

HILARIOUS COMMENTARY: EZRA POUND'S CANTO XCVIII

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I: COMMENTARY

Thrones De Los Cantares, the last full sequence of Pound's *Cantos*, has always been the least popular part of the long poem. Ronald Bush speaks for many when he concludes that its "substance is so abbreviated as to be unreadable" and that "the truncated and gnomic style of *Thrones* is inappropriate to the point of absurdity."¹ Whether or not we accept this damaging judgment, it's clear that the form of the poem underwent significant changes after the widely admired wartime sequence written at Pisa. There the contour of Pound's recollection was often sustained by the most fragile of syntactical ligatures—conjunctions ("and," "but," "so"), supported by under-motivated connecting phrases ("leading to," "which means that," "so that")—hinges barely able to support the weight of the poet's diverse memories but in their very weakness enacting his plight as one compelled now to remember.² In *Section: Rock-Drill De Los Cantares* (1955) and *Thrones de los Cantares* (1959) the writing becomes, by contrast, increasingly paratactic, staccato even: "Brederode' / (to Rush, Ap. 4. 1790) / . . . treaties of commerce only"

My thanks to Richard Sieburth and Peter Middleton for their comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

¹ Bush, "Late Cantos LXXII-CXVII," in Ira B. Nadel, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ezra Pound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 123. That the title of this sequence, like that of *Section: Rock-Drill De Los Cantares*, uses Spanish (hardly one of the principal languages of the poem) has drawn little comment. Is Pound perhaps alluding to the *Song of Songs*, *Cantar de los Cantares*?

² For an extended example, see Canto LXXIV/447. All references are to *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1996) and will be given in this form in the text.

(XCIV/653; ellipses in original). The reference to “Brederode,” for example, provokes lengthy annotation in Carroll F. Terrell’s *Companion to The Cantos* (Hendrik, Count of Brederode played a significant role in the sixteenth-century Dutch Revolution, though he is now largely forgotten) and Pound’s cavalier notation seems simply to assume that such contextual support will be delivered as necessary.³ The writing itself often looks like preliminary note-taking, and this apparent disregard for all but the most devoted reader has undoubtedly cost it a larger audience.

This rather unexpected development in the poem can be explained in part by the tension in Pound’s late writing between the pull of reference, on the one hand, and of allusion, on the other.⁴ The former pole is governed by the poet’s increasing sense of pedagogic urgency which does make him something of the “village explainer” that Gertrude Stein said he was, a distributor of axioms and verities, a purveyor of the natural and the self-evident. The reader, accordingly, is enjoined to “study with the mind of a grandson” (LXXXV/570), to become a passive recipient of what has become an apparently “parental’ tradition.”⁵ The counter-movement of allusive composition had reached its apogee in *The Pisan Cantos* where Pound, deprived of his usual print sources, became newly dependent on memory and direct perception. Here the poem moved “as the winds veer” (LXXIV/463), the mind drawing strength from an “ancestral” tradition so that the affective properties of things learned by heart and remembered create imaginative spaces in which associations and echoes expand almost infinitely. Such spaces would continue to exist in the late *Cantos*,

³ Carroll F. Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London: University of California Press, 1993), 570.

⁴ For this distinction, see Peter Nicholls, “The Elusive Allusion: Poetry and Exegesis,” in Peter Middleton and Nicky Marsh, ed., *Teaching Modernist Poetry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 10-24. I have examined the formal and conceptual consequences of Pound’s emphasis on the referential in “Late Pound: The Case of Canto CVII,” *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry*, 8. 20 (Fall, 2015), 1-16.

⁵ Pound, *Cantos*, 1986: 564. I borrow the distinction between “parental” and “ancestral” from Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971), 22 on the tradition not as “an authority looming over you but . . . As something ancestral rather than parental.”

though they would come under steady pressure from the referential impulse in Pound's writing.

I want to revisit this argument, but from another point of view and one more clearly within the particular purview of *Glossator*. For might this tension between reference and allusion be conceived also as one between the impulse to interpretation, on the one hand, and to commentary, on the other? I don't mean to suggest that the two can be simply set over against each other, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht does, for example, when he proposes a "contrast" between "the finite task of interpretation and the never-ending task of commentary."⁶ It is more plausible, perhaps, to regard the two as inextricably related, but as extremes of a shared continuum.⁷ Either way, the traditional association of commentary with *copia*, with abundance and amplification, seems relevant to the late *Cantos*, where Pound's fondness for commentary elicits a corresponding desire on the part of the reader to supplement the text's elliptical fragments, to recombine them into some ever-expanding whole.⁸ There is more, then, to the late *Cantos* than the simple and sometimes irksome task of hunting down references. Yet Pound himself seems to have been conflicted on exactly this issue, both wanting his ideal reader to follow his trail back to the particular texts to which he elliptically refers, *and* investing in a dream of his own poem's self-sufficiency, in its capacity to serve indeed as "A portable substitute for the British Museum."⁹ The source, we might say, is at once valued as origin *and* seen as somehow lacking, as requiring the Poundian text aesthetically to complete it.

What the late *Cantos* "add" is something in excess of the belated disclosure of a referent; indeed, the almost allegorical whirring of gears that signals that movement of interpretation is quite different from the nuanced *withholding* of revelation that is also a highly distinctive feature of *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones* (as we shall see, Pound

⁶ Hans Gumbrecht, *The Powers of Philology: Dynamics of Textual Scholarship* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 43.

⁷ The jury is far from out on this question: see Roy K. Gilson and Christina Shuttleworth, ed., *Classical Commentary: Histories, Practices, Theory* (Brill: Leiden, 2002), 4: "A commentary is first and foremost an interpretation."

⁸ On *copia* and the "desire to write," see Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 25.

⁹ Pound, "How to Read" (1929), in *Literary Essays*, ed., T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 16.

would talk frequently of *anagogy* in regard to those late parts of the poem). This arguably explains why in the very penultimate line of *The Cantos* Pound can still express the desire to “enter arcanum” (CXVII/823) even though, as Peter Liebrechts notes, the poet “was not really interested in the Plotinian One, but more in the *Nous*, the world of Platonic Forms,” a world the poet himself memorably defines as “the reality of the *nous*, of mind, apart from any man’s individual mind, of the sea crystalline and enduring, of the bright as it were molten glass that envelops us, full of light.”¹⁰ Pound’s “medievalism” hinges in part on this way of thinking of knowledge as distinct from the property of “any man’s individual mind.” He shares with Italian thinker Giorgio Agamben a concern with a fundamental historical shift in philosophical thinking as it moved away from problems relating to the one and the many to the very different ones arising from the relation of subject to object.¹¹ Before Descartes, Agamben suggests in *Infancy and History*, experience and knowledge occupied quite distinct realms: “The subject of experience was common sense, something existing in every individual...while the subject of science is the *noūs* or the active intellect, which is separate from experience . . . [T]he single individual was the *sub-jectum* in which the active, unique and separate intellect actuated knowledge.”¹² With Descartes, “a new metaphysical subject” appears, the “substantive I, in which the union of *noūs* and *psychē*, experience and knowledge, takes place,” and now we see “The removal of imagination from the realm of experience” as it comes to be regarded as something “unreal” (“its place has been

¹⁰ Peter Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (Madison, WI: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2004), 28; Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (1938; London: Peter Owen, 1966), 44. Cf. Haoming Liu, “Pharmaka and Volgar’ Eloquent: Speech and Ideogrammatic Writing in Ezra Pound’s Canto XCVIII,” *Asia Major*, 22. 2 (2009), 191: “the origin . . . is not privileged over its emanations . . . rather, the mediated, realized state of the effulgence of the origins is preferable to the pursuit of an unmediated, apocalyptic visions of the origin.”

¹¹ Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: The Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 21. Agamben doesn’t refer to Pound’s theories but he does quote from his 1912 *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti*—see *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 104, 106.

