

‘Pull Down Thy Vanity’: Post-Pastoral Subject in Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*

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Abstract:

*Anglophone modernism is often interpreted as reflecting a crisis of modernity brought about, among other factors, by the trauma of World War One. The parameters of the crisis include the perception that things are “falling apart,” i.e. a growing sense of the fragmentation of reality and of the exhaustion of traditional teleological narratives such as religion or the myth of progress. Poetry written in the face of this condition must necessarily be paradoxical in that it combines the profound skepticism of the times with an almost religious faith in the redemptive power of art. The paradoxes of modern poetry and its frequent recourse to silence in general have been discussed from a number of perspectives. Seldom, though, have critics taken into consideration the role played by the silence of nature in modernist poetry. In the work of Ezra Pound, it is possible to trace a progress from pastoral representations of nature to what Terry Gifford has defined as the “post-pastoral” mode. The latter mode is especially present in the Pisan section of Pound’s great epic poem *Cantos* and in its concluding parts. However, the earlier pastoral model is always already complicated by the tension between what, after Lacan, can be called the “énoncé” (statement) and the “énonciation” (enunciation) within Pound’s text. The pastoral and post-pastoral modes of nature representation correspond to two different subject positions. The pastoral setting involves a rigid subject/object dichotomy and the subject’s dominion over nature. The post-pastoral requires a reconfiguration of subjectivity to make space for the silent presence of nature, which no longer serves as a bearer of man-made meanings.*

The Paradoxes of Modernism

Most authors writing about Modernism note a paradoxical co-existence of two incompatible tendencies within the consciousness of the epoch. On the one hand, Modernism includes the grand and totalizing ambitions of poets such as Ezra Pound or Laura Riding, both of whom at certain points in their careers expressed a firm belief in the redemptive potential of poetry. On the other hand, Modernism coincided with a time of questioning, of radical formal experiments, of “making it new.” Broadly speaking, this split can be related to the tension between what is called “High Modernism” and the avant-garde, the first term standing for the solidifying ambitions of the era and the second one epitomizing the destabilizing, revolutionary, or anarchic energies of the time.¹

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The problem with this simple paradigm is that it readily deconstructs itself, as in fact both strains, High Modernism and the avant-garde, are modes of creation through rupture and crisis. The two tendencies often co-exist within the work of a single author. This cohabitation sometimes manifests itself in discrepancies between the writer's professed intentions and what his or her work actually makes happen, what in the terms of Lacanian analysis would be called, respectively, "*l'énoncé*" (statement) and "*l'énonciation*" (enunciation).² A fascinating example of such a split is to be found in the work of Laura Riding, whose poetic achievement almost drowns in the author's voluminous comments, appendices, prefaces and explanations, documents in which she tried to counterbalance the explosive energy of her art by making it flow in what she considered to be the appropriate direction. Laura Riding's confrontation with the anarchic powers of poetic language, with its enunciation which sometimes undercuts its statement, ultimately led to her renunciation of poetry,³ a gesture that might perhaps be read as symptomatic of Modernism's deeply paradoxical character, as the epitome of that period's fascination with silence as the only conceivable response to the insufficiency of language.

This problematic of silence also applies to Pound, especially with regard to the poet's progression from pastoral representations of nature to what Terry Gifford has defined as the "post-pastoral" mode. As we hope to show, although Pound's relationship to the natural world has not yet been sufficiently examined by ecocritics, the post-pastoral position is especially present in the Pisan section of Pound's great epic poem *Cantos* and in its concluding parts. However, the earlier pastoral model is always already complicated by the tension between what, after Lacan, can be called the "*énoncé*" (statement) and the "*énonciation*" (enunciation) within Pound's text.

Pound's *Cantos*

Indeed, this tension between "*l'énoncé*" and "*l'énonciation*" constitutes one of the most striking features of Ezra Pound's Modernist epic, the *Cantos*. It is a text which indefatigably instructs the reader in how to read and what meanings to look for. But the poet's sermonizing appears at odds with the poem's open-ended structure. Contrary to Pound's expressed intentions, the text does not miraculously metamorphose into a vortex, into pure patterned energy like "the rose in the steel dust" (469), but it remains radically incomplete, at times incomprehensible, and comes across as beautiful but also extremely frustrating. One of the most striking instances of this is when readers are confronted with pages upon solid pages of vaguely historical data or passages in languages other than English. The hiatuses and the lacunae of Pound's text render the poem difficult to grasp as a statement. As the poem progresses, the poet becomes more and more aware of the futility of his integrating efforts:

