platonic, Dantesque *Cantos*, Pound's poetry is deriving impetus from a process of upward movement. Allusions to acres of ground and the sacred

properties of trees have culminated in an image of leaves tilting upward toward sunshine.

Around this stem allusion to the phyllotaxis concept, Pound then arranges a quick succession of concluding images. Ino, daughter of Cadmus appears in a repetition of the mention of Leucothea in Canto XCVIII. Neoplatonist luminaries are listed—Duns Scotus Erigena, St Anselm, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, Charles François Marie Rémusat—in an apparitional panorama of the faces seated in Pound’s heavenly circle of thrones. The sun (“Helios”) is briefly glimpsed, and Ino reappears to show her “beautiful ankles”. Finally, in a return to the theme of construction, Pound rattles off a list of exemplary architecture—the Roman churches of San Domenica, Santa Sabina, Santa Maria Trastevere, and the Constantinople church Santa Maria in Cosmedin. Against these concrete spiritual ideals, Pound places the “melon hat of St Peter’s”, a building constructed after the “fall” of the post-Renaissance descent into capitalism and/or barbarism. Then, with a final flourish, the reader is admonished to remain attentive, as the sequence finishes with a clear sense that there is more to come, for all the rapid-fire notes of summary: “You in the dinghy (piccioletta) astern there!” (CIX/794) Pound’s allusion to the *Paradiso* suggests the journey will continue in succeeding episodes. Whether this was indeed the case is a matter for those scholars who have and continue to appraise *Drafts and Fragments*.

CONCLUSION

As so often with the *Cantos*, the reader is likely to emerge from Canto CIX somewhat dazed. This has ostensibly been a poem about order, and moreover one that arrives as the final instalment in a sequence which continually advances the most exacting standards for maintaining social and aesthetic harmony. Canto CIX should, if it is following its own internal logic, be a neat rounding off—in musical terms, a perfect cadence. From the first half of the poem, we have the image of Coke’s cottages arrayed in perfect proportion: neatly constructed blocks resembling those in plans for social-democratic townscapes. So far, the argument of the poem is grounded: in its historical source material, and in the practical case it makes for the importance of a well-constructed city. Yet already in this section we can see populist sentiments cutting against the authoritarian impulse. As noted above, there is some contradiction in the notion—advanced in the Coke passages and in the Charter

Oak tale—that on the one hand common law acts as a kind of independent safeguard against authoritarian rule—while on the other, it is the individual genius of the monarch that matters most. One might counter that Pound is making a case in *Thrones* for the co-existence of both royalty and commons in his ideal pantheon, and this is certainly one of the points he is making. One might also posit that the unifying thread here is order, broadly understood: that common judiciary and royal judiciousness can be two complementary arms of the body politique, both of which guarantee an orderly social realm. But the argument never quite comes across, especially with such weak examples as Edward VIII to prove the case, and there is finally no resolution of the tension between Poundian democracy and autocracy.

Indeed, instead of concluding the poem and the sequence with a gloss on the Coke material and its underlying tensions, Canto CIX departs in its final lines into the Mediterranean *paradiso* which so often acted as Pound's place of refuge. The abrupt shift from English culture—about which Pound was always deeply ambivalent—to the more comfortable terrain of Greece, Rome, and Sicily, is a typical escape act: the overall movement of the poem is from problematic legal debates to lyrical, ecstatic statements about organic unity and Renaissance architecture. There is certainly not, as Pound would surely have wished there to be, any kind of proof or justification in these final passages for the earlier disquisition on English governance. The array of neoplatonist heroes and the riff on phyllotaxis echo Coke, but these motifs do not say anything very helpful or concrete about how the just society or *paradiso terrestre* is to be organised. Given the title and premise of *Thrones*, this lack of specificity about ruling and rulers must be regarded as a notable shortcoming, for all the poetic qualities of Canto CIX's light-filled conclusion.

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