¹² *Infancy and History*, 20.

taken by the *ego cogito*).¹³ Pound spoke rather similarly of “what Imagination really meant before the term was debased—presumably by the Miltonists, tho’ probably before them. It has to do with the seeing of visions.”¹⁴ In a section titled “Cavalcanti and Sade (Need and Desire),” Agamben sketches out the way in which the Provençal and *stilnovo* poets had discovered that “love takes as its subject not the immediate sensory thing, but the phantasm,” the mental image.¹⁵ He goes on to note:

It is precisely because here love is not the opposition between a desiring *subject* and an *object* of desire, but has in the phantasm, so to speak, its subject-object, that the poets can define its character (in contrast with a *fol amour* which can only consume its object without ever being truly united with it, without ever experiencing it) as a *fulfilled love* [*fin’amors*], whose delights never end [*‘gioi che mai non fina’*].¹⁶

In Sade’s world, the phantasm is in contrast “infinitely elusive and hidden” because of imagination’s exclusion from experience; desire there mutates into insatiable need, so subverting what Pound called “the dogma that there is some proportion between the fine thing held in the mind, and the inferior thing ready for inferior consumption.”¹⁷ For the Provençal and *stilnovo* poets, love, whose object is inevitably situated elsewhere, could be brought to presence in the poetic word; the poem, says Agamben, becomes “the site where the fracture between desire and its unattainable object . . . is healed.” We have here “a circle where the phantasm generates desire, desire is translated into words, and the word defines a space wherein the appropriation of what could otherwise not be

¹³ *Infancy and History*, 28, 29

¹⁴ Quoted in K. K. Ruthven, *A Guide to Ezra Pound’s Personae* (1926) (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1969), 56. Cf. Pound in *Guide to Kulchur*, 77-8: “Out beyond that, the so-called rational statements attempt to prove what can not be proved; attempt to lift zero by its own bootstraps. A man sits still and claims that he moves by interjecting a ‘therefore’. The Cartesian hat trick. His grandfather was Aquinas.”

¹⁵ *Infancy and History*, 29.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ Pound, “Cavalcanti,” *Literary Essays*, 151.

appropriated or enjoyed is possible.”¹⁸ This circle, connecting “phantasm, desire, and word,” is a hermeneutic figure for the “joy that never ends,” a joy (Provençal *joï*) that, Agamben contends, is etymologically related to Latin *Jocus* as “word-play.”¹⁹ The cluster of elements here seems especially relevant to the late sections of *The Cantos*, especially if we add to them the kind of verbal play involved in commentary and allusion and the potential of this to combine linguistic precision with due acknowledgement of the mysterious nature of their subject matter.²⁰ For as Pound began to make plans for the paradisaic ending of his long poem, this question of the mysteries became increasingly prominent in his thinking. In *Guide to Kulchur*, for example:

The Duce and Kung fu Tseu equally perceive that their people need poetry; that prose is NOT education but the outer courts of the same. Beyond its doors are the mysteries. Eleusis. Things not to be spoken save in secret.²¹

This idea of the ineffable, of what cannot and should not be uttered, warns us against the kind of reading that would seek to interpret mysteries that are concealed behind doors and available only to the initiate. Mysteries tease; they invite innuendo (literally, a “nodding” to suggest a secret knowledge shared). And by teasing they tempt us to commentary, to a sort of circumlocutory reading that accepts in advance its failure to penetrate to the core of the mystery and is satisfied with—indeed, delights in—the echoes and associations it can

¹⁸ *Stanzas*, 129. Agamben concludes here that “the typically medieval conception of the phantasmatic character of love finds its resolution and fulfillment in poetic practice.”

¹⁹ *Stanzas*, 129, 130 n.9. The phrase “Joy that never ends” (“gioia che mai non fina”) is quoted from Guido delle Colonne (*ibid.*, 131 n.11).

²⁰ So Pound writes (*Literary Essays*, 159) of Cavalcanti’s Canzone: “BUT THE POEM IS VERY OBSCURE.’ The poem is extremely clear in a number of places, the philosophic terms are used with a complete precision of technique.” Agamben, *Stanzas*, 106 remarks rather similarly: “The famous canzone ‘Donna me prega,’ the axis of Cavalcanti’s *trobar clus* (‘closed,’ obscure style of making poetry), is nevertheless clearly illuminated if we restore it to the complex of doctrine that we have attempted to resuscitate.”

²¹ *Guide to Kulchur*, 144-5.

weave around the text, literally and metaphorically loading its margins with comment.²²

A poetics of allusion, then, is one that does not “consume” its object through interpretation, but rather amplifies it by a synchronized reading that leaves the original intact, still speaking partly for itself. In Canto XCI it has already been said that “They who are skilled in fire // shall read [ideogram] tan, the dawn” (XCI/635) and this is now underlined in Canto XCVIII on which I shall concentrate here: “there is no sight without fire,” we are told in its opening lines (XCVIII/704). Fire, it seems, permits a particular kind of “semiophanic” reading, not of readily graspable “truths,” so much as of flickering, insubstantial signs, with “a fanned flame in their moving” (685).²³ Such reading does not seek to interrogate—“ne quaesaris,” “ask not” (XCVIII/704)²⁴—but rather allows words to be “resplendent” with possible meanings, “with the sun (chih) / under it all” (XCIX/719). Perhaps Pound recalled here the close of Fenollosa’s “The Chinese Written Character”: “Thus in all poetry a word is like a sun, with its corona and chromosphere; words crowd upon words, and enwrap each other in their luminous envelopes until sentences become clear, continuous light-bands”).²⁵ In the late *Cantos*, Pound is not concerned so much with “continuous” sentences as with moments in which light is kindled and momentarily transfigures everything around it: “A match flares in

²² Cf. Paul Valéry, *Leonardo, Poe, Mallarmé*, trans. Malcolm Cowley and James R. Lawler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 180: “the attentive reading of a book is really a continuous commentary, a succession of notes that emanate from the inner voice.”

²³ Cf. Roland Barthes, “Loyola,” *Sade Fourier Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), 53: “the theophany he [Loyola] is methodically seeking is in fact a semiophany, what he is striving to obtain is more the sign of God than knowledge of Him or His presence.”

²⁴ The phrase is repeated from Canto XCI/632. See Horace, *Odes*, I. 11. 1: “Tu ne quaesieris, scire nefas, quem mihi, quem tibi / finem di dederint, Leuconoe”: “Don’t ask (we may not know), Leuconoe, / What the gods plan for you or me.” Pound notes in *The Spirit of Romance*, 96 that “Anatole France, in his commentary on Horace’s ‘Tu ne quaesaris,’ has told us a good deal about the various Oriental cults thronging the Eternal City.” The reference is probably to France’s note on his poem “Leuconoé,” in *Poésie de Anatole France* (Paris: Librairie Alphonse Lemerre, 1895), 281-4.

²⁵ Ernest Fenollosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*, ed., Haun Saussy, Jonathan Stalling, and Lucas Klein (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 60.

the eyes' hearth / then darkness" (CVI/772). This motif of flaring light, at once dazzling and intermittent, haunts the whole poem which is aptly imagined in its closing movement as "A little light, like a rushlight / to lead back to splendor" (CXVI/817).²⁶ To read by such a light is to grasp at connections that "flare" and then as suddenly recede. Pound's commentary on the texts that fascinate him—a reading and writing between their lines—offers an invitation to the reader to approach *The Cantos* in the same way. Commentary, in contrast to mere source-hunting, can satisfy the curiosity that "reaches into greater detail" (XCVI/679) at the same time that it makes an abundance of "detail" a kind of substitute for a definitive ending.²⁷

Commentary is in this sense our compensation for lack of the "full Εἰδὼς" or "knowing" (Canto LXXXI/540) that even the extreme experience of Pisa cannot deliver.²⁸ But it is a compensation that brings its own difficulties: as Pound notes in Canto XCVIII/691, "the text is somewhat exigent" (not "exigent," though it may be that too); it exacts, in short, a particular *demand* on the reader. This phrase occurs in the course of Pound's redaction of an ancient Chinese work that is in its turn also a commentary: *The Sacred Edict*, originally issued as sixteen Maxims by Emperor K'ang Hsi in 1670, was expanded in 1724 by his son, Yung-chêng, and then enlarged again and rendered into colloquial language by Salt Commissioner Wang-lu-p'uh. Canto XCVIII draws for the most part on the latter

²⁶ Cf. Margaret Fisher, *Ezra Pound's Radio Operas: The BBC Experiments, 1931-1933* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002), 152-3 on the "flamelike" musical structure of the "Donna mi prega" aria in Pound's opera *Cavalcanti*: "The scalar melodies . . . ascend and descend, flamelike in their rise and fall, occasionally licking up to the octave . . . a repetitious flamelike pattern conflates the language of philosophy with a nostalgia for a troubadour past." The motif of flame and fire is, of course, deeply indebted to Dante—see, for example, *Purgatorio*, XVIII, 28-33.

