EZRA POUND, MARCO POLO, AND CATHAY

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Studies of Ezra Pound and the Orient frequently focus on various aspects of his work with the papers of Ernest Fenollosa and on the numerous texts which helped shape Pound's understanding of Asia. One background text which is rarely discussed, however, is Marco Polo's *Description of the World*, usually known as the *Travels*. This book, perhaps the most influential travel book ever written, describes Marco Polo's thirteenth-century journey from Venice along the Silk Road to China, his adventures in Asia as an emissary of the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan, and his return by sea to Europe. When Pound titled his collection of Chinese translations "Cathay," he silently acknowledged a debt to Polo. It was Polo's *Travels* which brought the term "Cathay" into popular use in the West and fired the Western imagination with its first vision of the Orient.

This paper clarifies the nature of Pound's Orient by examining the connections between Marco Polo and Ezra Pound, between the *Travels* and the *Cantos*. The purpose is twofold: first, to explore an alternative to the usual approach to the study of Pound and the Orient—to follow Pound from Europe east along the Silk Road to China instead of west through Japan—and second, to examine how the fabulous image of Asia found in the *Travels* is used by Pound to advance his own ideas and create his own Orient. The heart of the paper is an examination of three texts: Chapter XXIV in Book II of the *Travels*, Pound's brief essay, "Kublai Khan and his Currency," and the beginning of Canto XVIII consisting of twenty-three lines Pound adapted from Polo. These texts all deal in different ways with Kublai Khan's making and control of paper currency in China. In the essay and in Canto XVIII,

Pound draws from Polo's *Travels* to promote his own economic theories. The recent controversy, spearheaded by Frances Wood, over whether or not Polo actually visited China links the *Travels* and the *Cantos* even more closely. Ultimately they are both fictional works grounded in experience but describing imaginary worlds.

I

Polo and Pound

And when he got thither the same fate befel him as befel Ulysses who, when he returned, after his twenty years' wanderings, to his native Ithaca, was recognized by nobody.

—Preface to *The Book of Marco Polo*, Giovanni Battista Ramusio

I ? I ? I ?
And ye?

—"On his Own Face in a Glass," *A Lume Spento*, Ezra Pound

Who are these men? Two travelers, two writers, two Venetians. In 1296 a bearded man dressed in a shabby, padded, Mongol-style coat with brass buttons, stepped off a small ship onto a stone quay in Venice. No one recognized him. At his family home he arranged an elaborate feast. When the guests arrived, he took a sharp knife and ripped open the seams of his ragged clothes. Emeralds, rubies, diamonds, and sapphires tumbled out. The amazed and bewildered guests now recognized Marco Polo and welcomed him home. When details of the arrival became known in Venice, the city flocked to the Ca' Polo to embrace him. At least that's the story told in the introduction to the *Travels* (Polo, vol. I, 5). Though Polo had all but forgotten his native tongue, everyone understood the language of his precious stones.

And there's more. In 1296, during a sea battle with the city of Genoa, Marco Polo was captured. In a Genoese jail he met another prisoner, the romance writer, Rusticello di Pisa. With Polo dictating

his adventures and Rusticello copying and embellishing, the *Travels* took shape. Polo was not the first Westerner to write an account of life in Asia, but the wealth of information he presented and the force of the romance-tinged text made the *Travels* popular throughout Europe.

In 1908 Ezra Pound arrived alone in Venice with about eighty dollars in his pocket. He settled in the San Trovaso neighborhood opposite a gondola repair shop. He watched the boat traffic from the Dogana, read Browning, and in June paid for the printing of his first collection of poetry, *A Lume Spento*, a book full of the masks, voices and identities which would become a characteristic of his work.

In 1917 Pound wrote to James Joyce: "I have begun an endless poem, of no known category, . . . all about everything" (Cookson, xvii). This poem, *The Cantos*, became Pound's lifework. The structure is broadly fugue-like, drawing elements from Dante, with a descent to hell followed by a movement toward paradise. There are gestures toward the epic, and large chunks of historical, political, and economic binding matter, among which Marco Polo makes a brief appearance.