But the beauty is not the madness
Tho' my errors and wrecks lie about me
And I am not a demigod,
I cannot make it cohere (816)

In the concluding sections of the work, the speaker begins to understand that his great poetic ambition—the ambition to "write paradise"—cannot be fulfilled. But this admission of the failure of the poem is made *in* the poem and constitutes its integral element. Pound now knows that his luminous fragments will not coalesce into a perfect form of crystalline clarity, and yet he continues to write in spite of this impossibility. He comes to the realization that much of what he believed in in the past—and one may assume that includes his political convictions—proved simply wrong, as a result of which many of his actions were those "of a man seeking good,/doing evil" (814). He writes:

M'amour, m'amour
what do I love and
where are you?
That I lost my center
fighting the world.
The dreams clash
and are shattered—
and that I tried to make a paradiso
terrestre. (822)

What is at stake here is more than merely an acknowledgment of human frailty. The *Cantos* records a process whereby the poet learns to work with the absolute awareness of the inevitable decomposition of his text. The multi-voiced garrulity of the *Cantos* is but a fragile defense against the ultimate meaninglessness of language, against the void that lurks behind words. Pound continues to write in the face of that void, despite the fact that his mastery over representation has been overthrown by an explosive force over which he has no control. An important aspect of this process lies in a reconfiguration of the speaker's subjectivity which consists in the shift from the position of the narcissistic assertion of identity to a full acceptance of the I's radical incompleteness. That shift involves the way in which the subject relates to the objects he observes, including non-human nature. The objectifying attitude is gradually replaced with a sense of interpenetration of the inside (the psyche) and the outside (nature). As a result, the concluding sections of *The Cantos* express a radical form of environmentality (to use Lawrence Buell's term) or what Terry Gifford has defined as a "post-pastoral" consciousness. For Robert P. Harrison, Pound's work was "a mad attempt at cultural and historical reforestation" whose beauty "dried up and exhausted its sources almost as quickly as it flourished" (217). But that reading holds true only if one remains attached to the poem's statement, ignoring the level of enunciation.

The Pastoralism of the Cantos

There are at least two modes in which nature enters the *Cantos*. The first one can be roughly labeled as pastoral and is epitomized by the famous Chinese "Seven Lakes" canto (XLIX); the second, and more interesting one from an ecocritical perspective, is the mode that prevails in the Pisan section of the poem and in its concluding parts, and in which the dichotomy of the paradigmatic human observer and nature as object is destabilized. The term "pastoral" is of course subject to a lively debate which cannot be here recounted in its entirety. My point of departure corresponds to the broadest definition of this term, the second of the three meanings of the pastoral outlined by Terry Gifford in the opening chapter of his book devoted to the issue. According to this definition, the term "pastoral" refers to "any literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban" (2).⁴ The "Seven Lakes" canto is certainly an example of pastoral poetry in this general sense:

For the seven lakes, and by no man these verses:

Rain; empty river; a voyage,

Fire from frozen cloud, heavy rain in the twilight

Under the cabin roof was one lantern.

The reeds are heavy; bent;

and the bamboos speak as if weeping. (244)

In a tone evocative of the poet's translations from the Chinese collected in the early volume titled *Cathay*, Pound begins this canto by amassing beautiful (and exotic) images. The tone is meditative, the pace slow, the technique, essentially, that of free verse one knows from Pound's most readable imagist poems. The landscape, though slightly melancholy, is filled with unspeakable ("and by no man these verses") harmony, which mirrors the inner peace of the inhabitants of the Seven Lakes area. In subsequent parts of the canto, Pound alludes to a poem allegedly written by the Emperor Shun (2255-2205):

Comes then snow scur on the river

And a world is covered with jade

Small boat floats like a lantern,

The flowing water clots as with cold. And at San Yin

they are a people of leisure.