²⁷ Cf. Geoffrey Hartman, "Preface" to Harold Bloom et al, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), viii: "Commentary, the oldest and most enduring literary-critical activity, has always shown that a received text means more than it says (it is 'allegorical'), or that it subverts all possible meanings by its 'irony'—a rhetorical and structural limit that prevents the dissolution of art into positive and exploitative truth."

²⁸ The substitution of this participial construction in place of Pound's original *eidōs* is discussed in Ronald Bush, "La filosofica famiglia: Cavalcanti, Avicenna, and the 'Form' of Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*," *Textual Practice*, 24. 4 (2010), 691.

rendition, while Canto XCIX employs Yung Chêng's text and engages in a more specifically philological reading. These different layers of commentary in the *Edict* provide a sort of model for Pound's own procedures here, taking him well beyond the brief authorial interruptions in the Adams and China Cantos. There the poem had drawn its energy from the narrative drive of its original multivolume texts; in *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones*, however, Pound's sources live on *spezzato*, absorbed into a fast-moving process of commentary where the expression of high-minded thoughts in a popular idiom generates humorous gyrations of tone ("the right pattern of levy is yang⁴ cheng¹ / id est: for use / not a fountain of folderols / for top poppinjays" [XCIX/727]). It's worth noting parenthetically that Baller introduced his translation with the unpromising warning that "These moral maxims have no life-giving power in them. They are as sterile as a schoolboy's copy book headings."²⁹ This was, for Baller, "mere morality" without the illuminating truth of Christian revelation; for Pound, any "sterility" would be amply compensated for by enlightened commentary.

As we have noted, Pound nonetheless finds the text at times "somewhat exigent" (XCVIII/711), this phrase referring in context to two ideograms he inscribes twice in this Canto: *cheng king*.

"Parents naturally hope their sons will be gentlemen."

正 cheng

經 king

The text is somewhat exigent, perhaps you will consider the

cheng 正 meaning of

king 經

From Kung's porch 門 mên,³

and not cheat the Administration.

(XCVIII/711)

²⁹ F. W. Baller, trans. *The Sacred Edict*, 6th edition (Shanghai: China Island Mission, 1924), iv.

In his translation of the *Edict*, F. W. Baller notes that the two characters together mean “‘upright’ in a Confucian sense. Here it applies rather to individual deportment than to rectitude between man and man.”³⁰ Baller’s word “deportment” no doubt strikes Pound as a trivialization of Confucian principle since, as the *Companion* observes, the character *king* or, in Baller’s transliteration, *ching* means on its own “the classics,” so we might conclude that the text is “somewhat exigent” because it asks us to consider the effective relation of manners to knowledge. This is demanding in several ways, partly because it requires a discriminating attention to the constituents of individual written characters, but also because it urges us to think outside the moral categories of Baller’s orthodox Christianity. That there is, indeed, a wisdom that exceeds simple “uprightness” is hinted at in the allusion to “Kung’s porch” in the lines that follow: as Baller observes, the character *mên*³ means “Lit., door: hence into a sect, or the sect itself: ep. ‘disciples of the Porch,’”³¹ and this idea of a threshold to cross suggests again an “arcanum” that resists “ordinary” reading at the same time as it seems necessarily to produce more writing. One might think, in parenthesis, of Alain Badiou’s account of Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dès* as a poem that “does not ask to be interpreted, nor does it possess any keys. The poem demands that we delve into its operation. The enigma lies in this very demand.”³² The “demand” is that we “enter” the poem “not in order to know what it means, but rather to think what happens in it.” Badiou’s phrasing is a little enigmatic, perhaps, but his emphasis on reading as event rather than as interpretation may be helpful in dealing with *Thrones*. Certainly, a thinking about “what happens” in the poem resonates with the idea of commentary as Pound conceives it in the late *Cantos*, entailing not just the minute scrutiny of a text’s verbal components, but a pleasurable practice of reflection that entwines itself with its object, slipping fluently between different languages and tonal registers. “Quis erudiet without documenta?,” he asks in Canto LXXXVI/581,³³ a phrase in

³⁰ *The Sacred Edict*, 5 n.9.

³¹ *The Sacred Edict*, 5 n.8.

³² Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 29.

³³ For the passage, see Thomas Grieve, “The Séraphin Couvreur Sources of Rock-Drill,” *Paideuma*, 4. 2 & 3 (Fall and Winter 1975), 466: “Qui non sequitur antiquorum documenta, in quibus ille erudiet?”

which the English “without” emphasizes the interruptive practice of commentary and highlights the work of translation on which its practice so frequently depends³⁴ (in the text of the Confucian *Chou King* that Pound is using here the Chinese is translated into both Latin and French and commentary moves freely between them).³⁵ Yet the pedagogical tone can be slightly misleading, for along with Pound’s desire to instruct his readers, to send them to the “facts,” there is a proliferation of allusive connections in the late *Cantos* that renders systematic commentary almost impossible. In Canto CIII, Pound quotes from the *Analects*: “I see its relation to one thing, / Hui sees its relation to ten” (CIII/752).³⁶ The ideal reader of *Thrones*, we conclude, will be one who, like Hui, sees the poem’s multilevel commentaries as a constantly proliferating network of “relations.” We are close here to that work of the future that Roland Barthes imagines as “an object made of commentaries,” a reticulated textual structure in which allusion makes good on its etymological promise of play and pleasure.³⁷ In the following pages I want to look

³⁴ On the connections between commentary and translation see, for example, Antoine Berman, “Critique, commentaire et traduction (Quelques réflexions à partir de Benjamin et de Blanchot),” *Poésie*, 37. 2 (1986), 104: “Le travail du traducteur est rigoureusement parallèle à celui du commentateur. Lui aussi, il longe le texte, s’enfonce dans son épaisseur signifiante, s’attarde et s’attache aux détails: pour lui, en fait, le texte n’est que détail signifiant.”

³⁵ Pound’s source is Séraphin Couvreur, *Chou King: Les Annales de la Chine* (1897; Paris: Cathasia, 1950). See also Daniel K. Gardner, “Confucian Commentary and Chinese Intellectual History,” *Journal of Asian Studies*, 57. 2 (May 1998), 400-1: “Commentary is interlinear, interrupting the words of the classic . . . interlinear commentary makes the claim that every word, every sentence, every paragraph of the canonical text is profoundly significant, deserving of the most genuine and thorough reflection.”

³⁶ Pound, *Confucius* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 210: “1. He [Confucius] asked Tze-Kung: who comprehends most, you or Hui? 2. The answer: No comparison, Hui hears one point and relates it to ten (understands its bearing on ten, I on one only); I hear one point and can only get to the next. 3. He said: Not the same, I agree you are not alike.”

³⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, ed. Stephen Heath, trans. Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985), 82: “Mutatis mutandis, the Middle Ages lived solely on rereading ancient texts, in Greek or Latin. Perhaps literature will now be precisely that: an object made of commentaries, a tutor of other languages, period. Who knows?” For a discussion of Barthes’s “medievalism,” see Bruce Holsinger, *The*

primarily at several semantic clusters in Canto XCVIII that work on the edges, as it were, of Pound's more sustained commentary on *The Sacred Edict*, clusters that seem also to signal the spirit in which the work of reader and writer should be undertaken.