And more. In 1945, after being indicted for treason by the United States government, Pound was arrested, taken to Genoa, and then transferred to a military detention camp outside Pisa. After suffering a breakdown he was moved to a medical tent and given access to a typewriter. There, with nothing but "the mirror of memory" to sustain him, he completed eleven cantos, published in 1948 as *The Pisan Cantos*. The force of vision, lyricism, and elegiac tone won Pound the Bollingen Prize in 1949 and helped make *The Pisan Cantos* a postwar literary sensation.

And Pound brought stones, too. In the *Cantos*, the Hell of money leads to the Paradise of stone. Most famously, the sapphire bedposts, the forest of marble, and the ball of crystal. And the stones speak: of clarity and renewed hope.

II

Voices On

What sort of bamboozling story is this that you are telling me?
—Ishmael to the landlord of the Spouter Inn, *Moby-Dick*, Herman Melville

It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear.
—Marco Polo to the Khan, *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino

Although many people know the name Marco Polo, only a very few have read his book. The original manuscript, now lost, was probably written in a Franco-Italian dialect. Almost 150 different manuscript and printed editions have been identified. They are in all the major European languages and include a significant amount of vocabulary from Persian, Arabic, Turkish, and Chinese. Most modern editions draw passages from various versions, especially from one by Giovanni Battista Ramusio, the first great promoter of the Polo legend (Wood, 43).

Ramusio's edition of the *Travels*, published in 1559, was the first to include the fanciful story of Polo's return to Venice, as well as numerous other incidents that do not occur in any other surviving versions. Modern editions rely heavily on Ramusio in part because many of the so-called "best" passages in the *Travels* occur only in his text (Wood, 47). The most influential twentieth-century English translation is by Sir Henry Yule. The third edition of his *Travels of Marco Polo*, published in 1903 with extensive detailed notes is the English version Ezra Pound knew.

From Polo to Rusticello to Ramusio to Yule to Pound, with numerous anonymous writers editing and adding along the way. What we have in the *Travels* is a fascinatingly tangled web of closely related texts gathered under one title and attributed to one man. To compli-

cate matters further, there are questions regarding Polo himself. Almost everything we know about him comes from the *Travels* and from a very few documents in Venice. Indeed, there is less corroborative evidence about the life of Marco Polo than almost any other celebrated writer in history. One German scholar has recently proposed that Marco Polo was invented by Rusticello, the ghostwriter of the *Travels* (Wood, 162).

When we turn to the actual contents of the *Travels*, the situation becomes even more intriguing. The book begins by proclaiming the truthfulness of the tale:

> Great Princes, Emperors, and Kings, Dukes and Marquises, Counts, Knights, and Burgesses! and People of all degrees who desire to get knowledge of the various races of mankind and of the diversities of the sundry regions of the World, take this book and cause it to be read to you. For ye shall find therein all kinds of wonderful things . . . [set down] according to the description of Messer Marco Polo, a wise and noble citizen of Venice, as he saw them with his own eyes. Some things, indeed, there be therein which he beheld not; but these he heard from men of credit and veracity. And we shall set down things seen as seen, and things heard as heard only, so that no jot of falsehood may mar the truth of our Book, and that all who shall read it or hear it read may put full faith in the truth of all its contents. (Polo, vol. I, 1)

Despite this bold declaration—possibly because of it—scholars have almost universally questioned the truth of the *Travels*. Though the journey described moves generally from Venice east to Asia and back to Venice, it is not a logical itinerary. Everyone who has attempted to trace Polo's route has eventually been forced to give up in frustration. There are simply too many holes. In *The Chan's Great Continent*, Jonathan Spence calls the *Travels* "a combination of verifiable fact, random information posing as statistics, exaggeration, make-believe, gullible acceptance of unsubstantiated stories, and a certain amount of

outright fabrication" (Spence, 1). In *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* Frances Wood points out that Polo doesn't mention the Great Wall, chopsticks, or tea, that his descriptions of cities he visited are often at odds with other contemporary descriptions, and that although he lived in China for more than fifteen years as the Khan's emissary, he appears nowhere in Chinese histories or documents.