Wild geese swoop to the sand-bar,

Clouds gather about the hole of the window

Broad water; geese line out with the autumn

Rocks clatter over the fisherman's lanterns,

A light moves on the north sky line;

where the young boys prod stones for shrimp. (244-245)

The poem promulgates a vision in which humans co-exist peacefully and harmoniously with non-human nature. The signs of human presence remain discreet, non-intrusive. The paradigmatic shepherd gets replaced with the fisherman. His boat is small, so as not to disturb the tranquil landscape, and it is compared to a lantern which (passively) floats on the river. This idyllic though melancholy mood finds its culmination in the Chinese folk song quoted near the end of the Canto:

Sun up, work

sundown; to rest

dig well and drink of the water

dig field; eat of the grain

Imperial power is? and to us what is it? (245)

Humans harmoniously immersed in their natural environment, their activities tuned in to the natural cycles of the earth: the ideal that Pound finds in ancient China is well known from less distant contexts as well, as this kind of pastoralism frequently appears in Anglo-American romantic literature. In fact, Pound's version of the idyll may owe more to the literature of his homeland than to that of China. It must be remembered that Pound obtained his initial knowledge of Chinese poetry and the Chinese written character from the notebooks of Ernest Fenollosa, who studied Emerson before going to China. Fenollosa's and Pound's China is therefore markedly Transcendentalist.

One of the ideas derived from Fenollosa's notebooks which significantly influenced Pound's poetic technique is the notion that the Chinese written character functions as an ideograph, or "a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature" (Pound, "The Chinese Written Character" 101). This belief became the grounds for Pound's elaboration of the organic relationship between the people and the earth, whose culmination is a form of government that amounts to no more than an extension of the natural order of things. Such a form of government existed, Pound was convinced, at the time of Confucius. The poet felt certain that it was possible and necessary to transplant Confucian ideas to America and Europe. Jefferson had already tried to do it. Unfortunately, Pound's increasingly deluded thinking led him to the conclusion that the new leader who would follow in the footsteps of Kung and Jefferson was Benito Mussolini.

It is therefore possible to claim that the ideogramic technique of the Cantos leads to a version of pastoralism. The notion that all human activities, including politics and the arts, can grow organically out of the natural setting, was Pound's response to what he considered as the impasse of symbolism. In poems such as the "Seven Lakes" Canto, Pound foregrounds what Greg Garrard describes as the "question of be/longing," the question concerning "the root of human beings on this earth" (186). However, traditional parameters of western nature poetry are not questioned in this mode of writing. Nature is made to bear man-made meanings, as in "the bamboos speak as if weeping" (244), or to meekly obey the governance of wise people, as in "dig field; eat of the grain" (245). Nature here constitutes, in Lawrence Buell's formulation, "a theatre for human events" (*The Environmental Imagination* 52). Various human paraphernalia and marks of civilized activity mix in with the landscape ("the monk's bell/ borne on the wind" (244); "Small boat floats like a lantern" (245), and though the signs of human intervention remain subtle and non-aggressive, yet it is precisely those signs that suffuse the natural setting with the aura of a certain moral accuracy. And it is precisely this moral accuracy that Pound was searching for at the time of composition—a natural ethics which would provide the grounds for the perfect social organization and the ideal government. That was the "paradiso terrestre" he tried, in vain, to write.

The simple pastoral mode described above is complicated by the final couplet of the canto:

The fourth; the dimension of stillness.
And the power over wild beasts. (245)

The last line makes it brutally clear that the idyllic "harmony" between humanity and non-human nature is conditioned by the former's dominion over some aspects of the latter ("wild beasts"). In other words, the representation of nature offered by the poem relies on the exclusion of its less agreeable elements. The reference to "stillness" corresponds to the silence evoked by the first line of the canto ("and by no man these verses" [244]). These aspects of the poem's enunciation suggest that the vision presented by its *énoncé* is by no means complete.

“Let the Wind Speak”: Pound’s Post-pastoral Silence

Pound’s misguided political ideas eventually led to his adoption of Musolini’s fascism. The poet had to pay a heavy price for this tragic mistake. After the Second World War was over, Pound, condemned as a traitor, imprisoned in a concrete, open-air cage at the military Detention Training Center near Pisa, began to re-evaluate his views. The increasing awareness of the evil he committed while “seeking good” finds its reflection in the parts of the poem written during that time. Strikingly, the shift in Pound’s judgment concerning the value of his life’s achievement is accompanied by a heightened sensitivity to natural phenomena, which are no longer treated merely as decoration. When, at the beginning of *The Pisan Cantos*, the reader encounters references to rain and wind, they no longer serve any human purpose. When Pound observes, poignantly, “rain also is of the process” (445) and, a few lines below, “the wind also is of the process” (445), he does not use the rain and the wind metaphorically. These two elements do not derive their aura from a mere translation of the landscape of the soul. The rain and the wind literally enter the cage of the prisoner and he registers them, but this time without any inclination towards mastery.