II: *HILARITAS*

Commentary thus considered is rather different from the multiple "keys" provided by Carroll F. Terrell's *Companion*, indispensable as those have become. We are so used to reading the difficult late *Cantos* either through a prior knowledge of Pound's ideas or by a frequently unrewarding return to his sources that we are almost unable to recover the sense of reading as ludic commentary that governed the poet's own practice at so many points. This was the Pound who observed in his redaction of passages from the Roman *Pandects* that "then the fun starts" (XCIV/654) and who rather inappropriately informed a testy Wyndham Lewis that "The fun of the next 50 years is in the greek not the latin"³⁸ "Fun" might seem an odd word to use about the lexical maneuvers of *Thrones*, but the "demand" made here is also in its less coercive forms an invitation to read as a commentator might, in the spirit of Chaucer's "Glossynge is a glorious thing, certeyn."³⁹ The promise of the late *Cantos*—and it is one often compromised by more authoritarian and "referential" tendencies in the poem—is that Pound's text might be animated by a humor that extends from the simplest joke or witticism to the metaphysical "joy" so ardently cultivated by the Provençal and *stilnovvo* poets, a joy that, rather like commentary itself, "never ends."

Hugh Kenner is perhaps the only critic to have caught this aspect of *Thrones* when he remarked that "Good humor is conspicuous in these [late] Cantos ('Gemisto: "Are Gods by hilaritas" . . .). Pound takes huge enjoyment in his lexicographic

Premodern Condition: Medievalism and the Making of Theory (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 152-94.

³⁸ *Pound/Lewis: The Letters of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), 303. Cf. *Ezra Pound's Letters to William Watt*, ed., William Watt (Marquette, MS: Northern Michigan University Press, 2001), n.p. (April 3, 1957): ". . . gk is / the future, and Byzance makes mediaval [sic] latin look corny / in fact most latin look corny."

³⁹ Chaucer, "The Summoner's Tale," l.1792.

high jinks.”⁴⁰ This word *hilaritas* certainly has a richness to cheer the commentator and I shall take it as a major clue to how we might read the late *Cantos*. In its few but resonant appearances in the poem it quickly comes to signify something more than mere geniality, though that meaning has, to be sure, an important role to play in what Pound adjudges “civility” to be. Indeed, *hilaritas* along with a series of cognate terms comes to function as something akin to what Heidegger called his “elemental words” (*Grundworte*).⁴¹ Although it appears only four times in *The Cantos*, *hilaritas* names an increasingly complex semantic field which, as we shall see, has rich formal and conceptual implications for the closing stages of the poem.⁴² We first encounter it toward the end of the Pisan sequence (LXXXIII/548) where we observe an important conjunction of now familiar elements. Under the double sign of water/HUDOR and peace/Pax, Pound recalls Neoplatonist Gemisto Plethon’s derivation of the gods from Neptune and the bas reliefs of the Tempio Malatestiano (Sigismundo Malatesta had transported philosopher Gemisto’s body to its final resting place in the Tempio Malatestiano at Rimini⁴³):

⁴⁰ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 534.

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 262: “the ultimate business of philosophy is to preserve the *force of the most elemental words* in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from leveling them off to that unintelligibility which functions in turn as a source of pseudo-problems” (emphases in original). Cf. Timothy Clark, *Martin Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 2011), 79: “These are words in which decisive deep-historical (*geschichtlich*) shifts show up, where little noticed but colossal alterations in the human world are at work in language.”

⁴² The account offered here thus differs from Walter B. Michaels, “Pound and Erigena,” *Paideuma*, I. 1 (Spring & Summer 1972), 51: “There is no further mention of Erigena in the *Pisan Cantos* and there are no more clusters organized around him in the entire poem.”

⁴³ “Chi vedrà più il sepolcro di Gemisto / Che tanto savio fu, se pur fu Greco?” (XLII/428)

ἦδ' ἢ

HUDOR et Pax

Gemisto stemmed all from Neptune

hence the Rimini bas reliefs

Sd Mr Yeats (W. B.) "Nothing affects these people

Except our conversation "

lux enim

ignis est accidens and,

wrote the prete in his edition of Scotus:

Hilaritas the virtue *hilaritas*

the queen stitched King Carolus' shirts or whatever

while Erigena put greek tags in his excellent verses

in fact an excellent poet, Paris

toujours Pari'

(Charles le Chauve)

(LXXXIII/548)

Pound weaves together the light metaphysics of Robert Grosseteste ("lux enim"⁴⁴) with a reference to fire as the attribute or "accident" of light, and these allusions are then associated with "Hilaritas the virtue *hilaritas*" which Pound attributes to the ninth-century philosopher Johannes Scotus Erigena. The Latin word means cheerfulness, good humor, joyousness, merriment; it is customarily associated with celebration (in Ancient Rome, *hilaria* were public holidays and on coinage Hilarity was personified as a matron holding a branch of palm in one hand and a cornucopia in the other). Thus associated with abundance and generosity, *hilaritas* might be the perfect virtue to preside over the ludic commentaries of *The Cantos*.⁴⁵ Fittingly, perhaps, the word enters the poem by way

⁴⁴ Pound, *Literary Essays*, 161. The *Companion* gives "for light / is an attribute of fire." Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism*, 285-6 suggests that Pound's line break should be taken to show the harnessing together of Grosseteste's "lux enim" with another Latin phrase and that this reverses the sense to mean "fire is an attribute or *lumen* of light."

⁴⁵ Agamben's account of the historical separation of "imagination" from "experience" might be compared with Terence Cave's discussion of the fate of *copia*—see *The Cornucopian Text*, 332: "Descartes suppresses eloquence, which had been crucial to the humanist encyclopedia; one might indeed say that he suppresses *copia*, the desire to give rein to the liberties of writing."

of an amusing anecdote Pound encountered when he finally obtained the Abbé Migne's collection of Scotus Erigena's works late in 1939. In his introduction to the *Periphyseon/ De Divisione naturae*, editor C. B. Schlueter recounts the story of King Charles the Bald asking the philosopher what separates a Scot from a sot ("Quid distat inter Sottum et Scottum"), to which Erigena had wittily replied "This table" ("Tabula tantum").⁴⁶ As Pound noted in a letter to T. S. Eliot, Schlueter took the anecdote to show Erigena's "Pietate insignia atque hilaritate," his "gracefully balanced piety and good humour."⁴⁷ The reference to humor in the dense text of Migne's *Patrologia* is eye-catching, certainly, but at first sight it's difficult to gauge its relation to the visionary evocations of water and light that precede it in Pound's lines. What we do notice, though, is that Erigena's witty riposte has the power to undercut the most absolute of social divisions, placing king and subject momentarily on the same level, separated only by a table. As Mark Byron has observed, Pound is commending the civility of Charles's court, though already the mystical implications of "the virtue *hilaritas*" seem to exceed mere social manners.⁴⁸

There are indications that Pound had been drawn to the word *hilaritas* before he began writing the later *Cantos*: in *Guide to Kulchur*, for example, he had admired the phrase *l'ilarità del Tuo Volto* in an

⁴⁶ John Scotus Erigena, *Opera Omnia quae Supersunt Omnia*, ed. Henry Joseph Floss, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol.122, ed. Jacques-Paul Migne (Paris, 1853), col. 0017A. Cf. Jacques Le Goff, "Laughter in the Middle Ages," in Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, ed., *A Cultural History of Humour* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997), 44, on the topos of the jesting king, *rex facetus*.

⁴⁷ Letter to T. S. Eliot, January 18, 1940, in *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (London: Faber and Faber, 1950), 334. The translation is by Mark Byron, *Ezra Pound's Eriugena* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 116. For the passage from Schlueter's 1838 Preface, see Migne, *Patrologia Latina*, 122, col.121B: "Quum enim auctor noster tam pietate, quam hilaritate insignis." Pound's shorthand reference in his notes (Byron, *Ezra Pound's Eriugena*, 179) gives "pietate, hilaritas / insignis."

⁴⁸ Byron, *Ezra Pound's Eriugena*, 204. Byron also comments on Erigena's "courtly persona" (11) and on the relevance of his "excellent verses," in Pound's phrase: "The cultivation of *hilaritas* in the court is evident in Erigena's poetry and the circumstantial evidence of interlinguistic puns and comedic set-pieces, of which 'tabula tantum' is the most celebrated example" (82).