But so what. It's true that the more firmly you try to grasp Marco Polo and his *Travels*, the more they slip away, but this slippery element ultimately adds to the fascination of the text. Much of the book is a merchant's version of poetry. There are details of the spices, textiles, and porcelain that are each city's specialty. In Suju forty pounds of excellent fresh ginger costs one Venetian groat (Polo, vol. II, 181). In Cambaluc cartloads of silk arrive every morning from which luxuriant cloth is made (Polo, vol. I, 415). In Tyunju exquisite porcelain is so abundant and cheap that for a groat you can buy three bowls of such beauty that nothing lovelier could be imagined (Polo, vol II, 236). Mixed in with this factual information are stories, told in the best Arabian nights manner, of exotic animals, magical events and bizarre customs. In Kelinfu there are birds which have no feathers, but hair only, like cat fur (Polo, vol II, 226). At the Khan's feasts, magicians cause wine cups to fly through the air (Polo, vol. I, 302). Tartars arrange marriage contracts and have grand weddings for the dead (Polo, vol. I, 267). And this merchant's poetry is on an epic scale. In Kinsay forty-three cartloads of pepper each weighing 233 pounds are consumed daily (Polo, vol II, 204). The city of Suju has 6,000 stone bridges each big enough for a ship, or even two ships at once to pass underneath (Polo, vol II, 181). The Khan keeps a stud of more than 10,000 horses "all pure white without a speck" (Polo, vol. I, 300). And when he hunts he takes 10,000 falconers with 5,000 falcons (Polo, vol. I, 402).

Politically, the China that Polo describes is a benevolent dictatorship. Though Kublai Khan later turned to Buddhism, he was educated by Confucian scholars and this may account for his relatively enlightened ideas of government. Polo notes the high taxes and other

problems, but he genuinely admires and respects the Khan for the magnificence of the empire he has created. The famous description of the making of money which attracted Pound appears about halfway through the *Travels*, in Chapter XXIV of Book II. In the chapter, Polo explains in detail how the Khan's mint in Cambaluc (Beijing) makes paper money in various sizes and denominations from the bark of mulberry trees. No other currency is allowed. All sales and purchases within the Khan's territories must use this money. Furthermore, Polo tells us, all merchants and travelers arriving in Cathay with gold, silver, gems and pearls can sell their goods only to the Khan and are paid in his paper money. In this way the Khan controls all the wealth in Cathay at a cost of virtually nothing to himself. Polo concludes: "Now you have heard the ways and means whereby the Great Khan may have, and in fact *has*, more treasure than all the Kings in the World; and you know all about it and the reason why" (Polo, vol. I, 426). Polo's straightforward account, an interesting historical footnote today, would have supplied invaluable information to fourteenth-century merchants who presumably would have caught the more subtle warning in the text: trader beware! Yule's bewildering commentary on this, which is longer than the chapter itself, includes a facsimile of a Ming dynasty banknote (see Figure 1).

Ezra Pound's first discussion of Marco Polo's *Travels* was in 1920 in an article for *The New Age* entitled "Kublai Khan and his Currency." Much of what Pound wrote for *The New Age* at this time was done simply to pay the rent and grocery bills. The large amount of quotation and summary in "Kublai Khan and his Currency" coupled with Pound's rhetorical bluster gives the essay an empty arrogance. But the fact that the same section of the *Travels* quoted in the essay appears in Canto XVIII published eight years later suggests that Pound's interest in Polo ran deeper.

The essay's beginning, satirically updating the declarations of truth in the *Travels*, is classic Pound:

> The gentleman who said 'Veritas praevalebit' was careful to

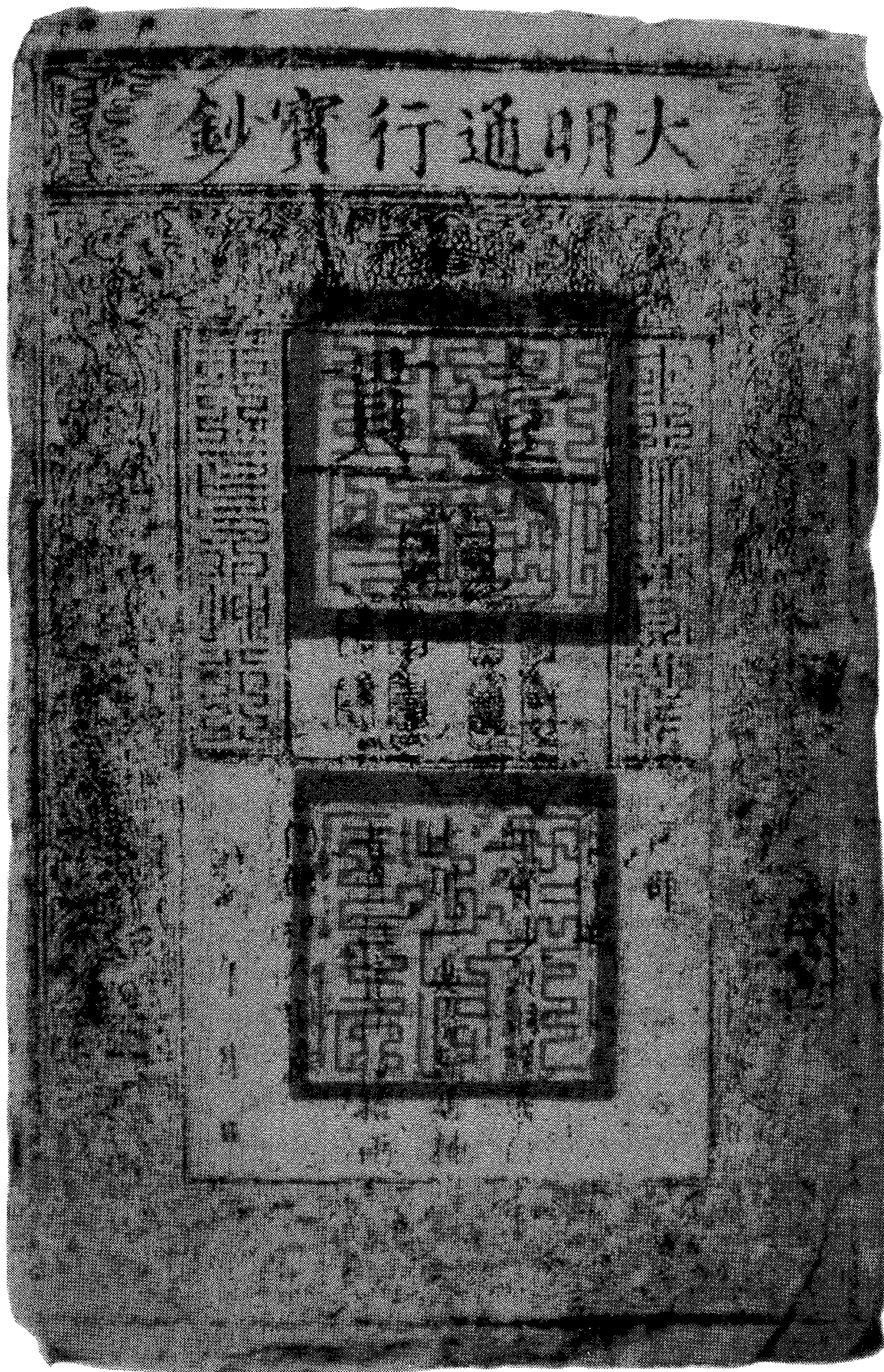

Figure 1. Ming dynasty banknote made from the bark of a mulberry tree (Polo, vol. I, 427).

> put his verb in the future tense and to affix no date to his prophecy. Truth sticks her nose out of the water-butt at rare intervals and then ducks beneath the shower of butt-lids hurled upon her. (Pound, *Selected Prose*, 174)

Pound, however, is careful. The truth he promotes is not the truth of Polo's description of the money making itself, but rather the economic truth behind the Khan's money making. The first part of the essay is largely a repetition of information from Yule's edition of the *Travels*. Pound then quickly comes to his point. "What we see on closer examination of the text," he says,

> is that Polo regarded the issue of paper money as a sort of clever hoax, backed up by tyranic power. The real tyranny resided, of course, in the Khan's control of credit. The parallels are fairly obvious. Paper money in Europe, as in the Orient, seems to have been regarded either as a perquisite of tyrants or as an expedient. . . . We have ceased to regard the issue of paper as a hoax, yet Polo smelled a rat and a real rat; but when he says 'Now you know all about it,' he over-estimated the intelligence of his readers. After six centuries the number of readers who 'know all about it' . . . is still exceedingly few. (Pound, *Selected Prose*, 175).