The precondition for this non-patronizing attitude towards nature lies in the reconfiguration of the poet’s subjective position. The speaker of *The Pisan Cantos* and, to an even greater extent, of the part titled “Drafts and Fragments” is increasingly uncertain of his control over the material of his observations and over the very texture of the poem. He no longer presents himself as the strong and self-possessed ego, confronted with a reality whose patterns he can discern and record. He no longer projects himself as a modern-day Odysseus who will lead himself, and the whole European civilization, back home. He is now but a miserable languaged body, a field of consciousness filled with pain, memories, quotations, bits and pieces of paradise and of hell. Paradise, when he can say “the lizard upheld me” (448), and hell when he imagines himself as “a lone ant from a broken ant-hill” (478). Both aspects of the natural are equally important.

This subjective reconfiguration, based on the shattering of an illusion which previously constituted the poet’s stronghold against the dark underside of symbolic reality, is also visible in the poem’s moments of silence. Returning to the wind:

the wind also is of the process,

sorella la luna

Fear god and the stupidity of the populace (LXXIV, 445)

There is a lot of empty space between “the wind is also of the process” and the reference to “sister moon” in the next verse. The logical link between the two lines is missing, which reminds one of the famous imagist haiku “In the Station of the Metro” (*Personae*, 109), with the connective between the two lines famously absent. But here the situation is different. While in the early poem, the connection between the two images was supposed to occur naturally in the mind of the reader (it being assumed that the homology between the faces in the underground and the petals on a black bough ought to give rise to an explosion of meaning), here the elliptical link between the two images really is missing. The empty space represents a genuine gap which is not to be filled with any contents. Gaps and silences figure prominently in the last parts of the poem. In Canto LXXIV, the speaker comes to terms with the fact that, though paradise is not simply a lie, one will not build the parradiso terrestre:

Le Paradis n’est pas artificiel

but spezzato apparently

it exists only in fragments [...]
(458)

These fragments will not be reintegrated because they never formed a whole in the first place. "Le Paradis" is always helplessly mixed up with hell, as the following fragment from Canto LXXVI makes clear:

Le Paradis n'est pas artificiel

States of mind are inexplicable to us

[...]

Le paradis n'est pas artificiel,
l'enfer non plus. (480)

Paradisaal moments occur, but at the cost of a renunciation. What must be abandoned is the self's egotistic urge to dominate. "Pull down thy vanity" (541.), the speaker demands, repeatedly, in Canto LXXXI, and adds: "Learn of the green world what can be thy place" (541). And in Canto LXXXII, he imagines death as the ultimate marriage of self with the earth. The relevant fragment within the piece begins with an allusion to Walt Whitman's "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking":

'O troubled reflection

'O Throat, O throbbing heart'

How drawn, O GEA TERRA

what draws as thou drawest

till one sink into thee by an arm's width

embracing thee. Drawest,

truly thou drawest.

Wisdom lies next thee,

simply, past metaphor. (546)

What "drawest" as the earth "drawest" might be the same force which exploded the grand ambition of creating the paradiso terrestre, the handbook for the princes, the poem including history: it is the force which takes one "past metaphor," into the realm beyond meaning and beyond the self. Here, one might observe, lies the horizon of Ezra Pound's life-long quest for an alternative to the self-satisfied aestheticism of European poetry.

Beyond this horizon is silence, and the poem makes this silence heard, as when the poet observes the business of a she-wasp:

in about ½ a day she has made her adobe

(la vespa) the tiny mud-flask

and that day I wrote no further (553)

In “and [...] I wrote no further,” space is created for non-human nature to be. Among the notes for Canto CXVII, on the very last pages of the epic gone terribly astray, the reader comes across the following confession:

I have tried to write Paradise

Do not move

Let the wind speak
that is paradise.

Let the Gods forgive what I
have made

Let those I love try to forgive
what I have made. (822)

In surrendering his authority to that of the wind, the poet is not repeating the Whitmanian gesture of inviting nature to speak through his mouth. In a much more radical move, he invites the wind to obliterate what the poet has made, to take the poet's place and speak instead of him. The “I” at the end of the line in which the speaker is asking the Gods for forgiveness feels strangely alienated, as if the voice who is uttering these lines was already separating itself from this “I” which made so many unnecessary things.