Italian prayer,⁴⁹ and Erigena had figured prominently in the Italian draft Cantos produced before Pound's internment at Pisa. One extended passage, simply headed "ERIGENA," refers to the philosopher as "Dottor Ilare," and bearing this name he is then associated with "gaiezza e splendore."⁵⁰ Already *hilaritas* denotes something more than simple good humor, and one can see how it goes on to acquire further and richer associations for Pound in a cancelled draft of the lines from Canto LXXXI (520) that record "new subtlety of eyes" in the poet's tent: "Ed ascoltando al leggier mormorio. As I was ~~list~~ list'ning to th' enchanted song / there came ~~no~~ new subtlety of eyes ~~into~~ ^within^ my tent / whether of spirit or hypostasis / of glad hilarities" ⁵¹ Like the final version of the passage, these lines go on to associate the appearance of the eyes with the domino mask of "carneval," but in the draft the "glad hilarities" are redoubled in pairs of smiling eyes ("but as unaware of other presence, / smiled, each ^pair^ as at loveliest").⁵²

The "unmasked eyes" remain in the published text, but while they still show no "anger," the smile associated with them there has disappeared. It is, perhaps, a telling revision when we remember that in the *Commedia*, "Beatrice's smile *is* the way that Dante journeys toward the beatific vision of God. *Sorriso/sorridere* and *riso/ridere*—as noun or verb, and apparently interchangeable in meaning—appear

⁴⁹ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 141. Noted by Michaels, "Pound and Erigena." Cf. Le Goff, "Laughter," 50: "In general, *hilaris* applies to the face: *vultus hilaris* means a happy, pleasant face; the expression corresponds almost exactly to what we today would call a laughing face, but decidedly not a hilarious face."

⁵⁰ Typescript draft in Italian (Cantos LXXIV-LXXXIV), published in Byron, *Ezra Pound's Eriugena*, 267-9: "Dottor Ilare rispettò la ragione / bontà di Dio ebbe in giuderdone, d'ogni ciclo cittadino / Omnia lunim [sic] lumina sunt . . . ciò che esiste e luce e non specchio / e non e specchio morto, pur se rifletta / anzi in se contiene i-luce, quindi esiste / la / ~~gaiz~~-gaiezza e splendore . . ." "Dr. Ilare" appeared in a draft version of Canto LXXIV: see Ronald Bush, "Towards Pisa: More from the Archives about Pound's Italian Cantos," *Agenda*, 34, 3-4 (1996/7), 93.

⁵¹ Draft of Canto LXXXI, quoted in Ronald Bush, "*La filosofica famiglia*," 689.

⁵² For origins of the reference to "carnival," see the draft passage quoted in Ronald Bush, "Towards Pisa," 114. See also the "Procession on procession" in Ur-Canto II—"Three Cantos of a Poem of Some Length," in Ezra Pound, *Early Writings: Poems and Prose*, ed. and introd. Ira B. Nadel (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 153.

over seventy times in the poem, in a wide variety of contexts.”⁵³ These smiles radiate both beauty and warmth in the often chilly doctrinal regions of the *Paradiso*. Yet Beatrice’s smile is, arguably, too much Dante’s own remarkable invention for it to become a redemptive motif in the late Cantos, though it is tempting to think that Pound discovered in Erigena’s *hilaritas* another—and earlier—variation on the theme.⁵⁴ We can see, at any rate, that in expanding the word’s range of meanings Pound bore Dante’s example in mind, for in the *Commedia* the smile is constantly the sign par excellence of beatitude and cosmic harmony, yielding in *Paradiso* XXVII (4-5) the splendid conceit of “un riso / dell’universo”. These lines show, too, that this smile is occasioned by the music of the *Gloria Patria*, “sì che m’inebriava il dolce canto,” “so that the sweet song held me rapt.” Like the song, the smile is all-embracing, drawing everything together in its spontaneous lyric effulgence.⁵⁵ And like song, it expresses a jubilation that is at once sensuous and spiritual.⁵⁶ Indeed, the smile introduces into the profound story of redemption what Peter Hawkins aptly calls “a spirit of sublime play.”⁵⁷ In doing so it

⁵³ Peter Hawkins, “All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante,” *PMLA*, 121. 2 (March 2006), 378 (his emphasis). Hawkins notes (382) that “The smiles that accumulate faster and faster as the poem moves toward its conclusion may even be a sign that the poet is emulating the *lieto fattore*, the happy divine creator.”

⁵⁴ Hawkins, “All Smiles,” 382 concludes that “the smile is not only Dante’s signature gesture but perhaps his most original and indeed useful contribution to medieval theology—and indeed to the Christian tradition itself, which has long found it easier to recall that ‘Jesus wept’ than to imagine that he might have laughed as well.” Hawkins also traces the emergence of the smile in medieval culture, noting the importance of *hilaritas* to Saint Francis and his followers (377) and concluding that “In the mid-thirteenth century, beatitude became something to smile about.”

⁵⁵ See Hawkins, “All Smiles,” 381 on the “self-reflecting divine smile” in *Paradiso*, XXXIII, 124-6.

⁵⁶ Compare Robin Blaser, “Great Companion: Dante Alighiere” (1997), in *The Holy Forest: Collected Poems of Robin Blaser* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2003), 441 on “the gift of *the amorous and poetic experience* so entangled—/ the face haunting the curious laughter of the syl-/ lables...” (italics in original).

⁵⁷ Hawkins, “All Smiles,” 382. Cf. Massimo Verdicchio, *The Poetics of Dante’s Paradiso* (Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), x: “The *Paradiso* is probably the most comical of the three cantica. Dante’s

insinuates a subtle irony for, as critic Massimo Verdicchio suggests, “the blessed souls still have something to hide, something of their past earthly life of which they are ashamed but which is revealed, nonetheless.”⁵⁸ In Paradise there is no punishment and no repentance, only that delicate inflection of the lips whose irony Dante subtly remarks through Folco’s speech in Canto IX: “Non però si pente, ma si ride, / non de la colpa, ch’a mente non torna, / ma del valor ch’ordinò e provide” (103-5).⁵⁹ Pound quotes these lines in his early essay on Dante, remarking that they might provide “matter for a philosophical treatise as long as the *Paradiso*” and this ninth Canto of the *Commedia* was certainly in his mind as he wrote *Thrones* (the title of the sequence originated here, with the idea of the mirrors—“You call them Thrones”—from which “God in judgment shines upon us” [IX, 61-2]).⁶⁰ As Pound had recognized, then, this smile is a complex one that signals the perpetual delight of the blessed at the same time as it acknowledges the errors of their mortal lives. This is also the Canto in which Cunizza speaks and Pound shares with Dante an admiration for the way in which this woman after leading a dissolute life redeemed herself by freeing her slaves.⁶¹

The deftly ironic twist of Dante’s lines as he presents the souls of the Heaven of Venus intimates transcendence without severing connection from the human and mundane (“the backward glance toward a sinful life once lived . . . carries with it no sense of

humour is at its highest when dealing with these souls, which he treats with the highest regard but also with the highest irony.”

⁵⁸ Verdicchio, *The Poetics*, 3

⁵⁹ *The Divine Comedy, Paradise: 1. Text*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 101: “Yet here we repent not, but we smile, not for the fault, which returns not to mind, but for the Power that ordained and foresaw.” Verdicchio, *The Poetics* observes (56) that “This is the virtue of the Heaven of Venus, which turns punishment into an ironic smile.” Singleton’s translation of *The Divine Comedy* will be referred to throughout.

⁶⁰ Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (1910; New York: New Directions, 1968) 146. The reference to Dante’s *Thrones* occurs also in the pre-Pisan drafts—see Bush, “Towards Pisa,” 115.