Pound, of course, was one of the few. As in Asia, so in Europe. The issuing of money and the power of tyrants go hand in hand. Pound follows this with a dig at academics, stating that the economic principle Polo describes is "so simple indeed that chairs in economics have been founded with increasing frequency to keep the fact from becoming apparent" (Pound, *Selected Prose*, 176). Power is maintained not simply by controlling money, but also by controlling knowledge. The final paragraph of the essay is unexpected. The Khan's unusual postal system, which appears several chapters later in the *Travels*, is described and praised:

> Kublai's post-riders with their coats buttoned behind and sealed with official seals so that there should be no question of their having dallied by the way-side, or reclined upon alien couches, are sufficient memorial to his insight into man's character. (Pound, *Selected Prose*, 176)

Although Pound is critical of the Khan's ruthless economic control, finally, like Polo, he admires him for his power and wisdom. The parallels, as Pound says, are fairly obvious. For Pound, the Great Khan and the Mongol Empire as described in the *Travels* are early examples of the kind of charismatic leader and enlightened political state that he envisioned for the West and that eventually led to his misguided support for Benito Mussolini and fascist Italy. Polo's special relationship with the Khan is a model for the relationship Pound attempted to establish with Mussolini. Both Polo and Pound were strangers in strange lands. For Polo this was ultimately an advantage that helped him win political favor and allowed him to observe life in the imperial court. Pound, by contrast, never cracked Mussolini's inner circle, and being in the wrong place at the wrong time ultimately landed him in St. Elizabeth's. In the essay Pound specifically identifies Polo as an insider. "We must in fairness admit," he says,

> that when the Khan finally allowed Polo to return to Venice, he redeemed a good deal of Polo's paper, and that the Venetians returned to their native city with a more universal medium of exchange [the precious stones]; but then Polo had been quite useful to the Khan, and may certainly be regarded as an insider. (Pound, *Selected Prose*, 175)

Pound, no matter what the context, sought access to and sought to create circles and vortices of privilege and power. In the essay he allies himself with Polo. "We know, we understand," he says, "listen."

In 1928 Pound published an edition of one hundred copies of *A*

Draft of the Cantos 17–27. Homer Pound had read Cantos XVIII and XIX by 1924 which suggests that the opening lines of Canto XVIII drawing from the *Travels* may have been written not long after "Kublai Khan and his Currency" appeared in *The New Age*. In a letter to his father Pound commented,

> As to Cantos 18–19; there ain't no key/Simplest parallel I can give is radio where you tell who is talking by the noise they make. If your copies are properly punctuated they shd. show where each voice begins and ends. You hear various people letting cats out of bags at maximum speed. (qtd. in Surette, 126)

In Canto XVIII the first noise we hear is Polo. Or is it?

> And of Kublai:
> "I have told you of that emperor's city in detail
> And will tell you of the coining in Cambaluc that hyght the secret of alchemy:
> They take the bast of the mulberry-tree,
> That is a skin between the wood and the bark,
> And of this they make paper, and mark it
> Half a tornesel, a tornesel, or a half-groat of silver,
> Or two groats, or five groats, or ten groats
> Or, for a great sheet, a gold bezant, 3 bezants, ten bezants;
> And they are written on by the officials,
> And smeared with the great khan's seal in vermilion;
> And the forgers are punished with death.
> And all this costs the Khan nothing,
> And so he is rich in this world.
> And his postmen go sewed up and sealed up,
> Their coats buttoned behind and then sealed,
> In this way from the voyage's one end to its other.
> And the Indian merchants arriving
> Must give up their jewels, and take this money in paper,

(That trade runs, in bezants to 400,000 the year.)
And the nobles must buy their pearls"
—thus Messire Polo; prison at Genoa—
"Of the Emperor." (Pound, *Cantos*, XVIII, 80)