The ultimate sections of the Cantos fulfill at least three of the six criteria Terry Gifford outlines in his discussion of post-pastoral literature. The first of those criteria is “an awe in attention to the natural world” (152). The speaker of these poems is awed to the extent that he frequently falls silent, realizing the inadequacy of language to reflect the literally wonderful character of the simplest facts of life. He demands that human beings “pull down” their vanity and find their proper place in “the green world.” The second of Gifford's criteria concerns “the recognition of a creative-destructive universe equally in balance in a continuous momentum of birth and death, death and rebirth, growth and decay, ecstasy and dissolution” (153). Both of these aspects of nature, the generative and the destructive, are present in Pound's mature work. The wasp and its “tiny mud flask” are full of life, so is the earth, “GEA TERRA,” but the latter simultaneously serves as a grave in that it receives the bodies of the dead, and the speaker fantasizes about lying down in that grave and dissolving in the absolute silence of nature.

The third—and perhaps the most important—feature of the post-pastoral to be found in the Cantos is “the recognition that the inner is also the working of the outer” (Gifford 156). The subjective position of the speaker in *The Pisan Cantos* is that of a humble participant in processes he cannot control. In Canto LXXVI, the speaker reflects on the unpredictable forces of history and imagines himself to be “a lone ant from a broken ant-hill” (478). Those reflections are interspersed with the observations concerning his own past shortcomings (“J'ai eu pitié des autres/probablement pas assez, and at moments that suited my own convenience,” 480), and with remarks about the presence of various living beings around him, such as the spider or a butterfly (“That butterfly has gone out thru my smoke hole,” 481). The relationship between the speaker and the little creatures he notices around him, such as various insects, is by no means hierarchical, he himself feels like “an ant” and his world is “a broken ant-hill.” The Canto ends with the following couplet, which eschews aggressive subjectivity based on domination:

woe to them that conquer with armies

and whose only right is their power (483)

History and nature were never treated as antonyms in Pound's poetry. In Canto LXXVI, the interpenetration of the two forces becomes especially visible. The speaker participates in both, but no teleology comes across in this fragmented poem full of gaps. There is a pervasive sense that "things have ends and beginnings" (482), which testifies not only to the poet's awareness of his own finality, but also to his intuition of the infinite, of that which transcends his individual existence. It is in that intuition that the broken subject of *The Pisan Cantos* finds his silent peace.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Some of the authors who dealt with this problem are Peter Bürger (*The Theory of the Avant-Garde*), Paul De Man (*Aesthetic Ideology; Blindness and Insight*), Matei Calinescu (*Five Faces of Modernity*), and Marjorie Perloff (*The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*).
 - ² Lacan introduces this distinction in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (Book 11 of his seminar) in order to mark off two levels present in every instance of speech, that is, the level of the conscious intention (ego-talk) versus the level of what is actually said (the intersubjective consequences of a given utterance). In order to illustrate this split, Lacan refers to the example of a paradoxical statement such as "I am lying." The person who utters such a sentence may actually be lying (for instance, he or she might have been lying a moment ago); at the same time, however, by disclosing his or her intentions, that person is telling the truth. In Lacan's own formulation: This division between the statement and the enunciation means that, in effect, from the *I am lying* which is at the level of the chain of the statement—the *am lying* is a signifier, forming part, in the Other, of the treasury of vocabulary in which the *I*, determined retroactively, becomes a signification, engendered at the level of the statement, of what it produces at the level of the enunciation—what results is an *I am deceiving you*. (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 139).
There is no statement without enunciation because language is by nature intersubjective. Every act of communication involves addressing someone, a real or potential other. Moreover, in order for communication to take place, the interlocutors must share a system of signifying elements. That system – language - is "the third party," the guarantor of every intersubjective exchange. In Lacanian terms, it is the (big) Other, the symbolic order, the locus of speech itself.
 - ³ After publishing *Collected Poems* in 1938, Riding discontinued her practice of poetry, devoting the rest of her life to working on an improved dictionary of the English language. She also wrote a number of texts in which she meditated on the nature of language and truth, among them *The Telling* (published in 1972).
 - ⁴ The other two meanings are "a historical form with a long tradition which began in poetry" and a pejorative use of the directed against pastoral poetry's blindness to ecological and social issues (Gifford 1-2).

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