⁶¹ Pound, *The Spirit of Romance*, 146. He also notes the appearance of Cunizza “in defiance of convention.” Verdicchio, *The Poetics* notes (55) that “she would be a good candidate for the fate of the lustful of *Inferno* V, had it not been for the intervention of Dante’s Providence, which arbitrarily places her in *Paradiso* IX.” For the various references to Cunizza in *The Cantos*, see Bush, “Towards Pisa,” 122 n.11.

recrimination,” as Peter Hawkins puts it).⁶² It bespeaks a generosity of vision that is not without poignancy, as Jorge Luis Borges once noted of the moment in *Paradiso* XXXI when Beatrice bestows her last smile on Dante and turns again to the eternal fountain (91-3): Borges points up the moment of piercing loss produced by what he calls this “eternal turning away of the face” even though it is also, of course, the prelude to Dante’s induction into even higher mysteries.⁶³ All of which reminds us that, as Benedetto Croce long ago pointed out, what we do not find in the *Commedia* is “flight from the world, absolute refuge in God, asceticism.”⁶⁴ For Pound, *hilaritas* speaks metonymically for the human comedy in its entirety, coupling common good humor with a cosmic principle that fuses the mind’s “awareness” with the “flowing” motion of the universe.

The word *hilaritas* appears three more times in *The Cantos*, (twice in Canto XCVIII and once in Canto C), on each occasion acquiring new and complex associations.⁶⁵ In the first of these passages, Eriugenic humour (also in evidence in his “excellent verses” [548]) is again aligned with the Greek neo-Platonist Gemisto Plethon who now seems to speak directly for “the virtue *hilaritas*”: “But Gemisto: ‘Are Gods by *hilaritas*’; / and their speed in communication” (705); the second passage is a slight variant on the first: “By *Hilaritas*’, said Gemisto, ‘by *hilaritas*: gods; / and by speed in communication” (710). The exact source of the second line is unclear: Peter Liebrechts assigns it to a passage in Plethon’s *Book of Laws* where it is said that “The gods are everything in Nature that is

⁶² Hawkins, “All Smiles,” 375.

⁶³ Jorge Luis Borges, “Beatrice’s Last Smile,” in *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 302-5. Cf. Rachel Jacoff, “The Post-Palinodic Smile: *Paradiso* VIII and IX,” *Dante Studies*, 98 (1980), 120: “The smile of these souls [Folco and Cunizza] implies a way of looking at the past equally free of guilt and nostalgia.”

⁶⁴ Quoted in John D. Sinclair, trans., *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 456. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1946; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953) makes a powerful and influential case for Dante’s “realism” and his “closeness to the actual in the realm of the sublime” (185).

⁶⁵ The *Companion* notes only two of these appearances. The allusion in Canto LXXXIII is there traced to Schlueter’s Preface, though the gloss for *hilaritas* in Cantos XCVIII notes erroneously that it is “A neologism Pound created to stand for one of the primary ways divinity manifests in the world.”

greater and more blessed than human nature” and that they “are essentially pure forms and motionless minds, acting solely by thought,”⁶⁶ while Pound in a letter to Wyndham Lewis reports that he found it in a recent study of Plethon by François Masai: “F. Masai on Plethon notes that gods are gods cause they got more hilaritas than the *animal electoral*, and also that they COMMUNICATE more rapidly with each other.”⁶⁷ “Hilaritas” thus attaches itself to Gemisto, though there appears to be no direct source for this in Masai’s study unless it be in this account of the happiness of the gods: “Les dieux sont tous les êtres d’une nature plus élevée et plus heureuse que celle de l’homme.”⁶⁸

As he composed *Thrones*, Pound was hopeful that “all [might] converge as the root” (XCIX/714), as a kind of ideogram in which his key thinkers might seem to share their insights among themselves, thus gesturing toward “the reality of the *nous*, of mind, apart from any man’s individual mind.”⁶⁹ Drafts quoted by Liebrechts show that provisional cross-overs of this kind included “‘Lux enim’ sd Plotinus” and an association of Cavalcanti with “hilaritas.”⁷⁰ Pound believed that Gemisto was crucial to this assemblage, not only because he “stemmed all from Neptune” (LXXXIII/548), thus providing a genealogy of the gods in terms that seemed to echo his own talk of *noûs* as like “the sea crystalline and enduring,” but also

⁶⁶ Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* does not give a full finding source. It is probably Gemisto Plethon, *Traité des Lois*, trad. A. Péliissier (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1858), 47: “ce sont des formes essentiellement pures, des esprits immuables, toujours et en toutes choses agissant par la seule force de leur proper pensée.”

⁶⁷ *Pound/Lewis*, 303. François Masai, *Pléthon et Le Platonisme de Mistra* (Paris: Société d’Édition “Les Belles Lettres,” 1956). No obvious source suggests itself in this text; however, see 257: “il semble que les ‘genres supérieurs’ communient entre eux plus encore que les hommes.” Or *ibid.*, 120: “Les dieux sont tous les êtres d’une nature plus élevée et plus heureuse que celle de l’homme.” The phrase of Remy de Gourmont referring to the “animal electoral” is quoted by Pound in “Remy de Gourmont” (1920), *Literary Essays*, 347: “Le caractère fondamental du citoyen est donc le dévouement, la résignation et la stupidité; il exerce principalement ces qualités selon trois fonctions physiologiques, comme animal reproducteur, comme animal électoral, comme animal contribuable.”

⁶⁸ Masai, *Pléthon*, 120.

⁶⁹ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 44. Cf. “But these had thrones, / and in my mind were still, uncontending” (CXIV/813).

⁷⁰ Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism*, 351, 341-2.

because Gemisto's pantheon of gods seemed to represent an authentic polytheism. Later, however, Pound reluctantly concluded that "He was not a proper polytheist, in this sense. His gods come from Neptune, so that there is a single source of being, aquatic (odor, Thales etc. as you like, or what is the difference)."⁷¹ A year later he noted that "Gemistus Plethon's polytheism evaporated when one got near it."⁷² When he read Masai's book, even the primacy of Neptune in Gemisto's system was thrown in doubt, for although Pound never mentioned this and the sea-god would make a heroic late appearance in Canto CXVI, Masai showed unequivocally that Gemisto's pantheon of gods was in fact governed by Zeus (a diagrammatic genealogy is given in which Zeus is equated with "l'être," while Poseidon follows him in the hierarchy and represents "l'acte"⁷³). Comments made much later to his companion Olga Rudge show how heavily Pound had invested in his gamble on "convergence": "To get rid of cheap blasphemy / a negative report on search for / polytheism & not finding any. / an attempt to establish neoplatonic / Xianity vs. the giudaic. & that / breaks down. Gemisto a key figure. / & that doesn't work. / a collection of marginalia."⁷⁴ His mistake, Pound thought in retrospect, was that "the various figures shd be kept / as representing points of view. / mechanism instead of principle. which comes to / using occhio per la mente..." Yet the "principle," as he calls it here—something akin to the "hermeneutic circle" described by Agamben, perhaps—

⁷¹ Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, 224.

⁷² Letter to George Santayana, December 8, 1939, in *Selected Letters of Ezra Pound*, 331. Masai, *Pléthon*, 215 argues that Plethon's *Laws* is only polytheistic "en apparence" and that "ce monde divin, passablement hétérogène, trouvait dans l'Un et le Bien un principe d'organisation véritablement monothéiste" (106 n.2). Masai, again unfortunately for Pound's hopes of Gemisto, also flatly remarks (280) on "la pauvreté de sa sensibilité poétique". Even worse, perhaps, Masai draws attention to Gemisto's "communism" (92)!

⁷³ Perhaps more encouragingly, though, Masai's genealogy or "Tableau des catégories" also gives "1. Zeus (Dieu), 2. Poseidon (Νοῦς)."