Polo's description of money making in Cambaluc is quoted directly, but the poetic language and voice, the "noise" of the passage, belong unmistakably to Pound. In the fourth line, the use of the Middle English "hyght" to introduce "the secret of alchemy" adds an historically appropriate thirteenth-century detail to the passage and also shows Pound taking Polo's text and, by making it old, making it new, which is another way of saying making it his own. Pound the medievalist becomes Pound the Orientalist. The control and issue of money, a recurring theme that grows in importance in the course of the *Cantos* is introduced here for the first time where Pound controls and reissues Polo's text. In a sense we are back with Polo in the Genoa jail, this time with Pound ghostwriting. As in the essay, Pound mentions the Khan's mail system, but here the post riders appear and disappear just past the center of the passage breaking up the discussion of money. The effect is to destabilize and exoticize the text while stressing the Khan's absolute authority. Noun becomes verb as the Khan's vermilion seal is transformed into the sealing up of the post riders who are literally metamorphosed into the messages they carry. The basic technique of the *Travels*, to present with little or no direct comment, is here translated into Pound's modernist idiom. In Poundian terms, the real currency is language; the "secret of alchemy" is multivocal collage. The smug I-know-all-about-it-and-now-you-know-all-about-it tone of Pound's essay has been replaced by the radio turned on and turned up. It's Pound broadcasting. It's Rome calling circa 1920.

III

Triptych: Ecbatan—Cambaluc—Venice

Venice is exactly the place where I am not.
—"Venise de ma fenetre," Jean-Paul Sartre

One ingenious explanation for why the *Travels* was written is that it was designed as a mixture of self-promotion and oblique criticism of the West. By detailing the splendor of the East, the West looks petty and mean. Is Polo's merchant poetry really describing China or is it a mirror image of Europe (Spence, 16)? Is Pound's Cathay really Cathay or is it finally an "Other" image of the West? It's our own face in the glass, he says. "The verb is 'see,' not 'walk on' " (Pound, *Cantos*, CXVI, 810).

All cities are beautiful in last light. Pound's Venice and Polo's Cambaluc glow equally at sunset. The cities of the Silk Road shine and the road itself, linking worlds, is a world. Goods, technology, ideas, and culture move back and forth. In Ecbatan, where two strands of the Silk Road join, jade and spices from Asia, and cotton and grapes from Europe can be found in the bazaar. In the cool of the evening, the travelers gather in the patterned streets under the gilded tower and talk. Ideas of mathematics, astronomy, music, dance, poetry, items of high value and no bulk, are traded freely back and forth. In the morning the travelers are gone, east and west, but in the evening they talk. "The clock ticks and fades out" (Pound, *Cantos*, V, 17). Again the vision: Ecbatan, "city of Dioce, whose terraces are the colour of stars" (Pound, *Cantos*, LXXIV, 439).

The road to Ecbatan is the road to Cambaluc, city of the Emperor. Six miles on each side, twenty-four miles around with twelve gates, and streets so straight and wide you can see from end to end. And up and down the city are beautiful palaces with courts and gardens. To Cambaluc are brought more articles of greater cost, rarity, and variety

than to any other city in the world. And the city is arranged in squares like a chess board. In the middle is a great bell which is struck at night. After it has been struck three times, no one is allowed in the streets (Polo, vol. I, 374). In Cambaluc Polo and the Khan sit deep into the dark. Polo talks of his journeys through the empire. Each place is described in detail. The cities of the past, present, and future. The cities that exist and the cities of the imagination. Finally Polo is silent. The Khan begins. "There is still one city of which you never speak," he says.

> Marco Polo bowed his head.
> "Venice," the Khan said.
> Marco smiled. "What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?"
> The emperor did not turn a hair. "And yet I have never heard you mention that name."
> And Polo said: "Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice." (Calvino, 86)

We end where we began. Venice is the key. Without Venice, no Polo, no Pound, no Cathay. It is the essential city whose mythology incorporates all three. Without Venice, no *Description of the World*, no *Cantos*. Venice is the point of departure and the point of return. It is the most Oriental of European cities, a city saturated with the East, a city of traders and poets. And it is as near to the Orient as Ezra Pound ever got. Venice is, to paraphrase Ron Bush, Pound's vanished Troy, his Ithaca (Tanner, 288), and finally, I would suggest, his Cambaluc. The *Cantos* are grounded in a vision of Cathay, which is to say the *Cantos* are grounded in the ooze of Venice, which is to say the *Cantos* aren't grounded at all. They are floating and sinking, sinking and floating. Look: in the oyster light of a Venetian dawn two men are beginning a journey. One man is boarding a ship, another man is sitting down to write a poem.

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