⁷⁴ Olga Rudge Papers, Beinecke Library, Box 101 (#2603), "Transcription E.P. Annotated copies of notebooks kept by Pound 1962-69." An edition, edited by Richard Sieburth as *Ezra Pound/Olga Rudge, Tempus Tacendi: The Late Venice Notebooks 1962-72* is forthcoming from New Directions. Pound here also regrets making "An attempt to pick particular / heretics to combine into a continuity. / An attempt to find historic cases / representing a theory & then finding / they do not."

seemed at the time of *Thrones* to announce itself everywhere, fusing together ideas of love, justice, knowledge, and song in passages of rhythm that harmonized with the “world of light and flowing water” that Pound discerned in the Confucian texts.⁷⁵

We can now begin to see why the nexus of associations that gathers around the repeated word “hilaritas” in Canto XCVIII is radically opposed to the gilded images that *The Sacred Edict* associates with Taoism (“Does god need a clay model? gilded?” [708]). For Pound, such images represent a vulgar fetishism, something far removed from the flickering and insubstantial modalities of thought that in these late Cantos he aligns with fire, song and “flowing” movement. We recall from the beginning of the Canto that “there is no sight without fire” (XCVIII/704), but this, it is clear, is an intellectual rather than sensory seeing. It is, to quote from Pound’s first translation of “Donna mi prega,” “an ardour of thought / that the base likeness of it [love] kindleth not”.⁷⁶ Love derives initially from “a seen form,” but once rendered phantasmatic it is “not seen” (“forma non si vede”). This may explain Pound’s late habit of citing variant lines of the poem’s coda as reworked in the 1602 edition of Egidio Colonna’s commentary:

Va positione mia sicuramente
A gente di valor, a cui ti mando,
Di star con nessun’ huomo ti comando
Il qual vuol usar l’occhio per la mente.⁷⁷

Pound speculates that “This is very possibly Thomism, in extreme gibe at observing Averroists and Roger-Baconians,”⁷⁸ a gibe, that is, against his own view that Cavalcanti is “modern” in his leaning toward “natural dimostramento,” or “the proof by experiment.”⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Mary Paterson Cheadle, *Ezra Pound’s Confucian Translations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 102 translates the following from an unpublished essay by Pound in Italian, “Ta Hio” (probably written between 1942 and 1944): “Confucian life and thought turns in a world of light and flowing water.”

⁷⁶ Pound’s later translation is “Not in delight but in the being aware / Nor can he leave his true likeness elsewhere” (XXXVI/177).

⁷⁷ Quoted in Pound, “Cavalcanti,” *Literary Essays*, 191.

⁷⁸ “Cavalcanti,” *Literary Essays*, 191.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

When he comes back to the coda in Canto XCIV, however, the emphasis is rather different:

Beyond civic order:
 I'AMOR.
 Was it Frate Egidio — “per la mente”
 looking down and reproving
 “who shd/ mistake the eye for the mind”.
 Above prana, the light,
 past light, the crystal.
 Above crystal, the jade!

(XCIV/654)

Now “Frate Egidio” is looking down from a superior height on those making the visionary ascent, and the successive tiers of crystal and jade seem to suggest that the late Cantos will acknowledge with him that at this level one should not “mistake the eye for the mind.” In a draft of Canto CII, Pound suggests that “Agassiz wd/ have placed the stress; anagogica / il qual vuol tenir l’occhio per la mente / PERI THEORIA, Plotinus, III.8,”⁸⁰ where it would seem that to confuse perception with contemplation is to ignore that higher level of meaning that is anagogy.

The latter term figures only once in *The Cantos* and then in a not particularly revealing context—“stimulate anagogico” (XCIX/730)—but it was something of a favorite for Pound in the period at St Elizabeths. In the draft passage just quoted, the “anagogic” is sourced to the *Enneads*, where Plotinus in section III. 8 describes “the advancing stages of Contemplation” in which “there can be no seeing (a pure unity has no room for vision and an object).”⁸¹ Anagogy was, of course, a term Pound had originally taken from Dante’s account in the *Convivio* of the four levels of

⁸⁰ Quoted in Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism*, 360.

⁸¹ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna, abridged and ed., John Dillon (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), III. 8. In a letter of November 1956, quoted in Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism*, 342, Pound sketched his ideal edition of Plotinus, “omitting everything that is not religious / i.e. all the chopping of logic, and argument etc/ and leaving only the anagogic.”

meaning that inform the *Commedia*,⁸² though it was not a concept that Pound had had much time for in his early work (“Anagogical? Hell’s bells, ‘nobody’ knows what THAT is”).⁸³ During the fifties, though, he began to think of it as a way of defining a certain grasp of “form” in the arts. Writing to William Watt, editor of an architectural magazine called *Agora*, he claimed: “Anagogic / term already starting to circulate / hits all the arts . . . ‘Anagogic’ integrates all the arts / as in fact the VORT idea did.”⁸⁴ Brancusi, Pound says in that letter, is “definitely anagogic: prenez, manger!! / never merely occhio per la mente.”⁸⁵ In the *Convivio*, Dante defines this fourth level of meaning as “above the sense,” “sovrasenso,”⁸⁶ and this moving from perception to contemplation is indicated in a variety of ways in the late Cantos. Gemisto’s gods, as we have seen, are characterized as “acting solely by thought”, by the mind rather than by the eye, and while Guido’s Canzone begins with the sight of the lady (“Vien de veduta forma”), when she becomes an image or phantasm her form, as noted above, is no longer visible by sensory perception (“forma non si vede”). As Agamben puts it in his gloss on the Canzone, “even the sense of sight, since it is only an incidental cause of falling in love, is now excluded as inessential . . .

⁸² See Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 127. He also knew, of course, Dante’s famous epistle to Can Grande—he recommends this in his letters to William Watt and says that he will ask Giovanni Giovannini, one of his visitors from the Catholic University, “to make new trans” (*Ezra Pound’s Letters to William Watt* [Marquette, MI: Northern Michigan University Press, 2001], May 27, 1957).

⁸³ Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini: L’Idea Statale: Fascism as I Have Seen It* (1935; New York: Liveright, 1970), 17.

⁸⁴ *Ezra Pound’s Letters to William Watt*, May 27, 1957.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* The words “prenez, mangez” are from Matthew 26: 26: Jesus said “Take, eat; this is my body.” In his 1914 essay on “Vorticism,” in *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* (1916; Hessle, East Yorkshire: The Marvel Press, 1960), 98. Pound quotes Jacob Epstein “talking about ‘form, not the *form of anything*.” One further indication of Pound’s use of the term “anagogic” is that the poet’s onetime companion, possibly mistress, Sheri Martinelli, published a short-lived magazine called the *Anagogic & Paideumic Review* when she left Pound in 1959 and moved to San Francisco. See Steven Moore, “Sheri Martinelli: A Modernist Muse,” http://www.gargoylemagazine.com/gargoyle/Issues/scanned/issue41/modern_muse.htm

⁸⁶ Dante, *Convivio*, II.1.6.

in the proud awareness of the self-sufficiency of the imagination.”⁸⁷ Pound arrives at the same conclusion in his working notes on Cavalcanti: love is “a light not an image / in the possib[le] intellect” and “can’t give a likeness -/ of ? [or?] image.”⁸⁸ This distinction is one that he will reiterate in the late Cantos: he quotes St. Anselm, for example, “non spatio, sed sapientia’ / not in space but in knowing” (CV/766) and “speculum non est imago, / mirror, not image” (CV/768), concluding that “via mind is the nearest you’ll get to it” (CV/767). While writing *Thrones*, Pound was “mugging along with Plotinus,”⁸⁹ and this late desire to pass beyond the image or (to use Cavalcanti’s word, the “simiglglianza”, “likeness”) found confirmation in the *Enneads* where, he noted, there was a “clear distinction between . . . EIDOS, form, shape, εἶδος / and Eikon, likeness, εἰκων.”⁹⁰ Liebrechts helpfully glosses these comments to Lewis with the following passage from *Enneads*, V.9.13, transcribed into one of Pound’s notebooks for *Thrones*:

there must be true knowledge in the souls which are in us, and there are not images . . . or likenesses of their Forms as things are in the sense-world, but those very Forms existing here in a different mode: for they are not separated off in a particular place.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 106-7.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Fisher, *Ezra Pound’s Radio Operas*, 155. This is the importance of the association of memory with the “Diafan dal lume” in the Canzone—in Dante’s words, *Convivio*, III.9: “These visible things . . . pass into the eye (I do not mean the things themselves, but their forms) through the diaphanous medium (not in reality but in intention), much as in transparent glass.”

⁸⁹ *Pound/Lewis*, 301.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* “Simiglglianza”: given thus in Pound’s text of the Canzone, “Cavalcanti,” *Literary Essays*, 164.

⁹¹ Quoted in Liebrechts, *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism*, 343. The context suggests that this is Pound’s translation. Cf. MacKenna’s version: “Every soul, authentically a soul, has some form of rightness and moral wisdom; in the souls within ourselves there is true knowing: and these attributes are no images or copies from the Supreme, as in the sense-world, but actually are those very originals in a mode peculiar to this sphere. For those beings are not set apart in some defined place.”

“Existing here in a different mode”: Plotinus concluded this passage by noting that “the world of sense is one-where, the Intellectual Cosmos is everywhere. Whatever the freed soul attains to here, that is There.” “To make Cosmos” (CXVI/8155), to exceed the senses in “knowing” (εἶδος), but not to find that knowing “separated off” from the world—that would be precisely the hope of the last, fragmentary sequence of Cantos.

At the end of his life, though, Pound would also see himself as one who had in fact mistaken the eye for the mind. In an unpublished Venice notebook of 1966, he writes: “The errors so / obvious ---/ che prende l’occhio per la mente,” and, as we have already seen, he places the Italian phrase in apposition to what he sees there as his own confusion of “mechanism” with “principle.” Yet when he lighted on the word “anagogical” in the fifties he was deeply responsive to its utopian inflection. In the old Latin mnemonic that defines the four senses, the anagogical is where one is going (“Quo tendas anagogia”), the promise of a future intermittently legible in the present.⁹² Anagogy is a “leading up,” in its original Greek meaning; it is what Agamben terms an “anagogical leap of love,”⁹³ a phrase which nicely resonates with Canto XCVIII’s “speed in communication” and the idea of Neptune, with his “mind leaping / like dolphins” (CXVI/815). The redemption from Erebus that Pound records in *Rock-Drill* and *Thrones* is precisely this freeing of the imagination, with its discovery that the deictics of vision—most notably the ritually affirmative “now” that signals the mind’s ascent⁹⁴—that these are, as it were, deictics of promise, implying a slight displacement from the immediacy of the present: the “form

⁹² The Latin mnemonic is: “Littera gesta docet, Quod credas allegoria. / Moralia quod agas, Quo tendas anagogia.” Compare Dante’s definition of faith in *Paradiso*, XXIV. 64-6: “fede è sustanza di cose sperate / e argomento de le non parventi; / e questa pare a me sua quiditate.” Pound alludes to this in LXXXIX/620: “Quiditas, remarked D. Alighieri.” See also Nicola Masciandaro, “Conjuring the Phantasm” (Review of Giorgio Agamben’s *Signature of All Things*), *Theory and Event*, 13. 3 (2010), np: “anagogy is constituted by the immanence of a redemptive future that is impossibly already sensible in the fractured terms of the present.”

⁹³ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 141.

⁹⁴ For one of many examples, see Canto XCI/628 where the purified present of emergence from Erebus is registered in a “now” that is loaded with futural implication (“For the procession of Corpus / come now banners,” etc.).

that seems a form seen in a mirror,” forms “that border the visible,”⁹⁵ the “here” that is also partially an “elsewhere,” “Quo tendas.” The “hilaritas” that once described a philosopher’s sense of humor has now transformed itself into a kind of animating principle, and when Pound tells us that “love is the ‘form’ of philosophy” (XCIII/646) we begin to see what it means to read anagogically, with *hilaritas*: for this statement is partly tautological (love is the form of philo-sophy, love of knowledge); we have a proposition whose simple equivalence seems to slip the net of its own propositional logic, leaving us with “form” rather than meaning (hence, perhaps, Pound’s caveat here, that Dante “puts knowledge higher than I should”).

Canto XCVIII’s two *hilaritas* clusters will now receive one last reprise, in Canto C:

Barley, rice, cotton, tax-free
with hilaritas
 Letizia, Dante, Canto 18 a religion
Virtù enters
 Buona da sè volontà
 Lume non è, se non dal sereno
 stone to stone, as a river descending
 the sound a gemmed light,
 form is from the lute’s neck
 (C/736)

A quite daring expansion of the term is attempted here, with *hilaritas* now expressing generosity and abundance through an allusion to the King of Persia’s offer to potential immigrants in 1823 of “gratuitous grants of land, good for the production of wheat, barley, rice, and fruits, free from taxes or contributions of any kind.”⁹⁶ From this enlightened act of largesse we move by way of “hilaritas”—a slightly precipitous leap, but one for which Pound’s various

⁹⁵ Pound, “Cavalcanti,” *Literary Essays*, 154.

⁹⁶ The passage is first quoted in Canto LXXXVIII/604, from Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years’ View; or, A History of the Working of the American Government for Thirty Years, from 1820 to 1850*, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton, 1854), I, 106.

recontextualisations have prepared us—to find the poet admiring in *Paradiso* XVIII “a religion” that celebrates “letizia,” gladness and joy: “e letizia era ferza del paleo,” “and gladness was the whip of the top.”⁹⁷ Pound doesn’t quote Dante’s precise yet playful phrase, but the lines that follow are all concerned with energy and movement—with *Virtù*, the will (*volontà*), with the water falling “stone to stone” and with the sound that derives from the “lute’s neck.”⁹⁸ As the river “descends,” Pound’s fragmentary allusions to *Paradiso* XVIII, XIX and XX trace Dante’s ascent in the final stages of his journey. Pound recalls once more his own escape from the “heaviness” of Erebus, “Where no mind moves at all,” and Erigena’s *hilaritas* is now subtly constellated with Dante’s *letizia*, the joy that makes the light spin.⁹⁹ These two words will take their place with the troubadour *joi* when Pound quotes two resonant phrases from Bernart de Ventadorn in the final fragment of *The Cantos*:

La faillite de François Bernouard, Paris
or a field of larks at Allegre,
“es laissa cader”
so high toward the sun and then falling,
“de joi sas alas”
to set here the roads of France
(CXVII/823)

As Pound had translated the chanson back in 1910: “When I see the lark a-moving / For joy his wings against the sunlight, / Who forgets himself and lets himself fall / For the sweetness which goes into his

⁹⁷ *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso: 1. Text*, 201.

⁹⁸ *Virtù: Paradiso*, XVIII. 60, “la sua virtute avanza”; *volontà: Paradiso*, XIX. 86-7, “La prima volontà, ch’è da sé buona, / da sé, ch’è sommo ben, mai non si mosse”; “Lume non è, se non dal sereno,” *Paradiso*, XIX. 64; “stone to stone,” *Paradiso*, XX. 20: “di pietra in pietra”; the “gemmed light,” *Paradiso*, XX. 17, “io vidi ingemmato il sesto lume”; “form is from the lute’s neck,” *Paradiso*, XX. 22-3, “E come suono al collo de la cetra / prende sua forma.”

⁹⁹ See *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso: 2: Commentary*, 306 where Singleton quotes Grandgent’s gloss: “‘And joy was the whip of the top,’ i.e., it was joy that made it (the light) spin. Several times in the *Paradiso* Dante makes a swift rotary motion the symbol of keen delight.”

heart.”¹⁰⁰ The motif of flying and falling is rich in implication (“la faillite” is “bankruptcy”¹⁰¹), embodying the (Icarian?) arc of Pound’s own career, from that early walking-tour in France to what is now the end of his poem as he confronts “a bridge over worlds.” Perhaps, too, the motif parallels the almost cyclothymic swings in the late Cantos themselves, as they veer between elation and depression, between the “hilarity” of allusion and the relative “heaviness” of the referential mode. It is finally, though, this soaring “joy” that leaves its indelible trace, making commentary for once unnecessary and leaving *hilaritas* to speak momentarily for itself.

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¹⁰⁰ Pound, *Spirit of Romance*, 41 (my emphases). Cf. Charles Camproux, “La joie civilisatrice des troubadours,” *Table ronde*, 97 (1956), 68 on “cette immense liberté d’action que laisse au jeu de l’alouette, l’espace libre dont elle s’enivre et qui emplit tout son être de la joie la plus douce.”

¹⁰¹ For a helpful gloss on the first line, see Richard Sieburth, “Canto 119: François Bernouard,” *Paideuma*, 4. 2-3 (Fall and Winter 1975), 329-32.

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